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Coalition Formation and Congruence in a Multi-layered Setting: Belgium 1995–2008

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ABSTRACT One of the concepts with which the relation between governments at different levels can be analysed is the congruence of the coalitions. This article analyses the dynamics of government formation in Belgium from that perspective. The Belgian case is interesting because the recent decoupling of the electoral cycles from 2003 on allows us to see how the parties are trying to adapt to the possibilities and consequences of incongruence. The Belgian case is also rather exceptional. The absence of state-wide parties makes it indeed impossible for parties to define strategies at one level without assessing consequences at the other level. Congruence then seems to be the preferred strategy, although incongruence can offer interesting opportunities. Smaller parties, however, appear to be unable to play the double role imposed by incongruent coalitions.

KEY WORDS: Government formation, coalition congruence, Belgium, party systems, electoral cycle

Introduction

Coalition formation is a crucial phenomenon of the competition for power in many democracies. It has, therefore, been analysed extensively. Which parties have more chances of gaining access to power? Which combination of parties is more likely to form a coalition agreement? The questions have led to by now familiar models and concepts, built on the assumption that parties are trying to maximize their goals and taking into account the fact that these goals can be multiple and complex and sometimes conflicting (see e.g. Müller and Strom, 1999; 2000; de Winter, 2002).

Scholars of coalition formation have, however, been confronted with the fact that the familiar models—built on quite plausible assumptions about party behaviour—fail to predict and to explain a large number of coalitions. The formation of a coalition seems to be a far more complex affair, with a large number of contextual variables that influence the possibilities and the choices of the parties. This article will

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explore one of these elements. It will be shown how in multi-layered political systems the coalition formation is a game that is played at more than one level, and that these levels influence each other.

In his analysis of coalition formation at the subnational level in Belgium, France and Germany, Downs (1998) showed how coalition formation at the regional level can be different, how parties at the subnational level form types of coalitions that differ from what they do at the central level. That includes oversized governments, ideologically non-connected coalitions, inclusion of radical parties, all-party coalitions. Downs' first example, the formation of a coalition in the Belgian province of Limburg in 1991, also makes quite obvious that the subnational level—even if it produces different outcomes—cannot be seen as totally disconnected from the national level. This provincial coalition agreement had indeed been negotiated and signed by national politicians and aimed at realizing something that was not (yet) possible at the higher level: pushing the dominant Christian democrats out of power.

Looking at coalition formation at the subnational level thus not only increases the number of cases on which theories can be tested, but also brings into the picture a very relevant aspect of the context in which coalitions are being formed. Parties are, indeed, engaged in the competition for power at different levels. And they can have different goals and strategies at each level, because the nature of the competition—the size of the party and the size and the characteristics of the competitors—can be different at the national and at the subnational level (Ştefuriuc, 2007). The Scottish Labour Party has formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in Scotland, with the latter remaining an opposition party in Westminster. Today a Scottish National Party (SNP) minority government is in power in Edinburgh, with the SNP obviously in opposition in Westminster. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has always refused to even think of forming a federal coalition with the Left Party (Linke), but has formed SPD–Linke coalitions in East German *Länder*. The Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) fiercely reject the idea of forming a coalition with the Freedom Party (FPÖ/now BZÖ) at the federal level, but did enter a SPÖ–FPÖ coalition in Carinthia, with the FPÖ party leader Jörg Haider as *Landeshauptman*.

This divergence between levels is, in the first place, an argument for studying subnational coalition formation as a game that has its own specific rules. But it is also an argument for analysing *all* processes of coalition formation as a game that is not necessarily played at one single level. The coalition formations at different levels can each have a different nature and logic, but both processes can also thoroughly influence each other. National party politics can influence the regional or local coalition formation, and the regional or local coalition formation can influence the choices made at the central level. The multi-level nature of a political system becomes then a very important aspect of the institutional context in which parties engage in coalition formation at each of the levels. The multi-level nature can explain why coalitions are formed that deviate from those predicted by the formal model.

One of the concepts with which the relation between governments at different levels can be analysed is the *congruence* of the coalitions (Roberts, 1989). This paper will focus on that aspect. The first part will present some conceptual and analytical tools for the analysis of congruence between levels. These will then be put to work for the analysis of both federal and regional coalition formations in Belgium. Belgium

is, indeed, an interesting case in this respect. It has only recently become a federal country, with directly elected regional parliaments and thus with politically very meaningful coalition formation at the regional level. Belgium has gone through a (still ongoing) learning process. Political elites had to discover the multi-layered aspect of coalition formation. With the regional and federal elections only gradually being disconnected from each other (see below), the Belgian party elites were also gradually confronted with the possible consequences of incongruent coalitions.

The second part of the paper will give a quick overview of the institutional context in Belgium and of the structure of political parties in the Belgian federation. The third part describes and discusses government building at five points in time, some after combined regional and federal elections (1995 and 1999), one after regional elections only (2004) and two after federal elections only (2003 and 2007). The last process is a very long and painstaking formation of a federal government after the elections of June 2007. One of the reasons for the long duration of the negotiations is, indeed, related to the problem of congruence.

The five cases will also illustrate how and why the coalitions do not always look like one would expect if the game was played at one level only. In doing so, this paper answers the call to improve our insight of coalition formation processes by adding qualitative small-*n* studies to the statistical analysis of large numbers of coalition governments (de Winter and Dumont, 2006; Bäck and Dumont, 2007). The peculiar stories of government formation in Belgium will help us to understand how the multi-layered nature of a political system can deeply influence the strategic choices made by political parties.

Congruence and Incongruence of Governments

Congruence and incongruence refer to the relation between two governments. This relation is congruent if the same parties (or sections of the same parties) are present in both governments, and incongruent if the composition of the two governments is different. Comparing two governments can be done in different ways and at different levels. *Horizontal* congruence then refers to a relation between two governments at the same level: two regional governments in a regionalized or federal state or two national governments in two different countries. *Vertical* congruence compares the composition of a government at the regional level with the composition of the national government. We will deal with vertical congruence only.

Figure 1 makes a distinction between three types: full congruence, partial (in)congruence and full incongruence. It shows easily how the composition is likely to have an effect on the relations between the two governments. In the case of full incongruence, the governments are completely different. The relations between the two governments are at the same time *inter-party* relations. The parties governing at the regional level are national opposition parties (if they are, indeed, also present at the national level). This would be the case with, for instance, an SPD–Grünen federal coalition in Germany, with a CDU–FDP coalition at the *Land* level.

The second type is a partially congruent or partially incongruent coalition. This is a more complex pattern. Indeed, there is at least one party—party A—that can be labelled a *bridging party*. It governs at both levels, which means that part of the

Full incongruence of national and regional coalition

		NATIONAL LEVEL	
		Party A	Party B
Party C	Party D		
REGIONAL LEVEL			

Partial incongruence of national and regional coalition

		NATIONAL LEVEL	
		Party A	Party B
Party C	Party A		
REGIONAL LEVEL			

Full congruence of national and regional coalition

NATIONAL LEVEL	
Party A	Party B
Party A	Party B
REGIONAL LEVEL	

Figure 1. Typology of vertical (in)congruence of coalition governments.

relations between the two governments are *intra-party* relations. The bridging party connects the two governments and needs to manage internally the double relation with the coalition partners. The partner at the national level is (if present) a regional opposition party, and the partner at the regional level is (if present) a national opposition party. Party A has a double role to play, a role that differs between the levels of the system. The partners of the bridging party can be labelled *isolated parties*. They govern at one level only. And they also have to play a double role, be it of a different nature. They are also in opposition against their partner at another level, but only need to be loyal to one government.

The third type is full congruence and appears to be the easiest situation. All parties in both coalitions are bridging parties. They are loyal to each other at both levels. The relations within each government and between the two governments can be settled by negotiations among the same parties.

This typology is, of course—as is any good typology—a bit too simple. Real life can add a number of nuances. Not all governments need to be coalitions. One can also imagine a coalition at one level and a one-party government at another. That can, however, still be analysed in terms of congruence. Another nuance—already hinted at above—is the sheer presence of parties at a given level. Indeed, not all parties or party sections in multi-level systems participate in the elections at both

levels or are able to gain representation at both levels. The potential tensions between and inside parties in a bridging or isolated position in incongruent coalitions can vary in function of this presence. A party can only be active at the regional level. If it enters a coalition with a party governing at the national level, it will not oppose it at the national level. But for the bridging party the agreement with the regional party (imagine it being also regionalist) can be potentially harming for the policies it wants to conduct at the national level.

Bringing real life into this typology is one of the aims of this article. Belgium is a recent federation, and incongruent coalitions are therefore also a recent phenomenon. Very interestingly, the coalitions in Belgium have been mainly congruent, and have then moved towards more incongruence. This gradual change offers a nice opportunity to see how and why congruent or incongruent coalitions are formed and whether parties make strategic choices with the consequences of (in)congruence in mind.

One would assume that congruence is the solution preferred by political parties. Governing with the same partners at different levels makes it, indeed, much easier to keep a more or less coherent policy profile across the levels. It should also ease the intra-party co-ordination between the levels. If intensive co-operation is needed between the levels of government, the congruence of the coalitions at the two levels can also facilitate the communication between the two governments. The Belgian examples will show how the parties opt first for a congruent solution. They gradually (have to) accept the necessity of some degree of incongruence, and some parties will then even deliberately choose the incongruence—actually choose an isolated position—as a better way to realize their goals at the different levels.

The Belgian Federation: No Federal Parties

Belgium is a very young federation. Actually the unitary Belgian state was transformed gradually into a decentralized and finally fully-fledged federal state (for more details see Deschouwer, 2005). The last major stage was reached in 1995. That was the year of the first direct election of the regional parliaments. This period after 1995 can be divided in two periods. The first runs from 1995 until 2003. It covers the elections of 1995 and 1999. These were both elections for the federal parliament and for the regional parliaments (1999 also European Parliament) organized *on the same day*. In 2003 federal elections were organized separately for the very first time. It meant that for the first time that only a federal coalition had to be formed, while the regional governments remained in power. In 2004 regional elections were held while the federal coalition remained in power. In 2007 again federal elections were organized, while the next regional elections are due in 2009. This disconnection of the two elections from 2003 on has created a totally new institutional setting, to which the political parties are still trying to adapt.

The most striking and—for us—also crucial characteristic of the Belgian system is the *absence of federal parties*. All the political parties are unilingual, which means that they compete in only one of the two large language communities. Flemish parties are present at the polls in Flanders and in Brussels. Francophone parties are present in Wallonia and in Brussels. Until the 1970s there were still national political parties. Yet, in 1968, the Christian democrats fell apart to form two new unilingual parties.

In 1972 the liberals followed suit and in 1978 the socialist party split. New parties created afterwards, have all been rooted in one of the two unilingual party systems, even if they belong—like the Greens or the Right-wing extremist parties—to the same party family.¹

This absence of federal parties and the split party system severely blurs the distinction between the levels. Indeed, whether the election is federal or regional, the *same parties* with the *same party leaders* and often also the *same candidates* go to their part of the electorate. When, in 1995 and in 1999, both elections—federal and regional—were organized on the same day, the confusion between the levels was total (Vermessen, 1995; Deschouwer, 1999). Parties also used the elected members as one single personnel pool out of which they could go and pick the right members for the governments in which they participated. Of all the regional and community Prime Ministers in 1999, not one had been elected at the regional level. They had all run for a seat in either the federal House of Representatives or the Senate.

The absence of state-wide parties and the presence of two unilingual parties for each party family also illustrates another crucial characteristic of the Belgian federation. It is, indeed, bipolar. The federal level is the place where the two language communities and their parties come together. Governing at the federal level, therefore, requires an agreement between the two poles of the federation. The sharing of power at the central level is deeply built into the system. Thus, the Belgian federation is not only bipolar but also consociational. These characteristics are crucial indeed as the context in which coalitions are being formed. As said above, it gives a very special meaning to the notion of electoral cycle. In the absence of state-wide parties all parties are always involved in all elections, whatever the level at which they are organized. And forming a government after one of these elections always requires the parties to think of the next electoral deadline which is then normally not at the level where a coalition is being formed. Belgium is certainly a quite peculiar federation. But the Belgian case does allow us to show indeed how characteristics of the federation, the type of decision-making and the electoral and party system attributes are important contextual variables for understanding and explaining multi-level coalition formation.

Belgium is a federation of both territorial regions and language communities. This paper will limit its attention to the two major *regions* of Flanders and Wallonia. Flanders is the northern region and its official language is Dutch. Today Flanders is the more prosperous region of Belgium. It has a smaller territory but a larger population (6 million) than Wallonia (3.5 million). Wallonia is the southern region, with French as its official language. For the sake of clarity and parsimony, coalition formation in the Brussels region or in the three language communities (French, German and Dutch) will not be discussed. That would add some extra complexity, but would not offer any major new insights.

Five Processes of Coalition Formation

Full Congruence in 1995

The first direct election of the regional parliaments did not produce surprising results. These first regional elections were organized on the same day as the federal elections and the results were very similar (Table 1). The main campaign issues were federal.

Table 1. Results of the 1995 regional and federal elections in Flanders and Wallonia (percentage of the votes)

Flanders	Region	Federal	Wallonia	Region	Federal
CD&V	26.8	27.8	CDh	21.6	22.5
Open VLD	20.2	21.1	MR	23.7	23.9
SP.a	19.5	20.3	PS	35.2	33.7
Groen	7.1	7.0	Ecolo	10.4	10.3
Vlaams Belang	12.3	12.7	FN	5.1	6.4
VU	9.0	9.0			

Actually the parties of the outgoing federal coalition of Christian democrats and socialists had clearly announced that they wanted to continue the coalition. The electoral results did allow them to do so, with, however, the Francophone PS losing quite heavily (mainly due to some of its top politicians being involved in corruption scandals). The party presidents of the Christian democrats and socialists thus quickly put together a new federal government, and these same party presidents also quickly agreed on the formation of the regional governments: PS and CDh in Wallonia and CD&V and SP.a in Flanders. As can also be seen in Figure 2, this is a situation of perfect congruence, at least if we reason in terms of party families. Flemish and Francophone parties govern together at the federal level, but obviously not at the regional level. The federal government is also perfectly symmetrical: parties of the same family govern together.

There are two interesting and related consequences of this congruent and symmetric pattern. In the first place it creates a clear hierarchy. For all parties governing at both levels the central level is the most important. The CD&V Prime Minister of Belgium (then Jean-Luc Dehaene) is more important than the regional Prime Minister. The leader of the Walloon government is not the number one in the Parti Socialiste, but a federal vice-premier.

The hierarchy facilitates the management of intergovernmental relations and of intergovernmental conflicts (Swenden and Jans, 2006; Deschouwer, 2006). The

BELGIUM (150)			
CD&V (29)	SP.a (20)	PS (21)	CDh (12)
CD&V (37)	SP.a (26)	PS (30)	CDh (16)
FLANDERS (124)		WALLONIA (75)	

Figure 2. Structure of the coalitions in 1995 (and number of seats in federal or regional parliament—party of Prime Minister in bold).

Flemish government regularly voiced ideas and requests for further regional autonomy or for a stricter interpretation of the language facilities for the Francophone inhabitants of Flanders. While this could possibly have led to conflicts between the Flemish and the Belgian government or to tensions between Francophones and Dutch-speakers in the federal government, the intra-party hierarchy in the CD&V—having the leadership at both levels—effectively cooled down all potential conflicts.

The coalitions of 1995 are thus fully congruent. And this congruence was a deliberate choice. The coalition in Flanders was winning by a very narrow margin: 63 (50.8%) of the 124 seats. Before the direct election of the regional parliaments, there were already parliamentary assemblies for the regions. These were composed of the federal MPs (House and Senate) elected in that region. These assemblies also had an executive. Between 1991 and 1995 the Flemish executive had been composed of CD&V, SP.a and Volksunie. And while Volksunie had hoped to be part of the first real Flemish government, the party was not invited. The other parties preferred a small but fully congruent coalition.

Almost Full Congruence in 1999

In 1999, again after elections for both the federal and the regional parliaments were organized on the same day, the general tendency was still to put together congruent and symmetrical coalitions as much as possible. As a result of that, governments were formed that deviated substantially from those that would have been formed in a less complex single level polity. The coalition formation of 1999 was the first truly multi-level formation. The only way to understand the formations is by seeing them as games being played simultaneously in the regions and at the federal level.

The 1999 elections had been labelled the “mother of all elections”, because again the regional and the federal elections (House and Senate) were held on the same day, together with the European elections. As can be seen in Table 2, the results for all these elections were again hardly different. With the same parties participating in each of them, this is not too surprising. The results of the elections of 1999 were also quite mixed. In Wallonia the PS remained easily number one. In Flanders the liberal VLD managed to take the number one position by very closely beating the Christian democrats. The VLD also became the largest party of the country. Yet, for the election of the Flemish parliament, the victory went—also extremely closely—to the CD&V that

Table 2. Results of the 1999 regional and federal elections in Flanders and Wallonia (percentage of the votes)

Flanders	Region	Federal	Wallonia	Region	Federal
CD&V	22.1	22.6	CDh	17.1	16.8
Open VLD	22.0	22.7	MR	24.7	24.7
SP.a	15.0	15.7	PS	29.4	29.2
Groen	11.6	11.3	Ecolo	18.2	18.3
Vlaams Belang	15.5	15.4	FN	4.0	4.9
VU	9.3	8.8			

remained the largest group in the Flemish parliament. That actually gave them, in principle, the right to make the first move. Yet the Flemish Christian democrats never moved.

The Flemish liberals, now the largest party of Flanders and of Belgium, quickly realized that this was their chance to remove the Christian democrats—in power since 1958—from all the coalitions. For a few years already the idea of a ‘purple’ coalition of socialists and liberals had been seen and defended by many political commentators as something that would be a sign of a true political renewal. On the Francophone side the liberals and the socialists had already agreed before the 1999 elections that they would form a coalition together, at least in the Walloon region where a ‘purple’ majority would certainly be possible. They had agreed to stay together at the federal level too, but were aware that mathematically this would be much more difficult.

The key for the solution was in Flanders. The electoral defeat of the Christian democrats was not the first one. They had lost votes in almost all elections since the 1960s, yet always remained by far the number one party in Flanders. Heavy losses in 1991 had already made some prominent party leaders suggest a choice for the opposition. When the results of 1999 became known, the Christian democrats did declare defeat and—even if they were still the number one in the Flemish parliament—announced that governing was not an option. One of the reasons for not trying to take the lead in the coalition formation in Flanders—next to the feeling that it was indeed time for the others to do the dirty job—was the fact that it would have been extremely difficult if not impossible to form a coalition with one or more parties that would govern against them at the federal level. The double role of being both a governing and an opposition party would have been impossible to explain to the voters. Incongruence as an isolated party at the regional level was therefore not (yet) an option at all.

VLD could thus take the lead for the formation of a new-style purple government. A major problem, however, was that liberals and socialists did not have a majority in the Flemish regional parliament. A three-party coalition would have been possible only with the Right-wing populist Vlaams Belang (VB), but all parties had agreed repeatedly not to allow VB into government. The liberals and socialists had, therefore, to invite both the Greens and the VU to form a four-party coalition in which all the partners were needed for a winning formula. In the Walloon region a two-party coalition of liberals and socialists was possible, but at the federal level the two-party families did not have enough seats for a simple ‘purple’ formula.

Both the federal and the Walloon government were, therefore, adapted to the necessities of the Flemish coalition formation. And they were adapted to keeping the coalitions as congruent as possible. The Walloon coalition included the (mathematically not needed) Green party Ecolo. At the federal level one of the two Green parties would have been enough for a winning coalition. Yet, the Green parties of north and south—the only party family forming one single group in the federal parliament—had agreed to stick together. The federal government thus became an oversized six-party coalition.

As shown in Figure 3, the coalitions were almost perfectly congruent. There is only one party ‘disturbing’ the congruence: the Flemish nationalist Volksunie (VU). During

BELGIUM (150)						
<i>Open VLD</i> (23)	SP (14)	Groen (9)		MR (19)	PS (18)	Ecolo (11)
<i>Open VLD</i> (27)	SP (19)	Groen (12)	VU (11)	MR (25)	<i>PS</i> (21)	Ecolo (14)
FLANDERS (124)				WALLONIA (75)		

Figure 3. The structure of the coalitions in 1999–2003 and the number of seats of each partner in the federal and the regional parliament (party of Prime Minister in bold).

the formation phase—obviously involving both levels and both regions at the same time—the VU was in quite a powerful position. Without its consent a Flemish government was impossible. The VU was, however, also quite eager to join this ‘purple’ government of political renewal and radical change. Pushing the Christian democrats out of power in Flanders was a nice perspective.

Yet, the fact that the party was not needed at the federal level to form a winning coalition led to some hesitation. There were three options: staying out of both governments, entering only at the Flemish level or entering at both levels. The VU could, indeed, use its power position in Flanders to request entry into the federal coalition. If it had done so, the others would probably have accepted, albeit reluctantly. Further devolution of competencies to Flanders—one of the main goals of the VU—had to be achieved at the federal level anyway, since only the federal parliament can change the constitution. But, on the other hand, being in the Flemish government only and staying out at the federal level could be a way to put pressure on and keep an eye on the ‘bridging’ parties that would have to implement the constitutional changes at the federal level, without the VU itself being involved. Liberals and socialists were also not too eager to take the VU on board at the federal level, because including talks on institutional change would have made the formation of the federal coalition a longer and more painful process. At the federal level liberals and socialists wanted to show that the purple renewal could be put into place rapidly and in a general atmosphere of ethno-linguistic peace.

The VU was quite divided on these different options. It finally opted for the incongruent and isolated solution: governing in Flanders and not in Belgium. Although the choice was a fully free choice only to a limited extent, the party did see the advantages of the incongruence. At the federal level the party was not needed and, therefore, its power would be extremely limited. At the Flemish level it was needed, and that allowed the party to actively participate in policy making at the regional level that had, after all been, created as a result of the pressure of the VU since the 1960s. After having acquired Flemish autonomy, the VU felt a duty to be present when autonomy was put at work. In 1995 it had already hoped to be part of the Flemish

government, but was simply not invited (see above). Being present only in Flanders also offered the possibility to clearly mark the difference between the Flemish and the federal government. And, if the constitutional reforms at the federal level failed, the VU would not be the party to blame. As an isolated party at the regional level it could thus put pressure on the bridging parties and possibly blame them for not delivering what had to be done at the federal level.

The rest of the story is, however, not very glorious (Noppe and Wauters, 2002). When a new VU party president had to be elected in 2000, the faction defending opposition at all levels defeated the outgoing president who had opted for the incongruent strategy. The VU did remain in the Flemish government, but the gap between its co-operative Flemish strategy and its opposition strategy at the Belgian level (the new president was a federal MP) appeared difficult and finally impossible to manage. When a federal agreement was reached for some constitutional reforms, with the Flemish government highly involved, the VU party president and the party group in the federal parliament decided to vote against it. The split between the ‘governing’ faction and the ‘opposition’ faction, coinciding to a large extent (but not completely) with the split between the party at the Flemish level and the party at the Belgian level, finally led to the death of the party. It fell apart and two new parties were created: NVA and Spirit, with Spirit remaining in the Flemish government (be it now with one and not with two ministers).

The Federal Election of 2003: Regional Isolation of the Green Parties

The elections of 2003 were an institutional turning point. For the very first time elections for the federal parliament were organized separately, i.e. with the regional parliaments and governments remaining in power. While, in 1995 and 1999, there was hardly any difference to be seen between the federal and the regional elections—both in terms of campaigns and of results—this first ‘federal-only’ election could, in principle, have been different. Yet the institutional environment strongly reduces the chances of separate elections being different.

In the first place the political parties engaging in each election are still exactly the same. The unilingual and basically regional parties now participated in the election of the federal parliament, but with a campaign limited to the own-language group and with results that were—as always—read and interpreted within each of the language groups. In 1995 and 1999 all parties had a number of MPs elected in the regional and federal parliaments and chose from among these the ministers of the governments, irrespective of the level at which they had been elected. In 2003 only federal MPs could be elected. Yet, the candidates on the lists simply came from everywhere. All parties put their most important politicians on top of the list. That meant, in practice, that almost all regional ministers were prominently present in the campaign, often simply as the number one on their party list. The electoral system had been changed slightly, reducing the number of electoral constituencies from 22 to only 10 (Hooghe *et al.*, 2006). That increased the need for candidates being able to gather support beyond their own local constituency. Particularly the governing parties—liberals, socialists and Greens—seized the opportunity to field their best-known candidates, thus including the regional ministers.

The outgoing coalition had clearly announced that it would go on if the electoral result would allow it. The results were quite mixed (Table 3). Actually the liberal and socialist parties—the purple core of the coalition—did very well. The Flemish socialists had formed an electoral cartel (i.e. common lists) with Spirit, the more Left-wing and more moderately regionalist successor party of the Volksunie. The electoral cartel did extremely well. The Green parties, however, faced a disaster. The Francophone Greens of Ecolo had left the government a few weeks before the election, adding to the general mood that the Greens were not really mature and reliable partners. Their first time in government had, indeed, not been easy (Buelens and Deschouwer, 2002; Delwit and Van Haute, 2008). The Flemish Greens lost all their federal MPs (also due to a new 5% threshold per constituency) while Ecolo was reduced to only four seats. The combination of these results was that liberals and socialists were able to form a winning federal coalition, without the Greens.

And that left the Green parties in both Flanders and Wallonia in an awkward position. They suddenly became isolated parties in the regional governments (Figure 4), and had to decide on the best strategy to follow.

The Flemish Greens were devastated. They had dramatically lost the federal elections in which their regional ministers had taken the lead. The party president and the two Green ministers quickly resigned. But the major question was whether to stay in the regional government or not. The Flemish Greens decided—after some hesitation—to remain in the Flemish regional government. There were basically three reasons to do so. Leaving the regional government would have paralysed it, since the Greens were not a surplus party in the Flemish region. Quitting would have made them appear an unreliable partner. Leaving the government would also have meant the loss of financial resources. At the federal level the party lost all its state subsidies: direct subsidies to the party, subsidies to the parliamentary group and the resources—including personnel—available for the federal governing parties. All that was left were the means going to the group in the regional parliament and the means available to the Flemish regional ministers. The party had to fire many of its collaborators, and staying in power slightly reduced the pain and allowed the Greens to keep the most important members of the central party organization. A third reason is related to the second: being out of power and even out of parliament at the federal level would reduce the visibility of the party dramatically. And since the next regional elections were due in 2004, keeping two regional ministers guaranteed some presence in the political debates that are, in Belgium, almost completely confined

Table 3. Results of the 2003 federal election in Flanders and Wallonia (percentage of the votes)

Flanders		Wallonia	
CD&V	21.2	CDh	15.4
Open VLD	25.1	MR	28.4
SP.a-Vl.Pro	23.9	PS	36.4
Groen	4.0	Ecolo	7.4
Vlaams Belang	17.9	FN	5.6
NVA	4.8		

BELGIUM (150)					
	<i>Open VLD</i> (25)	SP.a- VL.Pro (23)	MR (25)	PS (24)	
Groen (12)	<i>Open VLD</i> (30)	SP.a- VL.Pro (29)	MR (25)	<i>PS</i> (21)	Ecolo (14)
FLANDERS (124)			WALLONIA (75)		

Figure 4. The structure of the coalitions in 2003–04 and number of seats of each partner in federal or regional parliament (party of Prime Minister in bold).

to one language group only. By staying in power at the Flemish level the Flemish Greens were still visibly in power. The official policy-related explanation was that the job was not finished and that they would finish it in a loyal way.

As an isolated party the Flemish Greens were also a federal opposition party, but their total absence at the federal level made that double role not too difficult to play. In the year preceding the 2004 campaign, the Flemish Greens were in the very first place debating and discussing internally about the future strategy. Most prominent was the debate about a possible electoral alliance with the socialists. It was not accepted, and led to some defection of Green MPs and local office holders.

For the Francophone Greens the situation was a bit different. The party was still present in the federal parliament—in opposition—and it was still a surplus party in the Walloon regional government. It also decided to stay. The reasons and arguments were similar to those of Groen. First, there was the policy-related argument that the job was not finished, and that the opportunities to control policy outputs should not be given away because of federal defeat. Secondly, there was also the resource-related argument. Ecolo still had a parliamentary group in the federal parliament and kept some federal party subsidies, but both were at a lower level. Leaving the Walloon government would have hurt even more. And, finally, there was the visibility argument. By remaining in power the party felt that it would be in a better position to prepare the regional elections of 2004.

Maybe the double role of government and opposition was a bit easier to play for Ecolo than for Groen, because it had already opted for a slightly ambiguous attitude since 1999. The party had accepted to govern but still tried to present itself as an alternative party, as a party not governing in the traditional way (Delwit and Van Haute, 2008). That was one of the ways in which Ecolo could keep some internal peace between those very much in favour of governing and those fearing that governing would kill the real spirit of the party and the real influence of the grassroots. While Groen had a strong party leader consciously co-ordinating the activities in the two governments, Ecolo had collective and shifting leaderships, with an ongoing debate about the decision to participate in the federal and regional coalitions.

The Incongruent Come-back of the Christian Democrats in 2004

The 2003 federal elections had been a triumph for the liberal and socialist parties. While in 1999 the (Flemish) Christian democrats had lost once more after being in government, they had now lost again, but this time after having been in opposition during four years. The Flemish liberals, who had seized power at the regional and federal level in 1999, remained solidly in control of both levels. Since the Christian democrats were believed to be fully defeated, the tensions between liberals and socialists became a bit more apparent. One major incident would become quite relevant. The two socialist parties and the Francophone liberals joined forces with the Greens (of course, Ecolo only) to introduce voting rights for residents of non-Belgian citizenship at local elections. The VLD party president wanted to defend the position of the party to the very end in the parliamentary debates, while Prime Minister Verhofstadt did not want this debate to weaken the government and preferred to quit and accept the decision of the parliament. He forced the VLD party president to resign. With all the other Flemish parties (except the socialists) also opposing the voting rights for non-Belgians and with the Right-wing populist Vlaams Belang fulminating against the very idea, the VLD was blamed for putting governmental power above principles. This choice for office against principles is, at first sight, a single-level matter. But with regional elections coming soon, it would become very much a multi-level matter.

While one of the two parties resulting from the demise of the Volksunie (Spirit) had successfully formed an electoral alliance with the socialists, the other successor party NVA had gone to the federal elections on its own. It had polled only 4.8% of the votes in Flanders and secured only one MP (the party president in his own province). Several still poor results in opinion polls made the NVA decide—after having been invited several times—to join forces with the CD&V and to form a so-called ‘Flemish cartel’. This cartel presented common lists at the regional elections in Flanders in 2004. In the Walloon region the campaign was—as always—very much focused on the clash between the socialists and the liberals, with the latter trying to close the gap or even to beat the socialists.

Of the four parties governing at the federal (and regional) level, only the Francophone socialists did well, improving slightly their federal 2003 score (Table 4). The three other parties, and especially the Flemish liberals and socialists, lost votes. In Flanders there were two remarkable results. First there was the come-back of the Christian democrats, becoming (with NVA) again the number one in the region. Vlaams Belang—that had changed

Table 4. Results of the 2004 regional elections in Flanders and Wallonia (percentage of the votes)

Flanders		Wallonia	
CD&V-NVA	26.1	CDh	17.6
Open VLD	19.8	MR	24.3
SP.a-Vl.Pro	19.7	PS	36.9
Groen	7.6	Ecolo	8.5
Vlaams Belang	24.2	FN	8.1

name after having been convicted for racism—did extremely well and polled a solid 24% of the votes. The Flemish liberals lost heavily and so did the socialists. While, at the federal level, the two parties of the purple coalition had received a strong mandate in 2003, the purple coalition in Flanders was dead in 2004. The Greens did pass the threshold, but announced that they would not govern this time. With the Vlaams Belang being excluded from power by all the others, there was only one single coalition possible for the Flemish region: CD&V–NVA, SP.a–Spirit and VLD. And this would definitely be an incongruent one (Figure 5).

In Flanders the incongruent coalition features a new phenomenon: an isolated party that is, however, not—like the Volksunie or the Greens in earlier constellations—a junior partner but that is the leading and dominant partner of the coalition. Indeed, CD&V is the Prime Minister’s party in Flanders, while it is not present in the federal government. The electoral alliance between CD&V and NVA had hardened the regionalist position of the Christian democrats, since NVA advocates the full independence of Flanders. The bridging position of VLD and SP.a—governing at both levels but only at one level with the Christian democrats—became therefore also much more difficult to manage. There were a number of severe conflicts between the Flemish and the federal government, one of which created very deep tensions between the CD&V and the two other parties.

During the campaign for the regional elections all Flemish parties had accepted and defended the idea that the electoral constituency of ‘Brussels–Halle–Vilvoorde’ (BHV), including the Brussels region and part of the Flemish province around Brussels, had to be split into a purely Brussels constituency and a Flemish one. This scission of BHV was an old request of the Flemish parties and had come back to the surface after the reshuffling of the electoral constituencies for the federal elections of 2003. CD&V and especially NVA had announced that they would not join a Flemish government if BHV was not split immediately. The power to do so is, however, at the federal level. When the Flemish coalition was negotiated, the bridging

BELGIUM (150)					
	Open VLD (25)	SP.a- Vl.Pro (23)	PS (25)		MR (24)
CD&V-NVA (35)	Open VLD (25)	SP.a- Vl.Pro (25)	PS (34)	CDh (14)	
FLANDERS (124)			WALLONIA (75)		

Figure 5. The structure of the coalitions in 2004–07 (party of Prime Minister in bold).

parties accepted—reluctantly—to write in the coalition agreement that BHV had to be split immediately, thus engaging themselves to accomplish this at the federal level. Francophone parties, however, simply rejected the idea of a split, and the federal government was not able to reach a compromise. Flemish liberals and socialists had to inform their Flemish Christian democratic partner in 2005 that they had failed to implement the Flemish regional coalition agreement at the federal level.

Back in 1999 CD&V had the possibility to—at least try to—form a Flemish regional government in which it would have been an isolated party. The party then refused to do so for several reasons, one of which was the difficulty of explaining to its voters the double role of governing and opposition party. In 2004 CD&V, however, did not hesitate. Contrary to 1999, the party was now in a winning mood. Getting fully back in power was a major goal, and the regional government was a first step towards it. Avoiding the double and incongruent position would only have been possible by changing the federal coalition. Yet that was not an easy solution. It would have been extremely difficult for the VLD—and especially for Prime Minister Verhofstadt—to take the Christian democrats on board in a government that been formed in an explicit attempt to keep them away from power. Adding the Christian democrats from Flanders would also have raised the question of whether the Francophone Christian democrats would have to enter the coalition too. Being an isolated party leading the regional government was thus the best option.

It was, however, still a choice that involved playing a difficult double role. This was solved by opting very explicitly to put emphasis on only one of them. The CD&V party leader Yves Leterme became the Flemish Prime Minister and carefully crafted an image of a regional government and of its Prime Minister ‘governing well’. The opposition role at the federal level was put on a lower key, with actually the same baseline: good governance is what we do (in Flanders) and the federal level is bad governance.

When the federal campaign for 2007 started building up in 2006, CD&V kept the same strategy as long as possible. It wanted obviously to return to power at the federal level and to beat the liberals and the socialists. It was quite obvious that the party leader and symbol, i.e. the Flemish Prime Minister Yves Leterme, would be the leader of that campaign. He did, however, announce only very late that he would indeed be a candidate, always responding to journalists who asked him whether he would run that “good governance in Flanders” was his first job and responsibility. The strategy did work very well (see below).

While incongruence in Flanders was not fully the deliberate choice of the parties but also to a large extent the result of the ‘cordon sanitaire’ excluding Vlaams Belang from the possible options, the PS in the Walloon regional government consciously opted for incongruence. Being clearly still the largest party of the region, the PS could either continue the (congruent) coalition with the liberals (Greens were not needed) or opt for a centre–left coalition with the Christian democrats. The PS president chose the latter solution, deciding to drop the liberals with whom they had just started a new federal coalition one year earlier. In Wallonia too the end of ‘purple’ was decided at the regional level. The re-entrance of the Christian democrats in Flanders announced their probable return to power at the federal level, and that is a major reason why the PS had already switched to a coalition with the Christian

democrats at the regional level. The Walloon regional coalition of 2004 was getting ready for the (expected) change of the federal coalition in 2007.

The Walloon regional coalition also produced an isolated party: the Francophone Christian democrats. This is a smaller party that eagerly accepted the invitation of the PS to join the government. Like its Flemish counterpart the CDh had been away from power since 1999, after being in government from 1958 until 1999. Getting back in power at the federal level is not a necessary goal for CDh. At the Walloon regional level it has always been and would still be a quite small party, while at the Walloon regional level it was able to negotiate a very interesting agreement with the PS. It was also easier for CDh than for CD&V to keep the opposition profile lower at the federal level, since the party had only 8 of the 150 seats in the House (against 21 for CD&V).

The choice of the PS to drop the liberal MR was not a move that improved relations in the federal government. The MR, indeed, became an isolated party in the federal government, with the PS as the sole bridge between the two levels of government. The regional coalition change was sending out the message that for the socialists the purple experiment was coming to an end. Ideological clashes between liberals and socialists became legion and the 2007 federal campaign was extremely aggressive on the Francophone side. With the PS involved in never-ending scandals at the local level in Wallonia, the MR presented itself as an alternative against the permanent power of the PS. And it did succeed at the polls.

The Multi-level Puzzle of 2007

The federal elections of 2007 were the second separate federal elections. Like the previous elections in 2003 they looked very much like regional elections, since the same parties participated only in their own language group. Regional governments still had two years to go—until 2009—but most members of the regional governments again appeared (and sometimes prominently) on the electoral lists. The Flemish Prime Minister decided to be the leader of the Senate list and the Walloon Prime Minister took the lead of the list in his province.

The results were—once again—quite spectacular, with a very high level of volatility in both language communities. In Flanders the CD&V–NVA alliance polled close to 30%, with the Vlaams Belang coming second with almost 20%. Liberals and socialists both lost votes again. In Wallonia, the PS lost its historical number one position, which was taken by a triumphant liberal MR. With the Christian democrats in Flanders and the liberals in Wallonia being the winners, and with both socialist parties being beaten, the logical coalition would be one of Christian democrats and liberals, led by the former Flemish Prime Minister Leterme. Any other four-party coalition would not be a winning one. The expected coalition of Christian democrats and socialists was, indeed, mathematically impossible (Table 5).

Negotiations over formation of the federal coalition took more than six months, at the end of which a temporary government headed by the outgoing Prime Minister Verhofstadt was put in place. This government includes the Francophone but not the Flemish socialists. It is oversized and—for the first time—not symmetrical. One socialist party is opposing a government with the other socialist party. The reasons for the

Table 5. Results of the 2007 federal elections in Flanders and Wallonia (percentage of the votes)

Flanders		Wallonia	
CD&V-NVA	29.6	CDh	15.7
Open VLD	18.7	MR	31.1
SP.a-VI.Pro	16.3	PS	29.5
Groen	6.2	Ecolo	12.7
Vlaams Belang	18.9	FN	5.5

failure to form the ‘simple’ coalition of Christian democrats and liberals with Leterme as Prime Minister can again be found in the multi-layered nature of the Belgian political context and, more particularly, in the relation between the federal and the regional governments. Figure 6 shows how the new federal and regional coalitions and their relations would have looked if the first attempt had succeeded.

CD&V (now with NVA) would be again firmly in control of both levels of government. It would also recreate the internal hierarchy in the party. The Flemish Prime Minister resigned in order to become federal Prime Minister and actually designated one of the Flemish ministers to succeed him. The new Flemish Prime Minister (Kris Peeters) had entered the regional government without actually being elected in the regional parliament (he used to lead a pressure group of smallholders). He was a candidate for the federal elections of 2007, however, and got elected in the federal parliament, after which he became the new Flemish regional Prime Minister. This is one more example of mixing up the levels.

Yet, the CD&V first needed to be able to bring the coalition together. On the Flemish side it would be a strong and dominant bridging party. The VLD would also be bridging, but without having to bear the full responsibility. The VLD is happy to govern again and to still be present at both levels, after having lost votes both in the regional elections of 2004 and in the federal elections of 2007.

The situation is trickier on the Walloon side. The socialist PS would be an isolated party, but still clearly in control of the Walloon regional government. It would have to play a double role, but opposing a centre–right federal cabinet would not be too

BELGIUM (150)					
	CD&V-NVA (30)	Open VLD (18)	CDh (10)	MR (23)	
SP.a- VI.Pro (25)	CD&V-NVA (35)	Open VLD (25)	CDh (14)		PS (34)
FLANDERS (124)			WALLONIA (75)		

Figure 6. The structure of the first formation attempt in 2007 (party of Prime Minister in bold).

difficult. The really difficult situation is for CDh. That would be the only bridging party on the Francophone side, but at both levels it is a junior partner. In 2004 it was invited by the PS to enter the Walloon regional government, and would now have to govern at the federal level against the same PS. At the federal level it would have to govern with the MR, now the largest Walloon party and the major opposition party in the Walloon region, while the CDh is still a very small partner (10 seats in the House against 23 for MR). Its real weight—both in terms of policy and office—at the federal level would be limited, with the PS criticizing it and with the next regional elections already in 2009. Furthermore the CDh is ideologically more to the left than its Flemish counterpart, which makes a ‘grand écart’ between a centre–left regional coalition and a centre–right federal coalition quite problematic.

There are two more elements of the institutional context that made the formation of this federal coalition—incongruent or not—a difficult exercise. The first is the absence of federal political parties and the fully split electoral campaign. On the Flemish side—among others after the failure to find a solution for the BHV constituency (see above)—all parties had promised that this time a government would not be formed without first an agreement on a number of institutional demands. These included the BHV issue but also the transfer of new competencies and financial means to the (richer) Flemish region. With the political parties only having to secure votes on their own side of the language border, they all engaged in a process of serious outbidding. On the Francophone side during the electoral campaign all parties committed themselves to refuse the split of BHV and the transfer of competencies and especially financial means from the federal to the regional level. With a Walloon region in need of financial equalization, the Francophone parties fear to be on the losing side.

In order to form a federal coalition, a compromise is thus needed between very incompatible demands. This is—as recent Belgian history has shown—not a mission impossible, but a mission that can take quite some time. With the big PS in opposition, MR and CDh are not ready to give in on the Francophone promises. With CD&V having won the elections in an alliance with the very radical nationalist NVA and with the equally separatist Vlaams Belang in opposition and ready to condemn all agreements, potentially governing parties on the Flemish side are also not eager to appear as the compromise makers. There is nobody—no party and no politician—communicating to the Belgian electorate as a whole and there is, therefore, nobody really representing the centre (Van Parijs and Deschouwer, 2007).

And finally—related to the previous point—there was the position of the potential new federal Prime Minister. He is the former Flemish Prime Minister who took very strong regionalist positions. With no CD&V in the federal government trying to moderate the demands, he was pushed towards a more radical position and was strongly rewarded at the (Flemish) polls. Switching from this purely Flemish position to the role of federal bridge builder is not impossible, but proved to be very difficult indeed.

After six months of negotiations—interrupted by cooling down periods and special go-between assignments given to senior politicians—the *formateur* Yves Leterme had to quit. Six months had not been enough to lift the gridlock. With the Belgian image abroad looking worse every day and with a budget for 2008 to be drafted urgently, the outgoing and losing Prime Minister Verhofstadt was given the task of forming a

BELGIUM (150)					
	<i>CD&V-NVA</i> (30)	Open VLD (18)	CDh (10)	MR (23)	PS (20)
SP.a- VL.Pro (25)	<i>CD&V-NVA</i> (35)	Open VLD (25)	CDh (14)		<i>PS</i> (34)
FLANDERS (124)			WALLONIA (75)		

Figure 7. The structure of the government formed in March 2008 (party of Prime Minister in bold).

temporary government. After a failed attempt to put the outgoing purple coalition—now a minority coalition—back on the rails, he was able to convince MR to accept the entrance of the PS in the coalition. The Flemish socialists were invited, but after having lost so many votes at the polls they preferred to stay out. Like all the other parties, their strategy at the federal level is inspired mainly by the prospects of elections at the regional level in 2009. In March 2008 this temporary government was replaced by a cabinet that is supposed to remain in office until the federal elections of 2011. The former Flemish Prime Minister Yves Leterme simply replaced the ‘transition’ Prime Minister Verhofstadt. The major difference between the government formed and the one that appeared impossible to form, is the presence of the PS. The federal government is now a bit more congruent than it would have been without the PS (Figure 7).

Conclusions

This paper wanted to explore the dynamics of coalition formation in a multi-layered polity. The recent Belgian history offers a number of interesting cases of coalition formation and allows us to reflect on the way in which the multi-layered institutional context interferes with coalition formation.

The absence of federal parties—a Belgian peculiarity—has important consequences. It means that regional and federal elections do not really differ from each other. In both cases the campaign is split and the election results are read as the results of two different elections. It allows parties to pool their personnel and to use the attractive candidates whenever they need them. It means that after federal elections nobody represents the centre because no party engages in an electoral dialogue with the Belgian population. And, finally, it leads to an almost permanent campaign, with every process of election formation looking forward to the next election, always being an election at the other level than the one where a coalition is being formed. For the Belgian parties there has been a learning process, leading possibly to changing

again the rhythm of the elections (i.e. organizing them simultaneously rather than separately). Electoral cycles are thus a crucial variable in this respect.

In 1995 and 1999 we witnessed a clear willingness to build not only symmetrical federal governments but also congruent federal and regional governments. All parties believed that this was easier to manage. In 1999 the (albeit closely) leading party of Flanders did not take the initiative to form a regional government because it would have been isolated in that government. Oversized coalitions were formed at all levels to keep them symmetrical and congruent. Only the VU then opted for isolation at the regional level, trying to play with the possibilities it offered, among others putting pressure on the bridging parties. Yet the weakness of the VU resulted in the party splitting apart between the governing and the opposition strategy.

In 2003 the Green parties found themselves, as a result of the federal election results—in an isolated position. They had to think about the best strategy to follow and decided that incongruence and isolation was not necessarily a bad solution. They combined office-related arguments (the job not finished) with office-seeking arguments (keeping the state resources) and vote-seeking arguments (remaining visible at least at one level). Particularly the Francophone Greens could, as a surplus party, really make a choice and opted for incongruence.

In 2004 we see two of the major parties opting very consciously for incongruence. The Flemish Christian democrats led a Flemish coalition meant to build their way back into power at the federal level also. While, in 1999, incongruence was avoided, in 2004 it was used deliberately. A choice was made for governing at one level only and for strongly building up (again) an image of a party able to govern efficiently.

The 2007 coalition formation was extremely difficult. One of the reasons for that is the incongruence that was built again into the relations between the federal and both regional coalitions. The notion of bridging and isolated parties seems to be an analytical tool that can help in understanding the party strategies and that might be used for the analysis of other incongruent coalitions in other regionalized states.

The Belgian stories of coalition formation also offer several striking examples of the way in which politics at one level affects the other level. It means that the analysis of one level—for coalition formation but also for other strategic choices of parties—cannot be understood properly by looking at that level only. In 1999 the Walloon and the federal governments were oversized, only to keep the congruence between the levels. The 2007 federal government is oversized because it appeared extremely difficult to divide the two Francophone parties—PS and CDh—governing together at the Walloon level. The decision of both Green parties in 2003 to stay in the regional governments was inspired—among others—by an attempt to remain visible until the next federal elections. In 2004 the coalition agreement of the Flemish regional government contained policies that had to be implemented at the federal level by the bridging parties. In 2004 the VLD was punished at the polls for a decision—local voting rights for non-Belgians—that it had not wanted to stop in the federal parliament.

Some of these things might be Belgian idiosyncrasies. The absence of federal parties and the full split of the party competition along the language lines is, indeed, exceptional. The bipolar federation and its inbuilt consociational logic are also quite specific to Belgium. Yet, the Belgian case presented here does confirm the idea that

theories of coalition formation need to be expanded and contextualized. Understanding and explaining the strategies of the parties is not too difficult. They do, indeed, try to maximize their pay-offs. But the way in which they make these hard choices can be understood only by bringing the full institutional context into the picture. And it goes without saying that the multi-layered aspect of it cannot be ignored.

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Note

¹Most Belgian political parties have recently adopted new names. This paper will always use these new names, even when referring to earlier periods when the parties used older names. Only for the Volksunie—a party that split into two successor parties NVA and Spirit—will I use VU as long as the old party existed. The Belgian parties that are present in this article are:

CD&V: Flemish Christian democrats (formerly CVP)

CDh: Francophone Christian democrats (formerly PSC)

PS: Francophone socialists

SP.a: Flemish socialists (formerly SP)

Open VLD: Flemish liberals (formerly PVV)

MR: Francophone liberals

Ecolo: Francophone greens

Groen: Flemish greens (formerly Agalev)

Vlaams Belang: Flemish Right-wing extremist party (formerly Vlaams Blok)

Volksunie: Flemish regionalist party (was dissolved in 2001)

NVA: Conservative Flemish regionalists (official successor party of Volksunie)

Vlaams Progressieven VL.Pro: Left-liberal Flemish regionalists (part of former Volksunie, formerly named Spirit)

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