



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on October 16, 2012

Belgian Separatist Party Wins Key Election

Elections this past weekend in Antwerp and other parts of Flemish Belgium, or Flanders, have again demonstrated the fragility of a forced-together country of peoples who have no particular wish to be connected. The Flemish separatist party, NVA or New Flemish Alliance — which had been largely responsible for the impasse that led to Belgium being the parliamentary democracy with the longest time span after a general election before a government was formed — [made major gains](#) in municipal and regional elections.



According to the *Wall Street Journal*,

The leader of the Flemish separatist party won Sunday's mayoral election in Antwerp, Belgium's second-largest city, and Bart De Wever used his victory to call for the government to go further toward splitting the country.

New Flemish Alliance President Bart De Wever summed up his party's aims:

We want to give Flemings the government they want at all levels. That is why I call on Elio Di Rupo and the Francophone politicians. Take up your responsibility. Your taxation government without a majority in Flanders is not backed by Flemings. Let us work together on a reform that gives Flemings and francophones the government that they deserve. These are municipal elections. Each is free to declare what he wants on an election night.

The *Journal* noted that “political tensions run high in Belgium, a federal state consisting of Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia and the bilingual Brussels-capital region.”

The paper continued,

“Your government does not have the support of Flanders,” Mr. De Wever said in a speech in Antwerp that was broadcast nationwide, calling on French-speaking socialist Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo and the French-speaking parties to “take responsibility” and negotiate another state overhaul to give more independence to the regions. “We’ve reached a point in history where there’s no going back.”

Belgium will have a general election in 2014, and these local elections are almost certain to give momentum to the NVA, which is already the largest political party in the national legislature. There are no less than 11 parties that had seats in the Chamber of Representatives, and out of the 150 seats in that chamber, the NVA's 27 make it the largest party. Though most of the seats are held by Flemish parties, the divisions are close.

Two of the political parties in opposition to the NVA are socialist — one Flemish and one Walloon. De Wever and his party note that most Belgians — six million out of a population of 11 million — are Flemish and about 3.5 million Walloon, French-speaking people. The people in Brussels, the nation's capital, do not easily fit into either category.



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Flemish earn higher incomes, tend to work longer hours, and save more, and also rely less on the state to support them. Part of the separatist movement represented by the NVA comes from a sense that the Flemish taxpayers are supporting a large number of Walloons who receive government benefits. In this respect, the division in Belgium resembles the divisions within the European Union between nations that are more productive and save more, such as Germany and Finland, and those spendthrift member states such as Greece that have fallen so deeply in debt that default seems inevitable.

In the case of Belgium, the legacy of modern European history also haunts the linguistically divided nation. The Flemish are more naturally a part of the Netherlands, and like the Netherlands, they might have been able to stay out of WWII had they not been artificially joined to the French-speaking Walloons. Antagonism between these two forcibly connected peoples was so strong that when the Germans were invading the nation, there were incidents of Flemish and Walloon military units firing on each other instead of on the Germans.

The results of different peoples being forced into the same nation have not been favorable in modern Europe. Yugoslavia, for instance, artificially joined together Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians, and Montenegrins into the same nation. These six peoples spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and had different levels of economic and educational achievement.

Yugoslavia broke apart in WWII and was only reunited under the iron hand of the communist dictator Marshal Tito. In the 1990s, this artificial nation began to disintegrate into civil war. Although conventional wisdom faults the Serbs, there was plenty of blame to go around. Atrocities were met by counter-atrocities. But the result of the disintegration of this invented nation is domestic tranquillity.

Czechoslovakia was also created out of whole cloth by the great powers at the Treaty of Versailles. Czechs and Slovaks were cobbled together into the same nation, but there were also Germans, Hungarians, Poles, and other minorities compelled to live in a land largely dominated by the Bohemian and Moravians, who formed a narrow majority of the population. Thus Czechoslovakia, much like Belgium, was industrialized and had a well-educated and generally affluent population. Its people also had the good sense to end an unhappy and coerced marriage of Czechs and Slovaks by the "Velvet Divorce." And it has worked.

Interestingly, sometimes peoples have managed to live together happily despite different languages and religions. Switzerland is a perfect example of this sort of success story. The cantons of the tiny nation were never forced into a common confederation, but instead saw mutual self-interest in a confederation in which local cantonal government was granted great power and the national government had few and closely restricted powers, focusing on self-defense.

The Swiss followed the advice of America's first president and stayed out of entangling alliances. They have not been involved in a war in 200 years. The Swiss currency is also robust, and because the nation is independent of the European Union, the prospect of economic collapse prevalent in many EU member states does not threaten the Swiss.

Will Flanders go the way of the Czech Republic or Slovenia? The irony of Belgium — whose capital is Brussels, the home of the European Union — will not be lost if that happens. Separatism, from Scotland to Catalonia, is leading an increasing number of Europeans to realize that bigger is not better when it comes to nations and governments.



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