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# A Swiss prescription for what ails Belgium

**By Andrew Reding**

A political sore is festering at the heart of the European Union. The inability of Belgium's feuding Dutch- and French-speaking political parties to form a stable government has fueled talk of partition. Yet opinion polls suggest most on both sides do not want a breakup. Given that the existing constitutional arrangement makes an eventual split virtually inevitable, why not look to nearby Switzerland for inspiration?

Switzerland has thrived as a stable multilingual democracy for centuries. Its French and German populations remained unified even through two world wars that pitted German and French populations in mortal combat just beyond its borders.

Belgium is similar to Switzerland in size and population. It likewise straddles the boundary between the Latin and Germanic zones of Europe.

Dutch speakers are in the majority, as German speakers are in Switzerland. French speakers make up 40 per cent of the population in Belgium; in Switzerland, French and Italian speakers represent 18 and 10 per cent of the population respectively. Both countries are divided into linguistic zones.

The critical difference is in the constitutional arrangement. Whereas Belgium made the transition to a federal system by splitting along its linguistic divide into Flanders and Wallonia, Switzerland formed as a confederation of more local levels of government — the cantons.

Belgium made the mistake of arming its linguistic groups with parliaments, one for Dutch-speakers, one for French-speakers, with Brussels set aside as a bilingual capital district. Compounding the problem, voters in Flanders may only vote for Flemish parties in national elections, and voters in Wallonia for francophone parties. That has rewarded politicians who appeal to factional interests at the expense of the nation.

It has also turned the linguistic border into a flashpoint.

Flemish politicians feel they must defend every centimetre of that border tenaciously, even if it means forcing French-speaking majorities in Brussels suburbs to conduct business in Dutch, have their children educated in Dutch and only be able to vote for Flemish parties.

With Brussels now an overwhelmingly French-speaking enclave surrounded by Flanders, francophone politicians fearing isolation in an independent Flanders want to acquire a slice of Dutch-speaking territory to link it with Wallonia.

In either case, local rights are jeopardized by the quest for linguistic purity.

Switzerland, on the other hand, never empowered the linguistic groups that could have torn it apart. Instead, it divided power between more local units and the national government. Of 26 cantons, 17 are German, four French, one Italian, and four mixed.

These cantons are jealous of their powers. The rural inhabitants of Schwitz are no more willing to be dominated by their fellow German-speakers of Zurich than inhabitants of Neuchâtel are by their fellow French-speakers in Geneva. By fostering loyalty to locality rather than to linguistic group, Switzerland has ensured the loyalty of all to the nation.

Were power to be devolved to Brussels and the 10 provinces, a similar arrangement would be conceivable in Belgium. Unlike the recently invented jurisdictions of Flanders and Wallonia, the provinces have histories as venerable as Switzerland's cantons. The provincial capitals include the historic cities of Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Namur and Liège, with their own dialects and fierce loyalties. One look at the magnificent Provinciaal Hof in Bruges allows one to grasp the rootedness of Belgian provinces.

With the exception of French speakers in the Brussels suburbs, none of the provinces has an internal language problem that threatens national stability. Brussels was once capital of Brabant, but like Belgium itself, the surrounding province was split by language. The messy partition could be remedied by expanding bilingual Brussels — the cosmopolitan capital region could assume the role of a Swiss mixed-language canton without threatening the linguistic integrity of the other provinces.

The other critical change would be to emulate the Swiss parliament, with nationwide political parties, a lower house composed of representatives in proportion to population, and an upper house in which Brussels and the provinces would have equal representation in order to defend local interests.

A long shot? Unquestionably. Factional interests created by the previous unwise “reform” will surely resist. But if Belgium is worth preserving, as most of its citizens still believe, no other type of arrangement stands much of a chance against the centrifugal forces of linguistic factionalism.

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