Territorialising Brussels: Belgian Devolution and the Spatial Conundrum of a Bilingual Capital

Guy Baeten
University of Lund, Department of Human Geography

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Correspondence to: j.anderson@qub.ac.uk; m.komarova@qub.ac.uk

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Editorial note
An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Project's annual Workshop, on ‘The City and the Contested State’, in Belfast in September 2008. Brussels is one of the ‘other divided cities’ being directly studied in the Project, and the only one where language, rather than religion, is the main ‘marker’ of ethno-national identities.
Biographical note
Guy Baeten is a Reader in Geography at the Department of Human Geography, University of Lund, Sweden. He specializes in European urban geography with a focus on large-scale urban development projects, financial aspects of urbanization, social deprivation, urban conflict, and imaginations of urban futures. His case study cities include London, Stockholm and Malmö as well as Brussels. He also does research on society-nature relationships, transportation, environmental dystopia and theoretical aspects of sustainable development.
Territorialising Brussels.
Belgian devolution and the spatial conundrum of a bilingual capital
Guy Baeten

Abstract
In spite of severe and continuing regional-linguistic tensions, far-reaching Belgian devolution has thus far prevented the Belgian state from breaking up. The territorialisation of Belgium in strictly defined language communities and territorial regions proved key to the relative success of regional-linguistic peacekeeping in Belgium. However, bilingual Brussels appears as the spatial conundrum in the permanent Belgian state reform. Carefully drawn borders around the territory of Brussels Capital Region are currently challenged by a set of economic, linguistic and socio-cultural changes that undermine the existing linguistic-territorial compromise. The paper will try to demonstrate how the linguistic antagonism of Belgium and Brussels, and the current governmental crisis, has to be understood in the light of historical class tensions, socio-economic development, continuing urbanisation and the ‘Europeanisation’ of Brussels.

Key words: language communities, regionalisation, urbanisation, linguistic conflict

Introduction
The paper seeks to demonstrate how Belgian state crises stem from the contradiction between newly emerging social, economic and linguistic realities on the one hand and, on the other hand, the fixed nature of language and regional boundaries drawn up to soothe earlier regional-linguistic conflicts. The virtually permanent nature of the state restructuring process appears to be both a strength and a weakness: on the one hand, it has resulted in high levels of devolution that would try to satisfy demands of both regional-linguistic communities, which partly explains the non-violent nature of Brussels’ and Belgium’s enduring regional-linguistic conflict. On the other hand, unending calls for further state reform and the search for ever more complex compromises have put a considerable burden on the smooth functioning of the Belgian state and the role of Brussels therein, at times resulting in lengthy periods of political paralysis. The main focus of this paper is on how contemporary social, economic and linguistic changes undermine the existing regional-linguistic compromise and, indeed, the very bi-partisan nature of the Belgian state and the Belgian way of doing politics. The city of Brussels, once more, appears as a territorial conundrum: earlier delineations have come to act as a straightjacket that no longer matches social, linguistic and economic realities. The
paper will start with a sketch of preceding historical regional-linguistic compromises. Contemporary regional tensions in Brussels and Belgium cannot be understood unless they are seen as the continuation of an on-going process of state reform and further ‘territorialisation’ of the Brussels. The paper will try to make clear how these tensions have to be understood in an historical context of class, socio-economic development.

**Belgium as a unitary state**

Roughly speaking, between the foundation of the Belgian state in 1830 and the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Belgium was a unitary state, with its entire territory officially bilingual, until the enforcement of a series of ‘language laws’ that made gradual concessions regarding the use of Flemish in public places from 1878 onwards. The first Flemish schools opened in Brussels in 1883, then still a mainly Flemish-speaking town. In practice, however, French firmly remained the *lingua franca* of the economic, cultural, intellectual and political elites throughout the country, including Flanders, until after the Second World War. The status of Flemish was gradually reduced to that of a dialect associated with the uneducated classes, ‘rurality’ and backwardness.

The city of Brussels was the urban embodiment of the 19th-century unitary constellation of Belgium: it controlled most of the heavy industries (coal mining, steel industries) in the southern region of Wallonia and it absorbed the bulk of lucrative profits from the Congolese territories. The national political and economic elites and the Brussels-urban elites, then, largely coincided and the unitary status of Belgium went largely unquestioned (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2007). The city of Brussels was the prosperous capital both of the first continental nation to be industrialized through British investments and expertise, and of a wealthy Belgian-Congolese economic empire based on the ruthless extraction of raw materials, from rubber to diamonds. The city of Brussels both absorbed and symbolised this national and colonial wealth. The Cinquantenaire, the triumph arc celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Belgian state in 1880, symbolises the 19th-century self-confident and self-content Belgian state with Brussels as its natural centre of gravity.

Meanwhile, continuous pressure by a relatively small but growing Flemish cultural elite, benefiting from a strong grassroots presence in schools, churches and other cultural institutions in villages and small towns, resulted in gradual concessions...
regarding the use of Flemish in public life through a series of consecutive ‘language laws’. This of course did not instantly undermine the status of French as the prime language of business and politics in Flanders, but it allowed changes that would significantly alter the relative importance of Flanders and Flemish in a largely unitary constellation. The first Flemish-speaking university was opened in the city of Ghent in 1930. These first regional-linguistic reforms would lay the foundation of a remarkably complex – at times impenetrable for those unfamiliar with Belgian regional-linguistic history – Belgian devolution process that is still ongoing. The economic crisis of the 1930s, and the subsequent war during which Belgium was occupied by German forces after an 18-day blitzkrieg, would postpone the regionalisation process.

**Drawing a line: language border formation 1961-3 and the birth of the ‘Brussels region’**

With the Belgian economic infrastructure relatively intact after the Second World War (Van der Wee, 1983), and the financial elites conservatively geared towards either investment abroad in the colonies or investment in domestic basic industries such as steel and coal (then in high demand for post-war reconstruction efforts) (Vandenbroucke, 1981), the Belgian economy experienced a remarkable boom in the years following World War II, making the most of its pre-war, pre-Fordist base and the riches of the colony. In spite of the obvious lack of industrial renewal, the 1958 Brussels World Exhibition celebrated the Belgian capital as a global technological spearhead, symbolised by the exhibition’s signature building, the Atomium, shaped like the unit cell of an iron crystal. The nine atoms also stood for the nine provinces of a united Belgium. Expo 1958 would be the last show of Belgian unity towards the outside world.

The post-war lethargy of the industrial and financial elites inevitably resulted in the gradual deterioration of the production infrastructure, culminating in a severe economic crisis, high unemployment levels and a general strike during the 1960-1 ‘Winter of Discontent’ (Mandel, 1962) (see figure 1). The strike, a response to the so-called Unity Law imposing austerity policies on the nation, proved fundamental in the shaping of the Belgian regional-linguistic conflict. The five-week strike’s centre of gravity was in the heavy industries of Wallonia, the French-speaking, socialist-dominated, southern region, with considerable support in the Flemish port cities of Ghent and Antwerp. The
fragmented support from workers, unions and political parties in conservative, catholic Flanders, a region enjoying growing levels of foreign direct investment from the fifties onwards – in sharp contrast with the ageing industrial base of Wallonia – made the Walloon strike leaders’ goal of a national strike unreachable. Facing defeat, and realising that uneven regional development would make nation-wide industrial action an increasingly remote goal, Walloon labour unions started to campaign for more regional powers to reform the Walloon industrial structure. Wallonia’s regionalism, hence, grew partly out of a distrust of Flanders, which had let Wallonia down during a pivotal moment of industrial action, and a distrust of Brussels-based political-economic elites, which had let Wallonia down when it badly needed industrial renewal. This change in focus of the Walloon unions initiated the fusion of labour movement struggles and regional-economic struggles (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2007). Socio-economic struggle and the demand for more regional-economic autonomy thus merged and formed the basis of an effective regionalisation of Belgian politics. On the Flemish side, the call for more regional autonomy was equally strong if not stronger, albeit more inspired by cultural-linguistic worries. The combination of regional-economic and regional-cultural asymmetries triggered a constitutional challenge that has occupied, and at times paralysed, the core of Belgian politics ever since.

<table>
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<th>Figure 1: Index of industrial production in North-Western European countries</th>
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<td>1962 (1938 = 100)</td>
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*Source: Mandel, 1962*

Severe regional tensions thus forced the national political elites to guide Belgium into a long-lasting process of regionalisation, starting with the language border formation in the early sixties and followed by a range of successive constitutional reforms from 1970
onwards. The territorialisation of Belgium along regional-linguistic lines seemed inevitable after the 1960-1 Winter of Discontent, but it also seemed mission impossible: how could a line be drawn between two language groups that would deemed fair by all parties involved, including language minorities on each side of the border who could easily feel neglected and mistreated? And what to do with bilingual Brussels?

The establishment of language borders between Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels was the result of 15 years of research and political negotiation, starting with the foundation of the Study Centre Harmel in 1948 and finally resulting in parliamentary approval in 1962 (it was implemented the next year). The language border effectively altered the existing philosophy behind the appeasement of regional conflicts. Since 1921, the linguistic regime in any given municipality, Flemish or Walloon, was determined by language counts (organized since 1846) which would decide by simple majority rule whether a municipal authority should be French or Flemish-speaking, and whether the language minority would be sizeable enough (at least 20 pct and later 30 pct) to be granted certain language minority rights in public life. The language counts of 1930 and 1947 (the 1940 count was cancelled) allowed a flexible language policy, based on the ‘personal’ principle: municipalities would be regarded as either ‘French’ or ‘Flemish’ simply because of the number of persons declaring themselves French or Flemish. Consequently, language majorities, based on language counts, could easily change, and that certainly happened in Brussels and surrounding municipalities, where many Flemish immigrants declared themselves French-speaking after having swapped to French as their prime language in public life. Conversely, French-speaking immigrants in Flemish communities would rather continue to declare themselves French-speaking. The result was a rapid ‘francophonisation’ of the Brussels region, not only in practice but also in politics. The number of people declaring themselves Flemish-speaking only in the ‘Brussels region’ decreased from 14.7 to 9.4 percent between the counts of 1930 and 1947 (starting at 67.1 percent in 1846). Unsurprisingly, this has been the main thorn in the side of Flemish nationalists for many decades. Flemish was rapidly losing terrain and it was feared that French would ‘spread like an oil-stain’ through Flanders stemming from the capital. More than 50 Flemish municipalities, driven by Flemish-nationalist sentiments, boycotted the 1947 count. The count scheduled for 1960 never materialised because of continuing Flemish protests and demonstrations, culminating in the infamous

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1 Brussels region refers to the 19 municipalities that form the current Brussels Capital Region
Flemish ‘Marches on Brussels’ of 1960 and 1962 which triggered considerable doses of civil unrest, including street fights amongst opposing language groups (Witte et al., 1997). It had become clear that the non-territorial ‘personal’ principle could not establish enduring peace between the two language communities, and, together with the growing regional socio-economic divide stemming from the Winter of Discontent, it had become clear that major reform was inevitable.

Meanwhile, the Harmel Study Centre was investigating the possibility of replacing the ‘personal principle’ with a ‘territorial principle’ as the prime criterion to define whether municipalities would belong to either Flanders, Wallonia or bilingual Brussels. Eventually, two experts, one Flemish and one French-speaking, were given the task to draw borderlines between the regions. Against the odds, both drawings were remarkably similar and after discussions and adjustments, the Study Centre was able to table a proposal for a territorial regionalization of Belgium along regional-linguistic lines in 1952. It would take until 1961 before the proposal was finally submitted to parliament, driven by regional antagonisms stemming from the Winter of Discontent, and it would take another year of political debate before the ‘language border’ was finally approved.

Brussels the conundrum

One of the Achilles heels of this historical territorial compromise proved to be ‘language concessions’ given to francophone minorities in some Flemish municipalities on the borders with both Wallonia and Brussels. Although now living on Flemish ‘territory’, francophone minorities continued to benefit from francophone municipal services as a temporary measure until these minorities would be ‘assimilated’, as the jargon would have it. From the francophone viewpoint, language concessions were a necessary element of the compromise since they did not want to completely endorse the ‘territorial principle’ at the expense of the personal principle. Over the years, these temporary language concessions have gained a de facto permanent status – a new thorn in the side of Flemish nationalists who would like to see the language concessions completely ‘extinguished’ by now.

Since the territorialisation of the regional-linguistic conflict in 1962, consecutive state reforms, starting in 1970, have installed Flemish, French and Brussels local
governments and parliaments and gradually transferred parts of national powers to those local institutions, resulting in a highly devolved state. The devolution process has been cumbersome, and particularly obscure for outsiders due to its highly legalistic nature and a good deal of political gymnastics, but it has been a relative success as far as regional-linguistic peacekeeping is concerned. A key element of the relative success of the Belgian regionalisation process, and also a key element in dealing with the conundrum of bilingual Brussels, is the legal distinction between ‘communities’ and ‘regions’ (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 : communities and regions in Belgium**

Regions are territorial (Flanders, Brussels, Wallonia) and their respective authorities deal with ‘territorial’ matters from economic policy to public transport. Communities are language-based (French, Flemish, plus a small German-speaking community near the German border) and their respective authorities deal with ‘personal’ issues from culture to education. In this way, the Brussels regional authority can broadly speaking handle territorial, non-language related matters, while the Flemish-speaking minority of Brussels is part of the wider Flemish community authorities which are responsible for both Flanders and the Flemish minority in Brussels. The same is true for the French-speaking community. This co-existence of a ‘personal’ (cultural, linguistic) approach and a ‘territorial’ approach has thus far managed to somehow meet a wide array of regional-linguistic demands, sensitivities and sentiments. It has created a unique status for the
city of Brussels where both approaches overlap, and it has de facto secured the very survival of the Belgian state.

This could not prevent, however, that Brussels sank into an unfavourable economic, cultural and political position from the 1960s onwards for several reasons: 1) the independence of Congo in 1960 initiated the demise of the Brussels-Belgian financial elite’s power base; 2) the sunset industries in Wallonia no longer secured a steady income stream to the Brussels capital holdings; 3) Flanders (and Wallonia) were turning towards foreign direct investment streams from the US and elsewhere, rather than the Brussels financial institutions, as their main hope for regional-economic development; 4) Flanders and Wallonia, in their search for more political autonomy, were turning their back towards Brussels as Belgium’s main decision centre; 5) Brussels suffered from stark anti-urban sentiments in the provinces where it was regarded as an ‘oil stain’ spreading French, socialism, crime and foreigners into pastoral, conservative, catholic, small-town Flanders; 6) Spatial planning in and around Brussels, during the 1960s and 1970s, was strongly influenced by this anti-urban current (De Decker et al IJURR): first, large-scale surburbanisation absorbed emigration from the city of Brussels to surrounding municipalities in both Flanders and Wallonia; second, an extensive network of railways (the most dense railway network in Europe) kept people under conservative catholic control in villages and small towns while able to commute to their Brussels office work spaces; and third, extensive motorway works, at some places ripping apart entire inner-city neighbourhoods, met the desire for motorised commuting to and from Brussels. In short, Brussels underwent a crisis of legitimacy as the capital of the nation. Brussels became the unloved capital of an unloved state from the 1960s onwards, suffering from weakened economic power, undermined political authority, and inability to unite the country (through signature cultural institutions, landmark architecture, international prestige, or otherwise). The vacuum of authority was soon filled by local mavericks who exploited the then almost anarchist-liberal attitude towards the inner city of Brussels. They embarked upon radical modernist building projects, such as the (only partly implemented) 80-tower Manhattan Plan. The deterioration of Brussels’ built environment, including the demolition of a significant part of its art nouveau heritage, and its replacement with brutal modern architecture, only served to further fuel anti-Brussels sentiments outside Brussels. Flemish nationalists actively campaigned against what they labeled the ‘Brusselisation’ of the Brussels perimeter.
Since then, Belgium, and the Brussels region in particular, have undergone significant linguistic, demographic, cultural, economic and political changes that have not only partly revived the economic, cultural and social status of Brussels but also impose serious challenges on the current territorial organisation of the Belgian state, and the place of Brussels therein.

Linguistic contradictions

A recent scientific language survey (not a proper language count) proves the consolidation of French as Brussels’ *lingua franca*: most people (more than 95 percent) claim to speak French (very) well, while the number of people who considers themselves (very) fluent in Dutch has shrunk from 33 percent to 28 percent between 2000 and 2006. Significantly, Dutch (or Flemish) has lost its role as Brussels’ second language to English: the number of (very) fluent English speakers increased from 33 to 35 percent in the same period. Moreover, some minority languages such as Arabic are slowly disappearing as descendants of (South-European, North-African and Turkish) immigrants largely convert to French as their preferred language. These simple linguistic changes, an integral part of the Europeanisation of Brussels (see later), seem to undermine one of the key features of the Brussels political compromise: language parity between French and Flemish. Seeking uneasy power balances between Belgium’s two main languages – an unending obsession of the Belgian political elites – is unceremoniously rendered marginal by newly emerging socio-linguistic realities. The legal arrangement that every decision by the Brussels government has to be taken on the basis of language parity (each language group has to formally agree on decisions) is becoming increasingly untenable due to the relative marginalisation of the Flemish language in Brussels. Moreover, the de facto permanent state of temporary language concessions to French-speaking minorities on the Flanders-Brussels borders has given credibility to the idea that some or all of these ‘concession municipalities’ should become fully part of the bilingual Brussels region. This adjustment of political realities to socio-linguistic realities seems virtually impossible in the light of the current political climate (see later).
**Socio-cultural contradictions**

There is a growing disparity between political concerns about language parity in Brussels on the one hand and everyday socio-cultural life on the other hand. First, linguistic adherence is not a prime identity marker amongst Brussels citizens. The 2006 survey (Janssens, 2008) asked Brussels inhabitants what they would associate themselves with most. Flemish speakers in Brussels named ‘Belgium’ as their prime association, followed by ‘Brussels’. ‘Flemish-speaking’ would only occupy third place. French-speaking inhabitants named ‘Brussels’ first, followed by ‘Belgium’, ‘Europe’ and ‘French-speaking’ in fourth place. According to the survey, only seventeen percent considers living with people who speak another language a ‘problem’. This straightforward quantitative evidence points at the relative unimportance of the bilingual antagonism in everyday life, as well as a contradiction between the socio-cultural realities of the everyday and agendas of national and regional politicians. Taking into consideration recent demonstrations in Brussels for Belgian unity with tens of thousands marching behind the Belgian flag—in sharp contrast with the linguistically divisive 1960s Marches on Brussels—one could argue that there is qualitative evidence of a significant *demise* of bilingual antagonism in Brussels and Belgium.
Unusual sight: 40,000 people marching for Belgian unity at a demonstration in November 2007, sparked by seemingly endless government formation talks between the Flemish and French

Second, Brussels is home to thriving non-Belgian cultures based on its colonial legacy (the Matonge neighbourhood in Brussels has a distinct Congolese flair) and, most prominently, the ‘guest worker’ legacy that has given sizeable parts of the inner city of Brussels a marked Mediterranean (Spanish, Italian, Moroccan, Turkish) presence. Ethnic entrepreneurs have developed a thriving ethnic economy based on trading, street markets, shops and restaurants (see for example Kesteloot and Mistiaen, 1997). These ‘bottom-up’ non-bilingual cultures are evidently defying the bilingual base of Brussels politics and generate a contradiction between the enduring bilingual antagonism and the cosmopolitanism of everyday life.

Third, processes of gentrification, together with a continued effort from the Flemish government to finance Flemish cultural institutions in Brussels, is bringing a group of highly educated Flemish-speaking youngsters to the city centre of Brussels (Van Criefingen, 2003). This group, irrespective of its actual size, has created a small but pertinent and solid Flemish prominence around the Rue Dansart, centred around a lively nightlife scene based on cultural institutions and ‘Flemish’ bars, cafés and restaurants. This presence of a small but self-confident group of Flemish-speaking people, who do
not carry the burden of the traditional linguistic antagonism on their shoulders, is partly eroding the historical language fight by giving Flemish presence in Brussels a novel, more qualitative, meaning and therefore Flemish ‘survival' in the heart of Brussels.

Fourth, the EU presence, together with a strong presence of other international institutions such as the European NATO headquarters, has transformed Brussels from being a small country’s national capital, marred by bi-partisan political fighting, to one of the globe’s key decision centres, resulting in a rapid Europeanisation of the urban socio-cultural fabric (Baeten, 2001b, 2003). This radical urban conversion is, again, undermining the bi-lingual basis of socio-political life in Brussels. The EU employed around 26,000 people in Brussels in 2005, and almost 58,000 jobs (consultant firms, media, hotel and catering, security, etcetera) were estimated to be directly or indirectly dependent on the European Union. Around 13-14 percent of total employment is in the ‘international sector’ (Corijn et al., 2009). In its wake, some international corporations (re)locate their headquarters to Brussels and its outskirts, precisely because of its international character. It goes without saying that Brussels’ Europeanisation has significantly contributed to the rapid cosmopolitanisation of socio-cultural life – beyond its traditional bi-lingual basis. 28 percent of Brussels' inhabitants do not have Belgian nationality, and around half the population is estimated to have a foreign background (DeBoosere, 2008) – one of most dense urban concentrations of ‘foreign presence’ in the world. According to John Stuyck, director of the Brussels-based English-language publishing company Ackroyd Publications,

"... There is a large group emerging from a globalising world and at this point the largest concentration is to be found in Brussels. Brussels is more cosmopolitan than Paris and London. It has been a magnet for people from all over Europe and has been creating a new brand of people that probably is also present in Paris and London but not in the same concentration. They are a very homogeneous group by education, age, salary, social interest, very culture-minded.

And Brussels is not a city that has a strong personality, it has no strong culture of its own... Brussels is a vacuum and the international group has slowly filled that vacuum and given it a personality of its own..."
...What will stay in the Brussels of tomorrow is the culture of everyone. The Flemish will keep their culture, the Germans, the French, and although hopefully, possibly, politically Europe will be one, culturally it will become more multicultural. Brussels is a spearhead of what Europe could be in 100 years. And my personal feeling is that it works. And people are quite keen to meet each other and understand each other. But.... I think... The word cosmopolitanism is a bit passé... we are beyond that, we are going a bit further... cosmopolitanism somehow still relates to nationality.” (interview, 2004)

While Brussels has become undeniably ‘European’, that does not mean that the city of Brussels can profile itself around this image – and hence smoothly supersede its bilingual luggage – in an unproblematic manner. First, the emerging European elites are poorly embedded in local political, administrative and socio-cultural structures (Swyngedouw and Baeten, 2001). Second, from the viewpoint of some local citizens, the Europeanisation of Brussels is nothing more than the continuation of the ‘Brusselisation’ (cf. supra) of Brussels and its surroundings (Doucet, 2007). The spread of English as a symbol of internationalisation, the EU impact on housing prices and the lack of adequate housing policies (Bernard, 2008) forcing low-income groups away from the greater Brussels area, the demand on infrastructure provision, together with the endless need for additional office space and its devastating impact on existing urban design and architecture, are a considerable price to pay to host the EU institutions. The Brussels’ (but also Flemish and Walloon) attitude towards European presence is largely ambiguous: while there is a general understanding that Europe brings wealth and employment to the city and the country, there is also a dose of ignorance and indifference towards the European institutions – as in other European countries. In sum, it can be argued that the Europeanisation of Brussels may have emasculated its bilingual foundations, but cannot provide a viable alternative vision for Brussels as the ‘post-national capital’.

**Economic contradictions**

First, the city of Brussels provides more than 600,000 jobs, but slightly more than half or 54 percent (Baeten, 2001a) of the Brussels’ working population resides outside the region and hence has a negative effect on the Brussels income tax base. Enlarging ‘Brussels capital region’ to incorporate some of its wealthy suburban municipalities is
unthinkable in the light of the historical language compromises made earlier. Any enlargement of Brussels would be regarded by Flemish nationalists as ‘giving away’ Flemish territory. The borders of the Brussels region hence act as a straight jacket that leave very little room for territorial state reform. In a similar vein, both the regions of Flanders and Wallonia are providing land for office construction in the immediate vicinity of the Brussels region and, in that way, cash in on the ‘world city’ status of Brussels while keeping employment on their own respective territories. The perverse effect is that the Brussels region hosts some of the poorest Belgian municipalities while it is the second richest region of Europe in terms of GDP per head of the population (Baeten, 2003). Income flows from centre to periphery and tax base erosion are not unique phenomena for the city of Brussels, of course, but possible solutions are seriously hampered by the strict territorialisation of Brussels due to its legacy of regional-linguistic conflict.

Meanwhile, attracted by the city’s obvious European and international image, international investment flows continue to enter the city and its hinterland. A telling example is the decision of Chrysler to locate their European headquarters in Brussels after their merger with Daimler in 1998. The then director Thomas Marinelli justifies the locational choice like this:

“Besides the local labour situation… I have found it to be very easy to recruit people to come to Belgium, to Brussels. Mostly because the image of an international city. That is one of the reasons we did not relocate to Stuttgart because we have a really good mix here of Europeans. … the single largest factor why we didn’t [relocate to Stuttgart] was that we couldn’t retain people with an international mindset, with a pan-European mindset, in a provincial city like Stuttgart. That was the feedback we got that it is not an international city. Even though there were Italian, Swedish or Spanish, Brussels was a perfectly acceptable place to live. Stuttgart was not … it loses the international flair, which they are stimulated by, when they live here.”(quoted in Elmhorn, 2001)

Several company directors refer to the cultural and economic ‘neutrality’ of Brussels, or the absence of a ‘dominant national culture’ as a reason to locate their headquarters in
the Brussels area. According to its then director Harry Elhardt, AT&T’s decision to place their European headquarters in Brussels was partly because

“You never feel culturally deprived, you never feel like a foreigner. You can live as you live back in the USA. It is not like in Paris or London where you feel the dominant national culture” (quoted in Elmhorn, 2001)

The Swedish IT company Icon MediaLab decided to relocate their headquarters from Stockholm to Brussels because

“we want to be a European based company, even though we will still have our roots in Sweden… but we want to be seen and show ourselves as a European company. Brussels as a city has the European emblem for natural reasons, it contributed to the decision to move here… Brussels is a common denominator” (Claes Torneman, quoted in Elmhorn, 2001)

These quotes illustrate well how foreign investors enter Brussels with a clearly non-local, non-bilingual image in mind – if anything, the Germanic-Latin ambiguity would be seen as part of the city’s European status, rather than a cumbersome source of political conflict and peacekeeping efforts.

In sum, Brussels is rapidly growing out of its territorial borders in economic terms, resulting in concentrations of wealth immediately outside the region and concentrations of poverty on its own soil, while the historical language compromises and sensitivities make it near to impossible to redraw borders to make Brussels fit its new spatial economic realities. In addition, foreign investors contribute to the further internationalisation of Brussels, and consider the multilingual and multicultural realities of Brussels a locational asset rather than a burden. The gap between, on the one hand, languages as economic assets, and, on the other hand, languages as political, social and cultural ‘problems’ that necessitate heroic political negotiation rounds to conjure up yet another ‘historical compromise’ that would last for a while, could not be wider.
Conclusions

This working paper argued that Belgian state crises emerge from the contradiction between newly emerging social, economic and linguistic spatialities on the one hand and, on the other hand, the fixed nature of language and regional boundaries drawn up to soothe earlier regional-linguistic conflicts. The careful delineation of the bi-lingual territory of ‘Brussels' has played a crucial role in Belgium’s linguistic pacification process during the second half of the twentieth century. Today, however, the borders of Brussels no longer coincide with social, cultural and economic territorial realities of the Brussels and Belgian economy. Brussels’ boundaries, once the territorial answer to a national bilingual antagonism, are now geographical signifiers of a past that paradoxically haunts the future of the whole nation. The borders of Brussels have come to act as a straightjacket for a cosmopolitan, European capital city bursting out of its regional-linguistic confines of the past; Brussels has become the Gordian knot in Belgium’s survival strategies. Proposals to rethink the territory of ‘Brussels’ to make it match its post-national and post-bilingual status, unleash nationalist sentiments that make it extremely difficult to continue with the reform of the Belgian state.
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