

Regionalist Parties in Belgium (VU, RW, FDF): Victims of Their Own Success?

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ABSTRACT This paper tackles the question of regionalist parties, a quite underdeveloped aspect of the literature, even if the phenomenon is of increasing importance in European democracies. In that sense, Belgian regionalist parties (VU, FDF and RW) are an interesting case study. They recorded significant success in the 1960s–1970s. Yet, three decades later, they disappeared or declined severely. This paper shows how this ‘Icarus’ fate’ is explained by the fact that Belgian regionalist parties were victims of their own success. After having demonstrated the incomplete and indirect success of these parties using Harmel’s dimensions, this study demonstrates how this success turned all favourable indicators red, leading to the decline and extinction of the three regionalist parties.

KEY WORDS: regionalist parties, party success, party decline, Belgium

Introduction

The interest that political scientists are showing in the study of regionalist parties is relatively recent. Literature on the subject is thus rather underdeveloped. However, within this literature, the Belgian case is far from being ignored (Dewit, 2005). Actually, the Flemish regionalist party, *Volkswunie* (VU), is one of the top seeds in this literature. In contrast, the French-speaking regionalist parties (*Front démocratique des francophones*, FDF; *Rassemblement wallon*, RW) have largely been ignored by researchers.

However, this interest in Belgian regionalist parties is not very surprising considering the significant impact they had on Belgian cultural and political life from the 1960s to the 1990s. In 1971, the VU attained the title of third Flemish party. From 1971 until 1981, the FDF was the largest party in Brussels. In the same period the RW ranked third in Wallonia. They all took part in several governments (1974–77, 1977–78, 1979–80, 1988–91). The phenomenon reached such an extent that it could not remain ignored by political scientists.

Besides its extent, it is also the newness of the phenomenon that has intrigued researchers. Party systems were regarded as particularly stable, ‘frozen’ (Mair and

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Smith, 1990: 28–41; Türsan, 1998: 1; Delwit, 2003: 55). After years of stability, the emergence of what political scientists called **new parties** was perceptible throughout Europe from the 1960s. Belgian regionalist parties were part of that wave (Deschouwer, 1990; Seiler, 1994). This trend constituted a challenge for the stability of party systems (Rokkan and Urwin, 1982). Therefore, political scientists have tried to explain the formation and success of these new parties (Hauss and Rayside, 1978; Harmel and Robertson, 1985).

Today, a third incentive must be added to newness and magnitude. In 2001, the VU disappeared from the political landscape. In 2004, for the first time in forty years, no independent democratic regionalist party competed for elections in Belgium.¹ Therefore, the analysis should be reversed. One should rather question the causes of the decline and extinction of regionalist parties in Belgium.

The underlying idea, already expressed by De Winter (1998), is that they have been victims of their own success. From then on, dwelling on the concept of success is essential. Harmel (1985: 413–414) distinguished three dimensions to the success of a new party: (1) electoral success, (2) durability and (3) the impact on the party system, political system and policy. The hypothesis states that the successes of the Belgian regionalist parties in these dimensions would have reversed or altered and led to their decline and extinction.

Consequently, this contribution is comprised of two sections. First, the origins, electoral results, decline and extinction of the three Belgian regionalist parties will be described briefly. Then, Harmel's three dimensions of success will be analysed to emphasize how these successes could have been a cause of decline. Comparison is not the main purpose of this article. Its specificity is the search for explanations of regionalist parties' decline and extinction.

Origins, Developments and Decline of Belgian Regionalist Parties

The Flemish Regionalist Movement and the Volksunie

At the independence of Belgium in 1830, the country was governed by francophone elites, despite a majority of Flemish inhabitants. Gradually, a protest Flemish movement took shape around a specific claim: the recognition of Flemish as an official language. Politically, the Flemish movement first expressed itself after World War I. The *Frontpartij* (literally, party from the front) settled around the defence of linguistic demands. In 1919, the party obtained 2.6% of the votes. After a radicalization in the 1920s, the *Frontpartij* suffered an electoral decline in 1932. It turned into a new, more rightist formation: the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV). At the 1936 and 1939 elections, the VNV won 7.1% and 8.3%, respectively, of the votes. The first goal of the VNV was separatism. However, beyond this regionalist label the VNV also endorsed ideas closer to Nazism, fascism and anti-Semitism (Witte and Craeybeckx, 1987: 228; De Wever, 1992). At the beginning of World War II, the party collaborated (Hasquin, 1988: 49). It thwarted any new political expression of the Flemish movement. In 1954 the *Volksunie* (VU) was founded but remained shut away from the political scene, largely because of the polarization of the philosophical divide through the 'School Issue',² which favoured the Christian Democrats of the *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP). The end of

the philosophical polarization, as well as the development of the polarization on linguistic and communitarian questions, favoured the expansion of the VU.

At the electoral level, the start was slow (Deschouwer, 1991; Govaert, 1993; 2002; De Winter and Türsan, 1998; Delwit and van Haute, 2002). In 1954 and 1958, the VU scored around 3.5% of the votes (Fig. 1). In the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the party made considerable progress. At the 1965 **breaking election** it broke the ten per cent barrier and, three years later, the 15 per cent. In 1971, the VU obtained its best electoral result: almost 19% of the suffrages. With this performance, the party stole the title of third Flemish party from the PVV Liberals. After its first governmental participation, the party was severely sanctioned at the 1978 elections, but recovered in the 1981 elections. Since the 1980s, the electoral decline has been constant globally. In 1985, the VU lost more than 100 000 voters but remained the fourth Flemish party. The 1987 elections confirmed this result. During the 1990s, the decline became even more pronounced. In 1991, the party lost again 130 000 voters and became the fifth party in Flanders. It reached the bottom in 1995, which brought the party back to its 1961 score. The 1999 elections ended with slight progress (Deschouwer, 2000), but turned out to be a last burst before the extinction of the party two years later.

Intra-party tensions were large. Asymmetrical governmental participation,³ controversial party leader elections and subsequent intra-party divisions, disappointing local election results in 2000, harsh negotiations around the ‘Saint-Polycarpe’ agreement⁴ (Delwit and Hellings, 2002), the ‘Sauwens case’ and the schism between the party and its movement ID21⁵—all these elements combined to question the survival of the party. During summer 2001, the divorce was decided. In practical terms, every party member had the possibility of voting for one of the three projects in the fray: the ‘Anciaux’ project (*Toekomstgroep*), the ‘Bourgeois’ project (*Vlaams-Nationaal*) and the ‘Sauwens’ project (*Middengroep/Niet Splitsen*). *Vlaams-Nationaal* won

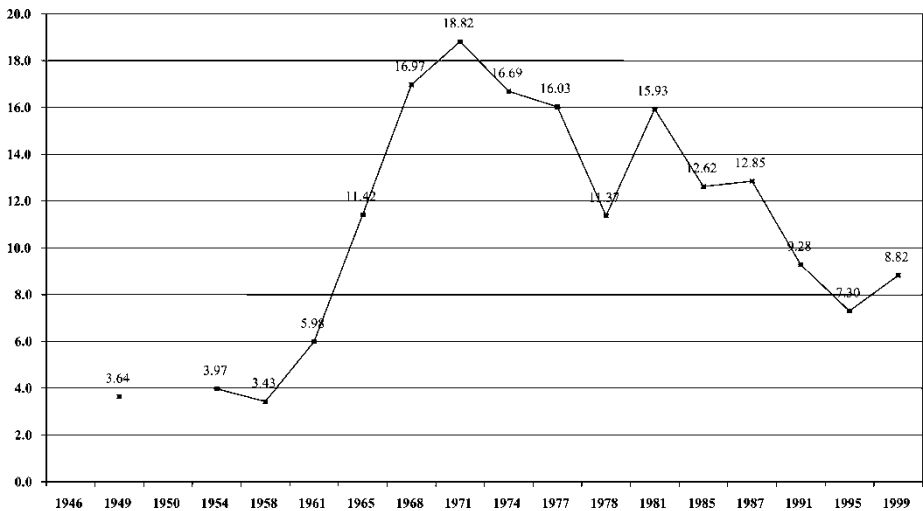


Figure 1. Electoral performance of the VU at the House of Representatives – Flemish political landscape (1949: Vlaamse Concentratie)

47.2% of the valid votes, *Niet Splitsen* 30.2% and the *Toekomstgroep* 22.6%. None of the three projects obtained enough votes to keep the name ‘*Volksunie*’ (Wauters, 2002) and the VU died. However, the ‘Bourgeois’ group inherited the party apparatus. Its final appellation was revealed on 13 October: ‘*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*’ (N-VA). After a period of shilly-shallying the ‘*Niet Splitsen*’ group decided on 8 October to leave their supporters the freedom to choose their future. At a Congress meeting on 10 November, the *Toekomstgroep* labelled itself ‘*Spirit*’.

Given that polls indicated that both the N-VA and Spirit were below the new 5% threshold necessary to win parliamentary seats (Delwit and Pilet, 2004), the independent survival of the two heir-parties was rapidly questioned. The N-VA negotiated with the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) in January 2002, with a view to forming a cartel at the 2003 federal elections. Spirit also decided on 29 June 2002 to support the proposal of a cartel with the Flemish Socialists (SP.A). None of them risked going independently to the 2003 elections, even if they both still existed.

The French-speaking Regionalist Movement—the FDF and the RW

The regionalist movement appeared in French-speaking Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century. In contrast with Flanders, the catalyst for this movement was not a strong national identity but a defensive reaction against Flemish claims (Herremans, 1978; Kesteloot, 1993). The first goal of the movement was the political and linguistic defence of the French-speaking minority in Belgium. Quickly it moved towards a federalist project for Belgium.

For a long time it remained marginal, principally supported by the bourgeoisie and universities. Its first expansion took place during World War II. After the peace settlement, the National Walloon Congress (NWC) gathered together all Walloon activists. At the first meeting held in Liège on 20–21 October 1945, the NWC made the headlines due to a surprising vote about the future they wanted for Wallonia. A majority voted for uniting Wallonia with France. A second ballot was held: this time, the majority supported the federalist option inside the Belgian state (Mabille, 2000).

In the 1960s, the nature of the Walloon movement evolved. First, it became more political. Secondly, it adopted a slightly different stance in Brussels and in Wallonia. In the former, the identity is based on the French language uniting Brussels and Wallonia, while, in Wallonia, the identity is more territorial, less insisting on a cultural unity between Brussels and Wallonia.

In Brussels, during the early 1960s, preoccupations were more focused on language problems (Crisp, 1965). Their main goal was the defence of French culture in a largely French-speaking city in Flemish territory. In 1961, the Flemish marches on Brussels and the vote of the 1962–63 laws on language use triggered a bigger movement among French speakers. These laws translated several Flemish demands, such as compulsory bilingualism in administrations or the inclusion of some municipalities of the Brussels periphery into the Flemish region. Such disposals were deep wounds for most French speakers in the capital.

In reaction, they created several associations to defend their rights. The movement was launched in the political arena and in universities. By the end of 1962, several university professors signed a “Manifesto for Brussels”. The success of this action gave

birth to a wider mobilization. In 1964, most of these movements united, resulting in the political party, the *Front démocratique des francophones* (FDF) (Kesteloot and Collignon, 1997). This new party really entered the political battlefield for the 1965 general elections.

The first elections were already a success for the FDF. The party submitted lists in the districts of Brussels and Nivelles where it received 8.6% and 4.6%, respectively, of the votes. Thereafter, its electoral performances could be divided into four periods (Buelens and Van Dyck, 1998: 51–69) (see Fig. 2). First, between 1965 and 1971, the FDF rose quickly to win the pole position in Brussels. From 1971 to 1978, the party managed to secure its leadership, with scores of around 30%. At the turn of the 1980s the party entered its third period. The FDF remained first but with fewer votes (17.4% in 1981). The last period, between 1985 and 1991, led the FDF to a marginal position. In 1991, the FDF went for the last time alone to the polls. It received only 9% of the votes.

In order to continue to exist, in 1993 the FDF signed an agreement with the French-speaking Liberals (PRL) to form a federation. The deal permitted them to be the first party in Brussels for the next ten years. Both parties remain independent and have their own organization. They present common lists for European, federal and regional elections. The FDF has one safe seat for the European parliament and half of the list for other elections. This agreement has saved the regionalist party which celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2004. Its electoral strength lies at the local level. In contrast with other Belgian new parties the FDF quickly built up some strongholds in several municipalities, especially in the south and in the east of Brussels. Yet, the most remarkable signs of this local strength are the electoral performances at local elections. The FDF had four of the nineteen mayors of Brussels in 1970, and six in 1976. And it still remains a major local actor. At the 2000 local elections, it had five mayors and took part in seven other executives.

The RW is the second political translation of the Walloon movement, which grew in the 1960s. Also born out of reaction against the Flemish movement, the mobilization was of different nature. While in Brussels the mobilization emphasized language use

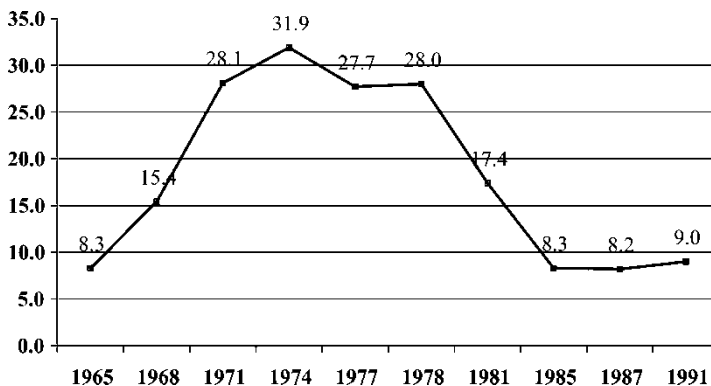


Figure 2. Electoral performance of the FDF at the House of Representatives – District of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde

problems, in the southern region, socio-economic concerns played a major role. Two events contributed to the superposition of the socio-economic and of the centre–periphery divide in Wallonia: the ‘*Question royale*’⁶ and the 1960–61 waves of strikes in Wallonia.

At this time, the Walloon labour movement built a bridge between socio-economic and regionalist issues. Renard, one of the leaders of the socialist union (FGTB), created the ‘*Mouvement populaire wallon*’ (MPW) in 1961. The MPW defended the federalization of the country as a solution for Walloon economic recovery (Renard, 1962). Quickly, the MPW gave to the Walloon regionalist movement the demographic and popular support that it lacked. This trend led to the creation of several left-wing Walloon regionalist parties for the 1965 general elections. These lists united under the banner of the ‘*Action commune wallonne*’. Two candidates were elected MPs. They decided to create the ‘*Parti wallon*’ (PW) just after the election.

Between 1965 and 1968, the PW was composed of left-wing regionalists coming from the MPW and from the *Parti socialiste belge* (PSB). In 1968, the ‘*Affaire de Louvain*’⁷ caused a split between Flemish and French-speaking Christian Democrats. For some, this event was so traumatic that they decided to join regionalist parties. In Wallonia, the PW was extended to the Christian Democrats to form the *Rassemblement wallon* (RW).

In 1968, the RW collected 9.1% of the votes in Wallonia (Fig. 3). With this result, the party ranked fourth in the southern region, just behind the Big Three (Socialists, Christian Democrats, Liberals). In 1971, the party reached its ceiling with 20.9%. It became the third party in Wallonia. The 1974 elections drew an end to this positive evolution. The party faced its first defeat, with only 16.2%. Three years later, it lost half of its votes (Lefèvre, 1977). These poor results happened after its first governmental participation. In 1978, the worrying trend strengthened and the RW remained at around 9.2%. The 1980s saw the end of the party, which lost all its seats in 1985. This fast collapse could be explained partially by the lack of local anchorage of the RW. It was present in every Walloon province but never succeeded to secure local strongholds, contrary to the FDF.

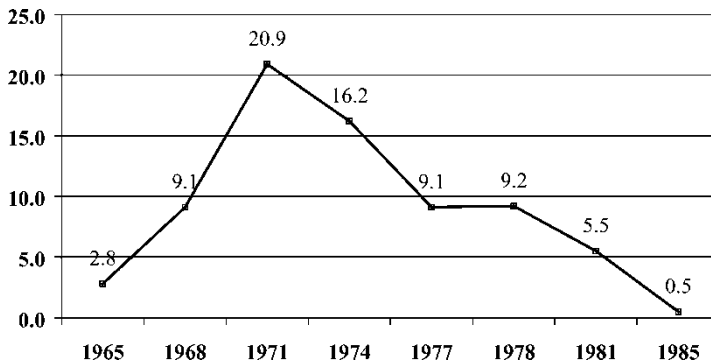


Figure 3. Electoral performance of the RW at the House of Representatives—Walloon political landscape.

Analysis

Starting from Harmel's definition (1985: 413–414), the successes of the regionalist parties can be analysed in three dimensions: electoral performances, durability and impact on the party system, the political system and on policies. Obviously, for each step, before seeing if the success caused damage to the regionalist parties, a preliminary question should be asked whether or not one could talk of a success.

Regionalist Parties and Their Successes

In terms of electoral performance, it has already been seen that one could undoubtedly attest to the regionalist parties' success from 1965 until the mid-1970s. In ten years they became substantial political forces on the Belgian political scene. However, during the mid-1970s, electoral performance decreased sharply.

In terms of durability, the RW performed the worst, with its approximately twenty years of existence. After about thirty years of independent existence, the FDF survived only through its alliance with the Liberals, but is still present. The VU performed the best. It emerged before the FDF and RW. And, even if intra-party tensions were patent and if the question of its survival was often posed, the party nevertheless remained independent until recently. It is only in 2001 that it split up into two branches. Both too weak to stay independent, they decided to go to the elections in a cartel but still exist.

Another element attesting to the success of regionalist parties during the 1960s and the 1970s is their impact on the Belgian party system. Before the emergence of the VU, the Belgian party system was characterized by great stability. The arrival of the Flemish regionalist party overturned this feature. The fractionalization index of the party system confirms this (Rae, 1968). It reached 0.64 in 1958 and grew constantly during next two decades. It never went below 0.80 (Delwit, 2003). The party system witnessed two major evolutions. The first is the emergence of the two other regionalist parties (RW, FDF) in reaction to the Flemish one. Yet, more important is the second evolution—the influence of the regionalist parties on the traditional parties (Socialists, Christian Democrats and Liberals). It is hard to demonstrate their exact influence on the internal problems that these parties faced. However, it is clear that the electoral success of the regionalist parties and the salience of community issues yielded the survival of unitary parties more difficult. None of them resisted to the pressure (Delwit, 2003). Christian Democrats were the first to envisage a split into two linguistic wings. It became effective in 1968, after the '*Affaire de Louvain*'. Three years later, in 1971, it was the Liberals' turn to tear each other to pieces. Socialists took longer to sue for divorce; it happened finally in 1978. The period of electoral success for the regionalist parties perfectly matches their period of greater impact on the political landscape.

Finally, the success of a political party has to be measured according to its impact on the political system and on policies. In this sense, it is important to analyse the programmatic priorities of the three Belgian regionalist parties in order to evaluate their success on these aspects.

Regionalist parties are children of the centre–periphery divide. Built upon tensions between the Flemish and the French-speaking communities, they pursued two major

goals. First, they wanted to oppose the three traditional parties that did not take regionalist demands into account. Secondly, they wanted to reform the Belgian state towards federalism.

However, the three parties differ regarding the shape of institutional reforms they want to implement. Müller-Rommel (1994, 1998) proposed six types of regionalist projects: protectionist, autonomist, national–federalist, European federalist, separatist, and irredentist. The political expressions of the Flemish movement and the political project of the VU have evolved between categories. Before World War I, Flemish claims took the shape of protectionist claims (protection of a minority). During the interwar years, the VNV adopted irredentist views in favour of the creation of the Great Netherlands. At its foundation, the VU advocated a deep reform in the sense of a federal State with two entities (Flemish and Walloon), i.e. a national–federalist view. In real terms it meant cultural autonomy for Flemish and French-speaking people, the fixing of the linguistic boundary, a definitive and effective linguistic regulation for Brussels, a strict equivalence between Flemish and French-speaking in all public services, the settlement of repression, and amnesty. The guideline of the party programme was ‘Flanders first’.

For its part, the FDF first defended a protectionist project. It aimed at protecting the French-speaking minority in Belgium and in Brussels. Nevertheless, the party turned to a national–federalist option in 1970 (Lefèvre, 1980). According to it, federalization was the sole way to guarantee the autonomy of both linguistic communities. Yet, the content of this federalist plan has evolved gradually since 1970. The first proposal pushed for a federal structure with two regions, Flanders and Wallonia, and defended an autonomous status for Brussels. Having seen that this plan did not guarantee enough independence for the capital city, the FDF moved towards a demand for the creation of a proper Brussels region with a wide territorial definition. For the party, the limitation to 19 municipalities was the source of all language-use problems in the periphery of Brussels (Crisp, 1971).

On regionalist issues, the RW always defended a national–federalist plan. First, they went for a ‘federalism for two and a half’, two regions (Flanders and Wallonia) and a specific status for Brussels. The Walloon autonomy was perceived as the best way to stop its economic decline and to settle peace for the country. Clearly, the question of Brussels received a different answer in the RW than in the FDF. For the RW, Brussels was not a priority, even if it pleaded for solidarity between French speakers.

The content of the regionalist project varied from one party to the other and during the period. The FDF and the VU first took on protectionist views to turn to national–federalist projects. The RW also developed a national–federalist project. But the three national–federalist projects differed on the status of Brussels (RW, VU vs. FDF). The FDF always feared a Flemish–Walloon agreement to solve the Brussels issue. It will be seen that these initial regionalist projects evolved after the first electoral defeats.

Next to their well-defined profile on the centre–periphery issues, regionalist parties did not develop fully detailed programmes. As far as the religious divide was concerned, all regionalist parties were the first to plead for a cross-cutting of pillars, social organizations that they frequently denounced. On the socio-economic divide also, regionalist parties defined themselves as pluralists (Anon., 1973). In order to avoid tensions linked with this pluralism, they decided to remain focused on

centre–periphery issues and developed few other issues. Regionalist parties were also the first parties to bring New Politics (Poguntke, 1989) positions to the agenda. They brought up propositions to renew Belgian democracy, tackled ethical and societal issues (abortion, euthanasia, immigration, gender equality, etc.), or environmental questions.

Did regionalist parties meet success in terms of impact on the political system and policies? The analysis of their programmatic priorities should allow one to draw a conclusion.

As far as their first goal is concerned, there is no doubt that regionalist parties met with full success. Belgian traditional parties could no longer ignore the regionalist question and even split along the issue. Since then, national parties no longer exist. Moreover, no proper national elections are held. Two different political systems live side by side. Parties from both systems meet only to rule the federal government.

The second part of regionalist parties' political project was to reform the Belgian institutions. Progressively since the 1970s, this goal has been achieved. In 1993, the Belgian constitution defined the country as a federal state made of three regions and of three communities.

One could thus maintain that regionalist parties in Belgium met double success, even though this success was incomplete and indirect.

First, the success was indirect. Indeed, to exert its influence on the political system and on policies, a party has several strategies at its disposal. Seiler (1982) identified three strategies: a strategy outside the system, a tribune strategy (indirect) and a governmental strategy (direct). The strategy developed by the regionalist parties wavered between the last two categories. Next to a noteworthy parliamentary work and abundant extra-parliamentary activities (demonstrations, links with associations, etc.), they participated several times in government coalitions.

In Belgium, ruling coalitions are hardly open to new parties. The three big political forces were the sole ones in government until the 1970s.⁸ Therefore, in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s regionalist parties first tried to have an indirect impact through a tribune strategy.

This tribune strategy was mobilized mainly by the VU. For instance, according to De Winter (1994: 35–36), several studies have demonstrated that during the 1970s VU representatives carried out a sizeable job, compared with other parties, in terms of participation in debates, control of government action or legislative initiatives. Moreover, the VU would frequently have had recourse to extra-parliamentary strategies to influence political life: call on the media, contact with pressure groups, organization of demonstrations (Smits, 1984),⁹ etc. This indirect tribune strategy allowed the party to exert some influence on policy. Dewachter *et al.* (1977: 245–265) evaluated the impact of opposition parties on Belgian legislative outcomes between 1965 and 1971. Their study revealed that despite its status as an opposition party, the VU achieved a significant proportion of its demands. Its tribune strategy allowed the party to bring linguistic questions to the political agenda, and to realize a significant part of its programme.

However, without having been abandoned, this tribune strategy was gradually challenged by a governmental strategy. Success led some party figureheads to rethink the strategy to adopt. Gradually, the perspective of government participation gained ground. At this time, the Big Three had to deal with three significant challengers.

In 1974, the Prime Minister Tindemans (Flemish Christian Democrat—CVP) was leading a minority Liberal—Catholic government. The Socialists refused to join the coalition. Therefore, Tindemans decided to open the doors to regionalist parties. The FDF and the VU refused, but the RW accepted. The 1970 State reform previewed the creation of three regions: Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders. The RW had therefore to implement a pre-regionalization plan. But intra-party tensions prevent the party from succeeding in this matter. The blockade came to an end when the PSB decided to vote a regionalization scheme designed by the Big Three (Crisp, 1978; Mabille, 2000). Electorally, the RW was severely sanctioned after this first experience. In 1977, the VU and the FDF both entered national government in coalition with the Socialists (PSB—BSP) and the Christian Democrats (PSC and CVP). They negotiated the ‘Egmont’ and the ‘Stuyvenberg’ Pacts that were supposed to implement the regionalization of the country. But the government fell on that issue and both parties suffered from participation. Paradoxically, the VU was more present in the executives during its electoral decline.¹⁰ It participated in the national government from 1988 to 1991. In the same way, the party was part of Flemish regional governments from 1981 to 1985, from 1988 to 1995 and from 1999 until 2003 (with disruptions caused by the party implosion during the legislature). And the two VU-heir parties are also participating in executives. Thanks to its electoral alliance with the SP.A, Spirit entered the Flemish regional and the federal governments in 2003; allied with the CD&V, the N-VA joined Spirit in the Flemish executive in 2004. As far as the FDF is concerned, national participation ended in 1980. From then on, the FDF was part of all regional executives in Brussels between 1989 and 2004. At the national level, the PRL—FDF federation was part of the ruling coalition from 1999 until 2003 and has been renewed on May 2003, but the FDF only has a minister in Brussels.

In this sense, the success of the regionalist parties was mainly indirect. Actually, it would be unfair to link the institutional reforms and their action in government too closely. Indeed, none of the main state reforms (1970, 1980, 1988, 1993 and 2001) was negotiated or voted by the regionalist parties. Each time, these changes occurred without their participation. Direct government strategy was thus mainly inefficient. On the contrary, indirect tribune strategy, mainly used by the VU, was more efficient at bringing new issues to the political agenda.

Furthermore, successes were also partial. For the RW, the programme was implemented almost fully. Wallonia became an autonomous region with large economic attributions. In contrast, some important requests of the FDF are still unrealized. For instance, the FDF has requested the extension of Brussels in order to protect the French-speaking minority of the suburban municipalities since the 1960s. Moreover, the status of the Brussels region remains less extended than Flanders or Wallonia. Knowing that, the FDF recorded only a partial success. The case of the VU is more intricate. Its initial project was realized. However, after each state reform, the party modified its project in a more radical way, therefore increasing its demands. At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, the party view evolved towards the confederal model (Govaert, 1993: 20). And, at the end of the 1990s, it evolved towards the claim for independence within the EU (European federalist project). The two parties stemming from the VU have maintained that perspective, with some nuances between the two projects. The N-VA sees Flanders as an independent and autonomous

state within the EU, in alliance with other regions. The option is clear and radical. Spirit's views are less clear. According to its founding fathers, 'nationalism' is obsolete. Conversely, they insist on the concept of 'regionalist'. They define themselves as 'post-Belgians'. However, they repeat their attachment to 'integral federalism', while opting for the confederal model for Flanders and Wallonia. It is thus difficult to determine their real communitarian project.

Clearly, one can talk of success regarding the implementation of the regionalist parties' political plans, even if incomplete and indirect.

Regionalist Parties—Victims of Their Own Successes?

After having analysed their success, the next stage is to analyse whether this success was damaging. The hypothesis is that successes turned favourable indicators red, weakened regionalist parties, enlightened intra-party divisions and led to their decline and extinction.

Indeed, electoral success, durability and impact on the party system were favoured by specific factors (at least three) that turned red when the success became too important. First, the political context of the 1960s and 1970s was favourable to opening up to regionalist demands. For a long time, the party system was considered as 'frozen'. The religious and socio-economic divides dominated Belgian political life. In 1958, the first one was dealt with when the three traditional parties signed the 'School Pact'. In the 1960s, the economic growth and the bases of the welfare state permitted a reduction in class conflict. Therefore, the centre-periphery divide found space to express itself. In Flanders, communitarian issues were latent (they had already been expressed during the interwar period) and were waiting for just such an opportunity to burst out; the VU first benefited from that opening. The FDF and the RW were created in reaction and given that opportunity structure. However, at the end of the 1970s, the situation altered. At least in Wallonia, the centre-periphery divide was rapidly challenged by the revival of the socio-economic divide. In the 1960s, the Walloon movement was strong enough to unite French-speaking Belgians from different backgrounds with a shared goal: defence against the Flemish movement. In the 1970s, other concerns went back on the Walloon agenda. The economic crisis increased social problems. Therefore, the regionalist mobilization became a secondary issue. The electorate went back to traditional parties that had a clearer socio-economic identity. The situation was different in Flanders. The socio-economic crisis was less acute, whereas the regionalist divide was deeper rooted. The different relations between the socio-economic and the communitarian divides could explain partially why the VU survived for longer (Frognier *et al.*, 1982).

Secondly, in the context of the 1960s and 1970s, regionalist parties were in a situation of monopoly. These parties had a new niche in the political system; they represented issues ignored by other parties. Indeed, traditional parties were incapable of answering regionalist demands, their unitary structure commanding compromise (De Winter, 1994: 55–56). The Big Three were perceived as ignoring the specific demands of the Belgian regions. Bologne (1978), former RW senator, expressed this feeling: 'the creation of ethnic-centred parties was build upon traditional parties' incapacity to solve the [regionalist] problem; their main concerns were socio-economic

related'. But, given their success, the traditional parties could no longer remain deaf to the regionalist question. In order to be competitive on this issue, they all integrated a new party structure and a new programmatic profile that reflected the incorporation of linguistic issues. The split of traditional parties freed them from their quest for a compromise between linguistic branches, and thus left a place for the expression of positions that were more centred on specific interests of the Flemish or Walloon population. From then on, regionalist parties lost their monopoly as far as the positioning on the centre–periphery divide was concerned. More specifically, another competitor emerged on the centre–periphery divide: the *Vlaams Blok* (1979). Symptomatically, the electoral decline of the regionalist parties began after this adaptation of other parties in the party system.

Thirdly, the electoral breakthrough took place when no other protest party challenged the regionalist parties. The three traditional parties had existed for almost a century and all took part in ruling coalitions. The virgin status of the new regionalist parties allowed them to attract protest voters. However, at the end of the 1970s, the situation changed. On the one hand, regionalists took part in ruling coalitions and therefore lost their 'virgin' status on that aspect. They adopted practices of the traditional parties. On the other hand, challenger protest parties emerged at the beginning of the 1980s.

Therefore, the opportunity structure, open to the materialization of a new divide, favoured the success of regionalist parties. But this success urged traditional parties to adapt and reduced regionalist parties' monopoly on the issue. This aspect, combined with the emergence of other new parties, diminished their specific appeal and influenced their electoral results negatively. Furthermore, the space for the expression of the centre–periphery divide also reduced in French-speaking Belgium.

Undeniably, electoral success, durability and (indirect) policy success were also favoured by certain factors (at least five) that turned red when the success became too important as well.

First, regionalist parties did not participate directly in the realization of federalization. None of the five main state reforms was decided when regionalist parties were part of the ruling coalition. These parties were victims of their success in entering government, because it showed the difficulties they had in implementing their programme.

Secondly, participation led regionalist parties to defend compromises that harmed their profile. Before participation, these 'new' parties had a puritan, virginal, incorrupt and protest profile. This allowed them to capture a not inconsiderable part of the electorate. After entering ruling coalitions, regionalist parties became parties 'like all others'. They lost the virginity status specific to new parties. In addition, they adopted practices of the traditional parties that had been formerly contested and therefore lost their image of protest parties. The radical profile defended on the opposition benches had to be adapted to the compulsory compromise solutions taken in government. This led to intra-party tensions and divisions into two wings: pragmatics (partisans of a governmental strategy and compromises) and radicals (partisans of a tribune strategy and opposed to any concession). For instance, while the RW participated in government the party split between these two wings. The VU finally imploded for the same reasons during the party's last participation and the negotiations for the 'Saint-Polycarpe' and 'Lambermont' agreements.

Thirdly, policy success was at hand, even if partial. All the three parties met at least part of their two objectives, if not all. The project of the RW was implemented fully, whereas the FDF still holds some unfulfilled priorities; the VU realized its initial project but radicalized it to create new demands. Therefore, they all lost part (if not all) of their *raison d'être*. The carrying out of the heart of their programme generated intra-party tensions. On this basis, some regionalist personalities judged that the federalist project recorded enough success to end this experience. This was the case for the RW. The FDF still has reasons to exist since its entire programme has not been implemented. This could partially explain the survival of the party, 40 years after its creation. But what remains of their linguistic demands is weak, and the party chose to join another party in a federation. As regards the VU, the radicalization could be interpreted as the construction of new goals to produce new reasons to exist, and as a desperate quest to get back a withdrawing electorate.

Fourthly, governmental participation and policy success pushed regionalist parties to take detailed positions on all issues. It caused intra-party tensions between the defenders of a 'pure' regionalist project and the partisans of a broader political project including strong institutional positions. Besides, as regionalist parties were pluralist parties on socio-economic and on ideological issues, tensions emerged when they had to define themselves on issues other than the 'pure' regionalist issue which was federative. In all parties factions confronted each other continually, ending up by a split. The RW faced difficulties in setting up socio-economic positions. The leftist option dominated the party and the electorate (Buelens and Van Dyck, 1998) but there were tensions regarding the intensity of the leftist profile. As to the FDF, two positions were opposed on socio-economic issues: a more leftist and a more rightist one. The election for the presidency of the party in 1984 illustrated this division. It caused several leftist personalities to quit the FDF. Since then, the positions have become easier to define. The FDF is clearly a centre-right party and supports fiscal reductions and market economy (Kesteloot and Collignon, 1997). From its foundation too the VU encountered divisions about the guidelines to follow. Should it remain exclusively centred on the Flemish nationalist issue or does it have to propose a global project? The 1969 party Congress consecrated the second view (Menu, 1994). In 1985, the electoral defeat was attributed by Van der Elst to the outsized dispersion of the party on non-exclusive issues. The president proposed a refocus on institutional issues to the detriment of socio-economic questions (Govaert, 1993: 38). In 1992, the departure of some figureheads to the Flemish Liberals was justified by a desire to open up that was not followed by the base of the party. Anciaux's programmatic redefinition work was in the same tradition of opening. It was one of the fundamental oppositions between the 'Bourgeois' and the 'Anciaux' groups. In Bourgeois' views, the Flemish nationalist issue was a constructive niche and should be the heart of the party activities and positioning. From Anciaux's point of view, other issues should also be taken into account and integrated in the party programme, with a progressive perspective. But the content of the programmatic extension was also subject to debate. On socio-economic issues, the VU opted for a centre-right position until the mid-1960s. Then, it moved towards the centre in the 1970s. Finally, the party took on left liberalist views from the end of the 1980s (De Winter, 1994: 30). Anciaux accentuated this option during the 1990s.

At last, policy success and government participation enhanced factionalism. It led some party figureheads to rethink the strategy to pursue and caused intra-party division between defenders of an indirect tribunal strategy and partisans of a direct government strategy. Besides, compromises linked with participation divided regionalist parties between a (tribune) faction—for whom the party had to stay ‘pure’, without compromise and remaining centred on communitarian issues—and another (participationist) faction, who considered that the intransigent position of the party had reached its limits and that the party should consent to compromises and open up to other issues. Next to these oppositions on the regionalist project (radicalism and exclusiveness vs. relative moderation and openness), oppositions occurred on socio-economic and ideological issues (right conservatives vs. left liberal progressives). The implosion of the VU illustrates the damaging effects of this factionalism perfectly. In 2000, the presidential contest was extremely competitive. Vankrunkelsven represented the participationist faction open to compromise and to themes other than institutional issues *sensu stricto*. He could count on Anciaux’s support. Bourgeois symbolized the historic nationalist view of the VU, a radical tribunal strategy and a more conservative approach. These oppositions, combined with strong personal incompatibilities, led to the party implosion.

Conclusions

This article has been focused on the three main regionalist parties in Belgium (VU, FDF and RW). In the history of these parties, 2004 is a crucial year because, for the first time since the 1960s, elections were held without any democratic regionalist parties standing as independent. The decline and the extinction of these former central actors of the Belgian political scene deserves an in-depth analysis. The explanatory hypothesis for their decay and implosion was that regionalist parties were victims of their own success. Based on Harmel’s (1985) definition of success, the hypothesis has been investigated in three dimensions: electoral success, durability and impact on party system, political system and policies.

In terms of success, this investigation has shown that regionalist parties met great success during the 1960s–1970s in all dimensions. Electoral performance, durability, impact on the party system (fractionalization), on the political system and on policies (reform of the state and the taking into account of regionalist issues) were successful, even if sometimes indirectly and partially.

Several factors favoured these successes: the political space for the expression of the centre–periphery divide; the monopoly that regionalist parties held on this particular issue; and their new protest party image in opposition to aging traditional parties.

However, these were damaging successes. The analysis has shown how their success turned the favourable indicators red. First, the political space for the expression of the centre–periphery divide was challenged by the reaffirmation of other traditional divisions, such as the socio-economic divide, mainly in Wallonia. Secondly, the success of regionalist parties led traditional parties to adapt structurally and programmatically to regain the fleeing electorate. Regionalist parties therefore lost their monopoly on this specific issue. Finally, the success of regionalist parties involved them in government participation. They lost their protest party image, while other new parties (Greens, VB)

emerged as new protest parties. Policy success and government participation revealed and enhanced factionalism. First, government participation was not fruitful in terms of state reforms. Secondly, regionalist parties lost their puritan, virginal, incorrupt and protest image. This caused intra-party divisions between pragmatics and radicals. Thirdly, with the policy success, regionalist parties lost a part of their *raison d'être*. This produced tensions between defenders of a 'pure' regionalist party and partisans of an opening up to other issues, but also divisions on the direction the party should go in opening up. All these elements had a negative impact on the electoral scores of the regionalist parties. It led the VU to split. This split draws to an end forty years where at least one regionalist party stood as an independent party for all elections held in Belgium.

Notes

¹The VU split in 2001 into two new regionalist parties, the N-VA and Spirit. For the 2004 regional elections, the N-VA was in cartel with the CD&V, Spirit with the SP.A. The FDF has formed a cartel with the French-speaking liberals since 1993, labelled *Mouvement réformateur* (MR) since 2002. The *Vlaams Belang* (former *Vlaams Blok*) is excluded from the analysis. It represents a very different experience because of the timing of its electoral success, but also for its characteristics of extreme right, populist party and divergent conception of Flemish nationalism (Breuning, 1997).

²The Belgian educational system is split in networks along the State/Church or philosophical divide. Each network historically belongs to one side of the divide and to a pillar, and is thus associated with a pillar party. The official network is related to the socialist and liberal pillars, whereas the free denominational network is related to the catholic pillar. The 'School Issue' (1954–58) opposed the traditional pillar parties on the issue of school funding. It ended up in 1958 in a 'School Pact' that pacified the issue.

³The VU was part of the Flemish regional government with the Socialists (SP), the greens (Agalev) and the Liberals (VLD), but not part of the federal government.

⁴The 'Saint-Polycarpe' agreement (also known as the 'Lambermont' agreement), as well as the 'Lombard' agreement and the 'Saint-Boniface' agreement, are the results of negotiations between the two communities on further allocation of competences from the federal level to regions and communities. As part of the Flemish government, the VU backed the agreement but it created intra-party tensions. The VU negotiators had to face the anger of some of the party's personalities who saw the content of the agreement as an unacceptable compromise.

⁵Johan Sauwens, Minister in the Flemish government, took part in a meeting organized by an association linked to extreme right movements. It launched the schism between the VU and its left liberal wing movement, ID21, created by Anciaux.

⁶The '*Question royale*' emerged after World War II: whether King Leopold III had to take back his royal functions divided the country. It split the country between the catholic Flanders and the secular Wallonia.

⁷The '*Affaire de Louvain*' concerned the functioning of the University of Leuven (Louvain in French), a catholic university traditionally linked to the catholic pillar. This university was located in Flanders but bilingual (Dutch and French). In 1968, demonstrations occurred with the perspective to 'flemishise' the university. It resulted in the split of the university. Leuven became a Dutch-speaking university and a new French-speaking catholic university was created in Wallonia, called 'Louvain-la-Neuve'. The issue divided the Christian Democrats between two linguistic wings (1968), leading to the first split of a traditional political family.

⁸The sole exception was the participation of the communists in the grand coalition created during the World Wars.

⁹According to Smits (1984), the VU initiated 61% of the demonstrations organized by political parties between 1960 and 1967.

¹⁰This could be explained by several factors. First, the VU was, in some cases, necessary to reach the two-thirds majority in order to vote in constitutional reforms. Secondly, at the regional level, the VU was also sometimes indispensable for reaching a simple majority given the growing weight of the *Vlaams Blok* (now *Vlaams Belang*) and the reluctance of the three traditional parties to form a coalition.

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