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Power-Sharing and the Paradox of Federalism: Federalization and the Evolution of Ethno-Territorial Conflict in the Case of Belgium (1979–2018)

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ABSTRACT Does federalism fuel tensions in divided states? This paper addresses this question from a power-sharing angle. It provides a longitudinal analysis of the evolution of ethno-territorial conflict during five waves of federalization in a least-likely case: Belgium (1979–2018). Two original datasets on all cabinet conflicts ($N = 1013$; $N = 328$) provide an unprecedented picture of ethno-territorial conflict's intensity, nature, and frequency (absolute/relative). All indicators forcefully contradict the paradox thesis. Conflict did not increase. If anything, there is a tentative decline. Exposing intra-segmental and segmentally mixed conflicts, this study also challenges conventional views on factors like bipolarity and the repercussions of split party systems.

Introduction

Governing divided states is not a walk in the park.¹ Questions of conflict and cooperation are central to most if not all of these states, and in recent decades, the challenge of ethnic conflict (-management) attracted significant scholarly attention (e.g. Guelke, 2012; Horowitz, 1993, 2000; Nordlinger, 1972; Reynolds, 2002; Wolff & Yakinthou, 2012). Within this field, scholars have studied a wide range of conflict-management tools, with federalism being one of the most popular and best-known examples (e.g. McGarry & O'Leary, 1994; O'Leary & McGarry, 1995; Smooha & Hanf, 1992). But does it work? Does federalism accommodate or aggravate tensions in divided states? The effects of federal and unitary structures have been the subject of an extensive debate (e.g. Amoretti & Bermeo, 2004; Anderson, 2013; Bermeo, 2002; Erk & Anderson, 2010; Horowitz, 2007; Swenden, 2013b). Many authors emphasize the pacifying potential of federalism as a combination of 'self-rule plus shared rule', as it has been famously depicted (Elazar, 1987, p. 12). Others consider it to be ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. This view is echoed in the so-called paradox of federalism (e.g. Erk & Anderson, 2010): rather than mitigating conflict, federalism could exacerbate tensions and undermine stability. To assess whether federalism 'fuels the fire

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or dampens the flames' (Brancati, 2006), this paper provides an unprecedented longitudinal analysis of ethno-territorial conflicts against the background of federalization in Belgium (1979–2018). The central research question is: How did the ethno-territorial conflict in Belgium evolve during federalization? As explained below, the Belgian case allows for a solid assessment of the paradox thesis. Its mishmash of institutional and historical features makes it a theoretically least-likely case for accommodation. The period under study (1979–2018) includes five federalization reforms and covers the entire period characterized by this set of risk factors. If federalization comes with escalation, this should be highly apparent in Belgium. If it fails to materialize here, this provides a significant blow to the paradox thesis.

This paper adds to the growing field on federalism as conflict-management in three ways. First, most analyses focus on the threat from the periphery: the impact of federalism on regional identities, regionalist party support, support for independence, etc. This *sub-state challenge* (self-rule), as it may be called, has received ample attention, but less research has addressed the *power-sharing challenge* (shared rule): the challenge and art of different ethnic groups governing together. This paper sheds some well-deserved light on this other half of the federal equation ('self rule plus shared rule'; Elazar, 1987, p. 12).

Second, this study shifts the focus from the mighty conflict eruptions to the more mundane struggle of everyday power-sharing. Previous analyses typically study *violent* ethnic conflicts, rebellion, or the very survival or collapse of power-sharing systems or states (e.g. Bakke & Wibbels, 2006; Brancati, 2006, 2009; Hale, 2004; McGarry & O'Leary, 2009; Niessen et al., 2020; Walsh, 2018). However, most of the time and in many divided polities (whether local polities, regions, or states) the challenge at stake is rather one of tensions in a more modest meaning. This challenge of day-to-day elite cooperation has received little attention, but it is crucial to understanding (in)stability in divided states (as emphasized by consociational theory; cf. Lijphart, 1969, 1977, 2002).

Third, this paper builds on novel definitions, typologies, measurements, and data of ethno-territorial conflicts and cabinet conflicts more generally. At least, this adds some terminological clarity to the debate, which often remains quite foggy in this respect. At best, these novelties can be of use for future analyses within the fields of both ethnic conflicts and coalition politics. This paper illustrates their potential.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the theory, hypothesis, and definitions are presented. The central hypothesis is that the ethno-territorial conflict has generally increased as federalization progressed. Second, the operationalization and data are addressed. Using refined coding instructions and the most extensive datasets to date, this study analyzes ethno-territorial conflicts through central-level *cabinet* conflicts. Third, the results are presented and discussed. All indicators forcefully contradict the main hypothesis: even in an unfavourable context, federalization did not clearly fuel the fire of ethno-territorial conflict. I conclude with some theoretical reflections on these findings and the way they contradict certain assumptions.

Theory and Hypothesis

The Paradox of Federalism

According to the paradox of federalism (e.g. Erk & Anderson, 2010), providing autonomy is counterproductive in that it exacerbates divisions and tensions, thus undermining the very stability it was meant to strengthen. By now, and building on insights from e.g.

Belgium, Spain, Canada, and the UK (and indeed, from cases across the globe), the repercussions of federalism -or the like- have been studied extensively (e.g. Amoretti & Bermeo, 2004; Anderson, 2013; Bermeo, 2002; Brancati, 2006, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2010; Gurr, 2000; Horowitz, 2000, 2007; Keil & Anderson, 2018; Swenden, 2013b; Watts, 2015; Wolff, 2013). Obviously, in assessing federalization's effectiveness, 'it is impossible to establish a firm set of criteria by which to judge success and failure' (Burgess, 2006, p. 269). It is equally evident, however, that existing assessments do not suffice.

Most studies have examined the paradox from the perspective of the *sub-state challenge* (the regionalist threat coming from the periphery). Federalism has been argued to strengthen regional identities, increase regionalist party support, fuel autonomy demands or separatism, and/or make secession a more viable alternative (e.g. Brancati, 2006, 2009; Guibernau, 2006; Kymlicka, 2001). It acknowledges and institutionalizes divisions. This can legitimize and nurture the idea that regional communities 'are separate peoples with inherent rights of self-government' (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 140). Meanwhile, it gives 'regional entrepreneurs' legitimacy, institutions, and resources that can be used to challenge the centre and boost sub-state nationalism even more. Scholar's focus on sub-state tensions and pressure is also reflected in numerous studies on federalism's impact on *violent* ethnic conflicts, rebellion, or the survival of states (e.g. Bakke & Wibbels, 2006; Brancati, 2006, 2009; Hale, 2004; McGarry & O'Leary, 2009; Niessen et al., 2020; Walsh, 2018).

Contrarily, the focus of this study is on power-sharing tensions. While fewer studies have reflected upon these dynamics, there are several arguments as to why federalization can burden power-sharing in divided states. One obvious reason is the potentially empowering impact of federalization on autonomy demands. State reform negotiations are typically tense. They go to the heart of sovereignty and loyalty issues and find themselves at the crossroads of technical complexity, political symbols, ideological red lines, and deep-rooted emotions. Each new round or even call for reforms forces politicians to cross this dangerous intersection, thus raising the risk of collisions. Meanwhile, the perspective of a full-blown break-up becomes increasingly realistic as federalization goes by: Secession 'is more likely where the cost of disentanglement is too small, in other words where the centre has been left with few competencies of significance.' (Swenden, 2013b, p. 69) Against this background, it is arguably harder to establish the kind of trust and indulgence on which power-sharing essentially relies. It is only logical to expect such dynamics to come with growing tensions.

Additionally, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015) present several reasons why federalization deals can 'accommodate the political conflicts that are currently on the agenda, while making it increasingly more difficult to pacify tensions in the long run'. To begin with, the authors argue that federalization makes it harder to solve central-level ethno-territorial conflict with large package deals (whereby everybody gets some sweets), because it leaves the central level with fewer and fewer competences and resources (sweets) to buy off peace. Also, initial negotiations often target the low-hanging fruit (the most obvious and undisputed policy domains and issues are easily agreed upon), but politicians will soon find themselves debating the more controversial claims as consecutive negotiation rounds go by. 'Hollowing the center in return for peace' (Hooghe, 2004) thus becomes increasingly more difficult. These reflections on conflict *resolution* can easily be translated to the issue of conflict *prevalence*. If solving conflicts becomes more difficult, unresolved

issues will continue to burden the agenda and flare up again, causing tensions to build up. Kicking the can means facing it more than once.

Finally, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015) argue that federalization lowers the cost of non-agreement. As the central level is stripped from many of its competences, a central gridlock no longer results in the *generalized policy paralysis* that used to urge politicians to reach an agreement (cf. also Hooghe, 2004; Jans, 2001). Rather than facing an encompassing blockage of the wider decision-making process, elites are confronted by *single policy paralyses* that are far more manageable and provide far less pressure. This takes away an important incentive for elites to avoid confrontation in the first place.

In sum, it is expected that (main hypothesis): The ethno-territorial conflict increased as federalization progressed.

Risk Factors and the Belgian Case

Obviously, the impact of federalization depends upon the context in which it is implemented. Several institutional and historical features increase the risk of tensions and instability (e.g. Horowitz, 2000; Swenden, 2006, 2013b; Watts, 2008, 2015). This study focuses on the Belgian case. Its particular combination of risk factors effectively makes it a theoretical powder keg and a least-likely case for accommodation. As such, insights from Belgium are relevant to a broader audience: if political accommodation succeeds here, federalization is likely to be fruitful in other, more favourable contexts too.

To begin with, Belgium is a centrifugal federation; an example of so-called holding together federalism (federalization through disintegration) that stands opposite coming together federalism (Stepan, 1999). Marching to the beat of regionalist pressures and ethno-territorial tensions, six state reforms transformed Belgium into a federation with increasingly autonomous sub-states. Indeed, when it comes to regionalist demands (at the party level), Belgium is a good example of the paradox of federalism (e.g. De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009; Delwit, 2011; Deschouwer, 2012; Hooghe, 2004). These centrifugal dynamics and the lingering threat of regionalism obviously burdened negotiations, and Belgian politicians often had to cruise the abovementioned intersection of demands, symbols, and complexity.

Secondly, from a comparative perspective, sub-states in Belgium enjoy a particularly large degree of autonomy (certainly in terms of competences) (Hooghe et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021; Watts, 2013). If stripping the central policy level increases the risk of conflict (cf. supra), this should be particularly visible in Belgium.

Thirdly, Hale (2004) argues that Belgium is one of the few federations that manages to survive (peacefully) despite having a *core ethnic region* (CER); a sub-state with a dramatic superiority in population (Flanders).² In his view, CERs jeopardize divided states' stability and survival. Amongst others, they can challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the centre and their supposedly stronger bargaining position can fuel tensions by making other sub-states fear that they will 'permanently get the short end of the federal stick in resource allocations and federal policy-making' (Hale, 2004, p. 175). Evidently, such dynamics undermine the power-sharing ambience. And as federalization strengthens the CER's position even more, this burden even grows.

Fourthly, subdividing segments is traditionally seen as an effective way to increase stability (Horowitz, 2000). But contrary to this logic, Belgium is a homogeneous federation: sub-state borders tend to coincide with segmental borders (Swenden, 2006). Inequality

issues tend to be politicized in *geographical* terms in most federations, as recurrent battles over e.g. transfers or national spending illustrate (Bakke & Wibbels, 2006). But when geographical and segmental borders overlap, such conflicts are particularly prone to *segmental* interpretations, e.g. as conflicts between *the Flemish* and *the Francophones*. According to Horowitz (2000, p. 619), homogeneous federations can only reduce conflict at the central level by highlighting and playing out divisions *within* the segments (sub-ethnic or lower-level ethnic divisions). But to a large extent, this is prevented by Belgium's bipolar nature.

Indeed, despite its four language areas and two types of sub-states, Belgium is typically seen as a *dyadic*, *bicommunal*, or *bipolar* federation (e.g. Brans et al., 2009; Niessen et al., 2020; Watts, 2008). Both historically, party-politically and institutionally, the dominant dynamic of Belgian federalism is one between Flemish and Francophone actors. This bipolarity is thought to evoke a permanent stand-off between the same groups, leaving little room for 'tension-reducing coalitions' (Elazar, 1987, p. 244): alliances that shift across negotiations, thus avoiding tensions between two sides from accumulating throughout time (opponents in one clash are allies in other disputes). Ironically, in this context, consociational mechanisms such as parity rules and mutual vetoes can be a recipe for 'cumulatively sharpening frustrations' (Watts, 2008, p. 184).

Sixthly, and painfully related to this warning, Belgium is a textbook example of a consociational federation (Deschouwer, 2002, 2005, 2006). Consociational democracy is described and advocated most thoroughly by Lijphart (1968, 1969, 1977, 2002), who defines it by four principles: grand coalition, segmental autonomy, mutual veto, and proportionality. The 1970 state reform, the first of six federalization deals in Belgium, anchored some very *consociational* mechanisms: linguistic parity in the Council of Ministers, two language groups in parliament, an alarm bell procedure, and special majority laws (e.g. Deschouwer, 2012).³ This formalized the bipolar nature of power-sharing in Belgium, created the kind of veto players that burden policy-making processes (Tsebelis, 2002), and left Flemish and Francophone politicians with two options: governing together or not governing at all (Deschouwer, 2013a, p. 214).

Such forced cooperation can only work if elites behave prudently and cooperatively, i.e. when there is a 'deliberate joint effort by the elites to stabilize the system.' (Lijphart, 1969, p. 213) But what incentives do elites have to be accommodative? From a game-theoretic perspective, consociational requirements like qualified majorities reduce the consequences of disagreement (Tsebelis, 1990). Disputes can be safely cultivated, as politicians know that they only become decisive and thus problematic when one conflict side reaches the qualified majority. So, 'paradoxically, the adoption of measures that reduce the consequences of disagreement (...) increase the frequency of disagreement.' (Tsebelis, 1990, p. 22). Some critics of consociational designs focus on electoral reform as an alternative. As argued by Horowitz (2002, p. 23), 'electoral rewards [...] can provide the motivation ethnic leaders otherwise lack'. But in Belgium, he states, no such incentives exist. Its consociational rules prescribe post-electoral cooperation, but the combination of a list-PR system and political parties divided along segmental lines 'does nothing to foster compromise on ethnic issues' in the pre-electoral arena (cf. also Horowitz, 1991, pp. 167–176). In contrast to systems with state-wide parties or AV arrangements (e.g. Horowitz, 2004), the combination of Belgium's electoral and party system is typically considered to be a recipe for conflict.⁴ Apart from the Marxist PVDA/PTB (*Partij van de Arbeid/ Parti du Travail de Belgique*), all parties are split along linguistic lines. There are separate Flemish and Francophone liberal parties, social-democratic parties, green parties, etc. (cf. De Winter et al.,

2009, pp. 72–76). These parties, it is said, have little incentives to reach out to the other side, and many reasons to opt for confrontation. They only address and represent their own segment, they face or fear being called traitors by parties on their side when compromise is sought, and they cannot be sanctioned or held accountable by the other side (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Deschouwer, 2002, 2006, 2013b; Swenden, 2006, 2013a).

Based on this accumulation of theoretical risk factors, Belgium can safely be considered a highly relevant case: if federalization means escalation, this should be particularly noticeable in Belgium.

Defining Ethno-Territorial and Cabinet Conflicts

To assess the paradox thesis, I focus on ethno-territorial conflicts. To conceptualize these conflicts, I build on the notion of segmental cleavages, a concept borrowed by Lijphart (1977) from Eckstein (1966) to define divided societies. Segmental cleavages refer to situations in which ‘political divisions follow very closely, and especially concern, lines of objective social differentiation, especially those particularly salient in a society’, whereby the divisions result in political competition and conflicts which ‘not only pit distinct segments against one another but especially concern segmental conflicts.’ (Eckstein, 1966, p. 34) Put differently, conflicts must be segmental (a) in terms of the factions that oppose each other, and (b) in terms of the issues at stake. I consider these as sufficient rather than necessary conditions. Accordingly, ethno-territorial conflicts are defined as conflicts (a) along segmental lines (Flemings vs. Francophones) and/or (b) conflicts on ethno-territorial issues (e.g. language policy, state reform). Using these dimensions, the following typology can be proposed (Figure 1).

This study analyses ethno-territorial conflicts through cabinet conflicts. Previous studies defined such conflicts in terms of ‘disagreements’ between coalition partners (e.g. Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993, p. 316 (Appendix II); Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015). But not all disagreements are conflicts. To discern the peaceful and cooperative disagreements that are inherent to coalition governance from the actual cabinet *conflicts* in which we are interested, an additional criterion is added. Disagreements must be *conflictual*, *antagonistic* in nature (indicators: cf. *infra*). Also, not all coalition party actors are relevant. To keep individual troublemakers from distorting our view, a *relevance criterion* is added: those

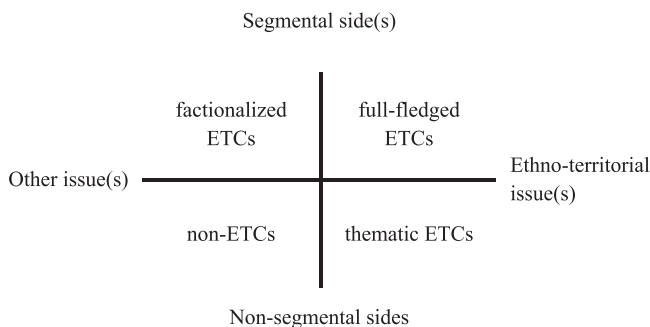


Figure 1. Typology of ethno-territorial conflicts (ETCs) by sides and issues

involved must be cabinet members or represent a coalition party at large (e.g. PPG-leader, president).⁵ Accordingly, cabinet conflicts are defined as any explicit and antagonistic disagreement between two or more cabinet members and/or relevant coalition party actors. For a more elaborate discussion, see Vandenberghe (2022a).

Data and Method

Focus

Using a new coding scheme (Vandenberghe, 2022a), both ethno-territorial and other conflicts in Belgian cabinets are mapped (1979–2018). This allows for an analysis of ethno-territorial conflicts' absolute and relative prevalence. Proportions tell us whether and to what extent ethno-territorial conflict is a predominant source of distress (high percentage) or rather a side-product of a larger context of confrontational politics (low percentage). In other words, whether there is a problem of segmental politics specifically or coalition politics more generally. The reason to focus on cabinets is straightforward. Being continuously engaged in high-level decision-making in a context of linguistic parity between ministers, the central cabinet is the true epicentre of Flemish-Francophone cooperation. Studying cabinets also facilitates future comparative studies, as power-sharing cabinets exist in most divided polities (whatever the policy level).

The choice for 1979 as a starting point is based on pragmatic and theoretical rationales. Regrettably, no progress-friendly and reliable sources allowed me to map conflicts *before* this era. Luckily, doing so is not a precondition to answer the research question. The mere absence of an upward conflict curve since 1979 suffices to reject the paradox hypothesis. From a theoretical perspective, 1979 marks the first full year after the split of the last traditional party in Belgium (cf. De Winter et al., 2009). As such, the analysis covers the whole period in which the Belgian federation was characterized by the abovementioned cocktail of risk factors. It includes five out of six state reforms, leaving only the first one (1970) out of sight. This is unfortunate, but not problematic. In assessing federalization's impact, the 1970 reform is less relevant. It enforced power-sharing and sowed the seeds of the Communities, but it failed to provide substantive sub-state autonomy (e.g. Hooghe, 2004). *De facto*, federalization only really gained track during the following reforms (1980, 1988, 1993, 2001, and 2011). These established the Flemish, Walloon (1980), and Brussels-Capital Region (1988), separate sub-state cabinets (1980), directly elected Flemish and Walloon sub-state parliaments (1993, first elections in 1995), ever-increasing fiscal autonomy, and substantial packages of competences. If the paradox of federalism holds, it should surface in the post-1979 period.

Ethno-Territorial Conflict

Recall that ethno-territorial conflicts are defined as all conflicts on ethno-territorial issues and/or along segmental lines. A dummy variable grasps whether the conflict concerns an ethno-territorial issue. To this end, I used the Belgian Agendas Project (BAP) (cf. Walgrave et al., 2019), which is part of the larger Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (cf. Baumgartner et al., 2019).⁶ A new *ethno-territorial issue* category was constructed (Table 1). It combines three categories of the BAP-codebook, which is customized to fit the Belgian context (Walgrave et al., 2009). Two categories are refined for the purposes

of this study (details and exceptions: cf. codebook, available on demand). Conflicts that are *clearly linked* to this new category are coded as conflicts on ethno-territorial issues too (e.g. clashes on the appointment of a minister due to his/her legacy of sectarian campaigns or language law violations).

A segmental sides variable distinguishes between conflicts (0) without segmental sides (or info), (1) with one segmental side, and (2) with two segmental sides. On a more fine-grained level, a separate variable grasps conflicts (0) with segmentally mixed sides, (1) among Francophones, (2) among Flemings, (3) between some Francophone and some Flemish actors, (4) between all Francophone and some Flemish actors, (5) between some Francophone and all Flemish actors, and (6) between all Francophone and all Flemish actors. To be considered a conflict *along segmental lines*, conflicting sides must be linguistically homogeneous *and* encompassing. So, *all* Flemish and/or *all* Francophone coalition partners must stand oppose (codes 4, 5, and 6). For example, when all Flemish coalition parties attack a Francophone minister (one side) or when all Francophone parties clash with all Flemish parties (two sides). To avoid distortion, an exception was made for the Michel I cabinet (two sides needed).⁷

Cabinet Conflict (Intensity)

This paper builds on a novel effort to empirically study cabinet conflicts (for a more elaborate discussion, see Vandenberghe, 2022a). Empirical studies of cabinet conflicts are scarce and typically rely on quantitative content analyses of printed newspapers or keyword searches in digital newspaper archives—often combined with additional sources (e.g. Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993; Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015; Moury & Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans & Moury, 2006). Own explorative analyses of printed newspapers selections sufficed to find major conflicts but failed to provide a *consistent* view of the smaller tensions that truly grasp the power-sharing atmosphere (grumpy sneers, short-lived blockages, etc.). Only an infeasible reading effort could overcome this. For similar reasons and reasons of data availability, numerous other

Table 1. Ethno-territorial issues

BAP	Summary
Code 2001	Intergovernmental Relations: (between sub-states and between the federal and sub-state level): administrative relations, finance of various levels of government, financial transfers, tensions between levels of government, powers and finances, (de) centralization, implementing a law or directive of another level of government, money transfers from one level to another, issues of coordination and/or the distribution of efforts, assets or liabilities (e.g. the distribution of efforts in implementing a climate agreement).
Code 2033	State Reform and Constitution: all issues of centre-periphery relations, the positions of the sub-states, the language areas, and the Dutch and French language groups at the federal level.
Code 2311	Promotion and defense of national culture: defense of the Belgian, Flemish, Brussels, or Walloon culture and identity, the (Dutch) language and its use.

Note: Amended extraction of codes from the Belgian Agendas Project (Walgrave et al., 2009). Details and exceptions: see codebook (available on demand).

sources were considered unfit for the purposes of this study: e.g. Political Data Yearbooks (European Journal of Political Research), magazines (e.g. Knack), parliamentary records, and the radio and TV archives of the Flemish public broadcaster (e.g. Het Journaal, Villa Politica, De Zevende Dag, Terzake). Hence, an alternative approach is used.

Unfortunately, no single source covered the entire post-1979 period. The bulk of coding is based on the political yearbooks of Res Publica (1979–2006; 1743 pages)—the predecessor of the journal *Politics of the Low Countries*.⁸ These 28 yearbooks provide a systematically available and peer-reviewed expert summary of Belgian politics that is comprehensive while maintaining an impressive eye for detail and lower-level incidents (small sneers, frustrations, etc.). These yearbooks only go as far as 2006. The most recent period (1995–2018) is coded using keyword searches in the GoPress digital news archive. The extensive overlap between both datasets (12 years) allows for a nuanced comparison and interpretation (cf. *infra*).

To code conflicts using the digital news archive, I searched the full Dutch selection of *Belga*, the largest and most authoritative Belgian news agency.⁹ This allows me to dodge the bullet of sampling: all articles and news releases of all days are covered, without having to pick one/some journal(s). In contrast to previous studies, I do not use keywords referring to cabinet conflicts *directly*: ‘conflict’, ‘parties’, ‘struggle’, etc. (e.g. Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015). To avoid missing those clashes that are not explicitly branded as such, a more thorough approach was used. First, using Boolean operators, keyword searches were used to find all articles whose title refers to the cabinet, cabinet members, or coalition parties (‘president’). Second, all headlines that indicated some kind of (potential) disagreement between coalition parties were selected. Finally, the 9,547 resulting articles were fully read to track and code all conflicts.

Six inductively constructed indicators allow me to decide whether or not a situation of disagreement is *conflictual/antagonistic* in nature: the verbal, threat, block, impose, survival, and branding indicators (Table 2). A residual category allows for case-specific flexibility. Building on these indicators, three levels of conflict intensity are discerned (Table 2). Previous analyses measured intensity indirectly, with proxies such as the compatibility of preferences, the constant-sum or variable-sum nature of situations, or the players involved (inter-party, interdepartmental, etc.) (Andeweg & Timmermans, 2008; Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015; Nousiainen, 1993). The direct approach used here is less prone to distortion and empirical slack.

Using news media to code conflicts might trigger criticism. First, while the debate on the growing media focus on conflict is yet to be settled (e.g. Vliegenthart et al., 2011), such a trend could distort the analyses presented below. Of course, any source can be prone to such trends. Nevertheless, I contain this risk by only using news archives for the most recent period (1995–2018). In this respect, the findings of this paper are also rather comforting. No generally growing levels of conflict are found. Second, the media uses strategy and game-frames (cf. Aalberg et al., 2012), and focuses on negativity -including conflict- in political news (cf. Lengauer et al., 2012). If anything, this is an asset. It implies that few conflicts will remain unexposed. Rather, there is a significant bycatch, which is discarded after rigorously checking for conflict indicators *myself*. Third, Belgian media tend to extrapolate statements and actions from one politician or party to Flanders and Francophone Belgium as a whole, often presenting both segments as homogeneous players in a conflictual relationship (Sinardet, 2008, 2012). But this terminological trigger-happiness does

Table 2. Conflict indicators and intensity levels.

Indicator	Intensity level	Description
<i>Verbal</i>	0	Pejorative criticism, swearing, blaming, scapegoating, anger, frustrations, disapproval, etc.
<i>Block</i>	1	Manifest blocking or attempts (restrictive coding): empty chair tactics, clear vetoes when X needs (urgent) approval, etc.
<i>Impose</i>	1	Imposing or trying to impose X on partner (restrictive coding): <i>faits accomplis</i> , sharp ultimatum or veto for X, etc.
<i>Threat</i>	1 (2 if survival)	Threatening partner (to block dossier X, to take revenge, etc.)
<i>Branding</i>	1 (2 if 'crisis')	Situation is labelled a conflict or the like (crisis, growing tensions, escalation, etc.)
<i>Survival</i>	2	Resignation of the cabinet, a coalition party, or a cabinet member is in the balance, subject to threats, etc.
<i>Other</i>	case-specific	Residual category (logbook)

Note: Detailed rules, examples, and exceptions: see codebook (available on demand).

not damage this paper's data on *segmental sides*. The extensive selection of articles and the detailed conflict descriptions provided a solid sight of the specific parties and individuals involved in the conflicts. With few exceptions, there was no need to rely on the segmental frames of the Belga news agency.

A logbook was used to guarantee coding consistency and transparency about doubts and exceptional cases. Surely, this approach is not exhaustive nor free of shortcomings. But it provides the most solid, detailed, and comprehensive view of cabinet conflicts in Belgium to date (Yearbook data: $N = 328$; News archive data: $N = 1013$).¹⁰ Conflicts that might not have been between coalition partners (cases of doubt) are not included in these numbers, nor in the analyses below.¹¹

Appendix 1 presents a comparison of both datasets (news archive vs. yearbooks) for the 12 overlapping years (1995–2006). It shows that news archive coding captures even more cabinet conflicts (439) than the already extensive coding of yearbooks (157). This difference is taken into consideration when presenting results (cf. *infra*). A second notable difference is that the yearbook dataset provides a more 'fiery' picture. It shows a larger proportion of intense conflicts (51% low-intensity clashes in the yearbook data, 74% in the news archive dataset). In general, however, the aggregated results are highly comparable. The values on the other variables are very similarly represented. For example, the percentage of cabinet conflicts on ethno-territorial issues is similarly low (12% vs. 17%), most conflicts do not involve segmental sides (87% vs. 92%), and the general proportion of ethno-territorial conflicts is equal (at 18%).

Finally, an intercoder reliability test exposes the degree of resemblance (Cohen's κ) between the original coding and that of an external coder (Appendix 2). The latter was briefed on the codebook and practiced for a day before coding a random selection of 50 conflicts.¹² All κ values indicate *excellent* intercoder reliability ratings ($\kappa > 0.8$), except for the *moderate* rating for the ethno-territorial issue variable ($\kappa = 0.646$).

Results

Ethno-Territorial Conflict: Prevalence and Morphology

Before addressing ethno-territorial conflict's evolution, it is interesting to dissect its general prevalence and morphology. On average, the yearbooks (1979–2006) exposed a new ethno-territorial conflict every three to four months (monthly $X = 0.28$; $SD = 0.52$). For the news archives (1995–2018), this number goes up to more than one new clash every two months ($X = 0.59$; $SD = 0.90$). Both datasets (news archive and yearbook data, reported in that order) indicate that a significant share of coalition conflicts is ethno-territorial in nature (16.7%–29.3%). As explained, ethno-territorial conflict is defined as conflict on ethno-territorial issues and/or between segmental sides. Between 15.7% and 24.4% of clashes concern ethno-territorial issues like state reform or language laws. Fewer conflicts are fought along linguistic lines (4.5%–16.2%). Insofar as they occur, they typically mobilize *one* segment only, e.g. all Francophone parties vs. one Flemish party (recall that for Michel I, such clashes are not seen as conflicts along segmental lines). Conflicts in which *both* segments stand oppose are more exceptional (1.5%–7.3%).

Focussing on ethno-territorial conflicts (excluding other clashes), [Figure 2](#) shows the prevalence of the three types of ethno-territorial conflicts. In terms of my typology, the largest set of conflicts is thematic in nature (72.8%, bottom right), about one in five is a full-fledged conflict (21.3%, top right), and only 5.9% is a factionalized conflict (top left). These findings already highlight the room for 'tension-reducing coalitions' (Elazar, 1987, p. 244). To avoid additional complexity, these results only cover the news archive data (1995–2018). As [Appendix 3](#) shows, the same hierarchy between conflict types arises from the yearbook data (1979–2006), although the latter does show notably larger proportions of conflicts along segmental lines.

The detailed conflict sides variable adds to this picture. Here too, news archive and yearbook data are reported in that order. In 24.0%–36.6% of cabinet conflicts, the opposing sides are segmentally mixed (e.g. Flemish and Francophone parties stand aside against another partner). Intra-segmental conflict is also quite frequent (37.2%–19.2% in total), although more so amongst Flemings (25.2%–13.4%) than amongst Francophones (12.0%–5.8%). About one in four conflicts is partly segmental (28.8%–22.9%), in that it puts part of the Flemish segment against part of the Francophone segment (e.g. one Flemish against one Francophone party in a large coalition).

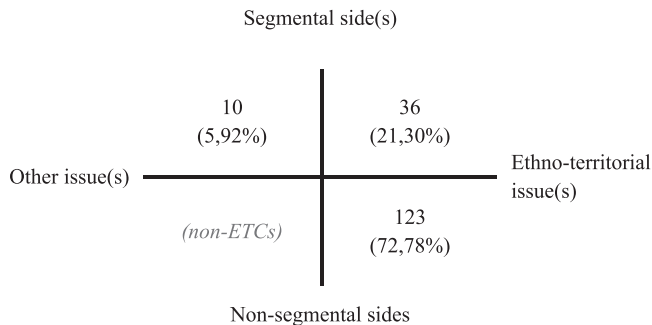


Figure 2. Typology of ethno-territorial conflicts (ETCs): prevalence in Belgian cabinets (1995–2018) ($N = 169$)

Ethno-Territorial Conflict: Evolution

The aggregated yearly level is well-fit for visualization. All figures present the data of both datasets (yearbooks, archives) within the same graphs. However, it should be kept in mind that these datasets are not surrogates. For Figures 3 and 5, axes ranges are adapted to compensate for the quantitative difference between them.¹³ To avoid chaotic visuals, no overlapping periods are shown in Figure 6. Only one dataset is presented fully (the remaining years are covered by the other dataset). A dashed demarcation line marks the border between both datasets. In choosing which dataset should be presented fully, I opted for the visuals that support the paradox thesis the most. This is in line with the choice to assess this thesis in a very favourable context: if there is a paradox, it should be apparent here.

No clear-cut upward trend can be discerned in the absolute frequency of ethno-territorial conflicts (Figure 3).¹⁴ If anything, there appears to be an overall decline in the number of conflicts since the late 1970s (cf. trendlines). Notably, this downward trend is blurred by numerous fluctuations. There is an apparent alternation between conflict and stability, with peaks of eruptions in e.g. 1979, 1986 (yearbook data), and 2008–2010 (archives).¹⁵ Some clear depths can be discerned too, most notably in the early 1990s (yearbooks) and early 2010s (archives). Furthermore, the adoption of new federalization deals (indicated with arrows) does not seem to have a clear impact. State reforms were sometimes directly followed by escalations and sometimes by declining conflict levels. Often, these trends were also really short-lived. In sum, the raw number of ethno-territorial conflicts did not increase as federalization progressed (to the contrary), and in the short run, individual federalization deals did not have an invariable impact.

The conflict's relative prevalence provides a somewhat similar picture (ethno-territorial conflict as a % of all cabinet conflicts; Figure 4). It shows an overall decline too (cf. trendlines). This indicates that, at least from this perspective, ethno-territorial conflict gradually became more and more of a side-product of confrontational politics, rather than being a predominant source of distress itself (especially since the late 1990s). Also, and confirming the picture of a more troublesome past, there were only five years in which there were at least as many ethno-territorial as other conflicts (1979, 1983, 1985, 1990, and 1994).

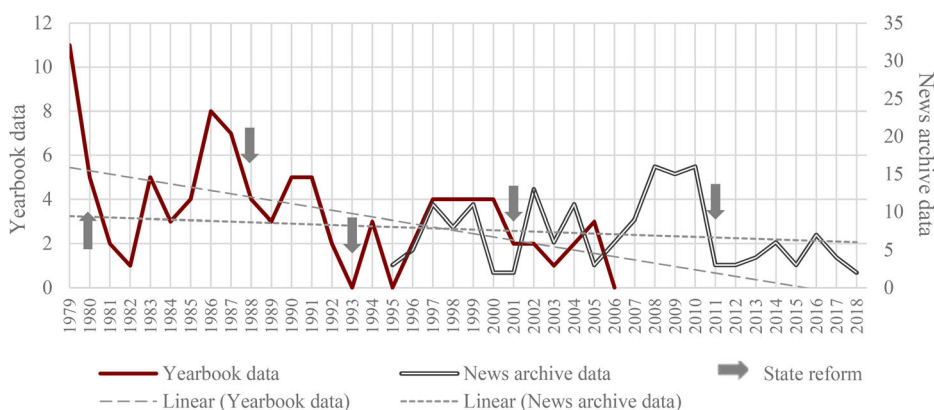


Figure 3. Ethno-territorial cabinet conflict: yearly absolute frequency (1979–2018)

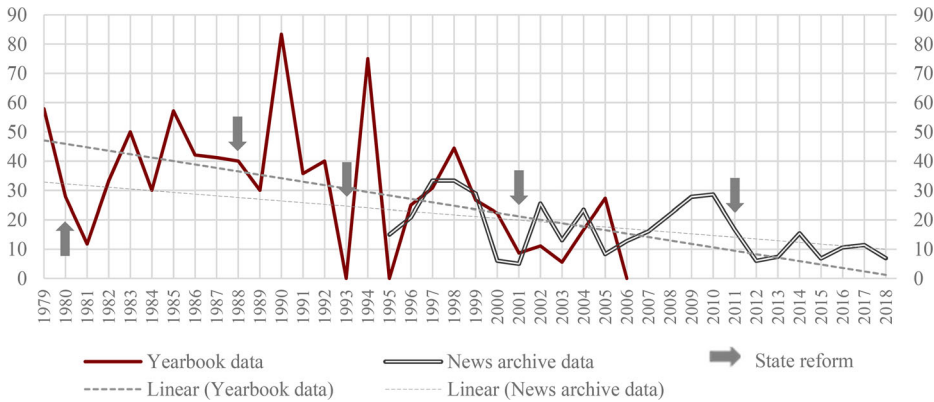


Figure 4. Ethno-territorial cabinet conflict: yearly relative frequency (% of all cabinet conflicts, 1979–2018)

Furthermore, and as with the absolute evolution, federalization deals have a very blurry immediate aftermath (escalation in some cases, pacification in others, often short-lived). So, in relative terms too, ethno-territorial conflict did not increase as federalization progressed and state reforms did not per se come with a direct aftermath of growing segmental tensions.

Frequency is one thing, but in assessing power-sharing dynamics, the intensity of ethno-territorial conflicts is arguably as important. Figure 5 excludes the least serious conflicts (intensity 0) and only visualizes clashes that involve threats, fierce blocking (e.g. empty chair politics), impositions, probable or effective cabinet resignations, etc. The resulting picture is clear: here too, no clear paradox-confirming dynamic is found. Overall, the general decline noted above remains intact (cf. trendlines). But perhaps more notably, an apparently cyclical pattern seems to surface. Intense ethno-territorial conflicts appear to come in waves. This pattern vanished after the agreement on the sixth state reform (*Vlin-derakkoord*, 2011), which was followed by an unprecedented period of stability.

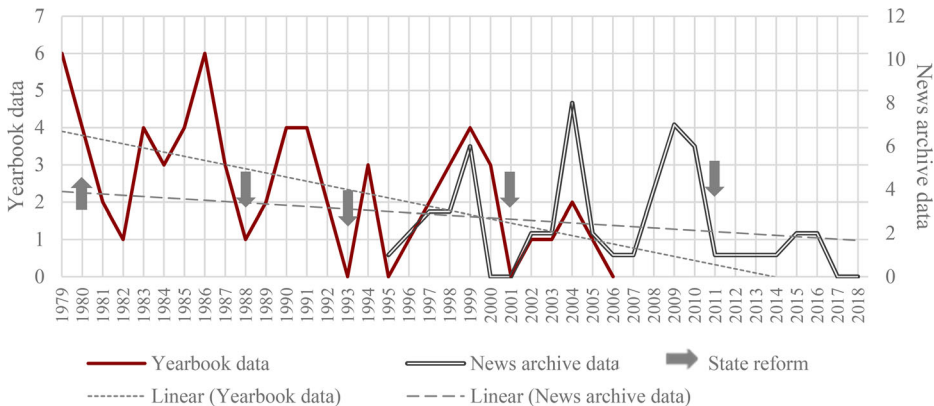


Figure 5. Intense ethno-territorial cabinet conflicts (0 excluded): yearly absolute frequency (1979–2018)

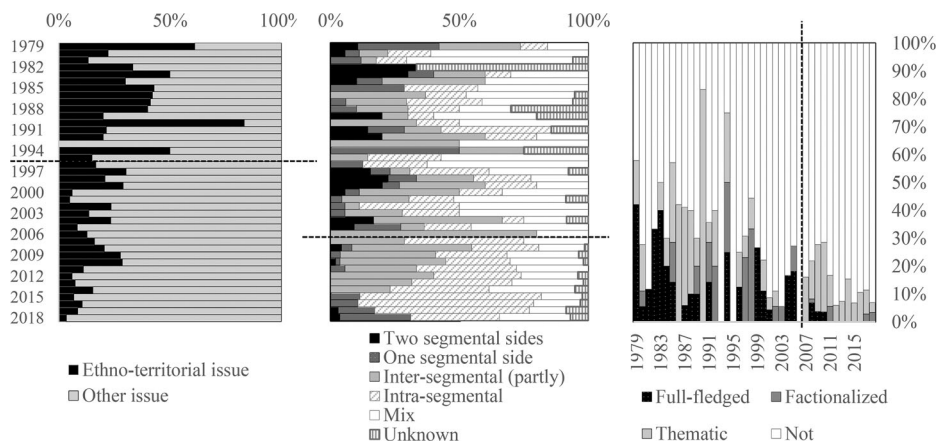


Figure 6. Ethno-territorial cabinet conflicts by issue (left), sides (middle), and type (right): yearly percentage of all cabinet conflicts (1979–2018)

Note: Michel I (2014–2018): to be conflicts ‘along segmental lines’, two segmental sides must be involved.

Unpacking ethno-territorial conflicts and conflict types adds to this picture (Figure 6). Throughout the 1979–2018 period, conflict on ethno-territorial issues burdened power-sharing in almost every single year. However, the proportions of cabinet conflicts on such issues used to be notably higher in the past. The same applies to conflicts between segmental sides; i.e. when the Flemish and/or Francophone coalition partners act ‘as a block’. Although such conflicts arise across the timeline, they were clearly more predominant in the past. Note that the recent growth in conflicts with one segmental side is a result of the unique composition of Michel I (2014–2018). These situations are not considered as conflicts along segmental lines (cf. supra).

Finally, and putting the pieces of the puzzle together, the evolution of the *types* of ethno-territorial conflicts is visualized on the right. In line with the abovementioned findings, there is a remarkable decline in the percentage of full-fledged conflicts (conflict on ethno-territorial issues and between segmental side(s)). Thematic conflicts (issues, not sides) persist throughout time, although in varying proportions. Their heydays appear to be in the past, too. The same applies to factionalized conflicts (sides, not issues), which are far less frequent in number.

Conclusion

Does federalism escalate tensions in divided states? This paper adds to the debate on the paradox of federalism by addressing it from a power-sharing perspective. It builds on new, fine-grained datasets of cabinet conflicts in Belgium ($N = 1013$; $N = 328$) to expose the evolution of ethno-territorial conflict during five major waves of federalization (1979–2018). The result is the most comprehensive view of the intensity, absolute, and relative frequency of ethno-territorial conflict in Belgium to date. The Belgian case allows for a solid assessment of the paradox thesis. Its unique combination of theoretical risk factors makes it a least-likely case for accommodation. It is a homogeneous, bipolar,

consociational, centrifugal federation with a core ethnic region, far-reaching sub-state autonomy, a list-PR system, and a split party system (De Winter et al., 2009; Deschouwer, 2002, 2005, 2006; Elazar, 1987; Hale, 2004; Hooghe et al., 2016; Horowitz, 2000, 2002; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021; Stepan, 1999; Swenden, 2006; Watts, 2008, 2013). Accordingly, the central hypothesis is that the ethno-territorial conflict has generally increased as federalization progressed.

The data show that the pertinence of ethno-territorial tensions is not an exaggerated phantasy of regionalist hardliners. Ethno-territorial politics visibly deserves its explosive reputation. On average, there is a new clash every two to three-and-a-half months (depending on the dataset). A significant share of coalition conflicts is ethno-territorial in nature (17% in one dataset, 29% in the other). Most of these clashes are about ethno-territorial issues like state reform or language laws, but there are fewer conflicts in which one or both segments (all Flemish/Francophone coalition actors) actually act *'en bloc'*. Conflicts in which *both* segments are fully mobilized against each other are particularly rare (barely 2%–7%). Hence, the problem is not so much segmental power-sharing as such (the fact that both sides must govern together), but rather the many issues and debates that are inherent to governing divided polities (ranging from local applications of language laws to major discussions on state reform). Conflict sides are found to vary strongly throughout time. About 60% of conflicts are either intra-segmental clashes or involve segmentally mixed sides. This goes against the quite common perception of two irreconcilable segments, which is perhaps nurtured by the fact that in roughly one in four conflicts (23%–29%), *parts* of both segments stand oppose (e.g. one Flemish vs. one Francophone minister).

In terms of conflict evolution, the results are clear. All indicators forcefully contradict the paradox thesis. Even in an unfavourable context, federalization did not fuel the fire of ethno-territorial cabinet conflict. Absolute, relative, and intensity levels vary throughout time, with peaks and valleys across the timeline. In the short term, state reform deals did not have an invariable impact. They are sometimes followed by pacification and sometimes by escalation. Insofar as any long-term tendency can be discerned, it is that of a tentative decline of conflict throughout federalization. The conflict's relative prevalence also shows that ethno-territorial conflict gradually became a side-product of confrontational politics, rather than being a predominant source of distress itself. Intense ethno-territorial conflict appears to come in waves, but in general, the frequency of such clashes decreased too. Furthermore, this seemingly cyclical pattern died out after the agreement on the sixth state reform (2011). An unprecedented period of lasting ethno-territorial stability took its place. Unpacking conflicts provides a similar view. The proportions of conflicts on ethno-territorial issues were remarkably higher in the past, and the same holds for conflicts between both segments. The percentage of full-fledged conflicts (on ethno-territorial issues *and* between segmental side(s)) shows a clear decline too. As Belgium is a highly unfavourable context for accommodation (according to theory), these findings provide a strong case against the paradox thesis. What might explain this surprising gap? I present three tentative reflections.

First, elites *do* have incentives to be prudent. The troublesome combination of a list-PR system and parties divided along segmental lines is thought to leave elites with no pre-electoral incentives to be cooperative (Horowitz, 1991, 2002). The resulting competition is argued to push them towards 'ethnic outbidding' dynamics: an inflation of claims and a radicalization of stances (e.g. Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972). This paper shows that even

in a highly unfavourable electoral, historical, institutional, and party landscape, this need not be the case. Parties in divided states are not doomed to confrontational stances and strategies. On the contrary, the exact opposite might happen. Just as mainstream parties can react to niche parties' emergence by opting for a contrasting position (an adversarial strategy; Meguid, 2005, 2008), accommodative politicians can target moderate voters in reaction to confrontational peers. They can present themselves as being responsible, cooperative, and constructive. The tonality of pleas for recentralization and a federal electoral district in Belgium seems to be indicative of such a growing discourse. So, from a *vote-seeking* rationale, incentives for prudent leadership exist. Such attitudes can also be rewarding from a policy-seeking or office-seeking perspective (Müller & Strøm, 1999). As both goals imply or necessitate segmental cooperation, the ambition to impact policy or join cabinets can be an important counterbalance to any urges to be too harsh towards the other side.

Second, this study demonstrates that bipolar federations do not per se leave little room for 'tension-reducing coalitions' (Elazar, 1987, p. 244). Power-sharing between two segments does not imply that all politics is bipolar, nor that segments commonly act as homogeneous blocks. With an effective number of parties between 6.8 and 9.1, and notoriously large coalitions of 4–6 parties (1978–2018; Döring & Manow, 2020), the Belgian case perfectly illustrates that bipolar federations can leave plenty of room for shifting coalitions across negotiations.

Third and perhaps most classically, transferring power to the sub-states diminishes the decision-making load at the central level, which is considered a favourable factor to elite cooperation (Lijphart, 1969, p. 218). Additionally, competences are often split *because* they were considered to be prone to ethno-territorial clashes in the first place. In this respect, this paper provides some cautious support for the idea or hope that federalization can 'prevent ethnic groups from fighting each other over the (perceived) unfair treatments by the others' (Brancati, 2006, p. 656) and remove 'multiethnic tensions from the politics of the center' (Swenden, 2006, p. 288).

These findings call for further research. Comparative analyses would be particularly fruitful, but energy should also be devoted to *explaining* conflict's prevalence. Relevant factors can be found in consociational theory (e.g. the number and strength of parties from each segment in the cabinet) and in the coalition politics literature (for commonly studied factors, see e.g. Bergman et al., 2008). Conflict *solutions* are also key. The (in)ability to solve conflicts and the kind of solutions found arguably tells us as much about accommodative power-sharing as the presence of conflict in the first place. Theoretical reflections on the impact of federalization on conflict-*solving* exist (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015), but these are yet to be tested with fine-grained longitudinal data. Finally, this paper only addresses one flank of the paradox (power-sharing at the central policy level). Whether federalization exacerbates conflict between sub-states or between policy levels, is yet to be assessed. Doing so could add significantly to our understanding of federalization's effects specifically, and the politics of divided states more generally.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

For an elaboration on the approach behind the data, see Vandenberghe (2022a). Following an embargo, the data that support the findings will be available on 1 November 2023 in Mendeley Data (Vandenberghe, 2022b). Meanwhile, data can be made available by the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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Notes

1. The term *divided state* is used here to refer to what Lijphart (1977, pp. 3–4) sometimes called ‘plural societies’: states with societies characterized by segmental cleavages (cf. Eckstein, 1966, p. 34), whereby parties, media, schools, and civil society organizations tend to be organized along the lines of these cleavages.
2. According to Hale (2004), CERs exist when a region possesses half of the federation’s population, or at least 20% more inhabitants than the second largest region.
3. The 1970 reform succeeded previous attempts to pacify tensions (e.g. several language laws and the establishment of a fixed language border in the early 1960s).
4. The Alternative Vote (AV) system is argued to reward political moderation, because the high threshold for election (an absolute majority of votes cast) gives parties incentives to aim for the marginal votes of voters of other segments (voters who won’t support ethnic hardliners opposing their interests) (Horowitz, 2004).
5. Given Belgium’s partitocratic nature (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), cases of doubt are included in the datasets and analyses.
6. BAP-data collected by Walgrave, Joly, Hardy, Zicha, Sevenans, and Van Assche. Funding: European Science Foundation (07-ECRP-008), Flemish National Science Foundation (G.0117.11N), Belgian Federal Science Policy (IUAP P7/46).
7. Michel I included three Flemish and only one Francophone party (MR, *Mouvement Réformateur*). To prevent any clash between MR and some of its coalition partners from automatically being coded as an ethno-territorial conflict, a more restrictive coding rule was applied. Only clashes between *two* homogeneous and encompassing sides (code 6) were seen as conflicts along *segmental lines*. One segmental side does not suffice.
8. Coded chapters: ‘Overzicht van het Belgische Politieke Gebeuren’.
9. Except for the period between 15 May 1997 and 31 December 2000 (French selection, as no Dutch Belga titles were available). Therefore, the selection includes 1,213 French articles.
10. For example, despite using a less wide definition, this approach exposed as many conflicts in the eight years from 1980 to 1987 ($N = 101$) as a manual newspaper analysis did for the twenty-seven years from 1961 to 1987 ($N = 101$) (Nousiainen, 1993, pp. 269–276). This number is 99 when excluding cases of doubt on whether the relevance criterion applies. Other analyses exposed far less conflicts in Belgium too (e.g. Timmermans & Moury, 2006).
11. Yearbook data: $N = 36$; News Archives: $N = 77$.
12. Including one case of doubt on whether the conflict was between coalition parties.
13. To this end, I use the comparison of overlapping years (1995–2006). For instance, in this period, the news archive data exposes 2,89 times as many ethno-territorial conflicts as the yearbook data, so its axis is about 2,89 times as large (max. 35) as that of the yearbook data (max. 12).
14. Deviations between both datasets are (partly) due to the fact that the archive data expose more low-intensity conflicts. Note that the trends of intense conflict frequencies (Figure 5) are more in line.
15. The eruptions of 1979 and 1986 are largely driven by clashes on local applications of language laws (mostly in Voeren). The 2008–2010 peak was the result of debates on a sixth state reform and the reform of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Dataset comparison: yearbooks vs. news archive (1995–2006)

	Res Publica yearbooks	GoPress news archive
Conflicts	157	439
Ethno-territorial conflicts	28 (17.83%)	81 (18.45%)
Intensity 0	80 (50.96%)	325 (74.03%)
Intensity 1	52 (33.12%)	61 (13.90%)
Intensity 2	25 (15.92%)	52 (11.85%)
0 segmental sides (incl. no info)	136 (86.63%)	406 (92.49%)
1 segmental side	10 (6.37%)	24 (5.47%)
2 segmental sides	11 (7.01%)	9 (2.05%)
Mixed sides (excl. no info)	60 (38.22%)	109 (24.83%)
Among Francophones	12 (7.64%)	55 (12.53%)
Among Flemings	22 (14.01%)	81 (18.45%)
Some Francophones vs. some Flemings	38 (24.20%)	148 (33.71%)
All Francophones vs. some Flemings	6 (3.82%)	13 (2.96%)
Some Francophones vs. all Flemings	4 (2.55%)	11 (2.51%)
All Francophones vs. all Flemings	11 (7.01%)	9 (2.05%)
Ethno-territorial issue	19 (12.10%)	75 (17.08%)

Appendix 2. Cohen's κ by variable (N = 50)^(a)

Variable	Cohen's κ	Sign.
Intensity	0.825	< 0.001
Segmental sides	0.828	< 0.001
Segmental sides (detailed)	0.874	< 0.001
Ethno-territorial issue	0.646	< 0.001

(a) 18 yearbook conflicts, 32 news archive conflicts.

Appendix 3. Typology of ethno-territorial conflicts (ETCs): prevalence in Belgian cabinets (1979–2006) (N = 96)

