

A divergent collective memory could help explain why the political crisis lasted so long in Belgium

December 6 2011

Researchers from various Belgian (UCL-Louvain, ULB-Brussels, HUB-Brussels, KULeuven, U. Antwerp) and American universities (New School, Harvard) have conducted research and reflections that give insights into the political crisis in Belgium, which has now been resolved, nearly 18 months after the general elections in June 2010. Their focus was on the way memories of past events affect current political and inter-group relations. According to the researchers, the political crisis could be partly explained by divergent and sometimes opposite memories which the two linguistic groups hold about the past.

These divergent memories come from multiple domains: linguistic, historical and economic.

Many Dutch-speaking Flemish do not accept that many French speakers do not speak Dutch. This reactivates vivid memories of contempt and humiliation felt when Flanders was dominated by French-speaking elites. This also strengthens their conviction that the Dutch language and Flemish culture are threatened and that the Flemish identity must be protected.

French speakers have difficulties in accepting the current economic growth in Flanders. This triggers memories of previous prosperity in their region. At the same time, Dutch speakers feel as if they were still oppressed and victims of the Belgian state, despite the fact that the

[economic power](#) is now in their region.

The debate over amnesty for WWII collaborators also reflects deep discrepant [collective memories](#). This debate has already occurred in many other European countries but not in Belgium, as many French speakers refuse to engage in the debate. This refusal leads to acute feelings of injustice among the Flemish, together with anger, spite and resentment.

The great success of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA in the general elections in 2010 could have been partly guided by resentment related to the past among many Flemish citizens. A recent study (Swyngedouw et Abts, 2011) has shown that many left-wing Flemish voted for the N-VA despite the party's right-wing program with regards to socio-economic issues. These data suggest that linguistic and [memory](#) issues are currently highly important in Flanders' political choices over more traditional ideological aspects opposing liberals and conservatives.

These examples demonstrate how discrepant collective memories on the part of Flanders and Wallonia help shape mutual feelings. The inability of the diverging representations of the past to coexist prevents Belgian citizens from developing a strong national identity and a clear sense of common belonging.

Unable to integrate the different facets of their national past, the Belgian authorities helped feelings of vexation and resentment flourish among citizens. In order to counteract this absence of a common identity, the Belgian state should, according to the researchers, play a federative role (which it never has so far) and to acknowledge the various memories shared by the Belgian linguistic communities.

More information: The study is published as a special issue of the SAGE journal, *Memory Studies*, and is free to access for a limited

period at: [mss.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 424034.full.pdf+html](https://mss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../424034.full.pdf+html)

Provided by SAGE Publications

Citation: A divergent collective memory could help explain why the political crisis lasted so long in Belgium (2011, December 6) retrieved 7 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-12-divergent-memory-political-crisis-belgium.html>

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