

The first Gravensteen Declaration

The signatories of this Declaration, who together constitute the Gravensteen Group*, hold a diverse set of political and ideological commitments and viewpoints, but they are united in their principled support for democracy and human rights. They value freedom, equality, solidarity, and mutual respect, and strongly reject all forms of racism and xenophobia.

They are concerned, however, by a tendency among participants in the recent debate about Belgian constitutional reform to conflate reasonable and just Flemish demands with (extreme-)right political thought. As a result, they wish to clarify and propose the following.

At the establishment of the Belgian state in 1830, the francophone elite secured its own privileged position by installing a regime that was based on both social inequality and the discrimination of the language and population of Flanders. The socio-economic inequality at the foundation of the Belgian state system was largely eliminated thanks to the efforts of an active workers' movement. In contrast, the Flemish population has struggled to successfully assert their right to their own language and culture.

Numerous opaque compromises later, the Belgian state structure is an institutional maze of seven parliaments and six governments. The 'damage to our state's reputation' abroad is caused not only by the recent political crisis, but also by the chaos that characterizes the Belgian construction after 177 years of patchwork constitutional development. The Flemish election results of June 10, 2007, should be interpreted in part as an expression of popular discontent with the historical trajectory of the Belgian state, and they seem to point in a particular direction for the future of Flanders.

A significant portion of the Flemish cultural class has failed to display the necessary intellectual courage to properly analyze the predicament we find ourselves in, and to us, this is incomprehensible. That this self-proclaimed 'progressive Flanders' resists all change and has instead joined the old Belgian elite in clinging to a Belgian status quo is, furthermore, unacceptable. They risk missing an opportunity to be part of the making of history.

Our point of departure is not an old-fashioned Flemish romanticism, but instead Enlightenment philosophy, the principle of democratic equality, and a modern constitutional vision that focuses on decentralization, subsidiarity, downscaling, and regional autonomy. This ideal finds common expression in communities across Europe, from Scotland and Kosovo to Catalonia and Estland.

The central principle is that of territoriality. The reforms of 1962-63 established the definitive boundaries of Flanders, Wallonia, and German-speaking Belgium as linguistic and cultural spaces within the Belgian federal system. This followed the acceptance – in part due to strong pressure from Wallonia – in 1932 of the strictly monolingual character of the three regions. In this respect, the linguistic borders in Belgium have the force of state borders. Like other bounded communities across the world, the three communities within Belgium maintain a vibrant social fabric with the help of certain rules and norms. Crucial is the expectation that newcomers will integrate in society over time by learning the language of their new homeland. This expectation does not constitute a lack of respect for their human rights with regard to freedom of religion, culture, or language use in the private sphere. In Flanders, non-European immigrants make a concerted and successful effort to learn the local language. While their counterparts from francophone Belgium are often more highly educated, they seem to resist making that same effort for reasons of principle, and they find

support for this stance among part of the (francophone) political class. Some even go so far as to suggest that the location of the border should be changed when a border town has a new linguistic majority. This implies a rejection of the principle of political solidarity between the linguistic communities as well as a rejection of the Belgian federal structure more generally. One can imagine how the French might react if a German majority in a French border town were to suggest moving the location of the state border...

The signatories of this Declaration find that the debate about socio-economic solidarity between communities is impossible in the absence of political solidarity; that is, when there is a lack of mutual respect for space and borders. An attitudinal change among francophone politicians is needed: we should not have to 'buy' this respect. The partition of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constitutes an application of the territoriality principle that is key to the Belgian constitution. In addition, real bilingualism in Brussels, as the capital district, provides the final chance for Belgium to survive as a confederation. In the absence of a consensus about these basic principles, any debate about constitutional reform is pointless.

In that case, we will be forced to take the necessary steps to incorporate the regions into the European Union as independent states. In a post-Belgian context of European collaboration, there will of course still be room for interregional solidarity. As members of the more prosperous region, we are keen to preserve solidarity of both the interpersonal and the interregional kind. We will decide to do so with our head and with our heart. But not in the context of a latent feeling of unease about cultural imperialism, unhealthy parasitism, and hidden party-political agendas.

This Belgium cannot function in the absence of clear and lasting agreements; those who reject democratic reform of this kind are in fact committed to the dissolution of that state. In line with this project of modernization, we demand more transparent political structures, more responsibility taking on the part of the regional governments, the application of democratic-constitutional rights, and the inviolability of the linguistic borders. If possible, we will undertake this reform with our francophone friends; if necessary, we will do so without them.

More autonomy will serve all communities well. Even francophone Belgium stunts its own growth when it allows itself to be held hostage by politicians who insist upon maintaining the status quo. Fortunately, individuals on both sides of the linguistic border are increasingly aware of this fact.

The hostility of the old must be replaced by a new commitment on the part of the communities to collaborate, balancing concerns with solidarity and responsibility. We would prefer to have Wallonia as a friendly partner-nation than to continue with a state structure that drags itself from one political crisis to the next.

The Gravensteen Group (in reverse alphabetical order):

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