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Belgium: Struggling with Solidarity



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As Belgium is still perceived as a traditional pro-integration EU member state, European solidarity is expected to be part of the country's DNA. During the COVID-19 pandemic, though, the country has not displayed particularly strong solidarity, not even towards its neighbouring countries. Neither has it demonstrated positive political leadership.

Hosting most EU institutions, benefiting from the single market as an open economy and having a long track record in supporting deeper integration, Belgium has been a staunch ally of the Union, not just for its own interest but also from a more voluntarist point of view. For a much longer time than in many other member states, policy-makers have benefited from the so-called permissive consensus in which a pro-EU attitude among elites contrasted with relatively little interest from the wider public. Recently, this has changed with Belgians being less in favour of EU integration. According to the latest Eurobarometer data (2019), for instance, 49% of Belgians have trust in the EU, compared to 53% 1 year before and 43% on average. Over the last decade, political parties, mainly but not exclusively from extremes of the political spectrum, have started to criticise the ongoing integration process, a strategy that clearly helped their electoral success.

Solidarity within the EU has for a long time not been considered to be an issue, but has attracted increasing controversy in light of ongoing internal state reform. It has become a central question as to how much solidarity is needed to keep Belgium together. Or put differently, to what degree are Belgian citizens willing to show (and pay for) solidarity with other parts of the country (intra-country solidarity),

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particularly in terms of social welfare and social security. This is seen as a system of interpersonal (financial) solidarity that is often criticised, but still broadly supported by the general public.

Financial solidarity with the EU overall is very strong. It is generally accepted that a country must pay for membership of the EU, but that ultimately this should be regarded more as an investment with a high return. Hence, only rarely has the country's EU budget contribution become the subject of discussion and then usually by the Flemish nationalists and extreme right. However, an increasingly sensitive issue of late concerns how the revenues are ultimately spent within Belgium, another challenge to intra-country solidarity. Flemish nationalists often complain that too much EU money is spent in the country's southern region of Wallonia, especially with regard to structural funds and new instruments such as the Just Transition Fund (created to facilitate the implementation of the European Green Deal). Generally speaking, Belgium does not consider itself to be a net payer. Although its contribution to the EU budget is higher than the country receives from different funds, one has to take into account that a considerable amount is invested in and around Brussels, due to the presence of many EU institutions. In 2018, for instance, Belgium paid EUR 3.84 billion (0.84% of GDP) to the EU budget, but EUR 8.51 billion (1.86% of GDP) was spent.

Probably the most popular form of solidarity comes in the form of longstanding cross-border relationships. Given the country's geographical location and political history as well as its strong ties with neighbouring regions and cities, this comes as no surprise. Financial assistance to facilitate cross-border cooperation (Interreg programmes) is certainly welcomed by policy-makers. Yet more important is the political belief shared by many that problems can be tackled seriously only if all countries involved work together. The Benelux grouping, whose economic agenda was overtaken by the EU, has found a new 'raison d'existence'. Cross-border cooperation has developed not only in soft policy areas such as culture and tourism, but also in hard policy areas such as home affairs. Outside of the Benelux heading, though, relations with for instance the Netherlands are not particularly self-evident.

Most controversial is the issue of migration. As a country of arrival and transmigration (particularly to the UK) with rising figures in the last decade, particularly since 2015, the attitude of Belgian policy-makers as well as the wider public is ambiguous, if not polarised. On the one hand, there is support for those in need when it is organised in a humane and fair way. Belgium wants to do its share, proven by the relatively high number of accepted refugees, especially minors, as well as many spontaneous and organised initiatives by individuals, NGOs and local governments. On the other hand, there is a strong tendency to think that Belgium has already done enough and is not responsible for solving the rest of the world's problems. Both sides favour more European solidarity 'in action', for instance in having common European rules and guidelines for relocating refugees somewhere close to the EU's external borders.

Surprisingly, as hinted above, a call for more European solidarity has largely been absent with regard to COVID-19. The federal government merely paid lip service to European integration at a time of crisis. Left-wing opposition parties called for more

action and leadership but in reality not much happened. As with most member states, the initial reaction was to opt for self-interest, with no compensatory words or deeds in regard to European solidarity, not even with neighbouring countries. Although at the peak of this crisis half of the Intensive Care Units beds remained empty, not a single patient was transferred to Belgium, unlike the situation in Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and France. This first wave ‘coronationalism’ was even more surprising, given the existing record of cross-border health cooperation.

However, a large support and relief effort did emerge when the EU leadership was finally able to agree on its overall coronavirus response during the European Summit of 17-21 July 2020. Among the mainstream political parties and media, it was seen as a breakthrough, especially in terms of the EU’s financial management with the creation of so-called Corona-bonds and the possible introduction of EU taxes. More integration in terms of health care (and sanitary crisis management) was not on the table and nor is it clear whether or not this would have received much support. Overall, Belgium has remained silent. Due to the strong (and adversarial) position of the Netherlands in providing southern EU member states with financial assistance to fight the pandemic, ‘political solidarity’ within the Benelux grouping existed only on paper, in sharp contrast to previous cooperation. At least in the public sphere, typically comparisons with the Netherlands in responding to COVID-19 are often made, but this does not seem to lead to more convergence. As a small member state, Belgium applauds everything that is done at European level which it cannot do on its own, such as making hard deals about a coronavirus vaccine with global pharmaceutical companies. Outspoken positions in support of European solidarity have been absent, although the tone might change soon. The new federal government’s ambition is to regain its position as ‘a strong voice in Europe and the world’ by, among other things, becoming an example of ‘effective solidarity’.

Some Recommendations

The Belgian government should release public statements making its position explicit whenever proposals with regard to European solidarity are made, for instance with regard to asylum and migration. A plan for cross-border patient transfers in times of health crises should be decided and good bilateral cooperation practices should be applied in different policy areas.

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