CHAPTER 3

Deliberative Stress in Linguistically Divided Belgium

Didier Caluwaerts

Min Reuchamps

ABSTRACT

Even though a diversity of perspectives and opinions is the driving force of any democracy, there is a point beyond which the diversity might become too great to allow for any meaningful public debate. This is often the case in deeply divided society, where deliberation within the political system is reduced to a game of discursive hand wrestling. Based on an analysis of linguistically divided Belgium, we want to determine what factors cause political systems to experience deliberative stress, and what levers exist for enabling these systems to realize their deliberative potential.

Political disagreement is the basic democratic condition in most Western societies, and few will deny that a diversity of perspectives and opinions is the driving force behind any democracy. However, there is a point beyond which the diversity might become too great to allow for any meaningful public debate. When identities oppose and interests collide, democracies will have a hard time avoiding civil strife and political breakdown. This is often true in deeply divided societies, such as Belgium, where citizens and elites refuse to engage in a meaningful dialogue with members of the other side. '[S]uch societies', Dryzek (2005, 230) contends, 'are divided into blocs with dense within-bloc communication but little across-bloc communication', and this leads more often than not to a situation where citizens and elites stand firm on their initial position even if it leads to a complete political and social deadlock (Caluwaerts, 2012).

In deeply divided societies, the public sphere becomes so balkanized that public debates are reduced to little more than a game of discursive hand wrestling. Whenever this happens, democratic deliberation starts to dysfunction. The glue of interaction and dialogue that holds democracies together fails to do so when conflicts are deep, and deliberative systems in divided societies more often than not come apart at the seams (Caluwaerts and Deschouwer, 2013; Steiner, 2012).

This is exactly what Belgian politics has witnessed over the past 50 years: slowly but steadily, the deep political divides have split up every aspect of the country (Deschouwer, 2012). Its political, social and economic systems are, in varying degrees, divided along linguistic lines, and the image that 'Belgium has become one country with two democracies' is now widely accepted among citizens, politicians and the media

alike. However, despite its deeply divided nature and its democratic and deliberative stress, Belgium has not known any violent outbursts of ethno-linguistic conflict since the 1960s. This makes it a very interesting case, one that differs from other 'torn' societies, and by exploring the deliberative characteristics of the Belgian system, we can find some important answers to the following questions: what factors cause political systems to experience deliberative stress? And what levers exist for enabling divided political systems to realize their deliberative potential?

In what follows, we first discuss the nature of the Belgian divide, before going on to analyze the macro-level characteristics of the Belgian political system that lead to deliberative stress, such as the political segmentation process and the split in the media and party systems. In the third section, we take a closer look at the micro-level factors that constrain deliberation within the political system. Finally, we look at the future prospects for deliberation in deeply divided Belgium by discussing two recent initiatives, which explicitly set out to restore the deliberative qualities of the Belgian system.

THE NATURE OF THE BELGIAN DIVIDE

Belgians often depict their country as 'an accident of history'. It is a country whose national unity has been threatened ever since the start, and whose sense of national belonging was never firmly established. One of the main reasons for this is that the language issue has always been viewed as a source of political unease and of struggle between the two main language groups, the Dutch-speakers and the French-

speakers (Deschouwer, 2012). For a brief period after Belgium's independence in 1830, the predominantly francophone elites attempted to defuse the language problems by constitutionally imposing French as the country's official language. However, there were bound to be serious reactions to this 'one country, one language' policy, and the Flemish movement soon began to formulate demands for Dutch to be officially recognized as the second language. There have been many constitutional reforms over the years, each of which has granted significantly more autonomy to the language groups, but the struggle between them continues to this very day, and demands for linguistic recognition and cultural autonomy still dominate political life.

For deliberative democrats, this divide between language groups should be of great interest, because linguistic diversity poses one of the greatest threats to deliberative democracy. After all, deliberative democracy relies heavily on talk as the basis for political decision making, but the multilingual nature of the Belgian divide implies that incentives for citizens to inform themselves about the viewpoints of the other side, and the possibilities of doing so, are very limited. Multilingualism constitutes a particular disincentive for deliberation, because the threshold for mutual understanding is set very high (Fiket, Olsen and Trenz, 2011). For instance, in a study of multilingual deliberation at European Social Forum meetings, Doerr (2012) argues that there is an increased risk of misunderstandings and enclave deliberation in multilingual settings.

Simultaneous translation might be able to only partly eliminate this burden because, as O'Leary (2005, 10) comments, 'deliberation takes place in languages,

dialects, accents, and ethnically toned voices [so] that it is not possible to create 'ideal speech situations''. This means that even if it is possible for citizens to physically understand each other, and to understand what is happening on the other side of the linguistic border, the language differences will function as an important signifier for the underlying political conflict (Kraus, 2008, 112). Deliberation will thus still be fraught with misunderstandings. In the context of colliding identities and interests, however, even the slightest misunderstanding may be interpreted as an expression of bad will and a display of contempt, leading to even deeper political conflicts.

Deliberation, and democracy as a whole, thus suffer from the lack of a common language basis, and the development of a unified public sphere in multilingual polities cannot be driven simply by providing translation. This lends some support to the argument by Van Parijs (2004) that multilingual societies could benefit from a single *lingua franca* to foster democratic stability. Normative tension in such a case would, however, be between recognizing the equal status of different language regimes at the expense of deliberation, and fostering dialogue by allowing language disenfranchisement (Longman, 2007). This second option is unlikely to be victorious in a deeply divided country such as Belgium, where linguistic recognition has been one of the main objects of political strife and where language, identity and power are closely tied together.

The existence of multiple languages thus raises the threshold for mutual understanding, and hinders the development of the unified public opinion that is necessary for the proper functioning of a democracy. Or, to quote John Stuart Mill:

'[a]mong a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist' (Mill, 1991 [orig. 1859], 428). If people suffer from a lack of a common language, this therefore seriously hinders the establishment of a stable political union. In this sense, Belgium – much like the EU – constitutes a worst-case scenario for the emergence of a thoroughly deliberative political system.

But language in itself is not necessarily a problem, even though plurilingualism raises the threshold for mutual understanding. In Belgium, behind languages are identities and interests, and these matter very much, because they are intrinsically linked to political preferences as to how the country should evolve (Reuchamps *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, Flemings, on the one hand, and Francophones, on the other, are often presented with opposed visions. This goes back to the very beginning of the new country. Then, the French-speaking elites, throughout the country and thus even in Dutch-speaking areas, sought to develop a strong and exclusive Belgian identity, and were unwilling to recognize 'regional' identities, be they Flemish or Walloon. In opposition to this Belgian French-speaking elite, the Flemish movement initially attempted to get Dutch recognized, next to French, as an official language for public affairs. It was only in the 1870s – that is almost fifty years after the foundation of the country – that the first linguistic laws were slowly passed.

Finally, the linguistic divide did not coincide only with different identities, but also with economic cleavages. The Flemish Region is currently more prosperous than the Walloon Region, even though the latter had been the economic engine of the country

from 1830 through 1960. This has led to both a linguistic and an economic dismantlement, and to a complex and so-called bipolar federalism, with two types of federal units: the three Communities are in charge of linguistic and cultural issues, whereas the three Regions are competent in economic areas.

DISMANTLING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

As we described above, Belgium is primarily divided along linguistic lines, but the language problems furthermore interact with three specific characteristics of the Belgian system, namely its logic of separation, the split media landscape, and the split in the party system. We will discuss each of these characteristics, and their consequences for the deliberativeness of the system, in the following sections.

The institutional logic of separation

Over the years, tensions between the linguistic groups have been steadily rising, and in order to reduce them, the institutional infrastructure of Belgium was transformed in such a way as to physically and politically separate the two groups as much as possible (Perrez and Reuchamps, 2012). Whenever there is an issue which leads to problems, the elites resort to granting self-rule. By giving the groups autonomy, the elites make sure that there is no need for the citizens of both groups to confront each other.

Since the first wave of federalization in Belgium at the end of the 1960s, the country has been increasingly organized across the community line, with a strong institutional separation, and this has impacted deliberation. On the one hand, the nature of the federal system is not based on a cooperative federalism, or on what is often called intergovernmental relations. In fact, apart from the so-called conciliation committee, which is made up of representatives from both federal and sub-state levels and was formed to discuss conflicts of competences but which is only important on paper, typical intergovernmental relations are not very highly developed in Belgium, in contrast to what can be found in other, similar, multinational federations such as Canada (Poirier, 2002; 2009). On the other hand, while the federal level is the main – even the only – meeting point between the two main groups, this level is built around recognition of homogenous linguistic groups. In Parliament, each MP has to be a member of one group or the other. In fact, linguistic identity is key in the Belgian federal system, because its main rules rely on this identification. For instance, the government has to have equal numbers of Dutch-speaking ministers and French-speaking ministers – with the possible exception of the Prime Minister (Deschouwer, 2012).

Moreover, if key elements in the federal organization of the country are to be changed, special-majority laws apply, namely laws that are passed by two-thirds of federal MPs but with a majority within each language group: in other words, a majority of Dutch-speaking representatives and a majority of French-speaking representatives. Similarly, an alarm bell procedure can be used by one of the two language groups if it fears a bill might impact strongly the interests of its community. These rules therefore

force the elites to work together on fundamental political and constitutional issues. This ensures that not all lines of communication are closed, but it severely reduces the number of issues on which agreement, consensus and deliberation are necessary.

This politics of separation has, however, had some very negative effects on the deliberative qualities of the Belgian political system. Even though a large number of policy choices are still being made at federal level, public opinion and political debate are increasingly being organized at sub-systemic level (Reuchamps, 2013a). In other words, there is no longer a national public sphere, as political and policy debates take place primarily within the boundaries set by the linguistic border. This should not be a problem as such, as long as these regional public dialogues succeed in fuelling the decision-making processes at federal level, but they fail to do so. As a result, Belgium is a textbook case of a segmented country, and its politics of (physical and symbolic) separation of the people into two groups goes radically against the deliberative assumption that citizens are able to sit together to discuss their differences and learn from each other (Dryzek, 2005).

The split in the media system

The separation of the institutional infrastructure that followed the federalization process in Belgium deeply divided the Belgian public sphere. This division was deepened further by the split in the media system. In modern mass democracies, public debate relies heavily on mediation. Citizens and elites have to be in some way connected to each other, and information has to circulate freely in the public sphere. The media are

the link in the transfer of information, and accuracy in, and completeness of, media representations go a long way towards determining how well the deliberative system can live up to its epistemic, ethical and democratic function.

However, as is often the case in divided societies, the Belgian media system is deeply segmented. From the early 1900s onwards, Flemish demands for linguistic and cultural recognition were driven by the desire for autonomy, and decoupling of the Flemish and Francophone media was considered to be a necessary condition for self-rule in cultural affairs. As a way to acknowledge the existence of two internally homogeneous language groups in Belgium, the national public media service, NIR-INR, was split into a French- and a Dutch-speaking side. Even though they physically share the same building in Brussels to this very day, Flemish (VRT) and Francophone (RTBF) broadcasters have complete autonomy with regard to programming within their linguistically-defined territory. This arrangement differs from most other divided or multilingual countries, where public broadcasters are still united (Shaughnessy and Fuente Cobo, 1990).

This regionalization of news broadcasters inevitably laid the foundations for widely diverging news coverage on both sides of the linguistic divide. Recent research has shown that French and Dutch-speaking media often frame political problems in different and opposing terms, and that coverage of news items from the other side of the divide is very limited. Moreover, journalists often use an 'us vs. them' rhetoric, in order to make issues readily understandable (Sinardet, 2012). This all adds to the deliberative stress that the Belgian political system faces.

Before jumping to conclusions, however, it should be stressed that a divided media landscape should not necessarily undermine the viability of a deliberative system. The media might very well be zealously partisan in their reporting of events, and thus very undeliberative in themselves, but the interplay between two (or more) partisan media systems could yield a positive deliberative dynamic at systems level (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012, 24). However, the Belgian system exhibits a number of additional characteristics which create conditions that do not favor the emergence and stability of a deliberative system (Billiet et al., 2006), chief among which is the increasing lack of knowledge of the other national language (Van Parys and Wauters, 2006). If both sides' media were in the same language, the threshold for following the other segment's media would be very low, and arguments from one part could easily penetrate the other parts. However, a multilingual society requires active knowledge of the other language, and this occurs in Belgium in only a very limited way. Only a very small number of citizens master the other language (Van Parys and Wauters, 2006), and this raises the threshold for citizens (and politicians) to inform themselves about public opinions on the other side of the linguistic divide.

It is therefore pertinent to say that the separation of the national media had significant consequences, from a deliberation perspective. It was much more than just a mere administrative change, as it also led to regionalization of the Belgian public sphere and to public deliberation being organized at a sub-systemic level. Once the media had turned inwards, their coverage became very one-sided, and even reinforced commonly-held nationalist prejudices (Sinardet, 2012). This one-sidedness in media coverage leads

to enduring misperceptions (and overestimations) of political differences, and it hinders the establishment of a common public sphere.

The split in the media system, combined with high demands in terms of language knowledge, thus discourages the different parts of the system from hearing each others' arguments. In fact, the regionalization of the media ensures that public opinion is anything but open to 'the other side'. This openness to rational persuasion is, however, the core principle of any deliberative system. Combine the proliferation of nationalist symbols through the media, the biased news coverage, and the closed-mindedness that follows, and the result is that Belgian politics can hardly be claimed to foster a stable and viable deliberative system.

The split in the party system

The deep divide in the media system, and in the public sphere, is further amplified by the fact that the party system is also segmented along linguistic lines. As a result of the large-scale reform of the state that has taken place since the 1970s, there are no longer any Belgian – nationwide – parties. Because of rising nationalist tensions, and the emergence of strong whip parties which outflanked the traditional parties on regionalist issues, the once nationally organized party system split up into two regionally organized systems.

This is particularly relevant to the Belgian deliberative system, for two reasons. First of all, since political parties only field candidates on one side of the language border, candidates and parties have no incentive whatsoever to talk to citizens of the

other linguistic group in order to get votes. This cuts off all lines of communication, and the best electoral strategy for parties is not to enter into a dialogue, but rather to radicalize their position, at the expense of the other linguistic group (Deschouwer, 2012).

The split in the party landscape thus distorts the deliberative capacities of the entire system. Because politicians are no longer held accountable for their choices and decisions by the other linguistic group, they have no need to persuade (or seduce) that other group, and this, in turn, fosters a sort of enclave deliberation among like-minded groups. After all, it undermines the very mechanisms of accountability, which are central to the working of any political decision-making system, including a deliberative one.

The second reason why the absence of nationwide parties induces deliberative stress is that the national parties were traditionally seen as platforms where the elites from both sides met and settled their differences. The previous national parties encompassed elites from both sides of the language divide, and whenever problems arose, there would be a process of deliberation between the language groups within the party. The former national parties thus formed a crucial wheel in political deliberations between the two major groups. When the party system split, however, it meant that this forum for contact between the two communities no longer existed, and that there is no real battleground for negotiation. Slowly but surely all the bridges across the divide have been burned down, and at the moment the only arena in which the parties meet each other is the federal government, which is constantly in the public eye, with the result that the elites are reluctant to compromise, for fear of being called treacherous.

We can expect the deliberative effects of this political party split to become even more pronounced as the generational replacement process amongst the parties' leaderships follows its course. The generations that were socialized within the former national parties had strong personal ties and connections across the linguistic border, whereas the generation that followed did not. The effect of such personal connections should not be underestimated, from a deliberative systems perspective. Even though there is little publicity about these behind-the-scenes contacts, they do offer opportunities for exchanging information and for argumentation and persuasion processes. It is important to take these changes in political personnel into account, because they have so far limited the number of contacts between the groups, and they thereby undermine exchange of information processes from one party to the other.

WHY CITIZENS COULD NOT BRIDGE THE DIVIDES

So far, we have seen that the way in which Belgian institutional, media and party systems are structured undermines the potential for deliberation at macro-level. The media and the parties follow the institutional logic of separation, which inevitably leads to the flow of information exchanged between the different actors in, and parts of, the system being breached. However, such a separation should not necessarily be a bad thing, as long as mechanisms exist which link the different parts of the system (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012).

It can be imagined that this bridging function could be taken on by citizens. However, the role of citizens is undermined by the consociational nature of Belgian politics (Deschouwer, 2006). Ever since the 1940s, Belgian politics has been based on the premise that the elites are in charge of building bridges between opposing groups, and that citizens have to remain deferent (Lijphart, 1975; Reuchamps, 2013b). After all, grumbling masses would sound the deathblow for the politics of pacification, because they would exert pressure on their segmental elites to pursue their regionalist agendas and render any compromise unacceptable. 'The central position of the elites', Huyse (1970, 157; authors' translation) argues, 'is balanced by a third-rate role of the citizen'.

Belgium is thus a very elitist type of democracy, arguably in order to guarantee democratic stability, but these elites have neither the desire nor any incentive to reach out to the other side when reaching out is penalized electorally (Sinardet *et al.*, 2012). In Belgian politics, sitting down together and searching for mutually acceptable solutions to problems that affect both linguistic groups is often viewed as betraying the interests of the ingroup, and parties are often electorally penalized in the polling booth for displaying 'the spirit of deliberation' (Steiner, 2009). Lines of communication between the elites of the two linguistic groups are thus fairly closed, and this led in 2011 to a world record of no less than 540 days being set in terms of the time spent to form a coalition (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). Only when Belgian ratings on the international markets were lowered and the governability of the Belgian federation itself reached its limits did the negotiators come to an agreement.

People's deferent attitude also affects the deliberative qualities of the political system in other ways. In a consociational democracy, the relationship between representatives and represented is very one-sided. Communication between them runs top-down, and citizens have very little say in the decision-making process between two elections. Political decisions are therefore not necessarily carried by a large segment of the population, and the political agenda is thus often considered to be completely distinct from the public agenda (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). Results of surveys into citizens' and elites' political preferences systematically show that the importance the elites attach to regionalist issues is not shared by citizens (Deschouwer and Sinardet, 2010). Citizens value issues such as employment and social security more, whereas elites have long been focusing exclusively on state reform. This decoupling between public and power means that political discussions in the public sphere are not only divided horizontally (i.e. between linguistic groups), but also vertically (i.e. between elites and citizens). As such, the public deference that characterizes Belgium as a divided society further undermines the deliberativeness of the political system.

STRESS AND REGULATION IN THE DELIBERATIVE SYSTEM

As the previous sections have shown, Belgium has in recent decades undergone a deep and structural transformation from a unitary to a federal state with a completely split public sphere, but the effects of these institutional changes on the level and quality of deliberation at micro-level and macro-level have long been overlooked. The Belgian

political elites have been more successful in defusing conflicts than in restoring public debate, with the result that deliberation between groups is relatively weak, overall.

However, a number of recent political and academic initiatives have explicitly set out to reinvigorate and deepen deliberative processes within the wider public sphere. Two of the most promising initiatives were the proposals to introduce a federal electoral district, and a large deliberative mini-public called the G1000 Citizens' Summit. We will now attempt to assess whether these initiatives could improve the deliberative qualities of Belgian politics. It should be noted beforehand, however, that federal circumscription is at the moment merely an experimental idea, while the G1000 project only ended in November 2012. We will therefore not be able to fully assess the impact of either, but we will focus on the promise they hold as levers for deliberation in divided Belgium.

Reinvigorating deliberation top-down: The federal circumscription

The lack of deliberation across the linguistic border in Belgium is largely due to the language barrier, but there is also a more structural reason for the low deliberative quality of the Belgian political system. As we saw earlier, one factor that is of particular importance, as far as the poor level of deliberation in Belgium is concerned, is that parties only present candidates on one side of the linguistic border. This means that politicians have nothing to gain by reaching out to the other side. To put it more bluntly, engaging in a constructive dialogue with citizens and elites from the other language group is seen as compromising the ingroup's interests, and will inevitably be penalized

in the voting booth. Public debate is therefore increasingly occurring within, rather than between, the language groups.

As a reaction to this, however, a group of Belgian political scientists (the Pavia Group) recently proposed a measure that could remedy this problem. They propose establishing an electoral district in which a limited number of federal MPs would be elected on a nationwide scale (Deschouwer and Van Parijs, 2007, 2008). These MPs would have to seek votes in both language groups, and the desire to get elected or re-elected would thus constitute a strong incentive to listen to the other linguistic group and take on board its arguments.

Since this kind of electoral change has to be approved by a two-thirds majority in the federal parliament, and because the proposal would fundamentally change the electoral dynamics of the Belgian system, it has not yet won a majority. It is therefore too early to evaluate whether it has had an effect, but simulations have shown that the direct mechanical effects of introducing a federal circumscription on the composition of parliament might be very limited (Fabre, 2011).

However, the deliberative effects might be greater. After all, the federal circumscription 'would alleviate the democratic deficit from which Belgium's federal system suffers' (Deschouwer and Van Parijs, 2009, 14), because it would allow all Belgian voters to hold these truly national elites responsible for their political choices. This would activate democratic accountability mechanisms, and would require politicians to reach out to the other language group. From a deliberative perspective, the federal electoral district would thus foster the sharing of perspectives across the

linguistic border. As Deschouwer and Van Parijs (2009, 16) contend, these nationally elected seats 'will increase considerably the incentive for parties and candidates to court voters across the linguistic border'.

If politicians have to rely on all Belgian citizens if they are to be re-elected, they will have to engage in dialogue with these voters, and they will have to listen to the concerns of those they do not normally listen to. The nationwide electoral district could thus restore truly (federal) dialogue between the language communities, and thereby contribute to reducing deliberative stress by raising public deliberations from regional (sub-systemic) level to the national (systemic) stage. In other words, it offers incentives for the development of a nationwide public dialogue that could improve the overall deliberative qualities of the system. But so far, the elites seem unwilling to move forward in such a direction (Sinardet *et al.*, 2012)

Reinvigorating deliberation bottom-up: The G1000 Citizens' Summit

In addition to the proposal to install a federal electoral district in order to get the elites on both sides on speaking terms with the entire population, Belgium has recently also witnessed another initiative, called the G1000 Citizens' Summit. This deliberation event is particularly interesting, in the light of the literature on deliberative systems, in that it explicitly sets out to restore dialogue between the two linguistic groups by bringing together a large number of citizens from both sides of the linguistic divide to discuss some of the key issues in Belgian politics (Van Reybrouck *et al.*, 2011; G1000, 2012; Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2013).

The initiative was launched at a critical moment in relations between the two communities. In the aftermath of the 2010 elections, Flemish and Francophone parties gathered to start the process of forming their federal-level coalition. After about 400 days, the talks were completely deadlocked and the party negotiators seemed further from a compromise than ever. None of them was willing to give in, because they feared defeat at the next elections. In this climate, where regionalist sentiments and discourse skyrocketed and any compromise was explicitly labeled treacherous, Belgium witnessed the rise of a number of protest movements. There was the *Shame* protest march, the *Belgian Fries* revolution and the *Not In My Name* initiative, but the only systematic initiative that truly succeeded in putting dialogue between the communities center stage on the political agenda was *G1000*, albeit not without facing strong resistance (Van Damme *et al.*, 2012; Van Ingelgom, 2013).

G1000 aimed to bring ordinary citizens from both sides of the linguistic divide together as a mini-public to discuss salient political and public issues. It was designed as a three-step process (Reuchamps and Caluwaerts, 2012). First, using an internet application, every Belgian citizen was invited to name the issues that he/she found most important. Then, on 11 November 2011, a large town hall meeting of 704 participants (randomly selected from all inhabitants of Belgium) was organized, in order to discuss the three issues deemed to be most salient in the internet consultation. This second phase was followed by a third, when a random selection of 32 citizens met for three weekends in the form of a citizens' panel to deliberate on the issue of work in our society and come up with recommendations.

This was the first time since 1950, when there was a referendum on the return of the King from captivity in Germany, that Belgian citizens were actively called upon to participate directly in political decision making. Moreover, it was also the very first time that Flemings and Francophones sat down together to discuss issues of common concern. Despite all the good intentions, the question remains as to whether the G1000 has had any effect on reducing stress in the system. The short-term effects of the initiative on reducing system stress are relatively limited (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2013). The G1000 did not reduce polarization of the public sphere. It might even have increased it, because Flemish and Francophone media reported on the initiative in completely different ways, which only served to fuel the 'us vs. them' rhetoric of the time. However, because the initiative got so much media attention, it forced the political elites to choose sides and to suggest reasons why they were for or against such a citizen initiative. As such, the G1000 sparked a certain degree of deliberation between the elites of both language groups, and also between the elites and citizens, on the importance of hearing citizens out on important political issues. In the longer run, the G1000 has paved the way for further citizen-led initiatives from local level to national level.

Finally, the event also had some effect on the participants themselves. By sitting down with citizens they did not know and hearing stories and perspectives from the other side, they reconsidered, however briefly, their positions and came out of their nationalist trenches. For instance, a comparison of the pre-test and post-test questionnaires has shown that citizens, despite the deep divides that separate them,

held significantly better outgroup attitudes after the event (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, forthcoming). Moreover, the post-test results also indicated that participants felt they had really learnt something from listening to each other. The G1000 thus showed that the deliberative quality of a divided political system relies more on opportunities than on willingness to talk across the divides.

All in all, we can say that the G1000 project contributed to the public debate by allowing citizens to look across the linguistic border and find out what the other side thought and felt. This suggests, at a more abstract level, that mini-publics could be capable of reducing stress in deliberative systems that are completely deadlocked.[1] This is interesting, because a question that is often asked is what role these deliberative citizen experiments can play in the larger deliberative system. Our analysis shows that they can, to some extent, lead to a kind of dialogue between groups or systemic actors that are not normally on speaking terms.

CONCLUSION: DIVISION AND DELIBERATION

In this chapter, we set out to explore the challenges facing deliberation in divided societies, and we therefore assessed the promises and pitfalls of deliberation in Belgium. Our basic conclusion is that the deliberative system in Belgium is stressed: it fails to live up to its epistemic and democratic functions, and the country's public dialogue is distorted because there is no strong, national public sphere. Public deliberation takes place on a sub-systemic level, and there is little to no contact

between these subsystems. We thus witnessed a process of enclave deliberation at systems level.

The main reason for this is that Belgium is deeply divided along linguistic lines. Just as multilingualism raises the threshold for ordinary citizens to talk to each other in mini-publics, so the existence of multiple languages in the public sphere hinders deliberation at systemic level. This is an observation that has already been made about the European Union (Kraus, 2008; Van Parijs, 2004), but it also holds true for Belgium as an ethno-linguistically divided society.

Because of its divided nature, however, the negative effects of plurilingualism are further amplified by the split in the media system. In the state as it currently exists, with its two separate enclaves, the best (commercial or political) strategy for the media is to turn inwards and focus exclusively on what happens within one of the enclaves. This leads to the organization of public dialogues at a sub-systemic level and to a decoupling of systemic components, a distortion of the deliberative potential, and eventually to an extremization of public positions because there is no, or very little, contestation of arguments.

On the other hand, the Belgian language differences have also eliminated the possibility of the elites seeking mutual understanding across boundaries. Because the electoral system was modeled in such a way as to recognize the linguistic integrity of the territories, parties only present themselves on one side of the language border. This allows them to simply ignore the demands and perspectives of the other linguistic group and to develop a stronger nationalist stance, because it will bring them electoral gains.

Despite the trend towards more segmentation and less deliberation, we did find some evidence that certain actors in the Belgian political system are attempting to boost deliberation in the public sphere. Two initiatives stood out. On the one hand, the aim of the plea for a national electoral district was to improve politician accountability, and it assumes that politicians will listen more carefully to the opinions of the other linguistic groups. On the other hand, G1000 brought citizens from both sides of the linguistic divide together to discuss salient political issues and to force politicians to come out of their nationalist trenches and speak to each other. Both these initiatives have a strong potential for improving the overall deliberativeness of the system.

However, G1000 was a one-off initiative, and the federal electoral district has not yet won a parliamentary majority. As a result, in the short term their effects might be very limited, while in the long term their outputs might be too diffuse. This, of course, raises several important issues for further research. One central question that arises is what constitute favorable conditions for structural regulation. Should this be initiated by formal political actors if it wants to be effective, or can external actors exert sufficient pressure on the system to increase its deliberative capacities? And also, what role can mini-publics play in breaking the political and deliberative deadlock that characterizes many divided societies?

These questions apply to both Belgium and the EU. At the core of the issue is the fact that it is not only a multilingualism challenge but also the challenge of dealing with identity politics and economic differences. In such circumstances, deliberative democracy is pushed to the edge. Research on deliberative systems in diverse and

divided polities would therefore benefit greatly from a comparative agenda where different systems, or different regulatory mechanisms within one system, are compared.

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NOTES CHAPTER 3

[1] The same dynamics of deliberative stress and regulation through mini-publics can be witnessed in Greece, Ireland and Iceland, where deliberative events were set up after deep financial and political crises.