Belgian TV hoax exposes political tensions

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La Une, the first channel of Belgium's francophone public broadcaster RTBF, interrupted regular programmes earlier this month to announce that Flanders, the Dutch-speaking north of the country, had unilaterally declared its independence and that Belgium had ceased to exist as a nation. The broadcast was a hoax that had taken two years to prepare.

Reactions were immediate. The station received some 2,600 telephone calls, and its website crashed under the weight of hits. The government was inundated with calls from foreign embassies and international news agencies. A poll of viewers suggested that 89 percent believed the story when the two-hour broadcast began, with six percent still believing it at the end (after disclaimers had been running for over an hour). The daily *Le Soir* ran a headline the following morning "Belgium died last night", while Friday's *De Standaard* posed "The end of Belgium?"

In the programme, RTBF's journalists discussed the division of the country into two with academics and Flemish politicians, including Speaker of the Chamber of Representatives Herman Ducroo (a member of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt's Flemish Liberal Party VLD). Prominent Flemish senator Jean-Marie Dedecker, another VLD member, was quoted as saying, "My ultimate dream has been realised". Grainy footage apparently showed the King leaving on the first available air force plane for Kinshasa, while jubilant Flemish crowds waved flags and danced in the streets.

From the outset RTBF broadcast on screen a telephone number for concerned viewers to call. They then began to broadcast a message that "This is perhaps not a fiction". This has been defended as an echo of the Belgian surrealist René Magritte's picture "This is not a pipe". After 40 minutes, at the insistence of francophone Minister for Media Affairs Fadila Laanan, the station broadcast the message, "This is fiction," on screen.

RTBF has defended the broadcast, saying it wanted to provoke debate on Belgium's future ahead of next year's general election. Yves Thiran, RTBF's head of news, told the BBC that their intention was "to show Belgian viewers the intensity of the issue of the future of Belgium and the real possibility of Belgium no longer being a country in a few months". Thiran said that it showed "the importance of a topical political debate". He defended the broadcast for having extended the debate beyond academic and political circles.

Much of Belgium's political establishment has expressed anger at the broadcast, turning their attention mostly to the journalists and executives of RTBF. Verhofstadt described the broadcast as "a misplaced joke". His spokesman Didier Seeuws called it "very bad Orson Welles". The monarchy described the depiction of their hasty flight as in "bad taste".

Yves Leterme, the Flemish premier, called Alain Gerlache, RTBF's TV Director and a former spokesman for Verhofstadt, "irresponsible". Fadila Laanan questioned the ethics of the journalists involved, and has indicated that RTBF could face consequences. In particular she has called for RTBF's CEO Jean-Paul Philippot to be held accountable. National Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht, though, attempted to play down the commotion, saying the broadcast was "completely fake" and describing it as "no big deal".

Responses to the hoax have revealed the sharp tensions within official Belgian politics. RTBF spokesman Bruno de Blander said, "We think the question of the future of Belgium is in the minds of our viewers". A poll conducted last week for "Questions a la Une" (the programme interrupted by the hoax) suggested that 58 percent of Belgians believe that Belgium will not change much. Only 15 percent of those polled believed that Belgium would eventually cease to exist. Half of these believed that separation will take place within 15 to 20 years. One commentator in the paper *Libre Belgique* wrote that the programme's "condemnation by most Belgians suggests that Belgium is more united than divided".

Considerably more of those polled by RTBF, though, (27 percent) believe that greater independence for the regions is likely. It is this tension, which has driven the political responses to the RTBF broadcast. Although the programme focused on the fears of Flemish nationalism, regionalists on both sides of the language divide have sought to use it to justify their own posturing within the federal structure of

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Belgium.

In French-speaking Wallonie in the south of the country, Finance Minister Didier Reynders of the liberal Reform Movement (MR) criticised the programme as "irresponsible". His concern was that the broadcast "totally discredits an institution that the French community has put a lot of investment into". Elio Di Rupo, leader of the francophone Socialist Party (PS), said that he had never seen such worry in his political life before. Joelle Milquet, leader of Wallonie's Christian Democrats (CDH), said that the future of the country should not be a game.

Initially, Di Rupo said that the programme was "irresponsible and anti-social" at a period "when our country is rocked by separatist leanings". Reynders seemed to distance himself from the Socialist Party, issuing a press release in which he called on Wallonie to "get rid of its old demons". Di Rupo's response was to accuse the MR leader of giving arguments to the "opponents of the French-speaking front". Milquet then threatened to boycott a forthcoming meeting of the three parties unless Di Rupo and Reynders reached a truce. Their only priority, she said, must be "to work together to improve the lives of Walloons".

The francophone parties have been able to exploit the programme in this way because all of the media attention on right-wing nationalist agendas in Belgium is focused on Flemish nationalism. Certainly one of the few expressions of support for the programme came from the xenophobic, anti-immigrant Vlaams Belang (VB—Flemish Interest, which was formerly known as Vlaams Blok).

VB's Filip Dewinter offered his congratulations to RTBF for their "daring" show, arguing that it supported VB's perspective of Flemish independence. The show, he said, "caused a shock in Wallonie where they come to the conclusion that the scenario of Flemish independence is no longer utopia". Thanks to the broadcast, he said, VB can speak publicly about "the independence of Flanders and Wallonie".

Other Flemish politicians have also sought to utilize the programme for their own ends. Leterme, calling the programme "abhorrent" and "a caricature of Flanders", said that francophones lump together separatist demands with Flemish calls for greater regional powers of governance. In fact, the re-negotiation of federal powers over the last 30 years, extending regional control of taxation and education, as well as cultural matters, has sought to appease separatist demands by ceding ground to nationalism.

Many of the other Flemish parties have tail-ended VB, which won about a quarter of the regional vote two years ago. One of Leterme's parliamentary allies, Bart de Wever of the moderate nationalist N-VA, has said that independence of the two regions is a step closer every day.

For the early part of its short history, Belgium was officially a French-speaking country, following the revolution of 1830 during which sections of the Brussels middle class were able to unite the whole country (French and Dutch speaking) against their Dutch rulers. The country's wealth was concentrated in the capital Brussels (a francophone enclave in the predominantly Dutch-speaking province of Brabant) and Walloon heavy industry. Flanders was until recently largely agricultural, and was marginalized by the francophone bourgeoisie. Jean-Marie Dedecker's comment on the broadcast that "After 175 years, we are finally free of the royal family" was addressed to their position as francophones, not as a monarchy.

Since the early 1960s and the collapse of industry in the Walloon region, particularly steel and coal, Flanders has developed rapidly as a centre of new technologies. It is now the more affluent part of the country, with a per capita GDP roughly 10 percent higher than that of the south. Disputes on regional autonomy have largely focused on whether Flanders should support Wallonie by taxation.

For all that they appeal to—the historical impoverishment of the region, and the discrimination against it by sections of the francophone ruling class—the Flemish nationalists are seeking to preserve this dominant economic position. VB are the most explicit about this, writing on their website, "For many decades the free-market-oriented Flemish have been subsidizing Socialist-dominated Wallonie". Their determination to end social welfare expenditure is a platform for an assault on the living conditions of the entire working class.

The RTBF hoax has exposed how deeply the political tensions run within Belgium, and the impossibility of resolving them under the present system. It has emphasized the necessity of a socialist strategy, which will unite all Belgian workers—French, Dutch, and German-speaking alike—with their class brothers and sisters internationally.

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