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Between Scylla and Charybdis? Twenty-Five Years Administrating the Contested Region of Brussels

Karl O'Connor¹ and Joost Vaesen²

Abstract

Although Belgian politics has experienced numerous political conflicts in the post-war period, the Brussels political system has, since 1989, remained relatively stable. This has led some scholars to suggest that Brussels may be experiencing a depolarization of its traditional linguistic cleavages. In this article, we analyze the possible realignment of these divisions and the possible emergence of an identity based on the urban territory. We trace the development of the public administrations at sub-state level in Brussels post 1989 and add new data on the often neglected elite-level bureaucrats and their individual attachment perceptions. This topic is most relevant as the organization and functioning of the public administrations have proven to be one of the major politically and socially divisive issues of the power-sharing agreement. The article draws on published and unpublished documents and interviews with 20 elite-level bureaucrats from four distinct public administrations operating in Brussels. The findings suggest that a regional urban attachment is emerging among the bureaucratic elite; however, this attachment would not prove robust if either community were to feel threatened. The likelihood of unintended policy making, which would have unintended consequences, is quite high given that the bureaucratic elite do not have confidence in the administrative structures of the city. The findings should be of interest to those interested in identification perceptions and to those studying other more fragile environments in and around Europe's borders that may one day consider adopting the Brussels approach to conflict management.

Keywords

¹Ulster University, Newtownabbey, Northern Ireland

²Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Corresponding Author Karl O'Connor, Ulster University, Jordanstown, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB, Northern Ireland.

Email: k.oconnor@ulster.ac.uk

Brussels, conflict management, bureaucracy, identity, power sharing

Introduction: The Traditional Cleavages Dividing the Belgian and Brussels Political System

Many cities within and around Europe's borders could be described as divided along ethnic, religious, or linguistic cleavages. Some cases such as Belfast, Mostar, Nicosia, and Brussels, however, differentiate themselves in that the legitimacy of the state authority within which they are situated is contested. Dumper (2011) has, therefore, argued that "[d]ivided cities within contested states should be seen as a category of cities in their own right" (p. 671). The case of Belgium, and more particularly that of Brussels, is consequentially of interest. Currently, Brussels is the only officially bilingual region in Belgium. The Flemish north of the country is unilingual Dutch-speaking and the Walloon south of the country is unilingual French-speaking, whereas the fourth linguistic region, the unilingual German-speaking region, is often neglected in studies on politico-linguistic conflict in Belgium. Furthermore, Brussels has been in the eye of the political federalization storm since the very beginning of the reshaping of the Belgian State. Post 1945, language has been the primary political cleavage dividing Belgians, and bilingual Brussels serves as a nexus between the largely Dutch-speaking north (Flanders) and the principally French-speaking south (Wallonia). In this article, we investigate whether traditional political cleavages are becoming depolarized and in turn are giving way to new attachments and hence new political oppositions.

Regional Identities

Fitjar (2010) investigated three hypotheses examining variation in regional identities. His first hypothesis proposed that levels of regional identity would be higher in regions where the spoken language is different from that which is dominant in the state as a whole. The second investigated whether levels of regional identity would be higher in regions with a history of political independence or autonomy, whereas the final hypothesis correlated foreign immigration with an increase in people's propensity to identify with their regions. Using Fitjar's study as a point of departure, this article investigates the extent to which an urban identity exists in Brussels. This idea of achieving peace through altering identity perceptions is not new in and of itself. With reference to Northern Ireland, Byrne (1995) has explored the idea that "in time, a . . . regional identity, allied to a European supranational identity may transcend the notion of an obsolete national identity as the concept of the nation state peters out" (p. 15). This was explored further in his later study where he concluded that a regional identity "could serve . . . to erode the geopolitical and psychological border between Northern and southern Ireland" (Byrne, 2001, p. 342). However, generating such

regional attachments within contested environments is not straightforward. Kerr's (2006) research, again in Northern Ireland, found, "it has proved impossible to build a syncretistic intercommunal or national identity . . . that could overarch and supersede ethno national allegiance" (p. 16). Furthermore, Nagle and Clancy (2012), again looking at Northern Ireland, write, "We argue that there are limits to the extent that ethnicity can be reconstructed into shared identities" (p. 78). Therefore, whereas Fitjar was interested in determining the cause of allegiance shift, we are most concerned with determining whether an allegiance shift is taking place: We investigate whether the traditional Belgian cleavages are being redrawn. To this end, we investigate the following hypothesis: An urban "Brussels" attachment supersedes a primary linguistic attachment within the region. To test our hypothesis, we concentrate on the attachment perceptions of just one section of society: the elite-level bureaucrat. Apart from being our area of expertise, the governance mechanisms of Brussels receive scant scholarly attention. Furthermore, focusing on the public administration will significantly contribute to our parallel aim of understanding how contested societies can be successfully governed (see Deschouwer, 2009; Renard, Vaesen, Voets, & Verjans, 2011, for an overview of the governing structures of Belgium and Brussels). If other contested societies are to learn from the Brussels experience, assessing the organization and functioning of the Brussels public administrations is fundamental to understand how the Brussels consociational model works (see Witte et al., 1999). Moreover, as we demonstrate in the sections below, the linguistic organization and language use of the bureaucratic machinery have proven to be one of the most politically and socially divisive issues in Belgium generally, and most particularly in Brussels.

Case Selection

Brussels proves an ideal place to situate our research question as the environment would tend to encourage the rejection of our hypothesis. Hepburn (2011) correlates decentralization with an increase in regional citizenship. Although she is more interested in determining who is perceived to belong or not to belong to this region, we investigate her underlying assumption that regional citizenship increases with decentralization. Using an ethno-politically contested society where traditional cleavages are most strong should lead to the rejection of our hypothesis. Brussels is, therefore, an example of what Eckstein (1975, p. 118) would have called a crucial case of the most likely case variety: If traditional ethno-political cleavages (French vs. Dutch language) are to supersede a capital-region divide (Brussels vs. Flanders/Wallonia), they are most likely to do so in Brussels.

Research Question

To test our hypothesis, we have formulated a number of questions: What are the politico-linguistic perceptions of the elite-level bureaucrat within the city today? To what extent do elite-level bureaucrats identify with the city over (a) their language groups and (b) their language territories? These questions refer to the governance of Brussels and especially the compromise between *self-rule* (autonomy for Brussels politicians) and *shared rule* (Brussels functioning as a bridge between the north and the south and thus featuring the dominance from Flemish and Walloon politicians reducing autonomy for Brussels politicians; Hooghe, 1993). Third, we ask, can a territory-based government form the basis of a cohesive identity within a contested environment, superseding traditional linguistic attachments? As we start with the premise that identity guides behavior, we are interested to determine whether these elite-level bureaucrats identify themselves along the traditional Belgian cleavages (French and Dutch), or have developed new attachments.

Background to the City

Assessing the realignment of the traditional cleavages, we have to take into account at least two major transitions affecting the Brussels contextual situation. The first important shift was the major process of federalization of the former Belgian unitary state. This completely overhauled the governance structure of both Brussels (Vaesen, 2008) and the entire Belgian state (John, 2004, p. 173). In 1989, it led to the establishment of sub-state-level actors of which the (officially bilingual) Brussels Capital Region (BCR) became the most important player in Brussels (Vaesen, 2008). The second transition has seen the sociolinguistic demographics of Brussels change dramatically. Globalization, and its inherent migratory (multilingual) waves, has affected the sociolinguistic demographic of the small global city of Brussels (Janssens, 2013). The context of the politico-linguistic cleavages has shifted in two most notable ways in recent decades. First of all, the position of Dutch vis-à-vis French was strengthened due to the economic and political resurgence of Flanders. Second, the internationalization of Brussels has altered the sociological composition of the city, thereby turning the preponderant bilingual city into a multilingual environment (Janssens, 2013; Witte & Van Velthoven, 2010, pp. 197-198). The most recent data on population background in Brussels demonstrated the immigrant population of Brussels to be 46% (Deboosere, Eggerickx, Van Hecke, & Wayens, 2009), although ongoing international immigration has most likely now pushed this far beyond the 50% threshold. Unilingual citizens in Brussels are restricted to some 5% Dutch speakers and some 34% of French speakers, thus implying the presence of some 14% bilinguals (combining French and Dutch) and some 47% of other bi/multilinguals or allophones (2012 Data, regarding language use in the family of origin: Janssens, 2013).

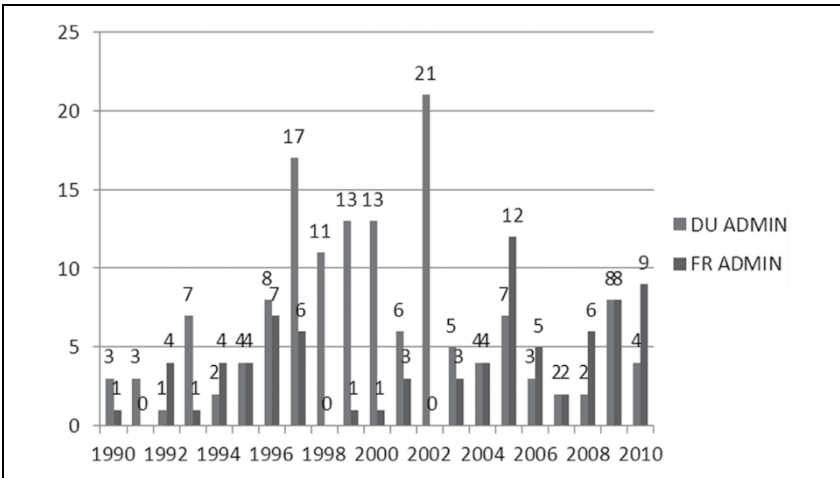


Figure 1. N of questions and interpellations in the assembly/parliament of the Brussels Capital Region regarding linguistic issues in the administrations, per linguistic group (1990-2010). DU=Dutch; FR=French

The Importance of the Public Administration in the Brussels Political Arena

Before analyzing the perceptions of the Brussels bureaucrats vis-à-vis the traditional politico-linguistic cleavage, this section situates our hypothesis within the politico-administrative environment, reinforcing the view that the environment within which our hypothesis is set would tend to favor rejection of the hypothesis. That administrative language use still matters among the political elite is obvious from Figure 1, which displays the number of questions and interpellations in the assembly/parliament of the BCR (1990-2010) referring to language issues in combination with administrations selected on the basis of the subject.¹ From the total volume of parliamentary questions and interpellations on language issues, 48% referred explicitly to different aspects of the administrations (43.5% for the Dutch linguistic group and 49.6% for the French linguistic group).

The relevance of this issue is clear, because it provoked the only systemic crisis within the Brussels Regional political arena. After the resignation of State Secretary Vic Anceaux (Volsunie-VU) following disagreement over the linguistic partition of civil servants in certain public services (such as the Fire Department) in November, 1997, consensus could not be reached within the Dutch language group: Two blocks, each with 5 seats in the assembly of the BCR remained opposed to each other. Referring to “force majeure” and given

the fact that the Regional assembly is a so-called legislature parliament that cannot be dissolved easily, the Executive of the BCR continued to govern until the following regional elections in 1999, thereby breaching the political compromise (Vanleemputten, 2003, p. 50). This brings us to the crux of the issue: The political conflict concerning the so-called Linguistic Courtesy Agreement, and the systemic crisis it implied, proved to be an exception in the Brussels political arena. This does not imply that tensions are absent, but in general, the politico-linguistic polarization within the Brussels political model diminished after the conclusion of the third State Reforms of 1988/1989 (Delcamp, 1993). The high political tensions and conflicts within the Brussels political arena mainly apply to the situation before 1988/1989. Since then, a depolarization of the traditional politico-linguistic cleavage has been evident. As Peter John (2004) suggested, the devolution process linked to the federalization program in Belgium did imply a diminishing of some political tensions, demonstrating the positive result of federalization without the instability that would have resulted from generating separate political arenas. The impact of this depolarization process was such that some observers refer to a burgeoning Brussels identity, overcoming the linguistic divide. However, a (possible) paradox can also be detected: After the third State Reform (1988-1989), the politico-linguistic tensions in Brussels have diminished, but the capital now faces the danger of being framed between the competing interests of Flanders and Wallonia (De Coorebyter, 2005, p. 12). In summary, although a Brussels identity may indeed be evident, an overview of parliamentary questions and interpellations, together with an understanding of the reasons behind the only systemic governance crisis (the linguistic repartition of bureaucrats in the Brussels regional administration in 1997), suggests that the design and functioning of the public administration remain a topic of contestation. The public administration remains, therefore, a site of particular interest when looking at questions of conflict management.

Institutional Structure

The actual administrative design is very complex. To meet the demands by Dutch-speaking politicians in Flanders regarding the increase of (sub-state) autonomy in cultural and educational matters, so-called "Communities" were established. The quest for devolution of economic policies, as pressed for by politicians in Wallonia, resulted in the establishment of "Regions" (Witte, Craeybeckx, & Meynen, 2009). These sub-state actors are restricted to specific territories, but one key feature is that these territories do overlap (Deschouwer, 2009). There are not two or three constituent political units for the Belgian State but six sub-state actors: three Communities (the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking, and German-speaking Community) and three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels). This institutional fragmentation is

especially obvious in the case of Brussels, mirroring the debate regarding the statute of the Belgian capital and the dichotomy between shared rule and self-rule (see Hooghe, 1993). The BCR administration is responsible for matters such as economic and employment policies, public transport, local government, and so on, reflecting a self-rule by Brussels politicians. The cultural and educational affairs in Brussels are split up along two Communities (mirroring a shared rule with Flanders and Wallonia): the Flemish Community and the French Community. Both have a specific extension in Brussels (with specific competences), labeled “Community Commissions,” namely, the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) for the former and the French Community Commission (COCOF) for the latter. To deal with some bilingual matters such as public hospitals, a bilingual Joint Community Commission (COCOM/GGC) was also established. To make it even more complex, asymmetry has become a further feature of this design (Witte, 1992): The French Community Commission was granted legislative power in certain competencies in the early 1990s, whereas its Dutch-speaking counterpart was not. Furthermore, the Dutch-speaking Flemish Region and the Dutch-speaking Flemish Community, which also incorporates cultural matters in bilingual Brussels, have merged in practice.² In conclusion, a plethora of political units are active in Brussels, leading it to be described as a splintered city (De Bruycker, 1999, p. 465) and provides an example of power sharing at the lowest common denominator (O'Connor, 2014).

Method

The attachment perceptions of elite-level bureaucrats have been scrutinized using semi-structured interviews. At the political cabinet level, preliminary interviews were conducted with six politically appointed directors from four ministerial cabinets. Three further scoping interviews were also conducted with three of the primary stakeholders involved in the development of the Brussels Cultural Plan (2007) because the latter was one of the first initiatives to establish cross-cutting cooperation in the field of the so-called personal and cultural competences in Brussels (see Nassaux, 2011). These interviews contributed to the design of the questionnaire and assisted in the selection of candidates. At the administrative level, face to face interviews were conducted with 20 elite-level bureaucrats within the sub-state administrations, namely, 6 directors within the Flemish Community Commission (VGC), 4 directors within the French Community Commission (COCOF), 4 directors within the Joint Community Commission (COCOM), and 3 directors within the BCR administration. As a number of directors within the BCR administration declined to participate, three senior managers were also interviewed.³ Interviews took place between March and May, 2010, and were given on condition of anonymity. Although there are indeed further public

administrations operating within the city, they were not incorporated into the research design as their competencies extended beyond the city boundaries, and they were not exclusively responsive to the Brussels political structures. Interviews usually took place within officials' offices, but occasionally took place at a neutral venue. Interviews lasted an average of 90 min, occasionally running to 2 hr. A semi-structured format was used for the interviews, incorporating a number of open questions to allow respondents to have maximum input into the data-collection process. The sample represents more than 80% of elite-level *occupied* positions from the COCOM, VGC, and COCOF administrations.⁴ All of those targeted for interview within these administrations agreed to participate in the research. The vast majority of bureaucrat interviewees (80%) were male. Nine were educated through Dutch, 10 were educated through French, and 1 was educated through English. Interviewees were asked whether they perceived themselves to belong to the "Dutch-speaking community," "to the French-speaking community," or to both communities. Eight respondents felt attached to each of the French and Dutch communities, whereas four respondents felt equally attached to both communities. This triangulation of data from questionnaires, interviews with both political cabinets ($n = 6$), and targeted elite-level bureaucrats ($n = 20$), together with secondary documents, ensures the robustness of our findings.

The Findings

First and foremost, we can say that a Brussels regional attachment is demonstrated among elite-level bureaucrats. When we asked elite-level bureaucrats about their attachments, responses indicated a shift away from the traditional community attachments. Respondents were asked to rank their (ethno-cultural) identification using the following categories⁵: Belgian, Flemish, Walloon, Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, Brussels, and European. Most respondents identified three levels of attachment. The responses are outlined in Figure 2. The various identification categories are on the y axis, whereas the extent to which these attachments were attributed first, second, and third preferences is depicted on the x axis.

As demonstrated by the graph above, identification with the traditional cleavages—Dutch/Flanders versus French/Wallonia—is surpassed by a Belgian state identity. No respondent placed Wallonia within his or her first three attachment preferences. However, of note to our study is the high number of respondents identifying with Brussels. Does this suggest a burgeoning Brussels, urban identity? Although indeed respondents may identify first with their country (10) or their language community (4—3 French-speaking, 1 Dutch-speaking)

or with their territory (3), 12 of our 20

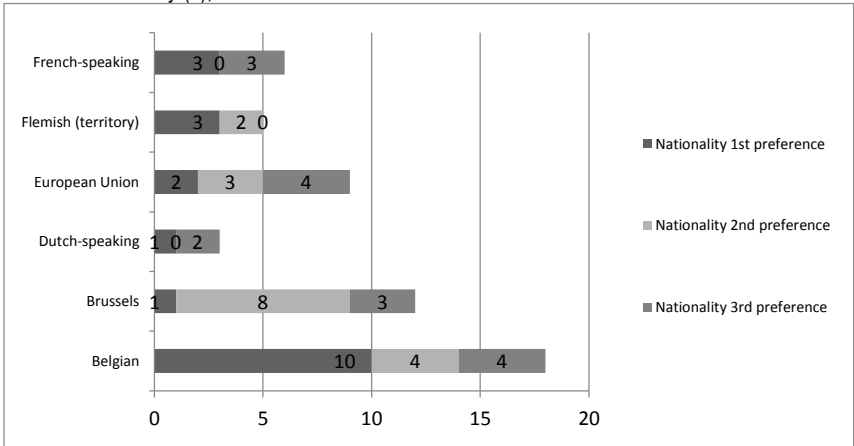


Figure 2. Nationality preferences

respondents ranked Brussels within their top 3 attachments. These results coincide with the overall results of the identification attachments of the Brussels population, based on a quinquennial representative survey. Indeed, the categories provoking the most positive identification in the first place proved to be “Brussels” (30.6%) or a “Brussels municipality” (23.5%) followed by “Belgian” (16.8%). The identification with one of the two traditional languages comprised (in the first place⁶) only 5.0% of the French-speaking Brussels inhabitants and 1.4% for Dutch-speaking Brussels inhabitants. Flemish and Walloon received equally low scores (2012 Data, Janssens, 2013, p. 107). Results for each of these categories vary between surveys; however, the preference for territorial identification (based on the city or municipality) over linguistic identification remains stable. The elite bureaucrats, therefore, do not dissociate from the general population of the city. Numerous respondents demonstrated this urban/territorial attachment: “Flanders doesn’t know Brussels any more . . . People in Flanders think Brussels is very dangerous—like Chicago. They don’t have an image of the reality of Brussels” (Interviewee 2). Further interviewees commented, “Brussels works . . . it is outside that there is a problem” (Interviewee 16). “It is still important that Dutch culture is respected, but we are different from those in Flanders” (Interviewee 20): There is a change in the town: people now speak Dutch in the shops too; The problem in Brussels is that the two language communities have too much power. We need to coordinate policy and standards for the Brussels region. (Interviewee 12)

This further substantiates our contention that an affiliation with the city exists among elite-level bureaucrats; and further, that this exists in opposition to a traditional ethno-political identity.

Although such a high level of attachment is significant, it must nonetheless be stressed that an emerging Brussels identity among elite bureaucrats is found to exist simultaneously with other attachments and, although often superseding a language community identity, rarely supersedes a state affiliation. Only one of the seven respondents who identified a language community as their primary attachment gave a second preference to a Brussels identity. At the same time, 7 of the 10 respondents identifying themselves as Belgian in the first instance identified with the city in the second instance. This too raises an interesting point—although a Flanders identity may compete directly with a Brussels identity or a Belgian identity, a Brussels identity appears to exist in communion with a Belgian identity (probably related to the capital function of Brussels).

To delve further into these ethno-cultural preferences, we asked interviewees to identify on a Likert-type scale their attachment levels to the urban government (namely, a territorial rather than linguistic identification). The findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The first table identifies attachment to the urban government by language group and the second by each of the sub-national level administrations. It is found that a significant number of respondents do not identify with an urban government. That is the case not only for the bureaucrats of the monolingual COCOF and VGC administrations but also for the bilingual BCR and COCOM. The latter is especially interesting because both institutions function with a bilingual status, which would be more likely to match a common, territorial vision (surpassing the traditional linguistic divide). Also of note is the finding that members of the French-speaking COCOF are least likely to feel attached to the (bilingual) territorial urban government. This may suggest a frustration among French-speaking bureaucrats with the recruitment process/compromises within the bilingual authorities.

In terms of attachment to the urban government by ethno-cultural markers/identity, a Brussels identification did not correspond with an attachment to the Brussels (regional) institutions. Of the nine respondents identifying with Brussels in either a first or second instance (Figure 2), six felt attached to the urban government whereas three did not. This would tend to lend support to the hypothesis that the institutions of Brussels do not represent those bureaucrats identifying with Brussels. This view is compounded in that only two interviewees thought that the involvement of the political structures in running their department was constructive. As presented in Table 3, the governance solution in Brussels has the confidence of neither those identifying with Brussels nor those identifying with the language communities. It reflects one of the challenges

Table 1. Attachment to Urban Government by Language Group.

	Dutch-speaking	French-speaking	Both languages
Feel attached or very attached to the Brussels urban government	5	2	2
Feel not very attached or not at all attached to the Brussels urban government	3	6	2

Table 2. Attachment to Urban Government by Institution.

	BCR	CCC	COCOF	VGC
Feel attached or very attached to the Brussels urban government	4	2	0	3
Feel not very attached or not at all attached to the Brussels urban government	3	2	4	2

Note. BCR = Brussels Capital Region; CCC= Common Community Commission; COCOF = French Community Commission; VGC = Flemish Community Commission.

Table 3. How Constructive Are the Political Structures to the Running of Your Department?

Value	Number of responses
Not at all constructive	13
Not constructive	3
Fairly constructive	1
Very constructive	1
Missing	2

of the current politico-institutional model in Brussels: Although it successfully defused the political conflict within the Brussels arena, the creation of separate political sub-arenas inhibited the development of a common vision for the city/region. There has been no provision for inter-institutional cooperation at elite bureaucrat level: In line with most interviewees, Interviewee 20 remarked, “There is never any institutional contact.” This is remarkable given the accumulation of political mandates among representatives, implying that the same political personnel populate the aforementioned sub-state-level institutions in Brussels (cf. Swenden & Brans, 2006). This frustration with the operation of government in the city was highlighted by numerous interviewees: “If you want to build a cycle lane across three communes it takes years to get agreement (Interviewee 1); “The institutional design is too complicated” (Interviewee 2); In some instances we share school sites but have two completely separate administrations—in the cafeteria for example we buy Dutch speaking tomatoes and they buy French

speaking tomatoes . . . In the botanical gardens in Meise, the ground is Flemish but the trees and flowers are bilingual. (Interviewee 6)

Some interviewees highlighted the dangers posed through lack of cooperation: “At the moment, we have three regulatory regimes for nursing homes—we could see a race to bottom” (Interviewee 11); “We have three community governments in Brussels doing the same job: even building hospitals” (Interviewee 14). Multiple interviewees referenced the crisis in education where there exists a need to build schools in immigrant areas: As education is a Community government competency, neither the Dutch- nor French-speaking community governments are willing to fund education projects for what they see is for those outside their constituencies.

At the same time, we also noted a desire among the administration for an increase in cooperation: “I want increased interaction with other players in the city—our administration is just one piece of the jigsaw” (Interviewee 1). “The only way to get this done is through collaboration—you can do what you can do with your department, but the key word if you want to succeed is collaboration” (Interviewee 2). “The institutional arrangement would work better if we could do more things together—for a start, why can we not cooperate with the GGC/CCC?” (Interviewee 4). “We can learn from GGC and COCOF they understand the Brussels situation too . . . the procedures that work etc.” (Interviewee 5). “We never have contact with other administrations . . . I would love to: Our Flemish colleagues have the same problems, how do they solve the solutions . . .?” (Interviewee 8); “There should be a platform where people meet” (Interviewee 14).

However, at the same time, the bureaucratic elite were found to have trust and confidence in their ministers (16), other elite-level bureaucrats in other departments (14), and elite-level bureaucrats within their own departments (13). This would suggest that the weaknesses in the model are indeed structural (or institution-based), not personal. So far, we have seen that there is a burgeoning Brussels identity among the bureaucratic elite. However, at the same time, we see a frustration with the existing governance structures.

We decided to probe further the idea that some elite-level bureaucrats have adopted a Brussels (territorial) identity in place of a (mono)linguistic identity, and try to determine the extent to which this identity would guide behavior. To do this, we drew on the active representation element of representative bureaucracy theory. To create the environment most likely for a bureaucrat to actively represent his or her primary identity, two criteria have been put forward: There must be a critical mass of that primary identity, and the issue must be of importance to the group expected to actively represent (Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002; Meier & O’Toole, 2006). In Brussels, recruitment quotas ensure that a critical mass of each “community” is represented among the bureaucratic elite when it comes to the officially bilingual institutions (although each monolingual institution has a pendant in

the other official language as well). Furthermore, the sacrificing of the merit principle in favor of linguistic quotas for recruitment is an issue of intense political sensitivity as demonstrated by Figure 1.

Looking at bureaucratic perceptions of the merit principle, it would be expected that Dutch-speaking bureaucrats would be in favor of maintaining the ethno-linguistic quotas and that French-speaking bureaucrats would be in favor of scrapping them. In Table 4, we find in line with these hypothesized expectations that Dutch speakers tend to be in favor of quota representation whereas French speakers tend to favor the merit principle. Indicative findings, therefore, suggest that in instances where a language could be threatened, primary linguistic attachments would come to the fore. Thus, although a territorial identity is indeed emerging, and many elite-level bureaucrats identify with the city region of Brussels over their language groups, if their language were to come under threat, a resurgence in linguistic attachments would be expected. These positions are further substantiated by qualitative remarks from both French and Dutch speakers. These range from the majority more reserved responses,

“The 50:50/70:30 recruitment doesn’t fit with the socio synergy of the city” (Interviewee 2 FR); “I am in favour of sacrificing the merit principle we are in a bilingual region there must be equilibrium between both communities” (Interviewee 9DU); “Sacrificing the merit principle is the price of peace, but I disagree with it” (Interviewee 19FR); “If we protect the French minority at the national level we must protect the Flemish language at the regional level” (Interviewee 10FR).

to the more extreme,

“I didn’t get a job because it was protected for a Flemish person. They have their rights protected we don’t need to sacrifice the merit principle any more” (Interviewee 10FR); “The merit principle should be sacrificed as French speakers in general don’t speak Dutch” (Interviewee 17DU); “You can’t have 50:50 recruitment in the long term there are more and more French people in this city—I don’t see this city as a bilingual city—it is a French speaking city. Quotas are necessary for Brussels to guarantee Dutch representation but not 50%” (Interviewee 11FR).

Concerns expressed by the bureaucratic elite about the functioning of the Brussels power-sharing structures must therefore be addressed. Otherwise, decisions emanating from these governance structures could have unintended consequences, jeopardizing the extensive progress that has been made within the region over the past 25 years.

Table 4. Sacrificing the Merit Principle Is Necessary for Good Governance Within the Contested City.

Agree	Disagree
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Dutch	7	3
French	2	5
Both	2	0

Implications of the Findings

The potential causes of this burgeoning Brussels territorial rather than cultural mono-linguistic attachment seem to be multiple. First of all, the establishment of definitive sub-state institutions in Brussels in 1989 involved the direct election of the assembly of the BCR, 6 years before its counterparts in Flanders and Wallonia. When looking at the careers (see Stolz, 2003) of Brussels' politicians, one notices a so-called "integrated pattern," with a substantial number of politicians moving up and down between sub-state and state assemblies. However, overtime, most of Brussels' municipal burgomasters moved toward the assembly of the BCR, because the latter institution became the reference government for the local governmental layer in the capital. As such, from the second legislature on, 11 or 12 out of the 19 burgomasters were present and even holding important mandates in this sub-state Parliament (Vaesen, 2008). This finding is very relevant because the office of commune burgomaster holds a lot of popular esteem and political power, and in the past, it was seen by some politicians as a preferred position over that of Minister of State Secretary in the Government of the BCR (Delcamp, 1993). It reflects a certain localism in the Brussels regional arena. It is clear that these new, full-term Brussels institutions displayed a particular attraction for political elites over national and community governments. This is also the case in the north and the south of the country (see Renard et al., 2011). In any case, the Government of the BCR from the start adopted a policy based on a holistic, integrated approach to Brussels. This implied that programs that could be situated in the gray zone of partition of competences between the Region, Communities and Community Commissions in Brussels, that the BCR Government would step in and provide the service, thereby using the autonomy of the local governmental layer.

In a second phase, the BCR started to integrate the Community Commissions as well (it involves the same political personnel due to the accumulation of political mandates), thus provoking tensions with their parent bodies: the French-speaking community and the Flemish-speaking community (Vaesen, 2008). This alignment of the Community Commissions to the BCR thus threatens to undermine the partition of competences and so the political compromise regarding the political-institutional architecture of Brussels. This realignment on a Brussels urban or territorial identity, rather than on linguistic markers does not imply however that the debate regarding cultural identity and its political recuperation in Brussels is over. Some

politicians and certain media in the capital do continue to underline that Brussels is a French-speaking city. In this political discourse, it is alleged that 93% of the citizens in the capital are French-speaking, thus reducing the potential impact of the “Flemish” sphere in Brussels to a tiny minority of 7%. However, such simplistic political statements do not coincide with the sociolinguistic reality, which is far more complex given the bilingualism or multilingualism of 61% of the Brussels citizens (see Janssens & Vaesen, 2015).

Furthermore, the role of the so-called cultural field in Brussels cannot be underestimated. Governance of educational and most cultural affairs is linguistically divided between the Flemish and French Communities in Brussels. However, in spite of this governance arrangement, some cultural institutions in Brussels have developed cross-cultural, bi/multilingual instruments. The BCR (responsibility for economics, employment, transport, trade, etc.) capitalizes on this evolution by supporting cultural initiatives (for which it is *stricto sensu* not competent) from budgets such as the *image building* budget, which is to support the trade and commercial environment of Brussels. Finally, the contribution of civil society associations (e.g., the cross-cultural “Cultural Plan for Brussels”), universities, and research institutions to the public debate cannot be neglected (see Mincke, Hubert, Vossen, & De Corte, 2011; Nassaux, 2011).

This article further substantiates claims previously presented by Fitjar (2010) and Hepburn (2011) suggesting that regional identities can supersede, and sometimes even usurp, traditional ethno-political affiliations. Drawing on a case where such secondary identities are least likely to emerge pushes this hypothesis to the limits. Although we only test this in relation to one section of society—the bureaucratic elite—we argue that this section of society is a significant partner in the governance of society, particularly that of Brussels. It is, therefore, worthy of research in its own right. The findings complement existing sociological research in Brussels, demonstrating that a Brussels urban identity is indeed evident. However, the findings also suggest that when the urban identity hypothesis is pushed to its limits, primary attachments do reemerge.

The implications of the research for political science are that regional identities, even in the most unlikely environments can supersede traditional ethno-political cleavages. If it is accepted that identity guides behavior, these identity perceptions shape how the bureaucrat can skew the implementation and design of public policy. The research also has implications for conflict management research, demonstrating that ethno-political cleavages can be altered and can do so within a short period of time. Although it is (currently) unlikely for Dutch-speaking inhabitants of Brussels to completely disassociate themselves with the Dutch-speaking people or with the region of Flanders and adopt a French-speaking

attachment, it is possible that a regional urban identity could emerge, superseding these traditional cleavages. In contrast with historical processes of Frenchification of Dutch-speaking inhabitants in Brussels, the current context has changed dramatically. Dutch has become not only a valuable asset to the Brussels labor market, but the sociodemographic composition of the city has also been altered significantly due to substantial rise in immigration. Today, more than 50% of the Brussels population do not have roots in the traditional linguistic divide. In response to these existing realities, some political actors have pushed for more regional autonomy (using the bilingual BCR as a vehicle) while many civil society actors have pleaded for cross-cultural cooperation in those domains, which remain fragmented in monolingual systems such as culture and education. Further research is required into this (re)emerging Brussels identity: Do the language groups interpret what it means to be an inhabitant of Brussels differently, and furthermore, does a socioeconomic divide exist? What is clear is that a population of the Brussels elite identify with Brussels. Further research is required to determine how exactly this identity is interpreted.

Our findings do not suggest that a homogeneous Brussels identity exists, nor do they suggest a common cultural vision for the city. Nonetheless, they do show that traditional linguistic cleavages are no longer the primary attachment of a significant proportion of bureaucrats. A Brussels identity is evident. Where it exists, it supersedes the traditional linguistic cleavages. However, these linguistic cleavages have not been completely eradicated. The evidence presented would suggest that if either community were to feel threatened, a resurgence in the linguistic cleavages would be likely. The significance of the findings is twofold. For Brussels, and indeed the wider Belgian contestation, the institutions of the region must respond to those possessing a Brussels attachment, not simply those with a Dutch-speaking or French-speaking attachment. Whereas previous studies have suggested that there may be a burgeoning Brussels identity, this study identifies that at the heart of the governance institutions, this identity also exists. The Brussels power-sharing solution, although proving itself to be politically durable amid a state environment that remains volatile, does not have the confidence of the elite-level bureaucrat. Although there is widespread trust and confidence in the actors themselves, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the governance structures of Brussels. The governance structures of Brussels, although proving successful in managing traditional politico-linguistic divisions, are less conducive to “good” coherent governance. These frustrations are evident among the bureaucratic elite. If these decision-making structures are maintained, it is not unlikely that they will produce poor decisions that would have unintended consequences. This

research has demonstrated that attachment to an urban identity, although it exists, would be threatened if either community felt threatened.

Furthermore, the evidence tends to support the assertions made elsewhere (O'Connor, 2014) that the governance structures of Brussels are not sustainable if the city is to move from conflict management to conflict resolution. The weakness is not in that of the individuals, as there is a high degree of confidence among the bureaucratic elite in their colleagues, their departments, and their political masters, but in the structures. Second, and more importantly for the study of conflict management, this finding demonstrates that although national tensions between the traditionally divided communities may remain high, or indeed may even be intensifying (Flemish nationalist parties continue to gather support in Flanders), a simultaneous increase in an urban identity is also apparent.

Finally, although the institutional design of Brussels has managed the conflict, it is now evident that it is not capable of managing the conflict management to conflict resolution process. The bureaucratic elite are stuck between Scylla and Charybdis in that they want to implement “good” public policy and would like to cooperate with their counterparts in other administrations (O'Connor, 2014); the political level (in Brussels) also wishes to cooperate (Vaesen, 2008); however, the institutional design imposed on the city does not facilitate such cooperation beyond the existing instruments of the cooperative federalism model.

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Notes

1. This selection method obviously gives only a rough indication of the number of interventions regarding this issue, because it does not take into account the actual discussions. The selected questions and interpellations refer explicitly to linguistic issues in the administrations.

2. However, the Constitution does not recognize this merging as it necessitates a majority vote on the French-speaking side as well.
3. The Brussels Capital Region (BCR) figure is disappointing as six of those targeted for interview declined to participate. However, given the nature of the study, it is more important to have representative samples from the Community Commission administrations as primary identities would be expected to be stronger in these institutions. Furthermore, the Community Commission administrations are all functioning in the Brussels city area but are all directly or indirectly linked with the monolingual Communities whose main locus of power is situated in Flanders and Wallonia.
4. A number of positions within the Joint Community Commission (COCOM) and French Community Commission (COCOF) were vacant at the time of fieldwork.
5. The same categories (together with other categories) are used in the standardized scientific survey regarding language use, identity, and identification in Brussels. Of the ethno-cultural markers race, religion, and language, only the latter is of importance (see Janssens, 2013).
6. When it comes to the issue of identity and identification, the survey actually contains three aspects: positive identification in the first place, positive identification in the second place, and finally negative identification ("with which categories do you not want to be identified"). Furthermore, distinctions are made between traditional French speakers, Dutch speakers, traditional bilinguals, and "new" bilinguals (see Janssens, 2013).

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Author Biographies

Karl O'Connor is lecturer in public administration within the Institute for Research in Social Sciences at the University of Ulster, UK. His research interests include public administration, conflict management, European governance, and Q Methodology. His recent monograph, *Public Administration in Contested Societies*, was published by Palgrave. He has also published in, among others, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *West European Politics*, and the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

Joost Vaesen is director of the Brussels Studies Institute, a Brussels-based interuniversity research consortium, and a lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research interests include Brussels politics and administration and urban education.