

Which way out for Flanders?

Flanders' push for autonomy from Wallonia grows, but separatism threatens Belgium's fragile unity.

Belgium, a small nation hosting the headquarters of the EU and NATO, faces a growing rift. Flanders, the prosperous Dutch-speaking north, increasingly seeks to break from southern French-speaking Wallonia. This tension, rooted in historical inequalities, has grown as Flanders' economic and cultural priorities diverged from Wallonia's.

Since the mid-20th century, Flemish nationalism has shifted from linguistic grievances to demands for autonomy or independence. Economic disparities, cultural shifts, and political gridlock fuel this drive. The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Vlaams Belang (VB) lead the charge, though their visions differ.

Some Flemings dream of joining the Netherlands, but this remains unlikely. While separatism reflects real frustrations, it threatens Belgium's stability and Flanders' global standing. [Confederalism](#) may be the practical outcome, granting near-total regional autonomy, but Belgium's [complex](#) political system complicates any resolution.

I. THE SEPARATIST SURGE

Successive reforms, driven by linguistic and regional pressures, have progressively shifted power away from the federal government. Flemish nationalism began as a cultural and linguistic movement. In the 19th century, Dutch-speakers, roughly 60% of Belgium's population, were sidelined by a French-speaking elite. Flanders, then poor and rural, lagged behind industrial Wallonia.

Post-WWII, Flanders became an economic powerhouse. By 2023, Flanders accounted for [82%](#) of Belgium's exports. This economic edge bred resentment over fiscal transfers to Wallonia, viewed as a socialist burden. The Flemish Movement, once intellectual, gave rise to powerful political parties like the Volksunie in the 1950s, and more recently N-VA and VB.

Culturally, Flanders has significantly shifted. Once devoutly Catholic, it is now largely secular. This shift reflects a growing Flemish identity tied to Dutch roots, not Belgian unity. N-VA, centre-right and pragmatic, pushes confederalism—regional control with shared defence and diplomacy. VB, right-wing and conservative, demands full independence, capitalising on anti-immigration sentiment. Both exploit frustration with Belgium's gridlocked federal system, which took [541](#) days to form a government in 2010-2011.

II. ECONOMIC DIVIDE AND FRAGILE FUTURE

Flanders' economic strength drives separatism. Its unemployment rate, 3,8% in 2025, contrasts with Wallonia's 8%. Antwerp's port, Europe's second-largest, fuels trade, unlike Wallonia's declining coal and steel sectors. Flemings resent subsidising Wallonia's costly welfare system, estimated at about 6-7 billion euros annually. These economic disparities highlight why many Flemings view Wallonia as a financial drain on their region's prosperity.

Bart De Wever, leader of the N-VA and Mayor of Antwerp calls Belgium a "crippled horse," advocating confederalism to limit federal powers. Wallonia's left-leaning politics, dominated by the socialists for decades, clashes with Flanders' rightward shift. Brussels, bilingual but geographically surrounded by Flanders, adds considerable complexity. Not to mention its strategic meaning as the main headquarters for EU institutions...

The notion of joining the Netherlands—a "Greater Netherlands"—appeals to some. Shared language and history, dating to the Low Countries before 1830, make it plausible. Some Dutch right-wing figures like Gerolf Annemans are not opposed to the idea. However, the Netherlands shows little interest.

On an international level, EU membership would not automatically extend to an independent Flanders. NATO and EU status, vital for prosperity, could falter, as seen in Scotland's 2014 referendum debates. Separatism's appeal is clear but risky. Wallonia, contributing 20% of Belgium's GDP, depends on Flanders. A split could push Wallonia toward France, reviving old partition plans.

Confederalism offers a middle path. Since 1980, six state reforms have decentralised Belgium, giving Flanders control over €50 billion, more than the federal budget. Belgium's federal budget in 2023 was around €45 billion, covering defence, social security, pensions, and federal institutions like the judiciary. The Flemish budget surpassing the federal one reflects the extent of decentralization, as regions now control significant tax revenues (e.g., property taxes, regional income tax surcharges) and policy areas.

N-VA's 2014 plan for a confederal parliament of regional MPs would transfer health and labour policies. Yet, Walloon parties like the Socialist Party (PS) resist further dismantling, and other Flemish parties prioritise economic recovery. Belgium's health system, praised during Covid, shows federalism's strengths. Flanders' push reflects legitimate grievances but risks fracturing a small state.

With 12 million citizens already divided by language, a breakup could weaken EU and NATO ties. Confederalism, largely achieved, may satisfy most Flemings without shattering Belgium. Flanders may not escape Belgium, but it can reshape it.