

# **The Paradoxes of Cultural and Music Diplomacy in a Federal Country**

## **A Case Study from Flanders, Belgium**

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In Belgium, similarly to other federal systems, cultural diplomacy is not only aimed at representing the country in the international arena. It also plays a key role in the cultural, political, and economic relations between subnational entities, as well as between them and the central state (Michelmann). The different shapes and contents of Belgian cultural diplomacy, indeed, can be observed as the result of cooperation and arrangements to ensure the coherence of the country's foreign policy. Nevertheless, cultural diplomacy is also strongly affected by the competition over material resources and over the space for subnational identity representation undertaken by the country's federated communities. In the case of Belgium, in other words, cultural diplomacy reflects the issues and claims involved in the conflict existing between its major language communities, the Flemish Dutch-speaking group in the north, and the French-speaking group in the south.

As a response to the political mobilization of different language groups, Belgium's institutional setting has given a high degree of autonomy to its constituent units. The country's federalization that started in 1970 has established political regions and cultural communities endowed with exclusive jurisdiction over a number of both space- and person-related matters, including the elaboration and implementation of cultural policies. In spite of this, claims for greater sub-national autonomy continue to characterize the country's contemporary politics and, in particular, the political debate in Flanders, the country's Dutch-speaking northern region. In this context, so-called Flemish nationalists articulate a hierarchical representation of the country's regional groups based on a utilitarian vision of the economic achievements, greater development, and

institutional efficiency of Flanders (Huyseune). Not surprisingly, the representation of Flanders's wealthier economy and good governance, together with a generalized will for internationalization, are key themes in the ideology and discourse of the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), the Flemish nationalist party that scored its most recent electoral success in the 2014 federal elections, becoming the largest party in the country and reawakening the historical conflict between the French and Flemish language communities (De Wever and Kesteloot).

In such a situation, we can observe several complications for a coherent national-Belgian approach towards cultural diplomacy. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze one example of Flemish cultural diplomacy in the context of federal Belgium, and to highlight its form as a practice that both interacts with the pressures coming from Flemish nationalistic discourses and, at the same time, exists as a direct consequence of the country's federal organization.

The role of culture in the genesis and evolution of the conflict characterizing Belgium has been deeply observed and analyzed in academic literature (Martiniello, "Culturalisation"; Blommaert). Language and ethnicity, in particular, represent key elements in the study of the Belgian case and of its different separatist trends including the forms of Flemish nationalism. Indeed, observers have highlighted strong culturalizations and ethnicizations of the Belgian domestic conflict that, mostly in non-violent form, have involved many different aspects of the sociocultural history and life of the federal state (Martiniello, "Culturalisation"; Blommaert). Nowadays, culture seems to be relegated to a marginal dimension, since political and economic elements have taken priority in the public debate. The aim of this paper is to reconsider the role of culture as an element that, based on a utilitarian vision, has great relevance in the debate as it can evoke ideas, principles, and attitudes involved in the competition and conflict between Belgium's federated entities today.

To this end, I will focus on cultural diplomacy. The specific use of culture made by institutions in a context like Belgium emerges as a means to produce and share forms of competition and the hierarchical representation of the federal state's different political components. More specifically, my hypothesis is that cultural diplomacy in Flanders can be observed as producing discourses on the region's economic development and structural efficiency. My chapter focuses on one specific case of cultural diplomacy concerning music as a cultural form, namely Antwerp's conservatory and international art campus deSingel. More specifically, I will analyze documentary sources pertaining to deSingel's official policy plan *Beleidsplan 2011-2015* (DeSingel Internationale Kunstcampus) which includes detailed information on international activities and networks. The

chapter is also based on non-documentary sources including two in-depth interviews. The first interview was conducted with deSingel's general and artistic manager Jerry Aerts. The second interviewee was Jan Peumans, leading member of the nationalist and conservative Flemish party New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and President of the Flemish Parliament.

It is also important to remark that my analysis will focus on the organizational, structural, and financial aspects of deSingel's music diplomacy rather than on purely musical dimensions, and on the ways these different dimensions are articulated within international and Belgian contexts. It is arguable that the research findings presented here are not only specific to music, and for this reason I will often employ the term cultural diplomacy instead of the more specific music diplomacy. I understand cultural diplomacy as a sector of public interest and policy action that is larger than music diplomacy. Nevertheless, deSingel is mainly recognized as a music institution, and the cases analyzed and examples provided in this chapter concern only cultural diplomacy projects involving music.

There are several reasons for selecting deSingel as a representative case study. First, the institution is one of the most important actors in the country's and Europe's cultural landscape, as well as one of the most strongly supported by public funds in the Flemish community. Secondly, deSingel is located in Antwerp, the largest city in Flanders and contemporary metropolitan stronghold of the Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA).<sup>1</sup> Last but not less important, deSingel has great symbolic relevance in the language conflict for its history. It is a direct descendant of the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp founded in 1898 as the first full Dutch-language institute for art education in Belgium, an iconic place in the evolution of the historical antagonism between French-speaking elites and Dutch-speaking populations in the country. Nowadays, as I will explain, this institution, perhaps more than any other, meets the guiding principles of integration and internationalization that inform contemporary Flemish cultural policy.

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1 Significantly, the leader of N-VA Bart De Wever has also served as mayor of Antwerp since January 2013.

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY CONTEXT: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A REGIONAL TASK**

Belgium is a federal country whose institutional and policy structures are based on the right of self-determination of the French and Flemish language groups considered to be constitutive elements of the nation (Martiniello, “Sortir” 71). Since the 1970s, a step-by-step process of institutional reform was implemented with the aim of pacifying the long-lasting conflict opposing the political elites of the two major language groups: The francophones in Wallonia and the néerlandophones in Flanders. The Flemish/francophone divide, indeed, is the central axis around which three political regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-capital region) and cultural communities (Flemish, French-speaking, and a small German-speaking community, which has no actual role in the conflict) have been established (Jacobs 4). The federal reforms were implemented on the principle of a multicultural state and aimed to delegate powers from the central state to subnational entities defined by language. However, the historical divide (so-called Community Cleavage) and the related claims for greater autonomy characterizing the two largest language communities have not ceased. Rather, in the last decades they have emerged with great strength within the Flemish political landscape in particular. This state of things occurred for essentially two political and economic reasons: The territorialization of national politics (with all the most important party families splitting into Flemish and French-speaking parties) and the emergence of Flanders as one of Europe’s richest regions (Blommaert).

The federalization of political-institutional structures has determined a major upheaval in the political representation and governance of Flemish and francophone parties, with all the country’s political families—the Christian-Democrat, the Socialist and the Liberal—splitting into Dutch- and French-speaking parties. As a consequence, problems of negotiation, cooperation, political legitimacy and stability come out each time a new executive has to be formed, dramatically shown by the 2010-2011 crisis when cabinet negotiations took a record time of 353 days before a new democratic government could be formed. The split of party families led political analysts to criticize the process of federal reform and to question its effectiveness as a solution for a conflict that, largely in non-violent forms, continues to characterize Belgium to the extent that it can be considered as a “federalism of disunion” (Martiniello, “Immigrant Integration” 120). Furthermore, in the last two decades the Community Cleavage has increasingly featured questions of economic efficiency and good-versus-bad governance. A process of rapid development started after World War II allowed Flan-

ders to take over the center of economic power from the formerly dominant Wallonia's industrial centers (Witte et al.). Nowadays, differences in economic performance, employment rate, and structural efficiency have increased the territorial dualism between the two regions. Flanders and Wallonia are often represented in antagonistic terms in the political debate. Flemish nationalists, in particular, managed to dominate the debate and achieve electoral success from 2007 onwards, during the global financial crisis, claiming for a further separation of socio-economic matters including social benefits, welfare, and the social security system.

It is on these premises that Flemish cultural diplomacy can be regarded as a political instrument which functions beyond the tasks of representing the region in the international arena. Apart from ideological and political conflict, specific organizations and the structures of the federal system itself greatly influence cultural diplomacy. In Belgium, cultural communities have exclusive jurisdiction over so-called 'person-related matters' including public policy-making with regard to art and culture-related activities. They operate within the limits of their own language territory except for the French and Dutch-speaking bilingual region of Brussels in which the Flemish and Francophone communities share jurisdiction. Cultural diplomacy is one of the initiatives in which language communities have a high degree of autonomy. In fact, the federal government does not have competences since the *in foro interno, in foro externo* principle introduced by a constitutional reform in 1988 guarantees the right for sub-state entities to manage the foreign policy concerning those matters for which they are granted domestic autonomy. Significantly, there is no cabinet position responsible for culture-related matters in the federal government (Craenen). Although the communities are invited to cooperate under the coordinating role of the federal government, Belgian foreign policy is not always granted concrete institutional coherence with regard to the directions to take and actions to implement in matters pertaining to cultural diplomacy. Since the federal reform of 1993, the communities have enjoyed self-government with regard to international relations, and cultural policies are governed by the principle of subsidiarity according to which the government's role is limited to general regulations and subsidies to non-governmental associations. Since then, and alongside the principle of democratic access that characterized the public approach towards culture and the arts, a business-oriented approach based on long-term policy planning has emerged in Flanders.

A generalized fascination for a utilitarian vision of culture as a means to promote local development, as well as the specific attention towards its business-related values, are not exclusive characteristics in the Flemish or Belgian con-

texts. They are common features of the approach towards cultural policies and diplomacy taken by both national and sub-national entities all around Europe. In Belgium, however, the cause-and-effect relationship between the tensions in the federal system and the local, municipal, and regional policy-making level is particularly evident. Economic inequalities are the basis of separatist claims voiced by Flemish nationalists, since pro-federalist positions within this political tradition seem to have been less dominant in the last years than during the era of state reforms. A harsh debate concerns the question of social security transfers between regions and, more generally, the gap between the richer Flanders and the poorer Wallonia. This debate revolves around the regional development paradigm that identifies Europe's wealthiest regions as endowed with particular sociocultural characteristics that foster development (Keating et al.). In Belgium, in both the regional and national public discourses, reference is often made to particular sociocultural specificities and endogenous virtues to explain Flanders's economic success (Huysseune).

In this context, Flemish cultural diplomacy shifts from the principles of co-operation to competition as it goes along with the trends and directions of the sub-national political environment increasingly dominated by Flemish nationalist trends. As a form of soft power aimed at attracting foreign audiences and institutions (Nye), it reflects the region's dominant political imperatives. Nowadays, a particular symbolic geography of a richer and more efficient Flanders versus a poorer and less efficient Wallonia seems to have an influence on the forms and contents of cultural diplomacy in Belgium.

## **POLITICAL CONTEXT: FLEMISH NATIONALISM**

An analysis of the specific development of Flemish nationalism throughout the evolution of Belgian politics would exceed the purpose of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is important to briefly outline the evolution of Flemish nationalism and to highlight its contemporary ideological features as they affect the context and dynamics of the case study presented here. Flemish nationalism has been an established component of Belgian institutional politics since the interwar period. It is grounded in the ideology of the nineteenth-century Flemish Movement that was created to support social and cultural emancipation of non-Francophone populations at a time when Belgium was dominated by French-speaking elites. In the years before and after the Second World War, two forms of Flemish nationalism, one moderate and another more radical, emerged in the Belgian political landscape. These ideological trends have been translated into formal

political parties and have influenced institutional politics up to the late 2000s: on one side the moderate-nationalist and pro-federalist party Volksunie (VU) established in 1954; on the other, the far-right and ethno-nationalist party Vlaams Blok/Belang (VB), born from the radical-separatist wing that split from the VU in 1978.

Seen as a direct expression of the traditional language-related struggle, VU was characterized by an idea of culture articulated within the claim for the emancipation of Dutch-speaking people and, by extension, as a means to pursue democratization. In the era of federal reforms from the 1970s to the early 2000s, VU aligned with the pro-federalist and pro-Belgium approach of the rest of the Flemish political groups, an attitude that represented the ground on which legislation concerning local and international cultural policy was thought and implemented. On the other side, the approach of VB was (and still is) framed within the traditional ethno-nationalist desire for congruence within the nation, in this specific case an independent Flemish nation, and a culturally homogeneous people. The making of a Flemish independent community and the protection of this community against external influences, even by rejecting culturally different people, are key issues that direct the party's rhetoric towards racism and xenophobia still today. Interestingly, the party has often prioritized its connection to the Netherlands and other Dutch-speaking countries, while being radically opposed to European integration (for a national and international analysis of VB see Swyngedouw; Jamin).

The bipolar nature of Flemish nationalism entails two completely different approaches towards cultural diplomacy as either an element to represent or share specific political ideas or as a concrete policy tool. Since the constitutional reform of 1993 that ratified the communitarization of foreign relations, the shape of international cultural policy and cultural diplomacy has partially reflected the twofold attitude of Flemish nationalism. In general terms, Belgian communities have been active in promoting a 'Europe of the Regions' and representing local specificities and interests (Massart-Piérard). The language communities of Belgium tended to establish strong relationships with neighboring countries speaking the same language. Flanders, in particular, developed its own policies in the longstanding international network called Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union), the union of Dutch-speaking countries that includes Holland as well as Suriname and South Africa (Bursens and Massart-Piérard 96). Besides the principle of language affinity, Flanders's international cultural policy focused on an identity-building project aimed at promoting the region's cultural peculiarities. A series of historical and newly established agencies including cultural organizations, schools and concert halls were presented as cultural

ambassadors tasked with implementing cooperative projects with partners worldwide. Special subsidies were granted to international activities in line with this strategy.

In the early 2000s, with the process of federalization being completed, VU fell apart and left space for the separatist extreme-right to represent the main ideological profile of Flemish nationalism. The political representation of VB has been limited, however, as the other Flemish parties agreed not to cooperate with the extreme-right and to contain the party in a so-called *cordon sanitaire* (buffer zone). In the same period, a new Flemish nationalist party emerged in the landscape of Belgian politics: the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA). Although the party's main aim is to achieve independence for Flanders, N-VA has reformulated this imperative in a contemporary diplomatic, pragmatic, and pro-European setting as they wish to establish an independent Flemish republic within the European Union and the international political arena. The party has effectively differentiated itself from the radical image of nationalism represented by VB. N-VA describes its goal as a democratic project that has nothing to do with radicalism, but that concerns questions of economic and structural efficiency as well as ethic and civic values (Maly). While VU and VB, for different reasons, never achieved large electoral success, N-VA gradually affirmed itself as a mainstream party with a large electorate, becoming the country's largest party in the 2010 federal elections.

The rise of N-VA in the regional and national political scene, and the generalized support for neoliberal and austerity policies in both language communities, highlighted a pragmatic attitude towards cultural diplomacy in the whole of Belgian politics. Nowadays, N-VA's policy approach aims particularly to the reduction of public spending as well as to the optimization of the institutional and government structure. Concerning the segment of cultural policy, one example of the influence of this institutional pragmatic approach is the so-called Arts Decree implemented in 2004 and amended in 2008. The Arts Decree represents the main instrument for cultural actors to access public funding for both national and international cultural activities. It provides two- and four-year funding for organizations and projects concerning cultural activities, arts education, and culture-related initiatives. Support for international initiatives can be obtained by organizations that propose activities incorporated within larger projects. Concerning the optimization of institutional and policy structures, a set of institutions has been selected and given the status of official cultural institutions of the Flemish Community and have been identified as main international actors. These institutions can rely on greater support from the regional government.



## **DESINGEL IN FLANDERS AND EUROPE: AN EXAMPLE OF FLEMISH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF N-VA**

As outlined above, the Flemish cultural sector is marked by the presence of main cultural actors selected as official institutions of the respective communities. The Antwerp-based international arts campus deSingel acquired the status of official cultural institution in 2004. It integrates a variety of culture-related activities covering different domains such as music, dance, theater, the performing arts, and architecture. It is a major public actor in the Belgian music landscape for activities ranging from music education to production and promotion. In addition, it is one of the country's most renowned venues for chamber, jazz, and experimental music. Established in a large campus in the periphery of Antwerp, deSingel's activities take place in a one-thousand-seat concert hall, an eight-hundred-seat theater, various music and theater studios, an exhibition area, a reading room, and a café.

According to the Arts Decree, deSingel's official recognition as a community institution does not entail, in itself, direct access to public funding. Like any other non-governmental association, institution or actor, deSingel is called to submit its own plans in order to find public support for its activities. However, its large-scale infrastructure, multi-profile activities, and leading position in the Flemish cultural landscape facilitate access to subsidies. In this regard, President of the Flemish Parliament Jan Peumans states:

It is obvious that such a large and active institution, a crown jewel in the Flemish creative and cultural sector, should rely on public subsidies. If you look at all the activities they provide, from education to entertainment, the public investment is no doubt compensated.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, deSingel is largely subsidized by the public sector with about seven million Euros from the Flemish Community, plus a few hundred thousand Euros from the Province and the City of Antwerp, to cover almost nine million Euros of annual total costs (see table 1).

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2 “C’est évident qu’une institution aussi grande et active, un fleuron dans le secteur créatif et culturel flamand, devrait compter sur des subventions publiques. Si vous regardez toutes les activités qu’ils font, de l’éducation au loisir, l’investissement public est sans doute compensé.”

Table 1: Overview over DeSingel's Income (2011-2015).

<b>deSingel 2011 income projected onto the years 2012 up to and including 2015</b> <small>(source: Beleidsplan 2011-2015)</small>					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
	€1.024.500	€1.045.000	€1.066.000	€1.087.000	€1.109.000
Flemish Community	€6.910.000	€7.031.000	€7.154.000	€7.279.000	€7.406.000
Province of Antwerp	€200.000	€204.000	€208.000	€212.000	€216.000
City of Antwerp	€150.000	€153.000	€156.000	€159.000	€162.000
Sponsoring	€100.000	€100.000	€100.000	€100.000	€100.000
Other	€530.000	€541.000	€552.000	€563.000	€574.000
	<b>€8.914.500</b>	<b>€9.074.000</b>	<b>€9.236.000</b>	<b>€9.400.000</b>	<b>€9.567.000</b>

Source: Beleidsplan 2011-2015.

As a consequence, a clear commitment to the interests of the region lies at the core of deSingel's official mission to be the beacon of Flemish arts in the international cultural scene. For example, in the official 2011-2015 policy plan, the international dimension of deSingel was clearly highlighted as a fundamental form of contribution to regional development:

for major performing artists from abroad deSingel provides a quality venue of very high standard, and via the arts campus Flemish artists with international potential are sent out to all the most important venues abroad. . . . We are convinced that with this scheme we can make a major contribution to Flanders, which has a lively cultural community that plays an active part in the intense international arts scene. (DeSingel 10)

The idea of arts production as a form of cultural capital to be safeguarded and enriched through contacts and exchanges with local and foreign partners is integral to the intention of acting on an international dimension. The policy plan states: "We shall continue our main task of stimulating and presenting international arts production. In this way we safeguard our capital and remain a leading player on the international art scene" (DeSingel 22).

In fact, deSingel acts on a twofold territorial dimension since it works as a community institution in collaboration with Flemish cultural actors, but also as a main agency in international networks. On one hand, it regularly consults with partners in Flanders and Brussels in order to avoid direct competition, preserving the complementarity of cultural offers and setting up co-productions and joint initiatives. This point is highlighted in the policy plan in the following terms: "in

no way is it our intention to compete with other Flemish Community institutions. On the contrary. Together with other institutions, and with an eye to cooperation, we have set up a joint consultative body” (DeSingel 108).

On the other hand, deSingel is one of the country’s most active institutions in music diplomacy, collaborating closely with international partners in bordering and neighboring countries such as France, Holland, England, Germany, and Luxembourg. One example of collaboration within and outside the Flemish community is the biennial music festival Opera XXI, coproduced in Flanders by deSingel, the Vlaamse Opera and the Muziektheater Transparant of Antwerp. Characterizing the organization of the event, deSingel’s general manager Jerry Aerts asserts:

Working with Flemish institutions is a priority for us. We want to stimulate and inspire other institutions as they represent the same cultural capital that we aim at opening and enriching. Opera XXI is a good occasion for achieving these tasks because it is in this kind of activities that we can bring our experience and structural organization into play. (Aerts)

In addition to Flemish organizations, several institutions from neighboring countries, such as the Dutch Operadagen Rotterdam and the French Centre National de Création Musicale de Lyon GRAME, participate in Opera XXI. The way this itinerant event is exported to third countries and organized in international venues is particularly paradigmatic of the way deSingel understands its representative role in the international arena. In this respect, Aerts discusses the edition hosted by the Italian Teatro Comunale di Bologna in April 2014:

[Opera XXI] is an example of how we do international activities. For instance, lately we have brought the festival to Bologna and produced an amazing play written and directed by Andrea Molino and Giorgio Van Straten, two Italian renowned composers who worked with Flemish professionals for the occasion. It has been a sort of revolution for the Italians as Opera XXI has been thought to bring pop music and styles into the classical frame of the theater. But what we provided, apart from the artistic direction, is structural guidance. We made our structural organization available to local organizers and, of course, we put the money. . . . It was totally impossible for the Theater of Bologna to organize and support the festival on their own. (Aerts)

The purpose of Opera XXI seems not only to be the representation of Flanders through musical and artistic exchange itself, but also to promote the institution’s structural and organizational qualities. What this form of music diplomacy seeks to showcase, to Italian audiences in this particular case, are the institutional ideas

and mechanisms of the Belgian region's cultural sector, rather than the contents and forms of its art and culture. In other words, the need to attract audiences is pursued through the representation and amplification of a production system rather than of the productions themselves.

If the process of Flemish identity building in the era of federal reforms revolved around the representation of local Flemish art forms and traditional cultural values, today these elements are no longer at the center of international projects. The Flemish community does not support and implement cultural diplomacy initiatives with the sole aim of showcasing its cultural values and identity through the arts and cultural production. Rather, supporting music but also dance, theater or any other art form in the international arena is a means for Flanders to spotlight its level of structural development and organizational capability. This approach can be seen as a reflection of the regional development paradigm that, as mentioned above, dominates the political debate both regionally and nationally. DeSingel director Aerts is explicit in this sense:

A small region in Europe; that is what we are. In the era of globalization we cannot rely on showing our traditional arts or cultural excellence which, certainly, we are proud of. And we are a Dutch-speaking region, not really a widespread language. That is why we prefer to export our know-how, our way to do the things rather than 'the things' themselves. . . . It is undeniable that the education system in our region, for example, is more developed. It simply works well. We have been able to transmit this level of efficiency to music education, and want to show how and why to our partners. That is how we attempt to reinforce the position of Flanders in the international scene. (Aerts)

It is quite clear that this quote reflects a utilitarian vision of the Flemish cultural sector, a vision relying on the idealization of principles such as economic development, system stability, and institutional efficiency. Aerts's words also convey a specific ethnocentric perspective depicting the Flemish way of operating in the cultural industry as a successful model to follow, without questioning the historical circumstances or the structural and economic conditions that led to the region's performance and level of development.

## **DESINGEL IN BELGIUM AND WALLONIA**

As already highlighted, deSingel was recognized as an official institution of the Flemish community in 2004 and, from then on, it has emerged as a main actor in the representation of Flanders in Belgium and beyond. However, its domestic

policy is apparently free from any particular obligation to serve exclusive community interests. Interestingly, concerning deSingel's policies for music education and support, Aerts states:

We have students from everywhere. Of about 580 students attending our courses, forty percent are foreigners. This means something. This means that we are recognized as a place to go for developing your talent. Of course, we are formally asked to support Flemish musicians, but the point is how this definition is regulated institutionally. . . . Flemish musicians are not only those who were born in Flanders, but also those who have been living and studying here. It is not, let's say, an ethnic or a nationalist distinction that we make, not at all. (Aerts)

Aerts affirms to have only a formal commitment with the community interest, in particular with the obligation to support Flemish artists, but also wants to maintain an anti-essentialist approach to the idea of Flemishness. In his view, deSingel's international students represent a tangible example of the way the art center promotes a form of identity whose limits go beyond the geographic territory of Flanders or the Dutch-speaking dimension.

Nevertheless, the logic that informs this kind of agency does not escape from the binary opposition between Flanders and Wallonia in which the Belgian internal conflict and the Flemish nationalist ideology are framed. Indeed, deSingel's activities can be regarded as having both symbolic and structural implications concerning the conflict between the language communities. First, deSingel's structural organization and qualitative standards are likely to be connected to Flanders's generalized prosperity and directly attributed to a form of local ethos, an attitude to business that could be considered an endogenous trait of Flemish people. This argument has great relevance in the political debate and public opinion in Belgium. Jan Peumans affirms:

I am sure that Flemings have a different mentality. This is the reason why we have a different level of efficiency. We are enterprising people and we put transparency first in our institutions. The same cannot be said for the other side of the country. It is a cultural difference that concerns both the people and the political class.<sup>3</sup>

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3 "Je suis sûr que les flamands ont une mentalité différente. C'est la raison pour laquelle nous avons un différent niveau d'efficacité. Nous sommes des gens entreprenants, et nous mettons d'abord la transparence dans nos institutions. On ne peut pas dire la même chose pour l'autre côté du pays. Il s'agit d'une différence culturelle, qui concerne le peuple et la classe politique."

The hypothesis that deSingel would produce, in a certain sense, the binary cultural opposition between the regions as it is understood by Flemish nationalists is not easy to demonstrate. It is understandably difficult to assess whether the operating institution follows the nationalists' ideas, or if the latter seek to appropriate the former's work and use it as a confirmation of the cultural superiority of Flemings. However, this hypothesis is formally rejected by Aerts only to be reaffirmed shortly after when he describes deSingel as a resource for the whole country:

We operate in a city governed by nationalists; we have nationalists among the members of our board. This does not influence our work. In what we represent, I don't see any instrumentalization from Flemish nationalists. . . . We don't close the door to French-speaking students, musicians, scenographers or technicians. They can come here and take advantage of our structures, program, and policy which are the product of a better organized system. (Aerts)

This quote shows how the position of deSingel as an official community institution is somehow ambivalent. On the one hand, there are not specific obligations or purposes to push forward the Flemish cultural identity, and deSingel represents itself as unconcerned with Flanders. On the other hand, however, its activity and leading position in the cultural sector bring out and reinforce an idea of structural and economic primacy of Flanders in the national context. To summarize, with regard to its functioning as a center for music education and cultural divulgation, the implications of deSingel with political nationalism are likely to be more symbolic than structural.

The symbolic role of deSingel in the Belgian domestic conflict described above is thus enforced as a structural rather than a cultural matter. As such, it can concretely inform policy choices and direct the action of cultural institutions in the national context. In this sense, it is interesting to compare the way deSingel constructs and maintains its international and national inter-community relationships with other partners. Indeed, the art center does not always seem to maintain the same approach. In the international scenario, as explained above, deSingel acts as a support partner when it comes to integrating international projects such as Opera XXI, providing structural and even financial support. The same cannot be said with regard to contacts and exchanges with Belgian French-speaking cultural institutions. As a matter of fact, deSingel is not involved in any inter-regional project with Wallonia.

In general, the reason for the lack of cooperation between deSingel and French-speaking cultural actors can be connected to the differences in the

economic performance between the two regions as well as the imperatives of institutional structural efficiency that dominate the contemporary political debate. According to utilitarian principles, cultural institutions and agencies would not be attractive as potential partners for their Flemish counterparts. When questioned about what French-speaking cultural institutions represent for deSingel, Jerry Aerts replies:

We do not have prejudices against Wallonia; there are very good schools and places for music in the south of Belgium. The point is that it is not convenient for us to make deals with them, or at least it has not been the case so far. . . . For example, some time ago we were in contact with Théâtre de la Place in Liège. This is just to prove that we are not *a priori* opposed to interregional cooperation. I don't know if any form of cooperation will be undertaken in the future, but it is difficult to organize things together in Belgium. There is a difference in the way we work on, organize, and finalize our projects, as well as in the way we use public subsidies. We are just like two separate neighboring countries. (Aerts)

According to Aerts, obstacles to inter-community cooperation seem to be related to Flanders's different and more effective subsidy system, and higher level of organizational efficiency as opposed to the real or presumed lower potential of Wallonia. It is important to remark that, as it has emerged above, differences in economic or structural efficiency are not conceived as an obstacle when deSingel is called to cooperate with economically and structurally weaker international partners, such as in the case of the collaboration on Opera XXI with the theater of Bologna.

This evident contradiction reflects the relationship between the Belgian communities as it is regulated by the country's federal arrangements. One guiding principle to the Belgian system, indeed, is that the governmental institutions that form the federation do not interfere with each other in matters that fall under regional jurisdiction. This is clearly stated by Jan Peumans:

The principle is not to stick your nose in the other's public affairs. If they make what for us is a mistake, we have to respect their choice and not insist on changing or affecting their decisions, their practices. That is how we decided to act as a federal country when we reformed the constitution.<sup>4</sup>

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4 "Le principe est de ne pas mettre ton nez dans les affaires publiques de l'autre. S'ils font ce que pour nous est une erreur, nous devons respecter leur choix et ne pas insister pour changer ou influencer leurs décisions, leurs pratiques. C'est comme ça que

While Flemish cultural institutions can promote themselves as efficient models on the international arena, they cannot play the same role towards their French-speaking counterparts. Not only does this principle frame the concrete action of a cultural actor such as deSingel, but it also informs the mutual understanding between Flemish and French-speaking public actors. The limits of the Belgian institutional setting are, according to Jerry Aerts, regrettably overlooked:

I still believe that we could have a national-Belgian role, especially because we are not perceived as a Flemish institution by the people. In other words, it is a pity. It is a waste of resources the fact that cooperation with Wallonia is so difficult, but it is one of the negative implications of our divided system. So it is difficult to open a productive debate about that in the country.

Although inter-community relationships are certainly affected by dichotomies, economic hierarchies and discourses about productivity and efficiency, these final quotes are key to understanding how the Belgian situation is also strongly conditioned by the limits of its federal system as it has been thought and implemented in the last decades. It is arguable that Belgium's federal arrangement not only can have serious consequences for sector economies—for the national cultural industry in this specific case—but also it undermines the possibility of developing dialogue and cohesion.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown that both Belgium's regional political context and the federal institutional structure have an effect on Flemish cultural diplomacy and, more specifically, on the action of a main actor such as Antwerp's arts and music center deSingel. On a national level, deSingel acts as a Flemish institution since it establishes forms of cooperation in local networks and avoids direct competition with other actors in the region. It furthermore plays a symbolic role in the reproduction and promotion of Flanders's cultural capital and helps to transform the Flemish identity towards a modern and cosmopolitan perspective. This transformation echoes the change in the ideological construction of Flemish nationalism that evolved, in the last decade, from a traditional and conservative approach to cultural identity and ethnicity to a discourse based on efficiency,

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nous avons décidé d'agir en tant que pays fédéral, quand on a réformé la Constitution.”



development, and modernity. In other words, there is a linear correspondence between the values represented by deSingel, the utilitarian perspective on culture dominating the institutional-political environment, and also the principles of contemporary Flemish nationalism. This correlation, indeed, is linked to the discourse on the superiority of Flanders in Belgium and the claims for independence as elaborated by nationalists today. The representation of Flanders's structural efficiency, a topic that nationalist movements themselves have produced and popularized, informs international cultural exchanges between the region and foreign countries. DeSingel positions itself as a model organization to be represented and promoted on the European stage, and maintains international relations with the aim of providing structural guidance and organizational help to its partners. Cultural diplomacy serves to represent and share a specific idea of Flanders as it has emerged from its conflicting and antagonistic relationships with Wallonia.

Inter-community cooperation between Flanders and Wallonia is not institutionally granted. The position of Wallonia is, indeed, an ambiguous one since the principles that inspire Flemish extra-regional cultural policies and those which regulate the political contacts between the Communities are in contradiction. On the one hand, the Flemish Community wants to make its own structural efficiency available to non-Flemish actors characterized by weaker structures or lower financial means. On the other hand, it cannot play this role in Wallonia since the Communities cannot interfere in each other's internal affairs. Networking is a priority for deSingel which puts strong emphasis on the internationalization of the cultural capital produced or supported through its structures. Among the local and international partners with which the institution continuously cooperates, Belgian French-speaking actors are not considered as potential partners.

In spite of its institutional role, deSingel does not want to be perceived as framed within a strong Flemish identity, or at least it does not want to be associated with any of its nationalistic or ethnocentric understandings. The cultural center welcomes students, musicians and other artists from everywhere, including Wallonia, to join the music school as well as to perform and collaborate with local colleagues. They can develop their talent while enriching the local cultural scene; likewise, they can be presented as a product of the Flemish cultural sector. However, the exchange that exists between deSingel and its European and international partners, with thousands of artists and students being both sent to and received from partner institutions in foreign countries, cannot exist with French-speaking institutions in Belgium. While it is clearly affirmed that deSingel identifies cooperation as a main dynamic in its functioning—and non-competition is agreed upon with other Flemish cultural institutions—the ap-

proach to Wallonia seems to be forcibly oriented towards competition or, better, towards a kind of unilateral relationship.

Music is among the most powerful elements through which the good of a nation, its values and achievements, can be showcased. In different contexts, projects of cultural diplomacy concerning music can be articulated within the perspective of a competition for national prestige (see Nathaus in this volume). In the example presented in this chapter, music has been scrutinized in its organizational, structural, and financial rather than strictly musical dimensions, including the allocation of public funding, the coordination of activities such as production, events, and education as well as the implementation of projects. The case of deSingel demonstrates that it is through these constellations that music can function in Flanders as a means to represent the region's prestige in the international arena. Flemish cultural identity, in the case of deSingel, is not conveyed by the music itself, but rather by the different structures and institutional actors through which it is produced, supported, and shared with audiences. Such utilitarian vision of culture is articulated within the dynamics of competition between language communities in Belgium. Although limited to one specific case study, the findings discussed in this chapter can open a specific perspective to observe the social and political role of music and culture in contemporary European societies, particularly in ethnically, culturally, and politically fragmented contexts. This perspective entails that the relationship between culture, language, and identity can go far beyond cultural forms themselves.

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