You are publishing this month a little book about the future of Belgium. Does Belgium have a future?

Definitely. The reason holds in two sentences. Neither Flanders nor Wallonia wants to leave Belgium without Brussels. Neither Flanders nor Wallonia can leave Belgium with Brussels. It follows that Belgium’s three regions are stuck together, doomed to keep forming a single political entity, though one that must keep reforming itself. The first chapter of the book explores without taboos the various separatist scenarios, including the absorption of Wallonia by France or giving Brussels a special status as capital of the European Union. And it explains why they won’t happen.

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The book is being published simultaneously in French and in Dutch. The French version is called Belgium. Une utopie pour le temps présent (Académie royale de Belgique, Brussels), the Dutch version Belgium. Een utopie voor onze tijd (Uitgeverij Polis, Antwerp). In both cases, “Belgium” features in English. Why?

Because English can, must and will play a growing and crucial role in the future of Belgium. In Wallonia and Brussels, English is known by more people than Dutch, and in Flanders by more people than French. For the younger generation, English is on its way to becoming Belgium’s first language, in terms of how many people are able to communicate in it. In the past, Belgians with different mother tongues tended to speak French.
with each other. Among the younger generation, English is used increasingly.

This must not be deplored as a betrayal of the unachievable ideal of a bilingual (FR/NL) Belgium. It must be welcomed and encouraged as an anticipation of Belgium and the Europe of the future. Of course, no one can pretend that mastering a lingua franca will ever provide a perfect substitute for learning the language of the other side. But the proportion of Walloons who know Dutch is still very low, and the proportion of Flemings who know French is decreasing, partly because of competition with English. While the ability to communicate in English will be, in Belgium as elsewhere in Europe, as banal as the ability to use a computer, mastering the other national language, in both Flanders and Wallonia, will be the preserve of an elite.

Does this mean that English should replace Dutch, French and German as Belgium’s official language?

It does not. Tomorrow’s Belgium must be a federation of four regions, each with a specific linguistic regime: Dutch, French and German, respectively, as the sole official languages in Flanders, Wallonia and a newly created region of Ostbelgien; and French, Dutch and English with an official status in Brussels. At the federal level, there is no need to change the official regime. But in all sorts of informal contexts where Belgians with different mother tongues meet, the use of English must be allowed, indeed encouraged. Not only when and because it will provide the least laborious medium of

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According to Philippe Van Parijs, neither Flanders nor Wallonia would want to leave Belgium without Brussels, and as neither region would ever be able to leave without the capital, a separatist scenario is highly unlikely.

Communication. Also because it is a “neutral” language: whether native speakers of French or Dutch, all have to make the effort of using a language that is not their best one.

English can even make a particularly strong claim to neutrality in the Belgian contexts, as it is a wonderful compromise between French and Dutch (or German). Very roughly, half of its lexicon is French and the other half Dutch, while its syntax is French and its morphology Dutch. That this potpourri of Belgian languages should have become Europe’s lingua franca is a miraculous present that Belgium would be very silly to turn down. Instead, Belgians should use to the full the opportunity it offers. In the book I mention various ways in which this is already happening.

Language aside, what else does a better future for Belgium call for?

It is essential to tackle head on the language issue, as it is at the core of Belgium’s specific malaise: the emergence of “two democracies” living side by side, with hardly any contact. But much else needs doing to equip the Belgian “demos” for the 21st century. Just one example. One of the ideas defended in the book is the creation of a country-wide electoral district for part of the seats in the federal Chamber, as elaborated by a group of academics from all Belgian universities called the Pavia Group.

If properly designed, all party leaders will want to be candidates in such a district. They will thereby be induced to articulate programmes that can be presented and defended before the population of the whole country, not just their own linguistic community. One of the pathologies of Belgian politics is that we no longer have national political parties. A country-wide electoral district does not presuppose the existence of such parties. It is made necessary by their absence.

The subtitle of your book says that Belgium is a utopia. Does this mean that you don’t believe yourself in the feasibility of what you propose?

I start the book with a quotation from the Austrian thinker and political leader Karl Renner, the author of the first attempt to work out how democratic institutions should be designed in order to cope with entrenched linguistic diversity. “Without a long-term vision, no immediate success,” he wrote a century ago. “Nothing more actual than those unreal, unactual, remote, utopian objectives.” I could not agree more. A coherent, sustainable and attractive long-term model is not only needed to guide reforms that are feasible in the short term. It also gives the strength to fight for these reforms.

Echoing the Belgian motto “L’union fait la force”, the prologue of the book is entitled “L’utopie fait la force”. The Flemish nationalist party N-VA would not have become Belgium’s first party, had it not been for the long-term utopian vision it offers. My book is an attempt to articulate what I believe to be a far better utopia for our country and indeed, by the same token, for the European Union. The last sentence of the book is a quote from the American historian Tony Judt: “Belgium does matter, and not just to Belgians.”