Federalisation projects in Belgium in the first half of the twentieth century

For more than one hundred and eighty years of its existence, Belgium was a unitary state. It is only over the last two decades that it has been a federation. However, early proposals aimed at changing the administrative arrangement of the country and featuring federative aspects emerged as early as the first half of the previous century. They reflected the dynamics of the intra-Belgian conflict between the country’s two main communities, the Flamands in the North and Walloons in the South, which has existed almost since the establishment of Belgium as a state. It was the linguistic discrimination against the Flemings by the elites of the new state that resulted in the launching of the Flemish movement, which pursued the improvement of the standing of the Flemish-speaking part of the population. The progressive expansion of the movement’s demands, led, in turn, to the emergence of the Walloon movement as a form of defence of the material interest of the French-speaking elite living in the south of the country. It was among the representatives of this movement that the idea of an administrative split of Belgium into Flanders and Wallonia, a postulate identical in terms of its substance to the adoption of a federal structure and establishment of a union-type state, first surfaced. Soon afterwards, the idea was also seized upon by some representatives of the Flemish movement as well. Subsequent proposals were often quite disparate and their details depended not only on the authors belonging to one or other of the linguistic groups, but also on the country’s current domestic and international situation. The most advanced were the projects aimed at changing the constitution to a federalist one and submitted to the parliament in 1931, 1938 and 1947. However, none of them would enter the legislative process. This reflected the attitude of the majority of the then Belgian political class, which was still opposed to any change of the unitary system of the state at that time, no matter what its linguistic affiliation. The content of these proposals is, however, significant as a context facilitating a better understanding of the gradual federalisation of Belgium dating from the nineteen seventies.

Tags: federation, confederation, federalisation, the Flemish movement, the Wallonian movement, a language border.