THE CRISIS OF THE NATION-STATE IN EUROPE: BETWEEN REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND REGIONALISM
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Abstract
This paper compares indicators and interpretations of the “crisis of democracy” theme, between Latin-American countries and West-European countries, basically covering the last two decades. The comparison will be on the one hand based on analysis of elite and mass attitudinal and behavioral data (regarding attachment to democratic values, institutions, key players, processes and policy outputs), and on the other hand on more objective indicators, like electoral participation of various sectors of society, electoral volatility, party competition and fragmentation, political protest and strike activity, quality of policy outputs, budgetary orthodoxy, etc. We will examine whether there is a significant difference between consensus vs. majoritarian democracies (Lijphart, 1999), but also other potential determinants will be taken into account, such as exposure of national to global economy.

Key words: crisis of democracy, democratic values, electoral participation.

Introduction
The theme of my presentation is “The crisis of the Nation-State in Europe: Between regional integration and regionalism”. I have chosen this not only because it is one of the themes I am currently working on (my 2006 edited book Autonomist Parties in Europe: identity politics in the revival of the territorial cleavage, Barcelona: Institut de Ciencias Politiques I Socials), this theme is certainly relevant for many west-european nation-states, but as far as I know, could also be of interest for Latin-America, and Venezuela in particular. It is particularly interesting for my own country, Belgium, whose existence is increasingly challenged by ethnic political actors in the rich Flemish region, who wan to break away from the Belgian state.

I believe that the double movement of regional integration and substate regionalism is more likely to occur in Latin-America than in other regions.
of the world. But this is an hypothesis which I invite you in the discussion, to explore, contradict or complement.

In fact, comparative politics is the branch of political sciences in which mutual learning about each other political systems is the essence of the method, permitting the testing of hypotheses regarding the complex relation between political phenomena.

I. The origins of the European nation-states: recent phenomena

A. Many European nation-states are 19th century

1. Define of Nation-State. Describe formation, success by early 20th

In the 20th century political thinking and popular imagery, see the phenomenon of the nation-state as a particular form of political system has become self-evident, and as something that has existed for centuries, and will continue to remain as the main framework of politics.

2. Nation-states formation and homogenization

However, one often tends to forget that the nation-state is for most west-European countries a relatively new phenomenon. In international relations the national states were only recognized as legitimate players by the treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

The idea of nation-state, as a stable territory with centralized power, population with common cultural traits, a community of individuals with common rights and duties vis-à-vis the state, is much more recent, with the exception of England, Spain, Portugal, and of course France. But even in France, at the moment of the French revolution of 1789, more than half of the people living on the territory of the “hexagon” spoke French, the others spoke Occitan, Provencal, Breton, Basque, Flemish, or German. Yet, less than a century later, due to intents, the state steered programs of homogenization by introducing common legal systems (code napoleon), the exclusive use of French in education, commerce, administration, politics and media. Peasants had become Frenchmen, French citizens. The French nation and nation-state had become a reality. Peasants had become Frenchmen, French citizens.

3. Recent Origins

Examples of Belgium, Ireland, etc.

Most West-European nation-states that currently exist are much younger. Italy, the five Scandinavian countries, Germany, Ireland, Belgium and
Luxembourg, Greece, Austria, were all founded in the 19th century, and often in the second half of it.

The situation in Central and Eastern Europe is even more dramatic due to several factors as the radical regime and border shifts after the fall of the Austria-German Empire, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the redrawing of the map of Europe by the Soviets after World War II (think of Poland), and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

(I was in a village in the north of Hungary in the 20th century, where the inhabitants changed six times from nationality without having moved from their houses).

If fixing stable state borders was for most European states a relevantly recent and bloody and traumatic experience, one can image that the creation of a national community within these shifting borders was even more difficult. When the Italian unifiers finally established the Italian state in 1860, they said that the easy part - the creation of the Italian state — was completed; now came the difficult tasks to create “Italians”.

So the grand old cases of Spain, England and France as successful attempts of creating the nation-states are exceptions rather than rule, and even those old cases of nation-states are under serious pressure, from below and above, as we will see.

4. Center-periphery and incomplete homogenization

The opposition among the homogenization led by the centre of the new states (usually the capital area: Paris, London, Madrid) and some strong peripheries is, if we follow the approach of Lipset and Rokkan, at the basis of one of the four founding cleavages of west-European parties system, the so-called Centre-periphery cleavage (next to the church-state cleavage, the urban-rural cleavage, and last but not least the class cleavage), that have shaped west-European party systems in a stable, even “frozen” way until the 1960s, and still continue to be the main dimensions of political divisions n current west-European party system.

Some authors perceive three waves of centre-periphery cleavage activation. First, there is the sub-state nationalist mobilization that developed at the same time the states launched their nation-creating program, most of them starting in the romanticist nineteenth century; we find the first expression of sub–state in nationalist awareness and mobilization. In fact, in most countries or regions in which we have
currently strong autonomist parties, we find founding organizations, social movements and cultural and intellectual expressions of the region’s specific identity, that go back to the 19th century (Scotland and Wales, Catalonia, the Basque country, Corsica, Flanders, etc.). Sometimes this was developed as a complement to the state-wide nation building process; in other cases, in opposition to this process, like in the Basque country, were basque nationalism was openly anti-spanish and even racist.

The conflicts in the interbellum, World War II and the first years after World War II, set an artificial stop to the “natural” development of these sub-state nationalist movements. The Franco dictatorship repressed all expressions of sub-state identities in favor of the Spanish unit. Some sub-state nationalist movements collaborated with the German or Italian occupying forces (like the Flemish nationalists), and therefore were repressed in the post-war period, and became marginal in the first post-war decades.

Only by the end of the 60s and early 70s we see a first revival of sub-state nationalism, especially in Scotland and Wales, Belgium, some French regions, and at the end of the 1970s also in the post-Franco Spain. This more or less synchronic success of NSWP has often been labeled the second wave of regionalist mobilization.

Finally, some authors perceive the emergence of a third wave in the 1990s, with the expansion of regionalism in all Spanish regions, the effects of regionalization on French regions, the emergence of the Leghe in Italy, and the growth of the Flemish independentist party Vlaams Blok, the emancipation of the regional level in the European Union, institutional and policy framework (structural funds and cohesion policy, Europe of the Regions, Committee of the Regions, etc) also contributed to the perception of a new wave in regionalist mobilization.

**B. Predominance In The 20th Century**

The summon of success of state-wide nation-building and nationalism were World War I and World War II, when millions of workers, whose leader in the socialist international had sworn would never take up arms against each other in order to fight an imperialist war over territory, resources and markets, between their national bourgeoisies, happily marched to the war front to teach a lesson to those evil and arrogant “tummies”, “frogs”, “boches”, or whatever national stereotype.
The excesses in human deaths and wounded, in material destruction, in genocide and deportation of entire peoples, will be the main trigger of the founding fathers of the European Union.

Still, the nation-state had also displayed more positive issues. It became the framework for the integration of the masses of workers, small farmers, etc. that was never empowered in the ancient regimes, into the new national political system, the nation-state, by granting them all citizens’ rights including suffrage.

The national state also became the framework for the development of political parties, which will rapidly become the instruments of the articulation and aggregation of citizen’s demands. The international or sub-state level of political mobilization and representation will become marginal. Politics are played and decided at the state level, mostly in the capitals (Diamani’s thesis of the “nationalization of electoral politics”), through the electoral competition between state-wide parties for winning power in the central state institutions (parliament, government, administration, and even judiciary).

In addition, the nation-state will after World War II become the framework for social-security systems, that will grant citizens not only political rights, but, and probably for them more important, social rights, e.g. unemployment benefits, social housing, public health care, public transport, old age pensions, free education (and thus the key to social mobility between classes), and even popular culture through TV and subsidies for forms of High Culture.

Thus the Nation-State became in the second half of the 20th century, the framework for modern mass democracy and political as well as social and cultural citizenship. In other words, as excesses of war between European states have been avoided since 1945, the European Nation-State seems to be a success story in terms of political system.

II. The emergence of a European supra-national state

A. European Integration

B. What kind of political system is the European Union?

There is no consensus on Europeanists on the question of “What kind of political system the European Union is”. There is a consensus that it is not a nation-state or even state in the way of states as we have known
them until now. Still, the European Union displays many features of a traditional state:

- Institutionally, it has a directly elected parliament, a two-faced government administration (European Council and European Commission) and a Judiciary (the European Court of Justice).

- It has a body of basic laws (and a constitution that is currently in a difficult process of ratification) and masses of secondary legislation that affect all sectors of society in all member states. Delors, the former president of the Commission, predicted once that with the establishment of the European Union, 80% of the laws passed by national parliament would be transpositions of directives of the European Commission.

- It has intermediary actors (parties, lobbies and social movements organized at the European level and based in Brussels)

- An impressive set of public policies (outputs) implemented basically by the national administrations of the member states,

- A well defined territory in which it’s laws are binding,

- A certain degree of sovereignty, often in a “pooled” form, that make European Union law the supreme law on European territory.

So we can argue that the European Union is not a state, not even a federal state, but still more than a confederation.

It is a “federal state in the making”, that has taken over making traditional core functions of the old-nations states, or co-decides in those functions.

It is clear that the old nation-state in Europe were too small to solve big problems of the postwar period: security and defense, monetary stability, the development of a market sufficiently large for new industries to flourish (cars, planes,) and reap economies of scale.

Even large states like France and Germany could not achieve these basic aims without international cooperation. Therefore, some authors, like Alan Milward, state that European integration has “rescued the nation-state” by absorbing functions that these nation-states could not perform anymore adequately in the postwar period. In addition, the traditional functions of the nation-states are also transferred to other international entities: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), United Nations (UN), the World Bank
and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the global markets and multinationals... and also private or private-public partnerships (cfr. privatization of public transport, energy and water supply, prisons, etc....)

Not a federal state (yet), but more than a confederation that erodes the core functions of the traditional nation-state.

C. What is lacking for the European Union to become a Europe-wide nation-state capable of challenging the state-wide nation-states?

1. The problem of the European Demos

Still, several elements to become a genuine federal European “nation-state” are lacking, such as:

a) European demos

Different brands of comparative longitudinal political culture research, like Eurobarometer (EB), European Value Studies and European Social Survey, indicate that the identification of European citizens with the European Union or Europe remains extremely weak. Apparently there is only a weak feeling of being European, much weaker than indicators of national belonging, and if it exists, it does so most often as a complement to national identity, not as an alternative. People still feel much more attached to their nation, region and village (91-87%) than to Europe (66%, EB63, sep 2005). So the horizontal dimension of demos (the attitudes of European citizens to their fellow citizens, the “we” feeling) seems to be quite weak.

b) Support for European Union institutions and basic values

Regarding the vertical dimension, the attitudes of citizens vis-à-vis their political regime, institutions, basic values, etc, generally a (sometimes small) majority of European Union citizens support the process of European Union integration, believe that their country has profited from this process, believe that democracy works adequately at the European Union level, tend to trust the European Union entirely, are proud to be European (but clearly less than to be a national...). A relative majority may seem a little thing, but it must be considered that since the 1990s, trust in institutions and key players in western democratic regimes has decline seriously. If we compare trust in similar institutions (European vs national parliaments, national government vs. EU council, national
administration vs European (Commission) national courts vs European court of Justice), we find that a growing and larger trust in the EU institutions than in the national ones, basically, due to the decline in trust in national institutions and key players.

c) Lack of European public space (Habermas)

Public space is still strongly departmentalized per country. National public opinions do not interactuate directly, debate or clash. French media will have strong discussions about national and European politics, but will talk only to French publics, not to German, Spanish, or any other. There is no European arena for public debate about major basic choices European people are confronted with.

d) Europarties and European elections are in second order

European elections are generally second order elections, fought by national parties on national issues. In comparison with their member parties at the national level, the main Europarties (Party of the European Socialists, the European Peoples Party, the European Liberal and Reform party, and the Greens/European Free Alliance are organizationally very weak, they do not manage to create ideological cohesion, have no leadership that is Europe-wide attractive, are not involved in the selection of candidates for the EU elections, have no direct membership, and exercise hardly any influence on their representatives in the European Commission and European Council. Basically, they only seem to exist in the European Parliament, where the members of the European Parliament of the confederations of political parties sit and most often vote by ideological group, not by nationality.

Hix and Lord (1997) have convincingly argued and illustrated that EU-politics is party politics. The political personnel of Commission, Council of Ministers and European Parliament are almost exclusively recruited from political parties. Hix and Lord (and others) even see the development of a truly European party system.

III. The erosion from the bottom

Together with the awareness that the old nation-state was too small to tackle big problems, there was a growing feeling that the nation-state was also too big to tackle small problems. “Decentralization” (and
“planning”) became the buzz-word in the vocabulary of “good governance” in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe.

A. Regionalization since 1970’s

1. Planning decentralization and welfare state and mixed economies

When most European states started to develop the welfare state that aims at bringing its benefits to all beneficiaries wherever they live they started to notice by the end of the 1950s, that there were still geographically located pockets of poverty and socio-economic underdevelopment. Hence, many states decided to develop specific programs for developing the laggard regions, often through central economic planning (regional development programs). Also, in several countries, the unitary state was weakened ‘from below’ through the process of politically inspired federalization (Belgium, Italy, Spain, UK), granting of autonomy to specific communities (Spain and the UK), federalism to all regions (Belgium) and regionalism (France, Italy). In relative terms, the regional level gained importance as policy level vis-à-vis the unitary state.

B. Regional Political Mobilization. Ethno Regional Parties (ERPs)

These different forms of empowerment of the regional level were accompanied by the second wave of regionalist political mobilization. For some observers, this second wave triggered these new reforms towards decentralization, while Newman argues the opposite. He (1994: 41) argues that the creation of regional policies (by the national states), rather than the centralization of policy-making sparked the surge of ethno regional parties in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time there was a cultural revival of minority languages, literature, music, and other expressions of regional identity.

1. Data Tronconi.

a. General trends

Comparative analysis of European Regional Parties (ERP) in Western Europe does indicate a surge of regionalist political success in the 1960s and 1970s in some countries (UK, Belgium, France, and Spain in the late 1970s after democratization), while in several regions with traditionally hegemonic regionalist parties, their score remained relatively stable.
(SVP, StVP, UV, N-IRL). In Catalonia, Basque country, Flanders, the Brussels’ region, South-Tyrol and Val d’Aosto and Northern Italy, Southern (Swedish speaking) Finland, etc. the ERP had become the first party within their region.

Electoral evolution of ethno-regional parties: a decade

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These parties have not only been successful in terms of vote seeking, also in terms of office seeking they performed remarkably well, either/
or at the level of the regional or national government, especially considering that their number of seats in the national parliament is often very weak, due to the small number of seats allotted to their region in function of its size.

Ethno-regional parties in government: first year of participation

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<tr>
<th>Participación en el gobierno nacional</th>
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In some countries, ethno regionalist party mobilization led to different forms of decentralization (protection of minority cultures, regionalization,
autonomy, federalism) and, rarely, peaceful separatism, cfr the “velvet” separation of Checko-Slovakia, but also violent cases, like the former Yugoslavia.

IV. The interplay between erosion from the top and the bottom: Ethnoregional Parties (ERPs), regionalization and European Union regional policies

The process of Europeanization is particularly relevant to ethno-regionalist parties, to speak about ‘own’ problems related to centre-periphery cleavages and the division of policy competences between territorial decision-making levels.

European integration represents a process of centralization of the decision-making process, spreading from economic activities linked to re-armament, then into other sectors of economic and monetary policy making, and recently starting to include aspects of foreign policy, defense and internal security.

Viewed from the perspective of a process of transfers of competencies from the national level to a higher level, European integration constitutes an amplification of the ‘democratic deficit’ defined in terms of distance between decision-makers and the beneficiaries of public policies. This also holds true for the regional level of decision-making. This process should logically widen the gap between regional populations and beneficiaries of public policies, and the new decision-making centers regarding policies relevant to the populations. (‘Brussels’),

a) EU constraints on ERP mobilization

The very notion of political sovereignty in Europe is being redefined considering current political and institutional developments. Historically, the founding fathers of European integration were strongly anti-nationalist, as nationalism was considered as the main cause to the European civil war that ran from 1933 to 1945. Hobsbawm (1992). The European Coal and Steel Community intended to put the basic industry necessary for (French and German) re-armament under supranational control, while the nuclear resources were pooled in the European Atomic Energy Community,(Euratom). European integration essentially aimed at diminishing the sovereignty of the national state in vital sectors. Thus, the traditional enemy of peripheral nationalist, the nation-state, changed
its nature in the process of Europeanization. In this particular sense, the ambition of some historic regions to become new nation-states in the classical 19th century sense may appear anachronistic. Yet one has to consider that the process of European integration and its enlargement of competencies taking traditional state functions can at the same time awaken classical arguments against Kleinstaaterei Hobsbawm (1992: 31), and make the quest for statehood more feasible and attractive. In some views, the new international institutional context has been on the one hand a successful answer to the incapacity of West-European nation-states to guarantee their physical and economic security permitting old nation-states to survive and prosper Milward (1992), while on the other hand, it has reduced the economic and military costs of the option of ‘independence within Europe’.

European integration and economic globalization changes the nature of the relationship between centers and peripheries. First, the widening of these regional disparities and the occurrence of asymmetrical shocks can not anymore be countered by public intervention: EU competition policy prohibits state subsides to ailing industrial sectors concentrated in certain regions. Also, the use of deficit spending and the manipulation of interest rates have severely been restricted by the European Monetary Union convergence criteria. De Grauwe (2000).

In spite of the efforts for EU structural funds policy, the budget for reducing regional disparities they remain on the average below 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) of European Union member states. Besides, they might also exacerbate territorial disparities and further peripherals marginal regions. Thus, not only regional winners and losers can become more easily identified as the process widens the gap, but also the emergence of new winners and new losers can alter the relationship between centers and peripheries.

b) Opportunities for regionalist mobilization created by the EU

Yet, emphasis is usually placed on the positive effects of an emerging regional polity at the European level. Europe has invested in regional policies according to the poorest regions substantial economic support. These programs have reinforced the regions as a relevant decision-making level, even in states where regions lacked significant competencies. Keating (1998:176).
The European Commission’s regional policies require the involvement of not only political partners (like regional and local executives), but also interest groups to participate in the policy preparation and implementation. The regions are thus forced to constitute themselves as competent actors to represent their regional interests in Brussels, and this through a multitude of channels of access to European Union decision-making (Commission, Council, Parliament, Committee of the Regions and other forms of cooperation between regions and cities, lobbies, etc.). This decision making model facilitates or reinforces policy networks between political, socio-economic, administrative actors, at the regional level as well as at the (inter-) communal, transregional and transborder level. The launching of the principia of subsidiarity, which was originally intended only to regulate the division of competencies between the European Union and the member states, has been seized by the Committee of the Regions and other regional platforms, as to be applicable also to the division of competencies between regions and the European Union as well as the national states. Finally, at the symbolic level, this decision-making process has projected regions and regional politicians into the European arena, presenting them as important participants in the European Union policy process. They allow regional politicians to take credit for attracting European Union subsidies, even those that would have come in any case simply by the working of the relevant eligibility rules Keating (1998:170).

Yet, European integration faces a series of political and constitutional challenges to regions with wide-ranging legislative powers for two reasons: First, the EU also erodes competencies in policy domains in the hands of the regions in federal states. Second, a new effect is emerging, where some member-states are gate-keepers of European policies, providing new grievances at the domestic level between centers and peripheries.

European political integration has provided the space to overcome the wide disparities in political projects about autonomy, sovereignty and devolution. The European elections (in which ERP generally perform better than at national elections) allowed the establishment of a European family of ethno regionalist parties around the group of mid-level politicians that some of those parties were capable of sending to the European Parliament. It leads to the establishment of a relatively coherent
ideological doctrine and electoral programs by the European Free Alliance that allowed them to overcome the wide disparities in political projects about devolution, autonomy, sovereignty and independence.

V. New Developments

A. Enlargement to non-Rokkanite countries

In ten new member states regionalist parties did nor fare well, and often did not even compete (as a single party) in the European elections. In Slovakia the Hungarian Federalist Party ran as a part of the Party of Hungarian Coalition, Magyar Koalició Pártja (MKP) that is basically a Christian conservative party focusing on the Hungarians. The MKP obtained two members of the European Parliament that joined the EPP. In Latvia, the Ethnic Russian party for Human Rights in a Unified Latvia (FHRUL) obtained one Member of the European Parliament, and it is associated to the European Free Alliance (EFA) by individual membership of its MEP. Hence, the new member states do not fit well the rokkanite center-periphery cleavage world (Rokkan & Urwin, 1982). Apart from some problems of protection of cross border minorities (Hungarians in former territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian minorities in the Baltic States, and the territorial dispersed Roma) all current East and Central European countries are “nations with a state”. Hence, only three of the 112 European Parliament seats allotted to enlargement countries, can be considered of having been won by an autonomist party, and only one of these have joined the EFA. Thus also enlargement seriously weakens the relative strength of the EFA, vis-à-vis the other europarties.

B. Contradictions of enlargement

On the positive side, there is a growing contradiction between the lack of institutional recognition of large regions, such as Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders, etc and the full recognition of small nation states, like the Baltic countries, Malta and Cyprus. The EFA argues that “if the only guarantee for political existence at the European level is “statality”, the only possibility given to stateless nations to be recognized at the European level will become an independent state in the framework of the European Union”. Hence, in order to avoid such independist strategies, the EU and its member states will have to institutionally incorporate the regions in the EU constitutional framework.
The same contradiction exists regarding the full recognition of the languages small new member states, and the refusal to recognize the official language of large r spoken by millions of EU-citizens (cf. Catalan). The new small nations with state are expected to be more sensitive to questions of the survival of cultural small communities, for instance regarding the use of minority languages as official EU-language and EU-policies regarding liberalizing the cultural communication markets. Also here the EU is expected to towards recognition, which also may enhance the status of these minority languages their own state.

C. Phasing out regional policies old Europe

The gradual phasing out of the structural aid to most of regions in Western Europe certainly undermines this emancipation of regional actors in the EU decision making.

D. Globalization and erosion national welfare state before EU welfare estate

E. Multiculturalism and immigration

VI. Comparisons with Latin America and Venezuela

A. Reactions against homogenization

1. Rights of indigenous people

Amazonian, Andean, Afro

Autonomy demands are combination of cultural, social and economic development of certain agglomerations/regions with high concentration of indigenous people.

2. Latin America Federalism

Zulia: Regional identity in rich oil province

Bolivia: Rich region Cochabamba (Capital Santa Cruz) asks for more autonomy

Mexico: Chiappas (poor region).

B. Attempts to regional integration

1. Economic: Mercosur

Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela. Associated (Chili) and candidates (Bolivia, Peru)
2. Latin America-demos: potentially more pronounced than EU demos? Common identity of being LATIN Americans which is stronger than centuries old opposition Gemanic/latin/anglo-saxon Europe?

3. Media
Telesur

4. Foreign policy: distancement vs US and globalization

Election of left and centre left presidents rejecting the neo-liberal Washington consensus.

For the governing Left in Europe (i.e. basically social-democrats most often in coalition with centrist or centre-right parties), globalization is accepted fatalistically, disenchanting important segments of their traditional electorate, that emigrate to the extreme left, or, more often, to the extreme right (cfr xenophobe “welfare chauvinism” present in the discourse most new extreme right wing parties.

5. Concluding remarks and points of discussion, comparison

The European nation-states, even those of long historical background, are under pressure of the EU integration that produced large amounts of transposition of these directives into the regional legal orders. It varies considerable between countries and it never arrived at Delors prediction of 80%. Most countries, including Eastern and Central European as well are older member will not reach that level.

Apart from these high politics “regime” questions, there are quite interesting points or comparison and scientific crossfertilisation between the Venezuelan and Begian case:

- The impact of corruption resources on the office and policy seeking behavior of parties, individual politicians, on the politicized operation of public service, on electoral incentive for citizens (clientelism), etc.

- The way government copes with the gigantic budget deficit, and how this affects the rapports between politics and civil society. How to govern with a bankrupt state? Belgium had the highest public debt of the EU (140% of the Gross National Product -GNP- in 1993) and in those years 40% of the public revenue was used for paying the interest on this debt. The Maastricht conversion criteria launched
to bring Europeans economies close enough in order to launch a common currency, the euro, required that public debt be brought back to 60% of the GNP. This budgetary constraint evidently reduces the output legitimacy of the political system.

- Inclusion and empowerment of the poorer strata of society: migrants in Belgium, masses of poor in Venezuela
- The virtues and costs of consensual (Belgian) vs adversarial / majoritarian style (Chavez) of politics.
- Model of cohabitation/ between diverse ethnic groups: racial melting pot, multiculturalism, segregated community development, assimilation into the dominant culture, ethnic discrimination.
- Maintaining the welfare state vis-à-vis tendencies of race to the bottom inspired by European competitive market ideology (rather than concerns of finally building a social Europe, amongst which a large (identity) consensus exists)
- Empowerment of women in society and economy, as well as in elected offices (in Belgium, since the 2003 general elections, about 35 % of parliament members are women, while 1995 this was only 10%).
- The capacities of electoral reform to trigger wider institutional change. Lijphart’s Patterns of Democracy (1999, including Venezuela) suggests that electoral systems are the main source of democracy belonging to the consensus type of the majoritarian Westminster type. What are the practical lessons, in terms of causal link between institutional reform and electoral and party system outcome (cfr Belgium: 5% threshold led to cartelization of smaller parties with traditional parties, facilitating some part claim to governmental leadership
- The role of political culture as additional/main source of differentiation between our two countries.
- Risk and opportunities in playing a leading role in regional integration (Belgium’s r has been pro-active and positive from the start, and this has probably produced positive outcome like the installation of the European Commission, the European Parliament,
the European Council, the Committee of the Regions, etc. in Brussels (providing considerable income to the Brussels Regional Economic Product). Any step towards Bolivarian unity will certainly put Caracas in the picture of hosting these new trans-national bodies.

- Investment of the countries resources into programs to reduce pronounced inequalities between different income and social categories.

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