

Sports federations in Flanders and their “Belgian” situation

Mr President,

Dear colleagues

Ladies and gentlemen,

Belgium is a complex country. Despite its small geographical size, the kingdom by the North Sea is divided into a Flemish (Dutch-language) region and a Walloon (French and German-language) region. This division has consequences for a number of ‘political’ themes. One of these is sport.

A minor state reform in 1969 divided the governmental structure of sport in Belgium into a Dutch-language structure and a French-language structure. This formed the basis for an autonomous Flemish sports policy.

Indeed, for more than 20 years now there have been Flemish decrees on sporting affairs which clearly differ from those in the Walloon community. The 1977 decree on the recognition and subsidising of nationally organised sports federations, has given rise to 2 types of sports federations in our country: split and unitary sports federations. One of the last examples of a unitary Belgian sports federation is the Royal Belgian Football Association (KBVB). Amongst other things, the unitary structure of this association implies that it cannot have decretal support, at its disposal.

However, most sports federations have adapted to the situation, and are split up into a Flemish and a Walloon section, with an umbrella organization to support national interests at an international level. Moreover, it is also responsible for organizing a Belgian competition.

Our contribution towards this congress therefore, is to briefly outline how the sports federations in Flanders deal with this fairly complex structure, and how it influences the way in which they operate.

As has already been mentioned, our top-class sports federations have adapted to the new structure of the state. However, if they wish to operate internationally, they have to belong to the umbrella organization at the Belgian level. The structure of these umbrella organizations has acquired different forms however, varying from a structure which operates largely on its own, with its own administration, to one with a relatively weak umbrella effect and a role which is more symbolical and formal. Here the Belgian umbrella organization functions as a post-box as it were, from which all information and tasks are distributed to the regional branches, so the Flemish and French-language sports federation. Moreover, nestling between these two extremes, are numerous other intermediate forms, where power and authority often directly subordinate to the strength of the regional functioning.

As far as the structure and operation of the Belgian umbrella organization are concerned, the general aim is for a far-reaching parity, regardless of the membership figures of the regional sports federations. And this is the main problem.

A possible explanation for this, lies in the fact that this parity is required by the French-language decree on the recognition and subsidising of sports federations. The principles of communal balance and language parity play an important role in the way it operates with regard to both sports and management. This is expressed first of all in the structure of the Board of Direction, and is confirmed in the constitution of all sorts of commissions and committees.

Finally, top-sports federations see the Belgian umbrella organization as having two main tasks:

1. the (intensive or not) coordination of events with a Belgian or international character (such as organizing international competitions)
2. ensuring that the federal sports federation and its regional branches operate internationally (by way of selections, sending out teams, for example).

If asked about their relationship with their French-language sister federation, more than half of the Flemish sports federations will state that there is a fair measure of cooperation between the two. The greatest problems however, occur on the level of the selections. This means that the regional branches find it difficult to reach agreement on the constitution of delegations at international competitions and tournaments. It is emphasized however, that community compromises are avoided as much as possible in this area; however we must not generalize too much here.

A number of federations still follow certain procedures guaranteeing the regional branches an equal, or minimum, number of delegates. Other minor bottlenecks which obstruct optimal cooperation are listed as being: general differences in attitude, the complexity of financial structures, and differences in aims with regard to policy and priorities. However, it must be said that the majority of the sports federations claiming to have smooth cooperation, in fact have very little to do with one another, so that the concept of 'smooth' is a very relative one.

A remarkable fact however, is that most of the split Flemish sports federations now have the opportunity to send their own sports delegation to international competitions and tournaments. Obviously, these are not official European Cup or World Cup matches or competitions which form part of the Olympic Games. They are usually so-called meetings or open competitions, in which teams or all sorts of different delegations, including clubs and regional and national teams, participate. Occasionally Flemish teams even participate in competitions in which only one team per country is officially allowed to participate. These too are initially open competitions or meetings, for which there is only a minimal amount of interest on a federal level and within the French-language federation. This provides the Flemish federation with an opportunity to appoint a delegation of its own. Obviously, compared to competitions which form part of the official European or World Championships, not to mention the Olympic Games, the international character of these events is not only limited, but often non-existent. Remarkably, most of these sports federations usually participate as a 'Belgian' team.

If asked about their actual experience of the current structural approach – the existence of both Belgian and Flemish structures – most sports federations indicate that they are not really happy with the situation, to the extent that they would in fact prefer a complete split and recognition on the international level to be enforced. Indeed, for them the greatest drawback in the present system is the possible obstruction caused by the parity in the Belgian umbrella, but also an excessive and unnecessary amount of administration. In addition to this, information, sometimes of a crucial nature, about international events, and sports operations in an international context, are delayed before reaching the Flemish and French-language sports federations. This often is disturbing the

Despite their dissatisfaction with the present situation, so far only two Flemish sports federations have made any real attempt to independently join their international sports federation. Without success, however. Indeed, the chances of immediate acceptance are thought to be very slim, particularly as it is assumed that the international federations concerned do not wish to create a precedent by accepting regional sports federations as fully fledged members. Indeed, it is often stated that full recognition of all these structures and organisms would result in a far-reaching fragmentation, and thus render a structured international functioning, impossible. Moreover, the Flemish federations should first take international statutes into consideration. Almost all international federations impose a limitation of only one member per 'country'.

Moreover, a few federations make the explicit condition that any member wishing to join must be recognized as a representative federation of the country, by the National Olympic Committee (NOC). This recognition by the NOC however, implies the limitation – as prescribed by the IOC statutes – that only independent states recognized as such by the international community, may become members.

We could say that sports federations not presenting a Flemish profile in the field of top sports could partly be explained by the fact that the most important body in the field of top sports, the Belgian Olympic Committee (BOIC), also has a unitary structure, and therefore does not wish to formally recognize the regional branches. In its operations, the BOIC is therefore mainly focused on the Belgian umbrellas, although at present a new trend is gradually emerging.

A possible splitting of the BOIC, into a Flemish and French-language Olympic committee will not change anything. Indeed, the statutes of IOC do not allow for a division of this nature. Flanders as an area of application with regard to a Flemish Olympic committee does not tally with the concept of 'country' as advocated by the IOC. Therefore, until Flanders is recognized by the IOC, any participation of an autonomous Flemish team in the Olympic Games is out of the question.

Finally, there are of course doubts with regard to an imposed regionalizing, and the feasibility of a Flemish top-class sport policy. For example, there are doubts regarding the appeal of the sport abroad should a full Flemish delegation participate at an international level. Sporting achievements on the international level partly depend on the number of top sportsmen from which a selection can be made. If this area of recruitment is reduced, and recruitment can only be done in Flanders and not in Belgium, these achievements will certainly decline. In other words, the appeal Flanders could acquire by way of its top-class sport, could never equal that of 'Belgian' sport. In connection with this we could say here that in the field of sport, Belgium has acquired a certain international name and reputation for itself, and that not all sports federations are convinced of a similar form of recognition coming to Flanders.

With regard to sponsoring, an imposed regionalization is completely opposed to the current trend towards globalization. Important sponsors demand more visibility and are simply no longer interested in smaller regions.

So to conclude, is the recognition of sports countries important for the Flemish Sports federations? The answer is yes. To give maximum chances to young athletes to develop their skills, and to participate in smaller competitions at the international level, we need international access for them without any obstruction.

On the highest competition level however, this question will stay unanswered for the moment.

Thank you for your attention.

Dirk Van Esser

President of the Flemish Sports Federations