

A draw for Flemish nationalism: Institutional change and stability in the Belgian sport system

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Abstract

This article combines insights from historical institutionalism with the literature on ideational policy change to explain why Belgian sport institutions like the national football team appear as outliers in the story of the country's unidirectional move towards a decentralised federal state. It shows how Flemish nationalist ideas drove the asymmetrical decentralisation of the originally unitary Belgian sport system. On one hand, mechanisms of gradual institutional change led to the complete decentralisation of public sport policy. The Flemish government consequently has the authority and means to generate symbols and policies that boost Flemish identity through sport, while no comprehensive policies can be developed at the federal level for instrumentalising sport to build Belgian identity. On the other hand, mechanisms of institutional stability including vested interests, strong veto players and Flemings' dislike of secessionism prevent the full decentralisation of the Belgian non-governmental sport governing bodies. This implies that Belgium continues to be represented in international sport competitions as a nation and that sport can thus also be employed to create and sustain Belgian alongside Flemish identity. Sport therefore contributes to sustaining the Flemings' dual Flemish-Belgian identity, which ultimately stands in the way of a fully autonomous Flemish state.

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Flemish nationalism, gradual change, historical institutionalism, sport, substate nationalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Belgian national football team placed third at the 2018 World Cup. For their homecoming, an estimated 40,000 fans lined the streets of Brussels and filled the Grand-Place. This celebration of the 'Red Devils' provided a rare occasion for Belgians to experience and express their Belgian identity. National sport teams, and particularly the national football team, are consistently cited as one of the very few institutions left along which a Belgian identity can be created and sustained (Kuper, 2018; Mudde, 2014). These institutions do not appear to have been subject to the unidirectional decentralising evolution that gradually broke down the unitarian Belgian state. Since the 1960s, governmental institutions have moved towards an ever-closer congruence with the two underlying ethno-linguistic groups in Belgium: the Dutch-speaking 'Flemings', who live in the northern part of the country, and the French-speaking 'Walloons', whose formal territories lie in the southern part.

Belgian sport institutions appear to be outliers in the story of the country's gradual move towards a decentralised federal state.¹ Indeed, there are no Flemish or Walloon national sport teams. Because Belgian sport governing bodies like the Belgian football federation and the Olympic Committee are still at the apex of the country's non-governmental sport system, individual athletes and teams compete under the Belgian flag in international tournaments. This is surprising for two reasons. First, it is well-known that Flemish nationalist forces have been the main driver behind the incremental transformation of Belgium from a unitary into a federal state. Second, sport clearly shares the characteristics of a policy area that is a 'prime candidate' to be targeted for decentralisation by such forces: It has 'identity-generating and mobilizing potential' (Béland & Lecours, 2005, p. 265). Watson (2017, p. 292) even argues that 'of the various cultural artefacts available for the production of national identity, sport has emerged as preeminent'. Sport therefore features prominently in the self-determination strategies of different ethno-cultural communities, including the Flemings (Vaczi & Bairner, 2021). Yet if Belgian sport institutions exist, sport can apparently also function as an important and even rare vehicle for the promotion of Belgian identity. These institutions would therefore appear to be preeminent targets for decentralisation by Flemish nationalists.

A closer look reveals that the institutions that make up the Belgian sport system do show traces of decentralisation, but this process appears to have been highly asymmetrical in nature. On one hand, the Belgian sport governing bodies have not been fully decentralised. These non-governmental organisations comprise the national Olympic committee, which organises Belgian athletes' participation in the Olympic Games, and the national sport federations, which represent Belgium in international sport federations. While the national Olympic committee remains fully unitary, Flemish and Walloon sport federations are housed under the umbrella of the Belgian sport federations. Because they have otherwise not split along linguistic lines, authority in these organisations is shared between the central or 'federal' level and the regional levels. At the governmental level, on the other hand, sport policy competences have been fully transferred to the Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities, respectively. They each have a minister, a budget and a regulatory framework for sport. Contrary to other federal states, the Belgian federal government thus does not have the formal competence to conduct sport policy. This naturally complicates the efficient implementation of public policies aimed at achieving international sporting success for Belgian elite athletes and national teams.

What explains this complex and unique sport system? And what role, if any, did Flemish nationalism play in its development? The literature provides few clues on these questions. Scholars of sport and nationalism tend to focus exclusively on the identity-generating potential of sport. Participation in international sport competitions (e.g., Philips, 2012; Watson, 2017), hosting major sport events (e.g., Harris, 2015), celebration of national sport stars (e.g., Tranter & Donoghue, 2021) and practice or consumption of 'traditional' national sport (e.g., Watson, 2017) are all regarded as activities that are conducive to the creation of shared myths, memories, symbols and/or traditions. These

are, in turn, crucial elements for building a national identity (Smith, 2002). Recent works explore how sport has thus played a role in the quest for political autonomy in different ethno-cultural communities (see Vaczi & Bairner, 2021). While the institutional context is acknowledged to play an influential role in the nature and salience of sport-related nationalism, the mentioned works treat it as a given rather than something that needs to be explained. The same is true for accounts of sport and Flemish nationalism, which do not theorise about the institutional development of the Belgian sport system (see Geeraert et al., 2021).

To find answers that are informed by theory, this article combines insights from historical institutionalism with the literature on ideational policy change. Historical institutionalism treats institutional settings as the outcome of a dynamic process of institutional development. It provides the theoretical language we need to understand and analyse the historical legacies of establishing moments. It further sheds light on the nature of and the conditions for institutional change (e.g., Benz & Broschek, 2013; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Recent work in this field incorporates ideas as variables to better explain the likelihood and direction of institutional change (Blyth et al., 2016). Scholars have employed different elements from this literature to explain nationalist-driven decentralising change and stability in the wider Belgian political system (e.g., Béland & Lecours, 2013; Farhat et al., 2021). Consequently, and because sport is likely to be targeted by decentralising nationalist forces, the institutional development of the Belgian sport system makes a likely case for the observation of related dynamics.

The next section develops a framework based on recent historical institutionalist and ideational scholarship. The subsequent analysis shows how Flemish nationalist ideas drove the decentralisation of the originally unitary Belgian sport system via mechanisms of gradual institutional change. It also demonstrates how mechanisms of institutional stability and societal ideas limit the decentralisation of the Belgian non-governmental sport governing bodies. Finally, it discusses how the stable institutional status quo provides opportunity for promoting Belgian identity instead. The final section summarises the findings and discusses how the asymmetrical decentralisation of the Belgian sport system limits the potential sport holds for Flemish nationalist purposes.

Methodologically, the article uses a qualitative, process-tracing approach (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). It builds upon data collected from historical scholarship, biographical works, press reports and governmental publications to trace the development of the institutional context of sport in Belgium.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Historical institutionalism and substate nationalism

Historical institutionalism emerged as a distinct tradition from institutional analysis in the early 1990s (Collier & Collier, 1991; Steinmo et al., 1992). The core assumption was that institutions, understood as 'formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions', are stable once they are in place (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 938). This means that timing needs to be taken seriously: It matters *when* institutionalisation occurs in a sequence of policy development (Pierson, 2004). Contingent institutional choices made at one moment in history, whether deliberate or not, create 'distinct legacies' (Collier & Collier, 1991, p. 29) as they 'structure the subsequent logic of political development' (Thelen & Conran, 2016, p. 56).

This institutional stability is mostly assumed to be the result of veto points and strong veto players (Tsebelis, 2002), vested interests and/or some type of positive feedback mechanism (Pierson, 2000). Veto players are individual or collective actors whose agreement is required for changing the institutional status quo. Veto points refer to a situation in which decisions need the agreement of several institutional points or links in a formal chain of decision-making. Actors have a vested interest in an institution when they benefit from it, and they therefore aim to keep it in place. Feedback mechanisms pertain to the self-reinforcing nature of institutions, which tend to attract more support over time as societal actors increasingly adjust to and/or benefit from their impact.

Given the core assumption of institutional stability, early historical institutionalists considered institutional change exceptional. Long periods of stability were assumed to be interrupted only by much shorter periods of rapid

institutional transformation caused by exogenous shocks. These periods are referred to as critical junctures, that is, 'relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest' (Capocchia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 348). Critical junctures thus mark a brief period in which agents have a range of institutional options. Once a particular option is chosen, however, 'it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available' (Mahoney, 2000, p. 513).

Because critical junctures rarely occur, historical institutionalism was criticised for having a status quo bias. Hacker (2004), Thelen (2004) and Streeck and Thelen (2005) acknowledge and address these concerns by conceptualising and theorising about endogenous mechanisms of 'gradual change': layering, displacement, drift and conversion. *Layering* occurs when new institutional elements are attached to an existing core. Because these elements do not directly undermine existing institutions, they usually do not provoke countermobilisation by status quo defenders. Over time, however, these elements may undermine the old institutional core by assuming an ever more prominent governing role. *Displacement* denotes a process of (gradual) breakdown of existing institutions due to the introduction of directly competing new institutions. *Drift* occurs when institutions remain in place against the background of a changing environment, which alters their impact. Finally, *conversion* takes place when institutions remain in place but are interpreted and handled differently. Entrepreneurial actors that dislike the status quo can significantly alter the institutional context and/or the trajectory of policy development, albeit in an incremental way, by turning to these mechanisms (Hacker, 2002).

These insights on institutional stability and change have proven valuable for analysing transformative processes in originally unitary systems of government that experience some migration of authority to a territorial periphery. Timing plays an essential role in these processes. In the case of Belgium, key public policies 'emerged in the context of strong centralisation' (Béland & Lecours, 2005, p. 271). Broschek (2013) notes that the subsequent decentralisation of public policies, occurred via the incremental introduction of regional substate layers to the Belgian unitary state by the state reforms of 1970, 1981 and 1988. This ultimately paved the way for the displacement of the unitary state by way of federal order in 1993. However, stability-inducing mechanisms are responsible for this incremental pattern and still prevent the downward migration of authority in certain policy areas today. Francophone political parties have a vested interest in preserving the Belgian nation, as a split would be detrimental to the socio-economic status of Wallonia. They are therefore reluctant to federalise particularly social policies and can draw on their veto power to block any state reform that could threaten the survival of Belgium in the long run. This power emanates from the constitutionally embedded consociational model of democracy that effectively creates veto points for each of the two major linguistic groups (Béland & Lecours, 2005). Thus, Francophone political parties have engaged in drift to keep certain federal policies in place despite Flemish demands for more autonomy and against the background of a divided society (Deschouwer, 2012). After the establishment of the Belgian federal state, Flemish and Francophone political parties nonetheless reached compromises about the further decentralisation of authority in the state reforms of 2001 and 2011. Béland and Lecours (2018, p. 60; also Deschouwer, 2012) argue that such negotiations constitute critical junctures because they may create a window of opportunity for decentralisation when political parties are forced to make compromises.

2.2 | Ideas and substate nationalism

Though the literature on ideational policy change has been employed to enhance the explanatory leverage of historical institutionalist theoretical frameworks, it is marred by conceptual confusion. A recent review of ideational scholarship in public policy clears the conceptual mist and finds that ideas affect policy outcomes 'depending on the precise specification of what ideas are' (Swinkels, 2020, p. 283). It identifies three broadly different conceptual approaches (Swinkels, 2020). Ideational scholarship on nationalism tends to focus on a single approach and employs ideas either as sense-making heuristics (e.g., Boehme, 2008), strategic tools (e.g., Béland & Lecours, 2005) or institutional frameworks (e.g., Broschek, 2010). This article takes an integrative approach. It incorporates the three conceptualisations of ideas in a single framework for analysis because each plays a significant role in relation to Flemish nationalism.

First, when conceptualised as heuristics, ideas are treated as subjective beliefs which influence how people perceive reality (Jervis, 2006). These pre-existing subjective beliefs, which are not necessarily consistent with objective reality, influence the policy choices actors make. This approach can explain entrepreneurial action aimed at obtaining political and territorial autonomy within the national space. The action in question is assumed to be motivated by a subjective belief that a distinct nation exists within the territory of the state; one which must be territorially and politically as independent as possible (Breuilly, 1994, p. 2; Lecours, 2012). The subjective belief that a distinct Flemish nation exists, and that enhancing the political autonomy of Flanders is positive per se, did not exist when the Belgian nation was established in 1830. As it developed and became 'anchored' in political institutions and parties, it drove political action aimed at both the decentralisation of the unitary Belgian state and the promotion of Flemish national identity (Béland & Lecours, 2005, p. 277).

This brings us to the second conceptualisation of ideas, namely, strategic tools or weapons, which are used by self-interested actors to influence policy processes and to achieve their instrumental goals (Blyth, 2002; Saurugger, 2013). This conception is very visible in the identity-building strategies employed by elites to gather popular support for their nationalist causes. These elites are assumed to 'politicise and manipulate cultural markers to shape boundaries between groups, and then use these groups as a basis for their own claims' (Lecours, 2001, p. 54). The so-called Flemish movement is a prime example: It played a key role in spreading Flemish identity by promoting a distinct regional language (i.e., Dutch) and culture to gather support for their quest for political autonomy. Flemish identity is, in other words, at least 'partly the product of strategic calculations' (Lecours, 2001, p. 54).

Finally, ideas are conceptualised as institutional frameworks when they are 'embedded in societies' (Swinkels, 2020, p. 286). In this conception, ideas function as 'a societal norm' (Swinkels, 2020, p. 286), 'core values' (Cox, 2004) or 'worldviews' (Campbell, 1998) that define the scope of available political action by determining what policies are considered morally appropriate. They can thus play an important role in keeping institutions in place (Mahoney, 2000). For instance, Broschek (2010) argues that congruence between the formal institutional set-up of the state and societal ideas about the appropriate state structure can prevent institutional change. The case of Belgium indeed demonstrates that, when deinstitutionalisation of unitarian institutions conflicts with societal norms, nationalist actors are not likely to undertake any serious efforts of that kind. Despite the electoral successes of nationalist parties, separatism remains very unpopular in Flanders. Flemish nationalist politicians that aim to secure a broad electoral base therefore avoid any political action associated with the short-term goal to split up the country (Maly, 2016).

2.3 | Towards an explanation of institutional change and stability in the Belgian sport system

Combining these insights with the characteristics of sport as a policy area allows us to identify case-specific observable implications. Timing clearly played a crucial role because sport-related institutions emerged within a wider Belgian context characterised by strong centralisation. It can be expected that Flemish nationalist ideas drove their decentralisation. The decentralisation of Belgium's originally unitarian state structures is indeed motivated by the subjective belief that Flemish autonomy is good per se. In the case of sport policy, however, there are additional nationalist motives for decentralisation associated with its potential for building a national identity, which is a strategic ideational tool employed by elites to generate popular support for political autonomy. Decentralisation at the governmental level not only provides opportunities for implementing Flemish public policies aimed at instrumentalising sport for building Flemish identity (Houlihan, 1997). It also removes similar opportunities at the central (i.e., federal) level for constructing Belgian identity through sport.

It can be expected that nationalist-driven efforts to decentralise sport policy are not limited to governmental institutions. In fact, public sport policies in Europe only developed seriously after World War II, when a private system comprised of non-governmental sport governing bodies had already crystallised. These bodies therefore occupy an

important governing role in the Belgian sport system (Vocasport, 2004). Fully decentralising Belgian non-governmental sport institutions would provide significant opportunities for building Flemish identity. They would be replaced by institutions that are Flemish and Walloon in name and nature. This would also imply that Flemish athletes and teams would compete under the Flemish flag at international sport competitions. It would thus remove important Belgian symbols in favour of Flemish ones.

Decentralising change of both public and non-governmental institutions in the Belgian sport system is expected to have occurred because of critical junctures, wherein political compromise opened a window of opportunity for the downward migration of authority. This change might also have taken a more incremental shape through the implementation of mechanisms such as layering, displacement and conversion.

Stability-inducing mechanisms like veto points and strong veto players, vested interests, and/or positive feedback effects likely explain why non-governmental sport organisations have not been subject to the same level of decentralisation as governmental sport policy. Given the potential benefits of decentralisation for building Flemish identity, we can expect to find powerful status quo defenders with a vested interest in preserving Belgian sport institutions. These actors engage in drift: Belgian sport institutions are kept in place against the background of a fully decentralised public sport policy. They discourage entrepreneurial action aimed at decentralisation because of their veto power and/or have successfully defended unitarian institutions against such action by relying on the same power. An important additional factor inducing institutional stability is likely ideational in nature, namely, the presence of strong societal norms, particularly Flemings' overall support for the continuation of Belgium and their dislike of separatism. A full decentralisation of Belgian sport federations would imply abolishing Belgian national teams. Because national sport teams 'are often equated with the nation', this would be interpreted as an overt act of separatism (Grix & Houlihan, 2014, p. 574). According to this reasoning, nationalist-driven politicians would not have taken any serious efforts in that direction for that very reason.

3 | ANALYSIS

3.1 | Flemish nationalism and decentralisation through layering, displacement and conversion

The idea of a Flemish nation did not exist when Belgium became independent from the Netherlands in 1830. The so-called Flemish movement started in reaction to the centralised unitary state structures that operated exclusively in French. The original aim of this Dutch-speaking movement was therefore to achieve cultural and linguistic equality in Flanders and at the national level. The French-speaking Belgian elite's refusal to accept these demands and a series of political crises along ethno-cultural lines which occurred later on reinforced the sense of Flemish identity among Flemish leaders and cultivated the idea of a politically autonomous Flemish nation (Deprez & Vos, 1998). At the turn of the century, the Flemish movement started to gather popular support for their cause by actively promoting Flemish identity and, thus, using ideas as strategic tools. Indeed, this identity was a political construction born out of activism; Flemish elites needed to justify their nationalist claims (Lecours, 2001). It initially gained acceptance only among Flemish intellectuals, clerics and bourgeoisie.

Sport played a significant role in the deliberate efforts by the Flemish movement to spread a Flemish identity among the masses (Renson, 1998a). Early efforts focused on the social emancipation of the Flemish lower class and the cultural liberation of the Flemish population via the establishment of Flemish federations for gymnastics, which was the most popular physical activity by the end of the 19th century (Tolleneer, 1995). Most significantly, however, the *Ronde van Vlaanderen* (Tour of Flanders) was created in 1913 to boost the sales of a newspaper that promoted the Flemish cause. This 1-day cycling race was intended to fill Flemish people with pride of their region and deliberately promote Flemish identity through lyrical news reports about Flemish cyclists. The term *Flandriens* was used to refer to the image of the Flemish cyclist who exhibited perseverance and brute force in their conquest of cobbled hills

and roads. As such, they personified the struggle for Flemish emancipation from the 'cultural repression by a long-time hegemonic Francophone Belgian State' (Renson, 1998a, p. 126). Cycling thus became a real 'vehicle for Flemish identity' (Renson, 1998a, p. 124), and the *Ronde van Vlaanderen* has even been dubbed 'one of the most distinctive celebrations of a regional sporting culture in Europe' (Roberts, 2015, p. 1).

When Flemish nationalist ideas became institutionalised, first within the Catholic party and later on in Flemish nationalist parties, political forces aligned with what was initially a grassroots movement. Political pressure for Flemish autonomy mounted eventually. The result of this pressure was a gradual federalisation of Belgium that began in the 1960s via layering (Broschek, 2013; Farhat et al., 2021). Indeed, the incremental introduction of substate layers to the Belgian unitary state ultimately resulted in the displacement of the unitary state by a federal order in 1993 (Deschouwer, 2012). This process of adding Flemish layers to the Belgian institutional core also aided the spread of Flemish identity. In the words of Béland & Lecours (2005, p. 277), 'Flemish nationalism became anchored in a set of institutions striving for greater power that could generate symbols and policies (most notably on language and education) boosting the Flemish identity'.

Similar dynamics have occurred in relation to sport policy. For the better part of a century, the organisation of sport was almost exclusively in the hands of unitary Belgian institutions. At state level, sport was introduced as a competence of the Belgian Ministry of Education in 1934. Two years later, it was transferred to the Belgian Ministry of Health. The first sport governing bodies emerged much earlier, at the end of the 19th century, and were exclusively Belgian in name and nature, though they were dominated by a Francophone elite. Non-governmental bodies like the Belgian football federation and the Belgian cycling federation came to regulate nation-wide competitions. They also represented the Belgian nation in international sport organisations and selected athletes to compete in international events. The Belgian elite even deliberately used international sport competitions such as the Olympic Games to make the country of Belgium known to the world (Delheye et al., 2014).

The decentralisation of this institutional context started at the governmental level when a critical juncture provided a window of opportunity for institutional change. In 1962, the socialist party agreed with the Catholic party's request for a partial language-based split of the Ministry of National Education and Culture.² The request was motivated by the belief that Flanders should enjoy more cultural autonomy, which would also provide opportunity for building a Flemish identity (Gosseye, 2021). As part of a larger compromise regarding this split, the socialist party accomplished that the National Institute for Sport and Physical Education was transferred from the Ministry of Health, which was traditionally run by the Catholic party, to the Ministry of National Education and Culture, which was then led by a socialist minister (Eyskens, 2010, p. 659). At the time, sport policy in Belgium was at an embryonic stage, and it was not being employed for nation-building purposes. The transfer was therefore deemed 'unimportant' (Eyskens, 2010, p. 659; own translation). It would nonetheless have significant consequences for institutional development because both Flemish and Francophone politicians were in favour of cultural autonomy, albeit for different reasons. While the Flemish were driven by nationalist ideology, Francophone support was motivated by a fear of cultural "imperialism" by the rapidly increasing Flemish majority' (Stephenson, 1972, p. 507). When Flemish politicians later became aware of sport's potential to build Flemish identity, the fact that it was now part of the partially split Ministry of National Education and Culture provided an opportunity for decentralisation. It is not difficult to imagine that decentralisation would have been more complicated, had this transfer not taken place: Health currently is still a federal competence.

The language-based split of the Ministry of National Education and Culture in the early 1960s constitutes an example of layering: Francophone and Flemish layers were added to the Belgian institutional core, which remained otherwise unchanged. Belgium was still a unitary state. The sport department would remain unitary in nature until 1968, when Flemish nationalist ideology motivated the deliberate establishment of Flemish and Francophone layers. One morning that year, Catholic minister of culture Frans Van Mechelen, a Flemish nationalist and fervent cultural federalist, simply announced to the 100 or so Flemish sport administrators that the unitary sport administration was split and introduced their new Flemish director-general (Fleerackers, 1988, p. 472). This unorthodox move was inspired by his dissatisfaction with the fact that most senior positions in the administration were firmly held

by francophones (Fleerackers, 1988). Moreover, as he came to recognise the pivotal role sport could play in the promotion of a democratised Flemish culture, Van Mechelen saw the need for an autonomous Flemish sport policy (Delheye, 2004). In 1969, the split was consolidated when the original Ministry for Education and Culture was split into a Ministry for Education and Dutch Culture and a Ministry for Education and French Culture. This meant that the sport department was split in a Dutch-speaking *Bestuur voor Lichamelijke Opvoeding, Sport en Openluchtlevens* [governing board for physical education, sport and open-air life] (BLOSO) and the Francophone *Administration de L'Éducation Physique et des Sports* [governing board for physical education and sports] (ADEPS) (De Vroede, 1990).

The addition of a Flemish layer not only altered the institutional status quo in a significant manner. It also had a profound impact on the trajectory of policy development since sport became instrumentalised for promoting Flemish identity. In 1970, the first important formal step towards the federalisation of Belgium occurred when a constitutional amendment established the cultural autonomy of the Dutch-speaking and Francophone Communities. The competences of the Belgian parliament in cultural affairs, including sport, were transferred to the Cultural Councils of both communities. The addition of this new layer to the Belgian state structure meant that the state competences for conducting sport policy were effectively displaced. This gave the Communities even more room for the promotion and subsidisation of sport. The focus in Flanders was on the construction of sport infrastructure in all parts of the region as well as on the implementation of large scale 'Sport for All' campaigns (BLOSO, 1985). These initiatives fitted Flemish aims of promoting a 'new, democratised Flemish culture' (Gosseye, 2021, p. 528). In addition, BLOSO 'went on to sail a resolute Flemish course' (Renson, 1998b, para. 45; own translation). For instance, it organised the *Gordel* [Belt], a popular family sport event that has been organised annually from 1981 onwards. Emerging from the Flemish movement, the event was meant to symbolically affirm and raise awareness for the Flemish character of the increasingly French-speaking Flemish outskirts (i.e., 'belt') of Brussels (De Vroede, 1990).

While sport policy on the government side was fully decentralised, sport governing bodies remained organised along unitary lines until the end of the 1970s. That is when decentralisation through layering also started to occur in Belgian sport federations. It was the result of a deliberate strategy by the Flemish Community, who wanted its money to go 'to the right place' and welcomed the parting with 'older French-speaking federation heads' (BLOSO, 1985, p. 8). Indeed, most of the board members in the Belgian federations had been Francophone. The Flemish Community consequently enacted subsidy rules with the deliberate aim of splitting Belgian sport federations into separate Flemish and Francophone 'wings'. This is an example of conversion, whereby institutions (here: subsidy rules and competences) are interpreted and handled differently than intended. Budgetary competences for sport were, of course, decentralised not with the intention to split Belgian sport federations. However, the decree of 2 March 1977, recognising and providing for subsidies for 'regionally' organised sport associations did just that. It stipulated that only Dutch-speaking sport federations that were established in Flanders or in Brussels were eligible for Flemish subsidies. The Francophone community thus had no choice but to adopt a similar decree. As a result, when the end of the 1970s came around, most of the Belgian federations had established Flemish and Francophone layers within their institutional structures (BLOSO, 1985). Only a few federations managed to resist the political pressure to split because their budgets did not rely on regional funding. Federations with particularly rich members (i.e., the golf federation and the equestrian federation) and those that governed the most popular sports (i.e., the football federation and the basketball federation) had sufficient revenue of their own (Thibaut, 2000, pp. 9–10). Yet even these federations would split up in the 2000s, when Flemish political pressure mounted, and commercial revenue streams declined.

This process would significantly alter the institutional status quo and the trajectory of policy development. The Flemish federations were governed by a new, Dutch-speaking board and a close relationship between Flemish sport federations and BLOSO developed within the context of an 'unusually large government influence on sport' (BLOSO, 1985, p. 2). As the Flemish and Francophone wings assumed ever more prominent governing roles, most Belgian federations were gradually turned into 'empty shell[s]' (BLOSO, 1985, p. 8) Yet, even though some of their pro-unitarian members had feared a complete split, the Belgian federations were not displaced. They continue to represent Belgium in international sport organisations, select athletes to compete in international events, regulate (aspects of) nation-wide competitions and sometimes host international championships.

The final step in the gradual federalisation process of Belgium occurred in 1993, when the fourth state reform established the Belgian federal state (Deschouwer, 2012). The displacement of the Belgian unitarian state by a federal state structure means that Belgium now officially consists of three Regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region and Brussels Capital Region) and three Communities (Flemish Community, French Community and German-speaking Community). The institutions of the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community are merged. Flanders therefore has one parliament and government, which is headed by a minister-president. At the behest of Flemish minister-president Luc Van den Brande, the Flemish government took an interest in sport policy. A member of the Flemish Catholic party and a strong advocate for more Flemish political autonomy, Van den Brande recognised the importance of sport as a tool for enhancing Flemish identity (Ruys, 1998). He encouraged the creation of a (short-lived) Flemish judo team funded by the Flemish government in 1993 to act as 'Flemish cultural ambassadors' (Thibaut, 2000, p. 21). The team members participated in international events with the Flemish Lion on their kimonos. In 1994, the Flemish government started funding a cycling team named 'Vlaanderen 2002 - Eddy Merckx' to allow young talent to join the professional ranks and to promote Flanders internationally (Vlaamse Raad, 1994, p. 956). A year later, it started funding international elite sport events that explicitly promoted Flanders (Thibaut, 2000, pp. 22–23).

The Flemish government devised a formal policy plan specifically for sport in 1997. A Flemish minister of sport was appointed in 1999. Since then, public policies aimed at managing regional identity have been implemented. The funding of international sport events to boost the image of Flanders and a range of measures to support elite athlete development are two worth mentioning.

3.2 | Institutional stability through vested interests, strong veto players and strong societal ideas

Although the above has demonstrated that ideationally driven decentralisation occurred via incremental change, deep historical legacies still create potent constraints for politicians that seek to employ sport as an instrument for enhancing Flemish identity. Timing is an important factor here. As noted, sport governing bodies in Belgium emerged in the context of strong centralisation where Flemish nationalist ideas did not exist and, thus, had no impact on institutional development. This contrasts with the situation in, for instance, the UK, where these bodies were English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish in name and nature upon inception. Adding Flemish and Francophone layers may have hollowed out the authority of the Belgian sport federations, but it did not result in their displacement. This constitutes an example of drift: Against the background of a fully decentralised public sport policy, these institutions are firmly kept in place by vested interests, strong veto players and strong societal ideas about the Belgian state.

Regarding the stabilising factor of vested interests, it is important to reiterate that Belgian sport governing bodies were founded by a Francophone elite, which had the cultural, political and economic control in the early Belgian state (Delheye et al., 2014; Tolleneer, 1997). Some bodies have kept close ties with this still existing Belgian political and economic elite (Stuurgroep Sportend Vlaanderen, 1997, p. 29). This 'Belgian sporting establishment' has a vested interest in keeping those institutions in place that are associated with the state and thus strongly oppose the introduction of Flemish and Francophone layers; a phenomenon it saw as 'splitting fever' (Renson, 2006, p. 137; own translation). The Belgian football federation, for example, has been characterised as 'a bastion of unitarian Belgicism' (Vanreusel et al., 1999, p. 103). However, the resistance was led by the Belgian Olympic Interfederal Committee (BOIC), which represents Belgium in the International Olympic Committee. The BOIC traditionally has strong links with the Belgian monarchy, the nobility and the economic elite (Renson, 2006). It has been characterised as 'a Belgian nationalist stronghold' that 'acts as a militant defendant of the unitarian state' (Vanreusel et al., 1999, p. 106). To date, it is the only non-governmental Belgian sport governing body that has managed to keep resisting the political pressure to split, most notably by increasing its revenue from private sponsoring (Renson, 2006).

The second reason why Belgian sport governing bodies continue to exist pertains to strong veto players. Any displacement of a Belgian sport governing body by a separate Flemish and a Francophone body would have to be

sanctioned not only by the boards of these bodies but also by the governing bodies that stand above it in the chain of hierarchy that characterises the so-called European sport model (European Commission, 1998). The integrated structure of this model implies that there is roughly a single governing body for each sport, a single body at the national and the continental level and a single global governing body. This creates additional veto points in relation to decentralisation. Simply put, it is impossible for a nation to compete in international sport events without first achieving the recognition of its national sport federations by continental and global sport governing bodies. Generally, these bodies avoid mingling in national political conflicts and ban political activism on the playing field. They therefore have a vested interest in preserving the institutional status quo regarding national sport governing bodies and teams unless a thus far unrepresented nation would achieve at least some recognition by the international community. For example, when a Flemish judo team was established and funded by the Flemish government in 1993, the European judo federation promptly banned the use of the Flemish Lion on Flemish athletes' kimonos, considering it a form of illegal political advertising (Thibaut, 2000, p. 21).

Global and regional sport bodies would thus likely veto any construction that would be incongruent with having a single governing body representing Belgium. Because they seek to protect their governing monopolies, these bodies also mobilise against governing bodies and sport competitions established outside their regulatory scope (Van Rompuy, 2015). Flemish nationalist politicians are aware of this reality. Tellingly, they recognise that 'we would first have to be an independent nation' before the Belgian football federation could be abolished and a Flemish national team could be established and that 'we cannot make this decision on our own' (Van Dijck in Flemish Parliament, 2009, n.p.). The Flemish movement's failed attempt to establish Flemish sport federations with the deliberate aim to displace the Belgian sport federations during the interbellum demonstrates this reality. As clubs and athletes that joined these organisations were promptly banned from participating in the competitions that took place within the realm of the traditional sport system, these federations never achieved any serious status (Tolleneer, 1997). The forced creation in 1977 of a Flemish layer 'on top of' the original Belgian institutional core and, thus, within the traditional 'European' sport model, proved to be a more viable strategy.

The final reason why Belgian sport federations are kept in place is related to strong societal ideas about the preservation of the Belgian state. Even though Flemish pro-independence parties achieve electoral successes, separatism is very unpopular in Flanders. This is attributed to the fact that most Flemings have a dual identity because they continue to identify with Belgium as well (Huysseune, 2017). Consequently, political action associated with separatism or 'hot' nationalism is not considered appropriate (Maly, 2016). The currently biggest party in Belgium, the Flemish nationalist *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance, N-VA), only presents Flemish independence as a long-term goal and advocates for a confederal Belgian state structure in the short run (Maddens, 2017). It also avoids 'hot' Flemish nationalism by promoting 'a new nationalistic discourse which has succeeded in positioning the party as "moderate," "democratic," "intellectual," [and] "rational"' (Maly, 2016, p. 279).

The N-VA's behaviour in relation to sport matters provides a good example of this approach. The party has held the ministerial position of sport in the Flemish government since 2009. The two N-VA ministers of sport to date have avoided issues that would spark controversy in Flanders because they are associated with secessionism. This despite receiving repeated calls from the Flemish movement to split the BOIC, which receives regional funding despite remaining unitary, and to establish Flemish representation at international sport events (Goubert, 2018). Instead, the N-VA ministers have opted for a more innocuous approach to promoting Flemish identity through sport. Minister Philippe Muyters, for instance, changed the name of the Flemish sport administration from 'Bloslo' to 'Sport Vlaanderen' [Sport Flanders] in 2016. This highlights the Flemish name and nature of a body that takes a central position in the governance and funding of recreational and elite sport in Flanders (De Boeck, 2015). Another notable initiative concerns the 2021 road cycling World Championships, which was funded and very visibly hosted by the Flemish region.

The N-VA's lack of political support for a Flemish national football team provides a very concrete example for the effects of strong societal ideas about Flemish secession. For historical reasons mentioned above, substate national football teams exist in countries like England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These teams are allowed to

compete in officially sanctioned European and World football tournaments. While a Flemish team would not be allowed to compete in these events for reasons mentioned, it would be able to play unofficial friendly games. Indeed, other substate national teams have been established elsewhere. A well-known example is the Catalonian national football team, which annually plays a friendly game. Even though the Flemish movement has proposed establishing a Flemish national team, Flemish nationalist parties consider this too politically controversial (SSL, 2016). N-VA mandatories consistently stress that they would only seek establishment of a Flemish football team in the context of a politically independent Flanders. Until then, some even admit that they root for the Belgian national football team (Flemish Parliament, 2005, 2009; Neyt, 2016). This fits the N-VA party bureau's instruction to mandatories to avoid political controversy by adopting a mildly positive discourse about the team's sportive success (Demeulemeester, 2014). Even the far-right *Vlaams Belang* [Flemish Interest], which defends Flemish independence as a short-term goal but has always put more emphasis on its anti-immigration programme, does not push for establishing Flemish national sport teams. This does not mean that it would not prefer to see such teams competing in international events. A few *Vlaams Belang* mandatories have indeed proposed establishing a Flemish national football team in the past. However, the party's current official stance is that a Flemish national team would only become an option if Flanders were independent (Taiana, 2019).

3.3 | The implications of the institutional status quo for Flemish and Belgian identity

Belgian sport governing bodies and, thus, national sport teams are stable institutions. This has important consequences because it implies that sport may also function as a tool for enhancing Belgian identity and even for mobilising Flemings against Flemish independence. Swenden and Jans (2006, p. 890) argue that '[t]here are few institutions of symbolic significance left along which a Belgian identity can be sustained or constructed'. Besides the Belgian monarchy, national sport teams like the national football team are consistently regarded as one of those institutions (Kuper, 2018; Mudde, 2014; Vanreusel et al., 1999, p. 106). International sport competition indeed brings about a high salience of Belgian symbols in news media, public discourse and public spaces (Martiniello & Boucher, 2017) and a large majority of Flemings feel proud of Belgian sporting success (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2018). Moreover, successful Belgian national teams validate Belgian nationalist discourse, which stresses that 'a division of the country into its monocultural segments would constitute an impoverishment' (Maddens & Vanden Berghe, 2003, p. 613).

Belgian sport institutions' contribution to generating and sustaining Belgian identity constitutes a positive feedback effect because it implies that they are, to an extent at least, self-reinforcing. Through their mere existence, they help sustaining the Flemings' dual Flemish-Belgian identity, which is cited as the key explanation for why separatism remains very unpopular in Flanders (Huyseune, 2017). As long as these conditions prevail, breaking up national sport federations and sport teams is considered an inappropriate act of separatism.

However, Belgian sport institutions not only play a passive role in sustaining Belgian identity. Defenders of the Belgian state can capitalise on these institutions to promote Belgian unity. For instance, it has been argued that the BOIC constructs a basis for national unity by using 'a subtle nationalist vocabulary' and praising 'successes by Olympic athletes [...] in a national Belgian context' (Vanreusel et al., 1999, p. 106). Likewise, the Belgian football federation and national team 'exploit every occasion to show their dedication to the Belgian state' (Vanreusel et al., 1999, p. 106). Recently, they deliberately promoted national unity by adopting slogans such as *tous ensemble/allemaal samen* (all together) and 'red together' for their marketing campaigns (Belga, 2018). The Belgian monarch adopts a similar discourse. After achieving third place at the 2018 World Cup, King Filip thanked the Belgian football team 'in the name of all Belgians' and praised its 'team spirit' (in Sporza, 2018, n.p.). It has been argued that the discursive use of 'all Belgians' in the speeches of the monarch seeks 'to marginalise the separatists' because it implies that 'the proponents of open or hidden separatism exclude themselves from the Belgian in-group and in a sense become foreigners' (Maddens & Vanden Berghe, 2003, p. 612).

4 | CONCLUSION

Insights from historical institutionalism and scholarship on ideational policy change both shed light on the institutional development that led to an asymmetrically decentralised Belgian sport system. Timing played a critical role, as both the institutionalisation of non-governmental sport governing bodies and the first government interventions in sport occurred within the context of a centralised Belgian state. The later development of Flemish nationalist ideas, namely, the subjective belief that a Flemish nation exists and ought to be politically autonomous, drove the decentralisation of this unitary system. At the governmental level, a critical juncture altered the trajectory of institutional development when sport was almost coincidentally transferred from the health ministry to the education and culture ministry as part of a political compromise. This facilitated the process of gradual institutional change through layering that ultimately led to the full decentralisation of public sport policy. Indeed, this ministry was the first to split along linguistic lines in the early 1960s. By the end of the 1960s, Flemish nationalist ideas and an apparent appreciation of the strategic identity-building potential associated with sport led to the language-based split of the sport department. This would ultimately result in a full transfer of authority for sport policy to the Flemish, French and German Communities when the Belgian unitary state was displaced by a federal political system.

Layering also occurred in relation to Belgian non-governmental sport governing bodies. It was the result of a deliberate conversion strategy, whereby the Flemish Community deliberately enacted subsidy rules to split Belgian sport federations by stipulating that only Dutch-speaking federations could receive funding. The nationalist belief that Flemish federations were better off without Francophone board members motivated this action. Flemish and Francophone sport federations were established under the umbrella of eventually all nation-wide Belgian sport federations. Though the latter's authority was hollowed out, they remain firmly in place against a context of a fully decentralised public sport policy. This institutional stability, which results in an asymmetrically decentralised Belgian sport system, is explained by the sporting establishment's vested interest in preserving Belgian sport governing bodies, strong veto players in the chain of hierarchy that characterises the European sport model and strong societal ideas about Flemish secession.

Using a sport metaphor, we could say that the story of the asymmetrical decentralisation of the Belgian sport system amounts to a draw for Flemish nationalism versus Belgian unionism. On one hand, the Flemish government now has the authority and means for generating symbols and policies that boost Flemish identity through sport, while no centralised comprehensive policies can be developed for instrumentalising sport for building Belgian identity.³ Highly visible sport institutions have also been established at its behest. They are Flemish in name and character. Examples are the Flemish sport federations and the government agency Sport Flanders. On the other hand, however, the stability of the Belgian sport institutions means that Belgium as a nation is still and will continue to be represented in international sport competitions. Potent and rather unique symbols like national sport teams can thus continually be employed to construct Belgian identity and validate the Belgian nationalist discourse that a split of Belgium would constitute an impoverishment. In the case of Belgium, sport sums up to contribute to the Flemings' dual Flemish-Belgian identity, which ultimately stands in the way of a fully autonomous Flemish state.

Beyond the Belgian case, this article demonstrates the value of employing a combination of historical institutionalism and ideational scholarship for studying substate nationalism and sport. These schools of thought provide the analytical tools that can explain change and stability in a nationalist-driven pattern of institutional development in sport and how the outcome of this process matters for the instrumentalisation of sport for building national identity.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The author wishes to thank one of the reviewers for suggesting this line of thought.
- ² From 1945 to 1972, the Flemish name for the Belgian Catholic party was *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP, Catholic People's Party) and its French name was *Parti Social Chrétien* (PSC). From 1940 to 1978, the Belgian socialist party was called *Belgische Socialistische Partij* (BSP) in Dutch and *Parti Socialiste Belge* (PSB) in French. Both parties split along linguistic lines in 1972 and 1978, respectively.
- ³ The federal government can still allocate funds for sport-related activities through other competences. For instance, it has funded the start of the Tour de France in Brussels in 2019 to enhance the international image of Belgium.

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