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CHAPTER 15

Civil service and public administrations in Belgium

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C15S1

15.1. Introduction

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LIJPHART (1981) has defined the Belgian system as a model of consensus democracy,¹ in which civil servants have an important mediating role to play between the parties and groups involved in the policy-making process. While Belgian civil servants consider themselves primarily to be servants of the state, they are bound to serve their political master while operating in a context of democratic principles and the rule of law (van der Meer et al. 2019). Like other OECD countries, Belgium went through a series of New Public Management (NPM) reforms. This paradigm shift in the management of public services (Hondeghe and Depré 2005) in the late twentieth century gave impetus to the study of administration and public policies by social scientists. New research perspectives encompassed questions of efficiency and effectivity and gradually informed the field of public administration studies. Alongside analyses of the implementation of NPM reforms, there was a steep increase in studies on public policies, either at federal or at regional level. Questions of governance linked more specifically to European integration also attracted a great deal of attention from researchers (De Visscher and Fallon 2017).

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Administrative systems are rooted in the past, but they have to adapt continuously to changing circumstances (Peters 2021). Our approach to the Belgian case aims to highlight some fundamental (and to some extent permanent) elements of our administrative system, and to point to the changes it has undergone as a result of new challenges since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This chapter deals with the organization of administrative services and the civil service in Belgium, focusing on centralized services (departments) and functionally decentralized institutions (public agencies) at federal and state levels only. It is structured in two sections. The first one deals with research on the characteristics of our administration system. The second one highlights some major challenges for our public services in the early twenty-first century and points to connected emerging research questions.

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15.2. Key features of public administrations and of the civil service in Belgium

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Based on the extant literature, this section presents the main characteristics of the Belgian administrative system. It covers the administrative tradition and culture of Belgium, the structure and types of administrative institutions, major administrative reforms, the civil

service system, and the role and appointment of top civil servants. The section ends with a view on how different regulations govern administrations in Belgium.

C15S3 15.2.1. **Administrative tradition and culture**

C15P4 The tradition of the Belgian bureaucracy is based on the Rechtsstaat approach (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017), in which the state is the driving force in society and its public services are mainly concerned with the preparation and enforcement of laws. The French Napoleonic model (Peters 2021) originally strongly influenced the structure of ministerial departments, their administrative processes, and the organization of the civil service. However, Belgian administrative institutions do not embody a strong state. The unification and centralization achieved after independence did not undermine local institutions, to which political representatives attached as much importance as they did to the national administrative apparatus. Even if the competences of the national level have been extended for almost 150 years, the drive towards centralization has enabled it to gain in scope rather than in power. Similarly, the Belgian administration is not highly technocratic, insofar as it is not dominated by a Grand Corps elite as in France, where the members, linked by a common professional origin, have a strong influence either on the administrative process or on the content of public policies (Molitor 1974). In Belgium, senior officials take their orders from the governing coalition while their careers, competencies, and rewards are set by decrees, such as the royal decree in force since the ‘Camu’ reform of 1937 for the federal administration. Following the typology of Hood and Lodge (2006), senior civil servants are ‘agents’ of their political masters and are characterized as ‘serial loyalists’.

C15P5 The Belgian model reflects several elements of the consociational type of bargain. First, the parity rule between high-ranking French- and Dutch-speaking civil servants is instrumental in ensuring a balance of power necessary to preserve the Belgian state. Second, until recently, senior officials enjoyed permanent tenure and were thus not wholly dependent on the government of the day. Third, even if there are few limitations on the political activities of civil servants, they, and the social groups they represent, are expected to be loyal to the state in exchange for their ‘fair share’ in the bureaucracy (Hondeghe 2011).

C15S4 15.2.2. **Structure and types of administrative institutions and impact of federalism on administrative organization**

C15P6 The state structure adopted after the revolution of 1830 was essentially centralized but retained certain elements of decentralization. It consisted of three levels of power: national (national level), provincial, and communal (decentralized levels). At the national level, political power was concentrated at the top; all the ministerial departments came under the direct authority of their ministers and the ministers’ personal advisers (Molitor 1974; Stenmans 1999). The so-called matrix structure of the ministerial departments was introduced by the ‘Copernicus’ reform, whereby a distinction was made between horizontal departments with coordinating powers (e.g. for human resources and financial control) and vertical departments competent in a specific policy domain. Executive agencies or functionally decentralized organizations emerged gradually alongside ministerial departments at the end of the nineteenth century. Each entity was placed under the administrative supervision of a minister and a department.

C15P7 Before the Second World War, the number of non-departmental bodies rose constantly. Several factors contributed to the early establishment of semi-public agencies, commonly referred to as ‘parastatals’ (De Broux 2010). Key among these were the rise of state intervention

following the economic crisis of the 1930s, the central government's assumption of services previously managed by local authorities or trade unions, such as unemployment insurance in 1935, and the provision of greater budgetary autonomy to certain bodies, sometimes to allow their expenses to be recorded off the balance sheet. Additionally, these agencies facilitated the involvement of civil society associations—including businesses, trade unions, mutual insurance companies, and professional organizations—in the management of specific policy sectors, such as the social security system.

C15P8 In order to rationalize the control and oversight of these executive agencies, the law of 16 March 1954 defined four types of public institution (categories A, B, C, and D), each with their own autonomy and control regime (Verhoest, Demuzere, and Rommel 2012). It was not until 1991 that a new law on Autonomous Public Companies changed the former A and B agencies for postal, telecom, railway, and airways services to a new hybrid agency to prepare these agencies for the future liberalization of the Common Market in which they were active. Besides their missions pertaining to the general interest, subsidized by the state, these Autonomous Public Companies performed commercial tasks and were supposed to be fully self-funded. By introducing new ideas on the control of Autonomous Public Companies, the Federal 1991 Law was crucial. From then on, these companies had to negotiate with the government a performance contract and three-year business plans, which clarified both tasks of general interest and financial recourse and set performance objectives and targets on which to be evaluated (for an illustration in the case of Infrabel, see Andrien et al. 2024). Around the same time, the government partially privatized some public companies, such as Belgacom (now Proximus, for telecoms) and the Post (renamed bpost), as well as nearly all banking institutions. It thus rid itself completely of activities in banking and finance, focusing on supporting the commercial development of what were considered strategic sectors.

C15P9 Since the state reform of 1980 (see chapter 'Federalism in Belgium' in this *Handbook*), each government of a region or community has had its own central administration and staff. In the Walloon Region and the French Community, the services of each entity take the form of a single ministry made up of distinctive directorates competent for a policy domain. The Flemish administration is divided into policy domains. Each of them consists of a department under direct responsibility of one or more ministers, and one or more agencies. In Brussels, the Ministry of the Brussels Region has been split into a multitude of separate departments since 2016.

C15P10 The newly created governments have also been given the right to create executive agencies, to regulate their organization, to define their tasks and autonomy, to allocate them resources, and to establish monitoring devices to control their performance. The first public organizations were created as a result of the split of national bodies competent for policies, which were transferred to the regions (e.g. public transport) and communities (e.g. radio and television). Other institutions were subsequently created to address the specific priorities of each entity (e.g. the Technology Stimulation Agency in the Walloon Region). Since the 1988 state reform, regional governments have gained the authority to create new legal frameworks for agency structure, autonomy, and control, replacing the 1954 law as the primary legal basis for public law agencies. The Flemish and Walloon governments have exercised this power by issuing new framework laws in 2003 and 2011, respectively, which established various types of agencies—departmental, public, and private law agencies in Flanders and three types of public organization in Wallonia.

C15S5 15.2.3. Administrative reforms

C15P11 Until the 'Camu' reform of 1937, there was no uniform statute covering all state employees; a variety of regulations and situations existed between ministries. Neither was there much

protection against the arbitrary intervention of political power in recruiting and promoting civil servants (Molitor 1982). The Royal Commissioner Louis Camu succeeded in installing a uniform statute for the agents of all the ministerial departments, which became the reference for the entire public sector, including government corporations and local public services. It brought about a degree of equity and stability for civil servants who thus saw their career guaranteed by the state under the rule of law. Recruitment and promotions of agents were formally governed by the merit principle (de Visscher et al. 2011). Although this reform attempted to professionalize the management of the Belgian civil service, political appointments and promotions persisted as a widespread phenomenon (Molitor 1974).

C15P12 ‘Modernisation’ efforts resumed from 1980 following the accelerated deficit of public finances and the implementation of the federal structure of the state, but a real managerial shift of the federal administration took place with the Copernicus reform (1999–2003). Deeply influenced by the NPM paradigm, this reform aimed at modernizing the internal structure of ministries and human resources management, creating a new management culture and innovative work methods. While some significant components of the reform, such as abolishing ministerial cabinets, were not implemented, experts agree that the path set out by the designers of Copernicus has generally been followed (Hondeghem and Depré 2005; Piraux 2017).

C15P13 The introduction of separate administrations in federal Belgium created different arenas and opportunities for administrative reform. From a comparative perspective, Flanders had an early start in modernizing its administration and it consolidated several reform components in a comprehensive package. In 1991, the Flemish government opted for a single ministry responsible for both regional and community affairs, organized according to a matrix structure. In 1999, it set up an ambitious new plan called BBB (Beter Bestuurlijk Beleid—Better Public Management). BBB jettisoned the matrix structure but maintained the unity of the Flemish administration. The government restored the primacy of politics by re-establishing a direct relationship between each minister and their department, thus avoiding a concentration of power at the level of the committee of secretaries-general. The BBB reform also introduced a system of mandates for senior civil servants of departments and agencies. Since then, performance agreements have governed the relationship between the ministers and their senior civil servants, and annual management reports serve as a basis for the evaluation of these officials (De Visscher and Montuelle 2010).

C15P14 Unlike in the Flemish and federal governments, the policy diffusion of reform ideas and the popularity of NPM discourse have been more limited in the French-speaking part of the country. While Flemish reforms have heavily involved both consultants and academics, institutionalizing research contracts with universities, the French-speaking Community and the Walloon Region have relied primarily on consultants with minimal academic input. The federal Copernicus reform, on the other hand, was preceded by both government-commissioned academic studies and employed many consultants, drawing heavily on OECD concepts of administrative reform (Brans, De Visscher, and Vancoppenolle 2006).

C15P15 Despite a more limited uptake of NPM discourse, a few NPM-inspired reforms did make it to implementation in the French-speaking Community and Walloon Region. These include the introduction of a mandate system for senior officials (starting in 2003 for the French Community and Walloon Region, and in 2007 also for the bilingual Brussels Region), the creation of the *École d’administration publique* (Public Administration School), and mandatory management training for mandate candidates. Additionally, since 2010, strategic planning and performance agreements have been systematically introduced across these entities.

C15P16 In our view, the factors identified by Brans, De Visscher, and Vancoppenolle (2006) remain valid in explaining these differences among entities: institutional fragmentation, the dominance of the Socialist Party (which is close to the unions and supports a statutory civil service), and the absence of a policy entrepreneur within political and academic circles explain the lack of a genuine public service policy in the southern part of the country.

C15S6 15.2.4. **Civil service systems**

C15P17 Developing and implementing public policies are classic responsibilities of civil servants (Brans and Fobé 2022). In Belgium, while implementation clearly belongs to the core activities of the civil service, political advisers to the ministers, working in ministerial cabinets (see chapter ‘Ministerial cabinets and advisers in Belgium’ in this *Handbook*), interfere in policy-making and coordination roles that are commonly assigned to the administration elsewhere.

C15P18 The civil service is plural if one considers the multiple statutes that vary across Belgium’s governments. Communities and regions determine rules on the administrative and financial status of their staff, except for rules on pensions. The differences between the statutes are multiple, covering hierarchical organization in levels and grades and the related salary, recruitment and internships, career of officers, promotion, evaluation, and the end of the statutory relationship (Van Dooren 2018; De Visscher and Dresse 2021).

C15P19 In the Belgian public sector, there are basically two broad categories of public sector employees: civil servants (statutory agents) and employees on a labour contract (non-statutory or contractual agents). The rights and duties of the former are fixed unilaterally by the government. The statute of civil servant has several advantages, including security of tenure, social benefits (e.g. a state pension), and the prospect of a career. Contractual agents are subject to the conditions and rules laid down by the law of 3 July 1978 for employment contracts in the private sector. Their career prospects are more limited and their pension scheme less favourable compared to statutory employees, but they do enjoy a certain degree of protection in terms of dismissal. Contractual agents are entitled to a hearing beforehand, and the employer must formally justify the dismissal. In the public sector, statutory employment was intended as the standard, but ministerial departments have long been permitted to hire contractual agents for specific needs, such as replacing absent staff or tasks requiring technical expertise. Exceptions also vary by type of public body, with some public law agencies, especially those competing in the market, enjoying greater latitude regarding the principle of statutory recruitment.

C15P20 State reforms have allowed the communities and regions to organize their civil service systems independently. This process culminated in the abolition, as part of the sixth state reform, of the Royal Decree on General Principles, thus lifting a series of rules governing the design of federated civil service systems.

C15P21 In the debate on the future of the civil service statute, various options compete: to reassert its distinctiveness, or to put an end to it, or to aim to harmonize the statutory and contractual regimes into a single model. Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia have taken opposite stances on the matter. In 2018, the Brussels government confirmed its preference for a statutory civil service. In 2021, the Walloon Region initiated a policy to convert the status of contractual employees to statutory agents, while Flanders decided to halt the recruitment of statutory agents from June 2024 onwards, thus signalling a shift towards contractualization. Except for certain positions of authority, which it aims to protect from political arbitrariness, statutory agents will gradually disappear. The centre-right coalitions that came to power in Wallonia and the French Community in 2024 also announced their intention to

stop recruiting statutory agents. This controversial issue is moreover at the heart of current political negotiations at the federal level.

C15S7 15.2.5. Top civil servants

C15P22 Under the Copernicus reform's mandate system, top civil servants are no longer appointed for life, but for a fixed period, varying by polity. Mandate extensions depend on positive evaluations. While in the past, top positions were accessible only through internal promotion, they are now open to external candidates. This system has been replicated by regional and community governments, with some differences. For instance, in the federal and Flemish administrations, top civil servants are appointed for a six-year term, while in the Walloon Region and the French-speaking Community, terms align with Parliament's five-year cycle and incoming governments may renew senior positions. To qualify for a mandate, candidates must belong to a pool, which in the French-speaking administrations requires a public management certificate issued by the School of Public Administration after the successful completion of an inter-university executive Master's programme in public management.

C15P23 The mandate system reflects a shift towards a more managerial public service bargain (Hood and Lodge 2006), granting top civil servants more managerial autonomy in exchange for greater accountability. Politicians should be responsible for overall strategy and policy and leave operational issues to public managers. Objectives are defined in management plans and monitored, and insufficient evaluations can lead to dismissal. Thus, the mandate system has impacted political-administrative relations. It has enhanced mobility at the administrative top, including dismissal of mandate holders who disagree with their political masters. The impact on power dynamics is uncertain. While top civil servants have gained autonomy (yet as a result of the budgetary crisis, they have not obtained the expected staff and budgetary resources), they have lost some independence because they are no longer appointed for life (Hondeghem et al. 2015). During the period 2018–21, there was a decline in mandate applicants at federal level.

C15P24 Political interference in the civil service has long been common in Belgium, although it has decreased for entry-level and mid-range positions, which no longer require political backing (Van Dooren 2018). Despite efforts to professionalize the procedures for appointing senior civil servants of ministerial departments and public law companies, these positions remain politicized. Under the mandate system, ministers now have less room for political manoeuvre, but party-political criteria still carry weight in the final stage of the recruitment process.

C15P25 In Belgium, senior officials' political affiliations are public secrets. Affiliations are relatively easy to detect since most senior officials have transited through ministerial offices or are engaged in local politics. In case of doubt, people are qualified as unlabelled. For instance, in 2023, of the forty-six top positions (one secretary-general, six directors-general, thirty-nine inspectors-general) at the Service Public de Wallonie, 36.9 per cent of the posts were held by officials labelled as socialist. CdH (Christian-democrats re-named 'Les Engagées') occupied an enviable position of 39.1 per cent. MR (liberals) and Ecolo (greens) followed with 15.2 per cent and 6.5 per cent, respectively. Non-partisan officials amounted to 2.2%. This over-representation of socialists and Christian-democrats clearly reflects the formerly predominant PS–CdH coalition in the region (Legrand 2024).

C15S8 15.2.6. **New modes of regulation**

C15P26 The expansion of the welfare state led to a surge in laws concerning many areas of life. This proliferation of laws was moreover boosted by the transition from a unitary to a federal state. These two movements generated both quantitative and qualitative issues. Quantitatively, the whole body of the law was barely manageable and recognizable. Qualitatively, in Belgium there are different perspectives on regulation, due to the varying diffusion and interpretation of NPM ideas across different administrations. Federal and Flemish levels set qualitative objectives, established clear legislative procedures, and adopted new tools to enhance governmental effectiveness, such as regulatory impact analysis, legislative lawyers, and regulatory management. However, initial enthusiasm for these reforms waned as many tools were phased out or fell short of their goals.

C15P27 Attempts were also made at various government levels to limit so-called ‘administrative burdens’. These included the Kafka hotline as one of the projects of the Federal Action Plan for Administrative Simplification. Similar initiatives were taken at regional level. Examples include initiatives for administrative simplification and digital administration run jointly by the Walloon and French-speaking administrations (Ensemble simplifions—Let’s simplify together), and the compensation rule for administrative burden in Flanders. Meanwhile, it had become evident that government was not the only actor regulating society. Despite hopes for effective self-regulation, here too expectations were unmet (Fobé et al. 2022). Ministerial cabinets remained reluctant to engage in any form of a priori review of their initiatives, as illustrated by the short-lived experience of the Walloon High Strategic Council.

C15P28 Meanwhile, the European Union’s push for liberalization and privatization, especially in economic areas where the government was also active, led to the creation of regulators, such as the Federal Commission for Electricity and Gas Regulation (CREG), the Flemish electricity and gas market regulator (Vlaamse Regulator voor de Elektriciteits- en Gasmarkt—VREG), and the Walloon Energy Commission (Commission wallonne pour l’Énergie—CWaPe) for the electricity and gas markets. Yet, anticipated benefits like lower prices and better services did not materialize. Other institutional changes in this context included the operation of ombudsman services, some of which were no longer responsible for government services but acquired sectoral competence regardless of whether the players were private or public. For example, the ombudsman service of the National Railway Company of Belgium (SNCB/NMBS) was transformed into the ombudsman for train passengers, and the ombudsman service of Bpost into the ombudsman for postal services (Schram 2023b).

C15P29 Reforms in regulation in Belgium are strongly driven by European Union initiatives and the degree of acceptance of NPM ideas, but do not seem to be successful. An important negative factor is that important legislation is mostly prepared in the cabinets where political goals are prime, and by private consultants, whereas parliaments miss instruments to guarantee the quality of their products.

C15S9 15.3. **Research agenda: challenges for Belgium’s administrative system in the twenty-first century**

C15P30 At the start of the twenty-first century, Belgium’s political-administrative institutions face significant challenges affecting public service organization and management. Internal factors like high levels of public debt and institutional complexity, along with external pressures

from climate change, new technologies, and pandemics, constantly strain the administrative apparatus. In this section we consider some of these challenges and point out a few avenues for further research.

C15S10 15.3.1. Public administrations to the test of fiscal consolidation

C15P31 In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2010s were marked by fiscal consolidation policies (see chapter ‘Financing the Belgian federation’ in this *Handbook*). To cut costs and ‘rationalise’ their civil services, Belgian governments opted for mechanisms like partial non-replacement of retirees and delaying new recruitment, rather than outright dismissals. In an ageing civil service, this led to a 10 per cent reduction in the federal government’s workforce between 2017 and 2022 (Hondeghem et al. 2022, 198). Although the federated entities saw staff increases as a result of the sixth state reform, they also significantly contributed to fiscal consolidation through a revision of their funding system (Piron 2022).

C15P32 This dynamic has had mixed effects on previous managerial reforms. On the one hand, the emphasis on fiscal sustainability has increased the focus on administrative cost-effectiveness and spurred reforms in public financial management tools. Influenced by European fiscal integration, all Belgian governments are moving, though at a different pace, towards audit systems and business-like double-entry accounting systems (Christiaens and Neyt 2015). Notably, spending reviews have been institutionalized by the federal, regional, and community governments to strengthen performance budgeting by challenging targeted expenses and administrative procedures (Gathy and Piron 2024). On the other hand, the focus on cost containment has hindered the implementation of some (costly) aspects of the Copernicus reform, such as pay raises for senior managers, civil service training, and evaluation policies. Budget constraints have deprived managers of being able to reward their best-performing agents, leading to the replacement of the evaluation system without introducing any equivalent motivational lever. Additionally, chronic underfunding of public investment, a trend since the 1980s, has worsened under fiscal consolidation policies. This is increasingly catching the public eye, as public assets like tunnels, roads, and public buildings visibly deteriorate (Piron 2019).

C15P33 European budgetary constraints were put on hold between 2020 and 2024. Their reactivation calls for new research to explore how fiscal restraints impact public administration, civil servants, and management reforms, and particularly the tensions and trade-offs between savings, public investment, managerial reforms, and human resources management. Will upcoming fiscal consolidation policies boost the effectiveness and efficiency of the public service, or further increase the strain on civil servants and public assets?

C15S11 15.3.2. Coordinating a highly fragmented administration

C15P34 Since the 1990s, the decentralization of public administration in Belgium has been accelerated by the combined influence of NPM and the federalization of the state. All the components of the Belgian federation have adopted recommendations of NPM supporters, leading to the creation of autonomous agencies with specified missions, presented as flexible and closer to citizens/customers. The federalization of the state, in turn, has also contributed to fragmentation, as unitary parastatal bodies (such as regional transport companies) were divided, and new agencies were established to manage some of the tasks transferred to the federated entities (Van Haepren 2012; Verhoest, Demuzere, and Rommel 2012).

C15P35 As each authority is responsible for setting the rules of its decentralized bodies, the administrative landscape is highly fragmented and differentiated. Agencies' structures across different levels of government vary widely in terms of: missions, public or private status, legal regime, presence or absence of a distinct legal personality and management committee, budgetary and human resources, and more. Eager to intensify the pro-market orientation of their policies, right-wing Flemish governments have been particularly active in adopting market-based and financialized forms of administrative decentralization, such as public-private partnerships (PPPs). With the support of a dedicated administrative structure, large PPP projects have been launched in a variety of sectors, including transport, sports, and education. By contrast, centre-left French-speaking entities have so far resisted this trend and hardly used such schemes, with the notable exception of the Liège's tramway (Piron 2024).

C15P36 In line with international trends (Verhoest, Demuzere, and Rommel 2012), the various governments of the country have responded to fragmentation through various strategies. The federal government has undertaken 'redesign' operations, merging numerous public institutions (Piriaux 2017), while the Walloon Region has followed suit on a smaller scale by consolidating three economic development agencies into a single structure (Wallonie Entreprendre). Additionally, efforts have been made to enhance horizontal and vertical coordination within the administration, although studies indicate that these measures have not fully mitigated centrifugal tendencies (Dockx, Vandergraesen, and Verhoest 2019; Hondeghem et al. 2022).

C15P37 The issue of administrative fragmentation adds to the existing divides within the political-administrative structures (i.e. between government and administration). The BBB is a case in point. It aimed to strengthen cooperation between the Flemish government and its administration and between administrations and agencies while reducing the size of ministerial cabinets and strengthening the role of the administration as a strategic partner. Recent evaluations point, however, at the persistence of significant coordination issues between the Flemish government, departments, and agencies (Van Humbeeck et al. 2023), largely due to the incessant interference of ministerial cabinets. In all regions, this persisting control of the cabinets over the administrations undermines the reform's goals of empowering the administration as a strategic partner in policy-making and reinforces the denounced tendency to siloing. This leads to a main research issue: how to redesign the vertical and trans-sectoral coordination in order to strengthen the administrative margin for manoeuvre to govern transition paths or address critical crisis.

C15S12 15.3.3 Which civil service(s) in a rapidly changing administration?

C15P38 The benefits of the civil service statute, such as job security through permanent tenure and a favourable pension scheme, have traditionally been seen as key factors attracting people to the civil service in Belgium (Hondeghem 2011; Bouckaert et al. 2018). These benefits, alongside intrinsic motivations to serve the public good, have made the civil service appealing. Therefore, assessing the impact of contractualization on the attractiveness of the civil service and employee motivation is crucial, especially amid large-scale generational changes. As a new generation replaces retiring civil servants, they bring expectations for more meaningful work and a better work-life balance. The following question arises: are public authorities better equipped than private companies to meet these new demands?

C15P39 On a different note, the participation of women in the civil service in Belgium remains underexplored in the literature. The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men (2019)

reports that, despite varying by level of government, men still dominate top management roles. The federal administration ranks last in Europe for women in senior positions, revealing a persistent ‘glass ceiling’ in Belgian civil service leadership, despite increased political attention and legal provisions for increasing the proportion of women at the administrative top. This suggests a need to move beyond a legal approach and explore political, sociological, and organizational factors behind this imbalance. Gender remains a critical lens, as the central argument of Stivers’ classic *Gender Images in Public Administration* (Stivers 2002) still holds true: masculine images dominate the field in respect of expertise, leadership, and virtue. Scholars do not systematically analyse how outcomes are affected by gender, and do not problematize masculinity (Kennedy, Bishu, and Heckler 2020). The private sector management methods favour competitive behaviour and promote inequality as a marker of success. This supports not only a normalization of inequality but also the neutralization of the concept of gender: issues previously linked to gender are seen as personal ‘choices’ and individual preferences (Connell 2006). Expanding this research to include other dimensions of ‘representative bureaucracy’, such as race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, and religion, and the intersections thereof, could also be valuable (Van de Walle, Vandenbussche, and Groeneveld 2013; Kirton and Greene 2015).

C15S13 15.3.4. Crisis management as a game changer

C15P40 Recent large-scale crises, such as the Covid pandemic or the deadly floods that touched Germany and Belgium in July 2021, have underscored the state’s central role in managing emergencies and in alleviating their consequences for the population. Each crisis requires unique coordination methods, rapid adaptation, and collaboration among public services, including between various government levels and with citizens (Fallon, Thiry, and Brunet 2020). Effective crisis management means knowing how to work with others. For example, during a pandemic, it is important to coordinate both the management of the emergency situation and the mobilization of first- and second-line health structures. Responsibility for the former is federal, under the authority of the Minister of the Interior, while for the latter health policies are shared among nine ministers, supported by a federal centre of expertise, as a result of a complex process of decentralization of this policy domain.

C15P41 Addressing emerging, complex, cross-cutting, and dynamic issues necessitates the mobilization of flexible and agile networks adapted to the crisis. This puts to the test the framework of our administrative system structured by a set of rules specifying the competences and responsibilities of each party, as well as the procedures leading to an efficient use of resources. Political polarization often hinders a ‘whole of government’ approach, reinforcing coordination in silos and the control of ministerial cabinets over administrative departments. However, recent crises have revealed new coordination processes, between levels of administration as well as within. For instance, during the Covid and flood crises, ministerial cabinets in Wallonia confined themselves to strategic guidance, trusting the experts of the Service Public de Wallonie to mobilize and deploy the necessary internal and external resources, away from strict administrative and financial controls. Administrative creativity and bricolage unfolded in the shadow of ministerial cabinets (Commissariat spécial à la reconstruction 2022).

C15P42 The state must build its crisis-response capacity, both before and during a crisis, ensuring robust governance responses to turbulent problems (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2023). This requires vigilance and a capacity for forward-looking analysis, and as a result, the ability to learn from crises and imagine future crises that defy existing frameworks (Fallon et al. 2012). In Belgium, where powers are widely distributed, it is crucial to involve regional and

community authorities in a common approach coordinated at federal level—as evidenced by the work of the Crisis Management Expert Commission at federal level (Schmitz and et al. 2023). Flexibility and adaptation are key assets but these qualities are constrained by the political, administrative, and situational context as presented above. Comparative studies of crisis management between regions and across different types of crises should help with analysing, beyond the formal-legal arrangements, how organizations and institutions work in practice in, and after, crises (Christensen, Lægveid, and Rykkja 2016): this line of research would lead to a better understanding of governance capacity and legitimacy to address wicked issues and walk transition paths.

C15S14 15.3.5 Looking for a robust and resilient administration

C15P43 Political and administrative leaders are now asked to develop more ‘agile’ management methods to deal with the emergence of turbulent and complex problems (Bouckaert 2023). Traditionally, public services operated under a bureaucratic logic, respecting the hierarchy of norms and submitting to political power. Later, they adopted a NPM managerial logic to ensure resource efficiency. Today, amid multiple crises—public finances, pandemics, floods, climate change—they must accompany and anticipate societal, environmental, and economic changes, aiming for robustness and resilience. In other words, ‘to be robust ... essentially means to be able to continue providing public value in the face of variable, inconsistent, unexpected, or unpredictable events and demands’ (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2023, 4), necessitating hybrid governance paradigms tailored to local contexts (Sørensen and Torfing 2024).

C15P44 Hood (1991) highlights the tensions between three main administrative paradigms (bureaucratic and hierarchical, lean and managerial, and robust and resilient), each driven by distinct internal logics based on specific values to ensure their main objective: legitimacy, performance, or security. He emphasizes the importance of adapting to local arrangements to ensure that public problems are dealt with effectively.

C15P45 Balancing these three administrative logics of reference or paradigms is a significant challenge for political and administrative authorities. It requires a careful blend of cross-functional agility and collaborative networks to anticipate crises and to integrate transition dynamics, while maintaining the bureaucratic and managerial qualities of the administration and the government’s strategic priorities: ‘Doing so necessitates the construction of institutions conducive to bricolage, that is, institutions that are characterised by a high degree of flexibility that allows for experimentation; institutions that foster inclusive deliberation, knowledge sharing and joint learning; and institutions that balance centralisation with distributed agency’ (Carstensen, Sørensen, and Torfing 2023, 36).

C15P46 Finally, there is a pragmatic need for a cross-cutting, forward-looking approach to support transitions. In terms of administration, this transformation requires ‘assuring that those who voice political demands are involved in aggregating and integrating political demands into binding decisions, particularly when facing long-term uncertain issues such as adaptation to climate change’ (Sørensen and Ansell 2023, 69). This calls for the development of participatory tools by administrations or parliaments, in addition to mobilizing the sectors of civil and economic society that are still active in these federal and federated political arenas.

C15P47 Hybridization of models and openness to citizens could become key areas of reform and significantly impact public administration in the coming years: this should be the focus of researchers’ attention.

C15S15 15.3.6. Digital governments

C15P48 The introduction of NPM in Belgium's governments has spurred the digitalization of public administration, aiming to enhance its efficiency, effectiveness, and customer focus while also reducing costs. This shift was strongly inspired by two early projects like Crossroads Bank for Social Security and the National Register, which used unique identifiers (the national register number) for unlocking personal data. For companies, the Crossroads Bank for Enterprises was added, with the company number as the key to unlocking company data. The e-government initiative, in turn, embraced the 'only once' principle, ensuring that citizens and companies need to provide information to the government only once, thus reducing redundancy and enhancing efficiency (Crompvoets et al. 2018).

C15P49 This represented a break with traditional methods whereby each government collected as much information as possible from citizens and companies, without all of that information being available to other administrations. However, the only once principle also carries risks, particularly when the collected data is incorrect or incomplete. To mitigate these risks, authentic sources with stringent data quality controls were created, with data exchanged through service integrators like the federal service integrator and the Flemish service integrator, Fidus. This approach prevents data multiplication and ensures that government entities access data based on necessity and proportionality. The exchange of data is guided by international standards and regulated by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR),² which, while primarily focused on personal data, also influences the handling of non-personal data. In Belgium, legislators have developed special instruments guiding the exchange of personal data: authorizations, protocols, and deliberations (Schram 2023a).

C15P50 Against this backdrop, a pressing issue is the consolidation and strengthening of 'administrative capacity', through the recruitment of specialized profiles in strategic sectors like IT. This long-standing challenge has gained renewed scientific and media attention due to the negative consequences of widespread outsourcing to consultancy firms: high costs, conflicts of interest, strategic capture of the public interest by private (and sometimes foreign) companies, etc. (Mazzucato and Collington 2023). The increased use of and dependency on international cloud providers should moreover be another subject of further research.

C15S16

15.4. Conclusion

C15P51 Over recent decades, powerful centrifugal dynamics have transformed the Weberian bureaucratic model enshrined in the 'Camu' statute of 1937 into a comparatively highly fragmented and decentralized administrative system. Federalism and subsequent state reforms have led to significant devolution of administrative resources and the creation of diverse and fully fledged administrative and civil service systems across levels of government (federal, regional, and community governments are each responsible for organizing their administration and civil service). At the same time, Europeanization (liberalization policies) and above all neo-managerial reforms have not only strengthened the dynamics of administrative fragmentation (agentification, liberalization, etc.), but also called into question the distinctiveness of the civil service and its legitimacy.

C15P52 Despite their heterogeneity, Belgium's public administrations and civil services are currently facing a series of common challenges, also reviewed in this chapter: fiscal consolidation, enhanced coordination, feminization, crisis management, resilience, and digitalization, to name but the most striking ones. Will these crucial challenges lead to greater convergence of administrative and civil service systems across the country or, rather, to a

strengthening of their distinctive features? To answer this question and broaden our knowledge of public administration and public services in Belgium, further analysis will be required, fruitfully mobilizing the terms of intra-national comparisons.

Notes

1. The authors thank the editors, and especially Marleen Brans, for insightful comments on previous versions of this paper.
2. Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on free movement of those data and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

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