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Belgium

A movement based on retrograde, monarchist, and ultra-Christian values

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With the political crisis stemming from the difficulty experienced by the right wing parties in forming a new federal executive because of "community quarrelling" thousands of people, essentially in Francophone Belgium, are hanging Belgian flags in their windows.

On Sunday November 18, a highly publicised demonstration "For the unity of the country" took place in Brussels. An "apolitical citizens" mobilisation representing the "silent majority" of Belgians? Or rather, in spite of the diversity of the causes attracting people to the march, an attempt by the far right to rebuild a Belgian nationalism, monarchist and retrograde?

November 18 was in reality constituted by the narrow conjuncture of two initiatives: a "National March for Unity" starting from the Gare du Nord and a "Festival of Unity" at the Parc du Cinquantenaire in the afternoon. The origin of the demonstration lay in a petition launched in August by Marie-Claire Houard, a Liege civil servant whose initiative has since been much publicised in the print and audio-visual media. Her appeal and her public declarations seek to "safeguard Belgium", supposedly under threat from a division undertaken at the desire of a minority political caste and only representing itself â€" thus denying that a majority of the Flemish electorate has certainly voted for the parties which have made a profound reform of the Belgian state their electoral centrepiece. The march basically constitutes a revival of the myth of the "Belgian people" through the negation of the binational character of the country and the historic struggle of the Walloon and Flemish peoples.

The petition that she has lunched has now gathered more than 140,000 signatures. Rarely has such an initiative benefited from such an intensive campaign of promotion: distribution through letter boxes and through 4,000 bookshops courtesy of the Sud-Presse group, posters on 2,900 advertising sites graciously conceded at reduced price by the company JC Decaux and so on. But despite this campaign of several months and the incessant over-dramatisation of the current crisis in the Francophone media (the most popular daily newspaper "La Dernière Heure", headlined on November 17 on its front page, for example: "Whoever wants to save Belgium mobilises!"), the demonstration on November 18 only attracted 35,000 people. By way of comparison, the White March of 1996 during the Dutroux affair attracted a hundred times more people. The last big trade union demonstration in October 2005 had more than 100,000 participants. And in 2006, after the murder of a young adolescent and media coverage at least equal to that for the unity march, 80,000 people marched in Brussels.

The linguistic composition of this demonstration demolishes moreover the argument of the organisers that it would represent the expression of the "silent majority" of Belgians, whether Flemish or Francophone. At best 20% of the demonstrators â€" and without doubt less â€" were Dutch speakers whereas the latter represent 60% of the Belgian population.

The far right pulling the strings?

If it is already debatable enough that some individuals proclaim themselves spokesperson of a "silent majority", the claim that the march was apolitical is a pure and simple falsification. First, because a public demonstration in favour of the unity of a country made up of two peoples is already a very political choice and also it takes place in a framework of explicit support for the monarchy â€" the words and the music of the Brabançonne (the Belgian national anthem) were omnipresent at the demonstration, as were the cries of "Long live the King!"

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Secondly, because a series of organisers of the activities on November 18 are on the contrary members or close to right or far right political formations, like Vincent Godefroid, close to the CDF [1] and in particular Alain Mahiat, who has appeared several times in the media as one of the key spokespersons for the march. Alain Mahiat is a leader of the "Unie" party, a small far right formation, pro-Belgian unity and Christian fundamentalist, originating from the BUB (Belgique-Unie-BelgiÃ«), a party which was led by Alain Escada, an activist in the Fraternité Saint-Pie X, a movement in the tradition of Charles Maurras, a far right ideologue, anti-Semite and French monarchist.

Certainly, the motivations of the people who put Belgian flags in their windows or who participated in the demonstration on the 18th are diverse and they cannot at all be put in the same bag. : For some it is about expressing their rejection of "communal political quarrels" which have paralysed the country, for others the fear of a break-up of Belgium leading to worse living conditions, a sentiment strengthened, as we have said, by the fact that the Francophone media dramatise the current crisis in presenting it as the prelude to the rapid disappearance of the country. But for a good number of these people and the organised currents which surf on their sentiments, the motivation is the promotion of a Belgian unity based on retrograde, monarchist, and ultra-Christian values.

[1] Chrétiens démocrates fédéraux (CDF – Federal Christian Democrats) created in 2002 from a right wing split from the Centre démocrate humaniste (CDH – Humanist Democratic Centre).