CHAPTER 16

Which Remaining Role for the Provincial Governor in the Belgian Centrifugal Federalism?

Fabienne Maron

16.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we would like to take stock of the role and responsibilities of provincial Governors in Belgium, and to put their evolution in perspective regarding past and last institutional developments, including a recent role taken by provincial Governors in crises management. The provincial Governor holds the position of an ‘inter-institutional’ agent between the federal, regional, and municipal authorities. It has both autonomy of action on provincial soil when the provincial interest is at stake and an ability to implement public policies developed by higher levels of power.

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It controls and is controlled; it acts independently or at the request of regional and federal authorities. It also plays an important role in many essential matters for local authorities. Responsible for implementing decisions made by other powers, but also for defending provincial interests, the Governor wears a double hat. This sometimes explains why the Province has hardly found its place in a federalized Belgium and that the role of the governor is one of the least well-known to citizens. The provincial entities and the institutional role of governor will certainly still be the subject of modernisation or transformation projects in the dynamic of State reform which constantly animates Belgium.

16.2 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND BELGIAN STATE REFORMS—THE PROVINCES IN EVOLVING BELGIUM’ STATE REFORMS

The institutional and political evolution of Belgium impacted the role of Governors over times. The various State reforms have marked the status of the Provinces and the role of governors.

The origin of Belgian Provinces is rooted in the past, since their origin predates the creation of Belgium. It was the French authorities which, in 1795, designed the nine departments, the limits of which still correspond to those of the current Provinces, with some minor details. As for their names, Belgian Provinces owe them to the Dutch regime established in 1815.

In the Belgian Declaration of Independence (1830), the Provinces appeared as constitutive: ‘Les Provinces de la Belgique, violemment détachées de la Hollande, constitueront un État indépendant’.

Nevertheless, the existence of the various provincial bodies and the competences attributed to the Provinces were fixed by the Belgian Constitution of 1831.

1 La Lys (future Province of West Flanders), l’Escaut (future Province of East Flanders), les Deux Nèthes (future Province of Antwerp), la Dyle (future Province of Brabant—divided into two entities by the Saint Michel agreement in 1992—Walloon Brabant and Flemish Brabant), la Meuse inférieure (future Province of Liège), les Forêts (future Province of Luxembourg and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg) as well as half of Limburg (current Province of Limburg), Sambre et Meuse (future Province of Namur) and Jemappes (future Province of Hainaut).

2 Delpérée, F. (2006). La Constitution de 1830 à nos jours (p. 234). Bruxelles: Racine.
Few changes have been made to these constitutional principles, but the evolution of provincial legislation has considerably changed their possibilities of action over time with the different phases of the state reform starting in 1970. The 1977 Egmont Pact even provided for the abolition of the Provinces, but that political agreement on a State reform project was never implemented. On the contrary, certain provisions strengthening the autonomy of the Provinces were subsequently adopted, notably by the provincial law of 1997. Beyond questions of jurisdiction, the federal evolution of the Belgian regime, through six State reforms (in 1970, 1980, 1988–1989, 1993, 2001 and 2012–2014) has been accompanied by important changes at the provincial level. Since 1993, an additional Province has been created following the division of Brabant into two separate Provinces: Walloon Brabant and Flemish Brabant. Since then, the Walloon and Flemish Regions are officially composed of five Provinces each while the territory of the Brussels Region is not part of any Province but has kept its governor. This integration of the provincial phenomenon within the Regions was accentuated following the Lambermont agreements in 2001. A series of powers relating to the organisation of the Provinces, to their functioning but also to the supervision exercised over the latter were transferred to the Regions (2002). In practical terms, the Regions are now responsible for the organisation of provincial institutions and elections (Doms 2002). With the 6th State reform, the Regions are, since 1st July 2014, allowed to abolish provincial institutions, a new possibility that puts a huge threat on the provincial institutions.

The role of the Belgian Provinces can be described as twofold. First, the Province is a subordinate power responsible for implementing the decisions taken at higher levels, namely federal, regional and/or community. In this case, the provincial institution acts as a local agent of higher power which entrusts it with this or that duty. The competences assigned to the Province in this context are identical for each of them, and are funded by the level of power which delegates the competence. As such, provincial authorities play a role in policing, specifically in matters of police coordination. Part of the supervision over the municipalities is also exercised at the provincial level.

3 The term ‘Commissioner’ of the Government is replaced by ‘Governor.’: Art. 2. A l’article 1er de la loi provinciale du 30 avril 1836, les mots “et un commissaire du gouvernement” sont remplacés par les mots “une députation permanente et un gouverneur”.

In addition, the Provinces constitute autonomous political entities competent to manage everything that falls under ‘the provincial interest’ (on this notion, see below). This power stems from the well-known principle of subsidiarity, which states that each action must be taken by the level of power best able to perform it effectively. With this in mind, the Provinces have fiscal autonomy allowing them to finance the missions they choose to assume. Provincial jurisdiction can therefore be very broad and varied. (Belgian Government Portal, About Belgium, Provinces—Role and Missions 2020).

The relatively broad autonomy granted to the Provinces is therefore at the origin of their involvement in very diverse activities. As a result, policies vary considerably from Province to Province, depending on local needs and on the views of the politicians in place. This diversity can be read as a reflection of a specific response to local needs, as demonstrated by the example of the Province of Liège, whose 22 competences range from Culture to Sport, from Tourism to Housing and from Agriculture to Education (basic and technical).

Provincial autonomy is, however, subject to certain restrictions. First, the Provinces are subject to administrative supervision exercised by the Regions (supervisory authorities). The Province is subject to control in the exercise of its powers; this is what distinguishes it as a decentralised authority from federated entities such as Regions and communities. The Constitution therefore provides that provincial activity is supervised by the supervisory authority or by the legislative power so that the law is not violated, or the public interest is not flouted. Provincial autonomy is therefore exercised within a legal framework which is respected by an authority external to the Province.

We can therefore affirm that a Belgian Province is both a decentralized entity when it acts within the framework of its autonomy (in education for example) and a deconcentrated entity when it implements the public policies initiated by higher levels of government (federal or regional). The normative power of the Province is qualified as ‘residual’ by constitutionalists, in the sense that it is bound to respect all legal provisions issued at a higher normative rank.

4 Belgian Federal Portal: https://www.belgium.be/fr/la_belgique/pouvoirs_publics/provinces (Accessed 20 May 2020).
Currently, there are ten Provinces, now contained within the respective Flemish and Walloon Regions, while the Brussels Region directly exercises provincial competences (Art. 5 of Belgian Constitution) (Table 16.1).

### 16.3 Concept of Provincial Interest, Competences and Proper Bodies

Article 41 of the Belgian Constitution, which has not undergone any modification since 1831, reads as follows: ‘The exclusively communal or provincial interests are regulated by the communal or provincial councils according to the principles established by the Constitution’.

*Les états [provinciaux] sont chargés de tout ce qui tient à l’administration et à l’économie intérieure de leur Province; les ordonnances et règlements que, dans l’intérêt général de la province, ils jugent nécessaires ou utiles, doivent, avant d’être mis à exécution, avoir reçu l’approbation du roi.*

This provision therefore enshrines the existence of a provincial council, and reserves for it a specific area of action, that of *provincial interest*. These developments, which still apply today, mean that the responsibility for public action should be entrusted to the smallest entity capable of
handling the matter itself. This is the application of the subsidiarity principle. The notion of ‘provincial interest’ does not, however, exhaust the question of provincial jurisdiction:

Ensemble des domaines dans lesquels la province peut agir au profit de sa population, sans toutefois empiéter sur les compétences des autres niveaux de pouvoir et sans léser l'intérêt général.

In fact, as mentioned above, the Provinces have a dual function: they are autonomous political communities (decentralisation) that are responsible for all matters that are of provincial interest and they are also subordinate powers responsible for the execution of decisions taken by other levels of power (deconcentration) that are superior: regional or federal. The federal authority, the Region or the Community, respectively with territorial jurisdiction, may direct a Province to act in a particular area, from which it delegates part of exercise. A hierarchical authority thus entrusts compulsory tasks to a subordinate power. However, even in the context of decentralisation, the Province is tested in the exercise of its powers. More generally, and this constitutes a share of the activity of the provincial institution, the Province leads (in the existing legislative and regulatory framework) policies it funds through its own fiscal autonomy.

To implement their powers, the Provinces have their own organs: the provincial council, the provincial college and the governor—with their respective staffs, composed of civil servants.

16.3.1 The Provincial Council

As abovementioned, article 41 of the Constitution ensures the existence of one of the provincial organs: the provincial council. In addition, article 162 of the Constitution guarantees the direct election of provincial councils: each Province therefore has a representative assembly whose members are elected without intermediaries by the citizens of the Province. The number of members of the provincial council depends on the size of the population of the Province. The members of the provincial Council are

5 In the Walloon region: 31 members in Provinces with less than 250,000 inhabitants; 37 members in the Provinces of 250,000–500,000 inhabitants; 43 members in the
elected for a six-year term. Provincial elections are held at the same time as municipal elections on the second Sunday in October. The last provincial elections were held on October 14, 2018.  

In Walloon region, the provincial council organisation is regulated by the Code of Democracy and Decentralisation. In Flanders, the provincial organisation is regulated by the provincial decree under the Flemish legal framework. The provincial council holds regulatory power, equivalent to legislative power at the federal level. As such, it regulates everything that relates to the provincial interest, subject to non-competition with other layers of government. It is also the council which votes the budget, which regulates the administrative organisation and which controls the organisations linked to the Province. The provincial council works in a complementary manner to the other layers (subsidiarity). It is not a question of competing with them and offering the same services. Provincial interest therefore allows the council to set up services that meet citizens’ needs in areas such as family, education, sport, tourism, health, childhood, culture, youth, agriculture, professional training and other actions in various domains.

16.3.2 The Provincial College

The provincial College (Walloon Region) or the Deputation (Flemish Region) executes the decisions of the provincial Council and ensures daily

Provinces of 500,000–750,000 inhabitants; 50 members in the Provinces of 750,000–1,000,000 inhabitants; 56 members in the Provinces of 1,000,000 inhabitants and more. In Flanders: 31 members in the Provinces with less than 1,000,000 inhabitants and 36 members in the Provinces with 1,000,000 inhabitants and more.

6 Blaise, P, Faniel, J., & Istasse, C. (2018). Les résultats des élections provinciales du 14 octobre 2018 in Courrier hebdomadaire no. 2386–2387, 115.

7 Art L2212-40—of CDLD—The “Code of local democracy and decentralization” brings together the provisions of 22 legal texts among which the provincial and municipal electoral laws, the law organizing agglomerations and federations of municipalities, the new municipal law, the decree organizing control over municipalities, Provinces, inter-municipal entities of the Walloon Region or the decree organizing the Walloon Provinces.(CDLD). Consolidated version, Wallex: https://wallex.wallonie.be/files/medias/10/CDLD.pdf (Accessed May 24, 2020).

8 Provinciedecreet: https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1014158&param=inhoud Consolidated Version (2018) (Accessed May 25, 2020).

9 Walloon Region: in Provinces with less than 750,000 inhabitants, the college includes four provincial deputies elected for six years within the council. In Provinces with at
management. It is the executive body of the Province, as such comparable to the municipal college. The college is politically responsible to the council, the members of the latter being able to question those of the first and submit to them questions that fall under provincial jurisdiction.

16.3.3 The Provincial Governor

The governor is not an elected official. He or she is appointed, and can be dismissed, by the Flemish or Walloon government, on the assent of the federal Council of Ministers of Belgium. The governor is mainly the commissioner of the regional government in the Province, in addition to his/her function for certain matters, as commissioner of the federal government.

As such, s/he is responsible for the execution of laws, decrees, and orders of general administration in the Province. S/he also exercises own powers, such as the supervision of the factories of churches and the CPAS, the fire services, the specific supervision over the police zones, the administrative supervision over the municipalities, the issuance of authorisations in matters of weapons, etc. One of the essential competences of the provincial governor relates to the maintenance of law and order: public order, tranquillity, security of persons on the territory of the Province, coordination of police and civil security services, implementation of provincial emergency plans. These competences include taking care to maintain close interactivity between the governor and the military commander of the Province. In practice, the governor exercises important functions in response to crisis and disasters, policing and coordinating the police zones of the Province.

least 750,000 inhabitants, the college comprises 5 provincial deputies elected for six years within the council. Same rule applies in Flanders.

10 The provincial governor is a commissioner of the Flemish Government in the Province, without prejudice function as Commissioner of the Federal Government. In accordance with Article 6, § 1, VIII, first paragraph, 1, third paragraph, BWHI, appointed and deposited by the Flemish Government, based on unanimous advice from the Council of Ministers. The Flemish Government establishes the status of the provincial governor. The provincial governor resides in the county seat or any other location in the county appointed by the Flemish Government after advice from the provincial council.
As the government’s representative, the governor has the right to attend provincial college and council meetings to review the legality of their deliberations. The governor also checks the provincial budget, at least once a year. He/she is also responsible for the execution of certain measures taken by the government.

As already mentioned, the provincial governor exercises many powers and is at the crossroads of the various competent layers of governance on the provincial territory. Such a functional diversity places the governor into a situation of multiple responsibility and obliges the office-holder to complex forms of accountability. To perform these tasks and manage the provincial administration, the governor is assisted by two senior civil servants—who are not political appointees—: the director-general and the financial director (Table 16.2).

16.4  THE GOVERNOR’S MISSIONS: DOUBLE HAT AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

In their capacity as commissioners of the federal government in the Provinces, the governors are entrusted with missions aimed at ensuring the enforcement and application of federal legislations and regulations. It is a very diverse set of tasks, particularly in the following areas:

- Civil security and emergency plans;
- Police and public order security;
- Specific administrative supervision over the functioning of the local police;
- Arms legislation;
- Fire departments’ coordination;
- Processing of citizens’ files for disasters following calamities.

Let us examine three examples: Public Order and Security, Civil Protection and Crisis Management.

16.4.1  Public Order & Security

This is one of the priorities for all provincial governors. It is a legal obligation for each Province to adopt a General Emergency Plan in order to provide appropriate coordination in case of crisis situations, in addition to
| Flemish Region (5) | Province of West Flanders | Governors Council/College Members | Population N = 2018 | Arrondissements Municipalities (Communes) | Domains of action |
|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------|
|                   | Decaluwé Carl 35/4        | 1,191,059                        | 8                 | 64                                       | 1. International relations |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 2. Urban development/Sustainability |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 3. Security Services Management |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 4. Agriculture and Innovation |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 5. Roads and Cycle roads |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 6. Tourism: region-tourism |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 7. Nature & Life Milieu |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 8. Provincial Domains Management |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 9. Climate Action and Water management |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 10. Fishing |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 11. Beaches management |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 12. Economy and employability |
|                   |                           |                                  |                   |                                          | 13. Education and Training |
| Province of East Flanders | Detollenaere Didier | 1,505,053 | 6 |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------|---|
|                          |                     | 65        |   |
|                          | 1. Leisure: Spare-time activities |
|                          | 2. Domains Management |
|                          | 3. Heritage Management |
|                          | 4. Tourism and Promotion of sites |
|                          | 5. Infrastructure for Events |
|                          | 6. Education and Training (VET) |
|                          | 7. Life Milieu and Environment |
|                          | 8. Climate Action and Nature (Green Zones) |
|                          | 9. Work & Entrepreneurship |
|                          | 10. Culture, Youth and Sport |
| Province of Antwerp       | Berx Cathy         | 1,847,486 | 3 |
|                          |                     | 70        |   |
|                          | 1. Development and Education |
|                          | 2. Leisure and activities |
|                          | 3. Spaces Management, Heritage and Mobility |
|                          | 4. Environment (Climate Action) |
|                          | 5. Economy, Regional Policy and Europe |
|                          | 6. General Policy Coordination |
|                          | 7. Finance |
|                          | 8. HR management, communication and Organisation |
|                          | 9. Logistic |
|                          | 10. ICT and e-gov |

*** Structured by Departments

(continued)
| Province of Limburg | Reynders Herman 31/4 | 870,880 | 3 | 42 |

1. **Life Milieu**: Strategic projects, Climate, Environment, Nature, Animals welfare, Water Management, Space organisation, urban development, Mobility and Transport, Safety and Security

2. **Work and Economy**: Economic development, social development, Agriculture, …

3. **Leisure**: Sport, Tourism, Nature protection

4. **Education, Training, Schools infrastructure and Transport, Education and Development (VET)**

5. **Limburg—Climate Neutral**

***Structured by Departments
Province of Flemish Brabant Lodewijk De Witte 36/4 1,138,489 2 65

1. Economy and Agriculture: Economy Policy, Entrepreneurship & Starters, Land and gardens
2. Well-being and Health
3. Leisure and Culture: infrastructure for events, Tourism, Domains Management, Heritage Management, Youth, Culture and Sport
4. Life Milieu and Environment: urban planning, Nature, Water Management, Life Milieu Protection, Licenses Management
5. Transport and Mobility: Cars, Bicycles, School Transport, Transport security, Mobility information
6. Education and Training: provincial education, VET (PIVO), Education Infrastructure and Material, Scholarship (2021)

Walloon Region (5) Governors Council Members College Population Arrond. Communes Domains of Action

(continued)
| Province of Walloon Brabant | Mahieu Gilles 37/4 | 401,106 | 1 | 27 |
|----------------------------|--------------------|---------|---|----|

1. Life: Culture and Tourism, Environment, Mobility and Transport, Territorial Development
2. Youth: Education and Training, Students support services, Citizenship for young people, Training center (VET) Language Training Center and Innovation, Green Economy sensibilisation, Sport & Leisure
3. Economy development: Economy & Employability, Entrepreneurship, Local authorities, Agriculture.
4. Share: Health, social cohesion and inclusion, Housing policy and agency
| Flemish Region (5) |
|-------------------|
| Province of Hainaut | Leclercq Tommy 56/5 | 1,340,147 | 7–9 |

1. Education and Training: Provincial Education, VET center, Support for professionals
2. Culture and Tourism
3. Social Policy: for people with disabilities, ageing people, medico-pedagogical center, social inclusion
4. Sport and Health policies
5. Eco-Territorial Development: Hainaut development, fight against pollution (laboratories), engineering, techniques...

(continued)
| Table 16.2  (continued) |   |   |   |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| **Flemish Region (5)**  |   |   |   |
| Province of Namur       | Mathen Denis 37/4 | 492,708 | 3 |
|                         |                     |         | 38 | |
| 1. Social and sanitary: citizenship, ageing, social cohesion, emergency services, support to medical staff (material), semi-automatic defibrillators |
| 2. Health: Mental health, School Health prevention, Preventive Medicine & health, Health promotion |
| 3. Education and Training: Provincial Education, Training Centre (VET), Social Education & social promotion |
| 4. Tourism |
| 5. Culture |
| 6. Environment |
| 7. Agriculture |
| 8. Water Management |
| 9. Infrastructure: roads and transport |
| 10. Economy and Development: innovation programme (ALFERS) & start-up support lab. |
| Province of Luxembourg | Schmitz Olivier 37/4 | 282,946 5 | 44 |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|----|
| 1. Citizens & Well-being: Social inclusion, equality, housing, projects management, education information, e-gov, e-access, family affairs, health: health prevention, Medical staff, mental health, palliative care, housing: social housing, pollution, energy & Mobility |
| 2. Local authorities: financial support, work protection, procurement, training, technical services, municipal archives and conference of mayors of the Province |
| 3. Schools and education: Academy for security team (firemen) Education and Infrastructure |

| Province of Liège | Jamar Hervé 56/5 | 1,103,745 4 | 84 (including 15 big cities) |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Education and Training: provincial education, Schools, VET |
| 2. Culture & Tourism, Youth, Sports & Events |
| 3. Well-being: Environment, Mobility, Health, Travels, Social inclusion, Climate action, Youth (open ado) |
| 4. Innovation and Entrepreneurship; Agriculture, rural development; Economy, Starters Lab- Incubator |

(continued)
Table 16.2 (continued)

| Administrative District of Brussels Capital—Governor and Vice Governor | Top Civil Servant: Scholliers Viviane Vice-Governor: Ostyn Jozef | NA | NA | Global Plan for Security and Prevention:  
  - Threats on the integrity of people  
  - Polarisation and radicalisation  
  - Drugs and addiction  
  - Human trafficking and smuggling  
  - Damage to property  
  - Mobility and road safety  
  - Environment and incivilities  
  - Financial crime and cybercrime  
  - Organised crime and trafficking in illegal goods  
  - Crisis management and resilience |

Source: Author’s creation
the municipal frameworks. One can mention, e.g. industrial accidents of the Seveso type and/or large-scale flood catastrophe or other calamities. The experiences make clear that having up-to-date emergency plans is an imperative for governors.

In addition, we know that emergency planning is an evolving matter and the governors have to anticipate and continue to:

- update the Province’s high-level emergency external plans (type Seveso) in close cooperation with the Minister of the Interior;
- improve information channels in crisis situations;
- inform the population about the right reflexes to have in an emergency situation;
- develop the radiological and nuclear zonal plans;
- approve the local emergency plans imposed to the mayors.

16.4.2 Civil Protection

The civil security reform has taken several significant steps, including the creation of new rescue zones. In consultation with all the mayors, the governors opted for an organisation in different zones. Significant work has been done to have a clear overview of the potential risks present in each zone, the human and material resources available and necessary to deal with them, the planning tools, necessary short-term financial commitments/investments. These zones now have significant amounts to develop zone projects, based on agreements signed with the Federal government.

This reform, conducted by Jan Jambon, Minister of the Interior, in 2017, entered into force in 2019, and reaffirmed the place and added-value of Civil Protection interventions within Civil Security, guaranteed operating and investment budgets for the future and was aiming to strengthen capacities to fight against new types of risks such as terrorism and climate change.

16.4.3 Crises Management

In Belgium, the preparation and management of emergency situations (commonly called Crises and Disasters Management) are organised at three levels: municipal, provincial and federal. The governor’s missions
in this area are manifold and s/he achieves them by being seconded and advised by professionals from the rescue and intervention services from different sectors: rescue operations; medical, health and psychosocial aid; police in emergency situations logistical support; as well as information and communication support.

Firefighters, actors in urgent medical aid, psychosocial work, police, military, members of civil protection and public service as well as the services of the governor are mobilised during all the process and the governor in person plays a key role in coordinating them.

As public manager of the Province, the governor can develop actions and projects that meet local needs, in domains such as education, culture, tourism, economy and territorial development, environment, agriculture, sport and leisure, etc.

In addition, the governor is the protocol authority responsible, in the Province, for accompanying members of the Royal Family, Belgian and foreign dignitaries, ambassadors as well as foreign delegations and missions or even guests of honour. He/she is also co-responsible vis-à-vis the citizens, either with the federal authorities, the regional authorities and the municipal authorities.

Moreover, the provincial governors are responsible for the political preparation of the tasks entrusted to them (see below). Since they are also commissioners of the governments of the Regions and the Communities, and to carry out the federal missions, the Federal Department of the Interior (Service public federal [SPF] de l’Intérieur) places officials at the disposal of the governors.

With its specific status, the administrative district of Brussels-Capital includes a senior official and a vice-governor. The vice-governor is appointed and dismissed by the Brussels government. Perfectly bilingual, the vice-governor is responsible for ensuring the application of laws and regulations relating to the use of languages in administrative matters in the municipalities of the administrative district of Brussels-Capital. His/her status is identical to that of a provincial governor elsewhere.
16.4.4 Responses to Citizens’ Security, Needs and Adaptability to the Soil: Recent Actions

As abovementioned, the governors can develop actions and projects which meet local needs, such as education, culture, tourism, economy and territorial development, environment, agriculture, sport and all actions not undertaken by regional and local authorities.

They also have responsibilities in protecting citizens against disasters, calamities or play a role in crisis management (as the 2020 sanitary COVID-19 pandemic).

In addition to the general overview provided by the examination of domains of action, we would like to demonstrate some concrete areas of action.

16.4.4.1 Environment—Construction of Bicycle Paths
The Province of West Flanders is working in close cooperation with the City of Ostend and the agency Aquafin, on the construction of a two-way bicycle path along Grintweg. That was decided by the West Flemish provincial council at its meeting on Thursday June 18, 2020. After the cycle path along the Grintweg has been set up, Ostend and Aquafin are starting the next phase in collaboration with the Province of West Flanders. The works concern the intersection of the Grintweg with the Groene 62. There, among other things, a tunnel is being built under the Groene 62 with a new two-way cycle path. In this way cyclists can continue to follow the Grintweg in a safe and comfortable way. The Province will then work on a new branch using a 130-metre bicycle ramp, also in a double direction. This will connect the new cycle path along the Grintweg to the Groene 62.

16.4.4.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Role of Provincial Governors
Since January 2020 and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, the health situation has been monitored in Belgium and the situation of emergency requested the mobilisation of the different layers of governance: federal, regional, community and local levels. Nevertheless, at the end of January 2020, at the Kingdom’s ‘conference of governors’,

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11 Groene 62: https://www.west-vlaanderen.be/artikel/provincie-zorgt-voor-fietsveilige-aansluiting-op-de-groene-62-oostende (Accessed June 19, 2020).
which meets monthly, which took place on February 05, the Coronavirus situation was tackled. At this stage, and until March 12, the situation was managed at the federal level in a specific and monodisciplinary manner by the Public Health Administration.

The Province governors played a role in implementing the measures taken at federal level and continued to anticipate during this period the possible consequences of this pandemic crisis from a multidisciplinary point of view and in multiplying contacts and actions: towards local authorities (conference of mayors), with the provincial crisis unit, with the regional executives, the Regional Health Agencies, the community level (responsible for education and teaching) and the National Crisis Centre. The governors were also involved in taking measures regarding matters of public order—such as police orders prohibiting certain rallies.

On March 12, the Belgian National Security Council decreed a ‘federal crisis phase’. During this period, all the decisions were taken by a management team comprised of the Prime Minister, the competent ministers, and the Ministers-President. The National Crisis Centre ensured a better coordination and information about the measures for the whole country. To operationalise these strategic and policy decisions, consultations were organised with the provincial Governors in charge of a coordination mission on the ground engaging different operational units as: firefighters, medical care services, police, logistics (defence, civil protection), information services etc.

Since, in the federal crisis phase, the governor is responsible for implementing the measures decided by the federal level on the territory of the Province, s/he acts as a relay to and from local authorities and citizens, anticipates the consequences of the application of these measures, takes public order measures, ensures the strategic coordination of the actions of stakeholders, provides a framework for the operational command post, establishes management procedures, monitors needs, resources and actions, manages information and communication (press releases and social networks).

During the recent crisis, the governors participated in the daily videoconferences of the COVID-19 National Crisis Centre but also in those of the Regional Government, the provincial College and to the conference of mayors by e-conference (fifteen times since March 21). The federal crisis phase, however, is not limited, for the governors, to a simple application of measures decided on by the federal coordinating committee. For example, several initiatives were taken to show creativity in this health
crisis management, with the setting-up of original structures such as the Medical Orientation Stations, general medicine stations located in front of hospitals: these infrastructures allowed patients to be quickly referred to the solution that suits them: return home, general medicine consultation (on site) or hospital (emergency).

For a social inclusive crisis management, the governors have played an important role in providing support to rest homes for the elderly (monitoring of material supplies, staff management, support services), by providing accommodation for vulnerable people (homeless, victims of domestic violence, etc.) and by facilitating social actions.

The Minister of the Interior, Peter De Crem, also called the governors and the mayors to support the Government for implementing the measures of restriction in terms of events organisation and restrictions of gathering in public space.

The exit phase of the containment and the economic recovery will certainly mobilise the governors with some actions and initiatives for territorial re-development.

16.4.4.3 Connecting Citizens to Walloon Brabant Initiatives and Projects: The Cube

As defined by the Province of Walloon Brabant, the Cube (cubebw.be.) consists of a ‘permanent space for citizen involvement’. Any reflection that will be conducted in the Cube aims to develop the territory of Walloon Brabant. The Cube is presented in the form of a digital platform where citizens are invited to participate in the development of strategies for the future of the Walloon Brabant Province, a kind of large-scale suggestion box.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic situation and circumstances, the first project submitted to the Cube concerns economic recovery and post-containment changes.

16.5 Conclusions

The role of the governors can be questioned in accordance of the recent institutional developments and State reform which put the Provinces and their governors in a weak position within the Belgian ‘institutional lasagne’. The existence of Provinces and governors depends of the willingness of political elites at the regional level of Flanders and Wallonia
to maintain – or not these administrative units and the governor’s institutional role. This can be questionable, since their visibility for the citizens is not well established and they have been questioned on a number of issues, e.g. the recruitment of the personnel who serve under their authority.

On a more positive note, Belgian governors and their teams play, in times of crisis, a coordination role and have an inter-institutional pivotal position that make them important actors for finding solutions and acting in an operational way. They also developed important projects for the territorial developments in their Province in order to face global challenges as those of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Yet, most citizens ignore the various areas of interest of the Provinces of which they benefit, their organisation and the support they bring to the communes. They are not aware of the shared responsibilities of the governors in managing critical situations. The lack of information on economic and territorial actions does not demonstrate the added-value of the governors to the governing and governance of Belgium, its Regions and communities, and its municipalities.

The future of the provincial layer and of the provincial governors has to be further discussed at the political level in the forthcoming years. We hope that, in this debate, the citizens will bear in mind the effective actions undertaken by governors in the Public Interest, with their double cap of commissioners and managers – both in times of crises and at the service of the long-term objectives of sustainable development.

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