In a recent piece in *De Morgen*, “Land zonder cultuur” (“Country without culture”, 2011), the acclaimed and prize-winning author Erwin Mortier sharply opposes both the separatist tendencies of the leading right-wing Flemish-nationalist political party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and the “Flemish movement” in general. He particularly takes issue with the detrimental consequences of the structure of Belgium’s current political organization in which cultural policy is legislated and executed on the Francophone and Flemish community levels rather than on the federal level. Mortier argues that the increasing federalization of Belgium’s cultural sector has “created an incredible cultural emptiness on the national level”, and crushed the international potential of cultural institutions in Brussels such as the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, the opera La Monnaie/De Munt, the International House of Literature Passa Porta, or the theatre house KVS.¹ Instead, Mortier subscribes to the notion of a “Belgian culture” that transcends the language and communitarian tensions between the Flemish and Francophone regions. In addition, he proposes to promote a cultural policy based on a national Belgian level and a new imagination of Brussels “as a capital community where the three national languages of Belgium [Dutch, French, and German] and English are officially accepted”.² Mortier contrasts his vision to a

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¹ Erwin Mortier, “Land zonder cultuur”, in *De Morgen*, 5 March 2011: “een onvergeeflijke culturele leegte gecreëerd op het nationale niveau.” This and all further translations are ours, unless stated otherwise.

² Ibid.: “als een hoofdstedelijke gemeenschap waar de drie landstalen en het Engels officieel erkend zijn.”
“Flemish movement” which he sees as historically supported by the need to defend Flemish language rights. Mortier questions the movement’s monolingualism as sprouting from provincial and Catholic-conservative ideological foundations, and, as such, poses an impediment to “Protestantism or free-thinking spirits” and “a broader cultural and intellectual heritage”.  

For the purpose of this essay, we will not discuss the legitimacy of Mortier’s claims nor the reactions his piece triggered in intellectual circles. However, seen in the context of the current political crisis in Belgium, which became most visible following the federal elections of 13 June 2010, Mortier’s text is illustrative for the myriad ways in which writers and intellectuals in Flanders have recently expressed pro-Belgian sentiments in the public domain, opposing hegemonic nationalist and neoliberal discourses dominant in Flemish politics. These latter discourses are generally characterized by a demand for increasing political and economic autonomy of the Flemish region.  

As Sarah De Mul discusses in her essay on the intercultural literary policy in Flanders in this volume, an important part of the ideological framework underpinning the Flemish institutional literary field is the idea that there is such a thing as a homogenous Flemish culture, a notion that is distinguished from Dutch culture, and at the same time is made compatible with the integration of non-ethnic Flemishness. The idea of a homogenous Flemish culture is reinforced as an effect of a specific construction of a “Flemish literature”, as De Mul writes, “through references to Dutch Literature in discussions about the lack and desirability of migration literature in Flanders”. The latter point suggests that a Flemish multicultural literature derives part of its meaning from the focus on the non-Flemish ethnic background of

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3 *Ibid.*: “het protestantisme of de vrijdenkerij” and “een weidser cultureel en intellectueel erfgoed”.

4 While in Wallonia the Social-Democratic party won the elections with a notable margin, the result in Flanders showed the overwhelming electoral success of nationalist right wing and conservative parties. In the wake of a complex combination of long-lasting communitarian tensions between the regions, and the urgency to decide on a number of difficult political issues and ongoing discussions about the functioning of the federal state structure itself, Belgium broke the world record in 2011 for a nation-state without government for the longest period ever (this record was previously held by Iraq with a period of 249 days). In Flanders, the winning parties are the N-VA (27.8%), CD&V (17.3%), Vlaams Belang (12.3%), and Lijst Dedecker (3.7%); in Wallonia, the Parti Socialiste (37.6%) is the winner.