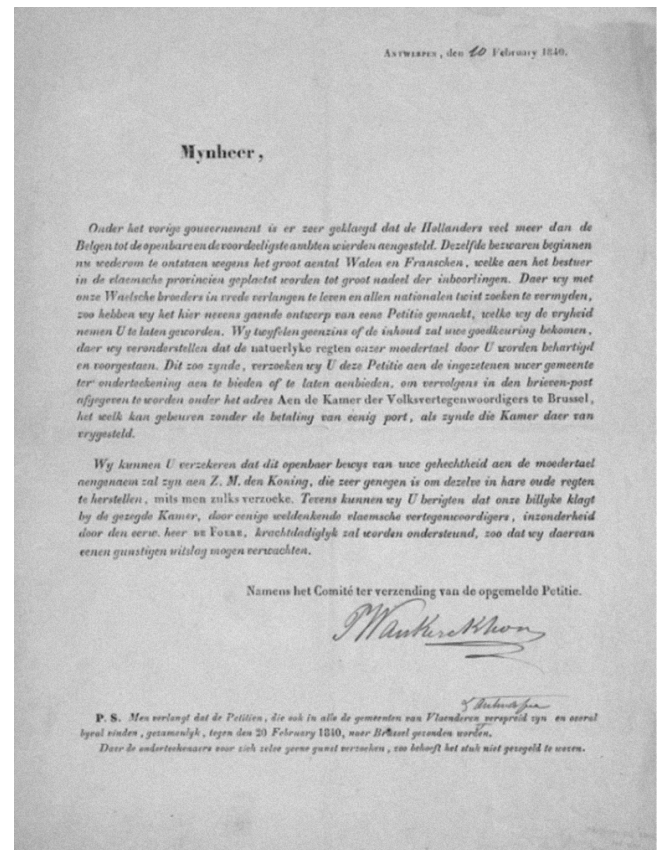


Petition to the Representatives of the Belgian people

Flanders
1840



Cataloguing data

Title (English)

Petition to the Representatives of the Belgian people

Title (original language)

Petionnement aan de vertegenwoordigers van het Belgische volk

Author(s) (Person(s))

Ferdinand Snellaert, Philip Blommaert, Jan Frans Willems

Date and place

1840, Ghent

Region(s)

Flanders

Language(s)

Dutch

Type of document

Petition

Reference Code

FL0001

Context

Generally marked as the first time the Flemish movement would formulate a political programme of any sorts, the "petitionnement" was formulated as a response to the linguistic policies as outlined in the new Belgian constitution following its independence in 1830. The petition - which would ask for linguistic reforms on both the state level and via the foundation of Flemish cultural institutes - would serve as a template for future endeavours of the Flemish movement in the following decades, and would contribute to the emergence of a political Flemish national movement. Its direct consequences would be the emergence of the movement in general (as outline by the Declaration) and of the first political attempt to address the "grievances" of the Flemish movement (see Flemish Commission)

To the representatives of the Belgian people.

Dear Sirs!

It is known that the Low German speaking Brabanters, Flemish and Limburgers have been governed in their mother tongue for at least six centuries and that their nationality has always excelled best, when that language enjoyed its full rights. Everywhere Nederduitsch [Lower German/Flemish] has been spoken since time immemorial, it is still spoken today. The old Lands-Constitutions or Joyous Entries of our Sovereign, our old laws, our local costumes are originally contained in that language. Many thousands of books have been printed in it and one cannot say that our ancestors ever considered Flemish a petty patois. In vain it has been suppressed by the last domination of the French and banned from the administration. The great majority of Belgians still speak Flemish and if it is true that it is now held in contempt by many, the cause of this is that since the French government one has shown too much affection for a French education and by no means for a national one; also that one does not properly appreciate what one does not know.

And what are the fruits of such a French education?

That there is little unity anymore between the upper classes who want to speak French and the lower classes, who still live in their old Flemish ways;

That for the love of French, thousands of foreigners have been lured into the country to make us even more Frenchified, either by means of the newspapers, or by public education, or by their appointment to the most important posts;

That the Belgian youth, once so religious when they were brought up in Flemish, by the influence of foreign ideas and the bad French books, of which our country is overflowing, is beginning to become as irreligious as it is by our southern neighbour;

That because of the French-speaking classes, by whom all authority is exercised, more and more persons come to the public administration in the Flemish regions, who absolutely cannot or do not want to speak Flemish, and who nevertheless, by virtue of their office, are destined to make decisions on our manners and customs, which they do not know or only know poorly;

That our simple countrymen very often fall into fines, lawsuits and expenses, because they do not understand the writings, which are given to them or are made to sign;

That in many places no mayors, town clerks, or other local officials can be found or elected to correspond with the higher government of the country;

That a large part of the population can no longer speak with some of the mayors and judges without the help of translators or third persons;

That one sees a large number of defendants being sentenced who do not understand a single word of the pleadings or debates, and thus are not able to reprimand their own lawyers when they err in the means of defense;

In sum, the French speakers have all the advantages and benefits in our country alone; while the Flemish bourgeois, although they make up the great majority of the population, are forced to blindly surrender to their leadership, which is one of the greatest transformations a nation can undergo.

And should we, Flemish Belgians, now that we have regained our old nationality, not also regain our natural rights? In Denmark and Switzerland, as in Belgium, there are different languages; however, the inhabitants of these countries are each governed by their own regional language and this does not affect their nationality.

In the past, the House of Burgundy was obliged to respect our language; the Austrian government confirmed its rights; will the Belgian State suppress it now? No, certainly not! We cannot believe that the men who govern us, however great their fondness for the French language may be, would wish to dry up the audacity of not even learning the language of their fellow citizens; But we think that they will willingly reach out to us to restore the unity, broken by the influence of the foreign, yes we hope that they will leave us as history teaches us that we should be, Flemish, Lower Germans [Nederduitschers], as God created us.

For these reasons we, the undersigned, desire that by you, My Lords, and by the state government, based on art. 23 of the National Constitution, measures be taken, in order to restore the Flemish language, as much as possible, to the same rights as it was during the Austrian government, when all civil servants in the Flemish provinces had to speak and write in Flemish; and on that account, we request that a law be established:

1. That all provincial and local interests in the Flemish-speaking regions will be dealt with in Flemish;
2. That the Kingdom's civil servants will use the same language in their relations there, be it with town councils or with the residents;
3. That this language must also be used by the courts, when the parties or the accused can understand it;
4. That a Flemish Academy, or a Flemish department at the Brussels Academy, will be established to encourage the Dutch language literature;
- And 5. That the Dutch language at the University of Ghent and at the other regional schools in the Flemish regions will enjoy the same privileges as the French language.

Doing this, you will do well and obtain the divine blessing on your work.

January-February 1840

Diliname is a digital library dedicated to preserving, disseminating, and providing access to historical documents that shaped key moments of the XIX and XX century. It aims to offer historical context for contemporary political and institutional developments.

Discover new docs at www.diliname.eu