60 more years of the EU would be a tragedy for Europe

Last weekend, 27 EU leaders gathered in Italy to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome – the event which gave birth to what has become the EU. When last weekend's festivities are compared with the 50th anniversary celebrations 10 years ago, however, it is apparent that the fault lines within the whole structure of the EU are becoming more visible as time passes.

Ten years ago, there were no issues with nations refusing to sign a declaration. This time, Greece and Poland both threatened to block the renewed statement of the EU's future intentions. Ten years ago, no one could have believed that, in a white paper setting out five options for the EU's future, a President of the European Commission would have mentioned scaling down the EU to a trade bloc and nothing more, even though this was clearly not his preferred choice. Ten years ago, the practise of scapegoating Brussels for everything which goes wrong was largely confined to the UK. Now it is grist to the mill in countries like Hungary.

It is possible that 2017 may be the year when the EU starts to heave a collective sigh of relief after a dismal decade. The €urozone economy seems finally to be turning the corner after an extensive programme of Quantitative Easing and the first of the big General Elections to take place this year has seen the anti-EU Geert Wilders gain fewer votes in the Netherlands than some had anticipated. No other nation looks set to follow the UK out of the exit door.

But these crumbs of comfort offer only a respite. The fundamental flaws in the EU project will still be present.

In order to understand why the EU has failed to live up to

expectations, one needs to travel north from Rome to Belgium. Rome, once capital of an empire which encompassed much of the Mediterranean world, may have provided the inspiration for European unification, but it has been the small, rather enigmatic country sandwiched between France and the Netherlands which has served as the real template.

You don't have to have spent very long in Belgium to realise that it isn't like most other European countries. While you can find minority indigenous ethnic groups in Spain, Finland, Romania and Sweden, among others, Belgium from its very beginning was an uncomfortable marriage between two ethnic groups between whom very little love has been lost.

The country came into being as recently as 1831 when it declared independence from the Netherlands. In the three previous centuries, the territory we now know as Belgium had been ruled by Spain, Austria, France and finally Holland. Unlike its northern neighbour which accepted the Reformation, its people were predominantly Roman Catholic and this was the main reason for the break with the Protestant Netherlands. However, in spite of sharing a common faith, the people did not share a common language. In the south lived the French-speaking Walloons while the North was populated by the Flemish people, who spoke Dutch.

Our country provided Belgium with its first king, Leopold I, a young widower who had previously been married to Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent, later King George IV. His second wife was a French princess, Louise of Orléans and the problems began straight away. The language of the court was French, which thus turned the Flemish into second-class citizens. To add insult to injury, Brussels itself was situated in Flanders, but the Francophone court resulted in a French-speaking enclave developing in parts of the new capital city. When Belgium industrialised, the heavy industry was situated in the French part of the country, which became the more prosperous area.

In the First World War, most of the officers in the Belgian army were francophones and some Dutch-speaking soldiers were court-martialled and even sentenced to death for not obeying orders even though their reason for not doing so was simple enough – they couldn't understand a word. Even the court proceedings were held in French.

Unsurprisingly, behaviour like this fuelled a strong resentment of the francophones by the Flemish majority, Even an attempt by Belgium's third king Albert I to preside over a genuinely bilingual court could not bind the two communities together. In recent years, Belgium's economy has become more services-orientated and much of its heavy industry has been shut down. French-speaking Charleroi, once the centre of Belgium's coal and steel production, is now a by-word for poverty and unemployment. Meanwhile, to the north, Flanders has now become the most prosperous part of Belgium and the Flemings are none too keen that their taxes are used to pay benefits to the Walloons, whom they regard as lazy.

These tensions have led to the devolution of quite significant powers to the two regions and to Brussels itself in an attempt to hold the country together, although there is still a national parliament where you find twice as many political parties as you would normally expect – a French-speaking Socialist party and a Dutch-speaking Socialist Party; a French-speaking Liberal Party and a Dutch-speaking Liberal Party and so on. The linguistic divide is sharper than any ideological divide, as evidenced by the 2010 General Election where arguments between the bickering parties lasted a full 541 days before a coalition government finally took office.

Unsurprisingly, parties have been formed in Flanders whose goal is independence – in other words, the end of Belgium. During my time in Brussels (2006-2008), a number of opinion polls painted a very pessimistic outlook for the country, with many expecting it to disintegrate within a decade.

Belgium, however, has muddled on and looks set to keep going at least for now. Besides the sheer inertia which the country's massive bureaucracy engenders, there is also the problem of Brussels itself – now a predominantly Francophone city – albeit surrounded by Dutch speakers – whose inhabitants are none too keen to see their country partitioned. In other words, the obstacles to ending this unhappy marriage are so great that carrying on seems the least bad option.

The parallels with the EU are obvious. For Flemings complaining about lazy Walloons, read Germans moaning about profligate Greeks. For one of two of Belgium's ethnic groups to be seen as second class citizens, think of Poland's worries about it and the other Visegrad nations being treated as second member states. In other words, the same problems but on a wider scale.

Most importanly, however, if two peoples united by religion and several hundred years of shared history are still so uncomfortable with each other after over 180 years, what chance is there of establishing a European federal state where all the citizens of 27 very different nations will somehow feel themselves to share a common European identity? It just isn't going to work.

Nevertheless, as the complexities of the UK's Brexit divorce will be very much to the fore during the next two years, it may well be that even the most uncomfortable members of EU-27, especially if they use the €uro, could well decide that inertia is the better option – in other words, to try to slow down the move towards closer integration but to grin and bear it and carry on much as before in spite of seemingly insurmountable problems.

The future of the EU therefore could be that of Belgium writ large. If so, it would be nothing less than a tragedy for the entire continent.