



BELGIUM

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Table 1. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt I

A. The party composition of Verhofstadt I

Date of investiture: 12 July 1999

No.	Party	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats (Lower House)	Number and percentage of cabinet posts ¹
21	Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD) (Flemish Liberals and Democrats) (Flemish-speaking)	23 (15.3%)	5 (27.8%) ²
31	Parti Socialiste (PS) (Socialist Party) (French-speaking)	19 (12.7%)	3 (16.7%)
22	Fédération Parti Réformateur Libéral (PRL) – Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF) – Mouvement des Citoyens pour le Changement (MCC) (Federation of the Liberal Reform Party, the Francophone Democratic Front and the Movement of Citizens for Change) (French-speaking)	18 (12.0%)	3 (16.7%)
30	Socialistische Partij (SP) (Socialist Party) (Flemish-speaking)	14 (9.3%)	3 (16.7%)
26	Ecolo (Greens) (French-speaking)	11 (7.3%)	2 (11.1%)
27	Agalev (Greens) (Flemish-speaking)	9 (6.0%)	2 (11.1%)
	Total	94 (62.7%)	18 (100%)

B. Cabinet members of Verhofstadt I

Prime Minister/Premier ministre – Eerste-minister: G. Verhofstadt (1953 male, VLD)

Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Employment/Vice-Première ministre, Ministre de l'Emploi:
L. Onkelinx (1958 female, PS)

Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs/Vice-Premier ministre, Ministre des Affaires
étrangères: L. Michel (1947 male, PRL)

Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Budget, Social Integration and Social Economy/Vice-Eerste
minister, Minister van Begroting, Maatschappelijke integratie en Sociale economie: J.
Vande Lanotte (1955 male, SP)

Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Mobility and Transportation/Vice-Première ministre, Min-
istre de la Mobilité et des Transports: I. Durant (1954 female, Ecolo)

- Minister of Consumer Interests, Health and Environment/Minister van Consumentenzaken, Volksgezondheid en Leefmilieu: M. Aelvoet (1944 female, Agalev)
- Minister of Home Affairs/Ministre de l'Intérieur: A. Duquesne (1941 male, PRL)
- Minister of Social Affairs and Pensions / Minister van Sociale zaken en Pensionen: F. Vandenbroucke (1955 male, SP)
- Minister of Civil Service and Modernisation of Public Administration/Minister van Ambtenarenzaken en Modernisering van de openbare besturen: L. Van den Bossche (1947 male, SP)
- Minister of Defense/Ministre de la Défense: A. Flahaut (1955 male, PS)
- Minister of Agriculture and the Self-Employed/Minister van Landbouw en Middenstand: J. Gabriels (1943 male, VLD)
- Minister of Justice/Minister van Justicie: M. Verwilghen (1952 male, VLD)
- Minister of Finance/Ministre des Finances: D. Reynders (1958 male, PRL)
- Minister of Telecommunications, Public Enterprises and Participations/Minister van Telecommunicatie, Overheidsbedrijven en Participaties: R. Daems (1959 male, VLD)
- Minister of Economy and Scientific Research/Ministre de l'Economie et de la Recherche scientifique: R. Demotte (1963 male, PS), *replaced* on 4 April 2000 by Ch. Picqué (1948 male, PS), also in charge of large town policy.³
- Secretary of State of Foreign Trade (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/Staatssecretaris voor Buitenlandse Handel (toegevoegd aan de Minister van Buitenlandse zaken): P. Chevalier (1952 male, VLD); *replaced* on 12 October 2000 by Neyts (1944 female, VLD).
- Secretary of State of Development Co-operation (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/Staatssecretaris voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (toegevoegd aan de Minister van Buitenlandse zaken): E. Boutmans (1948 male, Agalev).
- Secretary of State of Energy and Sustainable Development (attached to the Minister of Mobility and Transportation)/Secrétaire d'Etat à l'Energie et au développement durable (adjoint au Ministre de la Mobilité et des Transports): O. Deleuze (1954 male, Ecolo).

¹ Including 3 'Secretaries of State' (i.e. deputy ministers). Since 1999, unlike the preceding years, they have been taking part in the full Cabinet meetings.

² Including the Prime Minister.

³ Charles Picqué was since 1999 Commissioner of the government for the policy to be implemented in large towns. In order to keep the former balance in Commissioner positions (introduced in 1999 as temporary positions for specific functions, related to ministers or to secretaries of state), a new PS Commissioner was designated: Yvan Ylief, in charge of Scientific research, thus associated to Charles Picqué. Rudy Demotte became Minister of Budget, Culture and Sports at the French-speaking Community.

Institutional changes

A joint Senate-Chamber special 'political renewal' committee was installed in order to discuss and put forward reforms of the electoral system, the introduction of instruments of direct democracy, etc. It established a very long list of possible reforms, and the discussions evolved quite slowly. In the meantime, the government decided, on its own, to implement a 50% reduction of the weight of list votes in determining the order in which individual candid-

ates from the list are to be elected for elections at all levels.¹ This reform was the result of a compromise between the Liberals, who wanted a more drastic reform, and the Socialists and Greens who were not clearly in favour of such a reform. The distinction between effective and substitute candidates' lists was also abandoned. This reform was first implemented for the October local elections. The Council of Ministers also put forward a constitutional reform ensuring the presence of at least one member of each gender in the federal and subnational Cabinets.

Easier access to Belgian nationality was granted by Parliament and was enforced before the October local elections. Belgian citizens living abroad will also be encouraged to vote for general elections by a new, simplified and free procedure (only 18 persons out of a potential electorate of over 450,000 people voted in 1999, due to the complex and costly first version of the procedure). At the October local elections, 17.1% (more than double the 1999 European elections figures) of the EU citizens living in Belgium filed a form in order to vote. This was the first time such an opportunity was available. The well-established Italian community (especially in Wallonia) represented half of all European citizens registered to vote.

In the meantime, the committees in charge of institutional reforms (at the federal level and at the Brussels-Capital Region level) created by the 1999 governmental agreements remained deadlocked because of disagreement on most of the matters on the agenda. The federal committee (consisting of members of the different governments and parliaments, referred to by the acronym COSTA in Dutch, COREE in French) was taken over by the inner cabinet (kern) which signed an agreement regarding the transfer of Agriculture and

¹ The electoral code fixes the way in which seats are distributed among candidates on each party's list. There are two alternative ways of casting votes: a list vote, endorsing the order of candidates on the list that is presented, and a preference vote. Every candidate whose number of preference votes reaches the eligibility figure (calculated by dividing the party's total constituency vote by the number of seats it won, plus one) receives a seat. Usually, only those candidates at the top of party lists manage to win such a large number of votes. If the head of the list receives fewer preference votes than this, list votes are added to his preference votes until the required number is reached. This procedure is repeated for the second candidate on the list, and so on until all the party's seats have been allocated. However, if all list votes were needed before all the seats have been assigned, then the remaining seats are given to those remaining candidates who received the largest number of preference votes. In practice, voters rarely manage to alter the ordered list (less than 1% of all MPs elected since World War I) in spite of the fact that preference voting has increased dramatically (from 16% in 1919 to 56% in 1995). Under the new system, the number of list votes is to be divided by two before this procedure is applied.

Trade prerogatives to the regions.² The demand came from Flanders, whereas French-speaking parties of the majority received a promise of further talks on a better financing of the language communities (a 'francophone' demand). The Brussels committee, in charge of finding solutions to the problem of representation of Flemish interests in the Brussels-Capital Region parliament and to the threat of the (Flemish) extreme-right, which could block the functioning of Brussels political institutions, decided in May to postpone their meetings until after the local elections.

In October, representatives of the regional and federal governments and the co-presidents of the COSTA-COREE negotiated and reached the 'Sainte-Thérèse' agreement. The French-speaking parties wanted a revision of the federated entities financing mechanisms, and the Flemish parties wanted more tax autonomy. Both requests were met, but the highly symbolic and strategic transfer of control over communal (i.e. local) and provincial³ laws to the regions, already part of the 1992 Saint-Michael's agreement but never implemented because of the lack of guarantees offered to the French-speaking populations living in communes belonging to the Flemish Region (especially around Brussels), will now be implemented. The transfer of responsibility for Third-World aid to the regions was also decided. The Greens (especially the Flemish Greens of Agalev) criticised the latter decision, whereas the FDF completely opposed the regionalisation of communal and provincial laws. This is important, because it appeared that this agreement was to be translated into bills requiring special 2/3 majority. As the government cannot rely on such a majority, the votes of the VU (not part of the federal government but party to the agreement as it is part of the Flemish government) are needed, and they are even more crucial if the FDF representatives vote against. Having to deal with a very deep internal crisis (see below), the small VU was put under pressure but was nevertheless able to blackmail its partners.

Issues in national politics

If one looks at the number of issues that were subject to public debate and induced a certain level of conflict and polarisation, one can conclude that the year 2000 was a particularly lively year. One of the key reasons was the nature of the ruling 'rainbow' coalition, an odd assemblage of Liberals, Socialists and Greens. On many occasions, there were severe personal and ideological

² As a consequence, the federal Secretary of State in charge of Agriculture will have to abstain in votes of the European Council of Ministers every time regional ministers do not reach a common position.

³ Intermediate level between the communes and the regions/communities. There are 10 provinces in Belgium.

conflicts between the governmental partners, in stark contrast with the situation in the Dehaene cabinet up to 1999. Many of these conflicts occurred in public, as the various parties and personalities often used the mass media to express their views.

Most of the political year, both before and after, was influenced by the October local elections. The Flemish extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok recorded very good results in several cities, as did the French-speaking Greens of Ecolo. The Walloon Socialists (PS) kept their predominant position, as did the Christian Democrats (CVP) in Flanders. The formation of local coalitions, especially in the Brussels Region, led to harsh conflicts between French-speaking Liberals (PRL) and their partners in the federal and regional governments, as Socialists and Greens coalesced (sometimes with the PSC, in the opposition at all other levels) and tried to keep the Liberals out of power where they were the most powerful (especially in some Brussels communes). The large coalition needed in Antwerp to avoid the participation of the Vlaams Blok (which received 33% of the vote) also triggered harsh discussions among SP, VLD and Agalev. As some French-speaking Liberal mayors (PRL) lost their offices, the party president made some ministerial reshuffles at the subnational level. This was seen as a means of giving 'consolation prizes' to unlucky heavyweights. In the process, all PRL women with executive positions were removed, and the 24-old son of Minister of Foreign Affairs Michel was designated as Walloon Minister, which was criticized by other parties and the press with regard to the so-called 'new political culture' promised by the government parties.

Quite importantly, both the democratic nationalist VU (part of the Flemish government) and the French-speaking ethnolinguistic FDF (part of the federal coalition) had bad results at the local elections. This stirred a crisis especially inside the VU, which was already split between hard-line nationalists and a more 'pragmatic' and progressive wing. In any case, both of these parties tried to recover the initiative. This is one reason why the 'ethnolinguistic honeymoon' – a relatively serene linguistic climate that started after the 1999 elections, with fewer conflicts and several gestures of 'good will' from both Flemish and French-speaking members of government at the federal and subnational levels – slowly but surely ebbed away during the year 2000.

Apart from the set of key issues that dominated the political scene, the internal life of quite a few other political parties raised some existential questions. Both the PSC and the CVP, for the first time in opposition after decades in power, attempted to reshape their programmatic profile and political style. The PRL started discussing a possible change of label, in a move to try not only to integrate their current junior partners MCC and FDF (both of them quite reluctant), but also to capture the right wing of the PSC.

Mobility and transportation issues stood high on the agenda on quite a few occasions. In late December 1999, the Green Minister of Transportation, I. Durant, had put a ban on night flights at the Brussels international airport (to be effective from 2003 onwards), stirring a major political (and economic) dispute. In mid-January, she had to step back, as the issue was taken over by the Prime Minister. One month later a compromise deal was reached, including a system of reduction of night-time sound emission, but without forbidding night flights, and a TGV (fast train) connection to the airport. In September, protesting against rising petrol prices, lorry drivers massively blocked the centre of Brussels and other main Belgian cities and communications axes, virtually bringing the country to a halt, and demanded fewer taxes on diesel fuel. The Green transportation minister did not give ground on that point. Eventually, the government agreed to reduce some of the drivers' professional charges and to act more resolutely against unfair competition in the transportation sector. In the meantime, Walloon bus drivers also staged a month-long strike to obtain wage increases.

Consumer-related issues (health, food, agriculture) continued to shake the country – as well as many other European countries – in the aftermath of the 1999 'chickengate' scandal (dioxin in food products). The Chamber Committee on the dioxin scandal recommended that the whole administrative structure in charge of consumer safety and food control be reorganised. Farmers' organisations confirmed major financial losses in the agricultural sector, and farmers went back to the streets in protest against their loss of purchasing power. Nine cases of 'mad cow disease' (BSE) were detected in the country during the year 2000, creating a growing suspicion from consumers regarding meat products, and inducing a substantial decrease in meat consumption. On 11 December, the European Council of Ministers of Agriculture decided to suspend all use of animal-based feed for 6 months. The implementation of this decision was very difficult in the Belgian context. The estimated bill for BSE-related problems amounted to at least 250 million €. As if this were not enough, animal protection activists made public some clandestine video tapes showing acts of extreme violence against cattle in the country's main stock yards. This led to more – sometimes physically violent – conflicts between farmers and animal protection activists, and dealt one more blow to the image of the agricultural sector.

As far as economic issues are concerned, thanks to the conjuncture of particularly favourable economic circumstances and an unprecedented good situation in public finance, the Liberal Minister of Finance, D. Reynders, announced a fiscal reform in August. His basic aim was to reduce the overall tax pressure, but his plans stirred quite negative reactions, both from the trade unions and the employers' associations, not to mention the Socialist

and Green partners. The Liberal proposals would have consumed all of the new budgetary flexibility. Hence, these proposals had to be moderated so that the Socialists and Greens could also push their own projects. Another quite acute problem was raised as the result of soaring oil prices: the heating bill for poorer citizens. After some debates, the government decided to establish a partial reimbursement mechanism directed towards the less well-off.

There was a lot of talk, the whole year long, about ‘political renewal’ (see above), i.e. bringing about a better relationship between citizens and the political system. It was in this context that Minister of Civil Service and Modernisation of Public Administration L. Van den Bossche (SP) launched his ‘Copernicus Scheme’ aiming at the development of a new relationship between politicians and civil servants (including abolishing the ministerial cabinets), and at the satisfaction of the ‘citizen-client’. In an unprecedented initiative, 7 million Belgians aged 16 years or more received a questionnaire including 11 questions regarding reform of the public service. The turnout, however, was lower than 10%, with – unsurprisingly – 85% favourable answers. Most initiatives from this minister met strong criticism both from the trade unions and some of the other coalition parties.

The judiciary remained quite high on the agenda, stirring quite a few conflicts in the majority. The security and penitentiary scheme put forward by the Minister of Justice, in an attempt to fight crime and to ensure better access to justice for all citizens, was quite strongly amended because of the opposition of Ecolo and PS to some key points. It was then accepted by the Council of Ministers in May. Another ministerial project was voted in February – with no enthusiasm as far as the Socialists and the Greens were concerned – in connection with the European football championships (Euro 2000) in the summer: the procedure of immediate appearance (*comparution immédiate*) for hooligans and other petty criminals. Applied to only a few cases, this ‘snelrecht’ quickly showed problems and limits. In the meantime, debates and negotiations kept occurring in connection with the complete reorganisation of the police (due to start on 1 January 2001): the creation of a new two-level ‘integrated police’ (local and federal), bringing together the former *gendarmérie* (former army units) and the police. There were lots of conflicts, as well as demonstrations by personnel of the judicial police, a rare event in Belgian social history.

In stark contrast with preceding years, there was much less talk about the ‘Dutroux affair’ and some (ongoing or new) political-financial scandals. Nevertheless, in the context of an enquiry made by the Swiss, the Flemish Liberal Secretary of State Chevalier, suspected of fraud and abuse of trust in his occupation as lawyer, was forced to resign. The crash of the flamboyant

Flemish high-tech company Lernout & Hauspie, amidst allegations of wide-scale fraud, also made the headlines.

Immigration-related issues were amongst the most difficult for the 'rainbow' coalition to handle. In January, a one-time wide-scale regularisation of the '*sans papiers*' (illegal residents) was launched by the Home Office Minister, who also decreed a general and systematic control of borders. As a result, more than 50,000 regularisation requests were introduced in only three weeks' time. The problem was that the treatment of the requests took much longer than expected. By December, virtually no requests had been fully processed, and the '*sans papiers*' staged several demonstrations in protest, as several organisations – as well as the Socialists and the Greens – demanded quicker and more effective implementation. In addition, as the Liberals and the SP pushed towards a more restrictive handling of asylum seekers (*demandeurs d'asile*), this led to further tensions between them and their PS, Ecolo and Agalev partners.

Belgium was quite visible on the international scene throughout the year. One of the reasons was that the Minister of Foreign affairs (L. Michel) took several initiatives. Most notably, he played a leading role in the EU moves against the governmental participation of J. Haidar and the FPÖ in Austria, and in the international pressures to bring General Pinochet to court. Minister Michel was also a key actor in the troubled region of central Africa. In addition, a Brussels judge started a case against the Congolese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdoulaye Yerodia Ndombasi, charging him with incitement to hate and appeal to murder in connection with the war in central Africa. Further, the Chamber opened up a special Lumumba Committee to investigate the exact circumstances of the assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba in the 1960s and the possible involvement of Belgian political decision-makers.

Ethical and 'lifestyle' issues were also quite conflict-laden. There were very long parliamentary discussions regarding a proposal to introduce a legal and juridical framework for euthanasia. This was a sensitive issue, stirring tensions inside the majority parties and gaining great attention and interest in public opinion. In the meantime, the Green Minister of Health and Consumer Affairs, backed by the Greens, most Socialists and some (not all) Liberals, pushed for legislative reforms allowing personal use of cannabis. This proved a very divisive issue, on the political scene, in the media and in public opinion, as did discussion regarding the possible parental rights of the recently recognised homosexual couples.

Finally, in the grey zone between politics, society and gossip, and in contrast with the preceding year, there were few headline events regarding the royal family. A few times during the year, some 'people' magazines (wrongly) announced that Princess (and future Queen) Mathilde was ex-

pecting her first baby. In April, King Albert II had to undergo serious heart surgery. He recovered quite quickly and there were no signs that he had plans to hand over the throne prematurely to his son Prince Philippe. As in most neighbouring countries, the ‘millennium bug’ had no serious consequences in Belgium. There was however a (quite annoying) incident, as the ‘Télérad’ network monitoring radioactivity – and hence playing a key role in the event of a major accident in a nuclear power plant – was disabled by the bug. The European Football Championship (Euro 2000), jointly organised by Belgium and the Netherlands, was generally considered as a great success, although there were some lively debates regarding the use of force – considered by some as disproportionate – against some football supporters. The general tone in the media at the end of the year was that Belgium was now able to show a ‘good face’ abroad, after the ‘black years’ of the Dutroux affair and the chickengate scandal. To be honest, though, the Belgian political year 2000 had its ups and downs.

Sources and further information

Internet

- Belgian Federal Government on line: <http://belgium.fgov.be> [links to all other official sites]
- Detailed electoral results: <http://www.vub.ac.be/POLI/elections>

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