

## Belgium

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### Changes in cabinet

Jaak Gabriels became Minister of Economy, Foreign Trade and Housing in the Flemish regional government. As Annemie Neyts was already Secretary of State of Foreign Trade (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/*Staatssecretaris voor Buitenlandse Handel (toegevoegd aan de Minister van Buitenlandse zaken)*, she not only took on the Agriculture responsibility until January 2002 (see the section on institutional reforms, below) but also became Minister, to comply with the constitutional rule of linguistic parity in the Council of Ministers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as foreign trade is one of the competencies that will be transferred from the federal to the regional level on 1 January 2002 (again see the section on institutional reforms, below), she is due from that time to become ‘Minister without portfolio’ and she will remain attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Consequently, both the number and percentage of cabinet posts for each party have changed: VLD (4 posts, 23.5 per cent); PS, PRL-FDF-MCC and SP (3 posts and 17.6 per cent each); and ECOLO and AGALEV (2 posts and 11.8 per cent each).

### Changes in Parliament

In Parliament, changes also occurred, but mainly in the opposition parties (see below). One majority party Member of Parliament (MP), Vincent Decroly (ECOLO (Greens)), left his party in October to become an independent MP (see below). Hence, from October 2001 onwards, the formal majority dropped from 94 to 93 MPs out of 150, and the number of ECOLO MPs dropped from 11 to 10.

*Table 1. Cabinet composition*


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For the composition of Verhofstadt I on 1 January 2001,  
see *Political Data Yearbook 2000*: 254–255.

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*Changes during 2001:*

Minister of Agriculture and the Self-Employed/*Minister van Landbouw en Middenstand*: Jaak Gabriels (1943 male, VLD) resigned on 17 July and was replaced by Annemie Neyts (1944 female, VLD).

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### **Institutional changes**

During the first half of the year, institutional and ethno-linguistic issues remained high on the agenda. On 24 January, federal and regional ministers reached an agreement on yet another stage in the country's federalisation process: a revision of prior agreements (regionalisation of agriculture and foreign trade on 1 January 2002), a new system to finance the Communities, more fiscal autonomy for the Regions and Communities, and the regionalisation of the local and provincial law.

The last was a touchy issue both for the Francophones around the linguistic border and for the Flemish in Brussels. Indeed, the FDF (a member of the PRL-FDF-MCC federation and part of the governmental coalition), a defender of French-speaking interests, rejected the agreement. Its opposite number, the VU (Flemish nationalists), nearly imploded following the agreement; it was only accepted by a small majority within the party leadership and, consequently, some of its members in the federal Parliament as well as its president voted against it.

The fact that these politically sensitive projects had to be passed by a two-thirds majority in Parliament, caused serious problems to the governmental majority as it could no longer rely on the votes of the two FDF MPs and some of the VU MPs (without the VU and FDF votes, it would have only reached 94 votes in the House of Representatives, 6 votes short of the 100 votes required out of 150). In exchange for its ratification of the agreement, the FDF requested some compensation for Francophones, while the VU asked for a new cycle of negotiations and better Flemish representation in the Brussels institutions.

In March, a new agreement was reached on a partial regionalisation of aid to developing countries and of aid to some scientific and cultural institutions. However, the Brussels issue remained the 'hot' point on the agenda as the Brussels regional conference on State reform was launched to attempt to

bridge quite significant differences between the Francophones and the Flemish, mainly on the question of the (under-)representation of the Flemish in the Brussels regional council. Finally, the Prime Minister resolved the conflict before the end of March by obtaining a guaranteed minimum of Flemish representation at all decision-making levels in Brussels (local and regional), and by transferring more funds to the Community institutions. In spite of this new agreement, the VU vote in Parliament remained uncertain because the party was split into two factions (see below). Another problem was the approval of the bills by the Council of State.<sup>2</sup> Its advice (it is only an advisory body) highlighted some problems of constitutionality, as the regionalisation of local and provincial law required a change to the constitution and not merely a special-majority bill.

As he was unable to convince the VU to ratify the agreement, the Premier decided to turn to the opposition, namely to the PSC (French-speaking Christian Democrats). On 30 May, the majority accepted five PSC amendments to the financial sections of the agreement in order to reach a two-thirds majority in both chambers. However, the other part of the agreement (competences) received less support from the PSC. After negotiations between the government and the PSC, it was decided to add some financing mechanisms for the Brussels region and to support the ratification of the Council of Europe's 1995 European Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. On 6 June, the financial part of the law was passed (98 votes for, 40 against and 11 abstentions), and on 29 June it was the turn of the competences part (96 votes for, 41 against and 12 abstentions).

The parliamentary committee on 'political culture renewal', already bypassed by governmental projects on the issues on which it was supposed to work, cancelled some meetings due to absenteeism. In addition, the inter-ministerial and inter-parliamentary committee on institutional renewal that was also installed in 1999 (see the entry on Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 1999*), but also bypassed by negotiations undertaken elsewhere (mainly between party leaders) was dissolved. In the meantime, Prime Minister Verhofstadt took the opportunity of the general governmental policy declaration in front of the House of Representatives to put forward several institutional innovations, among which was the suppression of the Senate (which will be on the agenda in 2002).

One should also mention another institutions-related debate: the question of voting rights in local and provincial elections for non-European Union citizens. This issue saw the VLD (who stood firmly against it) in opposition to the rest of its partners in the majority. All Francophone parties, including the PSC, were in favour of such a measure. At the end of the year, this project remained stranded.

## Issues in national politics

### *Parties*

The Belgian party political landscape changed considerably, especially in the Flemish party system (De Winter & Dumont 1999). The most important change was the conclusion of the intense internal conflicts the VU suffered throughout the 1990s. Eventually, the party split in Autumn 2001 as a result of a deep dissensus regarding the support the party was called upon to give to the negotiations about the new state reforms. VU leaders had been actively involved in this process. The hardliners opposed the concessions the VU (and the other Flemish parties) made and several times refused to accept the outcome, pushing the VU delegates to re-open negotiations and obtain more concessions, which they did. Still, the party president, Bourgeois, leader of the *'fundis'*, strongly opposed the outcome negotiated by former presidents Anciaux and van Krunkelsven, both leaders of the *'realos'*. In the end, the Party Council endorsed the *'realos'* and although Bourgeois resigned, he decided, along with some of his followers, to vote against the agreement in Parliament and thus break party discipline.

In May, the Bourgeois and Anciaux factions agreed upon a divorce strategy and rules of the game. In July, three teams presented their programme for the future of the VU: *Vlaams Nationaal*, the *'fundis'* of Bourgeois, Anciaux' radical-liberal 'Future Group' (*Toekomstgroep*), and a middle-of-the-road group called 'No Splitting' (*Niet Splitsen*). Of the 9,801 members who voted in the referendum of 15 September (64 per cent of all members), 47.2 per cent voted for *Vlaams-Nationaal*, 30.2 per cent for *Niet-Splitsen* and only 22.6 per cent for the *Toekomstgroep* (there were 4.2 per cent blank and invalid votes), in spite of the fact that Anciaux was the VU's main vote-catcher.

As the divorce rules stipulated, *Vlaams Nationaal* took over the party organisation. On 2 December, it held its first congress under the name N-VA (*Nieuwe-Vlaamse Alliantie*). Programmatically, N-VA differs from the VU on a number of key issues: it sees itself as the 'syndicate of the Flemish Common Good', calls for full independence of a Flemish Republic within a federally integrated Europe, is more maximalist regarding the inclusion of Brussels in an independent Flanders, lays less emphasis on direct democracy, advocates enforced assimilation of migrants, etc. Hence, while it is undoubtedly a democratic party, it stands somewhere in-between the former VU and the extreme right-wing national-populist (and still growing) *Vlaams Blok*.

The *Toekomstgroep* decided to form a new left-liberal post-Belgian party called SPIRIT, and chose at its founding congress (10 November) Annemie Van De Casteele, an incumbent MP, as the new party president (with 97.8 per

cent of the votes). Ideologically, SPIRIT tries to find a niche in the electoral market, situated between the Flemish Greens, Socialists and Liberals. Programmatically, SPIRIT differs from the VU by having replaced the concept of Flemish nationalism by 'open and European regionalism' and integral federalism. It is also more anti-globalisation, more anti-monarchy, more radical in terms of direct democracy and direct non-conformist action, more multiculturalist, more socially progressive, more permissive (soft drugs, abortion, euthanasia, etc.), lays more emphasis on liberal rights and freedom, and is more 'europhile'.

The Flemish Christian Democrats, for the first time in 41 years excluded from government after the 1999 elections (see the entry for Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 1999*), attempted a facelift. On 29 September, the CVP transformed itself into CD&V (*Christelijk, Democratisch en Vlaams*) which, apart from becoming more permissive on some moral and ethical issues, also innovated by advocating confederalism. In the meantime, a group of MPs, among them former party president Van Hecke, had been conducting secret talks to establish close cooperation with the Flemish Liberals (VLD). The CD&V did not endorse this initiative, and eventually the Van Hecke group left the party to form the NCD (New Christian Democrats), which is due to be fully absorbed into the VLD in 2002.

The Flemish Socialists, as part of a programme of internal party reforms initiated by the new party leader, Janssens (the party's former commercial spin-doctor), transformed its name from SP into SP.a (*Socialistische Partij Anders* ('Differently')). Janssens was easily re-elected as the only candidate in October. In the meantime, the Flemish Greens and Liberals did not undergo any significant changes. The leader of the Flemish Liberals, De Gucht, was confirmed as party president with 86 per cent of the members' votes.

In spite of attempts of some right-wing Liberals and Christian Democrats, the Flemish democratic parties maintained their *cordon sanitaire* against the *Vlaams Blok*. They also sought to cut the public financing of racist parties, but the first case actually brought to court backfired, as the court declared itself incompetent. In the same period, the Flemish public television company decided to limit the coverage of the VB in its programmes.

Finally, one should also mention that, following the Walloon Regional Parliament, the Flemish Parliament decided to offer additional public funding to Flemish parties, which more or less doubled their public resources.

On the French-speaking side, the MCC (a splinter group of the PSC that joined the PRL-FDF-MCC federation before the 1999 elections; see the Belgium entry in the *Political Data Yearbook 1999*) publicly called for more integration of the components of the federation, a responsibility that the PRL (the largest party of the federation) should take. On the one hand, the PRL-

FDF-MCC had a difficult year in dealing with this question of integration, but also with the opposition of the FDF to the institutional agreements negotiated by the PRL leaders of the federation (see above), in addition to the criticisms against PRL Interior Minister Duquesne. On the other hand, though, it gained much visibility throughout the Belgian presidency of the European Union (see below) through the role played by the PRL ministers of Foreign Affairs (Louis Michel) and Finance (Didier Reynders).

The PSC adopted a new manifesto based on the concept of 'democratic humanism'. In an attempt to adapt to the secularisation of society, the party wanted to enlarge its appeal to non-Christians. Partly because it was pressed to do so by Christian organisations (trade unions, the educational sector, etc.), the PSC played a key role in the institutional negotiations (see above). The abstention of its MPs (as part of a 'give-and-take' bargain for compensations obtained in a last round of negotiations) permitted the adoption of the bills with a two-thirds majority (see above). The PSC's sister party, the CVP, however, heavily criticised this behaviour.

In May, the PS launched its 'workshops for progress' that will probably influence the drafting of its future electoral manifesto. This openness of meetings was quite new for this powerful and 'old-style' Socialist party, which its current president (Elio Di Rupo) is attempting to modernise throughout.

Finally, ECOLO was under quite a lot of pressure as it was criticized by the other coalition partners for being in government and, at the same time, being out of it by demonstrating in the streets against some governmental decisions. Internally, a proportion of the rank-and-file called for an exit from the federal government. Vincent Decroly, a high-profile '*fundi*' MP, who was very active in the 'white' citizens' movement following the Dutroux affair (see the Belgium entries in previous *Political Data Yearbooks*), was excluded from the party following his continuous criticism of government policies, but he remained in Parliament as an independent MP.

### *Themes and issues*

Severe personal and ideological conflicts between the ideologically heterogeneous governmental partners of the 'rainbow coalition' (Liberals, Socialists and Greens) that were already apparent in 2000 (see the Belgium entry in the *Political Data Yearbook 2000*) carried on into 2001. Many of these conflicts occurred in public view as the various parties and personalities often used the mass media to express their opinions.

The first part of the political year was influenced by the process of institutional reform that was initiated in 2000 (see the entry for Belgium in the

*Political Data Yearbook 2000*, and above). In contrast, the latter part of the year was dominated by the Belgian presidency of the European Union in the difficult context of the events of 11 September in the United States. National political strife was put on a low fire during the second half of 2001, when Belgium was in charge of the presidency. Important issues that divided the majority were put on hold as the coalition parties could not afford a serious governmental crisis at a time when the country found itself in the international (and media) spotlight. In May, Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Foreign Affairs Minister Michel publicly announced an unprecedented number of priorities (16) for the Belgian presidency, which carefully represented the ideological focus of the six coalition parties and therefore mobilised most ministers for European decision making (De Winter & Türsan 2001). The main priority was certainly the 'Laeken Declaration' on the future of the (enlarged) European Union. The Laeken Summit, in December, was indeed generally perceived as a success, thus boosting Verhofstadt's and Michel's national and international prestige.

Altogether, in socio-economic terms, the year 2001 was quite bleak. By the first trimester, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth figures already stood much lower than at the beginning of 2000. Even before the post-11 September period (in the fourth trimester, GDP growth actually came to a halt), it was quite clear that the country's economic performance was on the way down (as was the case in several other European Union countries) with few prospects of quick recovery. For the members of that 'rainbow coalition', this clearly meant that the euphoria of 1999 (an exceptional year in terms of economic performance) was over, and that policy compromises would become much more difficult when real budgetary choices would need to be made.

The bankruptcy of Sabena (the Belgian national airline) was the biggest economic and social issue in 2001. In June, Swissair (a 49.5 per cent shareholder in Sabena) decided to disengage from the Belgian company and reduce its financial losses by cutting the number of employees, planes and destinations, and by selling off subsidiary companies. The Belgian state (a 50.5 per cent shareholder) decided to go to court because Swissair had not fulfilled its April 2000 promises to participate to the re-capitalisation of the company. In the end, Swissair accepted an agreement, but it could not prevent the situation from worsening. In November, in spite of numerous strikes and demonstrations, the board of administration announced the bankruptcy of the company. The social and economic consequences were impressive: a debt of 2.3 billion Euros, 7,500 employees dismissed with a further 4,500 from subsidiary companies (catering, restaurants, hotels, formation, charter companies, etc.) and the dismissal of 25,000 indirect employees (i.e., 0.2 per cent of the

Belgian Gross National Product (GNP)). The state launched a social plan (pensions, redeployment help, etc.) costing almost 400 million Euro. One of Sabena's sister companies, DAT, took over some parts of Sabena's activities. According to a political agreement, this company should receive some financial support from the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) and a consortium of Belgian companies.

After having set up, in 2000, a calendar for the massive (about 3.5 billion Euros) lowering of income taxes (a major claim of the Liberals), the government only put forward 250 million Euros for an increase of social benefits, as a response to demonstrators and to leaders of the Socialist and Green parties. Although everyone in the majority realised that the room for manoeuvre allowed by economic growth was much more limited than initially forecast (see above), the promises made to different sectors lead to social unrest, whereas the government gave the image of being dominated by the Liberals. The VLD also called for a very tight budget for healthcare, but finally this budget was a compromise between the VLD proposal and what the health sector had asked for. In Flanders, a fund for people suffering chronic and disabling diseases was set up in order to cover non-medical costs. This was a step towards competition between social security at the federal level and social measures taken by regions.

The government also created, after much bargaining, a new tax regime for disposable packaging that combined ecotaxes and ecobonuses. By lowering VAT on drinks and imposing a tax on disposable packaging, products with re-usable packaging will become cheaper, whereas products with disposable packaging will become more expensive. In substantial and symbolic terms, this was a very important issue for the Green parties in government.

Issues connected to the SNCB-NMBS (the Belgian national railway) also were hotly disputed as Transport Minister Isabelle Durant (ECOLO) unsuccessfully attempted to reform its organisational structure. Budgetary issues opposed Flanders and Wallonia. The Flemish claimed they required priority in terms of transportation capacity (around the national airport, the Antwerp harbour and the Express Transit System (RER) around Brussels). The company's structural modernisation plans also faced stern resistance from the labour unions and the PS (the Francophone Socialist party).

In March, a railway accident causing the deaths of eight persons reminded the public and the government of the need to modernise the SNCB-NMBS. Two days later, an agreement set an investment of 20 billion Euros for security, the transportation of goods, the TGV high-speed train infrastructure and the modernisation of equipment, with a 60/40 per cent share of investments in Flanders and Wallonia. However, the reform of the administrative structure remained stranded; in October, the trade unions were openly in conflict with

the Transportation Minister and launched large industrial actions and strikes throughout the country.

The Belgian postal sector also was a hot issue. The administrator of the National Post announced surprisingly that he would close 400 of the 1,350 post offices in order to become more profitable in the perspective of a European liberalisation of the postal services. This caused strikes in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The union and political pressures made him abandon this project, and the government eventually dismissed him.

Quite novel in Belgium was the demonstration by some members of the Belgian Army, who demanded an increase in their wages and better conditions for their return to civil life. The 'Copernic' reform, an indepth reform of the federal administration, also sparked some demonstrations in February and March. The unions argued that the reform was far too private-sector-minded and that it would create more differentiation within the civil service. A clear (and much-criticised) example of the application of this reform was the nomination of the head of the Prime Minister's cabinet as the top administrator of general services, because the reform involved the planned disappearance of the ministerial cabinets and their integration into administrations to avoid any double use.

The reform of the police forces and the creation of an integrated police service created agitation and forced the government to increase budget transfers to the local authorities. The federal state would now invest a further 0.5 billion Euros in the reform because some test zones showed that the cost of the reform will be much higher than expected.

As in 2000, asylum-seekers remained a contested issue. From early January, it was decided that no more financial support would be granted to asylum-seekers, but only transitory 'bed and food' conditions in open centres. The government's new asylum policy triggered clashes between the Greens and the Francophone Socialists (as some eminent MPs demonstrated against these measures), on the one hand, and their coalition partners, especially the VLD and the SP, on the other, although measures had to be taken as the previous system of financial aid to asylum candidates had led to the development of international fraud networks (e.g., operating from Kazakhstan). In the meantime, the process of regularisation of illegal residents that was to end in July 2001 (see the entry for Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 2000*) went on much more slowly than expected, raising much criticism.

Ethical and 'lifestyle' issues continued to attract much attention in the media and public opinion. After the PRL-FDF-MCC finally defined its common position on the issue of the personal consumption of cannabis (it was the last party of the majority to define a clear political line), the ministers of Health (Aelvoet; Green) and Justice (Verwilghen, Liberal) officially presented

the government proposals with regard to the matter. According to Aelvoet, personal consumption of cannabis was to be de-penalised, while Verwilghen contended that the judge had to consider whether this consumption was 'problematic' (e.g., a social nuisance), and hence that this was not a formal de-penalisation of personal consumption.

The Senate committees of Justice and Social Affairs went on debating upon a legal and juridical framework for euthanasia. While the Christian Democratic parties (PSC and CVP) in the opposition, frustrated that their amendments were not even taken into consideration, called for a popular consultation on the issue, the majority parties voted on the most delicate articles of the proposal with the dissenting voices of some senators of the majority who had been professionally active as physicians. Finally, the Senate adopted the proposal of 'conditional de-penalisation' in plenary session, but also adopted a text promoting the development of palliative care. These texts were then sent to the Chamber of Representatives.

The discussion regarding homosexual couples continued, including the issue of homosexual marriage (despite the negative advice of the Council of State), but it looked as though parental rights would not be granted to these couples.

Obviously, one should also mention European and international affairs. In the economic sector, Finance Minister Reynders (PRL) played a key (and very visible) coordinating role in the final preparation stages for the 'transition towards the Euro'. Minister of International Affairs Louis Michel (PRL) also developed a very high international profile, something he had already done with the 'Haider case'. In his position, he had to manage the very troubled international situation following the 11 September events in the United States and the war in Afghanistan that followed.

The 1993 law that gave Belgian judicial courts a 'universal competence' with regard to war crimes and crimes against humanity became problematic for Belgian foreign relations, as suits against current chiefs of state were now being considered. The main example was the suit against Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for his involvement in the Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps massacres in 1982 in Lebanon. This had a very negative impact on Belgian-Israeli political relations, in spite of the separation of powers between the judiciary and the executive. In the meantime, the parliamentary committee on the assassination of Patrice Lumumba (the former Congolese Premier who was killed in the 1960s) concluded that Belgium had a 'moral' responsibility with regard to this assassination, but that there was no evidence of active participation in the murder. Minister Michel, however, went beyond these conclusions and stated that there was a clear Belgian 'political responsibility'.

Finally, quite a few ‘happenings’ and ‘*faits de société*’ of the year 2001 deserve to be mentioned. There was quite a lot of agitation in and around the monarchy and the royal family. On 25 October, Crown Prince Philippe and Princess Mathilde announced the birth of their first child, Princess Elisabeth, who might someday become the first Belgian Queen. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth, a book written by late King Léopold III was released. In this volume, he presented his own view of the events (mostly during World War II) that led to his abdication in 1950. This book stirred quite a lot of debate among historians and politicians alike. Another book, written by J. Nicolas and F. Lavachery, denounced the alleged implication of Belgian high political spheres, especially the Belgian monarchy, in criminal sexual cases (child abuse, paedophilia, etc.). A French court condemned the two authors. The monarchy as an institution was questioned several times. Examples of this were the report of the Lumumba committee (see above) that shed some light on the political role of the late King Baudouin, and also the debate around the yearly grants (*dotations*) that are allocated to the Princes and Princesses.

In January, former Prime Minister (1966–1968 and 1978) and PSC president Paul Vanden Boeynants died. He was one of the last representatives of the generation of unitarist politicians, opposed to the process of federalisation. This political figure, one of the very few who was a genuine ‘self-made man’, was very popular but also very controversial: he faced a number of political-financial and fiscal law suits, and was also kidnapped in bizarre circumstances by a famous gang in 1989.

On the negative side, the world-renowned high-tech voice-recognition company Lernout & Hauspie was declared bankrupt only two weeks before Sabena. On the positive side, two Belgian female tennis players – Clijsters, a Fleming, and Henin, a Walloon – joined the ‘top ten’ in the world rankings and reached the finals in the famous tournaments of Roland-Garros and Wimbledon. And, last but not least, in November, for the sixth consecutive time (a world record), the national football team qualified for the World Cup (this time in Japan and Korea in 2002). Hence Belgium will still exist for a while . . . provided that the national team performs well at the 2002 World Cup!

## Notes

1. That is, there must be as many Flemish ministers as Francophone ministers. The ‘linguistic identity’ of the Prime Minister is not taken into account.
2. The *Conseil d’Etat/Raad van State*, Belgium’s Supreme Administrative Court.

## Sources and further information

### *On the Internet:*

Belgian Federal Government online: <http://belgium.fgov.be> [contains links to all other official sites]

For detailed electoral results (at all levels): [www.vub.ac.be/POLI/elections](http://www.vub.ac.be/POLI/elections)

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