

Belgium

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Election and cabinet report

Four months before the European and regional elections, as the electoral campaign was picking up steam, Minister-President of the Brussels Region Daniel Ducarme decided on 11 February to resign from his mandates following the publication of his personal financial dossier in a newspaper. Ducarme was one of the heavyweights of the French-speaking Liberal Party (MR), which he chaired from 1989 to 1992 and from 1999 to 2003 when he decided to take over the minister-presidency of the Brussels Region from his Liberal colleague François-Xavier de Donnea in order to prepare for the 2004 regional elections. The Ducarme affair, which involved several years of undeclared income and roughly €300,000 owed to the state, was a nightmare for the MR, just four months before the elections. Having such an important representative evading income tax while the main policy achievement of the party since its comeback to power in 1999 was an ambitious tax reform (see previous *Political Data Yearbooks*), certainly gave the MR the worst possible publicity. A radio interview of Vice-PM and Foreign Affairs Minister Louis Michel minimising the event and comparing Ducarme's behaviour with regard to his fiscal duties to the 'negligence of artists', further fuelled discontent with the party, not the least because Ducarme was also Culture Minister in the French-speaking Community government. As a result of this resignation, Jacques Simonet – who became Secretary of State for European Affairs following the federal elections of 2003 – took over the minister-presidency of the Brussels Region that he left in 2000, and was replaced at the federal level by Frédérique Ries, formerly a star television anchorman (private channel RTL-TVI), who was elected MEP in 1999.

One could consider European elections in Belgium to be 'last order' elections rather than 'second order' elections.¹ Hence, the issues debated in Belgium in the European elections are both national *and* regional. This is reinforced by the fact that since 1999 European elections coincide with regional elections. As in 1999, European issues were entirely absent from the parties'

Table 1. Elections to the European Parliament

Date of election:	13 June 2004						
Total number of seats	24 ¹						
Electorate:	7,552,240						
Total votes cast:	6,857,986 (90.8 %)						
Total valid votes:	6,489,991 (94.6 %)						
Party	Number of votes	Percentage of votes ²	Percentage change since 1999 ³	Number of seats	Percentage of seats	Change since 1999	
<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten Vivant</i> – Flemish Liberals and Democrats Alive (VLD Vivant) (Flemish speaking)	880,279	13.6	-1.1	3	12.5	0	
<i>Cartel Social Progressief Alternatief-Spirit</i> – Social Progressive Alternative-Spirit (SP.a-Spirit) (Flemish-speaking)	716,317	11.0	+2.2	3	12.5	+1	
<i>Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie</i> – Christian Democrats and Flemish New Flemish Alliance (CD&V NVA) (Flemish-speaking)	1,131,119	17.4	+3.9	4	16.7	+1	
<i>GROEN!</i> – Green! (Flemish-speaking)	320,874	4.9	-2.5	1	4.2	-1	
<i>Vlaams Blok</i> – Flemish Bloc (Flemish-speaking)	930,731	14.3	+5.0	3	12.5	+1	

<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH) (French-speaking)	368,753	5.7	+0.7	1	4.2	0
<i>Front National</i> – National Front (FN) (French-speaking)	181,351	2.8	+1.3	0	0	0
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR) (French-speaking)	671,422	10.4	+0.3	3	12.5	0
<i>ECOLO</i> – Greens (French-speaking)	239,687	3.7	-4.8	1	4.2	-2
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS) (French-speaking)	878,577	13.5	+4.0	4	16.7	+1
<i>Christlich Sozialen Partei</i> – Christian Social Party (CSP) (German-speaking)	15,722	0.2	+0.0	1	4.2	0
Others	155,159	2.4	-9.0	0	0.0	-2

Notes: ¹The number of seats for Belgium in the European Parliament was reduced from 25 in 1999 to 24 in 2004. ²As these are national percentages, the actual figures for each party in its respective constituency (Dutch, French or German) are much higher. The Dutch '*collège électoral*' (14 seats) corresponds to the ten Dutch-speaking electoral constituencies (*arrondissements*) in Flanders, plus the voters who choose to vote for a Dutch-speaking list in the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde *arrondissement* (in and around Brussels). The French '*collège électoral*' (9 seats; i.e., one seat less than in 1999) corresponds to the nine French-speaking *arrondissements* in Wallonia (except for the two German-speaking *cantons* of Eupen and Sankt-Vith), plus the voters who choose to vote for a French-speaking list in the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde *arrondissement*. Finally, the much smaller German '*collège électoral*' (only 1 seat) corresponds to the two German-speaking *cantons* of Eupen and Sankt-Vith; the main competitors are the German-speaking constituency units of the major French-speaking parties (under a German label for three of them: the PS becomes the SP, the PRL becomes the PFF and the CDH becomes the CSP). ³As these are national percentages, the actual changes are much higher at the level of the separate French, Dutch or German constituencies (e.g., the actual change for the *Flemish Blok* in the Dutch constituency amounts to more than +8 per cent).

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt II

For the composition of Verhofstadt II on 1 January 2004, see Rihoux et al. (2004: 954–955).

Changes during 2004:

Secretary of State of European Affairs and Foreign Affairs (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/*Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires européennes et aux Affaires étrangères (adjoint au Ministre des Affaires étrangères)*: Jacques Simonet (1963 male, MR) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Frédérique Ries (1959 female, MR) on 12 February

Following the regional elections on 13 June, the following changes were made on 20 July (within the context of intertwined cabinet reshuffles at the federal, community and regional levels):

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs/*Vice-Premier ministre, Ministre des Affaires étrangères*: L. Michel (1947 male, MR) *resigned* and was *replaced* (as Minister) by Karel De Gucht (1954 male, VLD). The position of Deputy Prime Minister/*Vice-Premier ministre* was taken over by Didier Reynders (1958 male, MR), who also kept his position as Minister of Finance/*Ministre des Finances*

Minister of Development Cooperation/*Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking*: Marc Verwilghen (1952 male, VLD) *resigned* (to take another federal ministerial post; see below) and was *replaced* by Armand De Decker (1948 male, MR)

Minister of Economy, Energy, Foreign Trade and Science Policy/*Minister van Economie, Energie, Buitenlandse Handel en Wetenschapsbeleid*: Fientje Moerman (1958 female, VLD) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Marc Verwilghen (1952 male, VLD)

Minister of Environment, Consumer Protection and Sustainable Development/*Minister van Leefmilieu, Consumentenzaken en Duurzame Ontwikkeling*: Freya Van den Bossche (1975 female, SP.a) *resigned* (to take another federal ministerial post; see below) and was *replaced* by Bruno Tobback (1969 male, SP.a) for the Environment portfolio

Minister of Employment and Pensions/*Minister van Werk en Pensioenen*: Frank Vandenbroucke (1955 male, SP.a) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Freya Van den Bossche (1975 female, SP.a) for the Employment portfolio, and by Bruno Tobback (1969 male, SP.a) for the Pensions portfolio.

Minister of Transport and Social Economy/*Minister van Mobiliteit en Sociale Economie*: Bert Aniciaux (1959 male, SPIRIT) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Renaat Landuyt (1959 male, SP.a) for the Transport portfolio, and by Els Van Weert (1968 female, SPIRIT) for the Social Economy portfolio (as Secretary of State)

Minister of Civil Service, Social Integration, Urban Policy and Equal Opportunities/*Ministre de la Fonction publique, de l'Intégration sociale, de la Politique des grandes villes et de l'Egalité des chances*: M. Arena (1966 female, PS) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Christian Dupont (1947 male, PS)

Secretary of State of Work Organisation and Well-Being at Work (attached to the Minister of Employment and Pensions)/*Staatssecretaris voor Arbeidsorganisatie en Welzijn op het werk (toegevoegd aan de Minister van Werk en Pensioenen)*: Kathleen Van Brempt (1969 female, SP.a) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Els Van Weert (1968 female, SPIRIT)

Secretary of State of European Affairs and Foreign Affairs (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/*Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires européennes et aux Affaires étrangères, adjointe au Ministre des Affaires étrangères*: Frédérique Ries (1959 female, MR) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Didier Donfut (1956 male, PS)

Secretary of State of Family and Disabled Issues (attached to the Minister for Social Affairs and Public Health)/*Secrétaire d'Etat aux Familles et aux Personnes handicapées (adjointe au Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique)*: Isabelle Simonis (1967 female, PS) *resigned* and was *replaced* by Gisèle Mandaila Malamba (1969 female, MR)

2004 campaign. The main challenge was whether the regional results would allow the national socialist-liberal coalition to confirm its victory from the 2003 general elections at the regional as well as national level. If not, this might have led not only to a change of the incumbent Liberal-Socialist-Green² regional coalitions, but may even have destabilized the federal government (as actually happened later, although the federal government was not toppled). For all parties, the main objective was to gain or maintain power at the regional and federal levels.

Therefore, parties invested a lot of effort in their regional manifestoes and campaign, while their European programme was comparatively much less elaborate. Some parties simply added a few paragraphs on Europe to their regional manifesto, while others just referred to the manifesto developed by the europarty to which they belonged. Although the campaign for the regional elections did not have a predominant theme, touching mostly upon policy sectors hitherto falling under federal competencies (taxes, security, social security, pensions, mobility), Europe was certainly of least concern. One of the traditional reasons why European elections are last order is the fact that, apart from the Vlaams Blok (VB), there is a broad and stable consensus among Belgian parties with regard to the federal conception of European Union (EU) institutions and the principles of economic integration, of a common foreign and defence policy, and the primacy of deepening over widening (De Winter & Türsan 2001; Beyers & Kerremans 2001). While there is a significant minority of eurosceptic voters, the VB did not attempt to mobilise this reservoir. It would do so some months later, when negotiations between the EU and Turkey led to the decision to launch the accession process. Only then did the VB start to politicise EU issues, even calling for a referendum on the EU Constitution, while still reducing the EU constitutional debate to the party's xenophobic core business ('Turkey to the Turkish, Europe to the Europeans').

The media also played an important role in the de-Europeanisation of the European elections. Even in quality newspapers, at most one journalist specialises in European matters, and he or she has to fight hard to get 'Brussels articles' published. Hence it comes as no surprise that pre-election polls ordered by the parties or the media only sounded out voting intentions for the regional elections.

In terms of candidate selection, nearly all of the parties followed the strategy of 'all hands on deck', filling their regional and European lists with candidates enjoying some vote-catching notoriety at the European, national, regional or local level. Even among those candidates heading the European lists, we find those who had no ambition at all to sit in the European Parliament, as they already occupied more interesting executive offices in the

regional or federal governments (e.g., Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Vice-Prime Minister Michel), or as party leader (e.g., Di Rupo, PS). In addition, among those who did show an interest in taking up their seat, several leading candidates used this position just as a ‘parking’ mandate, while their main business would remain federal (e.g., the party leaders of the CDH, Milquet, and of the VB, Van Hecke). Hardworking incumbent MEP backbenchers were bypassed for candidates who had merits only at non-European levels. The only real challenge of the European election was the horse-race between two Flemish candidates who aspired to the highest European position, the Presidency of the Commission (i.e., Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) and his predecessor, Dehaene (CD&V)). Neither one only wished to sit as a simple MEP, but participated in the European election in order to reinforce their intra-Belgian claims to the Presidency, which would depend in part on whom would get the most preference votes.

Hence, given their last order feature, the results of the 2004 European elections differed very little from those of the higher order regional elections in terms of party strength (see Table 1). In fact, the results were interpreted by the parties and the media through comparison with results obtained in federal or regional elections, rarely *vis-à-vis* the previous European elections.

The 1999 European elections, which coincided with the federal elections, were quite atypical given an issue agenda loaded with scandals. The then incumbent governing parties (Socialists and Christian Democrats) received a serious beating at the 1999 federal and regional elections (see Rihoux 2000). They seemed to have recovered the ground they lost in 1999. Conversely, the Greens, who profited most from the 1999 crisis elections, fell back seriously, also paying a price for their governmental participation. The governing Liberals lost quite heavily in the Flemish constituency (becoming only the third largest party), but gained a bit in the francophone constituency.

The strongest shift was once again the further increase of the Vlaams Blok (14.3 per cent or plus 5 per cent measured at the national level; a leap from 15.1 to 23.2 per cent in the Flemish constituency). Still, in comparison with its performance at the 2004 regional elections, the VB’s results were slightly weaker (23.2 versus 24.2 per cent). This is probably due to the fact that the traditional parties can run candidates with a high European profile and merits (Dehaene, Verhofstadt), while the VB does not have ‘great Europeans’ in stock. The other extreme right-wing party – the francophone FN – also continued to make progress in spite of its almost total lack of organization and prominent candidates.

However, on election night and in the following weeks, none of these deviations were granted any political significance as the results of the regional elec-

tions forced a major coalition change in all regions, leading to regional coalition composition dissimilar from the federal coalition, a novel feature that has affected federal and regional politics since then. After these elections, and mainly due to the formation of the new regional and community governments, tremendous changes occurred in the Verhofstadt II³ federal team (see above). Only 10 out of the 21 ministers and secretaries of state kept the same ministerial portfolios they received one year before when the government was formed.

Overall, on 20 July, there were eight new ministers (or secretaries of state) appointed to the federal government to replace departing ones and three of the original team who were reshuffled. First of all, the question of the nomination of the Belgian EU Commissioner needed to be resolved. Since 1999, this seat had been filled by Philippe Busquin, former chairman of the French-speaking Socialist Party (PS). In the 2003 government formation, the PS kept this mandate, which has been part of the portfolio allocation phase of federal government building since the 1980s (De Winter et al. 2003), as there was still one year before the end of Busquin's term and the party could thus either keep it in 2004 or trade it against other positions with its partners in the federal government. It became clear in the early negotiations between the PS and the MR that the PS would not accept trading this seat for a 'mere' chair of the Senate (which is nevertheless supposed to 'weigh' the same as a minister or an EU commissioner). It also asked for a trade between two secretariats of state in order to have a governmental position with an international remit. In order to let Louis Michel fulfill his desire to go to the EU Commission, the MR not only accepted this deal, but also abandoned the Foreign Affairs ministry to the president of the Flemish liberals (Karel De Gucht), while Michel's position of Vice-Prime Minister was taken over by Finance Minister Didier Reynders. As Guy Verhofstadt was not keen on letting Louis Michel leave the government, the MR had to make this additional concession to the party of the Prime Minister (VLD). By integrating De Gucht into his team, Verhofstadt also managed to give this unpredictable character a prestigious position, away from the party's presidency (he was replaced by Bart Somers at the head of the VLD), at a time where the VLD underwent a serious defeat in the regional and EU polls (see above).

Most of other changes consisted of transfers of ministerial posts between the federal, regional and community governments: many former federal ministers were transferred to regional or community governmental positions, and vice versa. Finally, it should be mentioned that Gisèle Mandaila Malamba (MR; of Congolese origin), the new Secretary of State for Family and Disabled Issues, was the first black minister of state in Belgian history.

Issues in national politics

The year 2004 saw three major court trials. The famous ‘Dutroux trial’ captured Belgian and international media attention between March and June. The case of Marc Dutroux, charged with having kidnapped, sexually abused and killed young girls in 1996, had widespread political consequences from 1996 onwards. Dutroux was condemned to life imprisonment. Early in the year, the so-called ‘Cools trial’ (named after a Socialist state minister assassinated in 1991) finally also delivered its verdict, recognizing the guilt of six persons in the entourage of another (since then deceased) minister. In the ‘Vlaams Blok trial’, building upon a 1981 law punishing racist and xenophobic acts, three satellite organisations of the VB were explicitly condemned for such racist behaviour. As a result, the extreme-right wing party changed its name in November to ‘Vlaams Belang’ (Flemish Interest) in order to avoid references to a party that was clearly labelled as ‘racist’.

Only a few changes occurred in the other political parties. In the CD&V, Jo Vandeurzen replaced Yves Leterme as president, while Didier Reynders was easily elected as the head of the MR – being the only candidate.

Quite a few parties had to face scandals, especially on the French-speaking side. Similar to the Ducarme affair (see above), prominent MP Richard Fournaux, who moved from the CDH to the MR, also faced a tax fraud case. Former PSC president Gérard Deprez (now MR vice-president) also faced court charges for covering up fictive jobs in ministerial cabinets in the 1980s and early 1990s. Two prominent PS figures also faced difficulties. Isabelle Simonis (PS) had to resign as President of the Parliament of the French Community, after a leaked internal note of her cabinet made it clear that a forthcoming parliamentary campaign for the right to vote for non-EU citizens was mainly designed ‘to attract the vote of the non-Europeans in favour of the PS’. Marie Arena, Minister-President of the French Community government, nearly had to resign after revelations of high luxury expenses in the renovation of her cabinet’s offices.

The party of the Prime Minister, the VLD, was shaken by deep conflicts. In January, VLD president De Gucht threatened to leave the federal coalition if the right for non-European citizens to vote in local elections was passed in Parliament. Put under pressure by the Prime Minister, De Gucht was ejected from the party presidency in February, and the bill was passed on 20 February, although it did include some restrictions: residence in Belgium for at least five years; an obligation to register as a voter (the vote being compulsory in Belgium, this does not apply for other citizens); and suspension for those having received jail sentences. The VLD also almost faced a split over the issue of the ‘*cordon sanitaire*’ vis-à-vis the VB.

Parallel to the French debates, the issue of (non-)forbidding of religious symbols in schools and public administration aroused controversy and stern parliamentary debates. The Ghislengien disaster in July – a gas explosion in an industrial area that caused the deaths of 24 people and a lot of material damage – raised the issue of the control of the numerous gas and petrol pipelines crossing the country, and more generally of Belgian district planning and energy policies.

A new fiscal policy – the so-called ‘unique liberatory declaration’ which was a sort of fiscal amnesty granted for non-declared financial investments abroad, provided they were transferred back into Belgium – was intended to bring money back to the state. However, its financial success was quite limited. In the field of social policy, SP.a Minister of Employment Frank Vandembroucke opposed the PS and the major trade unions over the control and guidance of unemployed people in their search for a new job. Numerous demonstrations occurred in the education sector (French-speaking medical students and teachers), the hospital and health sector, the public sector (public transport in Brussels, postal services and jail personnel) and the ‘*non-marchand*’ (cultural and social) sector.

There were some policy successes, however. One of these was more symbolic: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Michel (MR), managed to find an agreement with Iran so that two Belgian-Iranian girls who had sought refuge in the Belgian embassy in Teheran could leave Iran and join their mother.

As is often the case, community issues remained top of the agenda. In January, Flemish city mayors of the province of Flemish Brabant threatened to boycott the regional and European elections of June in protest against the refusal to split the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvorde (BHV). With an eye on the June elections and in order to calm down these mayors, the SP.a and VLD promised to split the district in October. In the Flemish government’s agreement, which was elaborated after the regional elections, numerous demands were formulated by the three main Flemish democratic parties (CD&V-N-VA, SP.a-Spirit and VLD-Vivant). These included: the splitting of BHV, regionalisation of some parts of the social security and road security policies, and the refusal to sign the Council of Europe’s framework convention on the protection of national minorities. In reaction to this, the French-speaking parties formed a united front. As a result, not much progress was made on these topics by the end of the year, except for the launching of an inter-ministerial conference on community issues.

The complex night flights issue (around the Brussels national airport) continued to spur community conflict as well. After several successive plans to spread the night flights above Brussels’ periphery, and after many judicial episodes, the dispute was still not settled. In January, the federal government

decided to allow the international delivery service DHL to develop its activities at Brussels airport. In September, the federal coalition agreed upon raising the number of night flights and a spread of the air-routes, but it was opposed by the Brussels and Flemish governments. Eventually, as no firm political guarantee could be given to the company concerning the effective authorisation of the night flights, DHL decided in October to transfer a part of its activities from Brussels to Leipzig (Germany). As a result, approximately 1,700 direct and 3,400 indirect jobs will be lost by the year 2008.

Usually, the birth of a royal princess only constitutes a *'fait divers'*. However, the birth of Princess Louise in February, the first child of Prince Laurent and Princess Claire, and the decision to give her a Muslim godfather – Reza Pahlavi, son of the former Shah of Iran – caused some diplomatic problems. Furthermore, the involvement of Crown Prince Philippe in politics through his declaration that he wanted to oppose parties, such as the VB, willing to destroy Belgium, spurred political debate around the ability of the Prince to intervene in politics. It also revealed divergences between the elites of the Flemish and the French-speaking communities. However, at the same time, some talks were initiated so as to consider a Belgian bid for the 2016 Olympic Games, with all federated entities and the federal state coming into play. Hence it looks as though at least some of the country's political decision makers envision the persistence of some sort of Belgian federal model at least until 2016.

Notes

1. If one ignores the provincial elections, which since 1994 coincide with local elections that always completely obscure them.
2. Mainly Liberal-Socialist in the Brussels region.
3. Some observers even consider the government in place after these changes as Verhofstadt III. As there were no federal elections, no change in the party composition of the government, no change of Prime Minister nor a cabinet resignation offered to and accepted by the King, there is however no reason to consider it a new government according to these widely accepted criteria.

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