

Belgium

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Election and cabinet report

The end of the rainbow coalition was troublesome. Two weeks before the elections, the French-speaking Greens quit the cabinet following their refusal to endorse the compromise proposed by the Prime Minister and accepted by all other partners, regarding night-time flights around the Brussels national airport. The Transports portfolio (Durant) was transferred to the French-speaking Socialist (PS) Vice-Prime Minister Onkelinx, while former government commissioner Zenner (MR) took over the status and competencies of ousted Secretary of State Deleuze. Former government commissioner Ylieff (PS) became minister-adjunct for Scientific Research so that linguistic parity could be maintained in the Council of Ministers.

The general elections of 18 May can certainly be labelled 'historic'. Overall net volatility soared, while the comparatively high degree of fragmentation (effective number of parties) dropped dramatically. For the first time since 1981, gains and losses of party families ran parallel in the Flemish and Francophone party systems.

The main shock was the decimation of the Greens, who dropped from 16 per cent in 1999 (31 deputies and senators) to a mere 5.6 per cent in 2003 (6 deputies and senators, with none left for the Flemish Greens – Agalev). Agalev obtained its lowest score since its foundation. Never had a government party lost as much in one stroke. Apparently, Agalev did not manage (nor did Ecolo) to insert its crucial issues into the government agreement of the unedited purple-green coalition, and did not manage to realize the few issues they had managed to include, apart for a long-term nuclear phasing-out by 2040. Green ministers and their staff were politically and technically quite inexperienced and thus made many policy and communication blunders. By the end of the government's term, Agalev had become the punching bag of all other Flemish parties. In addition, the media and most new social movements, their traditional allies, were quite critical regarding their performance in government.

Table 1. Elections for the (federal) *Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*

Date of election:	18 May 2003						
Total number of seats:	150						
Electorate:	7,570,637						
Total votes cast:	6,936,801 (91.6%)						
Total valid votes:	6,572,189 (94.7%)						
Number	Party	Number of votes	Percentage of votes	Percentage change since 1999	Number of seats	Percentage of seats	Change since 1999
21	<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten – Flemish Liberals & Democrats (VLD)</i> , Flemish-speaking	1,009,223	15.4	+1.1	25	16.7	+1.3
19	<i>Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams – Christian-Democrat & Flemish (CD&V)</i> , Flemish-speaking	870,749	13.3	-0.8 ²	21	14.0	-0.7
31	<i>Parti Socialiste – Socialist Party (PS)</i> , French-speaking	855,992	13.0	+2.8	25	16.7	+4.0
22	<i>Mouvement Réformateur – Reform Movement (MR)</i> , French-speaking	748,952	11.4	+1.3 ³	24	16.0	+4.0
29	<i>Vlaams Blok – Flemish Block</i> , Flemish-speaking	767,605	11.7	+1.8	18	12.0	+2.0
30	<i>Cartel Sociaal Progressief Alternatief/SPIRIT – Social Progressive Alternative/SPIRIT (SP.a/SPIRIT)</i> , Flemish-speaking	979,750	14.9	+5.4 ⁴	23	15.3	+6.0

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Table 1. Continued

26	<i>Ecolo</i> – Greens, French-speaking	201,118	3.1	–4.3	4	2.7	–4.7
27	<i>Agalev</i> – Greens, Flemish-speaking	162,205	2.5	–4.5	0	0.0	–6.0
20	<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste/</i> Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-Speaking	359,660	5.5	–0.4 ⁵	8	5.3	–1.3
8	<i>Nieuw-Vlaame Alliantie</i> – New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Flemish- speaking ⁶	201,399	3.1	–2.5	1	0.7	–4.7
	<i>Vivant</i> , ⁷ French- & Flemish-speaking	81,337	1.3	–0.8	0	0.0	0.0
33	<i>Front National</i> – National Front (FN), French-speaking	130,012	2.0	+0.5	1	0.7	0.0
	Others	204,187	3.1	+0.6	0	0.0	0.0

Notes: ¹There are ten electoral constituencies (*arrondissements*) in Flanders (Flemish-speaking) and nine electoral constituencies (*arrondissements*) in Wallonia (French-speaking), plus the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency (*arrondissement*) in and around Brussels (French- and Flemish-speaking). Flemish-speaking parties only field lists in Flanders and the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde *arrondissement*, whereas French-speaking parties only field lists in Wallonia and the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde *arrondissement*. Hence, the actual electoral results of the parties are much higher in their respective regions, and the actual electoral shifts (i.e., at the regional level) between 1999 and 2003 are much stronger. ²In 1999, the CVP (former name until September 2001, see the entry on Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 2001*) gathered 14.1 per cent of the valid votes. ³In 1999, the *Fédération PRL-FDF-MCC* (former name until March 2002, see entry on Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 2002*) gathered 10.1 per cent of the valid votes. ⁴In 1999, the SP (former name until 2001, see entry on Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 2001*; in cartel with SPIRIT since 2002, see entry on Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 2002*) gathered 9.5 per cent of the valid votes. ⁵In 1999, the PSC (former name until 2002, see entry on Belgium in the *Political Data Yearbook 2002*) gathered 5.9 per cent of the valid votes. ⁶Compared to Volksunie (VU) in 1999. ⁷No English equivalent. Literal translation from French: ‘Alive’.

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt I

For the composition of Verhofstadt I on 1 January 2003, see *Political Data Yearbook 2000*: 254–255, *Political Data Yearbook 2001*: 916 and *Political Data Yearbook 2002*: 901.

Changes during 2003:

Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Mobility and Transportation/*Vice-Première ministre, Ministre de la Mobilité et des Transports*: I. Durant (1954 female, Ecolo) resigned on 5 May and was replaced by L. Onkelinx (1958 female, PS)

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) resigned on 5 May and was replaced by A. Zenner (1946 male, MR)

Minister-adjunct for Scientific Research/*Ministre adjoint de la Recherche scientifique*: Y. Ylief (1941 male, PS) appointed on 5 May

In Flanders, most Green voters defected to the Socialists (SP.a) who had concluded an electoral cartel with the left-libertarian post-national SPIRIT. The SP.a obtained its highest score since 1987. It was led by Flanders's most popular (and populist) political leader, S. Stevaert, while 6 out of Flanders' 10 most popular leaders belonged to the cartel. Thus the party managed to recover many of the voters that had left socialist ranks in the 1990s, as well as attract some first-time voters. The VLD, Verhofstadt's party, was also successful, obtaining its highest score ever. It managed to cash in the Chancellor's bonus of a popular and dynamic Prime Minister, its return to patronage resources after 12 meager years of opposition, and the government's execution of a central part of the liberal electoral manifesto (especially regarding tax cuts).

In the meantime, the Vlaams Blok won its sixteenth election in a row since its emergence in 1978. Certainly it profited effortlessly from the overt anti-Islam mood since 9/11 and the subsequent Afghan and Iraqi wars, as well as from the mainstreaming of xenophobic discourse in public opinion. Generous public party financing and public media treatment allowed it to expand further into Flanders' small towns and communes. It moderated its programme, campaign and candidates (featuring many women), while on the other hand its hardline law-and-order positions were endorsed by most other Flemish parties, which made the generalized *cordon sanitaire* erected around them by the democratic parties look increasingly unfair and partisan. Finally, there was the easy exploitation of the political vaudeville following a series of scandals in the Antwerp City Council (the party's historical stronghold).

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt II

A. The party composition of Verhofstadt II:
Date of investiture: 12 July 2003

Number	Party	Number & percentage of parliamentary seats	Number & percentage of cabinet posts ¹
21	<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Flemish Liberals & Democrats (VLD), Flemish-speaking	25 (16.7)	5 (23.8)
31	<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	25 (16.7)	5 (23.8)
22	<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	24 (16.0)	5 (23.8)
30	<i>Cartel Sociaal Progressief Alternatief/SPIRIT</i> – Social Progressive Alternative/SPIRIT (SP.a/SPIRIT), Flemish-speaking	23 (15.3)	6 (28.6)

*B. Cabinet members of Verhofstadt II:*²

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

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice/*Vice-Première ministre, Ministre de la Justice*: L. Onkelinx (1958 female, PS)

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

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for the Budget and Public Enterprise/*Vice-Eerste Minister, Minister van Begroting en Overheidsbedrijven*:
J. Vande Lanotte (1955 male, SP.a)

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Home Affairs/*Vice-Eerste minister, Minister van Binnenlandse zaken*: P. Dewael (1955 male, VLD)

Minister of Employment and Pensions/*Minister van Werk en Pensioenen*: F. Vandenbroucke (1955 male, SP.a)

Minister of Defense/*Ministre de la Défense*: A. Flahaut (1955 male, PS)

Minister of Development Co-operation/*Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking*: M. Verwilghen (1952 male, VLD)

Minister of Finance/*Ministre des Finances*: D. Reynders (1958 male, MR)
Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health/*Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique*: R. Demotte (1963 male, PS)
Minister of Economy, Energy, Foreign Trade and Science Policy/*Minister van Economie, Energie, Buitenlandse Handel en Wetenschapsbeleid*: F. Moerman (1958 female, VLD)
Minister of Transport and Social Economy/*Minister van Mobiliteit en Sociale Economie*: B. Anciaux (1959 male, SPIRIT)
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'Égalité des chances*: M. Arena (1966 female, PS)
Minister of the Self-Employed and Agriculture/*Ministre des Classes moyennes et de l'Agriculture*: S. Laruelle (1965 female, MR)
Minister of Environment, Consumer Protection and Sustainable Development/*Minister van Leefmilieu, Consumentenzaken en Duurzame Ontwikkeling*: F. Van den Bossche (1975 female, SP.a)

Notes: ¹Including six 'Secretaries of State' (deputy ministers). ²The six Secretaries of State are: Secretary of State of e-government (attached to the Minister for the Budget and Public Enterprise)/*Staatssecretaris voor Informatisering van de Staat (toegevoegd aan de Minister van Begroting en Overheidsbedrijven)*: P. Vanvelthoven (1962 male, SP.a); Secretary of State of Financial Modernisation and Combatting Tax Fraud (attached to the Minister of Finance)/*Secrétaire d'Etat à la Modernisation des Finances et à la Lutte contre la fraude fiscale (adjoint au Ministre des Finances)*: H. Jamar (1965 male, MR); 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)*: I. Simonis (1967 female, PS); Secretary of State of Administrative Simplification (attached to the Prime Minister)/*Staatssecretaris voor Administratieve Vereenvoudiging (toegevoegd aan de Eerste Minister)*: V. Van Quickenborne (1973 male, VLD); Secretary of State of Work Organization 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)*: Annissa Tamsamani (1966 female, SP.a), resigned 25 September, replaced by K. Van Brempt (1969 female, SP.a); and Secretary of State of European Affairs and Foreign Affairs (attached to the Minister of Foreign affairs)/*Secrétaire d'État aux Affaires européennes et aux Affaires étrangères (adjointe au Ministre des Affaires étrangères)*: Jacques Simonet (1963 male, MR).

As a contrast, Flanders' traditionally largest party, the CD&V (former CVP) did not manage to recover any of its losses during its first opposition period in 41 years and hit another historical bottom score. Among the many plausible explanations lies the difficulty of a centrist party to run a credible opposition against a centrist-by-necessity left-right coalition. Finally, the defeat of the N-VA (the conservative and independent successor party to the Volksunie) illustrated the dangerous effect of an electoral system innovation: the 5 per cent provincial threshold. While on average passing this threshold, it only managed to capture a seat in West Flanders, the fief of its party leader G. Bourgeois. Having learned its lesson the hard way, the NV-A soon afterwards managed to conclude an electoral cartel with the CD&V, to be tested for the first time at the June 2004 regional elections.

On the French-speaking side, apart from the fiasco of the Greens, the clearest trend was the major victory of the Socialists (PS), who, after their historic low score in 1999 went back to scores of the 1970s (though still far from their highest score in 1987 as an opposition party). It may be assumed that a large number of voters who had turned away from the PS (and turned to Ecolo or 'protest' votes) in 1999 returned to the PS in 2003. The PS was also able to attract the new (youngest) voters. It managed to neutralize Ecolo on its left while in government, also beating Ecolo strategically and in terms of political communication by signing a '*pôle des gauches*' common manifesto which clearly gave a 'progressive' leadership and renewed legitimacy to the PS. In addition, its very popular and uncontested leader, E. Di Rupo, managed to modernize the party image and programme. It was also able to play the role of moderate arbiter between the 'extremist' Liberals and Greens, to embrace some 'unsocialist' themes (such as security or environment), and even to open its lists to progressive Christian candidates, thus competing with Ecolo and the CDH for the quite substantial left-wing Christian electorate.

The French-speaking Liberals (MR) were also successful, obtaining their highest score ever. The MR managed to gain centre-right wing voters from the former PSC, now the predominantly more centre to centre-left CDH. Its *de facto* leader, L. Michel, Minister for Foreign Affairs, also was very popular – way beyond the ideologically Liberal electorate – and unchallenged within the party. As the MR did not have to fear competition from the right (see below), it was able to make a strategic move to the centre, sometimes even left of centre in the field of 'ethical diplomacy', disarmament, humanitarian aid, and so on. As their Flemish counterparts from the VLD, they were also able to capitalize on policy victories during the legislature, particularly in terms of tax cuts.

In contrast, the CDH was not able to reach 'normal' scores previously obtained by the former PSC, though managing not to lose too much ground as compared to 1999, thus remaining the third largest party, but far behind the PS and MR. It was probably able to gain back some ground from Ecolo, but lost many voters both to the MR on its right and to the PS on its left. As its Flemish counterpart CD&V, this rather centrist party also found it very difficult to be a credible opposition party against a coalition spanning from right to left (and thus governing, on average, around the centre). In addition, the position of its leader, J. Milquet, remained less consolidated than that of leaders in the PS and the MR, as some party barons quite often challenged her.

Finally, in sharp contrast to the Vlaams Blok, the francophone extreme right-wing FN did not manage to make a real breakthrough. It did, on average, reach a score of around 5 per cent, gathering some of the (non-negligible) xenophobic and anti-politics reservoir in Wallonia. It could also build upon the post-9/11 atmosphere and on the Iraq situation that fed islamophobia. However, in absolute contrast to the Vlaams Blok, the leadership and organization of the FN remained incredibly weak, virtually non-existent. The few leaders that do exist were neither charismatic nor qualified, and very much divided, thus leading to the fielding of still more extreme splinter lists such as the FNB (Front Nouveau de Belgique).

The formation of the Verhofstadt II cabinet lasted 52 days, still below the average duration of post-election coalition talks in the 1968 to 1999 period, but longer than the 1995 and 1999 formation processes. After a few days of personal consultations, to pave the way for a *formateur*, the King named an *informateur* on 21 May: French-speaking Socialist Party (PS) president E. Di Rupo. He consulted around 150 people from the political, economic, social and associative worlds, and presented a 67-page report to the King on 28 May. According to him, it was already clear that the Liberal and Socialist parties wanted to govern together. On 28 May, the incumbent Prime Minister Verhofstadt was appointed *formateur* of the new government. After having consulted the chairmen of both federal assemblies (Chamber and Senate) and the party presidents of the four parties (both Flemish and French-speaking Liberal and Socialist parties), he drafted his own document and presented it to the party presidents on 3 June.

After 42 days of rather fierce negotiations, the 66-page coalition agreement was signed by the leaders of the four parties. This document consists of 14 chapters, with clear socioeconomic priorities like employment (the Prime Minister's declared goal is laid out in the first chapter of the agreement: the creation of 200,000 new jobs). In order to create new jobs, new reductions

(some were already awarded by the defunct rainbow cabinet) of employers' charges were decided (€800 million per year in tax cuts for the payment of salaries), but the whole plan for employment had to be ratified by a national conference for labour with social partners and representatives of sub-national governments, convened by the federal government, in mid-September. A number of solutions were also sought to keep more workers above 55 of age employed in order to improve Belgium's employment rate, which lies well below the European average.

Although no new cuts in personal income tax were decided (despite the Liberals' attempts), the Socialist parties had to swallow a one-shot measure that is supposed to benefit the state budget (expected gain: €850 million), but that is at odds with primary leftist ideological principles – the so-called 'tax amnesty' for people who put money in accounts abroad (Luxembourg and elsewhere) to avoid Belgian tax. On the other hand, the Socialists managed to guarantee a yearly increase for the healthcare budget. The Socialists, and particularly the PS, were also successful in avoiding any reference to a future regionalization of this competence in the agreement (one of the longstanding claims of the VLD and other Flemish parties).

The coalition partners also showed that they were able to include Green touches in the government agreement without having to share power with the Green parties by reasserting that Belgium would respect its commitment to the Kyoto Agreement and would not question the nuclear phasing-out decided under the previous coalition. However, many important decisions on which the partners could not agree were externalized from the governmental arena (a national conference on labour, but also a new forum for institutional questions, voting rights for non-EU residents to be dealt with by Parliament, etc.).

On 10 and 11 July, the congresses of the coalition parties (five altogether, as SPIRIT had the governmental deal accepted separately from their electoral cartel partner SP.a) voted on governmental participation almost unanimously, and on 12 July the cabinet was sworn in by the King. Some ministers were named some days after, as they had to resign from their regional portfolios beforehand. Finally, the governmental declaration was read in front of the Chamber on 14 July, was debated and eventually voted on 16 July.

Three series of factors can account for the length and difficulty of this coalition formation process. First, it was the first time that federal elections were held separately from regional and community elections. Hence, as all these sub-national levels' majorities were composed of the same political forces as the federal one (except for the Brussels Region that did not have a rainbow coalition), the catastrophic federal electoral result of the Greens was problematic as they were supposed to remain in power at these levels for one more year (until new regional and community elections were held in June 2004).

After some hesitation, the Greens decided to remain in power at the regional and community levels. The proximity of regional and community (plus European) elections was also a handicap for the drafting of a comprehensive agreement that would satisfy parties who would be campaigning for a year. This was especially true for the Flemish governmental parties, as these two compete, together with the Christian Democrats and to a lesser extent with the extremist Flemish Block, for the title of largest party in Flanders.

Second, the electoral results gave the two largest party families (Liberals and Socialists) almost the same share, with the Liberals largest in seats and Socialist largest in votes. The PS president made it clear in the media that he wanted a 50–50 share both in terms of the policy agreement and portfolio allocation. Moreover, as the previous coalition was somewhat dominated by the Liberals – in part due to the shortness and vagueness of the 1999 coalition agreement that was quickly drafted in the context of the dioxin crisis – the Socialists wanted a more detailed coalition contract.

Third and finally, the economic situation of 2003 was much worse than in 1999 and prospects in terms of growth were not ideal either. In this context, the window for a win–win solution on socioeconomic issues was much less open for coalition parties that range from the right to the left of the political spectrum.

Institutional changes

On 12 July, the new federal government decided to introduce a bill (which was passed in Parliament through a special majority on 30 July) transferring to the regions the competencies over licences for import, export and transit of weapons. This issue created troubles in 2002, including the resignation of Minister of Consumer Protection, Health and Environment M. Aelvoet (Agalev), but was accepted by all partners. Indeed, it gave the opportunity for each region to manage its own rules regarding weapons licensing because of the specific regional characteristics of the weapons industries. Moreover, it was symbolically seen in Flanders as a further institutional step towards more autonomy.

Issues in national politics

Following a financial scandal in the city of Antwerp, an agreement was passed between the VLD and the SP.a so that P. Janssens, SP.a president, would become mayor of that city. As a result, he was replaced by the very popular

S. Stevaert at the head of the SP.a. Following the federal elections results on 18 May, there were other changes of party presidency. S. De Clerk, president of the CD&V, resigned and was replaced by Y. Leterme; while A. Duquesne became president of the MR, replacing D. Ducarme, appointed Minister-President of the Brussels Region. More significantly, following its major electoral defeat, the Flemish Green party Agalev, which had rejected the prior offer of SP.a-SPIRIT to form a cartel, changed its party name into 'Groen!' ('Green!') in November under the leadership of a new president, V. Dua.

During the months of February and March, Belgium entered the 'peace camp' with France, Germany and Russia that wanted to continue the United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq and prevent war. Large demonstrations took place in the streets of Brussels, while the political establishment was almost unanimously in favour of peace. Moreover, in a NATO meeting, Belgium vetoed the American request to support Turkey's defence and, as a result, had to face stiff American diplomatic threats.

The so-called 'universal competence' law also caused a lot of problems to Belgium and its foreign policy because it allowed the bringing of foreign decision-makers accused of crimes against humanity before Belgian courts. The case against Ariel Sharon created political tensions between Belgium and Israel. So too did a case against George Bush Sr., Colin Powell, Dick Cheney and Norman Schwarzkopf concerning the bombings during the 1991 Gulf War, following which Donald Rumsfeld threatened to remove NATO headquarters from Brussels. Under heavy international and domestic pressures, the government decided on 20 June that the law had to be modified. It gave up the possibility to judge foreign decision-makers and would only deal with cases where the person charged is Belgian. The 'universal competence' law was finally repealed in August and the last prosecutions were abandoned by Justice in September.

Law and order issues stood high on the agenda. In May, prison warders went on strike in protest against inmate over-population and understaffing. An agreement was finally reached between the unions and Minister of Justice M. Verwilghen (VLD) after weeks of dispute. In September, 18 Islamist activists, charged with having links to the terrorist network Al-Qaida and planning a bombing against an American military base in Belgium, were convicted. The 'Cools trial' (named after the former PS president and minister A. Cools, who was shot dead on 18 July 1991) opened on 17 October; eight persons belonging to the 'Belgo-Italian mafia' were accused of the assassination, but the motives and the 'hidden' partners for this act remained unknown.

In July, 200 Afghani refugees started a hunger strike in a Brussels church, asking for a collective regularization of their status as asylum seekers. Minis-

ter of Home Affairs P. Dewael (VLD) was strongly opposed to this regularization and the conflict lasted for weeks. Finally, an agreement was reached by a federal mediator. The issue of the migrants was also present in parliamentary debates. A law granting voting rights for non-European foreigners in local elections was approved in December by the Senate. This politically 'hot' issue required an alternative parliamentary majority, gathering all the democratic French-speaking parties plus the SP.a, thus pushing the party of the Prime Minister (VLD) into opposition. These debates clearly divided coalition partners, but also created some within-party tensions, especially in the MR.

The final report of the parliamentary investigation committee on the bankruptcy of Sabena, the Belgian national airline, was approved by the Senate (28 January). It designated the shareholder Swissair as the main culprit. Although the federal government hoped to create 200,000 new jobs, some large companies decided to downsize their personnel, such as Arcelor (1,700 jobs in the steel industry) and Ford motors (3,000 jobs). Transportation and mobility issues remained very divisive. The issue of night flights already cost the cabinet participation by Ecolo. On 9 June, a Brussels court judged the concentration of night-time flights above some areas around Brussels to be a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, as flights had to be equally spread above Brussels. The Minister of Mobility and Transportation B. Anciaux (SPIRIT) therefore wanted to apply this injunction by spreading the flights above the city of Brussels itself and reducing the noise above Flemish districts. This created a strong backlash from most French-speaking parties, who pleaded for the resignation of the federal minister. In November, after yet another court judgement, the federal government approved a new flight dispersion scheme, but the dispute remained far from settled. In the meantime, Brussels-based DHL announced its intention to extend its activities around the Brussels National Airport and to create some 1,000 new jobs. Conversely, amid financial difficulties, the national railway company (SNCB/NMBS) decided to cut more than 4,500 jobs within the next two years.

As is so often the case in Belgium, non-ethnic issues lead to linguistic/community conflict. The debate around a possible bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games was opened by the Minister-President of Flanders B. Somers (VLD) who developed a Flemish bid, while the French-speaking parties counter-attacked by presenting Brussels as the ideal (federal) candidate.

Finally, the royal family still remained a focus of the public attention. On 12 April, Prince Laurent was married to the Belgo-Briton Claire Coombs, while in August, Crown Prince Philippe and Princess Mathilde announced the birth of their second child, Prince Gabriel, who stands third in order of succession to the throne.

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