

Belgium

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Changes in cabinet

There were no changes in the composition of the Leterme II cabinet in 2010, either during the pre-election period (before the anticipated federal elections on 13 June) or during the caretaker period (after the elections).

Changes in Parliament

Shortly after the federal elections, two Senators of the N-VA were replaced by another member of their party. K. Geybels was expelled from her party after her name was cited in a drugs abuse scandal in Thailand, and Ph. Muyters joined the Flemish regional cabinet as Minister of Finance and Budget (as well as other portfolios) and thus had to resign from the Senate. At the same time, some of the candidates elected on 13 June chose not to sit in the federal parliament in order to continue sitting in one of the regional parliaments. For instance, B. De Wever (N-VA chairman) and Ph. Dewinter (VB) preferred to keep their seat in the Flemish parliament. M. Prévot (CDH) also chose to keep his seat in the Walloon parliament.

Election and cabinet report

The first few months of the year were marked by a continued lack of substantive progress in the institutional negotiations between the Flemish and French-speaking parties – a continuation of the situation that has prevailed ever since 2007 (see Rihoux et al. 2008, 2009, 2010). In particular, no consensus or

Table 1. Elections to the House of Representatives (lower chamber)

	13 June 2010				
	Total number of seats:	150			
	Electorate:	7,767,552			
	Total votes cast:	6,929,855 (89.2%)			
	Total valid votes:	6,527,367 (94.2%)			
Party	Number and percentage of votes	Change since 2007	Number and percentage of seats	Change since 2007	
<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> – New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Dutch-speaking	1,135,617 (17.4)	–	27 (18)	–	
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	894,543 (13.7)	2.8	26 (17.3)	+6	
<i>Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams</i> – Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	707,986 (10.9)	–	17 (11.3)	–	
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	605,617 (9.3)	–3.2	18 (12)	–5	
<i>Socialisten en Progressieven Anders</i> <i>Sociaal Progressief Alternatief</i> – Social Progressive Alternative (SPa), Dutch-speaking	602,867 (9.2)	–1.1	13 (8.7)	–1	
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking	563,873 (8.6)	–3.2	13 (8.7)	–5	
<i>Vlaams Belang</i> – Flemish Interest (VB), Dutch-speaking	506,697 (7.8)	–4.2	12 (8)	–5	
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-Speaking	360,441 (5.5)	–0.5	9 (6)	–1	
<i>Ecolo</i> – Ecologists, French-speaking	313,047 (4.8)	–0.3	8 (5.3)	0	
<i>Groen!</i> – Green!, Dutch-speaking	285,989 (4.4)	+0.4	5 (3.3)	+1	
<i>Lijst De Decker</i> – De Decker's List (LDD), Dutch-speaking	150,577 (2.3)	–1.7	1 (0.7)	–4	
<i>Parti Populaire</i> – People's Party (PP), French-speaking	84,005 (1.3)	–	1 (0.7)	–	
<i>Front National</i> – National Front (FN), French-speaking	33,591 (0.5)	–1.5	0 (0.0)	–1	
Others	282,517 (4.3)	+1.4	–	–	

Notes: All parties with at least one seat in the Chamber or that used to have representation in the previous composition of the Chamber appear in the table. As the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) and the *Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams* (CD&V) formed an electoral cartel in 2007 (Rihoux et al. 2008: 918–919), their individual results in 2010 are therefore not compared to the 2007 results. The *Socialisten en Progressieven Anders* (SPa), which used to be called *Sociaal Progressief Alternatief* (SPa – the acronym did not change) until January 2009 (therefore SPa refers to *Socialisten en Progressieven Anders* in Rihoux et al. 2010: 900), formed an electoral cartel in 2003 and 2007 with a much smaller partner, SPIRIT (which was, together with the N-VA, the other party that emerged out of the Flemish nationalist party *Volksunie* when the latter dissolved in 2001). SPIRIT was renamed successively *Vlaams Progressieven* (Flemish Progressists) and *Sociaal-Liberale Partij* (Social-Liberal Party) in 2008, and then merged with the Flemish Greens (*Groen!*) in December 2009. We therefore here compare SPa's results with those of 2007 when this party formed an electoral cartel with SPIRIT (see Rihoux et al. 2008: 918).

Table 2. Elections for the Senate (upper chamber)

Party	Number and percentage of votes	Change since 2007	Number and percentage of seats	Change since 2007
Date of election: 13 June 2010				
Total number of seats: 40 directly elected (71 altogether) ^a				
Electorate: 7,767,552				
Total votes cast: 6,929,478 (89.2%)				
Total valid votes: 6,469,103 (93.4%)				
Party	Number and percentage of votes	Change since 2007	Number and percentage of seats	Change since 2007
<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> – New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Dutch-speaking	1,268,780 (19.6)	–	9 (22.5)	–
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	880,828 (13.6)	3.4	7 (17.5)	+3
<i>Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams</i> – Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	646,375 (10)	–	4 (10)	–
<i>Sociaal Progressief Alternatief</i> – Social Progressive Alternative (SP.a), Dutch-speaking	613,079 (9.5)	–0.5	4 (10)	–
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	599,618 (9.3)	–3	4 (10)	–2
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking	533,124 (8.2)	–4.2	4 (10)	–1
<i>Vlaams Belang</i> – Flemish Interest (VB), Dutch-speaking	491,547 (7.6)	–4.3	3 (7.5)	–2
<i>Ecolo</i> – Ecologists, French-speaking	353,111 (5.5)	–0.4	2 (5)	–
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-speaking	331,87 (5.1)	–0.8	2 (5)	0
<i>Groen!</i> – Green!, Dutch-speaking	251,546 (3.9)	0.3	1 (2.5)	0
<i>Lijst De Decker</i> – De Decker's List (LDD), Dutch-speaking	130,779 (2)	–1.4	0 (0.0)	–1
<i>Parti Populaire</i> – People's Party (PP), French-speaking	98,858 (1.5)	–	0 (0.0)	0

Notes: The same comments as those for Table 1 apply, along with two additional ones. On the one hand, all parties with at least one directly elected Senator (only those parties are qualified for further seat devolution) that used to have at least one directly elected Senator in the previous composition of the Senate or that have at least one seat in the Chamber appear in the table. On the other hand, the FN did not compete for the Senate elections and therefore lost its only representative in this assembly. ^a40 of the 71 senators are directly elected; the results reported here concern these 40 seats.

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Leterme II

For the composition of Leterme II on 1 January 2010, see Rihoux et al. (2010: 902–903).

compromise agreement could be found on the crucial issue of the ‘BHV’ (Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde) constituency comprising Brussels and parts of its periphery (situated in Flanders, but with sizeable proportions of French-speaking inhabitants). In addition, the quite heterogeneous cabinet, comprised of the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (Open VLD) and of the French-speaking Christian Democrats (CDH), Liberals (MR) and Socialists (PS), remained divided both on ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic issues. On 22 April, in a bold move, the Flemish Liberals decided to leave the negotiation table as well as the federal government. With no alternative to hand, Prime Minister Yves Leterme was forced to submit the cabinet’s resignation to the King, who accepted it four days later, thereby launching the formal process for organising elections for 13 June.

Most parties were forced to assemble their electoral lists within a few days. As for the CD&V, the weakened Leterme, who had been the main winner of the 2007 general elections (Rihoux et al. 2008: 917–923), decided not to lead the CD&V list and to hand over that role to M. Thyssen, the party president. The organisation of the elections themselves was further complicated by the refusal, by numerous Flemish mayors in the Brussels periphery, to organise the elections in their respective municipalities. This was in protest against the absence of reform of the BHV constituency. In the end, the governor of the Flemish Brabant province had to take over the practical organisation in order to prevent the invalidation of the whole electoral process.

The elections resulted in quite major shifts compared to 2007 and 2009 (for a detailed analysis, see Blaise et al. 2010). Most notably, the radical nationalist N-VA, led by B. De Wever, gained a landslide victory on the Flemish side, as did the PS, led by E. Di Rupo, on the French-speaking side. As a result of this, the PS reinforced its dominance in the south of the country, while the N-VA clearly became the dominant player in the north. By contrast, it was a stunning defeat for the long-dominant CD&V (obtaining ten fewer seats in the lower chamber than the N-VA, its former ‘junior’ partner in a cartel at the 2007 elections) as well as for both Liberal parties (Open VLD and MR) and the populist *Lijst DeDecker*. The other parties lost or gained less dramatically – but in any case, the elections clearly set two dominant parties on the centre stage: the right-wing and Flemish independentist N-VA and the French-speaking left-wing PS.

After the June 13 elections, Belgium entered the longest period in its history of negotiations and attempts to form a new coalition. This political crisis was longer than the 2007 formation process (see Rihoux et al. 2008: 923) and continued throughout the year. The reasons for the crisis were the same as in 2007: the persisting and profound divergences on institutional issues between the French-speaking parties, on the one hand, and the Flemish ones – mainly the N-VA – on the other.

On 17 June, the king entrusted the N-VA leader and election winner B. De Wever to act as *informateur*. After declaring that there was not enough agreement on the institutional reforms to succeed, he was relieved of his mission by the King on 8 July. The King, rather than appointing E. Di Rupo as *formateur* as was expected, nominated him ‘pre-*formateur*’. In his consultations, Di Rupo attempted to create the two-third majority that was needed to enforce reforms of the federal institutions, and would have included all the democratic parties except the Liberals (i.e., CD&V, N-VA, SP.a and *Groen!* on the Flemish side; PS, CDH and *Ecolo* on the French-speaking one). He did not manage to reach such an agreement as the N-VA, followed by the CD&V, accused the French-speaking parties of not accepting the significant reforms and concessions the Flemish parties were asking for. Hence, on 29 August, Di Rupo asked the King to relieve him of his duties, which the King refused to do. However, no agreement could be reached, especially on the issues of the splitting of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde and the funding of the Brussels region. On 3 September, Di Rupo again submitted his resignation as pre-*formateur* to the King, who accepted it this time.

The day after, the King appointed D. Pieters (president of the Belgian senate, N-VA) and A. Flahaut (president of the lower chamber, PS) as ‘mediators’. Their task was to revive the talks between the seven parties. However, growing tensions arose between the PS and the N-VA, with Di Rupo accusing the N-VA of sabotaging the negotiations, and De Wever answering that the ‘financing law’ had to be reformed in order to provide better and autonomous financial means to the regions. On 4 October, in an unexpected twist, De Wever called a press conference to explain that he was pulling out of the negotiations, charging the French-speaking political parties with refusing the Flemish claims. The result was that Pieters and Flahaut were relieved of their duties as mediators the following day.

Four days later, De Wever was given a ten-day mission by the King of ‘clarification’ in order to establish convergences between the seven parties on the issues of the funding of Brussels, the transfer of powers to the regions and the financing law. On 17 October, De Wever made a written proposal which was rejected right away as outrageous by all three French-speaking parties involved in the negotiations.

On 21 October, J. Vande Lanotte (SP.a) was nominated by the King as ‘mediator’ to try to find a solution and resume negotiations – a mission that lasted till the very beginning of the following year. However, this still did not put an end to this seemingly endless political crisis (to be continued in next year’s report).

As a result of this stalemate, the Leterme II cabinet remained in position as ‘caretaker government’ with limited powers. However, as time progressed, and also due to pressures from many stakeholders – particularly the ‘social partners’ (trade unions and employers’ organizations) – the cabinet was de facto granted the right to take binding political decisions beyond the usual practice of caretaker governments.

Issues in national politics

The dramatic shifts after the June elections and the never-ending government formation process intervened in many parties’ leadership modernisation plans. On the Flemish side, the defeated Christian Democrat Prime Minister Leterme was blamed for the disastrous election result and was expected to disappear after the arrival of a new government. While this did not materialise, his running of the Belgian presidency of the European Union (July to December) and his good performance as caretaker Prime Minister restored somewhat his position in the party leadership.

The president of the CD&V, M. Thyssen, resigned a few days after the election, and was replaced in the interim by the virtually unknown vice-president W. Beke, who had to lead his party during the formation negotiations. In order to upgrade his interim status, the party decided to advance the regular leadership elections to 22 December, which he won with 98.7 per cent (while some potential competitors emerged, in the end only Beke was a candidate).

The N-VA, whose size had exploded, only had some organisational growth problems with which to cope. It had to develop a party brain trust, expand its narrow leadership structure of separatist diehards, and find some capable lieutenants to back up the party president De Wever, the architect of the electoral landslide and media face of the party.

The election defeat further undermined the shaky position of the president of the Flemish socialists (SP), C. Gennez, who was expected to be rewarded for her ungrateful job with a post in the new government. The party’s programmatic line became very blurred given its awkward position as government partner in the Flemish government (with N-VA and CD&V) while in

opposition to the federal caretaker government but actively negotiating to get into a new federal cabinet.

The new generation that led the Flemish Liberals (VLD) and provoked the fall of the Leterme Government (see above) was heavily criticised by the older, more participationist and less flamingant Verhofstadt generation. The party's electoral defeat reinforced President De Croo's choice to have a spell in opposition to refresh the party at all levels. However, due to the lack of a new government, it had to continue to participate in the federal caretaker government. By the end of the year, as the other parties did not make progress in government formation, VLD participation had become a feasible option again.

The *Vlaams Belang*, one of the main losers to the N-VA, reinforced its anti-Islam credo. Party cohesion was further undermined by the authoritarian leadership of Dewinter and the resistance of former president Van Hecke and his dying partner Morel, pleading for a softer image and internal democracy. Many lower-level moderate elites left the party.

The founder of the *Lijst DeDecker* decided to take a sabbatical after the elections decimated his party (to one seat) and he was replaced *ad interim* by Lode Vereeck, LDD group leader in the Flemish parliament.

In the Flemish greens (*Groen!*) the new unknown leader W. Van Besien consolidated the party's electoral position, and rapidly became a skilled and respected negotiator in the government-formation process. In spite of his participationist strategy, he was re-elected on 9 October without opposition (94 per cent). He managed to maintain close cooperation with *Ecolo* by forming a single group in the federal parliament and guaranteeing that they would enter (or not) the new government together.

On the French-speaking side, the electoral defeat of the francophone Greens did question the party's participationist strategy (with the PS and CDH at the regional level, both in Wallonia and in the Brussels region) and they worked in close collaboration with *Groen!* as well as with the other francophone parties in the government formation negotiations.

As for the three traditional francophone parties, they all had to face some '*affaires*' of favouritism, corruption, conflicts of interest, and even incompetence (especially the PS). In spite of these scandals, PS leader, Di Rupo, managed, as the winner of the elections and as the main francophone negotiator, to keep his party cohesion and hierarchy intact, further reinforcing his position at the polls.

The MR finally decided to change leader after the June electoral defeat and in a context of deep divisions in the party for or against the reigning party leader (and federal Minister of Finance and Vice-PM) D. Reynders. As negotiations dragged on, the party decided to organise leadership elections in February 2011.

In the CDH leadership, renewal was also disrupted as it was agreed that incumbent and long-time president and Deputy Prime Minister J. Milquet would be replaced by regional minister B. Lutgen as soon as a new government was formed.

Finally, the new right-wing populist *Parti Populaire – Personenpartij*, that obtained one seat, was shaken by various leadership quarrels.

In terms of substantive politics, on 1 January, H. Van Rompuy, former Belgian Prime Minister (CD&V) became the very first President of the European Council. For its part, Belgium took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from 1 July to 31 December. In spite of the caretaker nature of the government, the Belgian authorities (also including regional authorities) were able to conduct quite a successful Presidency.

As a result of the political crisis, Belgium had no budget for 2011. On 9 November, the caretaker cabinet approved the three ‘provisional twelfths’ (i.e., three months of operating budget) needed for the functioning of the state until March 2011. In the economic and social sector, at the end of July, there were several major plant shutdowns. For instance, because of a restructuring at Carrefour, the hypermarket chain, eleven hypermarkets closed in July despite a spirited strike movement, and in October, the Opel plant in Antwerp finally shut down, leaving another 2,400 or so workers redundant.

In April, the Belgian Catholic Church was caught in a turmoil caused by the confession by R. Vangheluwe, the Bishop of Bruges, to paedophile sexual abuse, followed by his resignation. It was one of the numerous paedophile sex scandals inside the Church, but not the least. Linked to these affairs, searches were carried out in June, in the episcopal palace of the Mechelen-Brussels archdiocese and in the private house of Cardinal Danneels, the former Belgian Primate. For his part, the present Primate, archbishop Léonard, after being accused of laxity in the paedophile scandals within the Church in which he saw a case of ‘tabloid condemnation’, further shocked public opinion by referring to AIDS as an ‘immanent justice’ and to homosexuality as ‘abnormal sex’.

On 31 March, the House of Representatives passed a vote for the prohibition of the burqa in public spaces. This bill still had to be approved by the Senate, but the dissolution of the Chambers in April prevented it from doing so.

Undocumented immigrants continued to be confronted with judicial repression and internment in closed centres. While the authorities spoke of saturation of the reception and accommodation networks, regular demonstrations went on against that policy.

Sources and Further Information

Publications:

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On the Internet:

- Belgian Federal Portal: www.belgium.be/en/index.jsp [global official portal for Belgium]
- Detailed electoral results: www.ibz.rrn.fgov.be/index.php?id=4&L=0 [official results, all elections]
- (See also, on many specific institutional and political topics, well-documented analyses in the weekly publications of the *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*: www.crisp.be/librairie/)