

Europe and Euroscepticism: ‘Non-issues’ in Belgian Politics

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Introduction

The 2009 European election does not put in question Belgium’s traditional reputation as a ‘Europhile’ member state. The 2004 European Parliament (EP) election campaign had seen some politicization of European Union (EU) topics – in particular the Bolkestein directive on services liberalization (Crespy 2010a). In contrast, Europe was conspicuously absent from the 2009 campaign. This was mainly due to the fact that regional elections, which are the beating heart of Belgium’s political life, were taking place on the same day. The EP election was to a large extent overshadowed by the debate on regional issues such as education, transparency and ethics in politics, and the composition of future governments at regional level (Dandoy and Pauwels 2009; Pilet and Brack 2008).

The assessment of the 2009 European election campaign presented in this chapter reconstitutes the ambivalent picture of the debate in Belgium. On the one hand, Belgian party politics remain faithful to Belgium’s ‘Europhile’ image with Euroscepticism restricted to the far and populist right. On the other hand, the blatant lack of interest among the Belgian parties and voters for EU issues goes hand-in-hand with a worried glance at increased abstentionism and Euroscepticism in other EU countries. This makes Europe and Euroscepticism in Belgium ‘non-issues’ in two respects: due to Europe’s very low saliency in the political debate and due to the absence of political dividing lines within and among parties on EU issues.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the discourses over Europe in Belgian politics and the developments thereof over time. The second section presents a general account of the 2009 campaign, including results and elected candidates in the EP. The third section presents a more thorough analysis of political discourse about Europe in the campaign as it is reflected in the party manifestos, on the one hand, and in the quality press, on the other hand. In the light of these results, the last section finally discusses the relationship between Belgium’s self-perception as an EU member state and the representations of the EU polity.

A ‘Europhile’ founding member state: evolution of the Belgian political discourse over Europe

When compared to the other EU member states, Belgium can be seen as a ‘Europhile’ country. At the origins of European integration, the federalist movement was strong in Belgium with the three major political families having their ‘father of Europe’: P. H. Spaak for the Socialists, P. Van Zeeland for the Christian Democrats

and J. Rey for the Liberals. Later Belgian personalities were also driving forces in the integration process, such as the Christian Democrat Leo Tindemans who advocated a common currency, a common foreign and defence policy and the strengthening of the European assembly in a famous report as early as 1975. Until now, the main Belgian political parties have consistently called for 'more Europe'.

A traditional nationalist critique of Europe

In Belgium, Euroscepticism is arguably limited to the fringes of the political spectrum. The most important force of resistance towards the EU is the strong nationalist and populist right in Flanders epitomized by the *Vlaams Belang*. In a populist vein, *Vlaams Belang* criticizes 'Euro-Brussels', highlighting the trends towards centralization and the costs of integration for citizens (Mudde 2000). However, it does not stake out a frontal opposition to Europe. Because of its ideology grounded in ethnic nationalism, it rather advocates a confederal Europe where the 'peoples' can enjoy an intact sovereignty (Bursens and Mudde 2005). The discourse of nationalist and regional parties about Europe is sometimes very ambivalent since the EU has consistently been rather favourable to regional identity and autonomy in the framework of the so-called 'Europe of the regions' (De Winter 2001). For the *Vlaams Belang*, this vision of Europe is grounded in a strong rejection of the Belgian state. With the *Vlaams Belang*, the more moderate Flemish nationalist *Volksunie* was the only party rejecting the Treaty of Maastricht. The nationalists put forward mainly two arguments. First, they deplored the weakness of the regional dimension of integration. Second, and more importantly, they feared that the new rights attached to European citizenship would alter the balance of representation among the linguistic groups around Brussels while, additionally, turning the capital of Flanders into the francophone capital of the EU. On the contrary, the francophone right extremists of the *Front national* decided not to oppose the treaty (Deschouwer and Van Assche 2008). In 2005, the *Vlaams Belang* and the *Front national* were the only two parties voting against the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT).

An increased left-wing social critique of Europe

On the left, small parties such as the *Parti des travailleurs belges* (PTB), the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR) or the *Parti communiste* also express harsh criticism of the EU for being anti-social. As these parties are not represented in the parliament, the impact of their discourse in the public sphere is very limited. In the last decade, the mainstream left has nevertheless increasingly called for 'another Europe'. Criticism of the social deficit of the EU, however, is not new and some scholars have highlighted its historical roots. Support for integration within the Belgian left was not as unanimous as it is often claimed. In particular, the socialist

movement was divided already at the origins of the integration project with some fringes seeing the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Defence Community as anti-Soviet undertakings incompatible with socialism (Delwit 1995). The unions were disappointed by the development of the European Economic Community (EEC) because of its liberal bias at the economic level and its intergovernmental bias, allowing for less union participation, at the institutional level. This nevertheless led them to concentrate on the national level and to abandon Europe rather than to contest it (Verschuere 2010). From the mid-1950s, the Belgian socialist party and union have therefore consistently combined a principled support for more integration with critical views on the actual European policies and institutions.

Today, the socialist union FGVB is much more inclined to protest than the francophone *Parti socialiste* (PS) and the Flemish *Socialisten en progressieven anders* (SP.A). It is also closer to more radical civil society organizations such as Attac. In 2004, a coalition composed of the French-speaking PS, the unions and associations belonging to the Belgian Social Forum pioneered contestation against the Bolkestein directive proposal for services liberalization in the EU and allowed for the diffusion of protest towards other countries and the EU level (Crespy 2010b). While no party called for the rejection of the 2005 European Constitutional Treaty, resentment towards ‘the neoliberal EU’ was relatively widespread within the leftist circles. Not entirely different to what happened in France, strong criticism towards the treaty was expressed within the PS; but in contrast to France, a strong traditional pro-European identity could avoid dissent and the Socialists favoured a strategy of protest against ‘Bolkestein’ while approving the ECT. While the PS called for a ‘yes to continue the struggle’, the SP.A advocated a ‘critical yes’ to the ECT. It is interesting to note that the Greens changed their voting behaviour towards European treaties. Whereas they rejected the Treaty of Maastricht for not being integrationist enough – especially as far as environmental issues were concerned – they approved the ECT in 2005, thus entering the ‘cartel’ of the clearly pro-EU government parties. Hence, the main parties’ critical stance consists in advocating more Europe while calling for a more ‘social Europe’, a more ‘federal Europe’ or a ‘greener Europe’ (Delwit et al. 2005; Pilet and van Haute 2007). Also, unlike in France for instance, the EU is not a cause for intra-party dissent in Belgium. On the contrary, the various parties have been consistently coherent on European issues (Brack and Pilet, forthcoming).

Weak mass-level hostility towards Europe

Apart from the Eurobarometer data, a survey on sources of mass-level Euroscepticism in Belgium has been conducted in the framework of the EU-funded project ‘Intune’. The conclusions claim that ‘negative evaluations of the egocentric benefits of European membership, social distrust in European fellow citizens and institutional distrust in the EU are the most important determinants of Euroscepticism, while

education, national attachment, exclusive identity, actor-oriented distrust, and political inefficacy have a smaller, but significant impact' (Abst et al. 2009). The identity-based explanation of mass-level Euroscepticism is rejected and education is deemed irrelevant. The interesting point here is that the emphasis is put on subjective (evaluation of benefits, distrust) rather than objective variables (income, education). Overall, Belgian public opinion remains nevertheless highly supportive of European integration. Opinions about EU membership being a 'good thing' are always above the EU average, fluctuating between 57% and 66% during the period 1973 to 2008 (European Commission 2008). To sum up, Euroscepticism in the Belgian political landscape may be 'hard' among some limited sections of the population and the political class, but overall it is 'hardly relevant' (Deschouwer and Van Assche 2008).

General overview of the 2009 EP election: the very low visibility of European issues in a stable political landscape

The main themes in the campaign

With the EP election being coupled with a regional election, European issues were barely discussed in the campaign. Three main European themes have been dealt with in the Belgian quality press (Dandoy and Pauwels 2009).¹ The first is the global financial crisis and the reaction to it at EU level. The lack of European coordination in tackling the crisis has often been criticized. The role of the Commission President José Manuel Barroso was also discussed. The liberal as well as the Christian and humanist parties have nevertheless been supportive of Barroso's appointment for a second term at the head of the Commission. Secondly, the Belgian press has attempted to emphasize the importance of the EU for citizens while providing information on the European institutions and policies. This can be seen as a response of the establishment to the pervasive lack of interest in the EP election and in the EU in general. Not only did the Belgian population display very little interest in European issues, but the Belgian press also provided worried accounts of unprecedentedly low levels of turnout in neighbouring countries like France. Moreover, forecasts about

1 *Le Soir*, *Vers l'Avenir*, *De Standaard*, and *Het Nieuwsblad* have been systematically investigated over a period of 4 weeks from 6 May 2009 until the election day on 7 June 2009. The data was collected by R. Dandoy and T. Pauwels in the frame of a collective project analyzing the press coverage in 22 EU member states carried out at the Cevipol (Université libre de Bruxelles). The analysis presented in this chapter builds on the summary by Dandoy and Pauwels in the corresponding Cahier du Cevipol (http://dev.ulb.ac.be/cevipol/dossiers_fichiers/cahiers-du-cevipol-2009-3.pdf) while providing a more in-depth analysis of the data (http://dev.ulb.ac.be/cevipol/fr/dossiers_elections-europeennes-2009.html) in the further sections of the chapter.

the strengthening of far right Eurosceptic and populist parties in the UK and the Netherlands, for instance, were reasons for concern expressed in the Belgian press. Thirdly, while most well-known politicians were running in the regional election, three prominent Belgian political personalities standing in the EP election did draw attention. On the francophone side, the candidacy of the European Commissioner for Development Louis Michel attracted media interest; on the Flemish side, a duel between two former Belgian prime ministers, the Liberal Guy Verhofstadt, and the Christian Democrat Jean-Luc Dehaene, was orchestrated in the media. The former TV presenter Anne Delvaux (*Centre démocrate humaniste*, CDH) and minister Jean-Claude Marcourt were also some of the few candidates for the EP garnering public attention.

Election results

Since voting is compulsory in Belgium, turnout levels are among the highest in Europe (between 90% and 92% since 1979). Nevertheless, about 10% of the electorate decided not to abide by this legal obligation. The Belgian consociation has a very fragmented, asymmetric and complex electoral and party system. Basically, the country has two separated party systems – the francophone and the Flemish – with German-speaking parties as a third and marginal component but nonetheless constituting its own electoral college.

Table 1: 2009 EP election results in the Dutch-speaking electoral college

Party	% votes (compared to 2004)	seats (compared to 2004)
<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> (CD&V)	23.26*	3 (-1)
<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (VLD)	20.56 (-1.35)	3 (0)
<i>Socialisten en progressieven anders</i> (SP.A)	13.23	2 (-1)
<i>Vlaams Belang</i>	15.88 (-7.28)	2 (-1)
<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (N-VA)	9.88*	1 (+1)
<i>Groen!</i>	7.90 (-0.08)	1 (0)
<i>Lijst Dedecker</i> (LDD)	7.28 (+7.28)	1 (+1)
Others	2.01	0 (0)
Total	100	13 (-1)

* In 2004, the CD&V and the NV-A formed a joint list which received 25.15% of the votes and 4 seats.

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>.

The 2009 EP election witnessed a re-composition of the Flemish party landscape which, however, did not result in a major altering of the balance between the various sections of the electorate. In contrast to 2004, when they ran together in a cartel with the Christian Democrats of the CD&V, the nationalists of the N-VA had their own

list in 2009. They performed particularly well while garnering almost 10% of the votes. The new small right-wing populist *Dedecker Lijst* also did quite well with more than 7% and one seat at its first competition. The gains of these two smaller far-right parties were made at the expense of the *Vlaams Belang*, which could not repeat its historical performance of 2004, losing more than 7% of the votes. The other parties got comparable results to 2004.

Table 2: 2009 EP election results in the French-speaking electoral college

Party	% votes (compared to 2004)	seats (compared to 2004)
<i>Parti socialiste</i> (PS)	29.10 (-6.99)	3 (-1)
<i>Mouvement réformateur</i> (MR)	26.05 (-1.53)	2 (-1)
<i>Ecolo</i>	22.88 (+13.03)	2 (+1)
<i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (CDH)	13.34 (-1.80)	1 (0)
<i>Front national</i>	3.57 (-3.88)	0 (0)
Others	5.06	0 (0)
Total	100	8 (-1)

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>.

The only significant development in the French-speaking college is the boost of the Green Party at the expense of the Socialists. While the other parties remained stable, the PS lost almost 7%, nevertheless remaining the first party with 29% of the votes and 3 seats. More remarkably, the Greens doubled their score of 2004 while garnering more than 22% of the votes and gaining 2 seats. The *Front national* performed worse than in 2004 and was again unable to send a representative to the EP.

Table 3: 2009 EP election results in the German-speaking electoral college

Party	% votes (compared to 2004)	seats (compared to 2004)
<i>Christlich Soziale Partei</i> (CSP)	32.25 (-10.23)	1 (0)
<i>Sozialistische Partei</i> (SP)	14.63 (-0.31)	0 (0)
<i>Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt</i> (PFF)	20.37 (-2.42)	0 (0)
<i>Ecolo</i>	15.58 (+5.09)	0 (0)
<i>Partei der Deutschsprachigen Belgier</i> (PDB)	10.07 (+0.77)	0 (0)
<i>Vivant</i>	6.25 (+6.25)	0 (0)
<i>Europa der Werte</i>	0.85 (+0.85)	0 (0)
Total	100.00	1 (0)

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>.

Finally, the German-speaking electoral college sent one representative to the EP. The 2009 election did not alter the preeminence of the Christian Social Party (CSP).

The Belgian political forces remained relatively stable. The most important development is a small sanction of parties in government – especially the PS – to the significant benefit of the Greens. The emergence of new nationalist and populist parties seems to have foremost damaged the *Vlaams Belang*.

Table 4: Belgian elected candidates for the 2009-2014 legislative period

Name	National party	EP political group
Ivo Belet	CD&V	EPP
Jean-Luc Dehaene	CD&V	EPP
Marianne Thyssen	CD&V	EPP
Frieda Brepoels	NV-A	Greens/EFA
Saïd El Khadraoui	SP.A	S&D
Kathleen Van Brempt	SP.A	S&D
Jan Eppink Derk	LDD	ECR
Dirk Sterckx	Open VLD	ALDE
Guy Verhofstadt	Open VLD	ALDE
Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck	Open VLD	ALDE
Bart Staes	Groen	Greens/EFA
Franck Vanhecke	VB	Non-attached
Philip Claeys	VB	Non-attached
Mathieu Grosch	CSP	EPP
Frédéric Daerden	PS	S&D
Véronique De Keyser	PS	S&D
Marc Tarabella	PS	S&D
Anne Delvaux	CDH	EPP
Isabelle Durant	Ecolo	Greens/EFA
Philippe Lamberts	Ecolo	Greens/EFA
Louis Michel	MR	ALDE
Frédérique Ries	MR	ALDE

Source: *European Parliament*.

Belgium has 22 seats in the new parliament. Thirteen of the elected Members of European Parliament (MEPs) were already sitting in the previous parliament and only 7 of them have never had any mandate as a MEP (Brack and Pilet forthcoming). This suggests that Europe is rather a matter for specialists who enjoy little visibility in the media, except for the former Commissioner Michel and the two former Prime Ministers Dehaene and Verhofstadt who embody the European – not to say federalist – Belgian spirit.

Europe in the campaign

The in-depth and systematic investigation of the Belgian quality press, on the one hand, and of the Belgian parties' manifestos, on the other hand, confirms the hints given by the observation of the general dynamic of the campaign. First, the saliency of Europe in the 2009 campaign is low. Second, Eurosceptic themes enjoy little visibility in the debate when compared to calls for 'more Europe'. The low turnout was a major theme in the press coverage of the campaign, while a 'Green New Deal' at the European level emerges as an objective shared by the vast majority of Belgian political parties.

'The bad Europeans are the others'

The major theme of the 2009 campaign in the quality press in Belgium can be broadly defined as the relationship to Europe. Insofar as the quality press can be seen as a tool made 'by' and 'for' the intellectual elite of a society, the coverage of the last European election reflects concerns among this section of the population about a poor linkage between national societies and the EU, not only at mass-level but also as far as the political class is concerned. It should be recalled that, in contrast with the 2004 EP election, the 2009 election is marked by the deleterious political climate caused by the painful ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty.

Since voting is compulsory in Belgium, concerns about the lack of interest or hostility towards Europe are mainly handled by means of general accounts of the campaign throughout the Union and the coverage of the campaign in other countries. 20 out of the 82 articles on the European election (about 24.3%) in the four newspapers analyzed deal with the theme of the relationship to Europe. Many articles comment on the predicted low turnout and the lack of interest for Europe in general or in specific countries such as France and Poland. The rise of Eurosceptic forces is also a major theme, especially with respect to the UK Independence Party and the rise of the Dutch populist leader Geert Wilders. In contrast, Belgium is pictured as a 'conquered field' and this is emphasized by the comment of a poll finding that 54% of the Belgians – that is 8% above the average in other EU countries – are interested in European matters. Some Belgian candidates expressed openness to dialogue with Eurosceptics, while columnists professed their love for Europe and called for the increased politicization of EU issues. Furthermore, the press commented on the announced decline of the *Vlaams Belang*, which is the sole opposition force in Flanders as well as the most significant Eurosceptic party in the country. All in all, the coverage of the campaign by the press gives the picture of a Belgian society seeing itself as a European-friendly people, while expressing deep concerns about electoral apathy and the rise of Eurosceptic forces all around.

While the campaign tended to confirm the reputation of the Belgians being 'good Europeans', it would nevertheless be too naive to assume that the Belgian electorate

remains unaffected by the widespread disaffection towards Europe. The contrast in the press between the Belgians as good Europeans and other national electorates as the bad Europeans hints at a self-convincing process which reflects an unspoken fear of a deteriorating relationship between the citizens and the EU. In this respect, it seems that the Belgian quality press tried to counter the lack of interest for Europe by means of an editorial strategy aimed at informing the public about Europe. Indeed, articles dealing with the role and functioning of the EU and its institutions form the third most important category of accounts of the campaign, representing almost 22% of all articles. Many articles shed light on the impact of the EU or some of its policies – such as the labelling of products, the harmonization of norms and standards, working times, or measures targeting energy savings – on citizens’ daily life. The role of the EU at the international level is also stressed with for instance articles recalling that the EU is the biggest contributor to development aid. It is particularly striking that a strong emphasis is put on the EP with articles on the activity of the past legislature, the most important pieces of legislation passed, the work of MEPs, the debate about the double location of the assembly between Strasbourg and Brussels, etc. More importantly, the increased power and self-assertion of the EP towards the Commission and the Council are stressed in many instances.

Table 5: European issues in the Belgian quality press

Theme	Number of articles	In%
Relationship to Europe (turnout and Euroscepticism)	20	24.3
Candidates	20	24.3
Information about the role of Europe and EU institutions	18	21.9
EU policies	9	11.2
climate change	2	
social Europe	2	
immigration	2	
agriculture	1	
personnel data	1	
several policies	1	
Model of EU polity	2	2.4
Others	13	15.9
Total	82	100

Source: Cevipol, http://dev.ulb.ac.be/cevipol/fr/dossiers_belgique.html.

While this picture may appear like a cliché, Belgian party politics similarly reflect the low relevance of both Europe and Euroscepticism in Belgian politics. The 12 manifestos of the most significant political parties under study vary to a large extent in length and form. Six parties (NV-A, LDD, PS, *Groen!*, *Ecolo*, MR) elaborated a specific programme dedicated to the EP election. For four parties (CDH, *Vlaams Belang*, FN, CD&V), the European issues were merged into a broader text addressing in the first place themes related to the regional level. It is interesting to underline

that the VLD and the SP.A did not produce a European programme, but rather referred on their website to the manifesto of their respective European party confederation, namely the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Party of European Socialists (PES). Eurosceptic themes are conspicuously absent from the party manifestos. The few instances of criticism of the European political project, evoking an integration/demarcation discourse, are unsurprisingly to be found in the manifestos of the Flemish far-right. The moderate nationalist NV-A is the only party to denounce the democratic deficit of the EU and to mention the necessary protection of subsidiarity in the Union. The 2009 EP election witnessed the foundation of a new far-right party in Flanders: the *Lijst Dedecker*. Its leader, the former Liberal senator (VLD) Jean-Marie Dedecker, distinguished himself as a neo-liberal populist *à la* Pim Fortuyn. Interestingly, LDD depicts itself as a ‘Eurorealist’ party, which is not opposed to integration, but calls for a more modest EU while using typical populist themes such as criticizing the EU as an elitist project and an overregulated and bureaucratic system. It should be underlined that the critique of overregulation and bureaucracy as features of the EU is the most widespread negative assessment of the EU in the party manifestos and is shared by the Christian Democrats of the CD&V as well as the Liberals of the MR.

The NV-A, LDD, the *Vlaams Belang* and the FN converge on favourite far-right themes related to integration/demarcation issues. The EU is seen as a threat to sovereignty and, more especially, as the vector of threatening immigration. LDD for instance accuses southern European countries such as Spain, Italy and Malta of being wide-open to illegal immigration or, even worse, engaged in massive regularization policies. In relation with the fears of acculturation of Christian Europe, the rejection of Turkey’s membership is unanimously shared by these four parties. Turkey’s accession to the EU is actually the main theme which was brought to public debate in the press by these parties and therefore acquired some visibility in the Belgian debate. In contrast, hard line immigration policies are dealt with in a critical way in the press. But once again, the negative assessments do not target the Flemish nationalist right, but the measures taken by Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Both the Flemish and the French-speaking newspapers deplore that the Italian prime minister, together with his xenophobic ally the *Lega Nord*, ‘makes immigration a crime’ and seeks to ‘barricade the country’. As far as left-wing criticism of the EU is concerned, it remains very discrete in party manifestos. Critiques of a ‘neoliberal Europe’ are absent from the left-wing parties’ manifestos, finding their only mention in the programme of the far right FN. Criticism of EU foreign policy also appears only once, in the programme provided by the francophone Green Party *Ecolo*. Overall, the level of Eurosceptic discursive elements both in party manifestos and in the press is remarkably low in Belgium. More specifically, the issue of identity – be it in its negative or in its positive dimension – is almost completely absent from the Belgian debate.

Failing political personnel

The issue of the difficult relationship to Europe finds a significant echo in the assessment of EU political personnel. While Belgian citizens and politicians are pictured as clearly 'pro-European', the press puts a strong emphasis on the limited commitment of Belgian politicians to European mandates. This topic is – together with the relationship to Europe – the most important issue addressed by the press, accounting for more than 24% of all articles dedicated to the EP election (see table 5).

The main target of criticism is the fact that many candidates for the European election were also candidates on regional or community lists. In this configuration, most of them would favour a regional mandate over the EP, hence leaving their seat in the EP to less known and experienced politicians. Former prime minister and a notable 'Europhile' Guy Verhofstadt was especially criticized for making contradictory statements, claiming that he would sit in the EP unless 'his country needed him'. Furthermore, the competition between the two former prime ministers and EP candidates, Guy Verhofstadt and Jean-Luc Dehaene, was presented as a merely personal competition for popularity in Belgium, since both have similar ideas and a similar 'Europhile' profile. The Belgian electoral system encourages such a quest for popularity since the preference vote, by which voters choose one person, introduces a strong personal element. Several candidates, among which the former TV presenter Anne Delvaux (CDH) and minister Marcourt (PS), sought to justify their double candidacy on European and regional lists. The co-leader of *Ecolo*, Isabelle Durant, stated that she would leave any other mandate to sit in the EP if she was to be elected, since her party has claimed to be an example as far as ethics in politics are concerned in recent years. *Ecolo* was nevertheless criticized for having 'double candidates' on its lists. In this context, the Liberal candidate and former Commissioner Louis Michel (MR) claimed that, although he was also candidate for the Presidency of the Walloon government, his priority was to sit in the EP. However, Michel's action as a Commissioner for Development raised criticism for lacking expertise on the dossiers and having a difficult relationship with José Manuel Barroso. Also, his commitment to Europe was questioned as he was suspected of possibly choosing a regional mandate over a seat in the EP. The lack of clarity about who will sit if elected caused much resentment among the Belgian population. The press criticized the hypocritical behaviour of candidates and party establishments who claim to be committed to Europe, but who nonetheless behave in an opportunistic manner and always favour national (regional) responsibilities over European mandates. It should be underlined that Guy Verhofstadt, Jean-Luc Dehaene, Anne Delvaux and Isabelle Durant all sit as MEPs. Only Jean-Claude Marcourt, who was elected as the head of the list and with about 100.000 preference votes, gave up his seat for the benefit of the second candidate on the list, Marc Tarabella.

The remaining accounts deal critically with the political personnel in the EU institutions. First, the probable appointment of José Manuel Barroso for a second mandate as the President of the Commission is presented as an evidence of inertia and

the lack of enthusiasm among national parties and governments for EU politics. Second, several articles draw a negative picture of MEP candidates. The low presence of women in eligible positions, and foremost as heads of lists, is deplored. The presence of a Polish candidate on the *Ecolo* list is presented as a more or less failed attempt to demonstrate political openness. Moreover, the constitution of transnational lists in a single Europe-wide constituency is presented as a rather unrealistic prospect. Ultimately, the European Parliament risks appearing as something of a final staging post for flailing (political) careers. Evidence given is the fact that an old-fashioned singer (Francis Lalanne), a disgraced former Justice minister (Rachida Dati) and a famous former examining magistrate (Eva Joly) ran in the EP election in France, as did a former Formula One driver (Ari Vatanen) in Finland, the daughter of the President (Elena Basescu) in Romania, and the grandson of the last king (Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia) as well as the prime minister himself in Italy (Silvio Berlusconi). To sum up, the Belgian quality press provided a mitigated coverage of the campaign. It remained loyal to the national self-understanding of Belgians being good Europeans while emphasizing the degraded relationship between the EU and public opinions. The analysis also unveils a non-negligible effort to provide informative accounts about EU policies and the role of the various European institutions. At the same time, it denounced the opportunistic and little committed behaviour of the political class towards Europe, including Belgian politicians.

EU policies: the classical left-right debate and the green boom

While the issues of identity and the EU political project are almost completely absent from the Belgian campaign, the manifestos concentrated much more on discussing EU policies, even in the case of parties which can be regarded as Eurosceptic. The most remarkable observation is the boom of environmental issues, with 9 out of 12 parties advocating a Green New Deal or at least a strengthening of the environmental policies at EU level. Logically, this dimension is much more developed by *Ecolo* and *Groen!*, while it remains quite vague in the discourse of other parties. The action of the EU in environmental policies has therefore generated a wide consensus among the Belgian political class. This recent development seems nevertheless not to be specific to the EU and can also be observed in politics at regional and national level. This is reflected in the press only to a limited extent, since climate change policies in relationship to the EU were the object of only 2 articles during the campaign. This may arguably suggest that the green boom is more a political trend and an identity marker of political ‘modernity’ used in the party manifestos than an issue which is really at the core of politics in the Belgian public sphere.

Besides the green issues, the campaign reflects a more classical opposition between the neoliberal and the social model of EU integration. Except for the Liberals of the VLD, the MR and the populist liberal styled-LDD, most Belgian political parties advocate more regulation of the internal market. The left-wing parties (PS,

SP.A, *Groen!*, *Ecolo*) typically reiterate their support for a social – and green – Europe. But in the context of the financial crisis, even the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the CDH call for the setting up of new regulation instruments at least in the financial sector. Less frequently, the EU is pictured as an ‘answer’ to a globalization process seen more or less explicitly as too neoliberal and detrimental to national societies. However, the EU policies are never acknowledged as a tool for enhancing Europe’s competitiveness and the Lisbon Strategy is not mentioned by any party.

The issue of social Europe was present in the press, notably with the coverage of a 50.000 person demonstration which took place in Brussels on 16 May. Initiated by the Belgian trade unions, the demonstration called for social and economic measures at EU level in order to tackle rising unemployment and protect the workers who ‘do not want to pay for the crisis’. There was also a broader discussion fed by national politicians over the model of integration. The Christian Democratic candidate and former Prime Minister Yves Leterme published a book just before the elections in which he advocated a ‘Rhineland’ model of regulated capitalism in Europe as opposed to Anglo-Saxon ‘neoliberalism’. The Socialist minister Jean-Claude Marcourt tried to draw attention to the common ‘socialist project for Europe’ put forward by all socialist and social democratic members of the PES in order to struggle against liberalization policies. Interestingly, the Common Agricultural Policy was also framed in terms of social *versus* neoliberal Europe. For the Belgian press, European decision makers stand in front of a clear choice: regulate or liberalize agriculture. For Benoît Lutgen, a well-known personality of the CDH, the EU is ‘too liberal’ and must carry out more regulation in the agricultural sector. In general, the balance between the various political forces in Belgium is rather favourable to regulation policies and – if not social Europe – to a model of European-style regulated capitalism which contrasts with neoliberal trends at work with globalization.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of the analysis of the Belgian 2009 campaign for the EP election presented in this chapter is the low relevance of European themes in Belgian politics. This is not so surprising since the country has had an agitated domestic political life in recent years. The conflict opposing the representatives of the Flemish and the francophone communities most strongly structures Belgian politics. Furthermore, the significant devolution of power to the Belgian regions (namely Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) has made the regional election a crucial electoral moment in the country. As a consequence, the 2009 EP election was to a large extent overshadowed by the regional election taking place on the same day. When dealt with, Europe is pictured in a paradoxical manner. On the one hand, the idea that the Belgians are good Europeans was central in the campaign, both in the press coverage and in the manifestos of the political parties. Reflecting and fostering Belgian

citizens' interest for European issues, the quality press was relatively informative about developments in EU policies in the last legislature and about the role of the different institutions of the EU. In the party manifestos, Eurosceptic themes were relatively weak and concentrated on the criticism of overregulation and bureaucratization, or on the contrary on the 'neoliberal' nature of the EU and on themes related to the Union's enlargement to Turkey.

However, the EU is often depicted as a weak political system with failing political personnel. The press was especially critical of the weakness of EU-level decision makers, such as the Commission President. It similarly targeted the opportunistic way national politicians deal with the EU and European elections, criticizing their various manoeuvres to secure mandates, improve their reputations, or fill a gap in their careers. In many ways, European politics are depicted as the backyard of national politics. At the same time, the campaign accounts for a non-negligible debate about the policies conducted at European level. In this respect, Europe is absorbed into the classical left-right cleavage opposing a neoliberal Europe to a social Europe. In contrast, the theme of a green Europe has gained an important visibility in the Belgian debate. Not only is it one of the most frequently mentioned policy areas in the party manifestos, but the call for a greener Europe is the object of a broad consensus among the Belgian political class. While it seems to be only a 'buzz word' for some parties, others have formulated detailed propositions for more EU action in this area.

Belgium therefore remains a traditional Europhile founding member state. While mass-level Euroscepticism is still very low, the typical Eurosceptic themes of Europe as a threat to sovereignty and identity or as the vector of undesired immigration are quasi absent from party manifestos as well as from the public sphere. As the country seems to be stuck in the communitarian turmoil, the regional as well as the European election results account for an arguably paradoxical stability of the Belgian political landscape. The main political forces achieved results similar to those of the last election. Two developments shall nevertheless be mentioned. The first is the emergence of new parties at the expense of the *Vlaams Belang*. The second is the relative weakening of the PS to the benefit of the Greens. All in all, these two developments have little impact on the attitude of Belgian political forces towards Europe. As previously, the Belgian political landscape combines a traditional far-right populist hostility towards Europe on the one hand, with a left-wing critique of 'liberal Europe' on the other. But there was a relative renewal of the political forces representing these criticisms. On the right, a new populist ultra-liberal current succeeds in enjoying more political respectability than the classic nationalist parties. On the left, the Greens have benefited from the considerably increased importance of ecological issues in Europe in recent years. As far as European electoral competition is concerned, the Greens can rely on the fact that the EU has quite extensive competencies regarding climate change, an issue which has been at the top of the EU's political agenda.

Parties critical of the EU from both the right and the left avoid frontal opposition to EU integration. Criticism is rather presented in the guise of suggestions for re-

forming the EU and it is articulated according to identifiable conflicting models of the EU polity, be it an ultra-liberal Europe, a Europe of the regions encouraging regional autonomy, or a politically much more integrated social and green Europe. The above-mentioned self-understanding of Belgians as a people supportive of EU integration contrasts with the reports of the campaigns in other countries. Indeed, the Belgian quality press reported extensively about the lack of interest for Europe among the citizens and the dramatically low turnout in countries where voting is not compulsory. In conclusion, the analysis of the 2009 EP campaign sees Belgium emerge as an introverted political stronghold of Europhilia nevertheless concerned with the deteriorated political climate in the EU.

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