

## 3

### Belgium

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Analysis of the two Belgian socialist parties leads to a report of partly contrasting situations. The Socialist Party (PS) and *Socialistische Partij anders* (SP.a) both experienced a rough (to say the least) decade in the 1990s. They have been part of the majority since May 1988 and had to take responsibility for the drastic fiscal consolidation and to cope with an unprecedented challenge to public authorities caused by the Dutroux scandal. They also became involved in several cases of secret funding, which tripped several of their most respected personalities. Since that time, the fates of the PS and the SP.a have taken different directions. The PS has recovered a significant electoral and political importance, including winning a resounding victory in the June 2010 federal election and securing the position of Prime Minister for its President, Elio Di Rupo. In contrast, the Dutch-speaking Socialists have suffered their lowest election results, as they have been unable to provide a dynamic and attractive left wing in Flanders, where nationalism and the hard-right – flying the colours of the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) – prevail.

#### 3.1 History

The PS and the SP.a were founded as a result of the 1978 split in the unitary Belgian Socialist Party (PSB-BSP). After the failure of the Egmont Pact – a political agreement designed to establish the regional reality in Belgium – the French and Dutch wings took divergent paths regarding both which directions to follow as well as Leo Tindemans' (the Prime Minister who resigned) specific responsibility. The Dutch and French Socialists then agreed to take autonomous paths and to 'create' two political groups. The heirs of the PSB-BSP and before 1940, of the Belgian Labour Party-Belgische Werkliedenpartij (POB-BWP) – founded in 1885 maintained relatively similar features: sound pragmatism and a hushed preference for theoretical debates, although less markedly so in Flanders (Dandoy, 2011, pp. 87-207).

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French-speaking socialist party can boast of a strong footing and basis with low-income wage earners. It can be added that it is strongly rooted in municipalities. This is not true on the Dutch side, where SP.a is present mainly in big cities, but is largely superseded by the Flemish Christian Democrats (the former CVP, now called CD&V) in medium-size municipalities.

For many years, Belgian Socialists based their presence in the political scene on the delegated defence of the working man and lay employees, in the context of what Lijphart (1967) called a 'pillarized' Belgian society. The PSB-BSP relied on its own 'pillar' in the form of a counter-societal model. Early on, Socialists aspired to champion the interests of the working class, civil servants and employees in the political and social spheres. To that end, they relied on getting involved in the representative democratic institutions, from the borough to the federal level. In this context, POB-BWP set itself to goal of obtaining political rights as leverage for broadening social rights and became a decisive player in favour in the expansion of universal suffrage. It latter accessed local executive authorities and, after WWI, national ones. In the aftermath of WWII, PSB-BSP contributed greatly to setting up the welfare state, 'in the Belgian way'.

Like their fellow European counterparts, the PS and SP.a have, since the mi-seventies, faced an identity crisis due to declining state, and to the cultural victory of the concept of non-regulatory government at economic, financial and social levels, even though the September 2008 financial crisis somewhat changed this perspective.

After WWII, Belgian Socialists regularly shifted their political positions. After the liberation, the socialists were involved in a tough confrontation with the catholic world. The issue of royalty and school matters (Delwit, 2012) crystallized a very difficult struggle around the philosophical divide. They hoped to develop the public education system in Flanders and brain the back of hegemonic free religious education in the Flemish part of the country. The Van Acker government (socialist-liberal) hoped in vain to achieve this goal between 1954 and 1958, however, resistance in the catholic world aw intense. Therefore, the pacification introduced by the school pact, ratified in 1959, changed the game. In the sixties, the socialists agreed to govern with the social Christian family and faced the difficult management of linguistic and social tensions. In the wake of the golden sixties and the May 1968 events, PSB-BSP launched into redefining its platform, leaning heavily to the left. In 1974, it held a major doctrinal conference that illustrated this shift (BSP, 1974). Paradoxically, this strongly leftist posture was endorsed at the end of a period of sustained economic growth and the start of a major economic crisis, epitomized in the 1973 and 1978 oil shock as well as in the severe rise in unemployment and inflation in the second half of the seventies. Hence, the party was encouraged to review its ambitions and

its programmatic axes. The neo-liberal wave surged. The times when public authorities would intervene heavy-handedly in economic and social matters seemed a thing of the past. After extremely difficult years in government from 1977 to 1981 on account of institutional issues, the law on wage moderation, and the fate of steel industry in Wallonia, the Socialists ended up in the opposition following the Parliamentary elections. Within a group rife with enduring divisions, and which finally split in 1978, new guidelines were promoted. PS and SP.A refocused their programme on socioeconomic development. However, they used different methods of repositioning themselves. In the French-speaking area, the PS shifted to a more regional focus and a regionalist creed, symbolized by the rallying of José Happart, who was dubbed the 'hero' of Wallonia's cause (Collinge, 1989, p. 10). In the Dutch-speaking spectrum, the socialists became more open to post-materialist actors and values, including becoming active participants in the massive peace movement against the manufacturing of Pershing and Cruise nuclear missiles in Western Europe, and of SS20 missiles in Central and Eastern Europe. They also tried, but with mixed success, to open up to different components in the Christian Democratic world.

After their return to power in 1988, neither one of these socialist parties proved too have advanced much in terms of either endorsing doctrinal innovations or in achieving major shifts. At the socioeconomic level, they tried, with different partners over time, to keep up a number of social achievements that were sometimes considerably challenged.

## **3.2 Organization**

### **3.2.1 Statutes and party structure**

At the statute level, PS set itself the goal to 'organize, within a class struggle context, all the socialist forces in Wallonia and Brussels, without distinction of race, sex, language, nationality, religious beliefs or philosophy, in order to get office and achieve workers' complete emancipation' (PS, 2010, p. 2). People joined PS individually – so long as they are sixteen years of age at least. Membership was obtained from a local section, from the work-place, or by being a member of a group affiliated to the Party of European Socialists while residing in Belgium. The PS structure is as follows: first, is the local section, whose territorial boundaries and living conditions are determined by a district Federation. In any borough, sections are aggregated into a Communal Socialist Union (CSU), who jurisdiction includes matters of political and communal management. Second is the Federation, which covers electoral districts at the regional level, because, since 2002, districts have been provincialized at the federal level. PS has 14 federations: Walloon Brabant, Bruxelles, Charleroi, Dinant-Philippeville, Huy-Waremme, Liège, Luxembourg, Mons-Borinage,

Namur, Soignies Thuin, Verviers, the Picard Wallonia and the German speaking federation. Once a year at least, a provincial congress is held (in Walloon Brabant, Hainaut, Liège, Luxembourg and Namur). In addition, PS has adopted the regional reality by establishing a standing Committee of Walloon Socialist Federations and the Committee of the Socialist Federation in Brussels, whose task is to set 'regional policy options, in accordance with the decision taken by Congress' (art. 48).

PS's 'general authorities' revolve around the Congress, the Board, the Forum and the college of Federal Secretaries. Congress is the party's supreme body and is responsible for defining the party's political line – 'except for the powers expressly reserved to the regional Congress' (art. 30). It meets every two years and elects its board members on that occasion.

In between conventions, the Boards 'decides on the party's political stands' and makes all federal jurisdiction decisions. Its missions and weight have therefore increased. In its new configuration, the Board comprises the President and the party Secretary General, six representatives of the Brussels Federation, plus one 'for every 5,000-member increment, starting from the 5,001<sup>st</sup> affiliate' and two representatives of every other federation, plus one 'for every 5,000-member increment, starting from 5,000<sup>st</sup> affiliate' (art. 38). The Forum is a flexible structure without any internal power. It is a "place for reflection and debate' and is open to all. The party must hold at least one annual forum on a topic chosen by the Board.

The College of Federal Secretaries is a new layer authority. It is competent 'for organizational and administrative matters' (art. 50). It consists of 14 federal secretaries, the Secretary of the Inter-federal Business Sections Committee and the Secretary General, who chairs meetings, with the President and the two Vice-Presidents may attend. Beyond these formal structures, the party's policies, as well as regular and most important arbitrations, are made in a group called the 'G9' whose composition changes regularly. There are four 'national' mandates in the PS: the President, the two Vice-Presidents and the Secretary General. Since the 1999 constitutional reform of the PS, members have elected the President by direct suffrage. The first election in this configuration occurred on 10 October 1999. Winning 28,208 out of the 40,258 votes cast, Di Rupo easily won the election. In 2003, Di Rupo had no challenger, and he won 27,174 out of 28,950 votes validly cast. In the wake of the electoral defeat in June 2007, a third direct election by members was organized. On July 11, 2007 Di Rupo won a third term against Jean-Pierre De Clercq with 20,654 votes in comparison to De Clercq's 2,425. Finally Di Rupo was re-elected on May 29, 2011 without any opposition, collecting 17,436 out of the 18,032 valid votes.

The principle of electing the President by members' direct votes was extended to the Local Socialist Union (USC). Both Section Committees and the President

are elected by direct vote. As for Federations, article 25 of the Statutes provides that the Federal Assembly may adopt the principle of direct-vote elections as regards the Federation President, which has undoubtedly resulted in major pre-election sparring. Congress elects the Secretary General. This position is responsible for the party's daily management and implementing decisions 'as regards organization and recruitment issues, as adopted by PS bodies'. In February 2008, Jean-Pol Baras was replaced in this position by Gilles Mahieu.

For all initiatives pertaining to the party, PS has introduced temporary protection quotas:

- No instance may count more than two-thirds of representatives of the same gender, with a view to achieving parity (art. 7);
- Each instance must count at least 15 percent of representatives under 30 years old.

With respect to SP.a, the party's bylaws provide that its action is 'unconditionally democratic and social'. SP.a Dutch Socialists promote 'a society without class distinction, in which everyone can develop fully and freely, without any form of discrimination based on sex, race, disability, language, nationality, religion or philosophical beliefs' (SP.a, 2002, p. 3). Party membership is individual and is available from the age of 15. The basic party structure is the 'community section', which is in charge of the political party at the municipal level (art. 8). Communal sections are organized in a 'provincial section'; there are

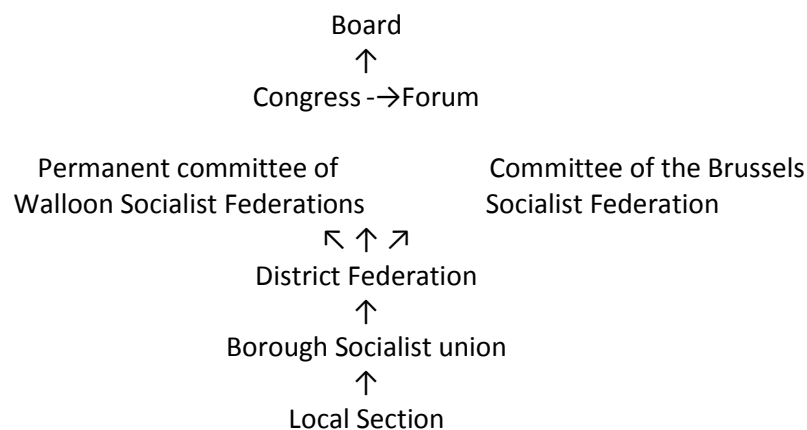


Figure 3.1 PS multi-level organization

six of them: Antwerp, Flanders, East Flanders, Limburg, Flemish Brabant and the Brussels-Capital region.

At the National level, Congress is the party's highest organ. Congress sets the Party line. It is responsible for the registration of voters when the constituency coincides with Flanders (as is the case at senatorial and European elections) as well as for the appointment of Community senators and co-opted ones. It is to be convened at least once a year (art. 15). In between two congresses, the Council of President and Secretaries becomes the decision-making body. It appoints the National Secretary and Deputy Secretaries, and is composed of Board and Administrative Commission members, parliamentarians, Presidents, and provincial associations and local chapters' secretaries, plus an additional member for every 500 members in any local section. For its part, the Board directs and represents the party. It is in charge of implementing the decisions made by the Congress, the Council of Presidents, and the Secretaries. It is composed of the party President, the National Secretary, and Deputy Secretaries, as well as sixteen elected members.

Finally, The President and the Vice-Chairman of the Party are now directly elected members. Their mandate is incompatible with any ministerial function. Dutch Socialists have repeatedly had to hold Presidential elections, as no President has actually exercised his mandate for a long period of time. In October 1999, the party took a gamble with its surprising choice of a new president: Patrick Janssens – the only running candidate, and unknown to most party members until then – nevertheless garnered 81.61 percent of the vote cast by 36,000 militants (46 percent of party members). In 2003, Janssens handed the presidency over to Steve Stevaert, who relinquished his term in 2005, in favour of Johan Vande Lanotte, after a short interim by Caroline Gennez this same year. The latter succeeded Vande Lanotte in 2007, after competing with Erik De Bruyn, who represented the party's left wing. De Bruyn had collected 33.6 percent of the votes against 66.4 percent by Caroline Gennez. She resigned from the party presidency in September 2011, in favour of Bruno Tobback, the only running candidate.

### **3.2.2 Members**

Until 1945, membership in Belgian Labour Party was obtained indirectly, *via* 'organizations and associations controlled by the Socialists'. After the war, the Socialists adopted new statutes that included scrapping collective membership for the benefit of individual membership. The principal of individual membership, however, did not diminish the 'mass' character of the socialist family in Belgium. The number of PSB-BSP members exceeded 250,000 in the late seventies. In 1978 – the year that PS and SP.a split – PSB reached 259,000 affiliated members, that is to say roughly one in six voters. At the time of split, PS had 147,269 members, and in 1981, affiliated socialists numbered

Table 3.1. PS and SP.a membership, 1999-2010

	PS		SP.a	
	Members	% of electorate	Members	% of electorate
1999	104,886	16.6	71,386	12.0
2003	82,399	9.6	61,637	6.3
2007	78,365	10.8	57,175	8.4
2010	81,491	9.1	49,323	8.2

167,087. In a way, it was rather a swan song; indeed, membership has steadily decreased ever since. In the early 2000s, numbers fell below the 100,000 threshold for the first time, and have remained at 80,000 members ever since.

PS has long fulfilled one of the criteria for defining a social democratic formation: a close relationship between membership size and voters' numbers. But in the contemporary period, that ratio has also been frayed. IN 1978, at the time of the split, it was at 20.4 percent; in 1991, it stood at 15.4 percent. At the May 2003 federal election – for the first time no longer reaching 10 percent – it was at 9.63 percent, precisely, and in 2007, it settled at 10.8 percent, mainly due to PS' electoral defeat.

Dutch Socialists performed worse both in terms of membership and regarding the voter to member ratio. While the number of members rose to more than 100,000 until 1990, it is now well below this figure, and has even reached less than 50,000. As for the member/constituent ratio, while it is used to stand at 16.3 percent in 1978, it gradually sank and hit a trough in 2010, namely 8.2 percent.

Who join the PS? A survey of a large sample of PS members in 2005 can provide a picture. Nearly two-thirds of socialist affiliates are men, reflecting a reality often present in European parties, with the exception of the British Conservative Party. PS members are also rather old: though 60 percent of them are ages 55 and over, only 6 percent are less than 35 years of age. We have found that the PS is faced with the problem of generation renewal, both in terms of numbers and activists. As a matter of fact, this problem is not specific to French-speaking Socialists. The phenomenon of staying aloof of parties can be observed at the European level too (Delwit, 2011a; Mair and Biezen, 2001).

The secular dimension of the PS is noticeable in its members' philosophical stands. A little less than 40 percent expressed a belief in God, but we identified that only 13 percent are regular churchgoers<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, 28 percent of non-believers declared they were members of a Free Thought Association. That observation is even more evident in the review of the school network(s) they attended. Only 16 percent of them have not fully completed their schooling in

Table 3.2 Sociology of PS membership, 2005

<b>Sociological Profile</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	
Women	
<b>Age</b>	
18-24	0.75
25-34	5.65
35-44	12.55
45-54	20.45
55 et plus	60.6
<b>Philosophical leaning</b>	
Unbelievers	61.59
Believers	38.41
<b>School network attended</b>	
State Schools	82.78
Free and denominational	11,00
Free and non-denominational	1.01
Several networks	5.21
<b>Status</b>	
Inactive Professionals	45.88
Active Professionals	54.12
<b>Including</b>	
Worker	11.62
Employee	25.51
Civil servant	44.42
Self-employed and shop-owner	4.33
Liberal Professional	2.28
Senior manager	7.06
Middle-management employee	4.78

Source: survey undertaken by the author

either the free denominational or other networks. The formal network is indubitably over-represented relative to the average (about 50 percent). Similarly, among members with a university degree, it is noted that only 17 percent of respondents have completed their studies at the Brussels Free University<sup>2</sup>.

Given the age structure, the number of inactive professionals is high: a little less than one member in two, the vast majority of whom are (pre)pensioners. Among active professionals, wage-earners definitely prevail, with a very large component of public sector employees. Nearly one out every two active professionals is a civil servant. A widespread membership in the 'socialist world' is remarkable: 77 percent of members are affiliated with the Socialist



Mutuality, whereas only 7.3 percent are affiliated with Christian organizations. Additionally, among union members, 91 percent belong to the General Federation of Labor (5FGTB), and only 4.2 percent to the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC).

PS members declare their unambiguous left-wing leanings. On a left-right scale ranging from 0 as the leftmost position and 10 the right-most position, the affiliate's average self-positioning is 2.6. On average, members rank their party slightly more to the right than their own positions. The average is 2.96.

Does this mean that PS affiliates still position themselves to the left on issues facing different areas of society? To answer this question, we have constructed three indicators of left-right positioning, via statements submitted to members. The first refers to the socioeconomic themes opposing a liberal perspective (right-wing) to a regulationist (left-wing) one; the second related to societal issues outside socioeconomic matters confronting libertarian (left-wing) and authoritarian (right-wing) cultural postures; and the third concerns relationships to others, pitting ethnocentric views (right-wing) against Universalist ones (left-wing). The classification ranges from '-10-', representing the right-most position on the indicator, to '+10' representing the leftmost position. Members are more left-wing on socioeconomic issues, the average score being 3.44. The same applies to the axis respecting social issues where, on average, PS affiliates lean towards a libertarian, yet still reserved, cultural position; the average score rises to 2.32. However, the 'relationships to others' item reveals more 'centrist' attitudes, since the average score is slightly negative: -0.24.

*Table 3.3* PS and SP.a electoral results, 1999-2010

Year	Federal elections (%)		Seats (number and %)		European elections (%)		Seats (number and %)	
	PS	SP.a	PS	SP.a	PS	SP.a	PS	SP.a
1999	29.19	15.71	19	14				
			12.7	9.3				
2003	36.39	24.33	25	23				
			16.7	15.3				
2004					36.09	17.83	4	2
							16.7	8.3
2007	29.48	16.34	20	14				
			13.3	9.3				
2009					29.1	13.23	3	2
							13.6	9.1
2010	37.69	15.3	26	13				
			17.3	8.7				

### 3.3 Elections results

The electoral curve of Belgian Socialists can be plotted along three stages since WWII. Between 1945 and 1965, PSB-BSP boasted exceptionally high scores. Following the 1965 election, which is described as a 'departure' in Belgium, the Belgian Socialist Party went through a long period during which election results

*Table 3.4* Sociology of the PS electorate, 2010

<b>Sociological profile</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	50,1
Women	49,9
<b>Age</b>	
18-24	12,5
25-34	13,9
35-44	21,1
45-54	20,4
55-64	18,7
65+	13,4
<b>Status</b>	
<b>Active Professionals</b>	
White-collar worker	23,4
Blue-collar worker	18,1
Civil servant	9,4
Manager	2,6
Self-employed/Shop-owner	2,5
Liberal professions	1,7
<b>Inactive professionals</b>	
Pensioner	20,2
Invalid	3,7
Recipient of minimum subsistence benefits	0,5
Job-seeker	7,7
Housewife/ Male home-maker	3,2
Student	7,0
<b>Highest degree awarded</b>	
None	3,0
Primary School level	7,7
General lower-secondary level	4,4
Technical lower-secondary level	5,6
Vocational lower-secondary level	5,8
General higher-secondary level	18,6
Technical higher-secondary level	15,0
Vocational higher-secondary level	9,6
Post-secondary non-university level	20,4
University level	9,9

Source: Survey undertaken by the author

hit rock-bottom. Since the split of the PSB-BSP, the curves of both socialist groups' election results were much more turbulent, but they nevertheless kept pace with each other. This was no longer true after the 2007 federal election. After rising in the eighties and peaking in 1987 at 44 percent in PS's case and 24.6 percent in SP.A's case, both PS and SP.a recorded a continuous drop in three subsequent elections, bringing the socialist party just below 30 percent and SP.a under the 16 percent mark in the 1999 elections. This instability continued in the 2000s: the PS won more than 36 percent of the vote in May 2003 before sinking to 29.5 percent in 2007 and being beaten by the Reform Movement, then achieving another sturdy breakthrough in the June 2000 election, when it reaped 37.7 percent of the vote. For its part, the SP.a rebounded to 24 percent in 2003 but collapsed again in 2007 and, unlike its French-speaking alter ego, it slipped in 2010 down to 15.3 percent of the vote, its worst result since WWII.

What type of voters do socialist parties capture? Until the early sixties, Belgian socialism attracted first and foremost the votes of secular workers. It only managed a slight penetration of the Catholic workers' world, and established itself more easily among the middle classes or the new – secular – classes, in full bloom. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this feature was so important that Seiler described it as a substitution role 'to Masonic Lodges in the role of a counter-Church' (Seiler, 1992, p. 22). Even today, interest in PS and SP.a remains low among Catholic voters. In contrast, the philosophical barrier is much less meaningful among Muslim citizens (Sandri and De Decker, 2008, p. 47). At the June 2010 federal elections, the Walloon Socialist electorate's socio-demographic profile posted a strong popular base.

### **3.4 Relation to power and relationships with Other parties and social movements**

#### **3.4.1 Relation to power and relationships with other parties**

Socialist Parties are definitely 'parties of power'. Since WWII, the presence of socialists in government has become commonplace (Delwit, 2011b).

In 1999, Socialists and Liberals agreed to govern together again, without the presence of Social Christians. Since then, no government alliance seemed impossible for PS and SP.a. It is worth pointing out the long presence of socialists in office in the contemporary period. At national and federal levels, the PS has been part of all executive branches between December 2007 and December 2011. This is by far French-speaking Socialists' longest continuous participation in the federal National Executive. This is even more obvious as regards federated entities. In the Walloon region and the French Community, the PS did not take part in ministerial offices for only two years, between 1985 and 1987. In

*Table 3.5* PS and SP.a government participation 1999-2003

Years	Power/opposition
1999 – 2003	Power (PS) in coalition with VLD/PRL/FDF/Agalev/Ecolo
2003 –07	Power (PS AND SP.A) in coalition with POWER (PS) in coalition with VLD/MR
2007 –10	Power (PS) in coalition with Open VLD/CD&V/MR/cdh
2010	Power (PS AND SP.A) in coalition with Open VLD/CD&V/MR/cdh

the Brussels Region, its presence in government was never interrupted. And it held the post of President-Minister during three of the four completed legislatures. The same applies for SP.a, which had to sit in opposition benches in the Flemish Parliament only between 1985 and May 1988. Since 2009, SP.a has for the first time been in the opposition in the Brussels region.

### **3.4.2 Relationships with trade union and mutualities**

From the very beginning, POB-BWP has attempted to integrate the working class into the Belgian political, economic and cultural life. To do this, Belgian Socialists relied on conquering universal suffrage and power, and on entrusting the leadership of the labor movement organizations, thus constituting the Socialist pillar in Belgium. This pillar has endured despite several crises.

Until 1945, the socialist trade union – the Trade Union Commission created in 1898, which then became Belgisch Vakverbond-General Labour Confederation, BVV-CGTB – was organically linked to the party. After the Liberation, this established link was officially severed, against the wishes of some members and party cadres. FGTB-ABVV, the successor to BVV-CGTB, became autonomous, but this independence was tightly circumscribed. After Communist Theo Dejae resigned, one of the five FGTB-ABVV national secretaries was set up in 1949, dubbed the ‘Joint Action’. Originally established to fight against the return of King Leopold III on the throne, the Socialist Joint Action was an informal but powerful action community between organizations of the ‘socialist world’, and a means to provide political and electoral support to PSB-BSP. Despite the crisis affecting trade unions and their memberships in Europe, unionization remained extremely high in Belgium. FGTB-ABVV therefore boasted a substantial number of members from 1,400,000 to 1,500,000 according to its own data.

Episodically, relations between the socialist parties and FGTB-ABVV were rife more or less with strong tensions. This was the case at the time of the development of the Dehaene government’s ‘global plan’ in 1994, and more recently regarding the ‘Solidarity between Generation Pact’ (2005), and the pension

reforms (2011). But in a complex European and international environment, FGVB-ABVV was careful not to 'lay it on thicker' regarding the behaviour of the socialist party or of its Flemish alter ego SP.a.

As regards health care, the Socialists Mutualities (Socialistische Mutualiteiten) act was an impressive social actor in the industry of health care, whose material and symbolic importance is increasing in large sectors of the population. Both socialist parties fully embrace this sector by regularly occupying ministerial positions that they find particularly important, and the French PS was the driving force behind the 4.5 percent annual increase in health care standards, which is being currently reviewed.

### **3.5 Programmatic positioning**

#### **3.5.1 Socioeconomic issues**

'The main reason for our participation in government is to prevent the dismantling of social security', Philippe Busquin (1994), the President of the French-speaking Socialists, stated in 1994. This quote perfectly reveals the first dimension of the socialist program in exercise of responsibilities: to defend the Belgian welfare state model as much as possible. In the European and the international contexts, these social gains are being severely challenged, and Socialists brace themselves to keep what they consider as essential. That is why they refuse to reform the pension system, as it would imply extending the retirement age to 67, even though they must accept a reform of some pre-retirement or early retirement mechanisms in a more restrictive sense, to the chagrin of a portion of the union base that traditionally supports it. Similarly, PS and SP.a refuse to challenge the principle of automatic wage-indexation, despite intense pressure from the business world, from some liberal groups, and from a few European authorities<sup>3</sup>.

As regards employment, Belgian Socialists make it a 'top priority' (PS, 2010, p. 12). PS thus calls for a revival of sustainable eco-solidarity development. A series of measures have been put forward to address this challenge, despite the still high unemployment rates in Wallonia and Brussels: 'support for investment and innovation as well as for business creation', an increase in 'the immunization of taxes for the recruitment of additional staff in SMEs"', strengthening 'workers' training' as well as 'simplifying the allocation of income guarantee so as to make employment, even part time, more attractive.' However, one of the themes addressed in the 1990's – regarding the reduction or working time – was abandoned (Delwit, 1997).

In the context of an aging population with a reluctance to any form of immigration in Flanders, SP.a specifically aims to keep on the job workers in their fifties, whom it dubbed a priority 'target group' for employment policy in

Flanders. As such it has suggested gradually suiting their tasks to the workers' age. And, should such an adaptation result in salary reduction. Dutch socialists suggest that the government should offset that loss (SP.a, 2010, pp. 15-16).

### **3.5.2 A new balance of power between the federal state and federated entities**

With respect to the Belgian institutional landscape, French and Dutch socialists hold different views, even though their positions are not at odds with each other. Like most of other Flemish parties, SP.a has for several years promoted new advances regarding the federalization of the Belgian State, in the sense of weakening federal government prerogatives for the benefit of federated entities. Dutch Socialists emphasize the regionalization of employment policies. Like all Flemish parties, it advocated an outright split of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, while promoting a negotiated solution (SP.a, 2010, p. 44). During the very long time it took to form a government after the June 2010 federal elections, Vande Lanotte, the party strong man, presented his ideas for reforming the State in a note quite popularized in Flanders but virtually unknown in the French area.

The Socialist Party has shown for more than thirty years that it is a fervent advocate of regionalization in Belgium, while insisting over and over again on the importance of federal social security. In the tense Belgian context of the 2000s, the Socialist Party said, in June 2000, that it was prepared 'to take responsibility to lead the country out of both the economic and the social crisis that is experiencing and out of its institutional deadlock', on the basis of promoting a 'prosperity federalism' (Delwit, 1997, p. 146). It came through as well, since it took part in a political agreement on a sixth state reform, introduced in October 2011<sup>4</sup>. This agreement provides for reforming the Senate, phasing in a split of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral district, refinancing the Brussels Region, reviewing the special act on financing, and transferring a number of powers from the state to the federal entities – particularly employment policy and family allowances.

### **3.5.3 Post-materialist issues**

Throughout the 2000s, both socialist parties promoted measures meant to tackle societal issues. After being staunch supporters of decriminalizing abortion, they were key players, along with liberal and environmental groups, in fostering new societal developments: the Act on euthanasia (May 2002), the law on gay marriage (January 2003), the law on the right to vote granted to non-Belgian nationals who are not citizens of EU countries (May 2004)<sup>5</sup>, legislation allowing adoption by same sex partners (April 2006), and others.

In the environmental field, SP.a wants to lead the fight for promoting sustainable development. Therefore, Dutch socialists strongly promote a green economy

which, in their view, can boast many virtues: exemplarity on the international scene; fighting against GDF Suez's monopolistic dimension in Belgium, developing research and innovation in the renewable energies sector, and reducing CO2 emissions (SP.a 2010, p. 20). SP.a definitively means to shine in this field.

### **3.6 Intra-party life**

#### **3.6.1 PS**

Three lines of debate have occasionally stirred the Socialist Party's inner life. The first relates to left/right controversy on socioeconomic issues. In this respect, discussions were most heated in the late seventies and throughout the eighties. In a context marked by the two 1973 and 1978 oil shocks, rising inflation, and unemployment, the Socialist Party President, André Cools, wished to investigate a more 'realistic' momentum, less marked by the shift to the left implemented by a number of Social Democratic parties in the early seventies. In doing so, he had to oppose Georges Debunne, the Secretary General of the powerful socialist union, and the party's working-class wing. He unsuccessfully pushed his agenda, finally becoming fed up with it and resigning from the presidency. His succession was hotly contested between Guy Spitaels, a 'centrist' candidate, and a representative of the left wing, Ernest Glinne. The former won by a short lead and worked on reconciling the different viewpoints. In the nineties, the Brussels federation party President, Philippe Moureaux, instilled renewed stances to the left of the party, in a context where the Socialist party was taking part in the consolidation of public finances. At its June 1996 congress, the PS had to confirm its participation in government. The vote had provided it with a broad majority: 83.43 percent in favour, 10.77 percent against and 5.80 percent abstaining. The most significant reservations were made by the Brussels, Soignies and Thuin Federations.

The second one concerns the debate on the Belgian institutional architecture. One wing of the party advocates exclusively increasing weight of the region Namely the Walloon Region. Conversely, one trend insisted on giving more importance to the Community, that is to say the alliance between Brussels and Wallonia. The first trend has been long embodied by two key personalities: Walloon ministers Jean-Claude Van Cauwenberghe and José Happart, who have currently with drawn from political life. It is now led by Minister Jean-Claude Marcourt. The second was guided by successive presidents: Spitaels, Busquin and Di Rupo.

The third has to do with the representation of federations or, more broadly, of provinces in the party's internal balances, and as regards its external representation – corporate functions in particular. By this yardstick, internal debates deal mostly with findings equitable distribution (or correcting a lack of fair distribution) between federation leaders in Hainaut and Liège.

### 3.6.2 SP.a

Two fault lines are at work in the Dutch socialist party's life. The first pits advocates of openness towards new the salaried middle classes against those focused on socioeconomic issues. A left-right debate on socioeconomic issues interlocks and overlaps that opposition. As an illustration, the penultimate campaign for the election of the party presidency opposed a centrist candidate, Caroline Gennez, and left-wing leaning Erik De Bruyne. The former won – laboriously. Two years later, De Bruyne and some of his friends claimed that the party had given up on all its left-wing stands and deserted the SP.a to found a new party: the *Rood* (Red).

### 3.7 Conclusion

Beyond their common underlying foundations, prospects now seem to separate the PS and the SP.a. In Flanders, SP.a faced a wave of nationalist conservatism and was unable or unwilling to confront the profound dynamics at work there. It tried to compromise all at once on institutional issues and on economic and social matters. Rather inspired by Blair's Third Way or Gerhard Schröder's Neue Mitte, it did not capitalize on its 'liberal libertarian' profile and has now ended up without a clear identity, even though the left has posted a political and electoral all-time low in this area since 1945. Divided internally and weakened as never before, the party is in bad shape, as shown in its impressive succession of presidents over the past ten years.

As for the French-speaking spectrum, the Socialist Party remains a central piece on the political chessboard. But its posture is grounded on the logic of 'lesser evil' in economic and social matters, which makes it weaker occasionally. Though it still has a strong anchor among low-income wage-earners, the Socialist Party has yet to work hard to hang on the foundations of the welfare state, and thereby to keep the confidence of its social base. All the more so as, in the explosive Belgian context, it will have to demonstrate, as strikingly, where inter-territorial solidarity is bound to sag over the next ten years.

### Chronology

1885: Belgian Labor Party founded.

1893: Achievement of universal male suffrage tempered by plural voting.

1894: The party wins 28 seats in the Chamber of Representatives.

1914: The leader of the BLP, Emilie Vandervelde, appointed Minister of State.

1916: Vandervelde becomes Government Minister

1919: Achievement of true universal suffrage.

1919: first participation in peace-time government by BLP.



- 1936: BLP finishes first in elections.
- 1938: Henri de Man becomes party president at the death of Vandervelde
- 1940: Collaborationist Manifesto of de Man. Party dissolved.
- 1944: Belgian Socialist Party founded.
- 1944: Adoption of the principle of direction election of party members.
- 1947: Paul-Henri Spaak becomes Prime Minister
- 1954: Achille Van Acker becomes Prime minister.
- 1965: BSP: suffers severe electoral defeat.
- 1974: New Party program, marked by a turn to the left.
- 1978: BSP split into two distinct entities: the PS and the SP.a. André Cools is elected president of the PS, and Karel Van Miert of the *Socialistische Partij*.
- 1982: New program for the PS, marked by a turn to the centre.
- 1988: Start of a long period of Socialist presence in the government.
- 1999: Adoption of the principle of election of the president by universal suffrage.
- 2011: PS president becomes Prime Minister.

## Notes

1. Answers to 'participation in religious service at least once a week' and 'at least once a month' have been aggregated.
2. Université catholique de Louvain, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, Facultés catholiques de Mons et Facultés Notre Dame de la paix de Namur.
3. 'Though tentative, the fourth recommendation addressed to the Belgian government by the European Council suggests taking measures meant to reform – in consultation with social partners and in accordance with national practices, the system of collective bargaining and wage-indexation, so as to ensure salary increases follow more closely the evolutions of productivity on the work-place and competitiveness.'  
'Recommandation du Conseil européen du 12 juillet 2011 concernant le programme national de réforme de la Belgique pour 2011 et portant avis du Conseil concernant le programme de stabilité actualisé de la Belgique pour la période 2011-2014', Journal officiel de l'Union européenne, July 15, 2011.
4. Institutional agreement about the sixth reform of the State, *Un Etat plus fédéral plus efficace et des entités plus autonomes*, October 2011.
5. This time having to face hostility from the part of Dutch-speaking liberals.

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