

# **The 2004 European Elections in Belgium: An Election That Went by Unnoticed**

*Pascal Delwit\**

## **1. Introduction**

On June 13<sup>th</sup> 2004, Belgians voted in a European election for the sixth time. On that day, Belgium stood out from the majority of other European states on three points.

First of all, voting was compulsory. Whereas most analysts concentrated on the issue of turnout before (see Delwit 2000) and during the days following June 13<sup>th</sup> (see IDEA 2004), the Belgian state was spared the grumbles and worries about low voter turnout.

Secondly, against the tide and not at all like the state of affairs in the United Kingdom or Poland, where everything was blown out of proportion, the agenda of European issues was not the reason for any conflict or any appreciable split in the Belgian political arena (see Delwit 2004).

Lastly, beyond this observation, the European election took a backseat to the regional elections with which it was connected from that point onward. The regional elections of June 2004 were very important and virtually overshadowed their European counterpart.

The following analysis is divided into three parts. First of all, data dealing with the electoral context will be analyzed. We then break down the results according to the different institutional levels concerned. In the third and final part, we consider the impact of the European parliamentary vote on the Belgian political scene.

## **2. The election context**

### **2.1 The changing legal and administrative framework for elections**

Following the example of national and regional elections, the ballot system used in the Belgian European elections was proportional, organized on the basis of a D'Hondt model. The country was divided into three linguistic regions, namely Flemish, French-speaking, and German-speaking, and into four electoral districts, Wallonia, the German-speaking district, Flanders (minus the Hal-Vilvorde constituencies), and Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde. The voters from Brussels and those

---

\* Pascal Delwit, PhD. \*1961. Professor for Political Science at the Université libre de Bruxelles, email: pdelwit@ulb.ac.be

from the Hal-Vilvorde constituencies were able to vote for a list of French-speaking candidates or for a list of Flemish candidates. The division of seats was as follows: thirteen MEP's to be elected in the Flemish region, nine in the French-speaking and one in the German-speaking district.

In the European election, just as in other Belgian elections, voters made their decision within the system of semi-open lists. There were two options available for casting a valid ballot. First, electors could opt for the entire list as such (list ballot). Second, they could select one or several candidates from the same list (preference vote). The allocation of seats inside the list was then done on the basis of an eligibility threshold, starting from the leader on the list all the way down to the last name. If, with his/her preferential votes, a candidate did not reach the eligibility threshold, he/she "took" votes from the "top of the list", at least if there were any or if any remained. Indeed, increasingly fewer Belgians voted for the lists as such, preferring to vote for a specific candidate (see Wauters et al. 2004). In addition, the legislature halved the impact of list redistribution (see Cadranel/Delcor 2001). In other words, "block list voting" was reduced to the percent before the redistribution of seats inside the list was carried out.

Besides cutting the list partitioning effect in half, the Parliament introduced new restrictions for the creation of lists. According to this new regulation, lists had to include an equal number of males and females. In the event of an odd number of candidates, the number of individuals of one sex could only exceed the number of individuals of the other sex by one. In addition, in the future the two top spots on the list had to be filled by a member of each gender.

Finally, after having eliminated it in 2000, the Parliament reintroduced the principle of substitutes: each list contained a series of titular candidates and a series of substitute candidates. A substitute candidate becomes a MEP in case the titular candidate resigns.

## 2.2 The June 13<sup>th</sup> European elections: an issue of personalities

The Belgian run-up to the June 13<sup>th</sup> 2004 European elections was unquestionably marked by the decision of political parties to place their leading mentors at the top of their lists, who were not (necessarily) meant to take the seat: Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt for the *Flemish Liberal Party (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten – VLD)*, former Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene for the coalition of the *Flemish Christian Democratic Party* and the *Flemish Nationalist Party (Christen Democratisch & Vlaams-Nieuwe Vlaams Alliantie – CD&V-N-VA)*, the chairman of the French-speaking *Christian Democratic Party (Centre démocrate humaniste – CDH)* Joëlle Milquet, the leader of the *Socialist Party (Parti socialiste, PS)* Elio Di Rupo, and Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel for the French-speaking *Liberal Party (Mouvement réformateur – MR)*. For good measure, the coalition between the Flemish

*Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij. anders, SP.A)* and Spirit put forward the chairwoman of the *Socialist Trade Union (Fédération générale du travail de Belgique – FGTB-ABVV)* Mia De Vits. Only the two *Green* parties and the far-right party *Flemish Bloc (Vlaams Blok)* selected outgoing MEPs: Pierre Jonckheer (*Ecolo*), Bart Staes (*Groen!*), and Frank Van Hecke (*Vlaams Blok – Vl.Blok*). Nevertheless, it should be stressed that Van Hecke was the leader of the extreme right-wing *Flemish Party* and that *Ecolo* and *Groen!* had “surrounded” these lesser-known list leaders by personalities better known in the media: Isabelle Durant (Vice-Prime Minister between 1999 and 2003, *Ecolo*) and José Daras (Walloon Vice-Prime Minister in office at the time of the elections, *Ecolo*), Vera Dua (President of the party, Flemish regional Minister between 1999 and 2003, *Groen!*), Jos Geysel (political secretary between 1998 and 2003, *Groen!*), and Eddy Boutmans (Secretary of State for Development and Cooperation between 1999 and 2003, *Groen!*).

Strictly speaking, this was nothing new, but it was practiced on a much broader scale than before. It was a process that took place under two perspectives. The first aimed at maximizing party results as much as possible. The presence of a political *heavyweight* at the head of the list clearly increased party visibility within the context of an election that was not creating much attention or interest and was overpowered by regional elections. The second concerned the continual need to assess a person’s popularity in order to highlight it in the many negotiations taking place in Belgian political life. Politicians with a high number of personal votes at elections are stronger in the daily political decision-making process. From this standpoint, there were two major contests:

1. In the Flemish political scene, the current Prime Minister competing against his predecessor, with the implicit expectation, for one or the other, to be named Commission President.
2. In the French-speaking political arena, the two most enigmatic personalities, namely the *Socialist Party* leader and the *Liberal Party* strongman, were contesting against each other.

### 2.3 The socio-political context

As mentioned above, the 2004 European elections were held simultaneously with the regional elections. In the latter, far more attention was logically paid to all those involved: parties, media, social organizations, and voters. The regional election issues were crucial, especially on the Flemish side. The following questions were at stake:

- If the parties so desired, to what extent could the symmetry of coalitions between the federal government and the executive branches of the federal bodies be upheld?
- Which would be the number one Flemish party – and consequently of Belgium, in principle – after Election Day?

- What results would the *Vlaams Blok* obtain, which had not lost an election since the 1988 local elections?
- Which party affiliation would the Minister-President of the Brussels Region have considering the harsh struggle between *Socialists* and *Liberals* and the ambitions of the two list leaders – Jacques Simonet (*MR*) and Charles Picqué (*PS*) – to hold this office?
- Did the *Socialist Party* intend to continue the coalition with the *Liberals* (and *Greens*) in the Walloon and Brussels regions and in the French-speaking community?

The regional and European elections took place in a complex political context. From the very start of the new federal government, in September 2003, two major factors paralyzed government activity. The first was linked to the calendar. As it was an election year, it was clear that no major activities would be undertaken during the election run-up period. At the same time, the governmental partners were starting off the new year in a different mindset. The *Socialists*, the big winner of the May 2003 Federal elections (27.9 per cent), clearly wanted to mark the occasion and convey an image of *division between their party and the top executive branch* led by Guy Verhofstadt (*VLD*). As for the *Liberals* (who came in second place with 26.8 per cent, they wanted to keep the old dynamics, in which they were the key political family and determined the way business was conducted. Under such conditions, the legislature period had a difficult start, and the coalition parties were at each other's throats on several occasions. In short, a weakened ruling majority was running in the different elections.

In addition, several issues had a certain communitarian dimension (in the Belgian context, meaning relations between linguistic communities). Just shortly before the election, there was an outburst of community agitation over the subject of dissolution of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde. The election constituency permitted French-speaking voters in several urban districts around Brussels (the Hal-Vilvorde districts) to vote for the same lists for the elections to the House of Representatives as the French-speaking voters in Brussels and also let Flemish voters in Brussels have their votes counted with those from the Hal-Vilvorde districts. In addition, on the occasion of the senatorial and European elections, voters had the choice between a vote for the French-speaking or Flemish-speaking list. This situation was no longer accepted by any of the Flemish parties. Arguing on the basis of a decision by the Constitutional Court (see Delwit/Pilet 2004), they demanded the dissolution of this district and the inclusion of the Hal-Vilvorde districts in the Flemish-Brabant electoral constituency. However, in so doing, they omitted to include the fact that its very creation had been the price for dealing with the demands of French-speakers for the expansion of the Brussels region.

On the day before the elections, several mayors of district communities threatened to boycott the elections and were backed by a demonstration of 10.000 to 15.000 people in favor of this demand. To ward off the threat of an election boycott, a warning was issued by the Minister of the Interior and, above

all, the Flemish parties of the ruling majority pledged that they would settle the issue immediately after the election, although the demand as such was not acceptable to any French-speaking party.

## 2.4 A relatively weak European cleavage

Belgium is reputed to be a Europhile country, if not a Euro-enthusiastic one (see Delwit 2004a). Even though this general statement needs to be qualified, it does hold true that for fifty years there has been a kind of cross-party consensus on European issues. The study of EU-related treaty ratifications shows that approvals generally had a broader base than simple parliamentary majorities. For example, the treaties that established the Common Market and Euratom or the Single European Act were overwhelmingly approved by members of the House of Representatives (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Ratification of European treaties in Belgium**

	House of Representatives			Senate		
	Yes	No	Abstention	Yes	No	Abstention
European Coal and Steel Community	165	13	13	102	4	58
European Defense Community	148	49	3	125	49	3
Common Market / Euratom	179	4	2	134	2	2
European Single Act	180	0	0	148	0	0
Maastricht Treaty	146	33	3	115	26	1
Amsterdam Treaty	105	23	0	49	13	0
Nice Treaty	106	24	7	46	11	2

From the citizens' point of view, the European Union is largely viewed as a good thing for the country. However, a small number think oppositely (see Table 2).

For the past fifteen years or so, the relationship to the European construction has become a bit more complex in Belgium, in particular by the emergence and expansion of an increasingly more powerful extreme right-wing party: the *Vlaams Blok*. The *Vlaams Blok* was the only Belgian parliamentary party, which not only adopted a favourable position to the construction of a federal Europe, but which even supported the concept of a confederal Europe. The *Vlaams Blok* MP's objected to any institutional development by the European Community towards a political union. Their line of argument was based on a Flemish nationalist discourse (see Swyngedouw 1998). The Flemish extreme right wing felt that people should be able to choose their own destinies without being subject to restrictions of the EU, so they called for a clear division of tasks between the European Union and Member States.

**Table 2: Belgians' judgment concerning Belgium's membership in the European Union (1991-2004) (in percentages)**

	A good thing	A bad thing	Neither good nor bad	No answer	A good thing (European average)	A bad thing (European average)
1991	70	4	21	5	69	8
1992	59	9	27	5	58	12
1993	59	9	26	6	57	13
1994	56	10	27	7	55	12
1995	67	9	22	2	57	12
1996	48	15	31	6	45	17
1997	42	18	31	9	42	14
1998	47	9	36	8	54	12
1999	54	6	34	6	51	12
2000	62	10	23	5	49	14
2001	57	9	28	6	54	12
2002	58	4	30	8	53	11
2003	67	7	20	6	54	14
2004	57	10	29	5	48	17

Question: "Generally speaking, do you think that Belgium's membership in the European Community is ...?"

Source: Eurobarometer

Although the *Vlaams Blok* played a rather exceptional role in the Belgian party landscape, we should, however, point out that European issues were far from occupying the forefront of its 2004 election propaganda or political message. From this angle, the party can be considered as Eurosceptic in the view given by Peter Mair (2000), but even more so in the one given by Paul Taggart (1998). Nonetheless, we should mention that the *Vlaams Blok* was in favour of the European single market concept and recognized the peace-making role that European construction has played and the historical moment connected to Central and Eastern European enlargement.

In addition to that, some extreme left-wing parties, hostile to the European Union and to the adoption of a European *Constitution*, have hardly had any success, including the European elections, which are nevertheless better suited for tactical voting.

Another factor that complicated the relationship of political and social actors in face of the European construction was related to the reluctance that might be expressed (and sometimes translated into parliamentary votes) of Pro-Europe parties which were dissatisfied by the institutional route or hostile or reserved towards the course of the European Union which was considered neo-liberal.

In reference to reluctance expressed by federalist parties, an example would be the attitude of the *Christian Democrats* – in the opposition at the time – towards the Nice Treaty. Judging this treaty to be incomprehensible and considerably short of the developing needs of the European Union, the French-

speaking, and to some extent the Flemish, *Christian Democrats* took the decision not to back it, which was quite a novel event for this political party.

Further, it has to be mentioned that the *Belgian Greens – Ecolo and Agalev* – rejected the Maastricht Treaty on the basis of the treaty contents and the timetable provided for the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union. However, the refusal to ratify the treaty did not denote an anti-European or anti-Community feeling. Amongst the ecologist parties (see Bomberg 1998; Van de Walle 2003), the *Belgian Greens* thus combined Europeanism and criticism towards the economic, monetary, and social route being taken by the European Union.

For two years, the *Socialists* in Flanders and in the French-speaking part have shown themselves to be especially critical towards the European Union's development, and this party has communicated its concerns about the effects of the on-going enlargement process. At the end of 2002, the *SP.A* formally expressed these concerns and criticized the non-parallel paths of enlargement and consolidation: "We can not rally behind the European project such as it has developed to date. Our position is therefore: No to Europe, unless it changes" (Le Soir, October 4<sup>th</sup> 2002).

In short, these positions of political actors and citizens towards the European Union explain the lack of issues in the European campaign in Belgium. Obviously, a number of issues touched the debate – the European Constitution, Presidency of the European Commission, the hypothetical membership of Turkey in the European Union, the Bolkestein directive<sup>1</sup> relating to the liberalization of services, etc. – but they never became a (major) topic in the political debate, let alone a cornerstone of the discussion.

### 3. The results

Since the works of Reif and Schmitt (see Reif/Schmitt 1980; Reif 1985; Marsh 1998), the study of the results of European elections has been carried out mainly from the angle of "second order" elections. However, this perspective is only partially applicable in Belgium. In the first place, this is due to institutional reasons. The low turnout linked to the mediocre interest of citizens and social actors could only be checked since voting is compulsory in Belgium. It is also difficult due to political reasons. In Belgium governments are formed by a number of parties, sometimes without any one political party being dominant. Then, it is difficult for a voter to sanction the government through protest voting.

#### 3.1 Voter turnout

Due to compulsory voting, participation rates are very high. In all European elections, the voter turnout rate has always been higher than 90 percent. The

June 2004 European elections confirmed this trend, since nearly 91 percent of the electorate went to the polls (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Electoral turnout at European elections in Belgium (in percentages)**

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004
Turnout	91.3	92.1	90.7	90.7	90.9	90.8
Blanks and invalids	14.1	10.9	8.4	8.7	6.8	5.2

Source: Ministry of Interior

On the other hand, one factor distinguishes countries with compulsory voting: the significance of a proportionately higher number of blank and invalid ballots. In contrast to what was seen for voter turnout, the 5.2 percent blank and invalid ballots cast in 2004 was very high compared to the percentages recorded in other EU states. At the same time, we should note that there is a trend toward a continuous decrease in the percentage of blanks and invalid ballots. It is possible that with the introduction and development of computerized voting (see Delwit et al. 2004), which reduced potential mechanical errors – while still allowing a blank ballot – might have contributed to this reduction.

### 3.2 Breakdown of results

Considering the linguistic basis of Belgian political parties, it is not very informative to present the results at a national level, if not from the perspective of individual political parties. The 2004 European elections confirmed the analyses carried out since 1984: there is no longer any dominant *political family* in Belgium.<sup>2</sup> The three main historical political families – *Liberal*, *Socialist* and *Christian Democrat* – have always achieved relatively similar results, with each obtaining less than a quarter of the votes (see Table 4). The second point concerns the relative loss of the *Christian Democrats*. Despite an alliance in Flanders with the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* and a recovery compared to 1999, the *Christian Democratic* family slipped to third place in the Kingdom, even though it had been the leading family for a very long time.

As for the *Liberals*, they obtained their best results in a European election in 2004. Nonetheless, they had to give up the place of number one political family which they had reached in 1999. This time the leading position went to the *Socialist* family, a rather seldom occurrence in Belgium.<sup>3</sup>

The results of the extreme right wing meant that from now on, Belgium was amongst the nations with the highest proportion of voters who voted for an extreme right-wing party.

Finally, the disastrous results of the *Greens* in the national elections (see Delwit/Hellings 2004; Rihoux/ Hooghe 2003) was confirmed, but in a less clear-cut manner. At least each of the two *Green* parties was able to save its hides, i.e. to retain one MEP each, which was not foreseeable.



**Table 4: Belgian political families in European elections (in percentages)**

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	Seats/2004
<i>Liberals</i>	16.3	18.1	17.8	20.6	23.8	24.0	6
<i>Christian Democrats</i>	37.7	27.4	29.2	24.2	18.8	23.4	6
<i>Socialists</i>	23.4	30.4	26.9	22.4	18.5	24.7	7
<i>Right Wing</i>	0.6	1.3	4.1	11.4	10.9	17.6	3
<i>Greens</i>	3.4	8.2	13.9	11.6	16.0	8.7	2
<i>Far Left</i>	4.2	2.7	1.2	1.9	1.5	1.0	0
<i>Volkunie</i>	6.0	8.5	5.4	4.4	7.6		0
<i>FDF-RW</i>	7.6	2.5	1.5	0.0	0.0		

Source: Ministry of Interior

Distinguishing between language communities, the election results show the perpetuation of distinct political landscapes. Without it coming to a clash, the competition in the French-speaking political arena mainly had *Socialists* (*PS*) and *Liberals* (*MR*) grappling with one another. Contrary to 1999, the *Socialist Party* (clearly) gained the upper hand by winning nearly 900.000 votes against 672.000 for the *Liberals* (see Table 5). This turnaround was mainly due to the excellent *Socialist* results. Indeed, although outdistanced, the French-speaking *Liberals* had their best ever result in a European election (27.6 percent in the French-speaking constituency).

**Table 5: Electoral results in the French-speaking community**

	Votes	Percentage	Seats
<i>PS</i>	878.577	36.1	4
<i>MR</i>	671.422	27.6	3
<i>CDH</i>	368.753	15.2	1
<i>Ecolo</i>	239.687	9.8	1
<i>FN</i>	181.351	7.5	0
<i>RWF</i>	23.090	0.9	0
<i>CDF</i>	19.718	0.8	0
<i>PTB</i>	19.645	0.8	0
<i>MAS</i>	5.675	0.2	0
<i>FNB</i>	26.775	1.1	0

Source: Ministry of Interior

For their part, the Christian Democrats (*CDH*) obtained respectable results but remained well below the results they got in the seventies and eighties. As for the Greens, they lost 60 percent of their voters of the 1999 European election and suffered the loss of two of their three MEPs.

Although it did not succeed in winning any seat, the *Front national* (*FN*) made remarkable gains compared to previous elections. One should add that together with the 27.000 votes obtained by its rival, the *Front nouveau de Bel-*

*gique* (FNB), this resulted in almost 210.000 voters (8.55 percent) of the French-speaking electorate opting for the extreme right wing. The position of the Belgian *Front national* was very different from its Dutch-speaking counterpart, the *Vlaams Blok*. It was a party without visibility and without party membership, and had a very poor ideological background. Plus, it had the greatest difficulty in promoting a national(ist) dimension: Belgian, French-speaking, Walloon, or Brussels do not make much sense. But in terms of elections, its results could be compared to a *soufflé*: notable rises (1994-1995 and 2003-2004), with a remarkable collapse (between 1999 and 2000), due to the lack of a political base and because of identity and organizational reasons.

Unlike the configuration that prevailed in the French-speaking spectrum, the Flemish political landscape is an extremely fragmented one. No party won more than 30 percent of the votes (see Table 6). We should add that on the occasion of this election date, the three traditional political families were off campaigning within the framework of an electoral coalition: the *Christian Democrats* (CD&V) with the “main” parties stemming from the former *Volkswijde* (the Flemish nationalist party), *New Flemish Alliance* (N-VA); *Socialists* (SP.A) with the libertarian wing of the former *Volkswijde*, *Spirit*; and the *Liberals* (VLD) with a small ultra-liberal party advocating the elimination of income tax, *Vivant*.

**Table 6: Electoral results in Flanders**

	Votes	Percentage	Seats	Percentage
<i>VLD-Vivant</i>	880.279	21.9	3	21.43
<i>SP.A-Spirit</i>	716.317	17.8	3	21.43
<i>CD&amp;V-N-VA</i>	1.131.119	28.1	4	28.57
<i>Vlaams Blok</i>	930.731	23.2	3	21.43
<i>Groen!</i>	320.874	8.0	1	7.14
<i>PVDA</i>	24.807	0.6	0	0
<i>LSP</i>	14.166	0.4	0	0

Source: Ministry of Interior

The results of the European elections were basically in line with the results of the regional ballots obtained the same day, with a few fine differences. The two parties of the federal government (and in the outgoing regional executive) recorded appreciable losses compared to the May 2003 Federal elections. The trend was especially obvious for the Socialists, well below the 20 percent level. Admittedly, the list leader, the outgoing president of the Socialist trade union, did not have the same charisma or level of popularity as the Prime Minister in office, Guy Verhofstadt, or as Jean-Luc Dehaene, Vice-President of the European Convention and Prime Minister until 1999. Even so, the fragility of the 2003 election victory was underlined by this result and that, hardly better, of the regional elections.

The situation of the Prime Minister's party was hardly more enviable. It was very far away indeed from its hope of pulling ahead of the *CD&V* and emerging as "the" party of the centre-right in Flanders. Worse yet, not only did they lose what had won in 2003, but the *VLD* emerged from this election more divided than ever.

The *Christian Democrats* did not win the elections. At the regional level and at the European to a somewhat lesser extent, the *CD&V-N-VA* coalition was very far from reaching the percentage that some polls had predicted (29.6 per cent, *Le Soir*, March 29<sup>th</sup> 2004). More fundamentally, the electoral coalition's result did not reflect the combined results of the *CD&V* and *N-VA* in 2003, even though those results had been considered very poor for each party. In another example, in 1999 the combined result of *Christian Democrats* and *Volksunie* reached 34 percent. Even if at the European level Jean-Luc Dehaene did contribute just a bit *more*, this contribution certainly did not allow *Flemish Christian Democracy* to quietly contemplate the future, after fifteen years of a downward spiral.

The real winner of the election was the *Vlaams Blok*. Led by Frank Vanhecke, the extreme right-wing Flemish nationalist confirmed his *Iron Law* practiced since the October 1988 local elections: the party has not lost any election since. Compared with the European elections in June 1999, it gained eight additional percentage points. And if one takes the May 2003 Federal elections as a reference, the results are up again by six percentage points. The *Vlaams Blok* came in ahead of the two parties of the federal executive and matched the results of the *CD&V*.

Finally, *Groen!*, the Flemish Green Party, succeeded in passing the 5 percent threshold and therefore held onto a seat, which had been unimaginable a few months before the elections.

As mentioned above, the election in the German-speaking district was an electoral contest in name only. From the outset, the seat has gone to the *Christlich Soziale Partei* (the German-speaking branch of the *CDH*, *CSP*). 2004 was no different. The German-speaking *Christian Democrats* triumphed over the *Liberals* with ease (leading with 20 percentage points!). We should note that this election confirmed the difficulty that left-wing parties have in gaining a foothold among German-speaking Belgians. *Ecolo* and the *Sozialistische Partei* (the German-speaking branch of the *PS*, *SP*), who nonetheless hold the Minister-Presidency of the German-speaking Community, only got 25 percent of votes.

### 3.3 A leadership struggle unfavourable to the Liberals

The proportional voting system with semi-open lists, combined with an increased personalization of the political contest, has led political actors to examine the preferential votes submitted for candidates with almost equal scrutiny as the results themselves, if not even more so at times. In this game of daily strug-

gles for power, inherent in coalition governments, the *Liberals* turned out to be the losers.

In the French-speaking constituency, the *Socialist party* leader, Elio Di Rupo (483.644 votes) was ahead of the outgoing Foreign Affairs Minister, Louis Michel (327.374 votes), the leader of the *Centre démocrate humaniste*, Joëlle Milquet (191.900 votes), Secretary of State for European Affairs, Frédérique Ries (*MR* – 123.000 votes), outgoing European Commissioner Philippe Busquin (*PS* – 114.503 votes), Finance Minister Didier Reynders (*MR* – 95.475 votes), and former Vice Prime Minister from *Ecolo*, Isabelle Durant (73.597 votes).

In the Flemish political arena, on this sensitive area of preferential votes, Guy Verhofstadt was overtaken by his predecessor. With 651.345 preferential votes, the former *CD&V* and Belgian strongman completely outdistanced Guy Verhofstadt (*VLD* – 388.011 votes). Winning third place, the leader of the *Vlaams Blok*, Frank Vanhecke (260.430 votes) arrived in front of the head of the *Socialist* list, Mia De Vits (202.402 votes) and the strongman of the Flemish extreme right wing, Filip De Winter (193.525 votes).

What was the impact of the candidature of well-known personalities without any ambition to sit? As expected, a certain number of those elected on June 13<sup>th</sup> quickly announced their resignation. In total, eight of twenty-four elected MEPs decided not to assume their office: Geert Bourgeois (*N-VA*), Michel Daerden (*PS*), Karel De Gucht (*VLD*), Filip De Winter (*Vlaams Blok*), Elio Di Rupo (*PS*), Louis Michel (*MR*), Joëlle Milquet (*CDH*), and Guy Verhofstadt (*VLD*). However, in anticipation of this event, several parties had lined up the necessary substitutes for the leading candidates: for example, Philippe Busquin, former *PS* president and outgoing European Commissioner, Antoine Duquesne, outgoing leader of *MR*, Raymond Langendries, former President of the House of Representatives, and Dirk Sterckx, outgoing leader of the *VLD*.

#### 4. The impact of the European elections on national politics

The Belgian political system was greatly affected by the results of June 13<sup>th</sup> 2004. But to tell the truth, it wasn't so much the European elections as the outcome of the regional elections, namely the fact that in Flanders one out of every four voters voted for an extreme right-wing party. This new extreme right-wing upsurge, the defeat of the Flemish government parties, the victory of the *Socialist Party* in the Brussels Region, and the good showing by the *Centre démocrate humaniste* were important topics addressed by the analysis and made the European election results all the more *invisible*, with the exception of the two *battles of the leaders*: between Jean-Luc Dehaene and Guy Verhofstadt on the one hand and Elio Di Rupo and Louis Michel on the other.

Generally speaking, the European elections had no impact on national politics, except perhaps on the *Greens*, who had feared being politically marginalized at the national level and in *Green* European organizations (*European Green*

*Party* and the *Green-EFA group* in the European Parliament) on the supposition that they would not have been able to partially redress the 2003 election disaster.

In fact, the European issue only (re)appeared at the political and media forefront on the occasions of the European Council June 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> 2004, the ratification of the European Constitution, and the negotiations regarding the appointment of the European Commission President.<sup>4</sup>

Backed by the German and French delegations, Guy Verhofstadt came up against the opposition from several other delegations, including British and Italian. This failure enabled his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Michel, to walk off with the minor role of Belgian European Commissioner insofar as José-Manuel Barroso was preferred to Jean-Luc Dehaene inside the EPP and the EPP-ED group and was nominated on June the 29<sup>th</sup> by the Council meeting of Heads of State or Government.

## 5. Conclusion

In the end, the European elections hardly gathered any attention or actors. Paradoxically, the campaign only attracted public attention on the issue concerning the splitting of the Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde district and the threat of boycott by a number of mayors from the Flemish outskirts of Brussels, in short, Belgo-Belgian issues.

The absence of any focus on European issues among political parties (with the exception, in part, of the *Vlaams Blok*) and in particular the contemporaneity of these elections and regional elections – perhaps the most important elections in Belgium from now on – contributed to this low visibility, if not to say invisibility. Of course, one should consider the relative unfamiliarity with the mechanisms of the European decision-making process and its machinery in the European Parliament.

Most of the attention was focused on peripheral aspects (without being trivial) of the elections: the battle, not for seats but for preferential votes, oddly between Jean-Luc Dehaene and Guy Verhofstadt, on the one hand, and Elio Di Rupo and Louis Michel, on the other.

All the same, because voting is compulsory, the Belgians did go and vote. This obligation to vote distorted the outcome of the Belgian vote compared to other European countries, and logically had an effect on general statements concerning large-scale abstention. On the other hand, the punishment mechanism for the government was demonstrated to some degree: three of the four Federal government parties (the *VLD*, *MR*, and *SP.A-Spirit*) suffered a setback compared with the 2003 national result. The *PS* was the exception in this picture.

Paradoxically, however, it is not certain if the election outcomes serve as confirmation for assumptions concerning theories about second-order elections. Indeed, two facts qualify our last remark. The first is that for two of the three parties concerned (*VLD* and *MR*), the outcome was less harsh than at the re-

gional level, which was supposedly a first-order election with a greater amount of tactical voting. Only the *Flemish Socialists* obtained worse results in the European elections than in the regional one. The second has to do with the terms of comparison. If one takes the May 2003 national elections as a reference point, the remark is unambiguous, but we have to stress that the *Liberals* of the *VLD* and *MR* had achieved their best result ever since the introduction of universal suffrage at this election. Then, it was difficult to improve this electoral result. On the other hand, if we look at things from the perspective of *European elections* in Belgium, it must be noted that the *Liberals*, who were presented as the losers of the June 13<sup>th</sup> 2004 elections, achieved in the 2004 European elections the best results ever obtained in this type of election.

## References

- Bomberg, Elizabeth (1998): *Green Parties and Politics in the European Union*. London: Routledge.
- Cadranel, Benjamin/Delcor, Frédéric (2001): La réduction de moitié de l'effet dévolutif de la case de tête. In: *Actes du Colloque (Eds.): Les élections dans tous leurs états organize*. Brussels: Bruylant, 121-144 [Cadranel/Delcor: Reducing by Half the Effect of List Voting].
- Delwit, Pascal (2000): Electoral Participation and European Polls: A Limited Legitimacy. In: Grunberg, Gérard/Perrineau, Pascal/Ysmal, Colette (Eds.): *Europe at the Polls. The European Elections of 1999*, London-New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 207-222.
- Delwit, Pascal (2004): *La Belgique, l'Union européenne et les élections européennes*. Brussels: Bureau belge auprès du Parlement européen [Belgium, the European Union and the European Elections].
- Delwit, Pascal (2004a): *Belgique et Union européenne: une histoire d'amour et de raison*. In: Dulphy, Anne/Manigand Christian (Eds.): *Les opinions publiques face à l'Europe communautaire. Entre cultures nationales et horizon européen*. Brussels-Bern-Berlin: Peter Lang, 79-102 [Delwit: Belgium and the European Union. A Love Story and a Marriage of Convenience. In: Dulphy/Manigand: *Public Opinion on the European Union. Between National Cultures and a European Horizon*].
- Delwit, Pascal/Hellings, Benoit (2004): *Ecolo et les élections du 18 mai 2003. Du paradis au purgatoire ou à l'enfer?* In: *L'année sociale 2003*, No. 1, 38-49 [Ecolo and the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2003 Elections. From Paradise to Purgatory or to Hell?].
- Delwit, Pascal/Kulahci, Erol/Pilet Jean-Benoit (2004): *Le vote électronique en Belgique. Un choix légitime?* Ghent: Academia Press [Electronic Voting in Belgium. A legitimate Choice?].
- Delwit, Pascal/Pilet Jean-Benoit (2004): *Fédéralisme, institutions et vie politique. Stabilité, instabilité et retour*. In: Coenen, Marie-Thérèse/Govaert, Serge

- (Eds.): *L'état de la Belgique? 1989-2004. Quinze années à la charnière du siècle*, Brussels: De Boeck, 43-79 [Delwit/Pilet: *Federalism, Institutions, and Political Life. Stability, Instability and Return*. In: Coenen/Govaert: *The State of Belgium? 1989-2004. Fifteen Years at the turn of the century*].
- Deschouwer, Kris (1999): *From Consociationalism to Federalism: How the Belgian Parties Won*. In: Deschouwer, Kris/Luther, Kurt R. (Eds): *Party Elites in Divided Societies. Political Parties in Consociational Democracies*. London: Routledge, 74-107.
- IDEA (2004): *Europe Expands, Turnout Falls. The Significance of the 2004 European Parliament Elections*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- Mair, Peter (2000): *The Limited Impact of Europe on National Party Systems*. In: *West European Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 26-51.
- Marsh, Michael (1998): *Testing the Second-Order Election Theory after Four European Elections*. In: *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 28, 591-607.
- Reif, Karlheinz (1985): *Ten Second-Order National Elections*. In: Reif, Karlheinz (Ed.): *Ten European Elections*. London: Gower, 1-36.
- Reif, Karlheinz/Schmitt, Herman (1980): *Nine Second-Order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results*. In: *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 3-44.
- Rihoux, Benoît/Hooghe, Marc (2003): *The Harder the Fall... The Greens in the Belgian General Elections of 18 May 2003*. In: *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 120-126.
- Swyngedouw, Marc (1998): *L'idéologie du Vlaams Blok. L'offre identitaire*. In: *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 189-202 [The Flemish Bloc Ideology. The Identity's Proposal].
- Taggart, Paul (1998): *A Touchstone of Dissent. Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems*. In: *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 363-388.
- Van de Walle, Cédric (2003): *Le rôle de la Fédération européenne des partis verts. Etude de la coopération multilatérale entre partis verts à l'échelle européenne*. Brussels: Thèse de doctorat en science politique de l'ULB [The Role of the European Federation of Green Parties. Research on the Multilateral Cooperation between Green Parties at the European Level].
- Wauters, Bram/Weekers, Karolien/Pilet, Jean-Benoit (2004): *Het gebruik van de voorkeurstem bij de regionale en Europese parlementsverkiezingen van 13 juni 2004*. In: *Res Publica*, Vol. XLVI, No. 2-3, 377-412 [The Use of Personal Votes at the June 2004 Regional and European Elections].

- <sup>1</sup> In Belgium too there is opposition to the Bolkestein Directive. It is led by leftist and green organisations and parties. For example, the French-speaking *Socialist Party* has launched a petition against this directive on its website: <http://www.stopbolkestein.org/>
- <sup>2</sup> Aggregate results of *Christian Democratic Parties* and *Socialist Parties* give evidence of this situation: 78.5 percent in 1954, 62.6 percent in 1965, 58.0 in 1987, and 48.0 in the 2004 European elections.
- <sup>3</sup> After World War II, this only occurred in the 1987 and 1991 national elections and in the 1984 European election.
- <sup>4</sup> For example in two important newspapers *Le Soir* and *De Staandaard*: “Chirac en Schröder pokers met Verhofstadt”, *De Staandaard*, June 17<sup>th</sup> 2004; “Verhofstadt jette l'éponge étoilée”, *Le Soir*, June 19<sup>th</sup> 2004; “Dehaene ziet zich niet als kandidaat-voorzitter”, *De Staandaard*, June 19<sup>th</sup> 2004; “L'histoire du Belge qui se rêvait Président”, *Le Soir*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2004; “Angleterre-Belgique: 2-0. Dehaene-Verhofstadt: ?”, *Le Soir*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2004; “Verhofstadt: retour à la case 16”, *Le Soir*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2004; “Waarom Guy Verhofstadt geen voorzitter van de Commissie kon worden”, *De Staandaard*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2004; “Quelle perle pour l'Europe?”, *Le Soir*, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2004; “Verhofstadt en Michel wilden Dehaene lanceren voor Commissie”, *De Staandaard*, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2004; “Barroso donné grand favori”, *Le Soir*, June 28<sup>th</sup> 2004.