Chapter 4
Belgium

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In the typologies dedicated to democracies, Belgium belongs to the category of consensual democracies, i.e. systems characterised by executive-legislative power-sharing, decentralisation, political pluralism and minority rights (Lijphart, 1984; Mair, 1999). It is even an ideal–typical example of these, according to Lijphart (1981). Since 1993, it has been a federal State composed of two categories of federated entities, regions and communities. For half a century, the fragmentation of the Belgian political system has increased substantially (Delwit, 2012). By way of illustration, the effective number of parties rose from less than three in the 1946, 1949, 1950, 1954, 1958 and 1961 elections to between 8 and 10 in the contemporary period.

This evolution results from the division into two separate party systems, French- and Dutch-speaking ones, with each political family belonging to either one of them. There are virtually no longer any federal-national parties in Belgium. It also refers to the subsidence of the political and electoral influence wielded by the two great historical dominant political families—the Socialists and the Christian Democrats—as well as the concomitant emergence of political newcomers and the growth of the liberals. Since 1899, the electoral formula for all elections in Belgium has been a proportional representation system. Since then, reaching an absolute majority in parliament has become rare. For 40 years, forming a government has become a long and often difficult process, because of the sheer number of parties to be involved, the balance to be struck between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking social demands, let alone the different political sensitivities to be catered for.

In the political landscape, the Communist Party of Belgium (PCB-KPB) was until 1985 the main party of the radical left. But in the 1985 elections, it lost all its MPs and disappeared from the political scene. Since the late 2000s, another radical left party has been developing in Belgium, the Labour Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA). Developing from AMADA-TPO (All Power to the Workers), the PTB-PVDA held

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its first Congress in 1979. The party was Maoist until the mid-eighties, then Marxist-Leninist. Since the beginning of the 2000s, it has been trying to combine an identity where the Marxist grounding is preserved, with the prospect of a break with the 'system', and the face of a modern and 'trendy' Party. Since 2009, this strategy has paid off electorally and in 2014, for the first time in its history, the party captured two MPs, and it got twelve (of 150) in 2019. Accordingly, the party has been able to benefit from public party financing.

Mapping the Radical Left Family in Belgium

History

As in many European countries, the Belgian radical left was long embodied by the Communist Party (the PCB-KPB). The Communist Party was formed in 1921 and won its first seats in the 1925 elections (Gotovitch, 1997). Since the inter-war period, it has evinced several characteristics, which have lasted over time. The electoral and political potential of Belgian communism was relatively modest. Contrary to Germany until 1934, and post-1945 France or Italy, the PCB-KPB remained essentially confined to a range between 3 and 6 per cent of the votes (Delwit & Sandri, 2011). It exceeded these limits only on rare exceptions: in the two elections after WWII and the *élection de rupture* (the 'breaking-away' election) in 1965. There was strong asymmetry in Belgian communists' anchoring. They were electorally evanescent in the Flemish territory. The main electoral and political penetration territories were located, first of all, in Brussels as well as in the working-class areas of Hainaut and the province of Liège in Wallonia. It is also in these regions that it developed a degree of union presence worthy of the name.

In the European Communist movement, the Communist Party of Belgium exhibited a number of peculiarities. At its 1954 Congress, it challenged the centrality of the dictatorship of the proletariat, thus paving the way for the recognition of representative democracy as a reference system. At this meeting, it dismissed the Stalinist leadership who had been at the head of the party since 1944, against the will of the CPSU and against the advice of its 'older brother' party, the French Communist Party. In the context of these innovations, it was also one of the first Communist parties to express a more nuanced position towards the European Communities (Delwit, 1993) and to consider that political and trade union struggle should be led within them, not outside. In the 1970s, it became a Eurocommunist party, alongside the PCI, the PCF and the PCE (Delwit, 2016). However, by the end of that decade, it was riven by two competing types of political orientation. Some of its workers' federations supported the French Communist Party's new line, more pro-Soviet and more working-class. Other currents and federations were more in tune with the progress of the PCI and its leader, Enrico Berlinguer.

Like all European Communist parties, the PCB-KPB faced a significant setback in the 1980s. Its membership fell considerably (below 10,000) and it lost its last MPs at the 1985 election. However, the Belgian Communist Party was not the only radical left-wing organisation in Belgium. There have always been small Trotskyist movements whose names have evolved over time, such as the Revolutionary Communist League, Socialist Workers' Party, Socialist Party of Struggle, etc. Moreover, in 1970, a Maoist organisation was established. Originally, it was only present in the Dutch-speaking part of the country and known as AMADA (Alle macht aan de arbeiders—All Power to the Workers). From 1974 onwards, it broke into the French-speaking part of the country and became AMADA-TPO (Tout le pouvoir aux ouvriers, All Power to the Workers). In 1979, it officially became a party, the Labour Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA). AMADA-TPO and the PTB-PVDA saw themselves as parties strictly obeying Maoism and supported all Chinese points of view until the mid-1980s. From then on, although it retained many of the characteristics of Maoism, the PTB became a more typical Marxist-Leninist party, referring to the great figures of this galaxy: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

Principal Contemporary Radical Left Parties

In parallel with the PCB-KPB's decline, the PTB-PVDA has survived, despite the collapse of similarly-inclined organisations in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Under Ludo Martens's leadership (from its founding until 2008), it embraced many abrupt ideological shifts (Delwit, 2014) while maintaining a classical Marxist-Leninist model of functioning: a very centralised, highly ideological organisation, calling for members' total commitment.

Despite the fall of the Berlin Wall, changes in the Chinese regime and the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the PTB-PVDA survived and has continued its work tirelessly, in a number of sectors in Belgian society. In parallel, the PCB-KPB has also survived, but with very little visibility in the political and social arenas. It is virtually non-existent in Flanders and negligible in Brussels and Wallonia; an observation that also applies to the main Trotskyist organisations.

In the contemporary period, the Belgian radical left is thus embodied first and foremost in the PTB-PVDA—except for a small galaxy of other radical left-wing organisations (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 RLPs in Belgium in 2019

Name of the party	Ideological profile	Participation in a bigger coalition	European affiliation(s)	Score at the latest general election (%)
PTB-PVDA	Conservative communist	No	GUE-NGL	8.6 (in 2019)

Source Author

The Extra-Parliamentary Radical Left Galaxy

The wider radical left galaxy in Belgium is generally weak. Social movements have emerged in response to austerity measures and right-wing policies, but these have been led by the trade unions rather than the far left which remains peripheral. Similarly, the movement to promote refugee rights has been connected not just with the PTB-PVDA, but with the trade unions, as well as the social-democratic and Green parties.

In 2003, the Labour Party of Belgium suffered a severe internal crisis after the general election. The crisis essentially concerned the choice to form an electoral coalition with the European Arab League in the district of Antwerp (see below). It led to the departure of the General Secretary. In the aftermath, the party launched a political change, consisting mainly of communication strategies. At its 8th Congress in 2008, the PTB-PVDA adopted a double focus or a two-line strategy: the one that prevails *inside* and the one put forward *outside*. The first, not publicly advertised, refers to the primary identity of the party: the confirmation of a Marxist-Leninist corpus and the intention to pursue a socialist revolution. The second one, which is now the party's public window, is to present itself as an attractive party that is worth voting for. The party strives at winning 'little victories' in order to present itself as effective. It is no longer important to convince people of the correctness of Lenin's or Stalin's theses, but of the need to prove that an alternative is possible. Political awareness is at the heart of the process, and it requires success in different fields of action: in the social world, on university campuses and in municipalities.

Such a strategy was largely taken from the Socialist Party (SP) in the Netherlands (see Chapter 14 in this volume). This party underwent major changes in the second half of the 1990s and the 2000s. Like the PTB-PVDA, the SP transitioned from being a peripheral Maoist party into a party with relevance to the national party system (Sartori, 2005). Although the two parties maintain close ties, the PTB-PVDA nevertheless differs from the SP. The Labour Party always aims at promoting an oppositional politics, and participation in power is not an objective; moreover, in the SP, the two-line strategy is decreasingly evident.

Since the end of the 2000s, the PTB-PVDA has enjoyed undeniable success. It has made a media breakthrough, strengthened its penetration into the two main Belgian trade union organisations—the General Labour Federation of Belgium (FGTB-ABVV), of socialist proclivity, and the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC-ACV). The party has developed new links with trade union leaders and strengthened its links with some union branches since 2000 (especially in FGTB-ABVV and to a lesser extent CSC-ACV). Union leaders are now invited to conferences organised by the party, and it has been visible at demonstrations organised by trade unions. However, it is also apparent that the unions remain primarily orientated to larger parties with the FGTB-ABVV remaining particularly close to the social-democratic Socialist Party (PS) and Socialist Party. Different (SP.a), now renamed Vooruit (Forwards).

The PTB-PVDA's increased visibility has in several areas contributed to a marked improvement in its electoral performance. The most obvious translation of these changes took place in the spring 2014 elections, with the conquest of two seats in the Federal Chamber, two Members in the Walloon Regional Parliament and four MPs in the Brussels Regional Parliament. In the French-speaking spectrum, the Labour Party has also opened its lists to candidates in the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, now Anticapitalist Left—GA-SAP) and the Communist Party (PC), under the label: PTB-GO (Labour Party—Other Left). Beyond this, the only other far left party of note is the small Trotskyist (affiliated to the CWI) Socialist Party of Struggle-Left Socialist Party (PSL-LSP), which has also operated within the social-democratic parties. It has some presence in Flemish universities and student organisations but only has approximately two hundred members.

The radical left publications in Belgium are generally tied to the RLPs and have small circulations, for example, the PTB-PVDA publishes *Lava* to educate its mid-level leaders, while its publication *Solidaire* does at least seek to reach out to a broader audience and updates its news section every few days (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Radical left galaxy in Belgium in 2019

Political organisations	Trade unions/professional organisations	Social movements	Think tanks, foundations	Prominent intellectuals	Newspapers and other media
PTB-PVDA		Health centres, Medicine for the People Progressive Lawyers Network Intal Viva Salud (Medicine for the Third-World)	Institute for Marxist Studies	–	*Solidaire* (monthly) *Lava*
GA-SAP					*La gauche*
PC			Culture Association Joseph Jacquemotte		
PSL-LSP					*Socialisme*

Source Author

The Labour Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA)

Party Structure and Environment

The Party Organisational Model

In accordance with the party's identity at its inception and development, the Labour Party is a political party based on the Leninist party model. From 1970 to 2008, the PTB-PVDA adhered strictly to its representation of a revolutionary militant party. Membership is seen as a fundamental commitment and a total involvement in the cause of socialism. By this yardstick, the PTB-PVDA is made up of members who live by and for the party, and who accept the party line as being always correct. Participation in party life and in its peripheral organisations is paramount. It implies accepting militancy in a variety of forms and places. Many middle managers and activists were invited to work in 'companies', in areas set by the party leadership. In the same way, members are invited to donate to the party their wage-surplus over a 'worker's wage', which is actually set much lower than a real worker's average wage. The process is mandatory for all party executives. In the same way, insofar as militants are entirely at the service of the cause, any inheritance, especially real estate, must be bequeathed to the party. Any member of the Central Committee is obliged to do this.

Expectations and demands on members and managers are therefore exceptionally high. They combine with a temporal commitment that is no less so. This explains the occurrence of two dynamics typical for this form of organisation. First, turnover is high amongst members and grassroots activists. Many of them forsake such a life of asceticism and exile from society. It is all the more difficult to endure as corrections are frequent, both regarding the party's line and actions. Even harder, it results in a life of *entre-soi* (keeping oneself to oneself). Outside the party, activists have often alienated themselves from family, friends and acquaintances who are not party-members. Second, the remaining members become militants and hardened executives. It is much more unusual for them to leave the party along the way. Involved in a cult dynamic, they are also confronted with a form of prisoner's dilemma. Their departure is often materially unthinkable. Nevertheless, the party has experienced some serious crises in the leadership (see below).

In 2008, the PTB-PVDA reviewed its statutes as part of its strategic turn, and slightly amended them in 2015. At national level, the party's supreme body remains its Congress which consists of delegates from local branches (the final session of which is open to the public but only delegates can vote). It meets very exceptionally. While officially launched in 1979, the PTB celebrated its 8th Congress in 2008, the 9th in 2015 and the 10th in 2021. The Congress fulfils three important functions: defining the party's 'political, ideological and organisational line'; electing the members of the National Council, which replaced the Central Committee; and appointing the 'advisory members' of the National Council (PTB, 2008, p. 16).

Between two congress sessions, the sovereign body is the National Council. In addition to the members elected at the Convention, the National Council is home to two representatives of the main youth organisation, 'Communists and Active' (COMAC). The National Council elects Bureau members, which is in charge of the party leadership between meetings of the National Council. Until 2015, the President was elected by the National Council. In intra-party democracy indexes (von dem Berge et al., 2013, p. 15), such indirect election is regarded as the most exclusive method of election and the weakest level of intra-party democracy. From 2015 onwards, the president has been chosen by Congress. While procedures for selecting parliamentary candidates are not described in the party statutes, this appears to be a top-down process that is controlled first by each territory's Federation and then the National leadership.

At sub-national level, the PTB-PVDA is organised into provincial federations and grassroots groups. The latter is the 'driving force behind the party's work with the people'. It can cover a wide variety of situations: organisation in the enterprise, in municipalities, in the 'party services', or even in 'other fields of work' (PTB, 2008, p. 6). The PTB-PVDA still operates according to democratic centralism and deems party unity and sees the 'fight against divisive behaviour' as a 'fundamental principle' (PTB, 2008, pp. 16–17). Internal factions are not permitted, and it is difficult to identify even informal groups operating within the party.

In view of the aforementioned 'two-line strategy', the PTB-PVDA has implemented a new twofold approach to membership: the simplification of the membership process and the diversification of membership status. Under the terms of Article 6 of the statute, joining the Labour Party has now become a mundane process and act. It is enough to have reached the age of 18, to 'recognise' oneself in the party and pay one's dues. More significant are the hierarchy and diversification of membership status. Three categories are listed: the advisory member, the group member and the activist (PTB, 2008). The advisory member refers to the member as defined in Article 6. No other condition is expected of them than to 'recognise' themselves in the party and pay their dues. We can broadly equate it with what political literature refers to as a 'passive member' (van Haute & Gauja, 2015). As for the group member, they are one step up in expected dedication but also in political control. They must identify themselves with the party and must also regularly take part 'in grassroots group meetings'. In political typologies, this category is assimilated to the party activist: the one who invests time and often financial means in favour of his or her own party; with the militant member, we reach a degree that equates to executive functions or investments that approach total 'commitment' to all-inclusive organisations. The militant members thus undertake to pay back to the party anything higher in their wages than the scale fixed by the party. Similarly, they must be prepared to 'follow the activist training programme' (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Participatory
linkage of the PTB-PVDA

Direction	Strength	Range
Top-down/democratic centralism	High	Members/supporters

Source Author

Party Membership

In view of the statutory changes, but also its political and electoral breakthrough in
the contemporary period and its rise in opinion polls, the PTB-PVDA has recorded
an increase in its membership. In the 1979 to 2008 period, total membership ranged
from 800 to 2500. Since then, the progression has been steady. As early as 2012, the
party surpassed the 5000-member mark and, in 2016, it announced its ten-thousandth
member, although it is worth mentioning that most of them belonged to the first
category (outlined above).

At the 9th Congress in 2015, the party set out its new goal on this issue. This
involved reaching 17,000 members in 2020, the year after the major electoral
sequence (2018: municipal and provincial elections; and 2019: federal, regional
and European elections) (PTB, 2015, p. 97). The PTB says nothing of its members'
socio-demographic profile. However, it turns out that women are somewhat under-
represented. This is obvious in the middle and upper echelons of the party. In fact, the
party president repeated the mantra at the 2008 and 2015 congresses that it was high
time that the party focused work on those strata. In the same way, Dutch-speaking
members seem to predominate, whereas it is the opposite as regards the electorate. It
was not until 2015 that members' geographical distribution was proportional to the
regions' demographics. There are, however, two over-represented poles, which are
the strongholds of the PTB: Antwerp and the Liège province (Table 4.4).

The party has let no leaks appear concerning recent resignations. A number of
members who have more exposure to the party's 'internal' identity and the rigours
of democratic centralism have abandoned the PTB-PVDA. It should also be noted
that, in a context of increasing electoral performance and membership, the former is
more striking. Indeed, the party's membership density has slowly dropped. In 2007,
it was 4.67, and it fell to 3.25 in 2019 (Table 4.5).

Party Linkages

Since 2000, the PTB-PVDA has attempted to develop links with trade unions and
supported campaigns to promote rights for refugees. However, for the most part,
it remains a closed party in the sense that usually only PTB-PVDA members are
allowed to participate in the demonstrations that it organises. The party is more than
ever involved in the development of its own auxiliary organisations. A double logic
underpins such dynamism. The first, the most recent one, refers to the communication
strategy. One aspect of this is its verticality. The party utilises specific forms of

Table 4.4 PTB-PVDA party membership by federation and by Region (Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders, in bold)

	2013	2014	2015
Brussels-Capital	**847**	**1034**	**1181**
Brabant Wallon	212	296	348
Hainaut	625	904	948
Liège	1010	1392	1443
Luxemburg	24	40	49
Namur	134	230	250
Wallonia	**2005**	**2862**	**3038**
Antwerpen	2002	2419	2411
Limburg	747	728	712
Oost-Vlaanderen	1208	1426	1433
Vlaams Brabant	455	707	615
West-Vlaanderen	398	516	532
Flanders	**4810**	**5796**	**5703**

Source Party National Secretariat

Table 4.5 PTB-PVDA membership 2000–

Years	Number of members (% of party electorate in brackets)
2000	1254
2003	1354
2005	2251
2006	2335
2007	2625 (4.67)
2008	2890
2009	3154
2010	3939 (3.90)
2011	4477
2012	5602
2013	6810
2014	9692 (3.86)
2015	9992
2016	12,018
2017	14,622
2018	16,598
2019	20,276 (3.47)

Source Party National Secretariat

communication depending on the audience and the population it is dealing with. The second, more classical one, refers to the model of a socially integrative party (Neumann, 1956), a counter-society workers' party (Winock, 1992), which the PTB-PVDA wants to invigorate. As is usually the case with mass parties (Duverger, 1981) in general and communist parties in particular, these auxiliary organisations represent important segments of society.

The youth sector is considered to be of paramount importance. Not only is it a militant breeding ground, where one devotes one's time to the cause. But it is also from the ranks of the Youth Organisation that the future national and local leaders come from. In this area, the party has three organisations: the pioneers, Red Foxes and COMAC. Pioneers is the PTB-PVDA children's movement. The party recently launched the Red Foxes for high school students. Finally, in higher education and universities, the major actor is the COMAC organisation ('Communists and Active'). As might be expected with the new communication line, the reference to communism has been deleted from all the organisation's literature. In universities, COMAC takes part in participatory institutions, springing from what the organisation calls an active trade union movement,[1] called *Priorité étudiante* ('Priority to Students').[2]

The Medical Homes for the People (Médecine pour le peuple, MPLP) network is a determining element of the party's activity and influence. The electoral geography of the PTB-PVDA is closely associated with the territories in which these medical centres are located. MPLP has eleven locations: Deurne and Hoboken in the province of Antwerp; Genk and Lommel in Limburg; Zelzate in East Flanders; Seraing and Herstal in the province of Liège; La Louvière and Marcinelle in Hainaut; and Molenbeek-Saint-Jean as well as Schaerbeek in the Brussels region.

The PTB-PVDA also relies on a women's organisation. It is called *Marianne* and is active in four areas: Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi and Liège. Likewise, it has a publishing house, Proletarian Education (EPO).[3] EPO has refocused on publishing books in Dutch. It releases a significant number of titles. For its part, the Institute of Marxist Studies (INEM) is responsible for providing training.[4] The Labour Party has also established a lawyers' organisation, the Progress Lawyers Network.[5] Progress Lawyers Network has offices in Antwerp and Brussels. Law firms operate in the judicial field for the benefit of low-income citizens, or even in precarious situations.

Intal is the anti-imperialist organisation. This is one of the areas where the PTB-PVDA deals with international politics, geared at a targeted audience. The official objective of the association is to 'establish a counter-power in the North and South to jointly achieve the right to health'. To this end, the association is working in partnership with another satellite organisation, *Viva Salud*, formerly Medicine for the Third World (M3M). Intal's concrete action is focused on a number of countries: the Philippines, Congo, Colombia, Palestine and Venezuela. Intal is mainly based in Flanders. With regard to peace and security issues, the PTB often operates with two organisations: Vrede[6] and Vrede Actie,[7] which are active exclusively in the Dutch-speaking part of the country. The main message conveyed by these two associations is the refusal of any form of military intervention, as for example in the cases of Libya and Syria. The party has also published a monthly, *Solidaire*, as well as a magazine.

Long called *Études marxistes* (Marxist Studies), it has recently been transformed and is now called *Lava.*

As far as the trade union world is concerned, the PTB has not created its own structures. As noted above, it operates within the two major Belgian trade union organisations, the General Labour Federation of Belgium (FGTB-ABVV) and the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC-ACV). It can maintain strong positions in certain industries, such as public transport or the chemicals sector.

Intra-Party Life

Due to its Marxist-Leninist identity, the party's cohesion and the importance of discipline have been emphasised throughout its history. In the opening ('turning to the Right') or closing ('turning to the Left') phases, this has been a crucial component. Faced with the world's hostility and the action of the 'reaction', no more and no less than revolutionary heroism was expected of members. However, debates or even crises have punctuated the Labour Party's history. The first one arose at the dawn of the eighties, triggered by two factors. The first was the content of the first Congress in 1979. It imparted a right-wing line within the terms of a Marxist-Leninist movement. The leadership deemed that such openness had led to many acts of indiscipline and many failures in democratic centralism. Second, this fact was all the more problematic since this phase corresponded to the disappearance of the vast majority of Maoist organisations and the advent of ecological parties. A left-wing turn was conveyed at the second Congress to 'save' the party. Many middle managers then left the PTB-PVDA, which took time to recover.

The second, more visible crisis occurred during the symbolic year of 1989. Many officials did not agree with the explanations given about the Spring in Beijing and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Two executives of *Solidaire*'s editorial staff rejected the party's theses, soon joined by some middle managers. They announced their departure and did not hesitate to take Party President Ludo Martens' choices harshly to task. Moreover, they made it public, which led to controversy in the press. Once again, the party managed the crisis with a purge. Ludo Martens strangled dissent in a Stalinist-style book *From Tien an Men to Timisoara. Struggles and debates within the PTB* (1989–1991).

The third major crisis occurred in 2003. To some extent, it is more complex to identify. It touched upon several dimensions. The clearest was the party's future and strategy. In line with the 7th Congress orientations in 2002, the party ran for parliamentary elections in a new configuration. The PTB-PVDA had two Front lists. The first was closely linked to the social conflict that affected the Belgian airline, SABENA (which went bankrupt in the autumn of 2001). During the social struggle surrounding this issue, several union figures stood at the forefront and were highly publicised. Maria Vindevoghel—dubbed 'Maria' by the party—agreed to take part in one of the PTB-PVDA's lists in the Leuven and Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde constituencies. The second was the one that elicited the most comments. In the province of Antwerp, the PTB-PVDA formed an alliance with the radical Arab European League

Table 4.6 Environmental linkage of PTB-PVDA	Direction	Strength	Range
	Top-down	High	Strong and Exclusive

Source Author

(AEL) and presented a list called 'Resist', led by Dyab Abu Jahjah, the then AEL president.

The election result did not live up to expectations at all. The party fell far short of being able to claim a seat. These choices aroused the anger of part of the Antwerp apparatus and party grassroots members. However, they were not the only reason for discontent. For several years, the President (Ludo Martens) had spent very long periods in Congo, as a political advisor to Laurent-Désiré Kabila. The long-distance relations between the President and the Secretary-General (Nadine Rosa-Rosso) were getting increasingly difficult; especially since—another major fact—the tension also exposed a generational conflict. The first-generation PTB-PVDA executives were challenged by their 'offspring'.

The crisis ended with the expulsion of the Secretary-General, along with a dozen senior officials. It was also brought to a close with the President being placed under trusteeship; he was also ill, for that matter. Two prominent figures emerged: Antwerp's Peter Mertens and Brussels' David Pestieau. In 2008, at the 8th Congress, this political configuration was officialised. Twenty-nine years after creating and chairing the party, Ludo Martens stepped down in favour of Peter Mertens. The party changed its communication strategy, especially the way it presented itself to the outside world. While several local leaders have left the party in frustration at its internal politics, this has not as yet resulted in any organised splits that have resulted in the formation of viable parties (Table 4.6).

Electoral Support

The organisation that preceded the PTB-PVDA, AMADA-TPO, first took part in an election in 1974. Until then, AMADA-TPO had refused to compete in the various polls. According to the party leadership, elections might in future become a complementary route to extra-institutional struggles. Presenting a list could contribute to voters' awareness of the party and electoral campaigns were propitious times to promote the movement's revolutionary agenda.

Since then, the party has taken part in all elections, at all levels. At the beginning of the 1980s, the PTB-PVDA focused most of its efforts in electoral battles, to try and win an MP seat, in what was then its main area of strength and anchoring: Antwerp. In the 1985 parliamentary elections, Kris Merckx, one of the party leaders, barely missed the mark. Nevertheless, he did fail and, until 2014, the PTB-PVDA never again came near to getting an MP seat at the national, federal or regional levels, but succeeded in taking the occasional municipal or provincial councillor's seat.

From the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, something of a paradox emerged. Election results were still confidential. However, electoral times were felt quite intensely, internally. While the party had high hopes in 1999, it felt starkly disappointed at the result. Similarly, as we have observed, the 2003 federal election campaign was an intense experience for party-members and led to a deep crisis.

In electoral matters, the early 2000s witnessed a strategic reorientation. What mattered, from then on, was no longer to present a list in as many locations as possible, but to carry out a thorough and in-depth campaign in a number of targeted entities, so as to gauge the state of public opinion and expectations and to adapt to them. In the 2000 municipal elections, the experience was successfully tested in Herstal and Zelzate. After the 2003 crisis, this approach was further explored in the 2006 and 2012 municipal elections, in the 2007, 2010, 2014 and 2019 federal elections, as well as in the 2009 and 2014 regional elections. The campaign is always prepared through preliminary investigations and the party tries to 'incarnate' the issues—or as the party puts it, the aim is to 'listen to the people and find out which social problems concern them most, and put them on the agenda' (PTB member Bert de Belder in Shabeer, 2019). The PTB-PVDA's outstanding figures emerged: Peter Mertens, the former president and now General Secretary, and Raoul Hedebouw, the former party spokesman and now president. Besides, the same approach is being implemented at different levels. Mertens has cemented a powerful position within the party organisation and has been seen to be the party's 'strongman', while Hedebouw, the 'public face' of the party, has been portrayed as being charismatic in the media.

Further progress was observed in the 2006 communal elections. However, most important for the PTB-PVDA was the progress recorded in the 2009 regional elections. At the Walloon regional level, the PTB reached 1.24 per cent of the vote. This slight momentum was somewhat amplified in the 2010 federal election. In 2012, the party raised great hopes when it performed unexpectedly well in the municipal elections. The PTB-PVDA ran campaigns in six municipalities in Brussels; thirteen Walloon municipalities; and twenty-three Flemish ones, getting average results of 2.8, 5.6 and 3.5 per cent. Above all, its scores in some municipalities enabled it to significantly increase the number of its mandates. The Labour Party won thirty communal councillors in twelve entities. The most striking fact was its progress in Antwerp. The PTB-PVDA ranked ahead of the liberals and garnered four municipal councillors in the first Flemish city. Its anchoring was even more striking in its three areas of strength in the Liège province: Herstal (4 seats), Seraing (5 seats) and Liege (2 seats). Finally, in Zelzate, the PTB-PVDA breached the 20 per cent threshold and took over six seats.

The May 2014 national election was a watershed event for the party. For the first time, it reached the 5 per cent threshold in two provinces and won two seats in the federal parliament. It also obtained two MP seats in the Walloon Regional Parliament, and four in the Brussels Regional Parliament. This electoral milestone proved fundamental. Since then, it has enjoyed much greater visibility and, perhaps, most importantly, access to public party funding. Its 2019 success was still more stark (Table 4.7). The party gained ten more MPs and its first MEP, and its overall number of parliamentarians rose from 8 to 43 (Solidaire, 2019). The context for such results

Table 4.7 PTB-PVDA electoral results, 2000–2019

	National elections		European elections	
Year	Votes, % (*N*)	Seats, *N* (%)	Votes, % (*N*)	Seats, *N* (%)
2003	0.56 (37,324)			
2004			0.68 (44,452)	
2007	0.84 (56,158)			
2009			1.04 (68,540)	
2010	1.55 (101,088)			
2014	3.72 (251,276)	2 (1.33)	3.51 (235,048)	
2019	8.62 (584,621)	12 (8.0)	8.42 (566,274)	1 (4.76)

Source Ministry of Interior

was a polarising right-wing coalition in government for the previous 5 years, and the decline of traditional parties, which meant that the most significant electoral gains were for the two Green parties and for radical parties both on the left (PTB-PVDA) and especially on the right (Vlaams Belang) which more than tripled its vote share, winning 18 seats, 15 more than 5 years earlier (Pilet, 2020). The PTB's unitarian quasi-populism as 'the only remaining unitary, national and bilingual party, much to the advantage of the working people and their struggle against austerity and against the establishment' also helped it gain electoral traction (de Belder in Shabeer, 2019).

Sociology of the Electorate

In view of its relatively recent electoral breakthrough, we do not have much survey data on the PTB-PVDA's electoral sociology. Nevertheless, the 2014 exit-poll survey discloses some interesting information on the party's electoral anchoring in Wallonia (see Table 4.8).

Proportionally, the male vote is over-represented. Moreover, the PTB-PVDA's electorate is rather young. One-sixth of it is under the age of 25 and, more broadly, 46 per cent under the age of 40. A large proportion of its voters belong either to the wage-earning world or are inactive professionally, either as unemployed people or as students. On the other hand, the PTB-PVDA's electorate includes relatively few self-employed people, either in the liberal professions or in the worlds of shopkeepers and craftsmen.

From a more ideological point of view, a large part of the PTB-PVDA electorate is positioned to the left. On a ranking spectrum where 0 is the most left-wing position

and 9 the most right-wing, 17.4 per cent of its supporters opted for the most left-wing position (0), 14.8 per cent for position 1 and 16.8 per cent for position 2. At the other end of the electoral spectrum, the PTB-PVDA's presence is marginal: 2.3 per cent of its supporters opted for position 7; 0.7 and 1 per cent for positions 8 and 9. However, not all the PTB-PVDA electorate ranks on the left. It is worth pointing out a non-negligible centrist base. 17.1 per cent of PTB-PVDA voters chose rating 4 and 15.4 per cent chose rating 5. This suggests the expectations of some voters for more visible changes in a complex political system and, possibly, increased social preoccupations of middle-class voters.

Table 4.8 Sociology of the PTB-PVDA's electorate, 2014 (Wallonia) (%)

National share of votes	(3.72%)
Gender	
Male	56.1
Female	43.9
Age	
18–24	15.1
25–39	30.9
40–54	29.5
55–69	19.1
70+	5.5
Education	
None	2.0
Elementary	5.0
Lower Secondary	15.6
Upper Secondary	40.8
Tertiary	36.6
Socio-economic status	
Worker	16.2
Employee	23.2
Civil-Servant	7.9
Managerial Staff	2.6
Liberal Professions	1
Shop-owner	3.3
Unemployed	13.9
Housewife	0.7
Student	12.3
Retired	15.9
Invalid	2
Social rate beneficiaries	1
Political	

The Party Within the Party System

Party Faces: On the Ground; in Public Office; in Central Office

In the life of the party, the most important facet of the Belgian Labour Party is doubtlessly the party in central office (Katz & Mair, 1994). Given the importance of the party's centralised and *sacred* character, the place of power is at the 'Boulevard Lemonnier', i.e. the party headquarters. There—during the National Council meetings, and even more so at the meetings of the National Office and of the Daily Direction—the party selects what the 'on the ground' and 'public office' parties do, as well as their peripheral organisations' campaigns, decisions and actions.

However, the other two facets of the party are not unimportant. The PTB-PVDA mobilises its members in the regional parliaments and at the Federal House of Representatives, as well as at various other forums. The party's most important action during parliamentary assemblies takes place on the occasion of the sitting, when MPs put questions to the government in plenary session. These moments are captured in video snippets and sent to social networks. The PTB-PVDA does not have a monopoly on this approach. On the contrary, many politicians and all parties resort to it. Nevertheless, two elements distinguish the PTB-PVDA's parliamentary and institutional actions. The first is somehow to challenge the usefulness of institutional action and, more broadly, of the institutional framework. 'This is not where it all happens', Labour Party activists, executives and parliamentarians keep saying. What matters most is the social movement. The second stems from such an ideological basis: the party and its MPs dismiss most of the classical dimensions of parliamentarianism, legislative action and executive oversight, let alone any aspiration to participate in government (Table 4.9). The presence of the PTB-PVDA's federal and regional MPs in the parliamentary committees, where these two missions are mostly carried out, is—to say the least—very parsimonious. Activity is minimal with respect to amendments and legislative proposals, or then again questions to ministers. In short, while being present in institutions is crucial for communication, for parties to get public financing and to increase the number of political professionals, it does not make much more sense, substantially. This refers to the ambivalent relationship with representative democracy. Formally, the PTB-PVDA has never recognised it as the political regime that sets its terms of reference. Also, while the nouns and qualifiers, 'democracy' and 'democratic' are common in the party's documents or election platforms, they do not refer to representative democracy.

On the ground, the Labour Party's activity is much higher than other parties. The PTB-PVDA and its peripheral organisations are extremely, and daily, active in several fields. First of all, there is the professional world. This party's activists are regularly found at the doorstep of companies, and the party carries out considerable entryism into both major Belgian trade unions. Its participation in union demonstrations has now systematically become an opportunity to showcase its 'strength'. The PTB-PVDA is also much mobilised in a number of territories, where it tries to raise awareness on very down-to-earth issues, such as car-parks, garbage bags and the

price of school meals. In some municipalities, such commitment is coupled with the presence of a Medical Home for the People. Schools and even more so Universities are also places where the party takes strong direct and indirect action, via Red Foxes, COMAC and Priority to Students.

Relationships with Other Parties

Assessing the position of the Labour Party in the Belgian party system as well as its relations with other parties is no simple matter. In a way, the PTB-PVDA has been a relevant party only since 2014. Moreover, it belongs largely to the 'on the fringes of the system' category, if not even on the 'anti-system' fringes (Capoccia, 2002). What's more, the PTB-PVDA does not anticipate participation in power (Table 4.9). More appropriately, it has generally targeted *not* to be in power in federal, regional and community executive bodies. Nevertheless, at the end of 2017, it announced that it was now possible and conceivable it might participate in a majority coalition at municipal level. In 2012, it took part in one of the executive bodies of a district in the Antwerp municipality (Borgerhout). Antwerp districts have a unique institutional status in Belgium: they have little power, are often poorly known and misunderstood by Antwerp inhabitants. However, this form of participation has symbolic significance. It operates against the new right-wing coalition in the Antwerp municipality. Besides, the PTB-PVDA's Dutch-speaking Socialists and Greens can find common ground, there, to partner in action.

In 2018, it renewed its participation in the district of Borgerhout and, for the first time, the party accepted the opportunity to govern in one municipality; in Zelzate, in collaboration with the Flemish socialists. But it was quite exceptional and the party strongly refused to go ahead in other communes, like Molenbeek (Brussels area) or Herstal, in Wallonia. It was symptomatic that after its 2019 successes, the party rejected proposals to form any left-wing coalition in Wallonia that would comply with EU budgetary rules, a stance that both the PS and Ecolo rejected (Pilet, 2020).

Table 4.9 PTB-PVDA power participation, 1999–2019

Dates	Power/Opposition	Type of participation
1999–2003	Opposition	–
2003–2007	Opposition	–
2007–2010	Opposition	–
2010–2014	Opposition	–
2014–2019	Opposition	–
2019–	Opposition	–

Source Author

Party Programme

Regarding the party's programmatic objectives, it is necessary to distinguish between the primary objectives (Harmel & Janda, 1994) set out in the approach of *entre-soi* (keeping oneself to oneself) and its electoral platforms. Basically, the party remains entrenched in a fairly orthodox Communist party position, whose goal is 'tipping' the regime by means of the social movement. The word 'revolution' is no longer part of the party's vocabulary, or barely so, but an 'entirely different society' is still the major target. There will be a 'before' and an 'after'. The forms of this changeover and the contours of this communist society are rarely, if ever, addressed.

With respect to election platforms, the party proceeds in systematic fashion. It surveys target audiences and submits a set of proposals it has developed itself. At the end of the survey, only the most popular ones are integrated into the platform. These programmes are often a catalogue of left-wing measures, very close to what the social-democratic parties submit—a form of social-democratic, left-wing electoral platform. The PTB-PVDA mainly covers socio-economic or social security issues. It focuses on combating poverty and unemployment, improving working conditions and wages, strengthening health and public services' quality and financial means.

Symptomatically, the PTB-PVDA's election platforms say very little about issues that could frighten working-class voters. There is virtually nothing that has to do with migration or refugee issues. Now, when the issues are actually addressed, it leaves room for several interpretations. In the opinion of the PTB-PVDA, the influx of refugees is the consequence of Western powers' policies in Africa and in the Middle East. It would also be the result of their military interventions and, more broadly, those of NATO, as in Libya or Syria for example. It does not, however, seek to draw attention to cultural issues such as immigration. While it calls for acceptance of diversity and rights for Muslim women to wear the veil at work, it does not engage in a language of either multiculturalism or integration of migrants. Moreover, the party presents itself as being at the forefront of climate change and investing in renewable energy; however, its environmentalism appears limited. It opposes green taxes and it remains hesitant to criticise the goal of achieving economic growth. While the party presents itself as being feminist and calls for equal wages, the low levels of representation of women inside its party organisation have been criticised within the party.

Generally speaking, statements focusing on international issues are also rather few and far between. The party supports the dissolution of NATO but also presents Belgium's withdrawal from it in cautious terms through reducing its contribution to a bare minimum. The PTB-PVDA strongly criticises the EU and opposes the drift towards a militarised Europe. The party, does not, however, seek Belgium's departure from the EU. The primary ambition remains to focus communication and action on broader social (economic) issues (*la question sociale*), with a view to setting the agenda and raising awareness. This is the yardstick by which the programme should be assessed. As we have pointed out earlier, the party does not expect, or even wish, to put it to the test of power.

Conclusion

For more than 60 years, the radical left in Belgium was first embodied in the Communist Party of Belgium. It reached moderate scores in the industrial basins of Wallonia and in the capital, Brussels. Similarly, it has been able to demonstrate trade union influence in a number of industries or large companies, and intellectual influence in the academic world. Like other communist parties, the PCB-KPB gradually collapsed in the 1980s and, in fact, vanished from the Belgian political and social scene after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

For approximately 20 years afterwards, no radical left-wing forces of any kind emerged in Belgium. In recent years, this situation has changed. In 2014, the Belgian Labour Party (PTB-PVDA) succeeded in entering the federal Parliament and Wallonia's and Brussels' parliamentary bodies. Since then, its aura and audience have grown, as evidenced, amongst other things, by the barometers of voting intentions and its 2019 national and European elections results.[8]

The PTB-PVDA is not a new party. It was set up in 1979, resulting from AMADA (TPO) being carried under the baptismal font in 1970. The PTB-PVDA—a Maoist organisation, then to become, more broadly, a Marxist-Leninist one—geared its political approach differently in 2008, by acting within the framework of a double line: Marxist-(Leninist) *within*, sometimes socialist-populist (March, 2011), sometimes left-wing social-democratic *outside*. Combined with several auxiliary organisations, the PTB-PVDA is now a party and an organisation to be reckoned with in the social and political world. Electorally and politically, it could put forward its potential blackmail capacity (Sartori, 2005), after the 2018 and 2019 municipal and regional elections.

However, the Labour Party of Belgium faces a major challenge in translating its recent electoral success into lasting political dividends, given its fundamentally (systemic) oppositionist profile. In the radical left, the PTB-PVDA is close to parties such as the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), the Cypriot AKEL and, to a lesser extent, the Greek Communist Party (KKE). Its aspiration to 'break away', to work outside the constraints of the 'European treaties' and to promote the social movement in the balance of power does not easily materialise into concrete terms: How can such parties budge the European lines of the opposition? How to operate without having defined European partners? How can this be achieved by downgrading national and sub-national institutions of representative democracy or European institutions? These are so many questions that the PTB-PVDA has been eluding more or less skilfully, for the time being, but are more difficult to defend after electoral success, particularly when Socialists and Greens increasingly point out the PTB-PVDA's silence and contradictions on these issues. How to, perhaps, refuse to get involved and thereby allow the formation of a right-wing (or a more right-wing) coalition? The PTB-PVDA carefully studied left cooperation in Portugal and dismissed it. It is concerned about the inextricable situation in which the PCP placed itself after the 2015 political-electoral sequence of supporting a minority Socialist government to keep out the Right, without gaining any electoral dividends itself. Moreover, if the PTB-PVDA

moves forward in possible government participation, it takes the risk of undoing the crucial organisational cohesion and, more importantly the party's identity that has enabled it to exist for nearly 50 years already. Opening up this path is to change its partisan identity. Yet, refusing to do so means taking the risk of creating misunderstanding and rejection on the left, whether before or after the elections. Now, this is a complex equation the Labour Party of Belgium has yet to solve. But until now, as the 2018 municipal Elections and the 2019 national and European Elections proved, it is not an electoral problem for the PTB-PVDA in order to win elections.

Chronology

1921: Birth of the Communist Party of Belgium (PCB-KPB).
1925: First MPs for the PCB-KPB.
1944: Communist Party entry in the National Government.
1946: Best Electoral Result for the PCB-KPB.
1954: PCB-KPB abandons the principle of Proletarian Dictatorship.
1970: Birth of AMADA (All Power to Workers).
1974: AMADA becomes AMADA-TPO.
1979: First Congress of the Labour Party (PTB-PVDA).
1985: PCB-KPB loses its last MPs.
2003: Important internal crisis inside the PTB-PVDA. General Secretary Nadine Rosa-Rosso and prominent leaders are expelled.
2008: 8th Congress of the Labour Party: the two Lines strategy is adopted. President Ludo Martens is replaced by Peter Mertens.
2014: Best electoral Percentage yet gained. First federal and regional MPs for the Labour Party.
2015: 9th Congress of the Labour Party: no moves in the ideological line.
2019: Further improved electoral performance. Labour Party gains 10 more federal MPs and one MEP.

Notes

1. 'De la classe jusqu'au niveau national: les délégués étudiants de Comac s'organisent', COMAC, 12 October 2011. http://www.ptb.be/nc/weekblad/artikel/de-la-classe-jusquau-niveau-national-les-delegues-etudiants-de-comac-sorganisent/print.html.
2. http://www.priorite-etudiante.be/.
3. http://www.epo.be.
4. http://marx.be/.
5. http://www.progresslaw.net.
6. www.vrede.be.
7. http://www.vredesactie.be.
8. In December 2017, the Workers' Party was polling at 5.5 per cent in Flanders, 18.9 per cent in Wallonia and 7.9 per cent in Brussels.

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