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Belgium: The political system at a crossroad

With the European elections just around the corner, and in Belgium the legislative and regional elections taking place on the same day, the political system seems to be at a standstill. In 2024, Belgium holds the presidency of the EU. It will be assumed by a federal government that is out of breath and focused on the elections on 9 June 2024. Elections will take place under a more and more fragmented political system and deliver large governments unable to tackle the main problems of society. Confidence in politics and political parties is at a very low level and the fate of the federal state is being questioned by Flemish nationalist parties calling for the advent of confederalism or even Flemish independence.

Belgium has regularly been presented in light of its linguistic oppositions between ‘Flemish’ and ‘Walloons’. This initial view is not wrong, but it is not correct either. In this supposed dichotomy, Brussels and the people of Brussels are absent. The territory of Brussels is neither in Flanders nor in Wallonia. What’s more, although it is in Wallonia, the German-speaking community has its own specific characteristics and expectations.

Since the introduction of federalism in 1993, Belgium has had two categories of federated entities. There are three Communities: the French-, Flemish- and German-speaking Communities. There are also three Regions: Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders. The Communities deal primarily with issues relating to language, culture and education. While the Regions are mainly dedicated to the economy.

This short preamble is necessary because it is not easy to understand the internal and external facets of political life in Belgium without taking into account this rather fragmented institutional landscape and, sometimes, Belgium’s votes in the Council of Ministers of the EU. For public policies managed at the regional level in Belgium, an agreement between regions is necessary for a Belgian point of view and vote in the Council of Ministers.

We are witnessing a political and cultural evolution in the country, where citizens and collective players are increasingly thinking and acting within closed circles. Fewer and fewer Belgians are aware of the situation in the ‘other part of the country’, in terms of culture, politics and the economy, for example. The leader of the Flemish nationalists (*Nieuw*

Vlaams Alliantie, New Flemish Alliance, N-VA), Bart De Wever, has been talking of “two democracies”. But this is a mistake.

New dynamics

There are not two different political regimes in Belgium. But there are distinct backgrounds in ways of thinking, in the ranking of concerns, in the economic and political landscapes, or in social expectations. However, let us repeat, it is not necessarily binary in terms of language.

From an economic point of view, Belgium has been a dynamic country since its independence in 1831. Belgium is a country where the production of goods and services has long been strongly export-oriented. Over time, a territorial evolution has taken place in terms of development. For 120 years, the main area of economic production was in the industrial basins of Wallonia, centred on mining, iron and steel, metallurgy, chemicals, textiles and glassmaking. During this phase, with the partial exception of Antwerp and Ghent, economic development was less significant in Flanders, where the rural and agricultural dimension predominated.

Since the end of the 1950s, a reversal has taken place. The economic dynamic has slowed down in Wallonia, with the closure of mines, a major decline in the steel and metal industries, and the disappearance of the textile and glass industries. In contrast, it has soared on the Flemish side from the port of Antwerp, Zaventem airport (Brussels-National), Ghent and in the southern part of West Flanders on the Franco-Belgian border. Development has also been very impressive in Brussels, one of Europe’s major metropolises from an economic point of view, even though many people working in Brussels do not live there.¹

These economic changes over half a century have been affecting discussions in the economic and political spheres, as well as social relations. There is therefore a focus in thinking and debate on economic issues around the asymmetry between economic expansion in Flanders and Brussels, and in Wallonia or, more correctly, in certain parts of Wallonia.

There is nothing specifically Belgian about this. In many countries of the EU, economic and industrial trajectories also show territorial mutations. Some regions are growing or taking off; others are undergoing industrial restructuring. This is commonplace. Nevertheless, in Belgium, the issue is regularly posed in binary terms, often referring to the distinction between good and evil, or to qualifiers that are judgements: workers versus idlers; entrepreneurs versus immobile. These views are also quite common at the EU level. As in Europe, they have had a major impact on political debate and the decision-making process. This point is striking because three dimensions reinforce the centrifugal effects of this situation.

¹ Bisciari, P. and S. El Joueidi (2022) “Is Brussels a performing, competitive and attractive European metropolitan region?” *NBB Economic Review*, 21.

Firstly, there is a historical asymmetry in the electoral results of political families in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders. For example, left-wing parties have always been much weaker in Flanders than in Wallonia, and vice versa for right-wing parties.²

Secondly, there is a form of 'national' pride in Flanders that is largely missing in Brussels and Wallonia. The result is the presence of a powerful Flemish Nationalist party, the N-VA, and a very important Radical right-wing party, Vlaams Belang ('Flemish interest'). Both are active only within the Dutch-speaking spectrum, including the social sphere. Both advocate a form of welfare chauvinism³. In the 2019 elections, for example, Vlaams Belang called for a minimum pension of €1,500 and a return to a statutory pension age of 65, but only for Flemings. By contrast, there is no longer any Walloon regionalist party.

Finally, except for the Labour Party (PTB-PVDA), a radical-left-wing party, each political family is divided into two independent parties, sometimes with very loose links to each other, or even none at all during some periods: there are two Socialist; Christian Democrat; Liberal; and Green parties.

Since entering the 21st century, the political system has been characterised by a marked increase in electoral and parliamentary fragmentation. As far as the distribution of votes is concerned, the fragmentation index⁴ (between 0 and 1) shows the trend. In the most recent national election, it peaked at 0.91 (see Table 1). Given the proportional representation electoral system, this has a major impact on the distribution of seats, resulting in a wide spread in the House of Representatives. This is reflected in the effective number of parties.⁵ Here, too, it has never been higher than at the 2019 general election: 9.7 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Evolution of the fragmentation index and effective number of parties since 1946.

	Fragmentation index	Effective number of parties
1946	0.69	2.91
1949	0.69	2.75
1950	0.64	2.49
1954	0.67	2.63
1958	0.64	2.45
1961	0.68	2.69
1965	0.75	3.59
1968	0.81	4.97

2 Delwit, P. (2022) *La Vie Politique en Belgique de 1830 à Nos Jours* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles).

3 Abts, K., E. Dalle Mulle, S. van Kessel et al. (2021) «The welfare agenda of the populist radical right in Western Europe: Combining welfare chauvinism, producerism and populism». *Swiss Political Science Review*, 1(27): 21-40.

4 To calculate the fragmentation index, each party's proportion of the vote squared is summed. The index is equal to one minus this proportion. The closer the figure is to one, the more fragmented the system. Conversely, the closer it is to zero, the less fragmented it is: $I_f = 1 - \sum (vp/N)^2$. Rae, D. (1968) "A note on the fractionalization of some European party systems". *Comparative Political Studies*, 3(1): 413-418.

5 Laakso, M. and R. Taagepera (1979) "Effective number of parties: A measure with application to West Europe". *Comparative Political Studies*, 1(12): 3-27.

1971	0.81	5.90
1974	0.84	5.80
1977	0.82	5.21
1978	0.87	6.77
1981	0.89	7.62
1985	0.88	7.00
1987	0.88	7.13
1991	0.90	8.41
1995	0.89	8.03
1999	0.90	9.05
2003	0.89	7.03
2007	0.89	7.91
2010	0.90	8.71
2014	0.89	7.82
2019	0.91	9.69

The division of political families into two distinct parties mechanically increases electoral and parliamentary fragmentation. However, the contemporary trajectory of fragmentation is independent of this political fact. The historic socialist; Christian democrat and, to a lesser extent, liberal families are in decline (see Table 2).

Table 2. Evolution of the electoral results of the Christian Democrat, Socialist and Liberal families since 1919 in Belgium (in %).

	Christian Democratic family	Socialist family	Liberal family
1919	35.1	36.5	17.6
1921	34.1	34.8	17.8
1925	37.4	39.5	14.6
1929	35.4	36.0	16.6
1932	40.1	35.6	14.3
1936	27.6	32.0	12.4
1939	30.0	30.3	17.2
1946	42.5	31.6	8.9
1949	43.6	29.7	7.5
1950	48.0	34.2	11.3
1954	41.1	37.3	12.1
1958	46.5	35.8	11.0
1961	41.5	36.7	12.3

1965	34.5	28.3	21.6
1968	30.5	26.9	20.0
1971	30.1	27.2	16.8
1974	32.7	26.2	15.2
1977	36.0	27.1	15.6
1978	36.3	25.4	16.3
1981	26.5	25.1	21.5
1985	29.3	24.5	21.0
1987	27.5	30.5	21.0
1991	24.6	25.5	20.1
1995	24.9	24.4	23.4
1999	20.0	19.8	24.4
2003	18.6	28.6	26.4
2007	25.2	21.0	23.5
2010	16.4	22.9	17.8
2014	16.6	20.6	19.4
2019	12.6	16.2	16.1

The salience of the linguistic divide, political thought and action in isolation in the linguistic areas; the trend towards increased fragmentation; and the rise in power of radical right-wing and radical left-wing parties make it extremely difficult to establish governments and, even more so, governments that are even remotely coherent. Building a parliamentary majority is becoming increasingly difficult and time-consuming. Since the 2007 general election, an extreme length of time has been systematic: 194 days after the 2007 election a government was formed; 541 days after the 2010 election; 139 days after the 2014 election; and 493 days after the 2019 election. The result has been, on one hand, a loss of confidence in politics and political parties⁶ among large parts of the population and, on the other, long sequences of caretaker governments. They cannot take any new initiatives and must apply the budgetary framework implemented the previous year. From 1 January 2007 to 30 June 2023, the federal government was a caretaker government for 1,246 days, well over three years.

The federal government, which was established after the spring 2019 elections, took office on 1 October 2020. The parliamentary majority comprises seven political parties from four political families: Liberal, Socialist, Christian Democrat and Green. The opposition consists only of the Flemish nationalists, who are nevertheless in power in the Flemish Region, the French-speaking Christian Democrats, the small Brussels party DéFI, and parties of the radical right and left.

Due to the opposing ideological profiles of the players in government and the presence

6 "Grand baromètre: Sept Belges sur dix se méfient de la politique". *Le Soir*, 3 April, 2023.

of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking parties, no major changes can be made to public policy. Choices have always been based on the lowest common denominator between contradictory political and social expectations and demands.

The government that came into being in October 2020 was primarily a government fighting against the Covid-19 pandemic, for the widest and most effective vaccination campaign possible, and for social support for the sectors hit by the epidemic.

Once this mission had been successfully accomplished, governmental cohesion was severely weakened; this is logical given the opposing visions of the parties on several fundamental points: tax reform; individualisation of social rights; pension reform; and the energy and ecological transitions. Furthermore, Belgian governments have been called to order over the state of their public finances. Belgian public debt is once again over 100% of GDP.

Waiting for the 2024 elections

The year 2023 thus marked the transition from a fighting government to a paralysed one. Several ministers also experienced political problems. Vincent Van Quickenborne, Flemish Liberal minister of justice, resigned following an error by the judiciary in handling an extradition request for the terrorist who killed two Swedish supporters in Brussels on 16 October 2023. Sarah Schlitz, French-speaking Green secretary of state for equal opportunities, resigned too due to inappropriate use of a personal logo and errors in her answers in parliament. Hadja Lahbib, French-speaking Liberal minister for foreign affairs, was also in the hot seat for issuing visas to Russian and Iranian public officials and giving incorrect answers in the House. However, she refused to resign.

It should be added that, in recent years, the balance of power between political players in relation to the EU has been changing. For a long time, Belgium was a Europhile country for large parts of its population and for the vast majority of its parties. Several prominent Belgians have played a key role, directly or indirectly, in some of the advances made in European integration and in some of the decisive decisions taken in the reform of the Treaties. From 2009 to 2014, Herman van Rompuy was president of the European Council and, in July 2019, the former prime minister, Charles Michel, was elected president of the European Council too. Nevertheless, things have been partly changing.

In Flanders, the two leading parties, the N-VA and Vlaams Belang, are members of eurosceptic groups in the European Parliament: the European Conservatives and Reformists Group for the N-VA; and the Identity and Democracy Group for Vlaams Belang. The radical left Labour Party is quite hostile to European treaties, but not to European integration or even European federalism. Furthermore, the strong polarisation affecting the European Union leads parties to be cautious on the issue.⁷

There is therefore every chance that, as was the case in 2019, the concomitant

7 Hoon, L. (2023) "Euroscepticism in Belgium. Voters and parties in and toward the European Union". Doctoral thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles.

parliamentary, regional and European elections will push the debate on European issues into the background.

However, it should be noted that N-VA and Vlaams Belang make little reference to the EU in their communication, and that among EU member states, support for the idea that more decisions should be taken at EU level is one of the strongest in Belgium. 68% of Belgians are in favour, which puts Belgium in third place behind Cyprus (87%) and Spain (76%).⁸

On the political front, the mood is nervous. All parties in the federal government are forecast to fall, or even fall sharply. Prime Minister Alexander De Croo's OpenVLD party (Dutch-speaking liberals), for example, was forecast at 8.5% in autumn 2023. The French-speaking socialists and the Flemish Christian democrats are also expected to decline. On the other hand, Vlaams Belang and PTB-PVDA are expected to perform well. In September 2023, they were forecast to have 42 seats out of 150, compared with 30 today (see Table 3).

Table 3. Polls in September 2023 compared to election results in May 2019.

	Poll in September 2023		Elections 2019	
	Number of seats		Number of seats	
PS	16	30	20	29
Vooruit	14		9	
MR	16	22	14	26
OpenVLD	6		12	
CD&V	10	18	12	17
Les Engagés	8		5	
Ecolo	10	14	13	21
Groen	4		8	
PTB-PVDA	20	20	12	12
DéFI	1	1	2	2
N-VA	19	19	25	25
Vlaams Belang	26	26	18	18
	150	150	150	150

Admittedly, these are only voting intentions, and the agenda and framing of the election are not yet fixed. Nonetheless, an atmosphere of 'end of reign' and a leap into the unknown of fragmentation dominates people's minds. This mood of end of reign refers not only to the federal government, which seems simply to be waiting for the elections, but is also linked to the fate of Belgium: N-VA and Vlaams Belang advocate for a major state reform.

8 "L'opinion publique dans l'Union européenne. Rapport national: Belgique". Eurobaromètre Standard 98, Hiver 2022-2023, p. 18.

In this anticipation of the electoral dynamic and the possible outcome of the polls, there are many similarities between the north, centre and south of the country. There are, however, some differences. Among the three major historical political families, the collapse is particularly striking in Flanders. It was already clear in 2019 and seems to be ongoing, to the benefit of Vlaams Belang and, more recently, the PTB-PVDA.

The dynamic is less pronounced in Brussels and Wallonia. Although there was a sharp decline in 2019, the Socialist Party still remains the largest party and the Liberals (MR) second largest. Similarly, the influence of the Greens is stronger on the French-speaking side than in the Dutch-speaking area. This observation leads to another one: unlike the Flemish context, in Brussels and Wallonia, there is no radical right worthy of the name.⁹ In Flanders, Vlaams Belang leads the polls, while no radical right-wing party has a seat in Wallonia or Brussels. This leads to a last observation: the centrifugal political thrust benefits primarily the radical right in Flanders and primarily the radical left in Wallonia and Brussels. As said, this spectrum is occupied by the Belgian Labour Party. With its Maoist origins, the PTB-PVDA is not easily linked to other radical left parties.¹⁰ It does not come from the European communist mould, which it fought for a long time. It is not a party that follows the logic of left-wing populism, like Podemos in Spain. It is neither a party to the left of Social Democracy, playing the role of spur and support to a social democratic government, as in Sweden, Denmark or Finland.¹¹ Currently, its closest partner is the Portuguese Communist Party, and within the Left group, it is more closely linked to the so-called orthodox parties, particularly in international relations. The Labour Party does not want to govern on a national or regional scale and encourages social resistance through extra-institutional action, protests and strikes.

Under these circumstances, it is possible, if not likely, that the Socialist family will emerge as the leading political family in 2024, as in 2019. This status would be linked less to its own result than to the predicted decline of the Liberal family, its main challenger for this status.

Hypothetically, French-speaking socialists could lay claim to the post of prime minister, a clear aspiration for Paul Magnette (PS). Conner Rousseau, leader of the Flemish Socialists (Vooruit, Forward), also expected this, but, in November 2023, he had to resign due to racist comments during a party. Melissa Depaetere has been elected as interim leader. A socialist prime minister has been rather exceptional in Belgium. The prime minister was socialist for only a few months in 1938, from 1945 to 1949, from 1954 to 1958, in 1973 and from the end of 2011 to 2014.

However, we need to be cautious in our expectations. The results on 9 June 2024 will be decisive. But much will also depend on the interplay of the players and the ease or difficulty of establishing a government. Government formation has become so complex in Belgium that there is no longer a single logic leading to the appointment of a prime minister. The

9 Close, C. and M. Ognibene (2021) "Les droites radicales en Belgique francophone", in P. Delwit and E. van Haute (eds), *Les Partis Politiques en Belgique* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles), pp. 421-452.

10 Delwit, P. (2022) "The Labor Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA): A modern radical Left party?" *Frontiers in Political Science*, 11 May. DOI: 10.3389/fpos.2022.862949

11 Delwit, P. (2016) *Les Gauches Radicales en Europe. XIX^e-XXI^e Siècle* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles).

prime minister's influence in setting public policy has diminished over time. Above all, the prime minister retains a decisive influence over the agenda for dealing with issues and a form of veto in the decision-making process. To repeat Jean and Monica Charlot's comments on parties, his power "[...] in government is perhaps more materialised by the measures that are not taken because of his presence than by those that are translated into law by himself and his allies (power of legislative veto)".¹²

All that being said, although the prime minister's role is complex and not necessarily attractive to the party from which he or she comes, it has paradoxically grown in importance from another viewpoint: the prime minister takes part in the European Council and is therefore an important player in the European decision-making process. It is this 'international' dimension that makes the office so attractive today.

12 Charlot, J. and M. Charlot (1985) "L'interaction des groupes politiques", in V. Grawitz and J. Leca (eds) *Traité de Science Politique. 3. L'Action Politique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France), p. 519.