

Chapter 5

Belgium: *Ecolo* and *Agalev* (*Groen!*): Two Institutionalized Green Parties with Parallel but Different Stories

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Introduction

One of the distinguishing circumstances of the organizational evolution – of the evolution *tout court* as well – of the two Belgian Green parties, *Ecolo* and *Agalev* (*Groen!* from 2003 onwards) is that both these parties have, basically, never been extra-parliamentary parties. Their institutionalization started as early as 1981, when both of them won seats in Parliament, the first time in history when Greens were able to form a full-size parliamentary group.

Any analysis of their organizational evolution needs furthermore to seriously consider at least three features of the Belgian political and institutional context. To start with, Belgium is virtually a 'bi-national' state, with two main ethnolinguistic communities: Dutch-speaking (a large majority in the Flanders region and a minority in the Brussels region) and French-speaking (a large majority in the Wallonia region and a majority in the Brussels region). There is a quite deep ethno-linguistic cleavage, which has resulted in a lengthy federalization process from 1970 to 1994; Belgium was transformed from a unitary state to a full-fledged federal state, albeit a quite complex one. As a result, one may say that there are basically two separated party systems in Belgium: a Flemish or Dutch-speaking system and a French-speaking one. Hence, the two Green parties have emerged separately. At times, they have undergone similar transformations and evolutions, but each party has basically followed its own path.

Secondly, one of the key features of the Belgian context is that it has a tradition of strong, mass party organizations. Belgium has long been used as a textbook example of a neo-corporatist, 'pillarized' political-institutional system, with strong parties (Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals) defending the interests of their pillar (or 'sociological world') and numerous linked organizations (trade unions, cultural organizations, and so forth). From the early 1990s, not surprisingly, public funding of parties that make it to parliamentary representation has become very generous, both at the federal and regional levels, allowing parties – including the Greens – to maintain professional-type organizations.

Finally, and last but not least, the Belgian political opportunity structure is (or was) quite favourable for the emergence and development of new parties apart from the three 'traditional' party families. In historical perspective, the emergence of the Greens since the late 1970s has been preceded by the rise of ethno-linguistic parties (1960–1970s) and followed by the rise of national populist parties (1990s onwards). In a list PR electoral system, many parties (including the Greens) have quickly gained parliamentary representation. All things considered, however, the quick institutionalization and parliamentarization has proved quite destabilizing for several of these newcomers – especially for the Greens with their grass-roots democratic heritage.

For all these reasons, it makes sense to analyze the organizational trajectory of the Flemish and Francophone Greens separately, though of course some common features and trends will also be identified.

Ecolo (French-speaking)

The Legacies of Ecolo's Origins

The historic cradle of the Greens in French-speaking Belgium is located in Namur, present day capital of the Walloon Region. On the initiative of Paul Lannoye, a left-libertarian cadre who had left the Walloon regionalist party *Rassemblement Wallon*, the *Démocratie Nouvelle* (DN) [New Democracy] political movement was created in the early 1970s. It fielded candidates in the 1974 legislative elections, and in the 1976 local elections in Namur, along with other groupings under the '*Combat pour l'écologie et l'autogestion à Namur*' (Struggle for Ecology and Self-management in Namur) banner. This movement grew still further with the establishment of the Belgian section of Friends of the Earth (*Les Amis de la Terre*) in 1976, several founding members of which went on to play an active role in organizing the *Ecolo* party (Mahoux and Moden 1984, 6). The manifesto adopted by *Les Amis de la Terre* in 1977 anticipated many of the issues that *Ecolo* supported in the first half of the 1980s, and also some key organizational principles of the party-to-be. Indeed, 'integral federalism' was advocated as the method by which both society at large and the movement organization itself should operate. *Démocratie nouvelle* also wanted to avoid any delegation of powers and '... let each member of the alliance keep its autonomy and decision-making power.'

In the late 1970s, political structuring continued around the *Wallonie-écologie* (WE) (Wallonia Ecology) movement, which fielded lists at the 1977 and 1978 legislative elections, also in other electoral districts beyond the Namur area, albeit gathering only marginal electoral results.

A key qualitative step was taken on the occasion of the 1979 European elections during which *Europe écologie* – the only Green list present, backed by *Wallonie-écologie* – won nearly 5 per cent in Wallonia and 3.3 per cent in the

Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde district. This was a decisive push for the creation of a genuine political party. The *Mouvement Ecolo* was formally created during two assemblies in March 1980 (Delwit and De Waele 1996). The '*Mouvement*' label of the *Ecolo* party (which is still the official label) clearly shows this willingness to stick to a 'movementist', grass-roots type of organization and political style.

The First Years – and First Crisis

The party made its first breakthrough in the 1981 legislative elections, with the slogan '*Faire de la politique autrement*' (Let's do politics differently) – once again putting the emphasis on the organizational and political style dimension, not only on substantial policy proposals. It gathered 5.1 per cent in Wallonia and the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde district and, above all, it got its first elected representatives (two MPs and three senators). Winning these parliamentary seats launched a period of electoral progress for the party. Indeed following this initial success, *Ecolo* noted further victories. First of all in 1982, following the local elections, it ended up participating in the running of four municipalities including the city of Liège, the second largest city in Wallonia. Quite early on in the 1980s, the development of numerous local party branches was well under way in a substantial number of *communes* across Wallonia and Brussels. At the 1984 European Parliament elections, *Ecolo* won 9.9 per cent of the votes and obtained one MEP seat. Hence, in organizational terms, the party had elected representatives (and a certain level of resulting resources) at all levels only four years after its creation.

However, *Ecolo* quickly faced the difficulty of managing these victories. One of the key difficulties was to manage the party image. *Ecolo* ran in these three elections as political newcomer, as *party-movement* with significant extra-parliamentary activity and as opposition party. The presence of MPs created a quick shift from extra-institutional activities to parliamentary work. There was also the arrival of new members (see below). These two evolutions spurred internal tensions, which erupted following the 1985 legislative elections that were marked by a sharp drop in votes compared to the 1984 European elections.

The party was shaken by three internal crises in 1986. The first was connected to potential external support of a Christian-Liberal government. The second was clearly linked to the willingness of some activists to redefine the movement's goals and organization after five years of existence. Two major factions developed: those who saw *Ecolo* primarily as a protest *mouvement*, chiefly in the Brussels federation, versus advocates of a more clear-cut trend towards a *party* ambitious to participate in government, around Paul Lannoye and the Namur regional branch. The third crisis was a financial one: the exodus of members (see below), but above all the loss of MP seats, forced the party to freeze all its expenditures. It was not until the 1989 European elections, but especially the 1991 national elections that *Ecolo* experienced new growth (Delwit 1999).

Main Organizational Transformations: Description and Explanation

As the *Ecolo* founding fathers clearly wanted to distinguish the party from other political parties from an organizational point of view (see above), the principles of federalism, subsidiarity and voluntary work were the striking features of the initial party structure. The local and regional groups were eager to defend their broad prerogatives vis-à-vis the two federal party institutions, the Federal Council and the *Secrétariat Fédéral* (Executive Committee). Any form of centralism was rejected, as well as the perspective of professionalization. Consequently, the Executive Committee was a collective and amateur party organ. Clearly, in terms of party organizational features, during the first few years, *Ecolo* stood close to the *amateur-activist* ideal-type.

For several years, the Executive Committee comprised nine people. This number was then lowered to five, with a mix of amateurs and professionals. It had very scarce resources during the first few years, mainly stemming from membership fees, quite modest altogether (with only between 800 and 2,000 dues-paying members in the 1980s). Clearly, *Ecolo* was neither a *mass party* (Duverger 1992) nor a *party of social integration* (Neumann 1956a and b). Even though membership figures increased over time, *Ecolo* obviously did not meet the quantitative criteria for defining it as a party of the masses. The party was split into 14 regional branches that corresponded to a large extent with electoral districts. Two regional groups very clearly dominated in terms of members: Brussels and *Brabant wallon* (French-speaking Brabant, just South of Brussels). The members/voters ratio remained very low (less than one member for every 1,500 *Ecolo* voters), compared with a ratio of .15 to .20 for the Socialist Party (one member for 5–6 voters), for example (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 *Ecolo's* members/voters ratio in the French-speaking community (calculated for the General Election years)

Year	Members/voters ratio
1981	Unknown
1985	0.006
1987	0.004
1991	0.031
1995	0.013
1999	0.006
2003	0.022

Nevertheless, the party quickly benefited from a certain level of resources with the first four MPs and two senators in 1981, and by holding onto

parliamentary representation in the following elections. MPs and senators gave a significant part of their salary to the party.

In the early 1990s, the party's internal organization proved to be unsuitable. The 1991 electoral victory, combined with the new law on the public funding of parties (1989), brought unprecedented resources to the Greens: more MPs at various levels, more staff, more funds, and more members. The way the party organization was set up appeared outdated. An initial attempt of constitutional reform failed during a federal assembly held in Tournai on 10 May 1992. The plan was to reduce the number of Federal Secretaries from five to three, and to pay them a full salary, thus ending the coexistence of paid and non-paid Federal Secretaries. This failure reflected the intense vigilance (and reluctance) of many party activists vis-à-vis any notion of monopolizing power in the hands of a (small) group of professionals. However, the persistent friction between Federal Secretaries and the difficulties of political action outside *Ecolo* led to pursue efforts to (eventually) pass a reform. Without strong personalities, the Federal Secretariat had less and less influence vis-à-vis parliamentary groups and their 'media-genic' leaders.

In May 1993, the party's Federal Council initiated an internal debate on Party 'strategies, structures and functioning'. Led by Michel Somville from Namur and Pierre Jonckheer from Brussels, a party think tank put forward several proposals: (a) to move *Ecolo* towards becoming a (true) party; (b) to accept the principle of a 'representative democracy' in the decision-making process; (c) to reduce the Federal Secretariat to three people, full-paid, elected for four years, with only one possible re-election. Most of these suggestions were approved during the Huy-Burdinne General Assembly in January 1994, confirming similar reforms in other Green parties in that period (Rihoux 2001, 181). In April 1994, Isabelle Durant (Brussels), Danny Josse (Mons) and Jacky Morael (Liège) were elected as party Federal Secretaries.

Access to Government Responsibilities and its Lessons

After disappointing national elections in 1995, *Ecolo* bounced back in the second half of the 1990s. An open political forum was in operation between 1996 and 1998 in order to develop further the party program and to develop links with social movements and other activists as well as the empathy with the *mouvement blanc* (White Movement) mobilizing citizens against the child abuse and murders that emotionally shook Belgium in 1996 (Rihoux and Walgrave 1997). This broadened the party's constituency in the French-speaking political spectrum. By 1998–1999, the party leaders were eager to join governmental coalitions. The willingness to gain access to power was expressed without reservations, both internally and externally. However, the Greens turned down all pre-election negotiations proposals.

Ecolo won 19 per cent of French-speaking Community votes in the national and regional elections on 13 June 1999. In a particularly favourable conjuncture

(Hooghe and Rihoux 2000), the party succeeded in doubling its wager: win the elections and enter government at the federal and regional/community levels. However, becoming a governmental participant was definitely not without difficulties. At the end of four weeks of parallel government negotiations, the euphoria of 13 June had subsided. The governmental negotiations were difficult, as the *Ecolo* negotiators had to face growing discontent within the party and hostility from the Brussels regional branch, which felt abandoned in its demand for a post of minister in the Brussels government. Thus what was supposed to be a great event for the Green family – access to positions of responsibility – turned into an intense crisis meeting of which *Ecolo* had become so accustomed.

On 10 July 1999, participation in the federal, French-speaking Community and Walloon Region governments was only acquired reluctantly and coupled with harsh criticism towards the party leadership. At the end of long discussions, three posts were obtained in the Federal Government; 413 *Ecolo* members voted *in favour* and 272 *against*. For the Belgian French-speaking Community, the ratio was 492 *for* and 155 *against*. For the Walloon regional government, the Walloon party members voted with 340 *in favour* and 140 *against*. On the other hand, the deal failed with regard to participation in the Brussels regional government. One hundred and three Brussels members rejected participation while only 85 approved.

Jacky Morael, head of the think tank for Green party strategy and action since 1994 and chief negotiator was forbidden by members to become vice prime minister. Numerous Green negotiating partners later admitted that this catastrophic General Assembly proved to be crucial in the management of Green participation in government. *Ecolo* was not only depressed when it got into government, but was to a great extent discredited with its government partners.

At the beginning of this experience, the party was deeply torn apart. Internal division strongly marked party life and therefore the conditions of governing. For four years, despite or because of governmental participation, the party life was predominantly focused on internal matters. From the outset this was demonstrated by the election of a new Federal Secretariat – composed of Philippe Defeyt, Jacques Bauduin and Brigitte Ernst – labelled as an ‘anti-participationist’ ticket (510 votes) against a more ‘participationist’ ticket (401 votes) which had the support of the outgoing Federal Secretariat and all the Green ministers. This choice greatly weighed on party life, ministers’ action, ministers’ relations with the Federal Secretariat, and Federal Secretariat relations with political rivals. Simultaneously, *Ecolo* had to go through a tough apprenticeship of coalition government life.

At the end of the legislative period, *Ecolo* had not convinced a section of the new voters won in 1999 of its ability to manage effectively the portfolios for which it was responsible. It did not appear convincing as a party in power. *Ecolo* did not convince its voters of the relevance of its action inside the executives,

nor of its added value as government party. A large section of the 1999 Green electorate proved to be nonresponsive to the approach developed by *Ecolo* to explain what it referred to as *progress*.

As a prelude to the 2003 election campaign, *Ecolo* painstakingly tried to develop a discourse, aimed at making it understood that social changes in the making – thanks to the party – needed time but were already underway. *Sustainable development* was to remain the long term goal, but it involved a vague discourse, difficult to understand, and unverifiable. This was in sharp contrast to how other parties used powerful personalities to highlight one or the other emblematic dossiers which were readily covered in the media (health care, pensions, social policy, voluntary diplomacy or tax reform). *A contrario*, *Ecolo* was not able to take advantage, at the federal level, of any dossier presented in a positive light of which it could be regarded as initiator. In the election campaign, the Greens seemed on the defensive and appeared to be perpetually justifying themselves. *Ecolo* was never able to assume its status as party in power (Buelens and Deschouwer 2002; Hooghe and Rihoux 2003).

Electoral and Political Defeats (2003–2004) and their Consequences

The electoral payback was merciless. On 18 May 2003, *Ecolo* lost more than 60 per cent of its electorate and only held on to four of its 11 MP seats (Delwit and Hellings 2004; Hooghe and Rihoux 2003). The regional and European elections of 2004 confirmed this electoral defeat. Hence after these consecutive elections, *Ecolo* only kept four federal MPs (out of 150), two senators (out of 71), three Walloon MPs (out of 75) and seven Brussels MPs (out of 72). Paradoxically, *Ecolo* joined the Brussels regional government in 2004.

Ecolo undoubtedly found itself at a new turning point in its history. It involved drawing lessons, from an internal and external perspective, with regard to participating in government and taking on in-depth changes following its election defeats. The first one was the drastic drop in its resources. The loss of several tens of thousands of votes and several parliamentary seats was a harsh financial blow, to the extent that the law on public party funding defines a major part of the subsidy according to the number of votes. *Ecolo* had to resort to numerous layoffs (from 120 to 50 employed staff). The second was a direct consequence of return to the opposition benches at Federal, Walloon Region, French-speaking Community and (small) German-speaking Community levels: the loss of seven ministerial cabinets, meaning the departure of several hundred staff persons who were *de facto* party professionals. Third, the diminished political and electoral status of *Ecolo* has clearly led to much less continuous attention from the media.

In such a negative situation, issues of internal party organization (which were kept more or less ‘frozen’ during the governmental participation period) were back on the agenda. Within *Ecolo*, the first group of ‘customers’ to satisfy is the party activists taking part in the General Assembly. To a large extent,

though the locus of power is also quite well located in the hands of some full-paid professionals, *Ecolo* can still be defined as a *party of activists* (Seiler 2003). Even if this order belongs to the *heritage* of Green parties, and in part, to their identity, this way of looking at things does not fit in well with certain political aims in terms of elections and governing in a representative democracy, *a fortiori* of the consociational type.

In the fall of 2003, *Ecolo* decided to keep a collective leadership in the party executive, but slightly reshaped into a 'two + one' perspective: two *political* Federal Secretaries (Jean-Michel Javaux and Evelyne Huytebroeck, the latter replaced in 2004 by Isabelle Durant) and one *administrative* Federal Secretary (Claude Brouir). At two General Assemblies in September and December 2005, the party eventually decided to move one step further: the '*Secrétariat Fédéral*' was limited to two persons: two 'co-presidents'. These have to be male and female, and stemming from Wallonia and Brussels, are elected for a longer period of time (four years) and can be re-elected once. They put forward the name of a 'General Administrator', who is under their authority, and who is elected by the party council.

At the June 2007 general elections, after four years in opposition at the federal level (the party is still in a majority in the Brussels region), *Ecolo* resumed with good electoral scores and strongly increased again its number of MPs and senators – and the party apparatus could grow back to its maximal size of the late 1990s, thanks to increasing party funding. In December 2007, Jean-Claude Javaux and Isabelle Durant were voted in as co-presidents, and Claude Brouir as General administrator.

In conclusion, one may say that *Ecolo* was initially clearly quite close to the grass-roots, amateur-activist ideal-type. In the course of time, it did adapt significantly its organization, as it became ever more institutionalized and professionalized – at least until the 2003 and 2004 electoral defeats. However, even after almost 25 years as a stable parliamentary party, it has not fully become a 'mainstream' or 'traditional' party in terms of internal functioning. Among other things, it still displays specific participatory and direct democratic features (such as a direct Assembly of members instead of a Congress of delegates) and a specific leadership style, still more collective than in the more established party organizations, but coming closer to a more mainstream 'presidential' logic during the last few years.

Agalev (Dutch-speaking)

Agalev at the Origin

The amateur-activist ideal-type describes nearly in a perfect way the original status of the organization of *Agalev* at the very beginning. The origins of '*Agalev*' are situated in a movement initiated by a Catholic priest in Antwerp in 1970.

The name was first used in this movement called: '*Anders Gaan Leven*' ('five differently'). The political success of the party stemmed from a broad basis of new social movements such as feminists, third-world organizations and the peace movement in the early 1970s.

The first attempt of the *Anders Gaan Leven* movement to support candidates with green ideas on existing lists at the 1974 general elections and the 1976 local elections was not a success (Kitschelt 1989). At the next elections a list, with a temporary character, called '*Agalev*' participated with a moderate success. At the 1979 European elections, the 2.3 per cent of the votes in Flanders was a surprise. A permanent, non-party group called '*Agalev*' was founded within the movement. The threshold of participating at elections was heavily discussed in *Anders Gaan Leven* and divided the movement in two groups: the supporters of the founding father Luc Versteylet on the one hand and the more pragmatic members on the other hand. It was more of a strategic debate. Green ideology was never questioned, but the way to change society and the political leaders was fully discussed (Versteylet 1989).

In late 1981, after an unexpected electoral breakthrough, three *Agalev* MPs entered Parliament. However, there still was no formal party organization around them, and a conflict with the movement was inevitable. Versteylet's strategy, that is, to change politics with his movement in an informal, non-institutional way, was not compatible with a formal party structure. This would be the start of long-lasting tensions between the movement and the party. From the very beginning two goals would prevail in the party's policy: intra-party democracy and policy advocacy. Until the 1990s a lot of energy would go into resolving the tension between grass-roots democracy and party efficiency in decision making (Buelens and Rihoux 2001).

In 1982, *Agalev* was founded as a party, and all members elected a steering group at a congress vote. Among the members of this group, a steering committee was created. No formal leader was designated, as the party was too afraid to centralize the power and to weaken its grass-roots democracy. The MPs were only supposed to be the transmitters of the party ideas, not the creators. The first and most important level of organization was the local group. Candidates for elections were proposed by the local group, and at each electoral district a poll of the members from that area decided on the final list. However, until the late 1980s, the degree of development of this structure must not be overestimated. In 1985, for instance, only 925 members had to support a party with 250,000 voters, 43 local councillors, seven provincial councillors, seven national MPs and one MEP. Party members had too many duties, as intra-party democracy requested many moments of consultation and a well organized local action.

A First Reform

Increasingly, the still small but growing number of party professionals started to complain about their situation as well. In January 1989 a full issue of the party magazine was devoted to the 'tensions' between the professionals and the rank and file (Janssens 1989). In the editorial, Leo Cox, formal political secretary of the party, put it this way: 'In this country we have elections nearly every year. For this objective reason we became perhaps too much of an electoral praetorian guard, and less of a cultural movement Not only our so-called volunteers, but also our "professionals" obviously suffer from the speed of our electoral successes. "Communication" was the main drive for change in the party structure during the previous period; the idea of "efficiency" was introduced at the 1989 party congress.

The congress described in a specific way the role of the national secretariat and introduced the possibility of a referendum among the members (1989). Two distinct functions were created: the party secretary and the political secretary. For the first time the role of the party professionals was made explicit. The two secretaries had a special position, but were still controlled and appointed by volunteers in the steering committee. Their term of office was limited. This principle of rotation was also introduced for all elected mandates. No one could hold the same mandate more than two consecutive terms. Also for the first time the intention of a 50/50 distribution on a gender base was mentioned in the party constitution. A special clause was dedicated to the *Anders Gaan Leven* movement and the relation with the party: two separate organizations but with common goals and a common will to stay in consultation with each other. The explicit rule of the game they agreed on in 1989 was significant: 'Possible matters of dispute are not primarily treated in the press or [our] own publications, but in the national consultation group.' This new rule was not a success, as this 'bad habit' would not at all disappear in the following years.

The Professionals at the Top

The 1991 elections were not as successful as expected. Within the previous months an important internal debate took place. Should *Agalev* join the Flemish regional government, as it was formed in a proportional way? Was it possible to refuse to participate without losing its credibility as a party? The party was hesitating. All local experiences so far with coalitions and executive mandates were negative. There seemed to be no way to change local policy in a fundamental way, even as a member of the majority. *Agalev* was invited by the Liberals to form a national government with the Socialists: a 'purple coalition' would be unique, as Christian Democrats were the main (and pivotal) party in Flanders and had nearly always been in government since World War II. The Flemish Greens insisted on a strong ideological programme, but did not use

the 'breaking points' strategy. The formation failed, and both Socialists and Liberals blamed *Agalev* for its 'non-political' attitude.

However, there was a new political fact: for the first time *Agalev* was invited for government formation, and this would have consequences for the organization. The negotiators and the leaders of the party were disappointed in the lack of confidence among the members. The rank and file was very displeased by the way things were handled. A lack of information and the choice of topics to negotiate were the main problems. Former Senator Eric Grijs even left the party, because *Agalev* has given the impression that its demand for the right to vote for immigrants was negotiable. The threshold of negotiation provoked a conflict with the vision of the rank and file. From the rank and file's perspective, the goal of policy advocacy was not served by negotiations.

A year later, *Agalev* negotiated the Saint-Michael agreement, and supported some constitutional reforms, in exchange for an 'ecotax' and more advantageous electoral rules. All the negotiations on coalition building and 'ecotax' revealed once again the problematic relationship between professionals and volunteers (Buelens and Deschouwer 2002). As an experiment, the composition of the executive committee was changed in favour of the MPs. In 1992, five members were elected by the Congress among the volunteers, and four professionals: the two secretaries and two members of parliament with the right to vote. Also the three parliamentary group leaders – the Chamber of Representatives, the Senate, and the Flemish Parliament – were present (Janssens et al. 1993). In 1993 the composition of the committee was as follows: eight volunteers, the political secretary and the three parliamentary leaders (Janssens 1995). This change was inspired by pragmatism. It was far better to turn these 'informal leaders' into formal decision makers, so that they could be held responsible for their influence.

In the process, as the weight of the professionals increased, the position of the volunteers was increasingly problematic. In an internal hearing in August 1994, a member of the executive committee argued: 'It's impossible to combine this membership with a full-time job. Also a local political engagement is impossible. How can we represent the rank and file?' (Steenkiste 1994). The result of this hearing was a demand for an organizational change. Neither the rank and file, nor the professionals were satisfied with the party structure at that time. The party also needed more members, so increasing the numbers was one of the goals the party secretary was up to. As a consequence, party statutes were changed in 1993, and participation in a local group was not a necessary condition anymore to be accepted as party member.

The main formal changes took part between 1995 and 1996. What was started in 1992 as an experiment was now fixed in the new structures: the professionals took part in the decisions at the top of the party. The former executive committee was now called 'party committee' (*Partijbestuur*). This body can be considered as the top of the party. The composition remained nearly the same: six to nine volunteers elected by the Congress, three Parliamentary

group leaders (one from the chamber of representatives, one from the Flemish Parliament and a third one chosen among the three other [international councils: the Senate, the Brussels capital regional council and the European parliament]), and two other professionals (the political and party secretary). The presence of the chairman of the 'policy council' (*politieke raad*) was new. Since the volunteers had a majority in the committee, the professionals were still controlled by them.

The policy council was formerly called the steering committee. This body is responsible for the content of the political guidelines of the party and has four kinds of members: all the regional political secretaries (13), representatives of the regions (one for every 250 party members), six local office holders, and five members of the province councils.

The political and the party secretary became officially the 'daily committee' with a lot of responsibilities: the organization of the party secretariat and the management of the party, the support of the other committees and the supervision of the MPs.

Agalev in Government

The 1999 elections would give the party an historical gain in seats and votes. But more than that, it would create the opportunity to participate in government. Unlike *Ecolo* (see above), the negotiation for the coalition formation in 1999 was less traumatic for the party than the one in 1991. On the one hand, it was by then largely accepted that professionals were the core of the negotiating team, and on the other hand there was a daily briefing by email for the decision makers of the party. At the end of the negotiations the party top had a good idea of the achieved topics in the government agreement, and most of all, they all knew the problems it took to get the other parties so far. So among volunteers as well as among professionals there was a large consensus to accept governmental responsibility. The consequences for the party organization were not so obvious, but it was important for the decision-making process.

Besides the increase of the number of professionals, due to the good electoral results, a new group had to be fit in the organization: ministers and their staff. At the regional and national levels, there was the creation of these ministerial cabinets. In the Belgian context, ministerial cabinet members play a very important role, because they are located at the centre of political decision making. They thus define what the party is doing in government, how it negotiates, which agreements it accepts. The ministerial staff is accountable to the Minister, and that is a major problem for a party advocating grass-roots democracy and democratic control by the rank and file.

A second organizational pressure occurred at the level of the members of parliament. They used to be very active, and actually played the agenda-setting role that was now taken over by the ministerial staffs. Members of parliament had to wait for governmental initiatives and were furthermore supposed to

support them in a disciplined way. *Agalev* had tried to avoid tensions by creating working groups in which MPs, members of the ministerial staff and party personnel (the study centre) sit together (Interview: Geysels 2001), but this could not avoid the fact that the real initiatives came from the governmental branch of the party. The changes in the party organization after entering the government (May 2001) allowed the Ministers to be formally present in the central party organization. As a result of the rising membership numbers and the quite high proportion of young members, the youth organization '*Jong Agalev*' was also formally represented in the party committee.

The decision making process was quite complicated. The formal decisions were taken by the party committee and the policy council. However, within the government the ministers and their staff took far more important decisions on a daily basis. The pressure to take these decisions much quicker than usual, was augmented by the presence of the media. In times of crisis the party committee was able to meet within two days, which was too slowly for media communication. Communication problems were inevitable, as the media were always able to find a declaration from a more or less important party member, before the meeting of the party leaders officially took place. The image of the party in the media was one of disagreement, chaotic decision making and hesitating ministers in front of the cameras.

The key figure between the organization and the ministers was the political secretary, Jos Geysels. Although he was not formally a party president, he had the same role as the party presidents of other parties, and he shared the same power, but in an informal way. He was treated by the media as the main spokesman, together with the four ministers.

A Stunning Defeat, Leading to a 'Re-founding'

Considering Jos Geysel's central position, it is no wonder that he felt himself responsible for the electoral disaster in 2003. At the federal elections of 2003, not being able to pass the (newly decided) 5 per cent electoral threshold, *Agalev* lost all of its nine federal MPs. Without any representation in the federal parliament, the party lost its federal ministers and the professional staff was also dramatically reduced. Jos Geysels, as political secretary, resigned together with the two ministers at the regional level. The replacement of these important figures for the party revealed a problem: the lack of other media-genic political leaders of the next generation within the party. No successors were prepared and one year before the regional elections the party was in a deep crisis.

At the regional level *Agalev* was still in government, but without any representatives in the federal parliament, it was difficult to catch media attention. Opinion polls projected insufficient electoral results and the party was pushed by the public opinion to join the Socialist party. In order to survive, change was needed, and the period of hesitation after the electoral defeat of 2003 was considered to be negative for the image of the party. At the end of that year

the party congress took some important decisions. The name of the party was changed to 'Groen!' (Green!), and the party rejected the option to form a cartel with the Socialists for the upcoming regional elections. Vera Dua, a former Green minister, was elected political secretary.

The new job description of this 'political secretary', however, was one of a full-fledged party president. What was rejected several times before was now accepted: the party has one party leader. Some of the former Green MPs quit the party and joined other parties, as they didn't believe in an independent Green party any more. The electoral campaign for the regional elections (2004) was sober, very professional and focused on one issue: an independent Green party is needed. With six (Flemish) regional MPs eventually elected, the party survived its deepest crisis ever. The party also succeeded to pass the threshold at the 2007 General Elections, and could secure MP and senator seats again – it formed a joint parliamentary group with *Ecolo*. Elected senator, Vera Dua stepped down and the leading position – by then unambiguously turned into 'Voorzitter' (President) – was won by Mieke Vogels, one of the party's historical figures and previous minister.

Some Considerations on Agalev's Historical Evolution

It is obvious that *Agalev* (*Groen!*) went through a lot of changes in its history. It started as an amateur activist party but its current state is not so easy to describe. Some of the characteristics of the professional-electoral machine are present, but it is more of a mix between old and new. The party has a personal and professional leadership, the real power is in the hands of the party leader, and the staff and the party apparatus have become very professional. Perhaps the electoral defeat of 2003 stopped this evolution a little bit and forced the party to rediscover the grass roots. The new social movements tend to be more openly supportive of the Green party. The number of members increased, in spite of the electoral losses and the picture of the party activist became more diverse. Being in government was attractive for new members with ambition and a more pragmatic ideology. The second wave after the 2003 defeat was obviously more idealistic. Although the power is located more at the top, some aspects remained very grass-roots-like. The control of candidate selection remains at the electoral district level. The vote for an independent Green party at the 2003 congress was more of an idealistic choice than a strategic one, and it was certainly not an 'applause' only meeting. Volunteers, who are elected by the party members, are still a majority in the party committee. If we talk about ideology, one might say that it is more deepened, and more elaborated, but not changed. Once in government however, the party was forced to compromise its ideas and to weaken its demands. It is one of the aspects that can explain the electoral loss. The party leadership admits that they neglected green ideology, and that it was not clear enough for the voters which basic ideas were behind the compromises.

Why did the party organization change the way it did? Electoral performance is certainly one of the explanatory factors. At the very beginning, the electoral success forced the movement to create a real party organization. In 1999 the important gain at elections made negotiations for participation in government possible. The defeat of 2003 was certainly responsible for the acceptance of a *de facto* party president (fully turned into a party president a few years later), which had been rejected several times before by the congress. It is one of the symbolic examples of the struggle between grass-roots democracy and efficiency. If we talk about efficiency, we must talk about goal achievement. The Belgian political system and landscape was also responsible for some changes in goal orientation. The fact that *Agalev* was able to negotiate, was not only due to electoral success. The fractionalization of the Belgian political landscape made it possible that the Greens were needed for agreements or coalitions. It is a drive towards more pragmatic and strategic thinking. As a consequence, decision making became more and more important and stressing. Once in government, there was also the pressure of the media to make very quick decisions. This is completely non-compatible with grass-roots democracy, which takes time.

Agalev never suffered a profound crisis between factions, as between *Realos* and *Fundis* among the German Greens. Party leadership was seldom questioned. If there was an internal debate, it was more between professionals and volunteers, and again the keyword was 'efficiency.' The whole political environment pushed the party in a work pattern, which was more adapted to professionals and MPs than to volunteers. Party ideology pulled the party towards grass-roots democracy. The electoral losses and the dramatic reduction of the professional staff tend to give volunteers again more importance in the organization.

Some Comparative Conclusions

Although *Groen!* (*Agalev*) and *Ecolo* are two Green parties within the same country, the evolution of the parties is not identical. Some external factors were very similar. They both have to work in the same federal political system. As compared with other Green parties they were both electorally successful, at least until 2003. The political landscape gave them both the same opportunities and gave them both coalition potential. One should expect a similar evolution in party organization, but this is not completely the case. The main difference is the way leadership and grass roots have been treated.

Groen! and *Ecolo* started both with a focus on grass-roots democracy, very close to the 'amateur-activist' party ideal type. In only a few years' time, however, electoral success put a high pressure on this organizational concept by the introduction of professionals and a large group of MPs at several political levels. From the 1990s onwards, the Flemish Greens accepted that decisions were taken by the professionals, and hence a more pragmatic organizational

structure was inevitable. The acceptance of one party leader after the electoral loss and governmental participation in 2003 was the symbolic end stage for *Groen!* of a long process of change from an amateur-activist party towards a more professional (traditional) party structure. In contrast, the struggle between grass roots and professionals remains on the agenda within *Ecolo* until today, in spite of the recent formalization of party 'co-presidents'. The whole history of the party organization reflects this gap between grass-roots democracy and (in)formal leadership. Although the rank and file was continuously present as a decisive force, the party was often paralyzed by the quarrels between faction leaders and professionals over power.

The attitude of the rank and file is certainly a main factor to explain the difference between the two parties. *Ecolo* members still have a tradition of lack of confidence in their representatives and professionals. The acceptance of one party leader was a fact from the 1990s on for *Groen!* party activists and representatives, although it was not recognized as such in the organizational structure until recently. The absence of real factions within *Groen!* certainly helped this evolution. *Ecolo* remained far more divided (though not as deeply as the German Greens in the 1980s), often on a territorial basis, especially with a more radical (and left-wing oriented) predominance among the Brussels-based rank and file. The political culture in the party is more based on a conflict model. For *Groen!* there is a tendency towards a consensus model to resolve tensions. It is probably not a simple coincidence that the main political culture in Flanders is more oriented towards a model of collaboration and corporatism.

The Belgian case with its two Green parties is very interesting as many external variables remain the same. It proves that main variables such as electoral success and governmental participation do intervene, but that they alone are not sufficient to explain the evolution of the party organization. The Belgian case highlights the importance of the political culture and the attitude of the rank and file.

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