

BELGIUM

SEEN FROM BELGIUM UNDER THE TEST OF THE CORONAVIRUS

The way Belgium dealt with the Covid-19 epidemic presents several specific features. Firstly, we should remember that it was particularly exposed at the beginning of the epidemic, with a multitude of outbreaks resulting from exchanges with other European countries. This is primarily due to the status of Brussels, the seat of several European Union institutions and, therefore, the centre of human flows on the continent. In addition, several families returned in February from holidays spent in northern Italy. Faced with this situation, it has to be said that the Belgian Government was not a priori in the ideal political position to pursue an energetic policy. The country was in fact emerging from a political crisis that had witnessed leadership by a caretaker government for more than a year. The federal government no longer held a majority since the departure of the N-VA (Flemish Nationalists) in December 2018 due to disagreement over the migration policy. Since the parliamentary elections of May 2019, attempts to form a new government had been unsuccessful. While this initial weakness was temporarily overcome, political circumstances and institutional characteristics fundamentally influence the way in which the current crisis has been managed. To understand this, the political and health perspectives have to be considered jointly, since these two aspects influence each other.

The establishment of the Wilmès II government

At the onset of the crisis in January, Belgium was still trying to establish a fully-fledged government. As early as February 28, the chairman of the CD&V (Flemish Christian Democrats) saw the opportunity to take advantage of this crisis and the sense of urgency it inspired to finally form a federal government. A government that he called the "Corona coalition", which was as clear as it was ill-timed in terms of communication. A few weeks later, this coalition almost became a reality. On March 13, the intractable enemies -PS and N-VA- agreed to begin negotiations to form such a government. It was even agreed that Sophie Wilmès would remain as head of this supposedly provisional government while the Covid-19 epidemic and the economic and social consequences of containment were addressed. Indeed, Sophie Wilmès had already distinguished herself through her leadership and communication skills, combining clarity, empathy and determination. However, the establishment of this coalition finally failed due to a lack of support within the PS, the leading French-speaking party. The result was a hybrid and degraded formula: the caretaker government, unchanged in its composition, would henceforth be supported from outside by all the political parties, with the exception of the Vlaams Belang (Flemish extreme right) and the PTB (extreme left). This government continued as three parties only (MR, VLD and CD&V), without any change of ministerial portfolio. While this minority government formula is common in some parliamentary democracies, it is very rare in Belgium. In addition to this, the Wilmès government was given special powers for it to be able to take the necessary decisions to deal with the health crisis. To complicate matters, the N-VA, the country's largest party, voted for special powers but refused to support the establishment of a full government. This initial fragility went almost unnoticed both because of the urgency of the crisis and the

personality of Sophie Wilmès, who seemed to rise above these political quarrels.

Strict lockdown – in theory

As they faced the pandemic and the emergency situation, the authorities' response was twofold. From March 12 onwards, strong, specific measures were taken: there was a ban on all gatherings, schools and universities were closed, likewise cafés and restaurants. On March 17, the epidemic reached the so-called phase 3 stage, with the lockdown and closure of non-essential businesses. In detailing these measures, it is tempting to make a comparison with France. Indeed, the Belgian measures were taken a few hours after Emmanuel Macron's first speech on March 12, and the day after the announcement of the French lockdown on March 17. Similarly, the confinement measures taken in Belgium were fairly similar to those in force in France: citizens had to stay at home on pain of a fine, with strictly enumerated exceptions. But this similarity with the French situation was in fact very theoretical. In practice, the lockdown practised in Belgium was much more flexible than in France. People did not have to carry a certificate when they went out and, above all, police repression mainly concerned gatherings or breaches of confinement that were considered excessive. Here, as in other areas, Belgium's confinement policy placed it on the borderline between the particularly strict policies pursued in the Latin countries (France, Italy, Spain) and the much more flexible policies pursued in Germany or the Netherlands. It was nevertheless clearly in the first group rather than the second.

Belgian federalism: peculiarities and parenthesis

Before looking at the results of this policy, let us consider the particular decision-making process during the period beginning on March 12. A specific body took the decisions: the National Security

Council. This body has the particularity of including, in addition to the Prime Minister and some competent federal ministers, all the Minister-Presidents of the country's federated entities. Decisions are taken by consensus and it was decided from the outset to pursue a uniform policy throughout Belgium. This led in practice to suspend Belgian federalism. Indeed, the interest of federalism is to have differentiated policies according to the realities of each federated entity. In the Covid-19 crisis, Germany demonstrated the advantages of decentralized action. In Belgium, the governments of the different power levels were keen to have uniform action throughout the national territory. Thus, like unitary countries such as France, Belgium was unable to take action that matched local realities as close as possible. The same restrictions applied whether one was in a large city where the epidemic was rampant or in rural areas that were little affected. In the end, Belgium accumulated the defects of the unitary and federal systems. The advantage of a unitary country is indeed that it can take strong decisions quickly. With the exception of the first decisions in March to implement the confinement, this was not the case in Belgium. It was necessary to reach agreement between seven governments, each of which comprises coalitions of different parties. Moreover, a body set up for this specific purpose took the decisions falling within the remit of the federal government: the kern+10. Usually, the "kern" (restricted government) consists of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Ministers. The presidents of the 10 parties supporting this government were added to the kern to take account of this particular situation. This institution underlines both the importance of party chairmen in Belgium and the ability to create ad hoc bodies with no constitutional basis. It is above all a source of additional constraint for public action in the context of the pandemic.

The effectiveness of the fight against the pandemic

Despite all of these political and institutional handicaps, Belgium fought effectively against the Covid-19 epidemic. In terms of hospital infrastructure, we should remember that it was much better equipped than most other European States, with 16 intensive care beds per 100,000 inhabitants. In addition, the appropriate messages were very quickly communicated to the population, which, at least at the beginning, largely respected them. These included instructions on what to do in case of symptoms similar to Covid-19, namely to consult one's general practitioner by telephone and above all to avoid going directly to the emergency room. These instructions, coupled with the work of primary care medicine, helped to avoid an influx of patients to hospitals and contamination in waiting rooms. In Belgium, as elsewhere, the initial objective was to avoid overcrowding in the intensive care units. The fear of any government was indeed to witness a repeat of the scenes seen in Lombardy. Belgium was never really affected by this. Thus, while some hospitals (especially in Brussels) may have been saturated at one point, a national distribution plan prevented this local overcrowding from becoming a problem. At national level, 1,900 intensive care beds were devoted to potential Covid-19 patients. At the height of the crisis, only 1,285 (68%) of these were occupied. Hence, the Belgian hospital coped very well. But the dramatic number of deaths in nursing homes overshadowed this optimistic picture. This situation was of course witnessed in other European countries. But Belgium noted a record 64% of deaths occurred among residents of residential care facilities for the elderly. To spin the military metaphor, the enemy was contained where it was expected, but hit hard on another front. This relative neglect of nursing homes can partly be explained by the importance given to hospital medicine and its representatives, whether

in the media or in decision-making bodies. In any case, it raises questions about the effectiveness of the containment strategy. Indeed, these structures followed the containment measures to the letter. However, the strict observance of these instructions did not prevent both the staff and the residents of these establishments from being heavily contaminated.

More generally, the result is a sad record for Belgium: with 84 deaths from Covid-19 per 100,000 inhabitants, Belgium is proportionally the country most affected by the disease in the world. Admittedly, this very high figure must be put into perspective due to a particularly broad method used to count the number of deaths. But these methodological subtleties do not explain everything. Indeed, if the excess mortality rate during the crisis is taken into account Belgium is placed among the most affected countries in Europe. It thus ranks on the same level as Spain, which had less hospital capacity. In any case, these observations tend to challenge the idea that strict confinement prevents more deaths.

Experts in office?

The lockdown period in Belgium was marked by the emergence in the media of a series of public health experts: virologists, epidemiologists and doctors. This media presence was quickly coupled with an institutionalisation of their influence. Indeed, at the beginning of April, the Belgian government created the "Group of Experts in charge of the Exit Strategy" (GEES) to plan the country's end-of-lockdown. This council is unique in two ways. First of all, it is not a council of specialized experts that would include, for example, experts in public health. There are economists, a lawyer and a representative of the social sector. In a traditional format, the specialized expert groups inform the political authorities, who are responsible for reconciling the conflicting demands and interests of

different sectors. Here, however, the GEES carried out this process itself, which the political authorities have had the freedom to follow or not. The other element, which is as peculiar as it is disturbing, is the regular media appearances by members of the GEES, including since their appointment to this strategic council. The same experts (virologists, epidemiologists or doctors) always intervene to convey the same message: one must be extremely cautious and restrictive in the pace of ending lockdown. On one occasion, the report sent by this GEES to the National Security Council was leaked to the press, without it being known whether this leak came from a member of the GEES or from political leaders. In any case, it seems that the GEES and some of its members set themselves up as autonomous powers trying not only to influence, but also to compete with a weakened political power. With the height of the crisis over, the tensions between some GEES experts and political leaders came to light¹. The position adopted by the experts is incomprehensible if one does not bear in mind the weakening of the political class in Belgium. Indeed, in addition to the structural mistrust of the Belgian population towards its political figures, there was a context in which the latter were particularly discredited, both because of the repeated failures to form a permanent federal government and because of their unpreparedness in the face of the health crisis. It should also be remembered that political power is split between the federal government and the federated entities. In these circumstances, it is understandable that the role of experts might be preponderant, especially when they intervene directly in the media or on social networks.

Slow and erratic end of lockdown

This is probably one of the reasons why the end of the Belgian lockdown was one of the slowest in Europe. From an economic point of view, the relaxation of the rules regarding home working allowed a partial resumption of activity as of May 4, while all non-essential shops reopened on May 11. But it has been the timing of other aspects of end of lockdown, which contrasts with that of neighbouring countries. For example, no schools reopened before May 18. And this one was almost symbolic with only three levels taking classes two half-days a week. As for the kindergarten and primary classes, they were heading towards closure until the start of the school year in September. But an open and mediatized challenge on the part of paediatricians changed the situation. They stressed the psychological and social damage of prolonged confinement on young children and their low rate of contagion. They relied on foreign examples, particularly from Denmark. This public intervention shows that the problem may not have been the power of the experts, but rather the priority given to certain experts. As a result, the Flemish government decided to proceed with the complete reopening of its nursery and primary schools. Put under pressure, the French-speakers finally decided to follow suit.

With regard to social contacts, the initial plan was so restrictive that the National Security Council had to decide, again as a matter of urgency, to allow home visits by a maximum of four people from May 10. This decision followed criticism from the French-speaking environmentalist party and fears that the Belgians would largely violate the instructions on Mother's Day. A last-minute decision was also taken on access to second homes, under pressure from the mayors of municipalities on the Belgian coast. All these examples are based on the same operating mode: a very restrictive initial end of lockdown plan (in which virologists, epidemiologists and doctors were given a leading role) caused a

¹ On this issue see: « Pressions, lobbys, désaccords : trois mois de tensions entre experts et politiques », *La Libre Belgique*, 23 June 2020.

certain amount of pressure to which politicians gave in, most often as a matter of urgency. We must also mention the major inadequacies of the tracking policy, which has been both largely ineffective and apparently contrary to the rules of respect for private life. The anti-racism demonstration in Brussels at the beginning of June, which attracted 10,000 people, gave the final impression that the process of ending lockdown was far from under control.

After the crisis, further elections?

Although the Belgian end of lockdown has been particularly slow, the political game has quickly regained its rightful place. As a sign of the end of this period of national unity, the special powers granted to the Wilmès II government, initially planned for two three-month terms, were finally not extended beyond June. Negotiations to form a fully-fledged federal government have resumed, but no serious prospects have emerged for the time being.

Hence, the coronavirus crisis has failed to unite Belgium, and it has not provided it with a sustainable federal government. The national union perceived in March will not have survived the passage of the epidemic peak. On the other hand, the crisis will leave an economic and budgetary slate behind, which will be all the more substantial in view of the slow pace of end of lockdown. If elections were to be held in the autumn, one can legitimately fear a rise in extremist parties (extreme right in Flanders and extreme left in Wallonia), boosted by the economic crisis that is looming and easy criticism of the management of the epidemic.

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