

The Belgians are being called to the "election of all elections" on 25th May

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Analysis

8 million Belgians are being called to ballot on 25th May in what is called "the election of all elections." Indeed they will be electing the MPs, the Senators, and the regional representatives. National MPs will be elected for 5 years (instead of 4 previously). The electoral reform which modified the federal electoral procedure is supposed to bring greater stability to Belgium.

129,139 Belgians living abroad are registered on the electoral rolls. Only 42,489 voted in the last parliamentary elections on 13th June 2010. Moreover polling stations will remain open for an extra hour, a measure allowed in the event of multiple elections.

The elections on 13th June 2010 caused an electoral earthquake in Belgium. The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) led by Bart de Wever won 18.65% of the vote and took 28 seats in the Chamber of Representatives (20.64% of the vote and 9 seats in Senate), an unprecedented result and the best score ever won by the secessionist party. The parties advocating the independence of Flanders (New Flemish Alliance, Vlaams Belang (VB) and the DeDecker List (LDD)) rallied 44.1% of the Flemish electorate. After the vote politicians took no less than 541 days – a world record – before forming a government. On 6th December 2011 Elio di Rupo (Socialist Party, PS) became the first French-speaking Prime Minister since Edmond Leburton (1973-1974) and formed a government rallying the six main Belgian political parties supported by the two ecologist parties.

The N-VA is the focus of the electoral campaign. The media are speaking of the results that the nationalist party is credited with in the polls in Flanders or the response of the other parties to its leader, Bart de Wever. Four years ago the N-VA came out ahead in the parliamentary elections in Flanders but was ousted from power federally. The nationalist party whose programme takes all substance out of the Belgian Federal State would like to turn the elections on 25th May into a referendum on the independence of Flanders. It is presenting the present government as "socialist, French-speaking, and tax-hungry" maintaining that in the upcoming election voters must, according to Bart de Wever, make a "fundamental choice between the socialist model (synonymous with constant tax increases and public spending) and the

offer made by the N-VA". "Placing the Socialist Party and the New Flemish Alliance, back to back is like putting pyromaniacs and the fire brigade in the same bag. Only the Socialist Party can stabilise the country," answered Prime Minister Elio di Rupo.

A Belgian government without the Socialists seems highly unlikely. Although it has been losing ground in the polls Elio di Rupo's party is still in the lead in Wallonia and the country's French speakers see it as a bastion against the collapse of their country and the best defender of national unity, the Social State, in spite of the austerity measures taken by the present government.

"I do not think that this will take place. Governing without the Socialist Party means that apart from the Reform Movement (MR), one or two French speaking are prepared to govern with a Flemish centre-right majority on a federal level," indicates Carl Devos, a political scientist from the University of Gent. Although an alliance between the N-VA, the Christian Democratic Party (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD) is possible on the Flemish side, such a union, from which the left would be absent, seems almost impossible from a federal point of view. "Whatever the result the N-VA could not govern alone. It would have to convince its partners and therefore make compromises," adds Carl Devos.

Because of the Belgian system the N-VA and the Socialist Party only face each other in Brussels. Apart from the institutional future of Belgium several other issues – budgetary policy and structural reform vital for the country's modernisation – since it has been

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severely affected by the economic crisis – will be part of the electoral campaign.

The Belgian Political System

The kingdom of Belgium was founded in 1830 after a merger between the former Austrian Netherlands and the principality of Liege. At that time although a majority of the population spoke Dutch the nobility and the bourgeoisie spoke French. The Dutch speakers are mostly Protestant (Calvinist) and the French speakers, Catholics. The domination by the French speakers lasted over a century before Wallonia began to decline and Flanders started to flourish economically in the 1960's. The Walloons then asked for greater autonomy to counter the decline of their region. Tensions between the two communities have led to several constitutional reforms (1970, 1980, 1988-1989, 1993 and 2001) which over the years have transformed Belgium into a complex federal State.

The country has three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) and three linguistic communities (French, Dutch and German speaking) and two Community committees. In 1993 the first Article of the Fundamental Law stipulated that Belgium had ceased to be a single unitary State. New federal competences were transferred over to the regions which were already responsible for education, culture, social policy, housing, environment and the economy (external trade, agriculture). The Regional Parliaments became institutions that were elected by direct universal suffrage. Finally the reform in 2001 provided the regions with fiscal autonomy. 70% of the Federal State's budget is distributed to them. As a result of these developments Belgium no longer has any national political parties, which only enhances both linguistic and institutional differences. The political arena comprises French speakers in Wallonia, Dutch speakers in Flanders; the French and Dutch speakers now only mix in the region of Brussels-Capital. In Belgium therefore the electoral results are never calculated nationally but always regionally. The Flemish and the Walloons each have their own media and only share the royal family, the flag, justice and the army.

A 6th reform of the State, adopted in 2014, has transferred whole sections of competence and financial means over to the regions (employment) and to the

communities (family allowance), bodies to which it offers a unique degree of autonomy. When this reform comes into force (1st July 2014), the Flemish government will manage a bigger budget than that of the Federal State (public debt excluded).

The Belgian political system is based on a pillar system. Political parties emerged as a result of internal divisions within society, religious divisions (Church/State) primarily and then regional divisions (Walloons/Flemish) and finally social divisions (work/capital). For long time the political parties born of these divisions comprised true entities within the kingdom each managing a multitude of organisations (schools, insurance companies etc ...) which took responsibility for the members of the party and their families almost from birth to death. In exchange for their political loyalty the members of these various organisations found work, housing and other various social advantages. For their part the leaders of the different political movements shared out fairly the positions available in the civil services.

This system worked perfectly for decades before collapsing in the 1970's. In the 80's two new political movements emerged: the ecologists (Ecolo and Agalev in Flanders) and then the far right nationalists (Volksunie, Vlaams Blok which became Vlaams Belang, Democratic Front of French speaking inhabitants of Brussels, Walloon Assembly and National Front). These new parties have enjoyed increasing popularity. The Socialist and Christian Democrat Parties which rallied the majority of the electorate for many years now only win votes from a third of the Belgians.

Parliament is bicameral. The Chamber of Representatives comprises 150 MPs; the Senate comprises 71 members 40 of whom are elected by direct universal suffrage within three constituencies: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde (25 by the Dutch speaking college and 15 by the French speaking college), 21 are elected by the Parliaments of the two Communities (Flemish Council and the Council of the French Community) and 10 are appointed by co-optation. The Senate also comprises ex officio senators: children of the King aged 18 and over and who have been sworn in as Senators.

Both chambers are elected on the same day.

The general elections take place according to a system of integral proportional representation (the Hondt system) within 11 electoral districts.

The Belgians can vote for all the members on a list, for one or several candidates on a list, for one or several replacement candidates on a list and even for candidates and replacement candidates. In order to stand for election the "small" political parties have to collate between 200 and 500 signatures per district (a figure depending on the size of the electoral constituency) for the Chamber of Representatives and 5,000 for the Senate whilst the signature of three MPs suffices for the 'major' parties. Each political party has to win a minimum of 5% of the vote in an electoral district to win a seat in Parliament. Candidates must be aged at least 21 and the candidate lists have to respect sexual parity. It is obligatory to vote in Belgium and abstainers risk a warning (if they abstain for the first time) or a fine of 27.50 to 55 € set by the police judge. This sum may rise to 137.50 € if the offence is repeated.

12 parties are represented in the Chamber of Representatives at present:

– New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a Flemish nationalist party that emerged after the dissolution of the regional

Flemish party Volksunie on 19th September 2001, chaired by Bart de Wever – it has 27 seats;

– Socialist Party (PS), the party of Prime Minister Elio di Rupo led by Paul Magnette, - 13 seats;

– Reform Movement (MR), liberal party led by Charles Michel with 18 seats;

– Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V), led by Wouter Beke with 17 seats;

– Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A), led by Bruno Tobback with 13 seats;

– Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), a liberal party led by Gwendolyn Rutten, with 13 seats;

– Vlaams Belang (VB), a far right party chaired by Gerolf Annemans, with 12 seats;

– the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH), led by Benoît Lutgen, with 9 seats ;

– Ecolo, a Green French-speaking party co-led by Olivier Deleuze and Emily Hoyos, with 8 seats;

– Groen!, a Flemish Green Party chaired by Wouter Van Besien, with 5 seats;

– the Jean-Marie Dedecker List, a nationalist party, with 1 seat;

– the People's Party (PP) a populist party led by Mischaël Modrikamen, with also one seat.

Reminder of the parliamentary election results of June 13th 2010 in Belgium

Chamber of Representatives

Turnout: 83.73% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats won
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	1 135 617	17.40	27
Socialist Party (PS)	894 543	13.71	26
Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V)	707 986	10.85	17
Reform Movement (MR)	605 617	9.28	18
Flemish Socialist Party (sp.a)	602 867	9.24	13
Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	563 873	8.64	13
Vlaams Belang (VB)	506 697	7.76	12
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)	360 441	5.53	9
Ecolo	313 047	4.80	8
Groen!	285 989	4.38	5
Dedecker List (LDD)	150 577	2.31	1
People's Party (PP)	84 005	1.29	1
Others	316 108	4.84	0

Source : <http://elections.belgium.be/index.php?id=2726&L=0>

Senate

Turnout: 84.49% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats won
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	1 268 780	19,61	14
Socialist Party (PS)	880 828	13,62	13
Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V)	646 375	9,99	7
Reform Movement (MR)	599 618	9,27	8
Flemish Socialist Party (sp.a)	613 079	9,48	7
Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	533 124	8,24	6
Vlaams Belang (VB)	491 547	7,60	5
Ecolo	353 111	5,46	5
Democratic Humanist Centre (cdH)	331 870	5,13	4
Groen!	251 546	3,89	2
Dedecker List (LDD)	130 779	2,02	0
People's Party (PP)	98 858	1,53	0
Others	254 126	4,16	0

Source : <http://elections.belgium.be/index.php?id=2727&L=0>

In support of a confederate Belgium, the new credo of the New Flemish Alliance

The N-VA is putting forward a programme in which Flanders' independence (which only 15% of the Flemish say they support, a figure that has not changed in 15 years) no longer seems to be its primary goal. The party prefers to speak of transforming Belgium into a confederate state associating Flanders and Wallonia and in which the regions would hold all of the competences (taxation, employment, social security, education, healthcare, justice, energy, family) except for defence, immigration and debt management.

The N-VA's programme suggests that the federal government downsize from 15 to 6 members (3 ministers for each community), abolish the post of Prime Minister, transform the Belgian monarchy into one which is ceremonial (as in the Netherlands), abolish the Senate, reduce the number of members in the Chamber of Representatives to 50 (25 for Flanders and 25 for Wallonia). In this programme Brussels would lose its regional status and would become an administrative entity with weak competence

(employment, public works, mobility) and those living in Brussels would have to choose to join either Flanders or Wallonia for the elections and the social security. "We want confederalism to build the Flanders we have been dreaming of. We have to rid ourselves of tax increases, rising debt and a constantly expanding civil service. The solution is called confederalism," maintains Bart de Wever. The latter has however said that he was not making confederalism a condition for his participation in a future government coalition.

In 2010, the CD&V and Open VLD also favoured a confederate view of the future Belgium. The CD&V however defends a "positive confederalism", (i.e. that would prevent the collapse of Belgium) whilst the Open VLD focus more on socio-economic issues.

The N-VA also wants the next federal government to have a majority in Flanders. The present coalition can count on the support of 96 MPs (out of 150) but the three Flemish parties (SP.A, Open VLD and CD&V) have only 43 MPs within the Dutch-speaking college (out of 88).

The N-VA's programme is called *Welvaart en welzijn* (Prosperity and well-being); the party has chosen the

slogan *Verandering voor vooruitgang* (Change for Progress). The text that has been adopted suggests that taxation now be the responsibility of the regions, with VAT remaining the only tax to be collected by the Federal State. *"Flanders will be responsible for collecting business tax (between 33.39% and 27.13%) and income and we shall reduce taxes on low wages by 40%. The 40% band will be abolished and that of the 50% reserved for high revenues,"* indicated Jan Jambon, N-VA's parliamentary group leader in the Chamber of Representatives.

The party, which is liberal, is suggesting a freeze on federal public spending (to a total of 12.1 billion € in 2019 at the end of the legislature) until 2016, a reform of the labour market and greater monitoring of the unemployed. The N-VA wants to limit the duration of unemployment benefit to two years whilst increasing the amount – it wants to abolish the automatic indexation of wages that it wants to replace by a wage agreement to be negotiated per sector every two years and raise the integration income to that of the poverty line (this would be distributed in exchange for community service).

The party is proposing to set aside 17 billion euro (55 billion over the entire legislature) for the benefit of workers, the retired (increase of 8.5 billion euro per year in pensions, ie 2%) and businesses.

"We are offering another kind of politics focused on those who work, save and are entrepreneurial. A policy that rewards those who take their responsibilities in hand and who also take care of those in need, a policy which reduces taxes and puts an end to debt and slims down the public administration," declared Bart de Wever.

Finally the party wants to delay the exit from the use of nuclear power to 2065 (instead of 2015) and is suggesting the construction of a new power station.

Excluded from the outgoing government the N-VA is fighting to access power at the federal level – preferably without the SP. But the other parties do not seem to be prepared to join forces with it even if the party is now standing as a moderate centre-right force, toned down its expectations and is showing that it may be willing to compromise.

Bart de Wever has set himself the goal of winning 30% of the vote in the parliamentary elections on 25th May next. *"If we do not win 30% the other parties will be greatly tempted to continue to lead without the N-VA,"* he maintained. Moreover the Mayor of Antwerp

has spoken several times of the future referring to his possible departure. *"I have always said that I will not be chair of the N-VA one day too many. As chair I want to win the elections once more so that I can move on with a clear conscience,"* he declared.

The Left

Socialist Party leader Paul Magnette likes to say that during his mandate Elio di Rupo has stabilised a country that was on the verge of collapse, that growth has recovered, the public debt reduced under the 100% GDP mark and that Belgium's international reputation has been repaired. Although the SP is still predominant in Wallonia, and even though it is declining in the polls, Elio di Rupo is however much more popular than his party.

The socialist programme is promising an increase wages by 120€ monthly; it is also offering a "Youth Guarantee" to find jobs (or a traineeship) for young people after they have been unemployed for four months and to recover three billion € for the State coffers via two main means: capital tax that would enable income of 1.5 billion euro and the strengthening of the fight to counter tax fraud which would bring in a further 1.5 billion euro. Wealth tax which affects households with more than 1.25 million € (apart from their homes and goods acquired via their professional life) i.e. around 80,000 people (1% of the population) might bring in 400 million €.

Recently Belgium has experienced a rise in extreme movements: Belgians Arise led by Laurent Louis, the People's Party (PP), led by Mischaël Modrikamen, the Right led by Aldo Mungo (excluded from the People's Party), National Democracy (DN), formerly the Front National, Wallonia First and even the Belgian Workers' Party (PTB) led by Peter Mertens.

The latter party which claims to be "Marxist-Leninist" stands as the "taboo free left"; it wants to be an alternative, anti-capitalist force to the left of the SP and the Ecolo Greens. It is fighting to counter poverty and is supporting employment; it wants to bring the purchasing power of social aid beneficiaries up by 3 billion € and that of workers up by 70%. The Workers' Party of Belgium is against the European budgetary pact (treaty on stability, coordination and governance signed on March 2nd 2012) and is asking for the

withdrawal of Belgian troops from Afghanistan. "All of the major parties, except for the Dutch speaking ecologists and the Flemish far right of the *Vlaams Belang* are represented in the federal or regional executives. Hence when citizens are looking to make a protest vote they turn to the periphery," indicates Pascal Delwit, a professor of political science at the Free University of Brussels.

The far left which is critical of Elio di Rupo's government, saying it has not implemented a left wing policy hopes to win its first MPs on 25th May next. The Prime Minister repeats that voting for extremes is a gift to the right. Elio di Rupo criticises the inexperience of the Workers' Party of Belgium, its lack of social results and challenges its members' real will to govern.

The Liberals

The Reform Movement (MR) says that a priori it is against any alliance with the N-VA. Its former leader (2004-2011) and present deputy Prime Minister and Federal Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and European Affairs Minister Didier Reynders maintains that his party might govern with the nationalist party if it relinquished all constitutional claims. The Reform Movement is totally against any further reform of the State.

The party is advocating a reduction in public spending and in company charges (reduction in company tax) and a strengthening of the citizens buying power (reduction in labour charges for workers with low wages and a reduction in the number of tax bands with a zero tax rate on the first 13,000 € of income). According to the MR this tax reform would cost 5.8 billion €.

A 15 billion € reduction in public spending by 2019 comprises one of the main points in the Open VLD programme, which wants to reduce social contributions by 3.5 billion €. Reducing spending would be beneficial to all and would lead to the creation of 240,000 jobs, a 5 billion € reduction in charges on businesses, employees and pensioners and it would provide "oxygen to the Belgian economy". Open VLD also wants to reduce the number of tax bands down to two (25% and 45%), by 2021, oblige job seekers to follow training and to undertake two half days of weekly work on behalf of the community. The party says that it identifies with several of the economic measures defended by the N-VA but rejects the nationalists' community programme.

The Christian Democrats

The CD&V is officially in favour of confederalism but defends what it calls "positive federalism" ie developed federalism as in the Swiss or Canadian systems.

The CD&V, which has chosen the slogan "*It is possible to live better*", wants to raise the minimum taxable revenue level (from 6,800 to 9,800 €) and integration income for single people. According to the party Belgium can reach an employment rate of 76% in 2020.

It is not ruling out the formation of an asymmetric government on the federal and regional levels. "*As far as I am concerned there is no link between the two elections,*" declared Wouter Beke the party's leader.

For their part the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH) want to create 140,000 jobs. The party is standing as "the 3rd way" and rejects both the left and the right at the same time.

The Ecologists

The Green French-speakers of Ecolo are campaigning on "domestic socio-economic issues" with four priority themes: energy, relocation, youth and resource management. Ecolo says it has observed the negative results of the Elio di Rupo's government, which in its opinion, has undertaken an unfair policy, which it criticises for its failure to address unemployment, for the application of pro-rata social insertion benefits and a stalemate in terms of wages. According to Ecolo the outgoing government has favoured multinationals rather than SMEs and has created a "*two speed Belgium*."

A drift of taxation of labour towards capital and the fight to counter pollution, fairer taxation of businesses (which support SMEs rather than multi-nationals) and the introduction of energy bills that reward reductions in consumption, these are the three priorities of the the Flemish Green Party Groen!

The two ecologist parties want a progressive rise in social benefits to a level equal to the poverty line and the halt of pro-rata unemployment benefits, the general introduction of the tandem plan (designed to share work between generations) and finally the implementation of an energy pact between the Federal State and the regions.

Vlaams Belang losing momentum

The Vlaams Belang is suggesting a 25% reduction in social contributions paid by workers and employers, a measure that the party says can be financed by bringing immigration to an end as well as the aid given to asylum seekers and also by the reduction of the number of people in prison. This plan would, in the party's opinion, lead to the creation of 140,000 jobs and bring 3.6 billion € to the lowest retirement pensions. "We are increasingly a social party" declared the movement's leader, Gerolf Annemans.

On 14th October 2012 the Belgians elected their provincial town councillors. The N-VA became the leading party in three of the five Flemish provinces (Eastern Flanders, Flemish Brabant and Antwerp), where it came out ahead of the CD&V. The latter won in the other two provinces – Limburg and West Flanders. The SP gathered strength in Wallonia. It came out ahead in two of the five provinces: Hainaut and Liège. In Brussels it remained the leading party. The most striking event in these local elections was the victory achieved by the N-VA in Antwerp where it won 35.9% of the vote and 27 seats, which brought 80 years of socialist rule in the town. The party took advantage of the decline in the number of Vlaams Belang members, which had been eroded by internal quarrels and the departure of several of its members.

Another notable event in the local election was the rise of the Belgian Workers' Party which won 52 seats and 7% of the vote.

The local elections which led to a strengthening of the nationalists weakened Prime Minister di Rupo's government and sharpened the divorce between the

French and Flemish speaking parts of the country. "If I am not wrong the Belgians voted in a local election. There is no link with the federal level. It is not Elio di Rupo's work that we can judge in this or that community; it is the work of local representatives. I acknowledge the success of the N-VA but there is no link between the local and federal elections," said the Prime Minister. "The election is local but in Flanders people vote nationally," said political expert Pascal Delwit.

"The government will be judged in terms of the decline of the N-VA," Elio di Rupo is said to have declared on another occasion. For his part Bart de Wever has set 30% as the threshold for his party to become inevitable, which seems highly likely in view of the latest Barometer published by RTBF and Libre Belgique, which finds the CD&V and Open VLD struggling.

The SP is still in the lead in Wallonia; it is credited with 29.3% of the vote in the elections on 25th May. It is ahead of the MR (22.6%) and Ecolo which is over the 10% mark (11%). The CDH is due to win 9.4% of the vote. Finally the Workers' Party of Belgium is running particularly high in the polls with 8.1% of the vote.

In Flanders the N-VA dominates the political scene quite easily. It is due to win 32.9% of the vote in the region ahead of the CD&V which is due to win 16.9%; the Sp.a is credited with 13.6% and Open VLD are due to win 13.5%. The Vlaams Belang follows with (9.9%) and Groen: is due to win 7.6%.

47% of the Walloons and inhabitants of Brussels together want Elio di Rupo to play a major role over the next few months. In Flanders 37% say they want the same thing but with Bart de Wever at the helm.

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