

# Will Belgium re-elect the Swedish coalition in office?

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Analysis

*In Belgium the government has been managing current affairs since the end of 2018. On 8th December last the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) left the coalition in office in protest against the government's signature of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, a text adopted in December in Marrakesh. The following day Prime Minister Charles Michel (Reform Movement, MR) formed a minority government, which resigned on 18th December under the threat of a motion of no-confidence supported by the Socialist Party (PS), the Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A) and Ecolo. On 21st December King Philippe asked Charles Michel to manage current affairs until the next parliamentary elections that will take place on the same day as the European and regional elections, i.e. 26th May next.*

These elections are especially important since the Belgians will not be consulted again for the next four years. "We shall enter a four-year period in which no elections will take place. We have not had a period without elections in peace time as long as this since 1830," indicates Jean Faniel, General Director of the Research and Social Political Information Centre (CRISP).

Like the other European countries, as elections succeed each other Belgium's traditional parties are losing ground to the benefit of populist parties. "Anything is possible especially since 2014, with the Reform Movement being the only French speaking party to take part in the federal government, we have ended the need to have a majority within each linguistic group, even if we shall undoubtedly experience more imbalance than at present," stressed Dave Sinardet, a political expert from the University Saint Louis and the Free University of Brussels (VUB).

After the parliamentary elections on 25th May 2014 Charles Michel formed a unique coalition government which included, apart from his own party, the New Flemish Alliance, the Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD). The N-VA was the main party (it held 4 ministries) but its leaders did not occupy the post of Prime Minister. Never had the French-speaking parties been as few in a federal government, in which the New Flemish Alliance was taking part for the first time in its history.

This alliance was called the Swedish coalition due the parties' different colours – blue for the Reform Movement

and the Flemish Liberals and Democrats and yellow for the New Flemish Alliance, with the Flemish Christian Democratic Party being represented by a cross.

Also called the "kamikaze coalition" due to the presence of only one French-speaking party (the Reform Movement) and three Flemish parties, it almost succeeded in lasting the entire legislature. To a certain extent the Reform Movement, the Flemish Liberals and Democrats and to a lesser degree, the New Flemish Alliance, are all working to re-elect this coalition. The Flemish Christian Democratic Party is more reticent. To retain its majority however, if we are to believe the polls, the coalition will have to be widened to other parties, notably the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH),

According to a poll published in the daily papers *La libre Belgique* and *De Standaard* and by the Belgian Radio-Television and French Community (RTBF) and the VRT, a Dutch-speaking radio-television channel, Ecolo is due to come out first in Brussels with 21.50% of the vote. The ecologists are due to be followed by the Socialist Party (19%) and the Reform Movement (15.50%). In Wallonia, the Socialist Party is due to come ahead with 24.70% of the vote, Ecolo is due to come second (22%), a first in the French-speaking region and the Reform Movement is due to follow this with 18.30% of the vote. Finally, in Flanders, the New Flemish Alliance is clearly dominating the parliamentary election with 27.9% of the vote and is ahead of the Flemish Christian Democratic Party (14.7%), Groen (14.60%) and the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (14,20%).

On 14th October the Belgians renewed their local and provincial representatives. This election was the first since the parliamentary elections on 25th May 2014. Wallonia, where the ecologists gained ground, confirmed their push to the left - whilst the parties on the right grew stronger in Flanders, with the Flemish Christian Democratic Party retaining its lead position and the nationalists of Vlaams Belang (VB) winning back a few seats.

### The outgoing government

*"If the New Flemish Alliance is the lead party again in May, it intends to take the post of Prime Minister,"* declared Jan Jambon, former Prime Minister and Federal Minister for Security and Home Affairs, responsible for the Building Authority (2014-2018), and the populist party's candidate for the head of government. *"Five years ago, the biggest party did not have control, it was a mistake, but it was impossible to find the necessary support in Wallonia to a government led by the New Flemish Alliance. Since then we have shown that we are responsible, good managers,"* indicated Jan Jambon.

The party's chairman Bart de Wever, the mayor of Antwerpen, hopes to become Minister-President of Flanders. Possibly tired that the community's issues have not been processed at federal level over the last five years, it seems he wants to fall back on the Flemish region. However, Jan Jambon believes that it is possible to turn Belgium into a confederal state after the parliamentary elections on 26th May next, even if it means adapting the Constitution to this situation at a later date. The New Flemish Alliance provides the example of women's voting rights introduced before it became part of the Constitution to illustrate his idea. *"The New Flemish Alliance is prepared to everything it can to bring Belgium to an end, that includes violating the Constitution and ignoring the legal framework,"* declared Catherine Fonck, leader of the Humanist Democratic Centre in the House of Representatives. "A while ago Jan Jambon said that he hoped that Belgium would be ungovernable so that he could impose his communitarian agenda on the other parties. It is a game that we don't want

to play because an ungovernable Belgium would be synonymous to damaging Flanders for Flemish families and businesses," maintained the chair of the Flemish Christian Democratic Party, who deems however that the wish expressed by the leader of the New Flemish Alliance list is legitimate.

*"Everything will depend on the weight that the electorate gives to the New Flemish Alliance and with which parties we shall be able to negotiate. We shall never say: for us it is confederalism or nothing,"* maintained Jan Jambon.

For his part, Charles Michel is brandishing the spectre of communitarianism, and during the campaign he has emphasised the fact that he has been able to keep the separatist claims of the New Flemish Alliance at bay, since the latter accepted to freeze its institutional programme in exchange for its entry into government. *"We reject the traps of the institutional adventure; we want neither separatism, which divides nor ultra-socialism, which impoverishes,"* declared Charles Michel. *"This national-socialist cocktail, of division and impoverishment, is Brexit, but worse,"* he added in a statement that led to some discord.

According to Charles Michel, the departure of the New Flemish Alliance from the government at the end of 2018 "was a fantastic gift" made to the parties on the left. He stressed that the Flemish nationalists had wanted to position themselves on the hard line in the debate over migration in view of the elections on 26th May, a strategy that seems to have failed.

The outgoing Prime Minister is promoting the results of his government that has created 228,000 jobs over five years and has brought the activity rate above the 70% mark. The Tax shift, which aimed to reduce labour costs, entered into force at the beginning of 2016. Charles Michel's government also reformed the social security system and approved the progressive delay of the legal age of retirement from 65 to 67 years by 2030 (66 in 2025 and 67 in 2030). Finally, his economic policy has helped to consolidate public spending, which decreased from 54.7% to 53% of the GDP between 2014 and 2018.

The Reform Movement aims to create 240,000 new jobs over the next five years by further reducing tax pressure on labour (reductions in salary contributions by around 1,000€ per year on the low to midrange wages) and it also hopes to alleviate taxation.

The Flemish Liberals and Democrats' programme (Open VLD), aims to reduce taxation (to a total of 1,000€ per year according to their chair, Gwendolyn Rutten), create jobs and reduce public powers for greater efficacy. The party wants Belgium to achieve budgetary balance over the next legislature.

The Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V) hopes to have its "pension guarantee" approved, i.e. set at 1,500€ - a minimum total for the retirement pension after a full career, invest in healthcare and create 240,000 new jobs over the next legislature. In Wouter Beke's opinion – chair of the Flemish Christian Democratic Party – his movement lies at the centre of the political scale and defends the interests of the silent majority.

### The Opposition Forces

"We can do it, we have to form a government without the New Flemish Alliance," indicated Elio di Rupo, the chair of the Socialist Party (PS).

The PS undertook an opinion poll including two million households, which it interviewed regarding their expectations. Tax reform was the theme that came first. Those interviewed asked for a strengthening anti-tax fraud measures, the levying of a tax on the biggest companies and the adoption of a tax on the wealthiest. The PS drafted a programme covering thirty vital measures for the parliamentary elections. It wants to take 5% of the post-tax profit from businesses to create a Belgian climate transition fund. It notes that for each euro paid by the private sector, the same sum will be paid by the government. It also hopes to introduce free GP and dentist consultations, increase the retirement pension to reach a minimum of 1,500€ for a full career and reduce VAT on electricity to 6%.

The Dutch-speaking socialists of the Flemish Socialist Party (SPA) want to improve purchasing power by

increasing the minimum hourly wage by 10 to 14€ and exempt from tax all of those earning under 1,200€ per month. They also want to guarantee the minimum total for the retirement pension at 1,500€ for a full career of 42 years and they have made the return of the legal age of retirement from 67 to 65 the condition for their participation in a future government.

The Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH) no longer wants to govern with the New Flemish Alliance even though its chairman Maxime Prévot has refused to say a final "no" to the possibility that his predecessor Benoît Lutgen categorically rejected. "*The coalition with the New Flemish Alliance is not my priority but I never say "never" and we must respect the results of our Flemish friends,*" he declared. This is leading many analysts to believe that the Swedish coalition might well be strengthened by the presence of the Humanist Democratic Centre after these parliamentary elections.

The ecologists are riding high in the polls and have benefited from the mobilisation of young people in the fight to counter global warming over the last few months. Ecolo, the French-speaking party is presenting what it qualifies as Erasmus candidates for the very first time, i.e. French-speaking candidates, who feature on the Flemish federal lists and conversely, Dutch-speaking candidates on the Walloon lists.

Ecolo hopes to introduce a tax credit for the lowest wages, which would be implemented degressively to monthly salaries below 2,250 €.

Their Groen counterpart has declared nine priorities including the recruitment of new teachers, more means for the healthcare sector, an increase in wages for the weakest revenues (which would be funded by a tax on wealth over one million €), an increase in social aid and retirement pensions and the establishment of a carbon neutral society.

Ecolo and Groen are the only Belgian parties to form a single federal group in the House of Representatives. They agree on most things, even though Ecolo wants to introduce a four-day working week and return to a

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legal age of retirement of 65, whilst Groen is not as firm regarding these measures.

Finally, the Labour Party (PTB/PvdA) is rising rapidly. It is standing as the only “authentic left party” and has put forward 849 proposals for Belgium, including the end of privileges granted to MPs, the fight to counter poverty, the construction of social housing, free public transport, the improvement of teaching and healthcare, an investment of 10 billion € in the ecological transition. All of these proposals would be funded by a tax on millionaires, which according to the party, could bring in between 8 to 11 billion € per year.

### The Belgian Political System

In 1830, the kingdom of Belgium was founded on the merger of the former Austrian Netherlands and the principality of Liège. At the time most inhabitants spoke Dutch, the nobility and the bourgeoisie spoke French. The Dutch-speakers were mainly Protestants (Calvinists); the French-speakers, Catholics. The French speaking domination over the country lasted more than a century, but then in the 1960's, Wallonia started to decline at a time when the economy in Flanders started to prosper. The Walloons then asked for greater autonomy to counter the industrial decline of their region. Tension emerged between the two communities leading to several constitutional reforms (1970, 1980, 1988-1989, 1993, 2001 and 2011) which, over the years, have transformed Belgium into a federal State.

The kingdom has three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital), three linguistic communities (French, Dutch and German speaking) and to Community Committees. In 1993 article 1 of the Constitution stipulated that Belgium would cease to be a unitarian State. New federal competences were transferred to the regions which had already taken on responsibility for education, culture, social policy, housing, environment, urban planning and with some exceptions, employment and the economy (external trade and agriculture). The regional parliaments then became elected institutions by direct universal suffrage. The reform of 2001 granted tax autonomy to the regions. 70% of the State's Federal Budget is redistributed to them. As

a result of these developments, Belgium no longer has any national political parties, a split that has accentuated linguistic and institutional differences. The political landscape comprises French-speaking parties in Wallonia, Dutch-speaking movements in Flanders, which only run alongside each other in the Brussels-Capital region. The Flemish and Walloons each have their media and only share the royal family, the flag, the legal system and the army.

The sixth reform of the State adopted in 2014, transferred whole swathes of competence and financial means to the regions (employment) and to the communities (family allowance); the entities to which it offers a degree of unique autonomy. The Flemish government manages a greater budget than the Federal State (public debt apart).

The Belgian political system is based on “pillarisation”. The political parties developed on internal divisions with society: a religious split (Church/State) in the first place, then one that is regional (Walloons/Flemish) and finally on a social division (labour/capital). The political parties born of these divisions, were for a long-time real entities within the kingdom, each of them managing a host of organisations (schools, insurance companies etc ...), taking responsibility for members of the party and their family almost from birth to death. In exchange for their political loyalty, the members of these various organisations obtained employment, housing and other social advantages. For their part, the leaders of the various political parties divided the posts available in the public administrations.

This system worked perfectly for decades before faltering at the end of the 1970's. During the next decade several new movements emerged on the political landscape: the ecologists, then the far-right nationalists (Volksunie, Vlaams Blok, which became Vlaams Belang, the New Flemish Alliance, the Democratic Front of Brussels French-speakers, the Wallonian Rally and the National Front). These new parties have been increasingly successful. Socialists and Christian Democrats, - who for decades rallied most of the electorate to their name - now represent under 40% of Belgian voters.

The Belgian Parliament is bicameral. The House of Representatives comprises 150 MPs and the Senate 60 members, 40 of whom are appointed by the regional parliaments (29 Dutch speakers, 20 French speakers and one German speaker). The two Houses of Parliament are renewed every five years on the same day.

The vote is undertaken according to an integral proportional system of the highest average (d'Hondt method) within 22 electoral constituencies, 10 provinces, 5 in Flanders and 5 in Wallonia and 1 in Brussels. Each of these elects between 4 (Luxembourg) and 24 (Antwerpen) MPs. The electorate of Brussels appoints 15 MPs, i.e. either Dutch speakers or French speakers.

Belgians can vote in support of all the members of a list, for one or for several candidates, for one or several substitute candidates or in support of effective candidates and substitutes. To be able to stand for the vote, the 'small' parties must gather between 200 and 500 signatures (the figure depends on the size of the electoral constituency) per arrondissement for the House of Representatives, whilst the signature of 3 MPs is enough for the 'big' parties. Each party must win a minimum of 5% of the vote in an electoral arrondissement to be represented in parliament. Candidates must be aged at least 21 and the lists are gender equal.

It is obligatory to vote in Belgium. The country is also one of the first in the world to have introduced obligatory voting in 1896 (for men only at the time). Abstentionists risk a fine (if they abstain for the first time) or a fine of between 27.50 to 55€, which is set

by the police court. It can rise to 140€ if the person repeats the offence.

13 political parties are represented in the present House of Representatives:

- the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a Flemish nationalist party that emerged after the dissolution on 19th September 2001 of the Flemish regionalist party Volksunie, chaired by Bart De Wever, with 33 seats;
- the Socialist Party (PS) led by Elio di Rupo, has 23 seats;
- the Reform Movement (MR), liberal party of outgoing Prime Minister Charles Michel, 20 seats;
- the Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V), led by Wouter Beke, 18 seats
- the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), led by Gwendolyn Rutten, with 14 seats;
- the Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A), led by John Crombez, with 3 seats;
- Groen!, the ecologist party of Flanders chaired by Meyrem Almaci, with 6 seats;
- the Humanist Democratic Centre (cDH), led by Maxime Prévot, with 9 seats;
- Vlaams Belang (VB), a far-right party chaired by Tom Van Grieken, with 3 MPs;
- Ecolo, Green French-speaking party co-chaired by Zakia Khattabi and [Jean-Marc Nolle](#), with 6 seats;
- the Labour Party (PTB/PvdA), far-left, led by Peter Mertens, with 2 MPs;
- the Frenchs-speaking Federalist Democrats (FDF), that became the DéFI-Independent Federalist Democrats, chaired by Olivier Maingain, with 2 seats;
- the People's Party, (PP) , a populist party led by Mischaël Modrikamen, with one seat.

## Reminder of the results of the parliamentary elections of 25th May 2014 in Belgium.

### House of Representatives

Turnout: 94.23% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	No. of seats won
<b>New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)</b>	1 366 397	20,26	33
<b>Socialist Party (PS)</b>	787 058	11,67	23
<b>Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&amp;V)</b>	783 040	11,61	18
<b>Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)</b>	659 571	9,78	14
<b>Reform Movement (MR)</b>	650 260	9,64	20
<b>Flemish Socialist Party (SP. A)</b>	595 466	8,83	13
<b>Groen !</b>	358 947	5,32	6
<b>Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)</b>	336 184	4,98	9
<b>Labour Party (PTB/PvdA)</b>	251 276	3,72	2
<b>Vlaams Belang (VB)</b>	247 738	3,67	3
<b>Ecolo</b>	222 524	3,30	6
<b>French-speaking Democratic Federalists (FDF)</b>	121 384	1,80	2
<b>People's Party (PP)</b>	102 581	1,52	1
<b>Libertarian, Direct, Democratic (LDD)</b>	28 414	0,42	0

Source: [http://elections2014.belgium.be/fr/cha/results/results\\_tab\\_CKR00000.html](http://elections2014.belgium.be/fr/cha/results/results_tab_CKR00000.html)

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