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Belgium

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Introduction

Belgium's political scene in 2013 was marked by attempts to deal with economic setbacks and party positioning in advance of multiple simultaneous elections in mid-2014. Other than the coronation a new king, there were relatively few personnel changes, either in party leadership, ministerial positions or in parliament. Political debate revolved around national-level institutional reforms, taxes and spending.

Election report

There were no national-level elections in Belgium in 2013. The upcoming election schedule is shown in Table 1.

Cabinet report

See **Associated issues in national politics**.

Parliament report

In the House of Representatives, I. Vervotte (Flemish Christian-Democrats, CD&V) resigned on 2 January and was replaced by K. Waterschoot. S. Verherstraeten (CD&V), as new member of the federal government, was replaced by N. Van Gool on 10 January. Prime

Table 1. Upcoming election schedule in Belgium

Type of election	Date
European	25 May 2014
Parliamentary	25 May 2014
Regional	25 May 2014

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Di Rupo I in Belgium in 2013

Date of inception	6 December 2011					
Type of cabinet	Oversized Coalition (OC)					
Date of initial 2013 observation	1 January 2013					
Date of final 2013 observation	31 December 2013					
A. Party and gender composition of Di Rupo I at initial 2013 observation, 1 January	Party seats in cabinet		Cabinet seats held by women		Party seats in parliament	
	N	%	N	% (of party seats)	N	%
Socialist Party/ <i>Parti Socialiste</i> (PS)	4	21.1%	1	25.0%	26	17.3%
Christian Democratic & Flemish/ <i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> (CD&V)	4	21.1%	0	0.0%	17	11.3%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats / <i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (Open Vld)	3	15.8%	2	66.7%	13	8.7%
Reformist Movement/ <i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> (MR)	3	15.8%	1	33.3%	15	10.0%
Socialist Party Different/ <i>Socialistische Partij Anders</i> (SPA)	3	15.8%	1	33.3%	13	8.7%
Humanist Democratic Centre/ <i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (cdH)	2	10.5%	1	50.0%	9	6.0%
Totals	19	100.0%	6	31.6%	93	62.0%
B. Composition of Di Rupo I at initial 2013 observation, 1 January 2013						
See previous editions of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for Belgium (Rihoux et al. 2012: 44–45; 2013: 32) or http://politicaldatayearbook.com						
C. Changes in composition of Di Rupo I						
<p>Minister of Climate and Energy/<i>Ministre du Climat et de l'Énergie</i>: Paul Magnette (1971 male, PS) resigned on 17 January and was replaced respectively by (1) Jean-Pascal Labille (1961 male, PS) as Minister of Public Companies and Development Aid, in charge of Large Cities/<i>Ministre des Entreprises publiques et de la Coopération au développement, chargé des Grandes Villes</i> and by (2) Secretary of State Philippe Courard (1966 male, PS) who became Secretary of State of Social Affairs, Family and the Disabled, in charge of professional risks, adjunct to the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health and Secretary of State for Science Policy, adjunct to the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health/<i>Secrétaire d'État aux Affaires sociales, aux Familles, aux Personnes handicapées, chargé des Risques professionnels, adjoint à la ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique, et Secrétaire d'État à la Politique scientifique, adjoint à la ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique</i></p> <p>Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Sustainable Development, in charge of Civil Service/ <i>Vice-Eerste Minister en Minister van Financiën en Duurzame Ontwikkeling, belast met Ambtenarenzaken</i>: Steven Vanackere (1964 male, CD&V) resigned on 5 March and was replaced respectively by (1) Minister Pieter De Crem (1962 male, CD&V) who became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence/<i>Vice-Eerste Minister en Minister van Landsverdediging</i>, by (2) Koen Geens (1958 Male, CD&V) as Minister of Finance, in charge of Civil Service/<i>Minister van Financiën en Duurzame Ontwikkeling, belast met Ambtenarenzaken</i>, and Secretary of State of Institutional Reforms, adjunct to the Prime Minister, and by (3) Secretary of State Servais Verherstraeten (1960 male, CD&V) who became Secretary of State of Institutional Reforms, adjunct to the Prime Minister, and Secretary of State of the Building Authority, and Secretary of State of the Building Authority and Sustainable Development, adjunct to the Minister of Finance, in charge of Civil Service/<i>Staatssecretaris voor Staatshervorming, toegevoegd aan de Eerste Minister, en Staatssecretaris voor de Regie der gebouwen en Duurzame Ontwikkeling, toegevoegd aan de Minister van Financiën, belast met Ambtenarenzaken</i></p>						
D. Party and gender composition of Di Rupo I at final 2013 observation, 31 December	Party seats in cabinet		Party seats in cabinet held by women		Party seats in parliament	
	N	%	N	% (of party seats)	N	%
Socialist Party (PS)	4	21.1%	1	25.0%	26	17.3%
Christian Democratic & Flemish (CD&V)	4	21.1%	0	0.0%	17	11.3%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open Vld)	3	15.8%	2	66.7%	13	8.7%
Reformist Movement (MR)	3	15.8%	1	33.3%	15	10.0%
Socialist Party Different (SPA)	3	15.8%	1	33.3%	13	8.7%
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)	2	10.5%	1	50.0%	9	6.0%
Totals	19	100.0%	6	31.6%	93	62.0%

Sources: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (2013); La Chambre des Représentants/De Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers (2013).

Table 3. Party and gender composition of the lower house (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium 2013

Party	1 January 2013		31 December 2013	
	N	%	N	%
Socialist Party (PS)	26	17.3%	26	17.3%
Christian Democratic & Flemish (CD&V)	17	11.3%	17	11.3%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open Vld)	13	8.7%	13	8.7%
Reformist Movement (MR)	15	10.0%	15	10.0%
Socialist Party Different (SPA)	13	8.7%	13	8.7%
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)	9	6.0%	9	6.0%
Flemish Interest/ <i>Vlaams Belang</i> (VB)	12	8.0%	12	8.0%
New Flemish Alliance/ <i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (N-VA)	27	18.0%	27	18.0%
Ecology Party/ <i>Ecolo</i>	8	5.3%	8	5.3%
Green/ <i>Groen</i>	5	3.3%	5	3.3%
Francophone Democratic Federalists/ <i>Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones</i> (FDF)	3	2.0%	3	2.0%
Libertarian, Direct, Democratic/ <i>Libertair, Direct, Democratisch</i> (LDD)	1	0.7%	1	0.7%
People's Party/ <i>Parti populaire</i> (PP)	1	0.7%	1	0.7%
Women	57	38.0%	62	41.3%
Totals	150	100.0%	150	100.0%

Source: La Chambre des Représentants/De Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers (2013).

Minister E. Di Rupo (French-speaking Socialists, PS) was replaced by L. Meire on 10 January. The overall party composition of the House was not modified as a result of these changes.

No changes were observed in the Senate during 2013.

Institutional changes

The sixth state reform, involving major transfers of competences from the federal state to the regions and communities, as well as a re-definition of the federal Senate, was passed by both houses at the end of the year. Most of the bills and changes in constitutional provisions were voted by the institutional majority (the federal cabinet parties and the Greens) against the opposition (N-VA (Flemish Nationalists), VB (Flemish Radical Right-wing Nationalists), FDF (French-speaking Federalists)). As it comes into force on 1 July 2014, after the 25 May general election, this will be dealt with in next year's *Political Data Yearbook*.

No major leadership changes occurred in Flemish parties. The leader of the CD&V, Wouter Beke, was re-elected with 98.7 per cent of the members' vote as the only candidate. In preparation for the 'mother of all elections' (simultaneous elections at the regional, federal and European levels) on 25 May 2014, all Flemish parties (except the Greens) held general programmatic congresses. Some parties also decided by the end of 2013 who would head their lists at the 2014 elections (VB, *Groen* (Flemish Greens), CD&V). In fact, most noticeable were the efforts of the NVA to attract new candidates, some genuine newcomers

Table 4. Political party changes in Belgium in 2013

A. Party leadership changes in 2013

Flemish Interest leader Bruno Valkeniers (1955 male, VB) was replaced by Gerolf Annemans (1958 male, VB)

Socialist Party leader Elio Di Rupo (1951 male, PS) was replaced by Paul Magnette (1971 male, PS) on 17 January

Sources: *De Standaard* (2013); *Le Soir* (2013).

from civil society, but also a number from the VLD and the VB. Regarding the latter, the ‘*cordon sanitaire*’ – a pact concluded between all Flemish parties in 1989 to exclude any executive cooperation at any level with the VB – was violated for the first time when new local executives took office on 1 January 2013 (following the October 2012 local elections; Rihoux et al. 2013: 33). In fact, at the moment that the VB reached its lowest electoral score since its peak of 2004, the *cordon* got relaxed, allowing the election of VB members in 15 Flemish communes, but only into minor executive local positions.

On the francophone side, 2013 was a stable year for most parties. There were no changes in the party presidencies in the CDH, *Ecolo* (French-speaking Greens), FDF and MR (French-speaking Liberals). There was, however, a significant change at the top of the PS (the strongest francophone party) when Paul Magnette replaced Elio Di Rupo (Prime Minister) as party president on 17 January. This did not change the party line much, as Magnette was endorsed by Di Rupo and the party heavyweights. Still at the margin of the political system in 2013, the Maoist PTB/PVDA (the only party fully structured at the national level) was increasingly active in gearing up activist support, also helped by increased presence in local politics in the Antwerp, Brussels and Liège regions (Rihoux et al. 2013: 33). It announced membership figures at around 7,000 – a concerning development both for the PS and *Ecolo* from the perspective of the 2014 general elections.

The right-wing populist People’s Party (PP), created in 2009 at the national level (Rihoux et al. 2010: 906) but since 2011 restricted to the francophone side and still marginal in electoral terms, managed to recruit well-known television personality L. Trullemans in November. In that same month, it also held a programmatic congress in which it validated its ‘100 point’ manifesto targeted at the 2014 general elections. Finally, L. Louis, who had been the sole PP federal MP elected in 2010 (Rihoux et al. 2011: 920) but had left the PP to remain as an independent MP and then create his own party, the MLD (*Mouvement Libéral Démocrate*) (Rihoux et al. 2012: 46), dissolved the MLD in January. In November, following an unsuccessful attempt to take control of the anti-system Muslim *Islam Party*, he created another political movement, DLB (*Debout les Belges*). Throughout the year, he multiplied provocations in and out of parliament (antisemitic statements, naming the Prime Minister a ‘paedophile’, etc.), and continued to attract several law suits against him.

Associated issues in national politics

Most issues in Belgian politics were genuinely national, such as the passing of the huge sixth state reform bill (1,000 pages), budgetary austerity measures (see below) and the imple-

1 mentation of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde institutional reforms (on the latter point, see
2 Rihoux et al. 2011: 916). However, a few issues related to federal competences resonated
3 more within the Flemish than the francophone party system and public opinion, such as the
4 abuse of 'local administrative sanctions', the problem of youngsters going to fight with
5 radical Islamist groups in Syria, and the malfunctioning of the new FYRA trains intended
6 to ensure a faster connection between Brussels, Antwerp and the Netherlands. Also there
7 was the vehement critique of the N-VA on the supposed fiscal fraud of the ACW (*Algemeen*
8 *Christelijk Werknemersverbond*, General Christian Workers Association), the main faction
9 within the CD&V (and CDH (French-speaking Christian-Democrats)) and the wider
10 Christian pillar organisations in Belgium.

11 Within the Flemish executive (composed of Flemish Christian-Democrats, Socialists
12 and N-VA), some quarrels continued on major public work initiatives (e.g., the closure of
13 the Antwerp ring road), on secondary education reforms, the prohibition of the Muslim veil
14 in local administration and state schools, and budgetary austerity measures.

15 On 3 July, the head of state, King Albert II, announced his abdication, citing old age and
16 health problems to justify his decision. The abdication took place on 21 July, the National
17 Day. On the same day, his eldest son, Philippe, acceded to the throne, becoming the seventh
18 king of Belgium as Philippe I, and his wife became Queen Mathilde.

19 On 30 March, the federal coalition cobbled together a budget adjustment agreement
20 implying an effort of 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (€1.434 billion), of which
21 about a third consisted of tax increases and two thirds of new spending cuts, in order to
22 bring the public debt level below 100 per cent of GDP. The strongest cuts were made in
23 health care and development cooperation. Some special tax arrangements were eliminated
24 (deductibility of notional interests for multinational firms), and increases in taxation levels
25 were imposed on selected sectors, such as tobacco products and recipients of service
26 vouchers ('*titres-services*'/'*dienstencheques*', a form of state subsidy for low-qualified service
27 jobs, such as house cleaners widely used by Belgian households).

28 In the area of labour relations, the harmonisation of the status of blue collar and white
29 collar workers was passed on 26 December. This 'single status' for all employees will come
30 into force in January 2014 and will bring the length of the notice period given to manual/
31 industrial workers up to the level of the one for clerical employees.

32 The year 2013 was rather bad for Belgian economic growth. Despite the earlier reform
33 of the unemployment insurance system, which entailed the decrease of the number of
34 workers falling under the unemployment benefit system (Rihoux et al. 2013: 34), the
35 unemployment rate reached 8.5 per cent of the active population at the end the year (1
36 per cent higher than in 2012). Company bankruptcies in 2013 jumped to a record number
37 of 12,306 – an 11.5 per cent increase over the previous year's tally. The restructuring of
38 some large enterprises also led to the loss of thousands of jobs. Among them,
39 ArcelorMittal, the world-leading steel group, announced on 24 January the closing
40 down of most of its production lines in Liège. The Walloon Region had to intervene
41 and inject capital into the plant to save a part of the affected jobs. The American
corporation Caterpillar also announced on 28 February its decision to cut 1,400 of the
3,700 jobs at its Gosselies (Charleroi) plant. In the banking sector, too, the ING Group
and the BNP-Paribas-Fortis international bank announced plans involving significant
downsizing.

1 In this rather morose context, there was, however, strong public interest and a form of
2 'national pride' in connection with the Belgian national football team (the 'Red Devils')
3 that easily ensured its qualification for the 2014 World Cup and provisionally rose up to fifth
4 position in the FIFA rankings.

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