Belgium: Political Developments and Data in 2018

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Introduction

The non-typical Michel I federal coalition that was formed in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2015) went through a tumultuous year and eventually fell in December. After an unsuccessful attempt to continue with a minority Michel II cabinet, the PM had to resign and the cabinet continued in a caretaker capacity. The October local elections showed the coalition parties – and traditional parties in general – losing some ground. The overall socioeconomic climate remained tense in spite of some encouraging policy results, and the overall party-political atmosphere became increasingly nervous as all parties continued to gear up for the May 2019 ‘mother of all elections’ (regional, federal and European).

Cabinet report

It was a difficult year for the unique and asymmetric Michel I cabinet, composed of three Flemish parties and only one French-speaking party, the Liberal Reformist Movement (MR) (Rihoux et al. 2015). The year was marked by numerous scandals and tensions mostly related to migration issues that were repeatedly expected to topple the government.

Michel I eventually fell in early December after several weeks of government crisis. While PM Michel announced in September that Belgium would support the UN Migration Pact, the largest party of the government, the national-conservative New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), contested this position in late October, in an attempt to appeal to its electorate after disappointing results at the October 14 local elections. The other three government parties were not willing to abandon the UN Migration Pact, which led the five N-VA ministers and secretaries of state to resign on December 9. The *de facto* Michel II government reshuffled the N-VA portfolios amongst the remaining government members, and the two remaining secretaries of state were upgraded to the level of minister. PM Michel tried to set up a minority government with *ad hoc* majorities to pass important bills before the next elections of May 2019 but faced a stern opposition. When some opposition parties introduced a no-confidence vote, the PM decided to resign before the vote and the Michel II government’s termination was accepted by the King on December 21. Since then, the government continued in office in a caretaker capacity.

*Table 1.* Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2018

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Duration of cabinet | Inception | 11 October 2014 | Dissolution | 9 December 2018 |
| Period covered by table | From | 1 January 2018 | Until | 9 December 2018 |
| Type of cabinet | Minimum Winning Coalition (MWC) |
| A. | Party/gender composition on 1 January 2018 | Seats in cabineta | Seats held by women | Seats in parliament |
| N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
|  | New Flemish Alliance/ *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA), Dutch-speaking | 5 | 27.8% | 1 | 20.0% | 31 | 20.7% |
|  | Reformist Movement/*Mouvement Réformateur* (MR), French-speaking | 7 | 38.9% | 2 | 28.6% | 20 | 13.3% |
|  | Christian-Democrat and Flemish/*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* (CD&V), Dutch-speaking | 3 | 16.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 18 | 12.0% |
|  | Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking | 3 | 16.7% | 1 | 33.3% | 14 | 9.3% |
|  | Totals | 18 | 100.0% | 4 | 22.2% | 83 | 55.3% |
| B. | Composition of Michel I cabinet on 1 January 2018 |
|  | See previous edition of the *Political Data Yearbook* for Belgium (Rihoux et al. 2017) or <http://politicaldatayearbook.com> |
| C. | Changes in composition of Michel I cabinet during 2018 |
|  | Ministerial title | Outgoing minister | Outgoing date | Incoming minister | Comments |
|  | Minister of Defence, in charge of Civil Service  | Steven Vandeput (1967 male, N-VA) | 12 November  | Sander Loones(1979 male, N-VA) | Assumed office on 12 November  |
| D. | Party/gender composition on 9 December 2018 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Same as on 1 January  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Notes: a Including four ‘secretaries of state’ (deputy/junior ministers).

Source: CRISP (2019a)

*Table 2.* Cabinet composition of Michel II in Belgium in 2018

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Duration of cabinet | Inception | 9 December 2018 | Dissolution | 21 December 2018 |
| Period covered by table | From | 9 December 2018 | Until | 21 December 2018 |
| Type of cabinet | Minority Coalition (MC) |
| A. | Party/gender composition on 9 December 2018 | Seats in cabinet | Seats held by women | Seats in parliament |
| N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
|  | Reformist Movement (MR), French-speaking  | 7 | 53.8% | 2 | 28.6% | 20 | 13.3% |
|  | Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking  | 3 | 23.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 18 | 12.0% |
|  | Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking  | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 14 | 9.3% |
|  | Totals | 13 | 100% | 3 | 23.1% | 52 | 34.7% |
| B. | Composition of Michel II cabinet on 9 December 2018 |
|  | Ministerial Title | Minister |
|  | Prime Minister | Charles Michel (1975 male, MR) |
|  | Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Employment, Economy and Consumer Affairs, in charge of Foreign Trade, Combating Poverty, Equal Opportunities, and Disabled People | Kris Peeters (1962 male, CD&V) |
|  | Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, in charge of the Fight against Tax Fraud, and Minister of Development Cooperation | Alexander De Croo (1975 male, Open VLD) |
|  | Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, and of Defence, in charge of Belirisb and Federal Cultural Institutions | Didier Reynders (1958 male, MR) |
|  | Minister of Security and the Interior | Pieter De Crem (1962 male, CD&V) |
|  | Minister of Justice, in charge of the Buildings Agency | Koen Geens (1958 male, CD&V) |
|  | Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, and Asylum Policy and Migration | Maggie De Block (1962 female, Open VLD) |
|  | Minister of Pensions | Daniel Bacquelaine (1952 male, MR) |
|  | Minister of Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development | Marie-Christine Marghem (1963 female, MR) |
|  | Minister of the Budget and Civil Service, in charge of the National Lottery and Science Policy | Sophie Wilmès (1975 female, MR) |
|  | Minister of Mobility, in charge of Belgocontrol and the National Railway Company of Belgium | Francois Bellot (1954 male, MR) |
|  | Minister of Small Businesses, Self-employment, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Agriculture and Social Integration, in charge of Larger Towns | Denis Ducarme (1973 male, MR) |
|  | Minister of Digital Agenda, Telecom and Postal Services, in charge of Administrative Simplification, the Fight against Social Fraud, Privacy and North Sea | Philippe De Backer (1978 male, Open VLD) |
| C. | Changes in composition of Michel II cabinet during 2018 |
|  | Ministerial title | Outgoing minister | Outgoing date | Incoming minister | Comments |
|  | None |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| D. | Party/gender composition on 21 December 2018 | Seats in cabinet | Seats held by women | Seats in parliament |
| N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
|  | Same as on 9 December |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Notes: b Beliris: Cooperation Agreement between the federal state and the Brussels-Capital Region dedicated to the promotion of the national and international role of Brussels through infrastructure, renovation and mobility initiatives.

Source: CRISP (2019b)

Parliament report

The 5th year of the legislative term was characterised by a higher number of changes among MPs as compared to previous years. Among Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD) MPs, Annemie Turtelboom was replaced by Frank Wilrycx on 3 May, and Sabien Lahaye-Battheu was replaced by Sandrine De Crom on 6 December. In the francophone Socialist Party (PS), Eric Massin was replaced by Olivier Henry on 24 May, and Stéphane Crusnière was replaced by Michel Corthouts on 4 October. In the francophone Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH), Isabelle Poncelet was replaced by Anne-Catherine Goffinet on 20 September. In the francophone Green Party (Ecolo), Muriel Gerkens was replaced by Sarah Schlitz on 18 October and Benoit Hellings was replaced by Véronique Waterschoot on 6 December. Due to the resignation of the N-VA from the governmental coalition, Wim Van der Donckt was replaced by Zuhal Demir on 9 December and Renate Hufkens was replaced by Theo Francken on that same date.

In 2018, the share of women in the federal parliament stayed at around 40 per cent in the Flemish-speaking group and 30 per cent in the French-speaking group.

*Table 2*. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2018

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Party | 1 January 2018 | 31 December 2018 |
| All | Women | All | Women |
| N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Socialist Party/*Parti socialiste* (PS) | 23 | 15.3 | 7 | 30.4 | 23 | 15.3 | 7 | 30.4 |
| Christian Democratic and Flemish/*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* (CD&V)  | 18 | 12.0 | 8 | 44.4 | 18 | 12.0 | 8 | 44.4 |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD) | 14 | 9.3 | 7 | 50.0 | 14 | 9.3 | 6 | 43.0 |
| Reformist Movement/*Mouvement Réformateur* (MR) | 20 | 13.3 | 5 | 25.0 | 20 | 13.3 | 5 | 25.0 |
| Socialist Party Different/*Socialistische Partij Anders* (sp.a) | 13 | 8.7 | 7 | 53.8 | 13 | 8.7 | 7 | 53.8 |
| Humanist Democratic Centre/*Centre démocrate humaniste* (cdH) | 9 | 6.0 | 3 | 33.3 | 9 | 6.0 | 3 | 33.3 |
| Flemish Interest/*Vlaams Belang* (VB) | 3 | 2.0 | 1 | 33.3 | 3 | 2.0 | 1 | 33.3 |
| New Flemish Alliance/*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) | 31 | 20.7 | 14 | 45.2 | 31 | 20.7 | 13 | 42.0 |
| Independents | 2 | 1.3 | 1 | 50.0 | 2 | 1.3 | 1 | 50.0 |
| Green Party (francophone)/*Ecolo* (Ecolo) | 6 | 4.0 | 1 | 16.6 | 6 | 4.0 | 2 | 33.3 |
| Green Party (Flemish)/*Groen* (Groen) | 6 | 4.0 | 3 | 50.0 | 6 | 4.0 | 3 | 50.0 |
| Democratic Federalist Independent/*Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant* (DéFI) | 2 | 1.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 1.3 | 0 | 0.0 |
| People’s Party/*Parti Populaire* (PP) | 1 | 0.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 0.7 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Workers’ Party of Belgium /*Parti du travail de Belgique – Partij van de Arbeid van België* (PTB-PVDA) | 2 | 1.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 1.3 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Totals | 150 | 100.0 | 57 | 38.0 | 150 | 100.0 | 56 | 37.3 |

Source: Data on gender provided upon request by the General Services Department of the Belgian federal parliament.

**Political party report**

Most parties held programmatic congresses in connection with the 14 October local and provincial elections, and all parties were keen to avoiding leadership change during the year. Ecolo was the exception to the rule, as one of its two co-presidents, Patrick Dupriez, surprisingly resigned right after the party’s electoral success at the local elections. He was smoothly replaced by Jean-Marc Nollet, former regional minister (2009-2014) and prominent federal MP, by a party congress vote (93%) on 9 November, thereby forming a strong duo with the other co-president (Zakia Khattabi).

Belgium’s most powerful political leader, N-VA party president B. De Wever continued his fifth consecutive mandate, while remaining mayor of Antwerp, Flanders’ largest city. He announced his candidacy for becoming minister-president of Flanders after the 2019 regional elections.

*Table 3.* Political party changes in Belgium in 2018

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A. | Party institutional changes in 2018 |
|  | There were no changes in 2018  |
| B. | Party leadership changes in 2018 |
|  | Ecolo co-president Patrick Dupriez (1968 male, Ecolo) resigned on 20 October, replaced by Jean-Marc Nollet (1970 male, Ecolo) on 9 November by party congress vote (93%). |
| Sources: Various media. |

Institutional change report

As a result of the ‘sixth state reform’ that was passed in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) and following its gradual implementation from 2014 onwards (Rihoux et al. 2015; Rihoux et al. 2016; Rihoux et al. 2017; Rihoux et al. 2018), a final batch of competences were transferred on 1 January from the federal to the regional/community level. They touched upon specific healthcare policies such as psychiatric institutions, palliative care units and elderly patients.

Issues in national politics

On the ‘community conflict’ front between Flemings and Francophones, the dominant N-VA continued to put its demands completely on hold, as agreed at the formation of the Michel I government in 2014. It however relentlessly continued to underline North-South differences in various policy fields (refugees and migrants, the nomination of mayors in the some communes of the Brussels periphery (Rihoux et al. 2018), islamic veils at school, local mismanagement in Brussels, etc.), but without proposing reforms for more devolution.

Reflecting the federal government’s ambitions in terms of job creation, 61,000 new jobs (1.3 % of the total workforce) were created during the year, mainly in the private sector. This was a lower figure than in 2017, and a significant proportion of them were still part-time or flexible jobs. At 1.4%, the economy posted weak growth relative to 2017 (1.7%).

This was also an electoral year at the municipal and provincial level. Those ballots, as a dry run held on 14 October, seven months before the next federal, regional and European ones on 26 May 2019, were an important test. Overall, they showed a decrease for the coalition parties. The projection of the provincial results indicates that their majority in seats could be lost both at the federal level and in the regional Walloon parliament – but not in the Flemish one. Broadly, the traditional parties lost these elections, be it in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels regions, with the green parties the major beneficiaries in all regions. The ballots revealed the deepening left-right divide distinguishing the North from the South of Belgium. Indeed, in Flanders the lower scores of the N-VA were compensated by the gains of the far right nationalist Flemish Interest (VB), whereas the radical left Workers’ Party of Belgium (PTB) benefited from the ballot in Wallonia.

Concerning the asylum and migrants issue, the government failed to pass a bill authorizing home visits by the police of people suspected of hosting illegal migrants, due to the entrenched resistance of public opinion. In May, public opinion had been shocked by the death of Mawda, a two-year old Kurdish female toddler who was shot by the police during a high-speed chase of a van in which migrants tried to reach England.

On 26 October, after a long debate on the replacement of F-16 jet fighters, a 4 billion euro contract that sparked tensions between Francophones and Flemings, the government chose the American Lockheed F-35. This had been in competition with the French Dassault Rafale and the Eurofighter Typhoon of the multinational European consortium Eurofighter Jagdflugzeug.

Regarding the moral conflict line, the coalition had to face the issue implied by the request to remove abortion from the Penal Code. An ambiguous compromise was reached, indeed proceeding to the depenalization but maintaining some criminal sanctions if the abortion takes place outside the new legal requirements, and passing a new bill granting a legal status to the fetus.

On the social front, the trade unions staged mass demonstrations in May, October and December, in opposition to coalition projects regarding the retirement pension system. At the fringe of these actions, the spontaneous citizens’ movement of the “yellow vests” initiated in France found some echo in Belgium in the autumn, almost exclusively in the French-speaking regions and notably in Wallonia.

On 2 December, riding the wave of the international movement mobilized to advocate bold policies for sustainable development, a “climate coalition March” gathered more than 70 000 participants in Brussels.

Sources

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