

## **Belgium**

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### **Introduction**

The year 2016 was expected to be a relatively quiet one, as a mid-term year in between the 2014 general elections and the next electoral cycle in 2018 and 2019. Some tensions continued to prevail within the non-typical ‘Swedish’ federal coalition (referring to the blue of the liberals, the yellow of the N-VA and the cross of the CD&V) formed in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2015). The socioeconomic climate remained quite tense as well, but this was overshadowed by two severe terrorist acts in the Brussels area. These took a heavy toll, had negative economic consequences and led to enduring and stiff security measures all across the country.

### **Cabinet report**

This was not a peaceful year for the Michel I cabinet whose survival was challenged at least twice. This was not the result of ethnolinguistic tensions between the coalition partners, as the Flemish nationalist N-VA managed to keep its word and to keep community issues on the low side, even though this party still cherishes Flemish independence.

The terrorist attacks of 22 March shook the cabinet when the Ministers of the Interior and of Justice handed in their resignations, which were eventually refused by the prime minister. This was not the case for the Minister of Mobility who eventually resigned after a succession of scandals related in particular to airport security issues.

The negotiations on the 2017 budget were also difficult for the Michel I cabinet. When the CD&V deputy prime minister left the negotiations, the prime minister was constrained to postpone the presentation of the budget and to freeze some antagonistic proposals coming from the CD&V and the N-VA. Never did the divide run along linguistic community lines, as all intra-cabinet conflicts occurred between the three Flemish coalition parties: the centre-right liberal Open VLD, the Flemish nationalist N-VA and the centrist Christian-Democrats (CD&V).

### **Parliament report**

Frank Wilrycx (Open VLD) was replaced by Annemie Turtelboom because she resigned as Minister of Finance, Budget and Energy in the Flemish (regional) Government on 26 April and hence reclaimed her federal MP position.

Among the N-VA party, Hendrik Vuye and Veerle Wouters left the party on 21 September due to divergent views about the federalisation process with the party president Bart De Wever. They continued to sit in parliament as independent MPs.

In 2016, the mean share of women in the federal parliament stayed at around 40 per cent of the Flemish-speaking group and 30 per cent for the French-speaking one.

### **Political party report**

There were no significant party institutional or leadership changes in 2016.

### **Institutional change report**

As a result of the ‘sixth state reform’ that was agreed upon in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) and the implementation of some first elements in 2014 and 2015 (Rihoux et al. 2015; Rihoux et al. 2016), further competences with associated budgets and staff were transferred from the federal to the regional/community level. The main competences that were in effect transferred on 1 January touched upon employment policies (in particular unemployment benefits and controls) and health policies (in particular health promotion, medical tests, elderly healthcare support, local healthcare institutions, monitoring of infectious diseases, etc.). Further competences will be transferred in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

### **Issues in national politics**

The country’s overall socioeconomic situation remained quite tense in 2016. The government’s implementation of a tax shift in order to increase the competitiveness of companies (Rihoux et al. 2016) only produced limited effects in terms of effective job creations. On the downside, the year was marked again by restructuring measures and plants closures by multinational companies, leading to significant job losses. On 2 September, Caterpillar announced the closure of its Belgian plant in Gosselies (Charleroi suburbs), with approximately 2,200 direct and 3,000 indirect job losses expected. Three days later, the France-based insurance firm AXA announced the suppression of 650 jobs in Belgium within the next two years and, on 3 October, ING, the Dutch banking and financial services corporation, announced in turn a downsizing by one-third of its Belgium-based staff within five years, with a loss of over 3,100 jobs. The year was also marked by successive waves of trade union protest against the government’s austerity policies, with national demonstrations and general strikes in June, September and October. Unsurprisingly, mobilisation was strongest in Wallonia, as the only French-speaking party represented in the federal government is Prime Minister Michel’s party, the MR, for which only one-quarter of Walloons voted in 2014.

On the security front, while the army was patrolling the streets as a result of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and a higher terrorist threat (Rihoux et al. 2016), Belgium was stunned on 22 March after two simultaneous severe terrorist acts occurred. The first, at the Brussels International airport in Zaventem and the second, in the subway near the Maelbeek metro station in Brussels, with a total death toll of 32 and more than 300 people

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2016

Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet	Inception From Minimum Winning Coalition (MWC)	11 October 2014 1 January 2016	Dissolution Until	Still in office at end of 2016 31 December 2016
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2016		Seats in cabinet <sup>a</sup> N      %	Seats held by women N      % of party	Seats in parliament N      %
New Flemish Alliance/ <i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (N-VA), Dutch-speaking		5      27.8%	1      20.0%	33      22.0%
Reformist Movement/ <i>Mouvement réformateur</i> (MR), French-speaking		7      38.9%	3      42.9%	20      13.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish/ <i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> (CD&V), Dutch-speaking		3      16.7%	0      0.0%	18      12.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/ <i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen Democraten</i> (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking		3      16.7%	1      33.3%	14      9.3%
Totals		18      100.0%	5      27.8%	85      56.7%
B. Composition of Michel I cabinet on 1 January 2016				
See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for Belgium (Rihoux et al. 2016) or <a href="http://politicaldatayearbook.com">http://politicaldatayearbook.com</a>				
C. Changes in composition of Michel I cabinet during 2016				
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister of Mobility	Jacqueline Galant (1974 female, MR)	15 April 2016	Francois Bellot (1954 male, MR)	Assumed office on 18 April 2016
Secretary of State of the Struggle against Social Fraud, Privacy and the North Sea	Bart Tommelein (1962 male, Open VLD)	29 April 2016	Philippe De Backer (1978 male, Open VLD)	Assumed office on 2 May 2016
D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2016		Seats in cabinet <sup>a</sup> N      %	Seats held by women N      % of party	Seats in parliament N      %
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)		5      27.8%	1      20.0%	31 <sup>b</sup> 20.7%
Reformist Movement (MR)		7      38.9%	2      28.6%	20      13.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V)		3      16.7%	0      0.0%	18      12.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)		3      16.7%	1      33.3%	14      9.3%
Totals		18      100.0%	4      22.2%	83      55.3%

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Including four 'secretaries of state' (deputy/junior ministers).

<sup>b</sup>Two MPs left the party on 21 September due to disagreements regarding the future of federalism in Belgium. See Parliament report below.

Source: CRISP (2017).

Table 2. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2016

Party	1 January 2016				31 December 2016			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Socialist Party/ <i>Parti socialiste</i> (PS)	23	15.3%	7	30.4%	23	15.3%	7	30.4%
Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V)	18	12.0%	8	44.4%	18	12.0%	8	44.4%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	14	9.3%	6	42.9%	14	9.3%	7	50.0%
Reformist Movement (MR)	20	13.3%	5	25.0%	20	13.3%	5	25.0%
Socialist Party Different/ <i>Socialistische Partij Anders</i> (sp.a)	13	8.7%	7	53.8%	13	8.7%	7	53.8%
Humanist Democratic Centre/ <i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (cdH)	9	6.0%	3	33.3%	9	6.0%	3	33.3%
Flemish Interest/ <i>Vlaams Belang</i> (VB)	3	2.0%	1	33.3%	3	2.0%	1	33.3%
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	33	22.0%	15	45.5%	31	20.7%	14	45.2%
Independents					2	1.3%	1	50.0%
Ecology Party/ <i>Écologistes</i> (Ecolo)	6	4.0%	1	16.6%	6	4.0%	1	16.6%
Green (Groen)	6	4.0%	3	50.0%	6	4.0%	3	50.0%
Democratic Federalist Independent/ <i>Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant</i> (DéFI)	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%
People's Party/ <i>Parti Populaire</i> (PP)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%
Workers' Party of Belgium-Left Opening! <i>/Parti du travail de Belgique-Gauche d'ouverture!</i> (PTB-Go!)	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%
Totals	150	100.0%	56	37.3%	150	100.0%	57	38.0%

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

injured. This brought the whole Brussels area to a halt for several days and had longer-lasting negative consequences on the economy, in particular with a sharp drop in tourism figures over the year. It also took several months to bring the Brussels International airport – a very important economic hub for the country – back to its normal operational capacity. The already high alert level (level 3 on a scale of 4) was therefore maintained throughout the year. The government also added new measures to the security system adopted the year before. Among others, these included more CCTV in the streets and the creation of a specific service to protect sensitive installations.

Due to revelations of political and financial scandals involving politicians, public discontent against the political class grew over the year. Following the so-called Kazakhgate scandal, in which the former Speaker of the Senate Armand De Decker, and even the Deputy Prime Minister Didier Reynders (both MR), have become embroiled, a parliamentary investigation committee was set up in December. It will have to deal with the role they could have played in this affair, where the French Presidency allegedly tried to get the Belgian parliament to vote a law allowing some of their Kazakh economic partners facing a condemnation in Belgium to be let off.

At the very end of the year, a new scandal blew up: the Publifin affair, involving PS, MR and CDH political representatives within large public intermunicipal structures ('intercommunales') of the Liège area who were highly paid for useless public trusts they

did not even have to work for. It contributed to further undermine public confidence in the political system and mainstream political parties, especially in Wallonia.

### **Sources and further information**

Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2017). Gouvernement Charles Michel. Available online at: [http://www.crisp.be/crisp/wp-content/uploads/doc\\_pol/gouvernements/federal/compositions/Michel-2014-10-14\\_v5.pdf](http://www.crisp.be/crisp/wp-content/uploads/doc_pol/gouvernements/federal/compositions/Michel-2014-10-14_v5.pdf)

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