Belgium: Political Development and Data for 2017

Benoît Rihoux,1 Audrey Vandeleene,2 Lieven De Winter,1 Pierre Baudewyns1 & Serge Deruette3

1 *Centre de Science Politique et de Politique Comparée (CESPOL), Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium;* **2 *Lund University, Sweden****;* **3*Université de Mons, Belgium***

Introduction

Some tensions, especially around budget and tax issues, continued to prevail within the non-typical Michel I federal coalition that was formed in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2015). The overall socioeconomic climate remained quite tense, amidst a disputed economic record of the federal executive and some trade union mobilizations. Major corruption scandals erupted or continued to unfold, while an unexpected coalition change re-shuffled some cards on the French-speaking side. The overall party-political atmosphere gradually became more nervous as all parties began to gear up for the next electoral cycle with the local elections in 2018 followed by the regional, federal and European elections in 2019.

Cabinet report

As in the previous years, the largest party in the Michel I government, the Flemish Nationalist N-VA, managed to keep its word and kept community conflicts on hold – in spite of the fact that it still cherishes Flemish independence. The quite unique and asymmetric Michel I cabinet (Rihoux et al. 2015), composed of three Flemish parties and only one French-speaking party (the Liberal MR), was therefore able to avoid tensions on the community front. All intracabinet conflicts occurred between the three Flemish coalition parties, especially around socio-economic issues, and the francophone prime minister often had to act as appeaser between them. In October, a mini-crisis erupted as the result of a clash over the budget between the CD&V and the N-VA especially. At the final negotiations about a comprehensive budgetary and fiscal package deal, Kris Peeters, the Flemish Christian-democrat (CD&V) vice-prime minister, walked out of the inner cabinet’s evening meeting to consult his party leadership and did not return until the next day. Eventually, a deal was struck, but the prime minister’s State of Union speech at the opening of the parliamentary year had to be postponed for five days.

The migrant crisis, and in particular alleged collaborations with the Sudanese government, seriously hit Michel I. Several political opposition and civil society leaders repeatedly called the Secretary of State for asylum and migration Theo Francken (N-VA) to resign, to no avail as the Michel I coalition partners stayed loyal to a quite hard line on illegal migrants.

The crisis in the Walloon regional government slightly affected the federal government in that Michel I lost one minister. As a consequence of the coalition change in the Walloon cabinet, Willy Borsus became Minister President of the Walloon Region and stood aside for his party colleague Denis Ducarme, former parliamentary group leader at the Chamber of Representatives.

*Table 1.* Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2017

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Duration of cabinet | Inception | 11 October 2014 | Dissolution | Still in office at end of 2017 |
| Period covered by table | From | 1 January 2017 | Until | 31 December 2017 |
| Type of cabinet | Minimum Winning Coalition (MWC) |
| A. | Party/gender composition on 1 January 2017 | 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 Demokraten* (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 2017 |
|  | See previous editions of the *Political Data Yearbook* for Belgium (Rihoux et al. 2017) or <http://politicaldatayearbook.com> |
| C. | Changes in composition of Michel I cabinet during 2017 |
|  | Ministerial title | Outgoing minister | Outgoing date | Incoming minister | Comments |
|  | Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities, the Disabled, Science Policy, in charge of Large Cities, adjunct to the Minister of Finances and to the Minister of Interior | Elke Sleurs(1968 female, N-VA) | 20 February 2017 | Zuhal Demir (1980 female, N-VA) | Assumed office on 24 February 2017 |
|  | Minister of Middle Classes, the Self-employed, Small and Medium-sized Companies, Agriculture and Social Integration | Willy Borsus(1962 male, MR) | 26 July 2017 | Denis Ducarme(1973 male, MR) | Assumed office on 28 July 2017 |
| D. | Party/gender composition on 31 December 2017 | Seats in cabineta | Seats held by women | Seats in parliament |
| N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
|  | New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)  | 5 | 27.8% | 1 | 20.0% | 31 | 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: a Including four ‘secretaries of state’ (deputy/junior ministers).

Source: CRISP (2018)

Parliament report

The 4th year of the legislature was characterized by a few changes in the Chamber of Representatives. In the sp.a (Flemish Socialists), Johan Vande Lanotte was replaced by Annick Lambrecht on 10 January, and Ann Vanheste was replaced by Youri Casier on 11 December. In the PS (French-speaking Socialists), Willy Demeyer (PS) was replaced by Jacques Chabot on 2 November. In the N-VA (Flemish Nationalists), Zuhal Demir was replaced by Wim Van der Donckt on 9 March because of her appointment as Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities, the Disabled, Science Policy, in charge of Large Cities. Finally, in the MR (French-speaking Liberals), Denis Ducarme was replaced by Isabelle Galant on 28 July following his appointment as Minister of Middle Classes, the Self-employed, Small and Medium-sized Companies, Agriculture and Social Integration.

In 2017, the mean 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 one.

*Table 2*. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2017

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Party | 1 January 2017 | 31 December 2017 |
| 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(CD&V)  | 18 | 12.0% | 8 | 44.4% | 18 | 12.0% | 8 | 44.4% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD) | 14 | 9.3% | 7 | 50.0% | 14 | 9.3% | 7 | 50.0% |
| Reformist Movement(MR) | 20 | 13.3% | 5 | 25.0% | 20 | 13.3% | 6 | 33,0% |
| 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 (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% |
| Ecology Party/*Écologistes*(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/*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-Left Opening! !/*Parti du travail de Belgique-Gauche d'ouverture!* (PTB-Go!) | 2 | 1.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 1.3% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Totals | 150 | 100.0 | 57 | 38.0% | 150 | 100.0 | 57 | 38.0% |

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

**Political party report**

Most parties held regular party congresses, but none announced a major ideological turn – perhaps to the exception of the Socialist Party (PS) who initiated a turn towards a more Left-wing stance as it had to face growing competition by the Maoist PTB-Go! Party.

On the Flemish-speaking side, only one party needed to (re-)elect a leader: the N-VA. Bart De Wever, elected for the first time in 2004, was chosen for a fifth mandate on 18 November by an all member vote, with a 98,5 per cent majority and without any competitor. No leadership or institutional party change occurred on the French-speaking side.

*Table 3.* Political party changes in Belgium in 2017

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A. | Party institutional changes in 2017 |
|  | *[none]* |
| B. | Party leadership changes in 2017 |
|  | N-VA president Bart De Wever (1970 male, N-VA), re-elected on 18 November by membership vote (98,5%) |
| Sources: various media. |

Institutional change report

As a result of the ‘sixth state reform’ that was agreed upon in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) and following its stepwise implementation from 2014 onwards (Rihoux et al. 2015; Rihoux et al. 2016; Rihoux et al. 2017), 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 some specific healthcare policies: tobacco withdrawal treatments and home delivery of some healthcare services. A final batch of competences is due to be transferred on 1 January 2018.

Issues in national politics

On the socio-economic front, with a federal government announcing socio-economics as its top agenda, 69.000 new jobs were created during the year, a figure slightly above that of 2016, with quite a proportion of part-time and flexible jobs. The economic growth went up to a still quite meager 1.7 %, a figure below that of most of the other Western countries. Bankruptcy figures were higher than in 2016, and the plant closure at America’s Caterpillar in Gosselies became effective involving, together with redundancies at suppliers, about 5,000 job losses.

In that mixed climate, a general collective bargaining agreement was reached early in the year, ensuring less tension between unions and employers. Nonetheless, the year was marked by some large union-lead strikes and demonstrations aiming the federal government, which responded by denouncing them as purely political protests instrumentalised especially by the Socialists.

In September, State Secretary for Asylum and Immigration, Theo Francken (N-VA), caused yet again controversy, inviting a Sudanese delegation of officials to Brussels in spite of the likelihood that they were security agents sent to identify opponents and, whenever possible, arrange for their repatriation. As, according to testimonies of returned refugees, some of those were tortured upon their forced return, deportations had to be suspended, pending an investigation. He also began to receive stark criticism, especially from French-speaking opposition parties, for a draft bill that would enable the police to perform house visits of citizens hosting illegal migrants, so as to bring the latter in closed detention centres and eventually deport them if applicable.

The Publifin affair, the political-financial scandal which erupted at the end of 2016 (Rihoux et al. 2017: 34-35), involving corrupt public representatives within large public intermunicipal structures in the Walloon area of Liège, was not the only one to contribute to further undermine public confidence in the political system. In the Flemish Region too, a similar scandal was unearthed at the beginning of the year: the Publipart affair. In June, another corruption scandal wrought havoc. Implying among others Yvan Mayeur, the PS Mayor of the City of Brussels, it led to his resignation and the setting up of a parliamentary investigation committee. In the so-called Kazakhgate scandal (Rihoux et al. 2017: 34), the parliamentary investigation committee which had been set up in late 2016 seemed to be going nowhere.

In the area of security, in the wake of the 2016 terrorist attacks at the National airport and in the Brussels subway (Rihoux et al. 2017), the high alert level (3 on a scale of 4) was maintained throughout the year.

On the French-speaking side, a serious political crisis was triggered by the sudden coalition moves of the leader of the Francophone Christian Democrats (cdH), Benoît Lutgen. On 19 June, without warning his ministers in the Walloon regional government, the Brussels Regional government and the Community government of the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*, he announced at a press conference that he discontinued the coalition with the PS (Socialists), his main coalition partner in these sub-state executives. He did manage to create a new coalition in the Walloon executive with the Liberals (MR) under the leadership of the MR minister-president Willy Borsus installed on 28 July after a constructive vote of confidence. However, in the Brussels regional executive coalition, composed of PS, cdH, DéFI (the former FDF), as well as the Flemish CD&V, Open VLD and sp.a, no alternative coalition could be brought. After some months of ambiguity, this “caretaking” executive became effective again. Consequently, it was also impossible to form a new executive coalition for the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*. This coalition change (attempts), that occurred amongst francophone parties only, did not really concern the Flemish parties. Only the N-VA applauded Lutgen’s initiatives, as the N-VA had been pushing for ousting the Socialist since 2010, at all levels.

Another, entirely unexpected potential crisis came from Catalonia, when its independentist minister president fled the country and settled in Brussels. Flemish Nationalists, and the N-VA as their main party and also by now the predominant party in the federal and Flemish government, found themselves in an ambiguous position. While individual N-VA members were allowed to express full support for Catalan independence and their ‘brothers in exile’, the official position of the party was much more careful. The N-VA realized that full support for Catalan independence and their leaders in exile in Brussels would reinforce their own image of a separatist party, while the entire compromise that had enabled the formation of the Michel I government (and that presumably would enable a coalition continuation in 2019) was that they would put ethnolinguistic issues into the political fridge and concentrate instead on socio-economic topics on which a (centre-)right compromise could be found more easily.

The N-VA minister of internal affairs of the Flemish government Liesbeth Homans nominated the francophone Valérie Geeurickx (independent, but former vice-president of the “Flemish-unfriendly” FDF until 2014) as mayor of Linkebeek, after decades of linguistic troubles in that small Flemish commune in the Brussels periphery. Successive Flemish ministers of internal affairs had refused candidates proposed by the overwhelming francophone majority in the local council of the formally Flemish commune, granting since 1963 linguistic facilities to the large francophone majority. This eased tensions at least at the surface, while Flemish nationalists took on to carefully scrutinize every single word of the new mayor and her local executive – technically, the latter are forbidden to use French during the municipal council meetings.

Sources

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