

Belgium

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Introduction

The year 2015 was much less atypical than the previous year, which had witnessed simultaneous regional, parliamentary and European Parliament elections and the formation of the unprecedented ‘Swedish’ or ‘kamikaze’ federal coalition (Rihoux et al. 2015). The overall socioeconomic situation remained difficult and some ethnolinguistic tensions persisted at the elite level, but this was partly eclipsed by the rise of unforeseen policy agendas around the refugee crisis and the Islamist terrorist threats.

Cabinet report

Michel I cabinet, beginning October 2014

This unprecedented federal cabinet, labelled by some as the ‘kamikaze coalition’ due to the participation of the Flemish nationalists (New Flemish Alliance, N-VA) and its arithmetic and ideological asymmetry (Rihoux et al. 2015), continued to stand strong during the whole year. It agreed to remain focused not on the so-called ‘community’ (ethnolinguistic) issues but rather on socioeconomic issues and the stabilisation of public finances. Frictions within the coalition were frequent, with some ethnolinguistic overtones, but this did not endanger the cabinet’s survival. The terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis put security at the forefront of the agenda, which shed light in particular on N-VA, which held most security-related portfolios and the asylum portfolio. Prime Minister Charles Michel was mostly seen as a compromise-maker rather than a real leader (that role being allegedly devoted in the backstage to N-VA president Bart De Wever); Michel’s popularity scores rose in the Flemish part of the country, while remaining quite low in the French-speaking part.

Parliament report

During 2015, three federal MPs were replaced: Melchior Wathelet (Humanist Democratic Centre, cdH) decided to leave his political career and was replaced by Michel de Lamotte on 23 April; Zakia Khattabi (Ecology Party, Ecolo) became party co-president and was replaced by Gilles Vanden Burre on 28 May; and Sophie Wilmès (Reformist Movement, MR) joined

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2015

Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet	Inception From Minimum	11 October 2014 1 January 2015 Winning Coalition (MWC)	Dissolution Until	Still in office at end of 2015 31 December 2015		
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2015						
	Seats in cabinet ^a		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	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%	2	28.6%	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%	4	22.2%	85	56.7%
B. Composition of Michel I cabinet on 1 January 2015						
See previous editions of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for Belgium (Rihoux et al. 2015) or www.politicaldatayearbook.com						
C. Changes in composition of Michel I cabinet during 2015						
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Security and the Interior, in charge of Large Cities and the Building Authority Jan Jambon (1960 male, N-VA) lost one portfolio on 21 May and became Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Security and the Interior, in charge of the Building Authority						
Minister of Finances Johan Van Overtveldt (1955 male, N-VA) gained one portfolio on 21 May and became Minister of Finances, in charge of the Struggle against Fiscal Fraud						
Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities, the Disabled, Struggle against Fiscal Fraud, Science Policy, adjunct to the Minister of Finances Elke Sleurs (1968 female, N-VA) lost one portfolio and gained another on 21 May and became Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities, the Disabled, Science Policy, in charge of Large Cities						
Minister of Budget, charged with the National Lottery Hervé Jamar (1965 male, MR) resigned to take another post at the provincial level on 21 September; he was replaced by Sophie Wilmès (1975 female, MR) on 22 September						
D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2015						
	Seats in cabinet ^a		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	5	27.8%	1	20.0%	33	22.0%
Reformist Movement (MR)	7	38.9%	3	42.9%	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%	5	27.8%	85	56.7%

Note: ^aIncluding four 'secretaries of state' (deputy/junior ministers).

Source: CRISP (2015).

Table 2. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2015

Party	1 January 2015				31 December 2015			
	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%	6	42.9%
Reformist Movement (MR)	20	13.3%	6	30.0%	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%	33	22.0%	15	45.5%
Ecology Party (Ecolo)	6	4.0%	2	33.3%	6	4.0%	1	16.6%
Green (Groen)	6	4.0%	3	50.0%	6	4.0%	3	50.0%
Francophone Democratic Federalists/ <i>Fédéralistes démocrates francophones</i> (FDF), then 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%	58	38.7%	150	100.0	56	37.3%

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

the federal government as Minister of Budget and was replaced in parliament by Gautier Calomme on 13 October.

As the Michel I cabinet was quickly negotiated in 2014 and put in place before the end of the year, there were few sources of gender shifts in parliament. In 2015, the mean share of women in the federal parliament stayed around 40 per cent for the Flemish-speaking group and 30 per cent for the French-speaking one.

Institutional changes

After the 'sixth state reform' was agreed upon in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) and the implementation of some first elements in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2015), a whole range of further elements began to be implemented in 2015, in the form of the transfer of various competences (as well as budgets and staff) from the federal to the regional/community level. The main competences that were in effect transferred on 1 January touched upon numerous

Table 3. Changes in political parties in Belgium in 2015

A. Party institutional changes in 2015
Francophone Federalist Democrats/ <i>Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones</i> (FDF) changed its name to Democratic Federalist Independent/ <i>Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant</i> (DéFI) on 13 November
B. Party leadership changes in 2015
sp.a Party president Bruno Tobback (1969 male, sp.a) was replaced on 13 June by John Crombez (1973 male, sp.a) in a membership vote (78 per cent) Ecolo Party co-presidents Olivier Deleuze (1954 male, Ecolo) and Emily Hoyos (1977 female, Ecolo) were replaced on 22 March by Patrick Dupriez (1968 male, Ecolo) and Zakia Khattabi (1976 female, Ecolo) in a party assembly vote (60 per cent)

Source: Various media.

aspects of environment/agriculture, social, employment, energy, urban planning, economic, mobility and health policies. Further aspects of these competences are due to be transferred in the next few years (i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019).

Leadership changes in parties were much less numerous than in 2014. The only change on the Flemish-speaking side occurred within the Socialists (sp.a) whose president, Bruno Tobback, was blamed for losing the 2014 elections and criticised for his authoritarian style. After a bitter campaign, his self-declared challenger since July 2014, John Crombez, won 78 per cent of the membership vote on 13 June. Crombez's victory led to some party leadership shifts, but not to a major ideological shift to the left.

On the Francophone side, the only leadership change took place within Ecolo. Following a major defeat at the 2014 elections (Rihoux et al 2015), the election of two new co-presidents was anticipated, and Zakia Khattabi and Patrick Dupriez easily won the race with 60 per cent of the activists' vote on 22 March. The Democratic Federalists (FDF) president, Olivier Maingain, who was re-elected for a seventh consecutive term in March, pushed for a change of label of his party, thereby also reasserting its identity as an independent party (independent from the MR, in particular), covering quite a broad ideological spectrum. The new label, DéFI (*Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant*/Democratic Federalist Independent), was made official on 13 November.

Issues in national politics

On 1 January, time limits on unemployment benefits, which were decided under the previous coalition, entered into force and the local public welfare centres (CPAS/OCMW's) had to fill the breach as some unemployed were left with no income. The unannounced home visits to control the unemployed, abolished in 2000, were also re-installed. At a 1.2 per cent growth rate, the budgetary control passed in March transferred a part of the austerity measures to the Regions and Communities and included measures against social security fraud and tax evasion, decrease of payroll taxes on lower wages in the small and medium-sized enterprises, fiscal incentives for start-ups, and new resources for defence and special internal security forces.

Two of the most important measures included in the 2014 governmental declaration – the one-time suspension of Belgium’s otherwise automatic cost-of-living adjustments in the wages and the increase of legal retirement age from 65 to 67 – were passed in the lower house on 22 April and 23 July, respectively. On 10 October, the coalition passed provisions to implement the ‘tax shift’ – another major measure contained in its declaration. It is aimed at improving the economic competitiveness of companies and guaranteeing a greater purchasing power for workers by reducing both employer and employee payroll taxes from 33 to 25 per cent, compensated for by an increase in taxes on diesel, tobacco, alcohol, soft drinks and a higher value-added tax on electricity.

On the labour front, tensions grew in autumn. On 7 September, farmers marched on Brussels in response to the crisis in the agricultural commodity markets, mostly in the dairy and pig-farming sectors. Despite the resumption of the neo-corporatist ‘social dialogue’ (bargaining between trade union and employers’ organisations leaders) at the beginning of the year, about 100,000 people gathered in a national joint trade union demonstration in Brussels to protest the first anniversary of the government on 7 October and staggered strikes followed in the autumn.

Due to the inability of the federated entities to agree on the apportionment of the efforts required to meet the country’s climate obligations, Belgium appeared divided at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) held in Paris in November–December. Finally, just before the end of the conference, federal and regional ministers managed to reach an agreement (one of the least ambitious in Europe) on reductions of greenhouse gas emission and on the development of renewable energy. The Prime Minister also signed an agreement with the Electrabel GDF Suez energy corporation bearing on a reduction of their nuclear taxes and a ten-year working life extension for its ageing nuclear power plants, Doel 1 and 2, in spite of mounting debates on the security of the power plants and of the halting of some reactors (in both nuclear production sites: Doel and Tihange) due to technical problems.

With regards to the ever-present ethnolinguistic disputes, 2015 was altogether a quiet year. The major engine for institutional demands, the N-VA, had agreed to put on hold further calls for major reforms until the next federal elections in 2019, as a prerequisite for its entry in the Michel I cabinet (Rihoux et al. 2015). It basically stuck to its promise, in spite of criticism from the Flemish Nationalist movement and of the waning separatist xenophobe Vlaams Belang (VB) party. Only one genuine ethnolinguistic issue managed to reach the political agenda: the continued refusal of the N-VA Flemish Minister of the Interior Liesbeth Homans to nominate the francophone mayor Damien Thiéry (MR) of Linkebeek, allegedly as the latter did not abide by the language legislation in this small Flemish commune (with a majority of francophone inhabitants) in the Brussels periphery. A substitute Dutch-speaking mayor was nominated, who resigned after a few months, and new local elections were held on 13 December, won again by Damien Thiéry, to no avail. While this issue pitted the party of the Prime Minister (the MR, francophone Liberals) against the largest Flemish party (the N-VA), Michel managed to keep the issue off the federal government table.

At the beginning of the year, after the mid-January Islamist attacks in Paris (*Charlie Hebdo* and the *Hyper Cacher*), Belgium was praised for dismantling a terrorist cell in the Walloon city of Verviers. However, at the end of the year, following the 13 November terrorist attacks in Paris, Belgium was considered to be the weak link of anti-terrorism, with

the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek (where several Islamist terrorists had their place of residence) being stigmatised as the hotbed of jihadism. From 21 to 26 November, the terrorist alert level was raised to its maximum (level 4) in Brussels, turning it into a ‘ghost city’ with heavily armed army patrols in the streets.

As with other European countries, Belgium was dragged into the refugee crisis. In September, the Maximilien Park in Brussels became a makeshift camp, spurring a wave of citizenship solidarity. After suffering criticism for refusing to increase the number of cases processed daily by the Aliens Office, Theo Francken (N-VA), secretary of state for asylum and migration, finally agreed to open some emergency shelters. In addition, the overall capacity of accommodation facilities for refugees and asylum seekers (‘FEDASIL centres’) in various locations across the country was increased from approximately 16,000 to 36,000.

Sources and further information

Belgian Federal Portal [global official portal for Belgium]: www.belgium.be/en/index.jsp

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