

## Belgium

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### Elections and cabinet

The end of the ‘purple coalition’<sup>1</sup> was troublesome. Flemish parties, even the ones that were in the ruling coalition, campaigned for constitutional reforms and for granting greater autonomy to the regions. Conversely, all French-speaking parties opposed such reforms. Two different campaigns were held in the Flemish- and French-speaking communities. Since French-speaking parties compete only in French-speaking constituencies and Flemish parties in Flemish constituencies,<sup>2</sup> there is no reason for them to campaign in the other community. Moreover, electoral competition leads the parties to take a harder line and reject from the outset any kind of compromise with parties from the other community (Pilet & Van Haute 2008).

To a certain extent, the results of the 10 June elections can be labelled ‘protest voting’ (Blaise et al. 2007: 19–20). This hypothesis states that parties that were in the ruling coalition would lose votes, in contrast to new parties or parties in the opposition. Although useful for characterising the electoral results, this is far from being sufficient to explain all the variations. The main deviation from this hypothesis is the performance of the MR,<sup>3</sup> which, although it had been in the ruling coalition, obtained its highest score ever and improved on its 2003 vote share by 1.1 percentage points. Psychologically it was a great victory; the party became the second largest party in the country and the largest in the French-speaking community, finishing for the first time in front of the PS. However, this victory was mainly due to the losses of other large parties. During the campaign, the MR managed to take advantage of its position in the Walloon region (where it had been in opposition since 2004), denouncing fraud in other parties and especially its principal opponent, the PS.

The PS suffered from scandals that blew up a few months before the elections (see below). From then on, the French-speaking Socialist Party

Table 1. Elections for the (federal) Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers

	10 June 2007				
	Total number of seats:	150			
	Electorate:	7,720,796			
	Total votes cast:	7,032,077 (91.1%)			
	Total valid votes:	6,671,360 (94.8%)			
Party	Number and percentage of votes	Change since 2003	Number and percentage of seats	Change since 2003	
Cartel <i>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams/Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie</i> – Christian-Democrat and Flemish/New Flemish Alliance (CD&V/NV-A), Flemish-speaking	1,234,950 (18.5)	+2.2*	30 (20.0)	+8	
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	835,073 (12.5)	+1.1	23 (15.3)	-1	
<i>Vlaams Belang</i> – Flemish Interest (VB), Flemish-speaking	799,844 (12.0)	+0.4	17 (11.3)	-1	
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberale en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Flemish-speaking**	789,445 (11.8)	-3.5	18 (12.0)	-7	
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	724,787 (10.9)	-2.2	20 (13.3)	-5	
Cartel <i>Sociaal Progressief Alternatief-SPIRIT</i> – Social Progressive Alternative-SPIRIT (SPA-SPIRIT), Flemish-speaking	684,390 (10.3)	-4.7	14 (9.3)	-9	
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-speaking	404,077 (6.1)	+0.6	10 (6.7)	+2	
<i>Ecolo</i> – Ecologists, French-speaking	340,378 (5.1)	+2.0	8 (5.3)	+4	
<i>Lijst De Decker</i> – De Decker's List (LDD), Flemish-speaking	268,648 (4.0)	+4.0	5 (3.3)	+5	
<i>Groen!</i> – Green!, Flemish-speaking	265,828 (4.0)	+1.5	4 (2.7)	+4	
<i>Front National</i> – National Front (FN), French-speaking	131,385 (2.0)	0.0	1 (0.7)	0	
Others	192,555 (3.0)	-1.3	–	–	

Notes: \* Difference with combined vote of CD&V and NV-A in 2003. \*\* *Vivant* (no English equivalent; literal translation from French: 'Alive'; both French-speaking and Flemish-speaking) joined the VLD under the name 'Open VLD' in the Flemish cantons and polled 0.09 per cent of the total Belgian votes by presenting independent lists in only two French-speaking provinces.

Table 2. Elections for the Senate (upper chamber)

	10 June 2007			
	40 directly elected (71 in total)			
Date of election:	10 June 2007			
Total number of seats:	40 directly elected (71 in total)			
Electorate:	7,720,796			
Total votes cast:	7,032,384 (91.1%)			
Total valid votes:	6,628,127 (94.3%)			
Party	Number and percentage of votes	Change since 2003	Number and percentage of seats	Change since 2003
Cartel <i>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams/Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie</i> – Christian-Democrat & Flemish/New Flemish Alliance (CD&V/NV-A), Flemish-speaking	1,287,389 (19.4)	+3.7*	9 (22.5)	+3
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Flemish-speaking	821,980 (12.4)	-3.0	5 (12.5)	-2
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	815,755 (12.3)	+0.2	6 (15.0)	+1
<i>Vlaams Belang</i> – Flemish Interest (VB), Flemish-speaking	787,782 (11.9)	+0.6	5 (12.5)	0
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	678,812 (10.2)	-2.6	4 (10.0)	-2
Cartel <i>Sociaal Progressief Alternatief-SPIRIT</i> – Social Progressive Alternative-SPIRIT (SP.a-SPIRIT), Flemish-speaking	665,342 (10.0)	-5.4	4 (10.0)	-3
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-speaking	390,852 (5.9)	+0.4	2 (5.0)	0
<i>Ecolo</i> – Ecologists, French-speaking	385,466 (5.8)	+2.6	2 (5.0)	+1
<i>Groen!</i> – Green!, Flemish-speaking	241,151 (3.6)	+1.2	1 (2.5)	+1
<i>Lijst De Decker</i> – De Decker's List (LDD), Flemish-speaking	223,992 (3.4)	+3.4	1 (2.5)	+1
<i>Front National</i> – National Front (FN), French-speaking	150,461 (2.3)	0.0	1 (2.5)	0

Note: \* Difference with combined vote of CD&amp;V and NV-A in 2003.

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt II

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For the composition of Verhofstadt II on 1 January 2007, see Rihoux et al. (2004: 954–955; 2005: 960); De Winter & Dumont (2006: 1055).

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*Changes during 2007:*

Minister of Development Cooperation/*Ministre de la Coopération au développement*: Armand De Decker (1948 male, MR) *resigned* (to become Chairman of the Senate) and was *replaced* by Hervé Jamar (1965 male, MR) who was previously Secretary of State of Financial Modernisation and Combatting Tax Fraud/*Secrétaire d'Etat à la Modernisation des Finances et à la Lutte contre la fraude fiscale* on 12 July

Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health/*Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique*: Rudy Demotte (1963 male, PS) *resigned* (to become Minister-President of the Walloon Region) and was replaced by Didier Donfut (1956 male, PS) who was Secretary of State of European Affairs and Foreign Affairs/*Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires européennes et aux Affaires étrangères* on 20 July

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dropped from 13.1 per cent in 2003 to 10.9 in 2007. It still obtained a higher score than in 1999, but lost its first place in the French-speaking community for the first time in 60 years. The losses of SP.a-Spirit were even more pronounced, as it scored 4.7 per cent lower than in 2003. The alliance of the Flemish Socialists did not manage to preserve the major success of its popular leader S. Stevaert in 2003 (Rihoux et al. 2004: 953). From the second largest party in Belgium in 2003, it became the sixth largest in 2007. After this defeat, the new party leader J. Vande Lanotte, resigned. According to some interpretations, the SP.a-Spirit suffered from the bad image of the scandal-prone PS.

The VLD lost 3.5 per cent and obtained its lowest score since 1991. The Flemish Liberals were also victims of protest voting. The role of former Prime Minister G. Verhofstadt, leader of the VLD, was often blamed. Indeed, there was a genuine horse race in the media between him and the popular leader of the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) Y. Leterme. The latter was more charismatic and benefited from protest voting. G. Verhofstadt was also, quite understandably, worn-out by eight years as prime minister of two heterogeneous coalitions. Y. Leterme won this battle and obtained around 800,000 preferential votes (out of around 4.8 million potential voters in the Flemish constituencies and the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency). He was the big winner of the elections, and contributed, by his own personal score, to the impressive success of the Flemish Christian Democrats.

A second explanation is the formation of an alliance between the CD&V and the small right-wing Flemish Regionalist party (NV-A, a splinter from the *Volksunie*). For the first time, they presented a joint list in all Flemish constituencies at general elections. The alliance obtained 18.5 per cent: 2.2 per cent

Table 4. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt III

A. Party composition of Verhofstadt III: Date of investiture: 21 December 2007		
Party	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats	Number and percentage of cabinet posts
Cartel <i>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams/ Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie</i> – Christian-Democrat & Flemish/New Flemish Alliance (CD&V/NV-A), Flemish-speaking	30 (20.0)	4 (28.6)
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	23 (15.3)	3 (21.4)
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Flemish-speaking	18 (12.0)	3 (21.4)
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	20 (13.3)	3 (21.4)
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-Speaking	10 (6.7)	1 (7.1)
B. Cabinet members of Verhofstadt III:		
Prime Minister/ <i>Eerste minister, Premier ministre</i> : G. Verhofstadt (1953 male, Open VLD)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Institutional Reforms/ <i>Vice-Premier ministre, Ministre des Finances et des Réformes institutionnelles</i> : D. Reynders (1958 male, MR)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Budget, Mobility and Institutional Reforms/ <i>Vice-Eerste Minister, Minister van Begroting, Mobiliteit en Institutionele Hervormingen</i> : Y. Leterme (1960 male, CD&V)		
Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health/ <i>Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique</i> : L. Onkelinx (1958 female, PS)		
Minister of Home Affairs/ <i>Minister van Binnenlandse zaken</i> : P. Dewael (1955 male, Open VLD)		
Minister of Foreign Affairs/ <i>Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken</i> : Karel De Gucht (1954 male, Open VLD)		
Minister of Economy, the Self-Employed and Agriculture/ <i>Ministre de l'Economie, des Classes moyennes et de l'Agriculture</i> : S.Laruelle (1965 female, MR)		
Minister of Pensions and Social Integration/ <i>Ministre des Pensions et de l'Intégration sociale</i> : Christian Dupont (1947 male, PS)		
Minister of Employment/ <i>Ministre de l'Emploi</i> : Josly Piette (1943 male, CDH)		
Minister of Justice/ <i>Minister van Justitie</i> : Jo Vandeurzen (1958 male, CD&V)		
Minister of Defence/ <i>Minister van Landsverdediging</i> : Pieter De Crem (1962 male, CD&V)		
Minister of Climate and Energy/ <i>Ministre du Climat et de l'Energie</i> : Paul Magnette (1971 male, PS)		
Minister of Development Cooperation/ <i>Ministre de la Coopération au développement</i> : Charles Michel (1975 male, MR)		
Minister of Civil Service and Public Companies/ <i>Minister van Ambtenarenzaken en Overheidsbedrijven</i> : Inge Vervotte (1977 female, CD&V)		

more than the sum of the scores of the CD&V and the NV-A in 2003. This enabled the Flemish Christian Democrats to reinforce their claim to support greater autonomy for regions and their opposition to the purple coalition, which probably played a role in their success. The CD&V managed to recover its 1999 losses and its status as the largest party in Belgium.

The score of the French-speaking Democrat Humanists<sup>4</sup> (CDH) represents a second deviation from the protest voting hypothesis. Although the party was in opposition at the federal level, it won only 0.6 per cent of votes cast. Unlike the CD&V, it did not recover its 1999 losses. Among other explanations, the 'defeat' can be explained by the fact that the CDH has been in the ruling coalition of the Walloon region since 2004, together with the PS. They, too, probably suffered from the bad image of the French-speaking Socialists.

The Greens are the other big winners of the elections. The Flemish Greens (*Groen!*) won 1.5 per cent of votes cast and the French-speaking Greens (*Ecolo*) 2.0 per cent. However, this success needs qualification. Following their first-time participation in the ruling coalition, they experienced a massive defeat in the 2003 elections (Rihoux et al. 2004: 950). In 2007, they barely recovered their score of 1999, although that had been particularly high. Both *Groen!* and *Ecolo* reaped benefits from their four years in opposition and from their image as 'clean' parties – democratic organisations free from the taint of corruption.

The results of the far-right populist parties were mixed. On the one hand, they managed to keep or to slightly increase their scores, although, the (Flemish) VB has been partly slowed down in its ongoing victories since 1978 and won only 0.4 per cent more votes than in 2003. On the other hand, both VB and the much smaller French-speaking party (FN) scored lower than in the regional elections of 2004: the VB lost about 5 per cent in the Flemish constituencies (from 24 per cent in 2004 to 19 per cent in 2007), and the FN lost more than 2 per cent in the Walloon constituencies (from 8.1 per cent in 2004 to 5.6 per cent in 2007).<sup>5</sup> Still, with 12 per cent of votes cast, the VB became the second largest party in Flanders, although the elections of 2007 were perceived as a defeat by its leaders. One possible explanation of this defeat is the endorsing by other Flemish parties of VB's claims for greater autonomy to the regions. A newly formed Flemish party also endorsed these claims and contributed to the erosion of the VB. The LDD, a populist right-wing autonomist party, scored 4 per cent of the votes cast and managed to obtain five seats in parliament. The party was formed just before the elections by a former MP, J.-M. Dedecker, who had been expelled from the VLD in late 2006. The LDD took a harder line concerning both socio-economic and autonomist issues.

Results for the Senate elections mirrored those of the Chamber of Representatives, with important gains by the CD&V/NV-A, heavy defeats for both French-speaking and Flemish socialist parties, as well as for the party of the

outgoing prime minister (Flemish liberals, VLD), while the French-speaking Liberal Party gained one seat more, both Green parties returned to the Senate, newcomer LDD entered with with one elected senator and the other parties (both extremist VB and FN, but also the CDH) kept the same number of elected senators.

While government formation in Belgium has always been a very complex process violating many of the basic game-theoretical assumptions (Dumont & De Winter 1999), the 2007 formation process was certainly the outlier *par excellence* in terms of duration (193 days) of coalition composition. For the first time, the federal government is asymmetric in that one of the traditional party families is only represented by one of its linguistic components. One can also point to the quasi-absence of policy agreement, the specification of an expiry date and of the name of the next formateur, the violation of informal bargaining rules, the crucial role of a small separatist party and, last but not least, regime issues.

Before the 10 June elections, parties were aware that coalition negotiations would be complex and long, although Socialists and Christian Democrats expected to govern together, election results permitting. The main complicating factor was the profound incompatibility of the respective demands of the Flemish mainstream parties and the French-speaking ones on the institutional terrain. The election results torpedoed the planned centre-left coalition. First, both the Socialist parties suffered a major defeat. As a result, the Flemish SP.A opted immediately for an 'opposition cure' due to its much more unexpected losses. Second, even though the party of Prime Minister Verhofstadt (Open VLD) also took a serious beating and lost Flemish electoral leadership to the Christian Democrats' alliance, the French-speaking Liberals (MR) increased their votes and only lost marginally in seats, allowing the liberal family to remain the country's premier party family and therefore capable of playing a role in the formation process and/or staying in power. In any case, the centre-left option did not control a parliamentary majority. However, as the CD&V/NV-A alliance clearly became the largest party in the country, and due to the crushing victory of its leader Y. Leterme, the MR leader and outgoing Deputy Prime Minister, D. Reynders, rapidly called Leterme and agreed that the latter would lead the formation of a minimum winning formula composed of both the Christian Democrats and the Liberals – the so-called 'blue orange'.

On 13 June, the King appointed Reynders as informateur. He did not, however, manage to bring the 'blue orange' coalition parties any closer on the hot community issues. As the terrain was still seen as too dangerous to launch Leterme as formateur, on 5 July the King nominated former Christian Democrat Prime Minister, J.-L. Dehaene as 'intermediator/negotiator' – a role he played with some success only to abort his mission sooner than expected, feeling

pressured by Leterme's impatience. On 15 July, Leterme finally became formateur, but was surprisingly ill-prepared for his task. Negotiations were chaotic, there were constant leaks to the press, negotiators gave different interpretations of the (few) policy issues on which an agreement was found, partners double-crossed each other regularly, the principle of secrecy of the King's conversations with key players was regularly violated and so on. The formateur, who had been the main spokesman of the Flemish demands as incumbent Flemish Minister-President since 2004, was also thoroughly distrusted by French-speaking public and elite opinion. Political communication mistakes fuelled doubts about his ability to become Prime Minister of all Belgians in the French-speaking part of the country. The failure of Leterme's first round as formateur was also due to his attempt to achieve things that, taken together, were not attainable: becoming prime minister of a centre-right minimal winning coalition (the 'blue orange' had 81 seats out of 150 in the House) that would implement a large number of policy transfers from the federal to the regional level, which required a revision of the Constitution via a two-thirds majority in the House and the Senate. As the French-speaking negotiating parties refused to give in to Flemish demands, this would in any case require the support of some opposition parties to reach a two-thirds majority – an unlikely scenario with a high potential for electoral fallout at the 2009 regional elections.

Hence on 23 August, Leterme gave up his formateur mission. After consultations, the King tasked H. Van Rompuy, the Speaker of the House and CD&V *eminence grise*, on 29 August to undertake an 'exploration' mission. He worked for one month with great discretion and managed to create considerable consensus between the 'blue orange' party leaders over the (de-)federalisation process. On this new basis, Leterme was appointed again as formateur on 29 September. His mission was put on hold when on 7 November, all Flemish parties (against all French-speaking MPs) voted for a bill proposing the splitting of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde ('B-H-V') – a strong symbolic Flemish demand that has poisoned community relations since the 1960s. This blunt use of the power of the Flemish majority against the French-speaking minority was a clear violation of Belgium's tradition of consensual decision making and log-rolling. The French-speaking parties immediately used one of the minority protection mechanisms – the so-called 'conflict of interest' clause, activated by the French-speaking community assembly – and effectively froze the parliamentary process for the rest of the year. In spite of all this, the French-speaking parties allowed Leterme to continue his attempt to form a government, as the freezing of the 'B-H-V' suited them and no credible alternative was available.

By the end of November, agreement between the partners seemed in sight, but was eventually torpedoed by Leterme's alliance partner, the separatist

NV-A, leading to his second resignation as formateur on 1 December. Throughout the government formation process, the NV-A effectively used its veto power against a compromise on the Flemish side, since, without its support, the coalition did not have a majority among Flemish MPs in the federal parliament. The fact that the party of the formateur was permanently held hostage by this small anti-system party fuelled mistrust of Leterme among French-speaking parties, media and public opinion.

The King then made an unexpected move, asking incumbent Prime Minister, G. Verhofstadt (still leading his 'purple' caretaker government), to break the impasse. Verhofstadt instantly seized this opportunity to end his (Belgian) career as 'saviour of the country'. After several weeks, he managed to form an 'interim government' (on 21 December), invested with full powers but with a limited and vague agreement, including the blue 'blue orange' parties as well as the French-speaking Socialists, hitherto kept out of the negotiations at the request of the MR. For an originally centre-right coalition, the proportion of (centre-)left-oriented ministers was also quite high, with three socialists plus two Christian Democratic trade unionists appointed as ministers out of only 14 ministerial positions.

Verhofstadt promised to yield his position to Leterme by 23 March 2008, therefore setting up an expiry date. The entire community dispute was delegated to a Council of Wise Men, chaired by Leterme and Reynders, who also became vice prime ministers of the asymmetric (CD&V/NV-A, CDH, Open VLD, MR, PS) Verhofstadt III government. As the populist promises made during the formation (lowering taxes and increasing social transfers) became increasingly hard to honour (as budgetary means faded away due to global recession), the main disputes on socio-economic issues were also transferred to a working group chaired by the vice prime ministers.

Hence, six and a half months of negotiations gave birth to an interim oversized coalition controlling a two-thirds majority, but with hardly any socio-economic or institutional reform programme. Partner parties did not trust each other, and some ministers grew to positively detest each other during the formation process. The new government did not satisfy the initial expectations of the winners of the elections (CD&V/NV-A and MR), while the electoral losers (VLD, PS) got more out of the formation more than they ever could have hoped. The smallest coalition partner, the CDH with its most tenacious and coherent party leader J. Milquet, hardly had to swallow any compromise at all. Last but not least, the formation process further polarised political elites, the media and to a lesser extent public opinion on both sides of the linguistic borders. The Flemish media and the two far-right populist parties (VB and LDD, that captured more than a quarter of the Flemish vote) repeatedly called for a final solution (separatism) if the French-speaking parties would not give

in to the 'legitimate' Flemish calls for more autonomy. However the French-speaking parties interpreted these demands more than ever as conscious steps towards an ultimate goal of dismantling the Belgian state – a move that would be disastrous for Wallonia, which needs the financial North-South transfers to assist its ailing economy. Hence, the chaotic formation process further fuelled growing community tension, which may lead to a genuine regime crisis in the near future.

### **Issues in national politics**

More than ever, the political question that keeps agitating Belgians is the community issue. The preceding year had seemed particularly – and abnormally – tame in this respect. It resurfaced as the hot-button issue in the middle of this election year to form the bulk of the campaign themes and the main-spring of the ensuing political crisis. Against a background of the continuing government crisis, both in Brussels and in Wallonia, Belgian flags were installed by citizens fearing the separation of the country. A demonstration for the unity of the country was initiated by a citizen's petition that gathered over 150,000 signatures, but the crowd demonstrating in Brussels (35,000 participants) were mainly French-speaking, as Flemish media did not relay the information the same way as the French-speaking ones. Trade unions also mobilised in favour of solidarity between the country's regions.

Beyond these ever-present community issues, the political year was also characterised by judicial questions such as the Charleroi 'affairs' soap-opera and the political-financial scandals involving the local PS, as well as socio-economic and humanitarian ones. The political-financial scandals mostly involved the former government of the city of Charleroi, where the PS had an absolute majority before the local elections of October 2006. These scandals, which were already on the agenda in 2005 and 2006 (De Winter & Dumont 2006: 1059; Rihoux et al. 2007: 897), reached a climax in 2007. During the campaign for the June general elections, old affairs came to the surface, involving basically all members of the 'old guard' (including all PS deputy mayors as well as top civil servants) around former mayor J.-C. Van Cauwenberghe and his successor, who was also from the PS. Eventually, all the members of the local executive resigned, which forced the Walloon region to change its legislation to enable the appointment of a new mayor, with the CDH politician J.-J. Viseur eventually emerging as the victor.

On the judicial front, a member of the royal family gave testimony in court for the first time ever. Prince Laurent, the youngest son of the King, was asked by the prosecuting counsel to give evidence as witness in the 'Vaessen case',

which involved the illegal use of army funds to furnish the Prince's villa (see Rihoux et al. 2007: 897). Eventually, Vaessen was condemned for embezzlement in February. Also on the judicial front, the Antwerp criminal court issued a historic verdict in the trial of the young H. Van Themsche, who was found guilty on two counts of racially motivated murder: the court sentenced him to life imprisonment (the heaviest punishment available) and, for the first time in Belgium, took into account racism as an aggravating circumstance.

In the economic and social sector, the workers at the Volkswagen plant in Forest accepted Audi's take-over of its facilities, as had been proposed at the end of 2006 by the management (see Rihoux et al. 2007: 898). This secured up to 40 per cent of jobs, but also involved payroll cuts of 20 per cent and an increase in working hours.

On the humanitarian front, the issue of illegal residents and asylum seekers stayed high on the agenda. This year a particular case hit the media: that of an Ecuadorian mother and her 11 year-old daughter, Angelica, who after living as undocumented immigrants in Belgium for many years, were denounced as illegal aliens by a 'true-blood' Belgian and then held in a detention centre. In July, the authorities tried to deport them to Ecuador against their will. Several humanitarian organisations mobilised on this issue. Eventually, they were released on the orders of a court.

In terms of the private sphere, a law reforming the divorce procedure came into force this year. Divorce is increasing in Belgium, by more than anywhere else in the European Union (indeed, the annual total is inching gradually closer toward that of marriages). The law simplifies the divorce procedure and eliminates the idea of tort or fault.

Finally, on the international scene, Belgium became a member of the United Nations Security Council for the period 2007–2008. The role of Belgian diplomats, in spite of Belgium being such a small country, is generally considered important in such international organisations.

To conclude, politically speaking, in 2007 Belgium was largely paralysed by the re-emergence of community tensions. These were heightened during the first half of the year by the campaign leading to the June federal elections and then, during the last six months, were further intensified by the unsuccessful attempts to form a new federal coalition.

## Notes

1. A coalition between socialist and liberal parties. It was composed of the French-speaking Liberals (MR), the French-speaking Socialists (PS), the Flemish Liberals (Open-VLD) and the Flemish Socialists in alliance with a small splinter group of the former Flemish Regionalists: *Volksunie* (SP.a-Spirit).

2. The only bilingual constituency is Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV).
3. These paragraphs about election results are mainly inspired by Blaise et al. (2007: 15–18).
4. Formerly, the party was the French-speaking Christian Democrats (PSC). In 1999 it became the Democrat Humanist Centre. On average, it is more centre-left-wing than the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V).
5. These figures do not include the bilingual Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency.

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### *On the Internet:*

- Belgian Federal Portal: [www.belgium.be/eportal/index.jsp](http://www.belgium.be/eportal/index.jsp) (global official portal for Belgium)
- Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*: [www.crisp.be/FR/catalogue/catalogue\\_index.htm](http://www.crisp.be/FR/catalogue/catalogue_index.htm) (a weekly synthesis of specific institutional and political topics)
- Detailed electoral results: [www.ibz.rrn.fgov.be/index.php?id=4&L=0](http://www.ibz.rrn.fgov.be/index.php?id=4&L=0) (official results for all elections)

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