

Belgium: Political Developments and Data in 2020

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Introduction

The year 2020 started off with the continued impossibility of forming a new Cabinet after the May 2019 elections, hence still with a caretaker government (Wilmès I). From March onwards, the conditions nevertheless changed drastically with the COVID-19 crisis. This led to a – still temporary but fully empowered – government (Wilmès II) supported by seven other parties in order to handle the crisis, and eventually to a regular Cabinet (De Croo I) in October. The authorities muddled through the pandemic with great difficulties, having to continuously revise the plans and to deal with divergent views from the multiple stakeholders in the complex Belgian federal arrangement.

Cabinet report

After a full 2019 year with a caretaker government due to the most cumbersome federal government formation following the May 2019 general elections, Belgium started 2020 with Wilmès I, a minority government in a caretaker capacity (Rihoux et al. 2020) (Table 1). The formation process went on with, as *informateurs*, two party leaders freshly elected in 2019 (Rihoux et al. 2020), Georges-Louis Bouchez (Reformist Movement/*Mouvement Réformateur* – MR) and Joachim Coens (Christian-Democrat and Flemish/*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* – CD&V), who failed to find a viable solution, trapped in the dilemma of including or not the largest party in Parliament, the Flemish Nationalist New Flemish Alliance/*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA). On 31 January, King Philippe surprisingly appointed the Minister of Justice in place, Koen Geens (CD&V), for a mission that would only last two weeks, after intense and open tensions between the largest Flemish and Francophone parties, N-VA and Socialist Party/*Parti socialiste* (PS), that Geens failed to reconcile.

On 19 February, the presidents of both federal Chambers, Sabine Laruelle (MR) and Patrick Dewael, Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD) received the mandate from the King to ‘take any initiative aimed at establishing a full-fledged federal government’. Laruelle was the first ever female royal mission-holder in Belgium. Their mission was abruptly terminated due to the COVID-19 crisis. To help face the pandemic, it was decided to set up a fully empowered government in place of the caretaker government. Sophie Wilmès was appointed *formatrice* on 16 March,

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Wilms I in Belgium in 2020

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	27 October 2019	Dissolution	17 March 2020			
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2020	Until	17 March 2020			
Type of Cabinet	Minority Coalition						
A.	Party/gender composition on 1 January 2020	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
		N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Reformist Movement	<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i>	7	53.8%	2	28.6%	14	9.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i>	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i>	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Totals		13	100.0%	4	30.8%	38	25.3%
B.	Composition of Wilms I Cabinet on 1 January 2020						
	See previous editions of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for Belgium or http://politicaldatayearbook.com						

Table 1. (Continued)

C.	Changes in composition of Wilms I Cabinet during 2020	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments		
	Ministerial title						
	None						
D.	Party/gender composition on 17 March 2020	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
		N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Reformist Movement	<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i>	7	53.8%	2	28.6%	14	9.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i>	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i>	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Totals		13	100.0%	4	30.8%	38	25.3%

Note: This government was a caretaker government for the entire period.
Source: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2021).

the first time ever that a woman has held such a position in Belgium. Wilmès II was sworn in on 17 March in the exact same party composition and same ministerial portfolios for the same ministers as Wilmès I, namely a minority coalition comprising the MR, CD&V and Open VLD (Table 2). Nevertheless, a large coalition supported this government from the outside, gathering all parties represented in the federal Parliament except the radical parties Flemish Interest/*Vlaams Belang* (VB) and Workers' Party of Belgium/*Parti du travail de Belgique/Partij van de arbeid van België* (PTB/PVDA). In concrete terms, these seven additional parties were informally involved in the main government decisions via the weekly meeting of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, Minister of Interior and Minister of Public Health, and the presidents (or their representatives) of all 10 supporting political parties. In addition, as from 26 March, Wilmès II benefitted from so-called 'special powers' for a three-month period, renewable once. The Prime Minister promised to use them only for matters linked to the pandemic crisis, and to remain in a caretaker role for the other business. She committed to offer Parliament a new vote of confidence within a maximum of six months.

While the government formation process was officially on hold, the presidents of both Socialist parties, Paul Magnette (PS) and Conner Rousseau (Socialist Party Different/*Socialistische Partij Anders* – sp.a), launched negotiations again at the end of May, without any royal appointment. Their initiative failed, as well as the following informal enterprise (mid-June–mid-July), by the presidents of the three parties involved in the Wilmès II minority coalition, Georges-Louis Bouchez (MR), Joachim Coens (CD&V) and Egbert Lachaert (Open VLD). On 20 July, the King eventually appointed Paul Magnette (PS) and Bart De Wever (N-VA), in a role that everyone but the King labelled *préformateurs*. He hereby officially commissioned politicians to form a new government while the current government was not in a caretaker capacity, which can be added to the many peculiarities of this formation process. The duet agreed on a policy note in which the institutional reforms were central, but failed to convince enough coalition partners on this proposal. They eventually resigned and the King gave a similar mandate to the leader of the Open VLD, Lachaert, again without labelling this assignment a 'preformation,' a testimony of the government formation's deadlock. But the clock was ticking as Wilmès II would become again a caretaker government on 17 September, as promised. Another party president, Conner Rousseau (sp.a), joined Lachaert on 4 September for a new mission, finally an official preformation one. As progress was at last being made, the seven potential coalition partners agreed to extend Wilmès II with two additional weeks until 1 October, due to the forced quarantine of one of the *préformateurs*, Lachaert.

The final mission was given to Alexander De Croo (Open VLD) and Paul Magnette (PS), whom the King appointed as joint *formateurs* on 23 September. During the following weeks, hard negotiations centred on the name of the Prime Minister, and eventually De Croo was designated as Prime Minister of a new fully empowered government, gathering an asymmetric oversized coalition with the Flemish and Francophone Socialists (sp.a and PS), Liberals (Open VLD and MR) and Greens (*Groen* and Ecology Party/*Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales* – Ecolo), as well as the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), while the latter's sister party (Humanist Democratic Centre/*Centre démocrate humaniste* – cdH) remained in opposition. This coalition, labelled as 'Vivaldi' with reference to the four seasons, was one of the most popular coalition options among the

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Wilmès II in Belgium in 2020

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	17 March 2020	Dissolution	1 October 2020			
Period covered by table	From	17 March 2020	Until	1 October 2020			
Type of Cabinet	Minority Coalition						
A.	Party/gender composition on 17 March 2020						
		Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
		N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Reformist Movement	<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i>	7	53.8%	2	28.6%	14	9.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i>	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i>	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Totals		13	100.0%	4	30.8%	38	25.3%
B.	Composition of Wilmès II Cabinet on Cabinet inception date 17 March 2020						
	Ministerial Title			Minister			
	See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for Belgium or http://politicaldatayearbook.com						

Table 2. (Continued)

C.	Changes in composition of Wilmès II Cabinet during 2020	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments	Seats in Parliament	
						N	%
	Ministerial title						
	None						
D.	Party/gender composition on 1 October 2020	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
		N	%	N	% of party	N	%
	Reformist Movement	7	53.8%	2	28.6%	14	9.3%
	Christian-Democrat and Flemish	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
	Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	3	23.1%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
	Totals	13	100.0%	4	30.8%	38	25.3%

Note: The government was identical in terms of composition as Wilmès I, but is considered as a new Cabinet due to a major status change: from caretaker government to a fully empowered government.

Source: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2021).

Table 3. Cabinet composition of De Croo I in Belgium in 2020

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	1 October 2020	Dissolution	Still in office at the end of the year		
Period covered by table	From	1 October 2020	Until	31 December 2020		
Type of Cabinet	Oversized Coalition					
A. Party/gender composition on 1 October 2020	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Socialist Party	4	20.0%	2	50.0%	19	12.6%
Reformist Movement	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	14	9.3%
Ecology Party	3	15.0%	2	66.6%	13	8.6%
Christian Democratic and Flemish	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Socialist Party Different	2	10.0%	1	50.0%	9	6.0%
Green	2	10.0%	2	100.0%	8	5.3%
Totals	20	100.0%	10	50.0%	87	57.8%

Table 3. (Continued)

B. Composition of De Croo I Cabinet on Cabinet inception date 1 October 2020						
Ministerial Title	Minister					
Prime Minister	Alexander	De Croo	1975	Male	Open	VLD
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Economy and Labour	Pierre-Yves	Dermagne	1980	Male	PS	PS
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, of Foreign Trade and of Federal Cultural Institutions	Sophie	Wilmès	1975	Female	MR	MR
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Mobility	Georges	Gilkinet	1971	Male	Ecolo	Ecolo
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finances charged with the Coordination of the Struggle against Fraud	Vincent	Van Peteghem	1980	Male	CD&V	CD&V
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health	Frank	Vandenbroucke	1955	Male	sp.a	sp.a
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Civil Service, of Public Companies, of Telecommunications and Postal Service	Petra	De Sutter	1963	Female	Groen	Groen

Table 3. (Continued)

B. Composition of De Croo I Cabinet on Cabinet inception date 1 October 2020						
Ministerial Title	Minister	Vincent	Van Quickenborne	1973	Male	Open VLD
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, charged with the North Sea		Vincent	Van Quickenborne	1973	Male	Open VLD
Minister of Middle Classes, the Self-employed, Small and Medium-sized Companies, of Agriculture, of Institutional Reforms and Democratic Renewal	<i>Ministre des Classes moyennes, des Indépendants, des PME et de l'Agriculture, des Réformes institutionnelles et du Renouveau démocratique</i>	David	Clarival	1976	Male	MR
Minister of Pensions and of Social Integration, charged with the Disabled, Struggle against Poverty and Beliris		Karine	Lalieux	1964	Female	PS
Minister of Defense						
Minister of Climate, Environment, Sustainable Development and Green Deal	<i>Ministre du Climat, de l'Environnement, du Développement durable et du Green Deal</i>	Ludivine Zakia	Dedonder Khattabi	1977 1976	Female Female	PS Ecolo
Minister of the Interior, of Institutional Reforms and Democratic Renewal	<i>Ministre de l'Intérieur, des Réformes institutionnelles et du Renouveau démocratique</i>	Annelies	Verlinden	1978	Female	CD&V

Table 3. (Continued)

B. Composition of De Croo I Cabinet on Cabinet inception date 1 October 2020	
Ministerial Title	Minister
Minister of Development Aid, charged with Large Cities	Meryame Kitir
Minister of Energy	Timme Van der Straeten
Secretary of State for the Recovery and Strategic Investments, charged with Science Policy, adjunct to the Minister of Economy and Labour	Thomas Dermine
Secretary of State of Digitalisation, charged with Administrative Simplification, Privacy and the Building Authority, adjunct to the Prime Minister	Mathieu Michel
Secretary of State of Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities, and Diversity, adjunct to the Minister of Mobility	Sarah Schlitz
	1980
	1978
	1986
	1979
	1986
	sp.a
	Female
	Female
	Male
	Groen
	PS
	MR
	Female
	Ecolo

Table 3. (Continued)

B. Composition of De Croo I Cabinet on Cabinet inception date 1 October 2020						
Ministerial Title	Minister					
Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration, charged with the National lottery, adjunct to the Minister of the Interior, of Institutional Reforms and Democratic Renewal	Sammy Mahdi	1988	Male			CD&V
Secretary of State of Budget and of Consumer Protection, adjunct to the Minister of Justice, charged with the North Sea	Eva De Bleeker	1974	Female			Open VLD
C. Changes in composition of De Croo I Cabinet during 2020						
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments		
None						

Table 3. (Continued)

D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2020	Seats in Cabinet			Seats held by women			Seats in Parliament		
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%			
Socialist Party	4	20.0%	2	50.0%	19	12.6%			
Reformist Movement	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	14	9.3%			
Ecology Party	3	15.0%	2	66.6%	13	8.6%			
Christian Democratic and Flemish	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%			
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%			
Socialist Party Different	2	10.0%	1	50.0%	9	6.0%			
Green	2	10.0%	2	100.0%	8	5.3%			
Totals	20	100.0%	10	50.0%	87	57.8%			

Note: Beliris refers to a Cooperation Agreement between the federal state and Brussels-Capital Region dedicated to the promotion of the national and international role of Brussels through infrastructures, renovation and mobility initiatives.

Source: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2021).

many mentioned throughout the 16 months of the formation process (Sägesser 2020). De Croo I was sworn in on 1 October. The newly appointed team stood out in terms of renewal rate, with only 30 per cent of Cabinet members with a former ministerial experience, and in terms of gender balance, with a perfect equilibrium among the 20 ministers and secretaries of state.

Parliament report

The second year of the legislature after the May 2019 elections witnessed changes among the different political groups in the Chamber of Representatives. Several replacements took place on 1 October due to the instalment of the De Croo I Cabinet (Table 4).

Among Open VLD MPs, Alexander De Croo was replaced by Tania De Jonghe on 17 March, and Vincent Van Quickenborne was replaced by Jasper Pillen on 1 October. For the Francophone Liberals (MR), Sophie Wilmès was replaced by Nathalie Gilson on 17 March, and David Clarinval was replaced by Christophe Bombled on 17 March as well. In the PS (Francophone Socialists), Ludivine Dedonder was replaced by Leslie Leoni on 1 October. On 18 January, Emir Kir was excluded from the PS and continued to sit as an independent, which decreased the number of PS MPs by one unit.

In Ecolo (Francophone Greens), different MPs were replaced on 1 October due to the party's governmental participation: Georges Gilkinet was replaced by Cécile Cornet, Zakia Khattabi was replaced by Claire Hugon, Tinne van der Straeten was replaced by Guillaume Defossé, and Sarah Schlitz was replaced by Nicolas Parent. For its Flemish counterpart Groen, Jessika Soors was replaced by Eva Platteau on 12 November. In the Flemish Socialist party (sp.a), John Crombez was replaced by Vicky Reynaert on 17 September, Meryame Kitir was replaced by Bert Moyaers on 1 October, and Jan Bertles was replaced by Gitta Vanpeborgh on 12 November. Finally, for the N-VA, Jan Spooren was replaced by Sigrid Goethals on 17 September.

In 2020, 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.

Political party report

After an agitated 2019 that had featured party presidential elections in nine parties (Rihoux et al. 2020), the atmosphere was quieter in most parties. Such elections only took place in two Flemish parties in 2020 (Table 5).

The Open VLD had to choose a new party leader, as Gwendolyn Rutten, the president in office, announced that she would not run for office again. This led to a competitive election among four contenders, and the race was easily won on 22 May by Egbert Lachaert, head of the party's federal parliamentary group, by 61 per cent in the first round of the party membership vote. In the leading Flemish party, the N-VA, strongman Bart De Wever was easily elected for a sixth consecutive term, capturing no less than 97 per cent of the membership vote.

Table 4. Party and gender composition of the lower house of Parliament (Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers) in Belgium in 2020

Party	1 January 2020				31 December 2020			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
New Flemish Alliance	24	16.0%	11	45.8%	24	16.0%	12	50.0%
Socialist Party	20	13.4%	5	25.0%	19	12.7%	5	26.3%
Flemish Interest Reformist Movement	18	12.0%	7	38.9%	18	12.0%	7	38.9%
Ecology Party	14	9.3%	6	42.9%	14	9.3%	6	42.9%
	13	8.7%	8	61.5%	13	8.7%	7	53.8%
	12	8.0%	4	33.3%	12	8.0%	4	33.3%
	12	8.0%	5	41.7%	12	8.0%	6	50.0%
	12	8.0%	3	25.0%	12	8.0%	3	25.0%
	9	6.0%	4	44.4%	9	6.0%	5	55.5%
	8	5.3%	3	37.5%	8	5.3%	3	37.5%
	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	5	3.3%	2	40.0%
	2	1.3%	1	50.0%	2	1.3%	1	50.0%
	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	2	1.4%	0	0.0%
Totals	150	100.0%	59	39.3%	150	100.0%	61	40.7%

Table 5. Changes in political parties in Belgium in 2020

A. Party institutional changes in 2020												
None												
B. Party leadership changes in 2020												
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	Open VLD	Party President	Gwendolyn Rutten	1975	Female	Did not run for re-election and replaced by direct membership vote (61%)	22 May	replaced by Egbert	Lachaert	1977	male	Open VLD
New Flemish Alliance	N-VA	Party President	Bart De Wever	1970	Male	Re-elected by party membership vote (96%)	14 November					

Sources: Diverse media sources and official party websites.

Institutional change report

No further institutional changes were decided or implemented in 2020, as the implementation of the ‘sixth state reform’ passed in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014), that is, the transfer of further competences from the federal to the regional/community level, was gradually completed in 2018 and 2019 (Rihoux et al. 2019, 2020). The De Croo I coalition agreement did contain two pages on state reform, promising the preparation of a comprehensive revision of the constitution to be implemented in the next legislative term (2024–29), that is, a seventh state reform. However, the guiding principle of more efficient division of competences between the federal and regional levels can be interpreted as a plea for recentralization as well as for further devolution. In short, apart from a few small issues, the seven coalition parties did not manage to conclude a substantial agreement on state reform.

Issues in national politics

Regarding the structurally salient ‘community conflict’ between Flemings and Francophones, until the swearing in of the De Croo I government on 1 October, community questions were subject to the caretaker government regime, which did not allow any government initiative in any major policy field. In any case, the previous Michel I Cabinet had agreed, in 2014–15, to put all community matters in the ‘political fridge’, in spite of the presence of the Flemish-independence N-VA in the federal government until December 2018 (Rihoux et al. 2016, 2019). The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic at the very top of the political agenda reduced the saliency of community affairs even more (Faniel and Sägers 2020). Yet, this mega-issue certainly played a crucial role in parties’ strategies and alliances during the governmental formation process (see above), especially regarding the potential inclusion of the N-VA in the new Cabinet.

As everywhere, the year 2020 was profoundly marked by the COVID-19 crisis. Other social and societal issues were nevertheless also salient during the year. With regards socioeconomic issues, trade union activity and strikes were reduced from March onwards. However, before the outbreak of the pandemic in the country, on 28 January a national demonstration took place in Brussels calling for the strengthening of social security. It was combined with strikes in public transport in Wallonia and Brussels. On 23 November, the Liège criminal court condemned 17 FGTB (Francophone Socialist trade union) activists, including Thierry Bodson, by then ABVV/FGTB president (ABVV is the Flemish Socialist trade union), to sentences of up to one month-suspended prison terms, in connection with a motorway blockade action carried out in 2015 in the Liège region. In response, the union, denouncing an attack on the right to strike and a threat to all social movements, organized work stoppages across the country on 1 December, as well as diverse actions on 10 December.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, both the paper and electronic ballots of the social elections, involving almost 2 million workers, were postponed to November. The ACV/CSC (the Christian trade union, with its respective Flemish and Francophone wings) confirmed its dominant position with 56 per cent of the vote, with the ABVV/FGTB (Socialist trade union)

at 33 per cent and the ACLVB/CGSLB (the Liberal trade union, with its respective Flemish and Francophone wings) at 9 per cent. The proportion of female candidates, still a minority, nevertheless increased somewhat.

On 6 March, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, 3500 youngsters demonstrated in Brussels with Youth for Climate, in the presence of Greta Thunberg. Towards the end of the year, their mobilization took other forms: from 30 November to 2 December, 60 activists took turns for 60 hours in Namur and Brussels to denounce Europe's climate inaction, thus organizing the longest climate demonstration in strict compliance with COVID-19 regulations.

Obviously, though, the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic continuously stood at the forefront of the political agenda from mid-March onwards. The Wilmès I minority coalition formed on 27 October 2019, the only government in Belgian history to be sworn in strictly on a caretaker basis (Rihoux et al. 2020; see also Cabinet report above), was confronted with the pandemic. Its first reaction was to reassure public opinion that the country was safe and to monitor borders via quarantines. On 4 February, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed: a Belgian national who had been repatriated from China together with nine compatriots. In retrospect, considering the explosion of the pandemic that followed soon thereafter, the seriousness of the situation was downplayed. By 11 March the first COVID-19 casualty was announced, followed by others as the number of infections and deaths grew rapidly.

The crisis response decisions were taken following meetings of the National Security Council, a Cabinet-level body activated during crises (such as those related to terrorism) and composed of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and other relevant ministers, who may be joined, as was the case for this health crisis, by Cabinet members of the Communities and Regions, and groups of experts. The National Security Council decided to close schools from 14 March until the Easter holidays, as well as all restaurants, bars, cafés and night clubs.

On 17 March, the Wilmès Cabinet became a fully fledged government, supported by seven opposition parties (Wilmès II; see Cabinet report above). It received the special powers it had requested to deal with the health emergency. On that very day, it announced a lockdown from the following day onwards. It was extended twice, until 3 May, when the first wave of the pandemic had mostly cleared out after causing several thousand deaths, especially among the elderly. Non-essential shops were closed and the population was asked to stay at home. Gatherings and festivals were banned. The borders were closed, except for freight, Belgian nationals returning from abroad and imperative travel for professional reasons.

As care homes featured particularly high death rates, staff and residents were systematically tested for the virus, and visits by relatives were prohibited (from 20 April onwards, only one person, always the same, was allowed to visit). All mass events were banned until the end of the summer. The wearing of face masks, which until then had only been recommended (due to the shortage of masks), was made compulsory in closed public places. Some cities extended the obligation to the street as well. Teleworking was encouraged wherever possible.

A first phase of lockdown mitigation started to be implemented on 6 May, and a second one on 11 May: visits to care homes were allowed again, as well as the reopening of shops, including hairdressers, primary and secondary schools, and, at the beginning of

June, kindergartens. The borders with Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands were reopened. Each family, the so-called ‘home bubble’, had to stick to a list of four people (over the age of 12 years) who were allowed to be in close contact with each other.

From 8 June, a third phase of lockdown mitigation came into effect. The ‘bubble’ was extended to 10 persons. The general principle, as stated by the Prime Minister, was that ‘freedom is the rule and prohibitions the exception’: cafés and restaurants were allowed to reopen under certain conditions. On 1 July, with a further phase of the lifting of lockdown measures, cultural and artistic events, subject to conditions and limits in terms of number of attendees, were also allowed. However, due to the increasing number of infections in July and the fear of a second wave of contamination, the next phase, which was to come into effect on 1 August, was postponed and the ‘bubble’ was reduced to five persons.

It was up to the De Croo I Cabinet, installed on 1 October (see Cabinet report above), to deal with a second wave of the epidemic. Its first measure was to further limit social contacts and restrict the opening of cafés and restaurants to 11 p.m. On 19 October, cafés and restaurants were fully closed, a curfew was imposed from midnight to 5 a.m., close contact beyond the family ‘bubble’ was restricted to one additional person, and outside gatherings to four persons. Teleworking became mandatory again wherever possible. Unlike the previous government, which relied mostly on the National Security Council, the De Croo I government gave more weight to the Concertation Committee, an existing formal body designed to settle disputes between the federated entities, whose equal regional composition allows the federated entities to be better represented. At the end of October, a curfew extension was imposed, with some variations according to regions: from 10 p.m. in Wallonia and Brussels, while it remained from midnight in Flanders. A lockdown was imposed again at the beginning of November. Although non-essential businesses were able to reopen subject to strict conditions in early December, the lockdown was extended until the end of the year, including Christmas and New Year’s Eve.

Even though the federal Cabinet, in particular the Prime Minister and the Federal Minister of Health, clearly received the lead to manage the crisis from March onwards, tensions between the federated entities were frequent throughout. This regularly led to contradictory signals in the media, as each entity tended to push for its own agenda and approach to the pandemic.

Sources

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