

## **Belgium : Political Developments and Data in 2021.**

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### *Abstract:*

*The year 2021 was the first full year for the De Croo I cabinet, which had been installed in October 2020 after difficult and lengthy negotiations. The oversized and ideologically diverse coalition government struggled as it was confronted with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst frequent tensions between the coalition partners, with the two largest Flemish parties (the VB and the N-VA) shooting from the opposition. Further, usual disagreements continued to prevail between Flemish and Francophone parties and their respective executives at the subnational level. Hence, discussions on the contours of a – still very tentative – seventh state reform did not make much progress. Wallonia, the country's southern region, was hit by catastrophic floods in July. The whole public response to these floods added up to the massive costs of handling COVID-19, which resulted in a structurally large budget deficit.*

### *Abstract in second language:*

*L'année 2021 fut la première année complète pour le gouvernement De Croo I entré en fonction en octobre 2020 au terme de longues et difficiles négociations. La coalition très large et idéologiquement diversifiée rencontra bien des difficultés dans sa gestion de la pandémie*

*COVID-19 ; cette dernière suscita de fréquentes tensions entre les partenaires de la coalition alors que les deux plus grands partis flamands (le VB et la N-VA) menaient une opposition active. Par ailleurs, les désaccords habituels se prolongèrent entre les partis flamands et francophones et leurs exécutifs respectifs à l'échelon subnational. Dans ces conditions, les discussions autour d'une septième réforme de l'Etat aux contours encore très vagues ne progressèrent guère. La Wallonie, la région du Sud du pays, fut frappée par des inondations catastrophiques en juillet. La réponse des autorités publiques à ces inondations, conjuguée aux coûts très élevés de la gestion COVID-19, se traduisit par un déficit budgétaire structurellement élevé.*

## **Introduction**

Under normal circumstances, 2021 would have been expected to be a relatively smooth political year in Belgium, as it was the first full year of the recently installed (October 2020) De Croo I cabinet and there was still quite some time before the heat of the next electoral cycle of the 2024 general elections. Political tensions nonetheless continued to prevail, both within the coalition itself in the context of the very challenging handling of the COVID-19 crisis, and also – unsurprisingly – between the Flemish and Francophone parties on diverse policy topics and on the contours of a still very tentative seventh state reform.

## **Election report**

No elections were held in Belgium in 2021.

## **Cabinet report**

After a few eventful years for the federal cabinet, with a government resignation, a caretaker government, and a long government formation process, as well as several PMs and successive cabinet compositions (Rihoux et al. 2019, 2020), 2021 was exceptionally calm. The very same De Croo I team that had been sworn in back on 1 October 2020 kept office throughout the year. Attention was especially placed on the government's actions to face the COVID-19 pandemic – chiefly the vaccination campaign – for which the federal cabinet held, in addition to the Ministry of Health, a coordination role of its regional counterparts via the so-called Concertation Committee (*comité de concertation/overlegcomité*). Hence, the Prime Minister and the federal Minister of Health have enjoyed large visibility throughout the year, for better or for worse.

This oversized De Croo I coalition (Rihoux et al. 2021) was contested throughout the year by the parliamentary opposition, much more fiercely so by Flemish MPs. De Croo I indeed held a much broader majority on the francophone side with only two small French-speaking parties in the opposition (plus one national party, the PTB/PVDA), while the two largest Flemish parties (the VB and the N-VA) stood in the opposition. Dissenting voices could also be heard from the government parties themselves, as some party presidents did not hesitate to overtly criticise their coalition partners' decisions, thereby putting the cabinet's stability at risk.

*Table 1.* Cabinet composition of De Croo I in Belgium

- **Use table in Excel sheet for data on existing cabinets.**

## Parliament report

Only two replacements took place during the 2021 year at the lower house of the Parliament. For the French-speaking Socialist party (PS), Marc Goblet died on 16 June and was replaced by Hervé Rigot on 1 July. For the French-speaking Greens (Ecolo), Cécile Thibaut resigned on 2 September and was replaced by Olivier Vajda on 23 September. As a result of the latter change, the gender balance in Parliament was marginally modified (one fewer female MP).

*Table 2. Parliamentary Report, no changes.*

- **Use table in Excel sheet for data on parliaments.**

## Political party report

On 21 March, that is, three months later than initially planned, the Flemish Socialist party changed name, from *sp.a* to *Vooruit* (“Forward”). This change, announced already in September 2020 by the party leadership, was criticized by local parties that also carried that label. *Vooruit* henceforth presents itself as a Socialist “movement”, not as a party.

Regarding party presidential changes, virtually all parties had changed or renewed their party president in 2019 (nine parties) and 2020 (two parties) (Rihoux et al. 2020, 2021). Hence, as a party president mandate usually lasts three or four years, such elections only took place in one party, the Communist PTB-PVDA, the only Belgian party to be organized at the national level. Its president, Peter Mertens, elected by the statutory party congresses of 2008 and 2015, decided on 8 November not to seek a third mandate (he would become the party’s General secretary on 1 January 2022). On November 24, the party announced that there was only one

candidate for his succession: Raoul Hedebouw, the party's mediagenic and fully bilingual national spokesman and parliamentary party group leader at the Chamber. He was elected on 5 December with 94 per cent of the 883 local party delegates' vote at the statutory party congress that was held online due to COVID-19 regulations.

*Table 3. Changes in political parties in Belgium in 2021*

➤ **Use table in Excel sheet for data on changes**

### **Institutional change report**

Back in October 2020, the De Croo I government agreement promised that before the 2024 general elections the government would prepare a comprehensive revision of the constitution to be implemented in the next legislative term (2024–29) (Rihoux et al. 2021). The coalition agreement thus contained two pages on state reform, promising the preparation of a comprehensive revision of the constitution to be implemented in the next legislative term, that is, a seventh state reform. Yet, beyond the implementation of the sixth state reform passed in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014), which concerned the transfer of further competences from the federal to the regional/community level, gradually completed in 2018 and 2019 (Rihoux et al. 2019, 2020), no new institutional changes were decided or implemented in 2021.

Several Flemish parties, especially the N-VA and the CD&V, formulated various reform proposals for further devolution of competences and even steps towards confederalism. Conversely, other parties voiced the possibility of recentralizing some regional competencies, as the battle against COVID-19 revealed the handicap of too much decentralization of public health policy, with in total nine federal and regional/community ministers in charge of various aspects

of the anti-COVID-19 policies. Some recentralization arguments were also made regarding damage insurance in case of massive natural disasters (after giant floods in Wallonia in July), and regarding structural policies to mitigate climate change (e.g. the country's still debated nuclear exit).

Altogether, the guiding principle of more efficient division of competences between the federal and regional/community levels can be translated, depending on one's political position along the unitarist-separatist continuum, either into a plea for recentralization or for further devolution. The bottom line is that the seven coalition parties did not manage to conclude a substantial agreement on state reform in 2021. On 25 February, the government announced that, in 2022, it would organize an online consultation, open to all citizens, about institutional reforms and democratic renewal.

For the rest, recurrent frictions between Flemings and Francophones continued to occur, this year round on the *numerus clausus* for medical students, on the Walloon public debt, and on the "re-activation" of the long-term unemployed and ill workers.

### **Issues in national politics**

The year started under the lockdown measures taken back in November 2020 (Rihoux et al 2021) in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The hope raised by the first dose of vaccination at the end of the previous year was short-lived, as new Alpha and Beta variants of the virus appeared, then followed by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. This raised public doubts about the government's handling of the health crisis. The coalition was also divided. This

division was made abundantly clear in the Concertation Committee, the body managing the pandemic crisis (Rihoux et al. 2021), through the clash of two conflicting views: the first implied the full implementation of the experts' recommendations to stop the pandemic quickly; the second put a premium on the country's economic interests and alerted to the damage to growth that strict containment would entail.

These divergences within the coalition between the health imperatives and those of the resumption of economic activities led to decisions that appeared incoherent to part of the population. This contributed to the development of popular mistrust, expressed in particular through demonstrations opposing the health measures. For example, festive events, particularly in Brussels, were organised in opposition to the containment measures and led to clashes with the police. They were prolonged by a series of politically quite heterogeneous but also quite well-attended street demonstrations against COVID-19 policies; these demonstrators contested, in particular, the prioritization of mass vaccination and the imposition of a "Covid Safe Ticket" (CST).

In May and June, the hunt for Jurgen Conings, an extreme right-wing soldier who had threatened to kill one of the prominent experts assisting the Concertation Committee, and who had sought refuge in a forest in eastern Flanders, led to extensive search operations involving the police and the army. This episode, which brought to light the existence of right-wing extremists within the army, led Defence Minister Ludivine Dedonder (PS) to take measures to tighten the control of military personnel recruitment.

The improvement in the health situation in the spring made it possible to envisage a return to normal, inaugurated by a set of measures on 9 June: a "summer plan" allowing a

gradual lifting of the COVID-19 restrictive measures. However, this lightening of the mood did not exceed the summer.

The decisions taken by the Concertation Committee had, up till then, been implemented by ministerial decrees. The government referred to the urgency of the situation, but diverse MPs and legal experts called for a law that would allow Parliament to take the initiative. On the basis of a bill drawn up by the Minister of the Interior, Annelies Verlinden (CD&V), this "Pandemic Law", which was to be activated when a health emergency was declared, was finally passed on 15 July, as the pandemic crisis had abated. It was published on 20 August, more than a month after its adoption in Parliament, with a majority-against-opposition vote. However, the law was not activated for three months, until 8 November, when the epidemic emergency was finally declared. In the meantime, a new wave of COVID-19 led the government to take new constraining measures, again by ministerial decrees, thus avoiding parliamentary debate. Some legal experts expressed concern about the timing and the paradoxes of it all: no blanked law during the emergency, but measures restricting citizens' freedoms and rights continuing to be taken by ministerial orders outside of the emergency situation. The activation of this law made it possible to replace the ministerial decrees and to introduce a series of harmonised measures throughout the country.

Another disaster that hit the country was the floods in Wallonia in July, leaving close to forty dead, tens of thousands of people to be rehoused, and massive damage to infrastructure. This led to the setting up of a parliamentary enquiry committee in Wallonia to delve into the numerous malfunctions that apparently made the floods more acute. It was decided that part of the resources provided for in the Walloon recovery plan would be earmarked for reconstruction, thus increasing the budget deficit of the Walloon Region. The Federal Government's budget was



also be impacted though, as it too shouldered the costs in the aftermath of the floods. The Budget Deputy Minister, Eva De Bleeker (Open VLD), warned of the scale of the expenditure.

A federal budget agreement was reached on 12 October, with a large budget deficit of over 16 billion euros (3.2 per cent of GDP). At the end of the year, as in other countries, notably due to the increase in energy prices, inflation began to pick up, threatening purchasing power. The federal coalition partners were nonetheless able to agree, to the displeasure of the trade unions, on a maximum 0.4 per cent pay rise in the wage norm which determines the scope for wage cost increases every two years. On the other hand, they remained divided on the politically debated nuclear phase-out still scheduled for 2025 in the De Croo I governmental agreement. Similarly, tensions also prevailed between the governments of the federated entities, which were unable to reach an agreement on the issue of global warming in preparation for Glasgow COP26.

In general, the population's confidence in the coalition's action seemed to be consistently low. This was confirmed by a poll conducted by Ipsos between 25 May and 1 June. It showed a surge in voting intentions for radical parties, on the right with the Vlaams Belang in Flanders, but also on the left with the PTB-PVDA, especially in Wallonia but also in Flanders. Above all, it indicated the consistently low voter support for the traditional parties, that is, Socialists, Liberals and (former) Christian Democrats, which had already reached historically low scores back in the 2019 general elections (Rihoux et al. 2020).

## Sources

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