

Belgium: Political Developments and Data in 2022

A Strenuous Season for the Vivaldi Government?

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Abstract

The De Croo I Cabinet had to deal in 2022 with major issues related to international (war in Ukraine), European (energy supply) and national (inflation, social crisis and community problems) issues events. Given the coalition of parties that support the government, the policies developed by the government have sometimes taken a long time to be negotiated, decided, and implemented. In addition, the composition of the government had to be changed for various reasons, among others the vigorous opposition of the two main parties in Parliament (VB—*Vlaams Belang*—and N-VA—*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*).

Introduction

The Vivaldi coalition has had a strenuous season facing major issues, leading it to come under pressure from opposition parties and social actors resulting, among others, in changes in the composition of the government.

Election report

There were no major elections in Belgium in 2022.

Cabinet report

After a year and a half left unaltered, the De Croo I Cabinet was several times reshuffled in 2022 for personal and political reasons (Table 1). Two ministers were temporarily discharged from their duties, entrusting fellow ministers from their party family with their ministerial charges. Sophie Wilmès stepped aside to take care of her sick husband, while Meryame Kitir paused her ministerial mandate to deal with mental health problems. After a few months, both eventually resigned, leading to the appointment of two new ministers. Sophie Wilmès was replaced in July by, to the surprise of all, Hadja Lahbib, former television news anchor and until then not involved in politics nor a member of the liberal party MR (*Mouvement réformateur*), which nominated her. To quiet criticism questioning her party

Table 1. Cabinet composition of De Croo I in Belgium in 2022

Duration of Cabinet Period covered by table	Inception From	1 October 2020 1 January 2022	Dissolution Until	Still in office at the end of the year		Seats in Parliament			
				31 December 2022	31 December 2022	Seats held by women	N	%	
Type of Cabinet	Oversized coalition								
A.	Party/gender composition on 1 January 2022								
				N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Socialist Party		<i>Parti socialiste</i>	(PS)	4	20.0%	2	50.0%	19	12.6%
Reformist Movement Ecology Party		<i>Mouvement réformateur Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de lutttes originales</i>	(MR) (Ecolo)	3 3	15.0% 15.0%	1 2	33.3% 66.6%	14 13	9.3% 8.6%
Christian Democratic and Flemish		<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i>	(CD&V)	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats		<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i>	(Open VLD)	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Forward Green Totals		<i>Vooruit Groen</i>	(Vooruit) (Groen)	2 2	10.0% 10.0%	1 2	50.0% 100.0%	9 8	6.0% 5.3%
				20	100.0%	10	50.0%	87	57.8%
B.	Composition of Cabinet on 1 January 2022								
	See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for Belgium or http://politicaldatayearbook.com								

Table 1. (Continued)

C. Changes in composition of De Croo I Cabinet during 2022				
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister of Foreign and European affairs	Sophie Wilmès (1975, female, MR)	22 April 2022	Alexander De Croo (1975, male, Open VLD)	Sophie Wilmès is 'temporally discharged from her ministerial duties' for personal reasons
Minister of Foreign Trade	Sophie Wilmès (1975, female, MR)	22 April 2022	David Clarinval (1976, male, MR)	Sophie Wilmès is 'temporally discharged from her ministerial duties' for personal reasons
Minister charged with Federal Cultural Institutions	Sophie Wilmès (1975, female, MR)	22 April 2022	Mathieu Michel (1979, male, MR)	Sophie Wilmès is 'temporally discharged from her ministerial duties' for personal reasons
Minister charged with the National lottery	Sammy Mahdi (1988, male, CD&V)	28 June 2022	Vincent Van Peteghem (1980, male, CD&V)	Sammy Mahdi resigned because he became on 25 June leader of his party
Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration	Sammy Mahdi (1988, male, CD&V)	28 June 2022	Nicole de Moor (1984, female, CD&V)	Sammy Mahdi resigned because he became on 25 June leader of his party
Minister of Foreign and European Affairs	Alexander De Croo (1975, male, Open VLD)	15 July 2022	Hadja Lahbib (1970, female, MR)	Sophie Wilmès resigned and a new minister was appointed, taking back all competences temporarily distributed to the ministers in place

Table 1. (Continued)

C. Changes in composition of De Croo I Cabinet during 2022		Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister				
Minister of Foreign Trade	David Clarinval (1976, male, MR)	15 July 2022	Hadja Lahbib (1970, female, MR)	Sophie Wilmès resigned and a new minister was appointed, taking back all competences temporarily distributed to the ministers in place	
Minister charged with Federal Cultural Institutions	Mathieu Michel (1979, male, MR)	15 July 2022	Hadja Lahbib (1970, female, MR)	Sophie Wilmès resigned and a new minister was appointed, taking back all competences temporarily distributed to the ministers in place	
Minister of Development Aid, charged with Large Cities	Meryame Kitir (1980, female, Vooruit)	20 October 2022	Frank Vandenbroucke (1955, male, Vooruit)	Meryame Kitir is 'temporarily discharged from her ministerial duties' for personal reasons	
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)	18 November 2022	Alexia Bertrand (1979, female, Open VLD)	Eva De Bleeker resigned for political reasons	
Minister of Development Aid, charged with Large Cities	Frank Vandenbroucke (1955, male, Vooruit)	17 December 2022	Caroline Gennez (1975, female, Vooruit)	Meryame Kitir resigned and a new minister was appointed, taking back all competences temporarily distributed to the minister in place	

Table 1. (Continued)

	Party/gender composition on 31 December 2022	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
		N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Socialist Party	<i>Parti socialiste</i>	4	20.0%	2	50.0%	19	12.6%
Reformist Movement	<i>Mouvement réformateur</i>	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	14	9.3%
Ecology Party	<i>Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales</i>	3	15.0%	2	66.6%	13	8.6%
Christian Democratic and Flemish	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i>	3	15.0%	2	66.6%	12	8.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i>	3	15.0%	1	33.3%	12	8.0%
Forward Green	<i>Vooruit Groen</i>	2	10.0%	1	50.0%	9	6.0%
Totals		20	100.0%	11	55.0%	87	57.8%

Note: Ministerial titles in the original language are not indicated because they are both in Dutch and French.

Sources: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2023).

loyalty, she took the party membership card four months later. Meryame Kitir was replaced in December by the much less contested choice of the former party leader of Vooruit (the Flemish socialist party—in the past, sp.a), Caroline Gennez. Sammy Mahdi became in June leader of his party CD&V (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams*) and left his position as secretary of state to his former Chief of Staff Nicole de Moor, now charged with addressing, among others, the major migrant reception crisis. The fourth major change arose after wrong figures for the 2023 budget were shared with the Parliament by mistake. Pressure from the opposition parties (mainly by the N-VA—*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*—which spotted the mistake) on the government and Prime Minister De Croo in particular, a co-partisan of Secretary of State Eva De Bleeker, led to her resignation. The very last surprise appointment of the year was Alexia Bertrand, parliamentary party leader in the Brussels regional Parliament and member of the French-speaking liberal party MR, who was nominated by the Flemish liberal party Open VLD (*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*). Some expected Alexia Bertrand to be appointed Minister of Foreign and European Affairs in July, but she eventually made it to the government through the unexpected route of crossing the language border (i.e., through a Flemish party while she was a member of its francophone sister party), leading to heated debates about her future career, with a choice to be made between both sister liberal parties. Content-wise, the oversized De Croo I coalition Cabinet struggled, as it has from the beginning, to implement large policy changes, and had to stick to finding the lowest common denominator among the seven coalition parties' conflicting demands.

Parliament report

Just a few replacements took place in 2022 in the Chamber of Representatives (Table 2). As Raoul Hedebouw was elected in December 2021 as the leader of his party PTB-PVDA (*Parti du travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid van België*), he left his position as parliamentary party leader from 19 January to a party rising star, Sofie Merckx, serving her first term in the Chamber. Two resigning ministers made their comeback in Parliament: First, Wouter Beke (CD&V) resigned from the Flemish government due to disastrous polls for his party and some scandals falling within his ministerial duties of childcare policy. His successor in the Chamber, Steven Matheï, gave back his seat on 19 May. Second, as detailed in the Cabinet report, Sophie Wilmès resigned in July from the federal government and took back her seat in the Chamber from her successor Nathalie Gilson on 14 July. Two deputies left the Parliament to occupy new positions. Evita Willaert was appointed Alderwoman in the city of Ghent and, as required by her party's (Groen) rules, was replaced by Kathleen Pisman on 25 May to avoid mandate accumulation. Kattrin Jadin (MR) was appointed judge of the Constitutional Court and, consequently, had to leave Parliament. She was replaced by Mathieu Bihet on 2 September. He made his comeback to the Chamber of Representatives after a first short mandate of a few months in 2020, already as successor. On 11 October, Sophie Wilmès was appointed as a member of the Parliament Board, in replacement of her co-partisan Kattrin Jadin.

Table 2. Party and gender composition of the lower house of Parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2022

Party	1 January 2022						31 December 2022					
	All		Women		All		Women		All		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
New Flemish Alliance	24	16.0%	12	50.0%	24	16.0%	12	50.0%	24	16.0%	12	50.0%
Socialist Party	19	12.7%	7	36.8%	19	12.7%	7	36.8%	19	12.7%	7	36.8%
Flemish Interest	18	12.0%	6	33.3%	18	12.0%	6	33.3%	18	12.0%	6	33.3%
Reformist Movement	14	9.3%	5	35.7%	14	9.3%	5	35.7%	14	9.3%	4	28.6%
Ecology Party	13	8.7%	6	46.2%	13	8.7%	6	46.2%	13	8.7%	6	46.2%
Christian Democratic and Flemish	12	8.0%	5	41.7%	12	8.0%	5	41.7%	12	8.0%	5	41.7%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	12	8.0%	6	50.0%	12	8.0%	6	50.0%	12	8.0%	6	50.0%
Workers' Party of Belgium	12	8.0%	4	33.3%	12	8.0%	4	33.3%	12	8.0%	4	33.3%
Forward	9	6.0%	6	66.7%	9	6.0%	6	66.7%	9	6.0%	6	66.7%
Green	8	5.3%	4	50.0%	8	5.3%	4	50.0%	8	5.3%	4	50.0%
Humanist Democratic Centre/The Committed Democratic Federalist	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	5	3.3%	2	40.0%
Independent	2	1.3%	1	50.0%	2	1.3%	1	50.0%	2	1.3%	1	50.0%
Independents	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%
Totals	150	100.0%	64	42.7%	150	100.0%	63	42.0%	150	100.0%	63	42.0%

Note: The French-speaking centrist party cdH changed name on 12 March 2022 to become *Les Engagés* (The Committed).

Source: Website of the Chamber of Representatives (www.lachambre.be) (n.d.).

Political party report

About all parties had changed or renewed their party president in 2019 (nine parties) and 2020 (two parties). As mandates for party president usually last three or four years, in 2022, such elections only took place in one party, the Christian-democrat CD&V, where party president Joachim Coens (elected in 2019 by a narrow margin 53 per cent from Sammy Mahdi, son of an Iraqi refugee) resigned after another bad election poll on 6 May. The party organised new leadership elections on 25 June, where Mahdi (incumbent secretary of state of migration) won uncontested with 96.9 per cent. In November 2022, Conner Rousseau (leader of Vooruit, the Flemish Socialist party, formerly called sp.a) called for leader elections to be held in May 2023 (six months before the normal end of the term) in order not to have these coincide with the campaign for June 2024 elections.

Changes in political parties are summarised in Table 3.

Issues in national politics

From the outset, as in many countries, 2022 was the year of the gradual emergence from the confinement caused by the COVID-19 health crisis. But the population hardly had time to breathe, as the country began plunging into new ‘crises’.

A COVID-19 barometer using a ‘colour code’ and centred on the number of hospitalisations per day to monitor the evolution of the pandemic had only come into force on 28 January but was rapidly deactivated on 20 May. Most of the measures had already been lifted on 18 February (end of the teleworking obligation, reopening of discotheques and congress halls, with some conditions, among others). Other measures, including the generalised wearing of masks and the Covid Safe Ticket (see Rihoux et al. 2022), were lifted on 7 March. A 50,000-strong European demonstration against these restrictive measures, taking place in Brussels on 23 January, was marred by violence, but three weeks later, a new international demonstration, self-titled ‘freedom convoy’, gathered only a few participants.

The issue of the war in Ukraine was the main news in the media from 24 February onwards. Belgian aid to Ukraine (military, but especially humanitarian, aid) was relatively limited, compared to other European countries: Only 0.15 per cent of Belgium’s GDP was devoted to it. A major effort was made to help Ukrainian refugees: with the help of citizens, who hosted part of them, some 60,000 Ukrainians would be accommodated in the country. This surge of generosity in taking in Ukrainians contrasts sharply with the treatment of other refugees. For instance, at the end of 2022, while the number of migrants was stable, Belgium was experiencing an increasingly acute reception crisis, as the federal state was not fulfilling its asylum duties, namely, providing at least accommodation and assistance to people seeking asylum in our country. As a growing number of migrants are not hosted, or are crammed into unsanitary buildings in Brussels, the Belgian state has been condemned multiple times, by both Belgian courts and by the European Court of Human Rights, for failing to meet its international humanitarian obligations. Far from being a law-abiding state, the government does not respect court decisions in this matter. The FEDASIL centres, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, are saturated due to lack of places and staff.

Table 3. Changes in political parties in Belgium in 2022

		Party leadership changes in 2022									
Parti du travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid van België	PTB/PVDA	Party President	Peter Mertens	1969	Male	Did not run for re-election and replaced by a vote of the Party Congress (consisting of delegates from party local sections)	1 January 2022	Raoul Hedebouw	1977	Male	PTB/PVDA
Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams	CD&V	Party President	Joachim Coens	1966	Male	Did not run for re-election and replaced by direct membership vote	25 June 2022	Sammy Mahdi	1988	Male	CD&V

Sources: For PTB/PVDA, see main text; for CD&V, https://www.cdenv.be/sammy_mahdi, March 2023.

The nuclear issue also divided the ‘Vivaldi coalition’ (see Rihoux et al. 2022) in 2022. The agreement on the extension of the life span of two nuclear power plants, called for by the MR, was concluded in March 2022 after bitter discussions within the government. The issue of the cost of radioactive waste disposal and the sharing of risks, costs and benefits also leads to endless wrangling with Engie-Electrabel (the operator of the nuclear power plants). It was not concluded, as initially envisaged, in 2022 (it would be on 9 January 2023), with the Vivaldi coalition constantly delaying its decision and finally having to take it in a hurry, once faced with the short-term threat to the country’s energy supply stemming from the war on Ukraine. The government thus decided to extend these two nuclear power stations (Doel 4 and Tihange 3) until 2035, rather than 2025, as initially planned.

As a consequence, Belgium faced a higher increase in energy prices than elsewhere in Europe. The government’s reaction to the energy crisis was late, and the measures it proposed (a sign of divisions within the seven-party coalition) showed neither overall coherence nor a concerted strategy for the long term. Measures aimed at relieving the burden on households included the extension of the ‘social tariff’ to ‘low income’ groups, the reduction of the VAT rate from 21 per cent to 6 per cent on gas (from March 2022 onwards) and on electricity (from April 2022 onwards), the granting of a one-off heating bonus (100 euros) distributed to all households, supplemented in the autumn by an additional flat-rate aid to households with a variable energy contract. It should be noted that the question of whether the reduction in VAT on energy in the spring is temporary or permanent was not clearly decided within the coalition, leading to a government crisis when the budget issue was discussed in the autumn. This led State Secretary for Budget and Consumer Protection, Eva De Bleeker (Open VLD), to resign (see ‘Cabinet report’).

Inflation, which had already begun to raise in 2021, increased further in 2022. From 7 per cent inflation already in January, it overcame the 10 per cent barrier later in the year, a phenomenon not seen since the 1980s. As elsewhere in the Western world, the Russian invasion of Ukraine contributed to the sharp rise in prices. As in Belgium, inflation is passed on through the mechanism of ‘wage indexation’ (a provision that automatically links changes in wages to changes in a retail prices index of a list of consumer goods), there were no less than five 2 per cent increases in wages throughout the year, although they did not fully cover the rising cost of living.

A national workers’ demonstration brought together 80,000 people in Brussels on 20 June, and a one-day strike on 9 November blocking much of the country’s economic and social life. While company profits were particularly high in the first semester of 2022, the unions demanded that they negotiate wage increases and preserve purchasing power in the face of soaring energy prices. This social issue opposing employers and unions also divides the seven parties of the coalition. Whereas the trade unions demanded the maintenance of wage indexation and the modification of the law that regulates the framework within which the social actors negotiate wages, employers refused both. In order not to appear to be choosing sides in this ‘Faustian’ social dilemma, the government did not modify either of these.

The 2022 coalition agreement of the De Croo I government did contain just two pages on state reform (out of 82 pages), announcing the preparation of a comprehensive revision of the constitution to be implemented in the next legislative term (after the 2024 general elections). However, the guiding principles of these reforms (more efficient

division of competences between the federal and regional levels) can be interpreted both as a classical plea for further devolution (as defended by the CD&V) and as a plea for partial recentralisation (for the other six coalition parties). Two departmental ministers were charged with the preparation of a large constitutional reform: Annelies Verlinden (CD&V, Flemish) and David Clarinval (MR, French speaker). In the meantime, apart from a few small matters, the seven coalition parties did not manage to conclude a clear and substantial agreement on state reform. The only novelty was that the government launched on 25 April 2022 a ‘national brainstorm’ about a variety of institutional reforms, through a (complicated) online platform, to which only 10,152 citizens responded (results would be published on 17 February 2023).

Later in the year, the country also faced another issue: drug trafficking, with the port of Antwerp being seen as the gateway to cocaine in Europe, where mafias were shooting at each other and threatened to kidnap Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne (Open VLD), prompting the government to set up an action plan against organized crime.

Source

Rihoux, B., Vandeleene, A., De Winter, L., Baudewyns, P., & Deruette, S. (2022). Belgium: Political developments and data in 2021. A tense first season for the Vivaldi government. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook* 61(1): 37–46.