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Belgium: Political developments and data in 2018

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Introduction

The non-typical Michel I federal coalition formed in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2015) went through a tumultuous year and eventually fell in December. After an unsuccessful attempt to continue with a minority Michel II Cabinet, the prime minister had to resign and the Cabinet continued in a caretaker capacity. The October local elections showed the coalition parties – and traditional parties in general – losing some ground. The overall socioeconomic climate remained tense in spite of some encouraging policy results, and the overall party-political atmosphere became increasingly nervous as all parties continued to gear up for the May 2019 ‘mother of all elections’ (regional, federal and European).

Cabinet report

It was a difficult year for the unique and asymmetric Michel I Cabinet, composed of three Flemish parties and only one French-speaking party, the Liberal Reformist Movement/*Mouvement Réformateur* (MR) (Rihoux et al. 2015). The year was marked by numerous scandals and tensions mostly related to migration issues that were repeatedly expected to topple the government.

Michel I eventually fell in early December after several weeks of government crisis. While Prime Minister Michel announced in September that Belgium would support the United Nations (UN) Migration Pact, the largest party of the government, the national-conservative New Flemish Alliance/*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA), contested this position in late October in an attempt to appeal to its electorate after disappointing results at the 14 October local elections. The other three government parties were not willing to abandon the UN Migration Pact, which led the five N-VA ministers and secretaries of state to resign on 9 December. The de facto Michel II government reshuffled the N-VA portfolios amongst the remaining government members, and the two remaining secretaries of state were upgraded to the level of minister. Prime Minister Michel tried to set up a minority government with ad hoc majorities to pass important bills before the next elections of May 2019, but faced a stern opposition. When some opposition parties introduced a no-confidence vote, the prime minister decided to resign before the vote and the Michel II government’s termination was accepted by the king on 21 December. From then, the government continued in office in a caretaker capacity.

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2018

Duration of Cabinet Period covered by table Type of Cabinet	Inception From Minimum winning coalition (MWC)	11 October 2014 1 January 2018	Dissolution Until	9 December 2018 9 December 2018
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2018	Seats in Cabinet ^a <i>N</i> %	Seats held by women <i>N</i> % of party	Seats in Parliament <i>N</i> %	
New Flemish Alliance/ <i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (N-VA), Dutch-speaking	5 27.8%	1 20.0%	31	20.7%
Reformist Movement/ <i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> (MR), French-speaking	7 38.9%	2 28.6%	20	13.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish/ <i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	3 16.7%	0 0%	18	12.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/ <i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking	3 16.7%	1 33.3%	14	9.3%
Totals	18 100%	4 22.2%	83	55.3%
B. Composition of Michel I Cabinet on 1 January 2018				
See previous edition of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for Belgium (Rihoux et al. 2017) or http://politicaldatayearbook.com				
C. Changes in composition of Michel I Cabinet during 2018				
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister of Defence, in charge of the Civil Service	Steven Vandeput (1967, male, N-VA)	12 November	Sander Loones (1979, male, N-VA)	Assumed office on 12 November
D. Party/gender composition on 9 December 2018				
Same as on 1 January				

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

Source: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2019a).

Parliament report

The fifth year of the legislative term was characterized by a higher number of changes among MPs as compared with previous years. Among Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD) MPs, Annemie Turtelboom was replaced by Frank Wilrycx on 3 May, and Sabien Lahaye-Battheu was replaced by Sandrine De Crom on 6 December. In the francophone Socialist Party/*Parti socialiste* (PS), Eric Massin was replaced by Olivier Henry on 24 May, and Stéphane Crusnière was replaced by

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Table 2. Cabinet composition of Michel II in Belgium in 2018

Duration of Cabinet Period covered by table Type of Cabinet	Inception From Minority coalition (MC)	9 December 2018 9 December 2018	Dissolution Until	21 December 2018 21 December 2018
A. Party/gender composition on 9 December 2018	Seats in Cabinet N %	Seats held by women N % of party	Seats in Parliament N %	
Reformist Movement (MR), French-speaking	7 53.8%	2 28.6%	20 13.3%	
Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	3 23.1%	0 0%	18 12.0%	
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking	3 23.1%	1 33.3%	14 9.3%	
Totals	13 100%	3 23.1%	52 34.7%	
B. Composition of Michel II Cabinet on 9 December 2018				
Ministerial title	Minister			
Prime Minister	Charles Michel (1975, male, MR)			
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Employment, Economy and Consumer Affairs, in charge of Foreign Trade, Combating Poverty, Equal Opportunities, and Disabled People	Kris Peeters (1962, male, CD&V)			
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, in charge of the Fight against Tax Fraud, and Minister of Development Cooperation	Alexander De Croo (1975, male, Open VLD)			
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, and of Defence, in charge of Beliris ^a and Federal Cultural Institutions	Didier Reynders (1958, male, MR)			
Minister of Security and the Interior	Pieter De Crem (1962, male, CD&V)			
Minister of Justice, in charge of the Buildings Agency	Koen Geens (1958, male, CD&V)			
Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, and Asylum Policy and Migration	Maggie De Block (1962, female, Open VLD)			
Minister of Pensions	Daniel Bacquelaîne (1952, male, MR)			
Minister of Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development	Marie-Christine Marghem (1963, female, MR)			
Minister of the Budget and Civil Service, in charge of the National Lottery and Science Policy	Sophie Wilmès (1975, female, MR)			
Minister of Mobility, in charge of Belgocontrol and the National Railway Company of Belgium	Francois Bellot (1954, male, MR)			
Minister of Small Businesses, Self-employment, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Agriculture and Social Integration, in charge of Larger Towns	Denis Ducarme (1973, male, MR)			
Minister of Digital Agenda, Telecom and Postal Services, in charge of Administrative Simplification, the Fight against Social Fraud, Privacy and North Sea	Philippe De Backer (1978, male, Open VLD)			

Table 2. Continued

C. Changes in composition of Michel II Cabinet during 2018						
Ministerial title		Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments	
None						
D. Party/gender composition on 21 December 2018						
		Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	% of party	<i>N</i> %
Same as on 9 December						

Note: ^aBeliris is a cooperation agreement between the federal state and the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) dedicated to the promotion of the national and international role of Brussels through infrastructure, renovation and mobility initiatives.

Source: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2019b).

Michel Corthouts on 4 October. In the francophone Humanist Democratic Centre/*Centre démocrate humaniste* (cdH), Isabelle Poncelet was replaced by Anne-Catherine Goffinet on 20 September. In the francophone Green Party/Ecolo, Muriel Gerken was replaced by Sarah Schlitz on 18 October and Benoît Hellings was replaced by Véronique Waterschoot on 6 December. Owing to the resignation of the N-VA from the governmental coalition, Wim Van der Donckt was replaced by Zuhail Demir on 9 December, and Renate Hufkens was replaced by Theo Francken on the same day.

In 2018, the 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 group.

Political party report

Most parties held programmatic congresses in connection with the 14 October local and provincial elections, and all parties were keen to avoid leadership change during the year. Ecolo was the exception to the rule, as one of its two co-presidents, Patrick Dupriez, surprisingly resigned right after the party's electoral success at the local elections. He was smoothly replaced by Jean-Marc Nollet, former regional minister (2009–14) and prominent federal MP, by a party congress vote (93%) on 9 November, thereby forming a strong duo with the other co-president (Zakia Khattabi).

Belgium's most powerful political leader, N-VA party president B. De Wever, continued his fifth consecutive mandate, while remaining mayor of Antwerp, Flanders' largest city. He announced his candidacy for becoming minister-president of Flanders after the 2019 regional elections.

Institutional change report

As a result of the 'sixth state reform' passed in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) and following its gradual implementation from 2014 onwards (Rihoux et al. 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018), a final batch of competences was transferred on 1 January from the federal to the

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Table 3. Party and gender composition of the lower house of Parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2018

Party	1 January 2018				31 December 2018			
	All N	%	Women N	%	All N	%	Women N	%
Socialist Party/ <i>Parti socialiste</i> (PS)	23	15.3%	7	30.4%	23	15.3%	7	30.4%
Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V)	18	12.0%	8	44.4%	18	12.0%	8	44.4%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	14	9.3%	7	50.0%	14	9.3%	6	43.0%
Reformist Movement (MR)	20	13.3%	5	25.0%	20	13.3%	5	25.0%
Socialist Party Different/ <i>Socialistische Partij Anders</i> (sp.a)	13	8.7%	7	53.8%	13	8.7%	7	53.8%
Humanist Democratic Centre/ <i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (cdH)	9	6.0%	3	33.3%	9	6.0%	3	33.3%
Flemish Interest/ <i>Vlaams Belang</i> (VB)	3	2.0%	1	33.3%	3	2.0%	1	33.3%
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	31	20.7%	14	45.2%	31	20.7%	13	42.0%
Independents	2	1.3%	1	50.0%	2	1.3%	1	50.0%
Green Party (francophone)/ <i>Ecolo</i> (Ecolo)	6	4.0%	1	16.6%	6	4.0%	2	33.3%
Green Party (Flemish)/ <i>Groen</i> (Groen)	6	4.0%	3	50.0%	6	4.0%	3	50.0%
Democratic Federalist Independent/ <i>Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant</i> (DéFI)	2	1.3%	0	0%	2	1.3%	0	0%
People's Party/ <i>Parti Populaire</i> (PP)	1	0.7%	0	0%	1	0.7%	0	0%
Workers' Party of Belgium/ <i>Parti du travail de Belgique – Partij van de Arbeid van België</i> (PTB-PVDA)	2	1.3%	0	0%	2	1.3%	0	0%
Totals	150	100%	57	38.0%	150	100%	56	37.3%

Source: Data on gender were provided upon request by the General Services Department of the Belgian federal Parliament.

Table 4. Political party changes in Belgium in 2018

A. Party institutional changes in 2018
No changes in 2018
B. Party leadership changes in 2018
Ecolo co-president Patrick Dupriez (1968, male, Ecolo) resigned on 20 October and was replaced by Jean-Marc Nollet (1970, male, Ecolo) on 9 November by a party congress vote (93%)

Sources: Various media.

regional/community level. They touched upon specific healthcare policies such as psychiatric institutions, palliative care units and elderly patients.

Issues in national politics

On the ‘community conflict’ front between Flemings and Francophones, the dominant N-VA continued to put its demands completely on hold, as agreed at the formation of the Michel I government in 2014. However, it relentlessly continued to underline north–south

differences in various policy fields – refugees and migrants, the nomination of mayors in the some communes of the Brussels periphery (Rihoux et al. 2018), Islamic veils at school, local mismanagement in Brussels, etc. – but without proposing reforms for more devolution.

Reflecting the federal government’s ambitions in terms of job creation, 61,000 new jobs (1.3 per cent of the total workforce) were created that year, mainly in the private sector. This was a lower figure than in 2017, and a significant proportion of the jobs were still part-time or flexible. At 1.4 per cent, the economy posted weak growth relative to 2017 (1.7 per cent).

This was also an electoral year at the municipal and provincial level. Those ballots, as a dry run held on 14 October, seven months before the next federal, regional and European ones on 26 May 2019, were an important test. Overall, they showed a decrease for the coalition parties. The projection of the provincial results indicates that their majority in seats could be lost at both the federal level and the regional Walloon Parliament – but not in the Flemish one. Broadly, the traditional parties lost these elections, be it in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels regions, with the green parties the major beneficiaries in all regions. The ballots revealed the deepening left–right divide distinguishing the north from the south of Belgium. Indeed, in Flanders, the lower scores of the N-VA were compensated for by the gains of the far right nationalist Flemish Interest/*Vlaams Belang* (VB), whereas the radical left Workers’ Party of Belgium/*Parti du travail de Belgique* – *Partij van de Arbeid van België* (PTB-PVDA) benefited from the ballot in Wallonia.

Concerning the asylum and migrants issue, the government failed to pass a bill authorizing home visits by the police of those suspected of hosting illegal migrants owing to the entrenched resistance of public opinion. In May, public opinion had been shocked by the death of Mawda, a two-year-old Kurdish girl who was shot by the police during a high-speed chase of a van in which migrants tried to reach England.

On 26 October, after a long debate on the replacement of American General Dynamics/Lockheed Martin F-16 jet fighters, a €4 billion contract that sparked tensions between Francophones and Flemings, the government chose the American Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II. This had been in competition with the French Dassault Rafale and the Eurofighter Typhoon of the multinational European consortium Eurofighter Jagdflugzeug.

Regarding the moral conflict line, the coalition had to face the issue implied by the request to remove abortion from the penal code. An ambiguous compromise was reached, indeed proceeding to the depenalization but maintaining some criminal sanctions if the abortion took place outside the new legal requirements, and passing a new bill granting a legal status to the foetus.

On the social front, the trade unions staged mass demonstrations in May, October and December in opposition to coalition projects regarding the retirement pension system. On the fringe of these actions, the spontaneous citizens’ movement of the ‘yellow vests’ initiated in France found some echo in Belgium in the autumn, almost exclusively in the French-speaking regions, and notably in Wallonia.

On 2 December, riding the wave of the international movement mobilized to advocate bold policies for sustainable development, a ‘climate coalition March’ gathered more than 70,000 participants in Brussels.

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