

Belgium

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Introduction

The year 2014 was particularly dense, with simultaneous regional, parliamentary and European Parliament elections on 25 May. This was followed by a relatively short government formation process towards an unprecedented ‘Swedish’ federal cabinet. The electoral cycle took place in the context of a still quite difficult socioeconomic situation and ethnolinguistic tensions at the elite level.

Election report

Regional elections, 25 May 2014

Most parties did not present a separate regional and federal manifesto (De Winter & Van Wylsberghe 2015), therefore blurring regional and federal issues. Remarkably, following the electoral results at the regional level (Blaise et al. 2014b), the resultant government formations saw regionalist parties come to power in three of the five regional/community governments.

In Flanders, the N-VA became the predominant party in the Flemish region, replacing the CD&V, and thus legitimately claimed the leadership of the formation of the Flemish executive, which resulted in the formation of the Bourgeois I government with the N-VA, the CD&V and the Open VLD.

At the Walloon elections, of the three incumbent coalition parties (PS, CdH and Ecolo) only the latter lost heavily, with the fourth traditional party (MR) regaining some ground, as well as the newcomers PTB and PP. The new Walloon government was formed as a left-centre coalition of the PS and CdH, under the leadership of Paul Magnette (PS), while the executive of the Francophone community government was headed by the incumbent Rudy Demotte (PS).

Elections for the Brussels regional parliament are always a bit peculiar, given the guaranteed over-representation of the small Flemish minority (10 per cent of the electorate), as well as the traditional divergent electoral results of respective Flemish and francophone parties. Again, Ecolo paid the price for its government participation. The MR lost due to the fact that the FDF presented for the first time since 1989 a separate list and obtained 15 per

cent of the francophone vote, allowing its inclusion into the new Brussels coalition with the PS and cdH (as well as the Open VLD and sp.a) under the leadership of Rudi Vervoort (PS).

Finally, ProDG became for the first time the leading party in the German-speaking community elections, and formed a coalition with the SP and Ecolo under the leadership of Oliver Paasch (ProDG).

Parliamentary elections, 25 May 2014

These were the first parliamentary elections held after the sixth state reform, which modified the bicameral structure of the federal parliament (see **Institutional changes** below). The Flemish N-VA dominated federal elections, winning more than 20 per cent of votes and gaining six seats. The leading francophone party (PS) won 11 per cent and lost three seats. This significantly decreased the difference between the two largest Francophone parties, the MR and the PS. The Flemish extreme right-wing party VB had a bad election, losing nine of its twelve seats. Ecolo also lost a third of its seats in the chamber. As a result of the split between the MR and the FDF in September 2011, the latter ran in the 2014 elections independently and obtained two seats – quite an achievement for a party mostly limited to the Brussels region. The communist PTB-PvDA (the only unitary – i.e., bilingual – party in Belgium), in an alliance with smaller extreme left-wing parties, succeeded in entering parliament. The PP maintained its unique seat, obtained for the first time at the 2010 elections. The remaining parties did not encounter dramatic changes in their vote or seat shares (Blaise et al. 2014a).

European Parliament elections, 25 May 2014

Given the simultaneous elections, the European Parliament elections did not generate much interest. As a result of Croatia's accession in 2013 and the number of seats of the EP being set at 751, Belgium was brought down from 22 to 21 seats, with 12 being allotted to the Flemish-speaking electoral constituency, eight (less one) to the French-speaking constituency and one granted to the German-speaking constituency (Blaise et al. 2014a).

In Flanders, confirming its electoral success at the federal and regional ballots, the N-VA came first and won four seats (three more than in 2009). The Open VLD, with Guy Verhofstadt at the head of its electoral roll, was on the increase and retained its three seats. Despite a better score than at the general elections, both the CD&V and the sp.a obtained one seat less than in 2009, as did the VB with drastic electoral losses. Conversely, Groen retained its seat, as usual reaching a better score than at the federal and regional ballots.

In the French-speaking constituency, despite polling lower than its former score, the PS retained its three seats, which was the total the MR also reached (one more than in 2009). Ecolo, in substantial decline compared to 2009, lost one of its two seats, while the cdH kept its single one. As more than 10 per cent of votes is necessary to obtain one of the eight seats allotted to the French-speaking parties, neither the PTB nor the PP nor the FDF were able to get a seat.

In the German-speaking constituency, the CSP remained the leading party with more than 30 per cent of the votes, keeping its seat.

Table 1. Elections to the lower house of parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2014

Date of election	25 May 2014	Previous election	13 June 2010
Electorate	8,008,776	Total seats	150
Total votes cast	7,157,498	Turnout	89.4%
Valid votes cast	6,744,547	Share of valid vote	94.2%

Party	Votes			Seats			
	N	%	Δ%	N	%	ΔN	Δ%
New Flemish Alliance/ <i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (N-VA)	1,366,397	20.3%	+2.9%	33	22.0%	+6	+4.0%
Socialist Party/ <i>Parti socialiste</i> (PS)	787,058	11.7%	−2.0%	23	15.3%	−3	−2.0%
Christian Democratic and Flemish/ <i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> (CD&V)	783,040	11.6%	0.8%	18	12.0%	+1	0.7%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/ <i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen Democraten</i> (Open VLD)	659,571	9.8%	+1.1%	14	9.3%	+1	0.7%
Reform Movement/ <i>Mouvement réformateur</i> (MR)	650,260	9.6%	0.4%	20	13.3%	+2	+1.3%
Socialist Party Different/ <i>Socialistische Partij Anders</i> (sp.a)	595,466	8.8%	−0.4%	13	8.7%	0	0.0%
Green/ <i>Groen</i>	358,947	5.3%	+0.9%	6	4.0%	+1	+0.7%
Humanist Democratic Centre/ <i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (cdH)	336,184	5.0%	−0.5%	9	6.0%	0	0.0%
Flemish Interest/ <i>Vlaams Belang</i> (VB)	247,738	3.7%	−4.1%	3	2.0%	−9	−6.0%
Ecologists/ECOLO	222,524	3.3%	−1.5%	6	4.0%	−2	−1.3%
Workers' Party of Belgium-Left Opening!/ <i>Parti du travail de Belgique-Gauche d'ouverture!</i> (PTB-GO!)	132,943	2.0%	+1.4%	2	1.3%	+2	+1.3%
Francophone Democratic Federalists/ <i>Fédéralistes démocrates francophones</i> (FDF)	121,384	1.8%	+1.8%	2	1.3%	+2	+1.3%
Workers' Party of Belgium +/ <i>Partij van de Arbeid</i> + (PvDA+)	118,333	1.8%	+0.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
People's Party/ <i>Parti Populaire</i> (PP)	102,581	1.5%	+0.2%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%
Others	262,121	3.9%	−	0	0.0%	−	−

Source: SPF Intérieur (2015a).

Cabinet report

Di Rupo I cabinet, ending May (October) 2014

The Di Rupo I cabinet, the first federal cabinet led by a French speaker since 1979, had been formed in December 2011 after the world's longest cabinet formation period: 541 days (Rihoux et al. 2012). The coalition was a classical symmetrical Socialist/Christian Democrat/Liberal one, which exceeded by 12 per cent the required majority in parliament. On 26 May, in the aftermath of the general elections, Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo submitted his cabinet's resignation to King Philippe, as is constitutionally required. The interim

Table 2. Elections to the European Parliament in Belgium in 2014

Date of election	25 May 2014	Previous election	7 June 2009
Electorate	7,948,854	Total seats	21 (one fewer than in 2009) ^a
Total votes cast	7,125,161	Turnout	89.6%
Valid votes cast	6,690,711	Share of valid vote	93.9%

Party	EP group ^b	N	Votes %	Δ%	N	%	Seats ΔN ^c	Δ%
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	ECR	1,123,355	16.8%	+10.7%	4	19.0%	+3	+14.3%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	ALDE	859,099	12.8%	+0.0%	3	14.3%	0	0.0%
Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V)	EPP	840,783	12.6%	-1.8%	2	9.5%	-1	-4.8%
Socialist Party (PS)	S&D	714,645	10.7%	-0.2%	3	14.3%	0	0.0%
Reform Movement (MR)	ALDE	661,332	9.9%	+0.2%	3	14.3%	+1	+4.8%
Socialist Party Different (sp.a)	S&D	555,348	8.3%	+0.1%	1	4.8%	-1	-4.8%
Green (Groen)	Greens/EFA	447,391	6.7%	+1.8%	1	4.8%	0	0.0%
Ecologists (ECOLO)	Greens/EFA	285,196	4.3%	-4.3%	1	4.8%	-1	-4.8%
Flemish Interest (VB)	NI	284,856	4.3%	-5.6%	1	4.8%	-1	-4.8%
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)	EPP	277,246	4.1%	-0.9%	1	4.8%	0	0.0%
People's Party (PP)	–	145,909	2.2%	+2.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Workers' Party of Belgium-Left Opening! (PTB-GO!)	–	133,811	2.0%	+0.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Workers' Party of Belgium (PVDA+)	–	101,237	1.5%	+0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Francophone Democratic Federalists (FDF)	–	82,540	1.2%	+1.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Belgians, Rise Up (DLB)	–	72,671	1.1%	+1.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Christian Social Party (CSP)	EPP	11,710	0.2%	0.0%	1	4.8%	0	0.0%
Others	–	93,582	1.3%	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Notes: ^aThe 2011 Lisbon Treaty yielded a reduction in Belgium's EP delegation from 22 to 21 to take effect with the EP election of 2014.

^bFor acronyms, see the introductory chapter 'Political data in 2014'.

^cFigures for change reflect differences between 2014 and the pre-Lisbon Treaty totals resulting from the 2009 election.

Source: SPF Intérieur (2015b).

government was then charged with day-to-day matters until 11 October when the Michel I cabinet took office.

Michel I cabinet, beginning October 2014

On 27 May, King Philippe, who had acceded to the throne less than a year before (Rihoux et al. 2014), nominated Bart De Wever, the N-VA party president as 'informateur' – the classic first role in Belgian government formation. His mission lasted one month and he got tripped up by the strong refusal from the cdH to enter a coalition formed by the MR, the N-VA and the CD&V. Two days later, MR president Ch. Michel was invited

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Di Rupo I in Belgium in 2014

Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet	Inception From Oversized Coalition (OC)	5 December 2011 1 January 2014	Dissolution Until	26 May 2014 11 October 2014 ^b
A. Party and gender composition on 1 January 2014	Seats in cabinet ^a N %	Seats held by women N % of party	Seats in parliament N %	
Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	4 21.1%	1 25.0%	26 17.3%	
Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	4 21.1%	0 0.0%	17 11.3%	
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking	3 15.8%	2 66.7%	13 8.7%	
Reformist Movement (MR), French-speaking	3 15.8%	1 33.3%	15 10.0%	
Socialist Party Different (sp.a), Dutch-speaking	3 15.8%	1 33.3%	13 8.7%	
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH), French-speaking	2 10.5%	1 50.0%	9 6.0%	
Totals	19 100.0%	6 31.6%	93 62.0%	

B. Composition of Di Rupo I cabinet on 1 January 2014

See previous editions of the *Political Data Yearbook* for Belgium (Rihoux et al.2014) or
www.politicaldatayearbook.com

C. Changes in composition of Di Rupo I cabinet during 2014

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and Equal Opportunities: Joëlle Milquet (1961 female, cdH) resigned to take another post in another government on 22 July; replaced by Melchior Wathelet (1977 male, cdH), who became Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior Secretary of State for Environment, Energy and Mobility, adjunct to the Minister of Interior and Equal Opportunities, and Secretary of State of Institutional Reforms, adjunct to the Prime Minister: Melchior Wathelet (1977 male, cdH) resigned to take another post in the same government on 22 July; replaced by Catherine Fonck (1968 female, cdH), who became Secretary of State for Environment, Energy and Mobility, adjunct to the Minister of Interior, and Secretary of State of Institutional Reforms, adjunct to the Prime Minister

Minister of Justice: Annemie Turtelboom (1967 female, Open VLD) resigned to take another post in another government on 25 July; replaced by Maggie De Block (1966 female, Open VLD), who became Minister of Justice charged with Asylum, Immigration, Social Integration and Struggle against Poverty Secretary of State for Social Affairs, Family, Disabled People and Science Policy, in charge of Professional Risks, adjunct to the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health: Philippe Courard (1966 male, PS) resigned to take another post on 12 September; replaced by Laurette Onkelinx (1958 female, PS), who became Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, in charge of Belirisc and Federal Cultural Institutions, and charged with Social Affairs, Family and Disabled People, and in charge of Professional Risks

Secretary of State for Combatting Social and Fiscal Fraud, adjunct to the Prime Minister: John Crombez (1973 male, sp.a) resigned on 22 September; replaced by Johan Vande Lanotte (1955 male, sp.a), who became Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Economy, Consumers and the North Sea, in charge of Combatting Social and Fiscal Fraud

Table 3. Continued

D. Party and gender composition on 11 October 2014	Seats in cabinet ^d		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament ^b	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Socialist Party (PS)	3	18.8%	1	33.3%	Not applicable ^b	
Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V)	4	25.0%	0	0.0%		
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	2	12.5%	1	50.0%		
Reformist Movement (MR)	3	18.8%	1	33.3%		
Socialist Party Different (sp.a)	2	12.5%	1	50.0%		
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)	2	12.5%	1	50.0%		
Totals	16	100.0%	5	31.3%		

Notes: ^aIncluding six 'secretaries of state' (deputy/junior ministers).

^bBetween the 25 May 2014 election and the 11 October 2014 inception of a new government, the government Di Rupo I should be considered as an 'interim' government from 26 May 2014 until 11 October 2014 (the inception date of the next government, formed as a result of the federal elections).

^cBeliris: 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.

^dIncluding three 'secretaries of state' (deputy/junior ministers).

Source: CRISP (2014).

to pursue the same duty. On 22 July, four parties accepted to commence negotiations to form a federal government. Kris Peeters (outgoing Flemish Minister-President, CD&V) and Charles Michel accepted the invitation to become the 'co-formateurs'. After eleven weeks of negotiations and the failure to convince the cdH to enter the majority, the 'kamikaze coalition' (in reference to the fact that the MR holds a minority of the Francophone seats) or the 'Swedish' coalition (referring to the blue of the Liberals, the yellow of the N-VA and the cross of the CD&V) was put into place. Michel, former Walloon Minister of the Interior and federal Minister of Development Aid, became the Prime Minister of an unprecedented cabinet. The Flemish nationalists N-VA were for the first time involved in a federal government, while the francophone PS was thrown back in the opposition after 26 consecutive years in office. The newly formed cabinet was asymmetrical both in terms of arithmetic (only one francophone party versus three Flemish parties) and in terms of party families (only one Christian democrat party and only one nationalist/regionalist party, both Flemish).

Parliament report

At the Open VLD, Maggie De Block and Alexander De Croo joined the federal government and were replaced, respectively, by Dirk Janssens, and Katja Gabriëls. Annemie Turtelboom joined the regional Flemish government and was replaced by Frank Wilryckx.

Among the CD&V ranks, Koen Geens and Pieter De Crem joined the federal government and were replaced, respectively, by Els Van Hoof and Sarah Claerhout.

Table 4. Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2014

Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet	Inception From Minimum	11 October 2014 11 October 2014 Winning Coalition (MWC)	Dissolution Until	Still in office at end of 2014 31 December 2014		
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2014	Seats in cabinet ^a N %		Seats held by women N % of party		Seats in parliament N %	
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Dutch-speaking	5	27.8%	1	20.0%	33	22.0%
Reformist Movement (MR), French-speaking	7	38.9%	2	28.6%	20	13.3%
Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	3	16.7%	0	0.0%	18	12.0%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats, Dutch-speaking	3	16.7%	1	33.3%	14	9.3%
Totals	18	100.0%	4	22.2%	85	56.7%
B. Composition of Michel I cabinet on 11 October 2014						
Prime Minister: Charles Michel (1975 male, MR)						
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, charged with Beliris ^b and Cultural Institutions: Didier Reynders (1958 male, MR)						
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Labour, Economy and Consumers, charged with Foreign Trade: Kris Peeters (1962 male, CD&V)						
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Security and the Interior, in charge of Large Cities and the Building Authority: Jan Jambon (1960 male, N-VA)						
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Development Aid, Digital Agenda, Telecommunications and Postal Service: Alexander De Croo (1975 male, Open VLD)						
Minister of Defence, in charge of Civil Service: Steven Vandeput (1967 male, N-VA)						
Minister of Justice: Koen Geens (1958 male, CD&V)						
Minister of Finances: Johan Van Overtveldt (1955 male, N-VA)						
Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health: Maggie De Block (1962 female, Open VLD)						
Minister of Budget, charged with the National lottery: Hervé Jamar (1965 male, MR)						
Minister of Mobility, charged with Belgocontrol and National Railway Company of Belgium: Jacqueline Galant (1974 female, MR) Minister of Pensions: Daniel Bacquelaine (1952 male, MR)						
Minister of Energy, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Marie Christine Marghem (1963 female, MR)						
Minister of Middle Classes, the Self-employed, Small and Medium-sized Companies, Agriculture and Social Integration: Willy Borsus (1962 male, MR)						
Secretary of State of Foreign Trade, adjunct to the Minister charged with Foreign Trade: Pieter De Crem (1962 male, CD&V)						
Secretary of State of the Struggle against Social Fraud, Privacy and the North Sea, adjunct to the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health: Bart Tommelein (1962 male, Open VLD)						
Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities, the Disabled, Struggle against Fiscal Fraud, Science Policy, adjunct to the Minister of Finances: Elke Sleurs (1968 female, N-VA)						
Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration, charged with Administrative Simplification, adjunct to the Minister of Security and the Interior: Theo Francken (1978 male, N-VA)						

Table 4. Continued

C. Changes in composition of Michel I cabinet during 2014
There were no changes

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

^bBeliris: 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: CRISP (2015).

For the N-VA, Jan Jambon and Theo Franken joined the federal government and were replaced, respectively, by Johan Klaps and Renate Hufkens.

For the MR, D. Reynders, Marie-Christine Marghem and Daniel Bacquellaine joined the federal government and were replaced, respectively, by Sophie Wilmès, Richard Miller and Luc Gustin.

Finally, at the CdH, Céline Fremault joined the Brussels regional government and was replaced by Georges Dallemagne.

Due to the fact that the Michel I cabinet was quickly negotiated, the replacement of MPs (men) by women, where applicable, took place in 2014. A comparison of the number of seats occupied by women on 25 May and in December shows, in general, an increase of women in each party. In 2014, the mean share of women in the federal parliament was around 40 per cent for the Flemish-speaking group and 30 per cent for the French-speaking one. In Flanders, the share is higher in 2014 than in 2010 and lower in the French-speaking part.

Institutional changes

From 2014 onwards, a whole range of elements of the 'sixth state reform' agreed upon in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) began to be implemented, after the previous 1970, 1980, 1989, 1993 and 2001 reforms that gradually transformed Belgium from a unitary to a federal country. The reform comprises two main sets of changes: institutional and policy/budget related. In institutional terms, from 2014 onwards, the Senate is no longer directly elected and instead becomes an indirectly elected assembly of regional and community parliaments, with fewer members (down from 71 to 60 including 29 Flemish, 20 francophones and one German-speaking); the Brussels-capital region and the German-speaking community are granted constitutive autonomy (as are the other regions and communities), and the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral constituency is split (Rihoux et al. 2014). In policy/budget terms, more competences, amounting to €17 billion per year (among which are: employment aid, child benefits and road traffic regulations) are transferred from the federal level to the regions and communities (this part of the reform was passed on 1 July, with implementation planned from January 2015 onwards). In parallel, the financing law was reformed so that the Regions and Communities receive more fiscal autonomy.

The shifts at the general and regional elections triggered a number of leadership changes in several parties. In Flanders, the two VB strongmen for the last two decades, Gerolf Annemans (incumbent president) and Philip Dewinter (group leader in the Flemish parliament), stepped aside and were even excluded from the new party executive. Annemans

Table 5. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2014

Party	1 January 2014				25 May 2014 election				31 December 2014			
	All		Women		All		Women		All		Women	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Socialist Party (PS)	26	17.3%	12	46.1%	23	15.3%	7	30.4%	23	15.3%	7	30.4%
Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V)	17	11.3%	8	47.0%	18	12.0%	6	33.3%	18	12.0%	8	44.4%
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)	13	8.7%	5	38.5%	14	9.3%	7	50.0%	14	9.3%	6	42.9%
Reformist Movement (MR)	15	10.0%	6	40.0%	20	13.3%	6	30.0%	20	13.3%	6	30.0%
Socialist Party Different (sp.a)	13	8.7%	5	38.5%	13	8.7%	7	53.8%	13	8.7%	7	53.8%
Humanist Democratic Centre (cdH)	9	6.0%	2	22.2%	9	6.0%	4	44.4%	9	6.0%	3	33.3%
Flemish Interest (VB)	12	8.0%	4	33.3%	3	2.0%	1	33.3%	3	2.0%	1	33.3%
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	27	18.0%	14	51.9%	33	22.0%	14	42.4%	33	22.0%	15	45.5%
Ecology Party (Ecolo)	8	5.3%	4	50.0%	6	4.0%	2	33.3%	6	4.0%	2	33.3%
Green (Groen)	5	3.3%	2	40.0%	6	4.0%	3	50.0%	6	4.0%	3	50.0%
Francophone Democratic Federalists (FDF)	3	2.0%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%
Libertarian, Direct, Democratic/ <i>Libertair, Direct, Democratisch</i> (LDD)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
People's Party (PP)	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%
Workers' Party of Belgium-Left Opening! (PTB-Go!)	–	–	–	–	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%	0	0.0%
Totals	150	100.0%	62	41.3%	150	100.0%	57	38.0%	150	100.0	58	38.7%

Sources: La Chambre (2014). Data on gender provided by the General Services Department of the Belgian parliament.

was replaced by a relatively unknown youngster, Tom Van Grieken, the president of the party youth. As for Groen, Meyrem Almaci succeeded Wouter Van Besien as chairperson when the latter decided not to run for a second mandate. She won 60 per cent of the votes cast by the members attending the party congress on 15 November.

On the French-speaking side, Ecolo's co-presidents Olivier Deleuze and Emily Hoyos were under strong pressure after their party's major defeat and decided to step down. The party installed an ad-hoc committee to analyse the causes of the defeat and to propose future reforms, while it was decided to anticipate the election of a new co-presidential team in spring 2015. Following the ousting of his party from the federal cabinet, outgoing Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo regained the presidency of the PS with 94 per cent of the membership vote on 22 November. In the MR, as the party president (Charles Michel) became Prime Minister, the latter got the party council to nominate Olivier Chastel as president on 20 October, which was then confirmed by a party members' vote (94 per cent) on 12 December.

Issues in national politics

Most policy issues were more or less directly framed in connection with the 25 May elections. Before and after the elections, one of the most salient policy disputes, with strong

Table 6. Political party changes in Belgium in 2014

Party leadership changes
Flemish Interest president Gerolf Annemans (1958 male, VB) was replaced on 19 October by Tom Van Grieken (1986 male, VB) by party congress
Green Party president Wouter Van Besien (1972 male, Groen) was replaced on 15 November by Meyrem Almaci (1976 female, Groen) by party congress
Socialist Party president Paul Magnette (1971 male, PS) was replaced on 22 November by Elio Di Rupo (1951 male, PS) by membership vote
Reform Movement president Charles Michel (1975 male, MR) was replaced on 20 October (council vote) and 12 December (membership vote) by Olivier Chastel (1964 male, MR)

Sources: Various media.

ethno-linguistic overtones, was the distribution of airline traffic from the Brussels airport and associated noise disturbances over the Brussels region and Flemish periphery. Also high on the agenda was the danger of a possible electricity blackout as a result of the safety halt of two of the country's five nuclear power reactors due to the discovery of numerous fissures in the reactor vessels. In a still difficult macroeconomic context, several socioeconomic issues proved conflict-ridden over the year. In March, an unemployment reform was passed in the House, providing for more regressive unemployment benefits and a three-year time limit of social integration allowances, which was challenged in particular by the Greens and by the trade unions. On the labour front, tensions grew after the May elections, during and after the formation of the Michel I government, in connection with debates around unemployment anti-fraud policies, a possible increase of legal retirement age and a possible suspension of cost-of-living adjustments in the wages. The main trade unions organised various forms of protest, including a national demonstration in Brussels on 6 November, rotating strikes across the provinces and a national general strike that brought the whole country to a standstill on 15 December. Nevertheless, the trade unions and employers' organisations eventually reached an agreement, with the facilitation of Minister Kris Peeters, but it was partly rejected by the Socialist trade union.

On 24 May, the day before the elections, Mehdi Nemmouche, a Muslim fundamentalist, opened fire in the Jewish Museum of Brussels, killing four people. This contributed to keeping the issue of Muslim extremism high on the agenda, along with the departure of Belgian nationals to Syria to join jihadist groups, and in particular DAESH. In September, alongside the United Kingdom and Denmark, Belgium joined the international coalition against DAESH.

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