# Belgium: Political Developments and Data in 2019

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## Introduction

The year 2019 was particularly hectic, with simultaneous federal, regional and European Parliament elections on 26 May. Anti-system parties were the main winners, especially the radical right-wing populist Flemish Interest/*Vlaams Belang* (VB) in Flanders and the communist Workers' Party of Belgium/*Parti du travail de Belgique* (PTB) in Wallonia. By contrast, the three traditional party families (Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats) recorded historically low results. This was also a politically tense year, with the enduring impossibility of forming a new Cabinet to replace the Michel I minority caretaker government.

## Election report

As in 2014, the federal, regional and European Parliament elections took place simultaneously. They featured a high level of aggregate volatility and recorded historically low scores for the three traditional party families, that is, Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats on the Flemish and Francophone sides: together they only gathered 45 per cent of the vote at the federal elections. This is the first time these parties have fallen below 50 per cent, in stark contrast to figures oscillating between 80 and 65 per cent between the 1970s and the 2000s (Istace 2019), and way below the preceding record low of 58 per cent in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2015). As in 2014, parties did not really produce separate regional and federal manifestos, therefore blurring regional and federal issues.

### Parliamentary elections

Several parties' fortunes changed as compared with 2014. In Flanders, the New Flemish Alliance/*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) remained the country's largest party with 16 per cent of vote share at the national level, but lost 4 per cent and eight seats, whereas the VB captured a stunning 12 per cent and 15 additional seats. The leading Francophone party, the Socialist Party/*Parti socialiste* (PS), managed to keep 10 per cent of the national vote, but lost three seats. Similarly, the Reformist Movement/*Mouvement réformateur* (MR), the single Francophone party in the caretaker federal coalition, kept 8 per cent of vote share at the national level and lost six seats, while the Humanist Democratic Centre/*Centre*

*démocrate humaniste* (cdH) reached a record low, losing four further seats. By contrast, the Ecology Party/*Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales* (Ecolo) made progress, gaining seven more seats in the chamber, and the communist Workers' Party of Belgium/*Parti du travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid van België* (PTB-PVDA), running as the only bilingual party covering the whole country, made its strongest progress on the Francophone side, obtaining 10 more seats across the country. Finally, the People's Party/*Parti Populaire* (PP) lost its single seat.

The big picture is that of a historic low for the three traditional party families, and of two ideologically very distant winners, both anti-system in their own ways: the radical right-wing and separatist VB on the Flemish side versus the radical left-wing PTB on the Francophone side (Table 1).

*European Parliament elections*

Given the simultaneous elections, the European Parliament elections did not generate much interest. As in 2014, Belgium kept 21 seats: 12 allotted to the Flemish-speaking electoral constituency, eight to the French-speaking one and a single seat granted to the German-speaking constituency. In the Flemish-speaking constituency, confirming their results at the federal and regional ballots, the N-VA and VB captured three seats each (the N-VA lost one seat as compared with 2014, though). The Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats/*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD) lost one seat, whereas the Christian Democratic and Flemish/*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* (CD&V), the Socialist Party Different/*Socialistische Partij Anders* (sp.a) and Green/*Groen* (Groen) stayed in a status quo. In the French-speaking constituency, the PS and MR lost one seat each, Ecolo won a second seat, the cdH managed to keep its two seats (including one seat via the *Christlich Soziale Partei* (CSP), its German-speaking section) and the PTB obtained its first ever MEP (Table 2).

*Regional elections*

In Flanders, the N-VA remained the predominant party, but the VB was the clear winner as it gained 17 more seats than in 2014. The CD&V lost quite a number of seats (–8); so did the sp.a (–6) and the Open VLD (–3). Groen won four more seats and stood among the winners alongside the PVDA. The N-VA legitimately claimed leadership for the formation of the Flemish executive, which resulted in the formation of a governmental coalition with the N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD, that is, the same coalition as the 2014 one, with Jan Jambon (N-VA) as Minister-President.

At the Walloon elections, the two clear winners were Ecolo (+8 seats) and the PTB (+10 seats). By contrast, the two largest parties, the PS and MR both lost seats (–7 and –5, respectively). So did the cdH (–3 seats) which reached a historic low and decided not to take part in any government coalition at the regional, community or federal levels. The new Walloon government was formed as a Socialist–Liberal–Green coalition gathering the PS, MR and Ecolo under the leadership of Elio Di Rupo (PS), while the government of the Francophone community was headed by Pierre-Yves Jeholet (MR).

*Table 1.* Elections to the lower house of Parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2019

| Date of election | 26 May 2019 | Previous election | 25 May 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Electorate | 8,167,709 | Total seats | 150 |
| Total votes cast | 7,218,633 | Turnout | 88.4% |
| Valid votes cast | 6,780,538 | Share of valid vote | 93.9% |

| Party | | | Votes | | | Seats | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | N | % | Δ % | N | % | ΔN | Δ % |
| New Flemish Alliance | Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie | (N-VA) | 1,086,787 | 16.0% | −4.2% | 25 | 16.7% | −8 | −5.3% |
| Flemish Interest | Vlaams Belang | (VB) | 810,177 | 12.0% | 8.3% | 18 | 12.0% | 15 | 10.0% |
| Socialist Party | Parti socialiste | (PS) | 641,623 | 9.5% | −2.2% | 20 | 13.3% | −3 | −2.0% |
| Christian Democratic and Flemish | Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams | (CD&V) | 602,520 | 8.9% | −2.7% | 12 | 8.0% | −6 | −4.0% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium | Parti du travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid van België | (PTB-PVDA) | 584,621 | 8.6% | 5.0% | 12 | 8.0% | 10 | 6.7% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten | (Open VLD) | 579,334 | 8.5% | −1.2% | 12 | 8.0% | −2 | −1.3% |
| Reformist Movement | Mouvement réformateur | (MR) | 512,825 | 7.6% | −2.1% | 14 | 9.3% | −6 | −4.0% |
| Socialist Party Different | Socialistische Partij Anders | (sp.a) | 455,034 | 6.7% | −2.1% | 9 | 6.0% | −4 | −2.7% |
| Ecology Party | Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales | (Ecolo) | 416,452 | 6.1% | 2.8% | 13 | 8.7% | 7 | 4.7% |

(*Continued*).

*Table 1.* Continued.

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Green | Groen | (Groen) | 413,836 | 6.1% | 0.8% | 8 | 5.3% | 2 | 1.3% |
| Humanist Democratic Centre | Centre démocrate humaniste | (cdH) | 250,861 | 3.7% | −1.3% | 5 | 3.3% | −4 | −2.7% |
| Democratic Federalist Independent | Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant | (DéFI) | 150,394 | 2.2% | −0.4% | 2 | 1.3% | 2 | 0.0% |
| People's Party | Parti Populaire | (PP) | 75,096 | 1.1% | −0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | −1 | −0.7% |
| Others | | | 200,978 | 3.0% | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |

Notes: Workers' Party of Belgium: a single list in 2019 and two separate lists in 2014 (PTB-GO! and PVDA+). To calculate the differences between elections, we sum the 2014 results of the PTB-GO! and PVDA+ and subtract from the 2019 election result for the PTB-PVDA.
Democratic Federalist Independent is the new party label of the former Francophone Democratic Federalists (FDF) adopted in 2015 (Rihoux et al. 2016). Differences refer to the difference between the 2019 DéFI results and the 2014 FDF results.
The number of seats for the N-VA was 33 in 2014. However, two MPs resigned from the party in 2016 (Rihoux et al. 2017). At the end of the term, the N-VA had 31 MPs. To calculate the differences in seats between elections, we take into account 33 seats and not 31.
Source: SPF Intérieur (https://elections2019.belgium.be), March 2020.

Table 2. Elections to the European Parliament (Parlement européen/Europees parlement) in Belgium in 2019

| Date of election | 26 May 2019 | | 25 May 2014 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Electorate | 8,122,985 | | |
| Total votes cast | 7,186,677 | Turnout | 88.5% |
| Valid votes cast | 6,732,157 | Share of valid vote | 93.7% |
| | | Total seats | 21 |

| Party | | | EP group | Previous election / Votes | | | Seats | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | | N | % | Δ% | N | % | ΔN | Δ% |
| New Flemish Alliance | Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie | (N-VA) | ACRE | 954,048 | 14.2% | −2.6% | 3 | 14.3% | −1 | −4.8% |
| Flemish Interest | Vlaams Belang | (VB) | ID | 811,169 | 12.1% | 7.8% | 3 | 14.3% | 2 | 9.5% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten | (Open VLD) | RE | 678,051 | 10.1% | −2.8% | 2 | 9.5% | −1 | −4.8% |
| Socialist Party | Parti socialiste | (PS) | S&D | 655,812 | 9.7% | −1.0% | 2 | 9.5% | −1 | −4.8% |
| Christian Democratic and Flemish | Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams | (CD&V) | PPE | 617,651 | 9.2% | −3.4% | 2 | 9.5% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Green | Groen | (Groen) | Verts/ALE | 525,908 | 7.8% | 1.1% | 1 | 4.8% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Ecology Party | Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales | (Ecolo) | Verts/ALE | 492,330 | 7.3% | 3.0% | 2 | 9.5% | 1 | 4.8% |
| Reformist Movement | Mouvement réformateur | (MR) | RE | 475,338 | 7.1% | −2.9% | 2 | 9.5% | −1 | −4.8% |
| Socialist Party Different | Socialistische Partij Anders | (sp.a) | S&D | 434,002 | 6.5% | −1.9% | 1 | 4.8% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium | Parti du travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid van België | (PTB-PVDA) | GUE/NGL | 355,883 | 5.3% | 3.3% | 1 | 4.8% | 1 | 4.8% |
| Humanist Democratic Centre | Centre démocrate humaniste | (cdH) | PPE | 232,325 | 3.5% | −0.9% | 2 | 9.5% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium | Partij van de arbeid van België | (PVDA) | GUE/NGL | 210,391 | 3.1% | 1.6% | 1 | 4.8% | 1 | 4.8% |
| Democratic Federalist Independent | Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant | (DéFI) | NI | 144,555 | 2.2% | 0.9% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| People's Party | Parti Populaire | (PP) | ADDE | 113,793 | 1.7% | −0.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Others | | | | 30,901 | 0.5% | −1.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |

Notes: Workers' Party of Belgium: a single list in 2019 and two separate lists in 2014 (PTB-GO! and PVDA+). To calculate the differences between elections, we sum the 2014 results of the PTB-GO! and PVDA+ and subtract from the 2019 election result for the PTB-PVDA.
Democratic Federalist Independent is the new party label of the former Francophone Democratic Federalists (FDF), adopted in 2015 (Rihoux et al. 2016).
Differences refer to the difference between the 2019 DéFI results and the 2014 FDF results.
The cdH category includes CSP; its German-speaking section (one MEP seat reserved for the German-speaking community).
Source: SPF Intérieur (https://elections2019.belgium.be), March 2020.

Elections for the Brussels Regional Parliament are always a bit peculiar, given the guaranteed overrepresentation of the small Flemish minority (about 10 per cent of the electorate), as well as the traditionally diverging electoral results of the respective Flemish and Francophone parties. Ecolo was the clear winner (+7 seats). The MR lost quite heavily (–5 seats), and so did the PS (–4 seats). The Democratic Federalist Independent/*Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant* (DéFI) (the former Francophone Democratic Federalists – FDF) remained a significant player, with 10 seats (status quo). Changes were less dramatic for the Flemish parties, amounting to gaining or losing one or two seats each. The new Brussels coalition, under the leadership of Rudy Vervoort (PS; the incumbent Minister-President), gathered the PS, Ecolo and DéFI together with two Flemish parties: the Open VLD and sp.a.

Finally, in the tiny area of Ostbelgien (a German-speaking community) corresponding to two German-speaking cantons, *Pro Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft* (ProDG), the catch-all ethnolinguistic party, took the lead with six seats and prolonged its former coalition with the PS and the Liberals *Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt* (PFF) under the leadership of Oliver Paasch (ProDG) (Tables 3 and 4).

*Cabinet report*

For the entire year, Belgium had no choice but to deal with a caretaker government. The year 2019 started with Michel I, or as some assumed Michel II, because of the loss of the largest coalition partner, the N-VA, in December 2018 and the subsequent government resignation (Rihoux et al. 2019). With the general elections approaching, no serious government coalition negotiations could be launched, and Charles Michel's government simply handled day-to-day matters in a caretaker capacity until 26 May. This government was kept in place after election day, awaiting a new coalition based on the renewed federal Parliament.

On 30 May, King Philippe appointed Didier Reynders and Johan Vande Lanotte (current and former federal Ministers, respectively a Francophone Liberal and a Flemish Socialist) as '*informateurs*', which is the typical initial role in Belgium's government formation process. The experienced duo launched discussions with all parties but the Flemish radical right-wing populist VB and the communist PTB-PVDA. A week later, the Francophone cdH declared that it would not join any government following its disappointing electoral results.

The formation process bogged down over the summer, while the main achievement of the 'informateurs' was to bring to the table the two largest parties on both sides of the language border: the Flemish nationalists (N-VA) and the Francophone Socialists (PS), albeit with no concrete outcome. The successful formation of the Brussels, Walloon and then Flemish coalitions for the respective regional governments did not help in gathering enough parties around a common project.

On 8 October, a new duo was appointed by the king, as Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) and Rudy Demotte (PS), respectively former Minister Presidents of Flanders and the French-speaking community, took over as '*préformateurs*'. Since the main bottleneck was the incompatibility between these two parties, their role was key, but resulted in a recognized failure to pursue further. The newly elected PS party leader, Paul Magnette, then received a new information mandate from the king on 5 November. Magnette invited both Green parties again – the latter had been excluded from the discussions since the late summer. At the end of November, the negotiations were close to reaching a pre-agreement on a

*Table 3.* Elections to the Flemish Parliament and the Brussels Capital City Regional Parliament (Flemish parties) (*Vlaams Parlement; Parlement van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest*) in Belgium in 2019

| Region | Flanders | Brussels (FL) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date of election | 26 May 2019 | 26 May 2019 |
| Total number of seats | 124 | 17 |
| Electorate | 4,838,566 | 588,203 |
| Total votes cast | 4,459,064 | 490,917 |
| Turnout | 92.1% | 83.5% |
| Total valid vote | 4,238,274 | 458,274 |
| Share of valid vote | 95.0% | 93.4% |

| Party | | | Vote | Seat | | Vote | Seat | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | % | N | % | % | N | % |
| New Flemish Alliance | *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* | (N-VA) | 24.8% | 35 | 28.0% | 18.0% | 3 | 25.0% |
| Flemish Interest | *Vlaams Belang* | (VB) | 18.5% | 23 | 19.0% | 8.3% | 1 | 8.3% |
| Christian Democratic and Flemish | *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* | (CD&V) | 15.4% | 19 | 15.0% | 7.5% | 1 | 8.3% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* | (Open VLD) | 13.1% | 16 | 13.0% | 15.8% | 3 | 25.0% |
| Socialist Party Different | *Socialistische Partij Anders* | (sp.a) | 10.1% | 12 | 10.0% | 15.1% | 3 | 25.0% |
| Greens | *Groen* | (Groen) | 10.1% | 14 | 11.0% | 20.6% | 4 | 33.3% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium | *Partij van de arbeid van België* | (PVDA) | 5.3% | 4 | 3.0% | 4.3% | 1 | 8.3% |
| Others | | | 2.6% | 1 | 1.0% | 10.5% | 1 | 8.3% |

Note: The sp.a is labelled one.brussels.sp.a in Brussels.
Source: SPF Intérieur (https://elections2019.belgium.be), March 2020.

*Table 4.* Elections to the Walloon Parliament and the Brussels Capital City Regional Parliament (Francophone parties) (*Parlement Wallon; Parlement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*) in Belgium in 2019

| Region | Wallonia | Brussels (FR) |
|---|---|---|
| Date of election: | 26 May 2019 | 26 May 2019 |
| Total number of seats: | 75 | 72 |
| Electorate | 2,563,033 | 588,203 |
| Total votes cast: | 2,220,443 | 490,917 |
| Turnout: | 86.6% | 83.5% |
| Total valid vote: | 2,034,813 | 458,274 |
| Share of valid vote: | 91.6% | 93.4% |

| Party | | Vote | Seat | | Vote | Seat | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | % | N | % | % | N | % |
| Socialist Party | (PS) *Parti socialiste* | 26.2% | 23 | 31.0% | 22.0% | 17 | 23.6% |
| Reformist Movement | (MR) *Mouvement réformateur* | 21.4% | 20 | 27.0% | 16.9% | 13 | 18.1% |
| Ecology Party | (Ecolo) *Ecologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales* | 14.5% | 12 | 16.0% | 19.1% | 15 | 20.8% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium | (PTB) *Parti du travail de Belgique* | 13.7% | 10 | 13.0% | 13.5% | 10 | 13.9% |
| Humanist Democratic Centre | (cdH) *Centre démocrate humaniste* | 11.0% | 10 | 13.0% | 7.6% | 6 | 8.3% |
| Democratic Federalist Independent | (DéFI) *Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant* | 4.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 13.8% | 10 | 13.9% |
| People's Party | (PP) *Parti Populaire* | 3.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 1.7% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Others | (Others) | 5.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 5.4% | 1 | 1.4% |

Source: SPF Intérieur (https://elections2019.belgium.be), March 2020.

so-called rainbow (or purple-green in Dutch) coalition with the Socialists, Liberals and Greens. This eventually failed, in particular because such a coalition would also have required the inclusion of the CD&V to reach a majority; the latter, however, sent signals that it would not join a coalition without the N-VA.

On 10 December, two newly elected party leaders, Georges-Louis Bouchez (Francophone MR) and Joachim Coens (Flemish CD&V) picked up the slack for a fourth round, again as *informateurs*. They began to test the possibility of a so-called 'Vivaldi' coalition (Socialists, Liberals, Greens and Christian Democrats) – these discussions were still under way by the end of the year, with the CD&V still insisting on a coalition including the N-VA.

Parallel to the new government formation, the caretaker government had to be reshuffled when Michel was called to preside the European Council. Sophie Wilmès, also a Francophone Liberal, Minister of Budget and Civil Service, was appointed as Prime Minister, thereby becoming the first ever female Belgian Prime Minister. The government remained in a caretaker capacity and its composition remained unchanged until Didier Reynders, former Foreign Affairs Minister, became a European Commissioner at the end of November (Tables 5 and 6).

*Parliament report*

Following the 26 May general election, the composition of the Chamber of Representatives was significantly modified in terms of seats share across parties. Four MPs were then replaced between October and December as they had taken on other political (executive) offices. Jean-Marc Nollet (Ecolo) was replaced by Laurence Hennuy on 3 October because of his party co-president function. In the MR, Michel, who became President of the European Council, was replaced by Vincent Scourneau on 14 November, and Didier Reynders, who became European Commissioner, was replaced by Philippe Pivin on 5 December. In the sp.a, Yasmine Kherbache was replaced by Ben Segers on 19 December as she became a member of the Constitutional Court (Table 7).

*Political party report*

This was a particularly agitated year in most parties, with one contending party being dissolved and no fewer than eight parties featuring party presidential elections, most of which were competitive.

The Francophone PP was dissolved on 18 June, after yet again disappointing electoral results, and its founder-president, Mischaël Modrikamen, announced he was quitting politics. Founded in 2009 (Rihoux et al. 2010: 906) as a conservative right-wing party, it further evolved into a radical right-wing populist party, ambitious to capture a broad segment of conservative, anti-immigrant and protest voters in Wallonia and Brussels. It had only obtained one federal MP seat in 2010 and 2014, which it lost in 2019, and one seat in the Walloon regional Parliament in 2014 (Rihoux et al. 2011, 2015).

Most Flemish parties with parliamentary representation held elections for the party's presidency.

*Table 5.* Cabinet composition of Michel I in Belgium in 2019

| Duration of cabinet | Inception | 11 October 2014 | | Dissolution | | | | 27 October 2019 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Period covered by table | From | 01 January 2019 | | Until | | | | 27 October 2019 | |
| Type of cabinet | | Minority Coalition | | | | | | | |

| A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2019 | | | Seats in cabinet | | Seats held by women | | Seats in parliament | | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | N | % | N | % of party | N | % | |
| Reformist Movement | *Mouvement Réformateur* | (MR) | 7 | 53.8% | 2 | 28.6% | 20 | 13.3% | |
| Christian-Democrat and Flemish | *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* | (CD&V) | 3 | 23.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 18 | 12.0% | |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* | (Open VLD) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 14 | 9.3% | |
| Totals | | | 13 | 100.0% | 3 | 23.1% | 52 | 34.7% | |

B. Composition of Michel I cabinet on 1 January 2019

See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for #Country or http://politicaldatayearbook.com

C. Changes in composition of Michel I cabinet during 2019

| Ministerial title | Outgoing minister | | | | Outgoing date | Incoming minister | | | | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Were there any cabinet changes?** YES | | | | | | | | | | |
| Minister of Labour, Economy and Consumers, charged with Foreign Trade, Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities and the Disabled | Kris | Peeters | 1962 | Male | CD&V | 01 July 2019 | Wouter | Beke | 1974 | Male | CD&V Peeters took his seat in the European Parliament. |
| Deputy Prime Minister | Kris | Peeters | 1962 | Male | CD&V | 01 July 2019 | Koen | Geens | 1958 | Male | CD&V Geens became Deputy Prime Minister |
| Minister of Labour, Economy and Consumers, charged with Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities and the Disabled | Wouter | Beke | 1974 | Male | CD&V | 02 October 2019 | Nathalie Muylle | 1969 | Female | CD&V Beke became Minister in the Flemish Government |

*(Continued).*

*Table 5.* Continued.

| Minister charged with Foreign Trade | Wouter Beke | 1974 | Male | CD&V | 02 October 2019 | Pieter | De Crem | 1962 | Male | CD&V | De Crem took the Foreign Trade portfolio on top of Security and the Interior. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

D.

Party/gender composition on 27 October 2019

| | | | Seats in cabinet | | Seats held by women | | Seats in parliament | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
| Reformist Movement | *Mouvement Réformateur* | (MR) | 7 | 53.8% | 2 | 28.6% | 14 | 9.3% |
| Christian-Democrat and Flemish | *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* | (CD&V) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* | (Open VLD) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% |
| Totals | | | 13 | 100.0% | 4 | 30.8% | 38 | 25.3% |

Notes 1. This government was a caretaker government for the entire period.
2.
3.

Source: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP) (2020)

*Table 6.* Cabinet composition of Wilmès I in Belgium in 2019

| Duration of cabinet | Inception | Dissolution | Still in office at the end of the year |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 27 October 2019 | Until | 31 December 2019 |
| Period covered by table Type of cabinet | From Minority Coalition | | |

**A. Party/gender composition on 27 October 2019**

| | | Seats in cabinet | | Seats held by women | | Seats in parliament | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
| Reformist Movement | *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR) | 7 | 53.8% | 2 | 28.6% | 14 | 9.3% |
| Christian-Democrat and Flemish | *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* (CD&V) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% |
| Totals | | 13 | 100.0% | 4 | 30.77% | 38 | 25.33% |

**B. Composition of Wilmès I cabinet on Cabinet inception date 27 October 2019**

| Ministerial Title | | Minister | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prime Minister | *#original language name ministry* | Sophie | Wilmès | 1975 | Female | MR |
| Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, charged with the Building Authority | *#original language name ministry* | Koen | Geens | 1958 | Male | CD&V |
| Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finances and of Development Aid, charged with the Struggle against Fiscal Fraud | *#original language name ministry* | Alexander | De Croo | 1975 | Male | Open VLD |
| Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, of Defense, charged with Beliris and Cultural Institutions | *#original language name ministry* | Didier | Reynders | 1958 | Male | MR |

*(Continued).*

*Table 6.* Continued.

| Ministry | | First name | Last name | Year | Gender | Party |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Minister of Security and the Interior, charged with Foreign Trade | #original language name ministry | Pieter | De Crem | 1962 | Male | CD&V |
| Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, of Asylum and Migration | #original language name ministry | Maggie | De Block | 1962 | Female | Open VLD |
| Minister of Pensions | #original language name ministry | Daniel | Bacquelaine | 1952 | Male | MR |
| Minister of Energy, the Environment and Sustainable Development | #original language name ministry | Marie-Christine | Marghem | 1963 | Female | MR |
| Minister of Mobility, charged with Belgocontrol and National Railway Company of Belgium | #original language name ministry | François | Bellot | 1954 | Male | MR |
| Minister of Middle Classes, the Self-employed, Small and Medium-sized Companies, Agriculture and Social Integration | #original language name ministry | Denis | Ducarme | 1973 | Male | MR |
| Minister of Digital Agenda, Telecommunications and Postal Service, charged with Administrative Simplification, the Struggle against Social Fraud, Privacy and the North Sea | #original language name ministry | Philippe | De Backer | 1978 | Male | Open VLD |
| Minister of Labour, Economy and Consumers, charged with Struggle against Poverty, Equal Opportunities and the Disabled | #original language name ministry | Nathalie | Muylle | 1969 | Female | CD&V |

*(Continued).*

*Table 6.* Continued.

| | #original language name ministry | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Defense | #original language name ministry | Didier | Reynders | 1958 | Male | MR | ########## | Philippe Goffin | 1967 | Male | MR | Didier Reynders became European Commissioner. |
| Minister charged with Beliris and Cultural Institutions | #original language name ministry | Didier | Reynders | 1958 | Male | MR | ########## | Sophie Wilmès | 1975 | Female | MR | Didier Reynders became European Commissioner. |
| Minister of European Affairs | #original language name ministry | Didier | Reynders | 1958 | Male | MR | ########## | Koen Geens | 1958 | Male | CD&V | Didier Reynders became European Commissioner. |

| D. | Party/gender composition on 31 December 2019 | | Seats in cabinet | | Seats held by women | | Seats in parliament | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
| Reformist Movement | Mouvement Réformateur | (MR) | 7 | 53.8% | 2 | 28.6% | 14 | 9.3% |
| Christian-Democrat and Flemish | Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams | (CD&V) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten | (Open VLD) | 3 | 23.1% | 1 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% |
| Totals | | | 13 | 100.0% | 4 | 30.8% | 38 | 25.3% |

Notes 1. This government was a caretaker government for the entire period.
2. 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.

*Table 7* Party and gender composition of the lower house of Parliament (*Chambre des Représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*) in Belgium in 2019

| Party | | | 1 January 2019 | | | | Elections 26 May 2019 | | | | 31 December 2019 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | All | | Women | | All | | Women | | All | | Women | |
| | | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| New Flemish Alliance | *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* | (N-VA) | 31 | 20.7% | 13 | 42.0% | 24 | 16.7% | 12 | 50.0% | 24 | 16.7% | 11 | 45.8% |
| Socialist Party | *Parti socialiste* | (PS) | 23 | 15.3% | 7 | 30.4% | 20 | 13.3% | 5 | 26.3% | 20 | 13.3% | 5 | 26.3% |
| Flemish Interest | *Vlaams Belang* | (VB) | 3 | 2.0% | 1 | 33.3% | 18 | 12.0% | 7 | 38.9% | 18 | 12.0% | 7 | 38.9% |
| Reformist Movement | *Mouvement réformateur* | (MR) | 20 | 13.3% | 6 | 33.0% | 14 | 9.3% | 6 | 42.9% | 14 | 9.3% | 6 | 42.9% |
| Ecology Party | *Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales* | (Ecolo) | 6 | 4.0% | 2 | 33.3% | 13 | 8.7% | 7 | 53.0% | 13 | 8.7% | 8 | 61.5% |
| Christian Democratic and Flemish | *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* | (CD&V) | 18 | 12.0% | 8 | 44.4% | 12 | 8.0% | 4 | 33.3% | 12 | 8.0% | 4 | 33.3% |
| Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats | *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* | (Open VLD) | 14 | 9.3% | 6 | 43.0% | 12 | 8.0% | 5 | 41.7% | 12 | 8.0% | 5 | 41.7% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium | *Parti du travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid van België* | (PTB-PVDA) | | | | | 12 | 8.0% | 3 | 25.0% | 12 | 8.0% | 3 | 25.0% |
| Socialist Party Different | *Socialistische Partij Anders* | (sp.a) | 13 | 8.7% | 7 | 53.8% | 9 | 6.0% | 4 | 44.4% | 9 | 6.0% | 4 | 44.4% |
| Green | (Groen) | | 6 | 4.0% | 3 | 50.0% | 8 | 5.3% | 3 | 37.5% | 8 | 5.3% | 3 | 37.5% |
| Humanist Democratic Centre | *Centre démocrate humaniste* | (cdH) | 9 | 6.0% | 3 | 33.3% | 5 | 3.3% | 2 | 40.0% | 5 | 3.3% | 2 | 40.0% |
| Democratic Federalist | *Démocrate Fédéraliste* | (DéFI) | 2 | 1.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 1.3% | 1 | 50.0% | 2 | 1.3% | 1 | 50.0% |
| Independent | *Indépendant* | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Independents | *Indépendants* | | 2 | 1.3% | 1 | 50.0% | 1 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| People's Party | *Parti Populaire* | (PP) | 1 | 0.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Workers' Party of Belgium-Left Opening! | *Parti du travail de Belgique-Gauche d'ouverture!* | (PTB-GO!) | 2 | 1.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Totals | | | 150 | 99.90% | 57 | 38.0% | 150 | 100.0% | 59 | 39.3% | 150 | 100.0% | 59 | 39.3% |

Notes: Workers' Party of Belgium: a single list in 2019 and two separate lists in 2014 (PTB-GO! and PVDA+). To calculate the differences between elections, we sum the 2014 results of the PTB-GO! and PVDA+ and subtract to the 2019 election result for the PTB-PVDA.

Democratic Federalist Independent is the new party name of the Francophone Democratic Federalists (FDF). Differences refer to the difference between the 2019 DéFI results and the 2014 FDF results.

Independent: Jean Marie Dedecker ran as independent on the N-VA list and is considered as independent in the lower house.

Sources: SPF Intérieur (https://elections2019.belgium.be), March 2020; and General Services Department of the Belgian federal Parliament office.

Contrary to common practice, in several cases these elections were genuinely competitive, apart from the VB where the incumbent party leader Tom Van Grieken was re-elected by a sweeping party council vote on 16 November, in the wake of the party's major success at the May elections.

The incumbent CD&V president Wouter Beke decided to resign immediately after his party's electoral defeat and became minister in the Flemish government. The election campaign was an open race with seven candidates. After a first round of party member votes, two candidates remained in the race: Joachim Coens, the candidate of the party establishment; and Sammy Mahdi, the president of the party youth organization. Coens eventually won in December by a narrow 53 per cent of valid member votes.

In Groen, as the term of Meyrem Almaci came to an end, the members congress had to choose between three competing president/vice-president teams, including an Almaci–Dany Neudt pair. At the members congress on 19 October, none of the three teams obtained an absolute majority, leading to a second round amongst the best two which was won by Almaci-Neudt with a tight 53 per cent, as some blamed Almaci for the party's meagre electoral progress in spite of the favourable context of the climate marches.

In the sp.a, the incumbent president John Crombez decided to resign immediately after his party's electoral defeat. Three candidates stood in competition, among whom 26-year-old Conner Rousseau, parliamentary group leader in the Flemish Parliament, who was elected by 72 per cent of the member vote (the results were announced on 8 November). Thus, he became the youngest party president ever in Belgium.

The picture was quite similar on the Francophone side, as each of the top four parties experienced leadership changes. PS president Elio Di Rupo, who became Walloon Minister-President on 13 September, did not run again for the party leadership after a 17-year-long reign (1999–2011 and 2014–19). Paul Magnette, who had already held that position *ad interim* in 2013–14 while Di Rupo was Prime Minister, ran as sole candidate and received 95 per cent of the party membership vote on 19 October.

At the MR, Olivier Chastel resigned as party president, self-reportedly because he wanted to concentrate on the European Parliament campaign (he eventually became an MEP), and was replaced by Charles Michel on 18 February via a vote by the party council. As Michel was chosen in July as future President of the European Council and due to come into office on 1 December, he resigned as well. This led to competitive elections with five candidates. Georges-Louis Bouchez eventually won with 62 per cent at a contested second round of party membership vote.

In a context of grim prospects for his party at the upcoming general elections, the cdH party president Benoit Lutgen resigned on 16 January. He was replaced by Maxime Prévot on 26 January, via a massive party congress vote (85 per cent).

In Ecolo, one of the two co-presidents, Zakia Khattabi, resigned on 18 July. Following party rules, as the other co-president (who opted to stay in office), Jean-Marc Nollet, is male and Wallonia based, she had to be replaced by another female, Brussels-based co-president. The tandem between Nollet and a young regional MP of Moroccan origin, Rajae Maouane, was easily voted in with 92 per cent of the party members congress on 15 September (Table 8).

*Table 8.* Changes in political parties in Belgium in 2019

A.

| | | | | | | | Party institutional changes in 2019 | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Party leadership changes in 2019 | | | | | | |
| People's Party | Parti Populaire | (PP) | was dissolved after the resignation of its past president (quitting politics) | Mischaël | Modrikamen | 1966 | male | after yet again disappointing electoral results (no seats obtained) | | | | | |
| Flemish Interest | VB | Party President | Tom | Van Grieken | 1986 | Male | Re-elected by party council (97%) | 16 November | | | VB | | |
| Christian Democratic and Flemish | CD&V | Party President | Wouter | Beke | 1974 | Male | Resigned and replaced via a direct party membership vote (53%) | 6 December | replaced by Joachim | Coens | 1966 | male | CD&V |
| Green Party (Flemish) | Groen | Party President | Meyrem | Almaci | 1976 | Female | Re-elected by party members congress in tandem with party Vice-President Dany Neudt (53%) | 19 October | | | Groen | | |
| Socialist Party Different | sp.a | Party President | John | Crombez | 1973 | Male | Resigned and replaced via a direct party membership vote (72%) | 8 November | replaced by Conner | Rousseau | 1992 | male | sp.a |
| Socialist Party | PS | Party President | Elio | Di Rupo | 1951 | Male | Did not run for re-election and replaced by a direct party membership vote (95%) | 19 October | replaced by Paul | Magnette | 1971 | male | SP |
| Reformist Movement | MR | Party President | Olivier | Chastel | 1964 | male | Resigned and replaced by a party council vote | 18 February | replaced by Charles | Michel | 1975 | male | MR |

*Table 8.* Continued

A.

| | | | | | | | Party institutional changes in 2019 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reformist Movement | MR | Party President | Charles | Michel | 1975 | male | Resigned and replaced by a party membership vote (62%) | 28 November | replaced by | Georges-Louis | Bouchez | 1986 | male | MR |
| Humanist Democratic Centre | cdH | Party President | Benoit | Lutgen | 1970 | male | Resigned and replaced by a party congress vote (85%) | 26 January | replaced by | Maxime | Prévot | 1978 | male | cdH |
| Green Party (francophone) | Ecolo | Party co-president | Zakia | Khattabi | 1976 | female | Resigned and replaced by a party member congress vote (92%, as part of tandem with Marc Nollet) | 15 September | replaced by | Rajae | Maouane | 1989 | female | Ecolo |

Source: Diverse media sources and official party websites.

*Institutional change report*

The implementation of the 'sixth state reform' passed in November 2013 (Rihoux et al. 2014) did not lead to the transfer of further competences from the federal to the regional/community level, as this gradual process was completed in 2018 (Rihoux et al. 2019). Some administrative transfer implementation procedures were, however, pursued up till late 2019.

Two significant electoral law changes pertaining to Wallonia took effect for the 26 May 2019 regional and federal elections. In Wallonia, a decree passed on 25 January 2018 decreased the number of electoral *arrondissements* from 13 to 11: from five to four in the Hainaut province, and from two to one in the Luxembourg province. This enlarged the population size of the least populated *arrondissements*, thereby allocating more seats to the latter and lowering the de facto threshold required to obtain a first seat. It was preceded by a federal bill, passed on 22 October 2017, that significantly modified the contours of some electoral *cantons* and shifted some cantons from one *arrondissement* to another in the Hainaut province (Bouhon et al. 2018).

A more minor institutional change also took place in Flanders: 15 municipalities (*gemeenten*) decided to engage in seven respective mergers, taking effect as of 1 January. This move was financially incentivized by the Flemish regional authorities. Consequently, the Flemish region fell from 308 to 300 municipalities.

Finally, a more symbolic institutional change took place within the tiny German-speaking community (about 70,000 inhabitants, corresponding to two *cantons* adjacent to Germany), which features a distinct, 25-seat Parliament and a government. By 2019, in all public communication, it systematically referred to the *Ostbelgien* (eastern Belgium) label, whereas its official constitutional label remains *Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens*. This stems from an initiative by its Minister-President in March 2017, which has since then been mainstreamed. Symbolically, it can be interpreted as a stronger assertion of its territorial identity as it seeks to capture more policy competences currently held by the Walloon region.

*Issues in national politics*

Regarding the ever-salient 'community conflict' between Flemings and Francophones, the fall of the Michel I government in December 2018, after the N-VA left the coalition in connection with the signing of the Marrakech declaration (Rihoux et al. 2019), placed immigration high on the agenda of 26 May electoral campaign, especially in Flanders. The October 2018 local elections had already shown the resurfacing saliency of this issue in Flanders, given the N-VA's first electoral defeat ever as well as the resurrection of the far-right VB (Rihoux et al. 2019). In addition, the entry of the N-VA in the Michel I government (2014–18) had been made on the explicit condition that community affairs would not be placed on the agenda for the entire legislative term (Rihoux et al. 2015).

Having left the Michel I government, the N-VA was free to adopt a stronger Flemish nationalist profile again, in line with its core business – article 1 of the N-VA statutes stipulates that the party strives for an 'independent Flemish republic', a final goal shared with the VB. However, after four years of silence, refocusing the campaign on its core business

was difficult for the N-VA, especially giving its continuing governing ambitions, requiring some alliance with a main Francophone party. Hence, the party tried to bridge the spread by propagating the fuzzy solution of 'confederalism' for fixing the country's community problems.

The major electoral shifts from the N-VA to the VB at the 26 May elections pushed the N-VA to push community issues into the coalition formation negotiations. As the largest Flemish party, the N-VA was involved in most of the formation attempts of 2019, during which it stood firm on further institutional reform demands that were non-negotiable for all Francophone parties. In the public eye, the N-VA somehow managed to frame the formation debate in one picturing itself fighting heroically for the Flemish interests against the unindulgent Francophones, especially the PS, the main Francophone party. Hence, given the rather indispensable position of the N-VA in the Flemish party system, other mainstream Flemish parties, and even the main Francophone parties, were willing to talk about state reform – though not from a secessionist angle, rather in terms of reforming the current frame of the federation, including re-transferring some devolved competencies back to the federal level.

As in other European countries, economic growth slowed down during the year, as Belgium's economic activity is structurally heavily dependent on external trade. In this context, some large-scale bankruptcies occurred, such as that of Durobor (glass manufacturer) and Thomas Cook (tour operator). Other large companies such as NMLK, Sonaca, Coca-Cola, Lhoist and Ikea announced severe restructuring plans, involving significant job losses. The country's largest telecoms company, Proximus, announced a major digitalization scheme, involving laying off 1350 employees and replacing them with 1250 others who were better adapted for the digital era. The banking sector, faced with extremely weak interest rates, also had to cut jobs, such as ING (3000), BNP Paribas Fortis (2500) and KBC (1400) – mostly by the non-replacement of retired employees. All banking institutions also accelerated their plans for closing down or automating a large proportion of local branch offices. In this grim context, a decisive step was made in the creation of a new cooperative, ethical and sustainable bank, NewB. It managed to raise more than €35 million by early December, mainly via multiple small subscribers across the country, and pursued further preparations so as to become operational in 2020.

The country's economic situation was also negatively impacted by the budgetary paralysis at the federal level. Since the fall of the Michel I government, the budget, reduced to a system of 'provisional twelfths', prevented the caretaker government from responding to structural challenges such as climate change, the ageing population, but also the growing public deficit (estimated at 1.7% of gross domestic product (GDP) at the end of 2019). The public debt, while still benefiting from extremely low interest rates, remained at more than 100% of GDP.

The absence of a governmental majority also offered greater latitude to Parliament, via the constitution of ad-hoc alternative parliamentary majorities. After the elections, for example, the Socialist, Green and Liberal parties, along with DéFI and PTB/PVDA, agreed on a total decriminalization of voluntary termination of pregnancy and on pushing back the time limit for carrying out the medical intervention. An ad-hoc opposition group, comprising the CD&V, N-VA, VB and cdH did, however, manage to prevent the vote on the text before the year's end. This was also the case for a bill proposal on euthanasia.

In October, the PTB/PVDA managed to obtain the vote on an amendment to the bill on provisional twelfths to set up a fund aimed at improving working conditions in the nursing sector. Other proposals also found the required numbers of votes, even unanimity, such as on improvements to the operation of the asbestos fund or on lifting time limitations on cases of sexual abuse of minors.

On the social front, the country was paralysed by a general strike on 13 February. It was jointly organized by the three main trade unions, and opposed the capping of maximum pay rises in the private sector at 0.8 per cent for the next two years, in the context of the 'tax shift' that had reduced the employers' social security contributions since 2016. In December, a general rail strike, organized by the Socialist and Liberal trade unions, but to which the Christian trade union did not subscribe, partly paralysed the country.

Protest and contention were also driven by other audiences. As in many other countries, and following a supportive visit by Greta Thunberg on 21 February, young Belgians staged large weekly marches in diverse locations, voicing their concerns with regards to climate change. Faced with the pressure of these marches, a 'climate bill', establishing a series of national goals to be reached, was debated at length in the lower house. It was, however, not finalized before the 26 May elections, and was unable to gather the required majority after the elections.

In the wake of the 'Yellow Vests' movement that was initiated in France, a similar movement also developed in Belgium, although on a much smaller scale and only on the Francophone side. Besides socioeconomic demands, they also pushed for renewed forms of more direct citizen participation.

These calls for greater civic involvement in decision-making processes resonated after the May elections. The 'poppy coalition' proposal made (to no avail) by Ecolo, which would have included members from civil society, went in this direction. So did some concrete institutional initiatives: in February, as part of an ambitious citizen participation and deliberation scheme (*Bürgerdialog*), the German-speaking community (*Ostbelgien*) authorities launched a citizen assembly (*Bürgerversammlung*) and a permanent citizen council (*Bürgerrat*) whose role is to formulate policy recommendations for the Community Parliament. More modestly, in December, the Brussels Parliament announced the creation of deliberative committees, made up of randomly selecting citizens, assisted by Brussels regional MPs, who will be able to formulate policy recommendations.

Finally, in the field of asylum and immigration policy, as the lot of the 'ordinary migrants' requesting asylum remained an unenviable one, access to the territory for migrants with specific qualifications was facilitated in January via a 'single permit' procedure (residence and work) in order to address structural manpower shortages in certain professions.

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