

The Belgian federal government

540 days after the last elections, a new government was announced in Belgium

8 December 2011

Following 540 days of negotiations among informers, pre-formers, conciliators, high-level groups and royal clarifiers, Belgium has officially announced a new federal government.

The new government is a coalition of six political parties and three political families. The Socialists (Parti Socialiste & Socialistische Partij. Anders), Liberals (Mouvement Réformateur & open Vlaamse Liberale Democraten) and Christian-Democrats (centre démocrate humaniste & Christelijk Democratisch & Vlaams) are represented on both sides of the linguistic border.

Two different agreements

The “accord communautaire” and the budget agreement

An understanding on Belgium’s federal structure had to be agreed upon before an agreement at a budgetary level

The first agreement was taken after 485 days of negotiations, following the departure of two important actors. On the Flemish side, the N-VA was not invited back to the table after it rejected a final proposal from Elio Di Rupo and on the francophone side, the Liberal Party MR dropped its block partner FDF (Francophone Democratic Front). The N-VA and the FDF were seen as the radical elements around the negotiation table and their departure was an important factor in enabling the other parties to be in a position to find a solution for problems such as B-H-V, the nominations of francophone mayors in the Brussels periphery and the organization of the judicial system.

Both green parties, Groen! and Ecolo, were involved in this agreement, but were ousted from the subsequent negotiations on budgetary grounds following pressure from the Flemish liberals (open VLD).

Six parties continued the talks to find a budget agreement

Although these negotiations did not last as long as the previous ones, they were certainly as intense. The liberal parties played hardball, insisting on a focus on expenditure cuts and fewer tax increases. Clear warnings and guidelines from the European level, as well as from rating agencies, helped the liberals to push this change through.

Notable elements of the budget agreement are taxes on company cars, the cutting of subsidies for green energy and significant cuts in healthcare costs. In addition, the number of years that citizens will be required to work will increase, criteria for unemployment benefits will become stricter, not accepting a job when on benefits will be harder and unemployment benefits will be reduced over time.

In a final dramatic chapter after Elio Di Rupo had offered his resignation one more time, all parties were invited to a “colloque singulier” (private talks) with King Albert IInd at his castle in Ciergnon in the Ardennes.

A compromise was finally agreed upon and announced on day 537, but it took until day 540 and one last round of all night negotiations to agree on the number of Ministers and Secretaries of State (linguistic balance being a constitutional requirement), and the positions for each party.



The Government

What’s next?

This government now faces the difficult task of implementing a budget agreement that includes big policy concessions and thus, political risks for all parties involved.

The coalition is expected to end its remaining two and a half years, during which all parties need to convince their supporters that the concessions made will be worth it. On the francophone side, opposition will be led by the Green party Ecolo and by the FDF (a radical party mostly present in the Brussels periphery and an ex-partner of the MR), but this is not expected to affect the stability of the new government.

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The most important external influence on this government will be Bart De Wever's N-VA (New Flemish Alliance), which was the overall winner in Flanders for the past federal elections but who did not manage to come to an agreement with the PS. The N-VA will lead the opposition and their popularity seems to be rising steadily in Flanders (the latest poll puts them at approximately 35% support in Flanders). Over the coming months or years, the question will be whether the N-VA will be rewarded or punished for not participating in the government and how this will affect the members of the new coalition. Another element that could affect the opposition is whether or not Bart De Wever, still the only real prominent political figure of the N-VA, chooses to run for mayor of Antwerp in the 2012 municipal elections.



The government

Who is who?

The new federal government will be composed of 13 ministers and will also include 6 Secretaries of State:

Ministers

Prime Minister: *Elio Di Rupo (PS)*

Minister for Internal Affairs: *Joëlle Milquet (cdh)*

Minister for Foreign Affairs: *Didier Reynders (MR)*

Minister for Financial Affairs: *Steven Vanackere (CD&V)*

Minister for Pensions: *Vincent Van Quickenborne (open VLD)*

Minister for Economy & Consumer Affairs: *Johan Vande Lanotte (sp.a)*

Minister for Defence: *Pieter De Crem (CD&V)*

Minister for Judicial Affairs: *Annemie Turtelboom (open VLD)*

Minister for Employment Affairs: *Monica De Coninck (sp.a)*

Minister for Health & Social Affairs: *Laurette Onkelinx (PS)*

Minister for Budget: *Olivier Chastel (MR)*

Minister for SME's and Business: *Sabine Laruelle (MR)*

Minister for Public Companies & Development Aid: *Paul Magnette (PS)*

Secretaries of State

Secretary of State for Energy, Mobility & Environment: *Melchior Wathelet (cdh)*

Secretary of State for Family Policies: *Philippe Courard (PS)*

Secretary of State for Government Reforms: *Servais Verherstraeten (CD&V)*

Secretary of State for Civil Service Affairs: *Hendrik Bogaert (CD&V)*

Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration: *Maggie De Block (open VLD)*

Secretary of State for the Fight against Social & Fiscal Fraud: *John Crombez (sp.a)*