

Belgium's extreme right Vlaams Blok increases vote in regional elections

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In recent regional and local elections, the xenophobic Vlaams Blok (VB) became the strongest party in Antwerp. The VB advocates the separation of the northern Flemish-speaking region of Flanders from French-speaking Wallonia, which together with the bilingual capital Brussels and a small German-speaking area comprise the modern Belgian state. Strongly anti-immigrant, it calls for the immediate repatriation of all so-called illegal immigrants.

The party increased its share in Belgium's second city by five percent to take one third of all votes cast, gaining twenty places on the 55-seat council.

As well as Antwerp, the October 8 poll also saw the VB emerge as strongest party in Mechelen, and the third largest in Ghent. Overall its vote rose Flanders to just under 10 percent.

The Vlaams Blok made a racist appeal to the wealthier layers of Antwerp, playing up the issues of criminality and immigration. However, Antwerp bucks the national trend on both counts. According to official statistics crime rates in the city are falling and of the nearly half a million inhabitants under 10 percent are non-Belgians.

At election rallies VB party leader Filip Dewinter loudly proclaimed, "Our people first" and that the Flemish should be "Masters of our own home." He admires Austria's far-right Freedom Party and says "Joerg Haider showed us that the nationalists can make it into government... What happened in Austria was important. The Belgians saw that a government alliance of nationalists and conservatives is possible, and especially that the sanctions, the demonising of a country, cannot last."

The aim of the Vlaams Blok is a separate Flemish state, and Dewinter boasted, "we already have a Flemish parliament and government. We will soon

have a Flemish taxation system and perhaps a Flemish social security system, the last link which ties us to Wallonia."

The northern region of Flanders, where much of Belgium's industry is based, is far wealthier than Wallonia and its economy has performed relatively better in recent years. The Flemish nationalists want to cut themselves free from what they regard as Flanders subsidising the welfare state in the south: unemployment in Antwerp fell in September to 6.9 percent, against 18 percent in Wallonia.

Dewinter and the VB espouse an odious form of Flemish chauvinism, and call for all those foreigners who they claim have entered Belgium illegally since 1974 (some 300,000 they claim) to be repatriated. Dewinter told an election rally that "All those who are not assimilated" should "get out". How does the VB propose to identify those that are not assimilated? "Those who wear an Islamic scarf, who believe that the laws of Islam are more important than those of this country, those who do not want to speak our language..."

Federal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt described the results for the Vlaams Blok as a "stain", and pledged to continue the "cordon sanitaire" along with the other establishment parties, and not allow the VB to participate in government at any level. Belgian daily *Le Soir* criticised Verhofstadt's response to the increased vote for the VB, saying, "There is no use minimising the phenomena... It is not just a question of maintaining the 'cordon sanitaire'. It is also a matter of hearing the alarm bells that have resounded in the ballot boxes. The success of the Vlaams Blok is the mark of deep distress that has not been answered. The Verhofstadt government faces the challenge of really integrating the population."

The Vlaams Blok is now Flanders' fourth strongest party behind the Liberals (whose vote increased marginally), the Christian Democrats (down 1.4 percent) and the Socialist Party (the biggest losers, down 2.7 percent). It also increased its vote to 9 percent in the federal capital Brussels, but lost all its six seats in Wallonia.

The losses for the Christian and Social Democrats in the recent regional and local elections continue a trend that saw the composition of the federal government change significantly in last year's general election.

For most of its post-war history, the Dutch-speaking *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP—Christian Peoples Party) formed the core of every coalition government, both at the federal and state level. Together with their social democratic coalition partners the CVP lost around a quarter of their seats.

The new federal government that was formed last year under Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, is a coalition of the Flemish and French-speaking Liberal Parties, together with the social democrats and the Greens. It has sought to preserve the delicate political balance of Belgium's Flemish and French speaking regions, mainly by making concessions to the wealthier Flanders. New fiscal regulations introduced this week will grant even further autonomy to Flanders in the area of taxation.

Under the new rules, the regions will be able to cut taxes by as much as 6.75 percent from 2004, which if carried through in Flanders would deprive the federal coffers of some 40 billion Belgian francs (\$850m). The impact of such a cut would be felt harshly in Wallonia, which with significantly higher unemployment levels already spends proportionately more on welfare payments than its richer neighbour.

Far from preventing the break up of Belgium along regional lines, the government's policies are playing into the hands of the Flemish nationalists.

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