

Belgium: Liberals and Social Democrats to renew coalition without the Greens

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The Liberals and Social Democrats have emerged as the strongest parties in the new federal parliament following the general election in Belgium on Sunday May 18. The biggest losers were the Greens, who look unlikely to re-enter the federal government.

Outgoing Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt's Flemish Liberal Democrat Party (VLD) and sister party the Reform Movement (MR) in francophone Wallonia emerged marginally ahead in the poll with 49 seats (+8) in Belgium's 150-seat Chamber of Representatives.

The Social Democrats in both Flanders and Wallonia made significant gains on their 1999 results, almost doubling their seats to 48. Elio Di Rupo, President of the Socialist Party (PS), called the result "the greatest victory for the PS in 15 years".

The 97 seats the Liberals and Social Democrats now control mean they can govern without the support of any other party. Outgoing Foreign Minister Louis Michel (Social Democrat) described the joint liberal-social democrat vote as "a very solid majority". Verhofstadt claimed the result had given the Liberals a "mandate to continue their work of modernising the country."

In 1999, the "rainbow coalition" had been dependent on the presence of the Greens. Sunday's poll saw them practically wiped out in both Flanders and Wallonia. The Flemish Greens (Agalev) lost all nine seats, while the francophone party (Ecolo) was reduced to just four seats (-7).

The Greens also lost votes in the Senate elections, holding on to only one seat (-4). While the Liberals gained one seat, taking their tally to 12, the Social Democrats increased their total to 13, a gain of 5 seats.

There are a number of indicators that this election reflects a deepening crisis within Belgian society. Belgium has a compulsory voting system, but still

managed to record up to 10 percent abstention in some areas.

The biggest indicator of rising social tensions is the continued growth of the far-right parties. The Front National in Wallonia remains a small party, but made significant gains—particularly in the region of Hainaut where it moved ahead of the Greens and in Charleroi where it gained 12 percent of the vote.

The racist Vlaams Blok (VB) saw its overall vote increase from 15.4 percent in 1999 to nearly 19 percent. In its stronghold of Antwerp, Belgium's second city, it did even better, taking roughly a third of the vote. Vlaams Blok calls for the separation of Flanders from the poorer francophone Wallonia in the south. They campaigned on an anti-immigrant platform, demanding the deportation of "illegal immigrants" and offering cash payments to entice legally resident migrants to return home.

While the other establishment parties have declared a *cordon sanitaire* around the Vlaams Blok, promising they will not cooperate with the party at any level, the Belgian media has had no hesitation in promoting VB leader Filip Dewinter as a "respectable" politician.

Attempts to soften the VB image, such as standing former beauty queen Anke Vandermeersch as a candidate, can barely disguise the stench of xenophobia that surrounds the party. Vandermeersch said on the campaign trail, "If people who emigrate here don't adapt to our systems, to our laws, to our values, they should go back to where they came from."

The VB are increasingly dictating the tone of public debate. Dyab Abou Jahjah, a parliamentary candidate for the party Resist (which emerged after several days of street violence in Antwerp when a young Muslim was shot dead) has accused the government of adapting to the Vlaams Blok agenda. "Vlaams Blok talks about

security, they start talking about security. Vlaams Blok talks about assimilation, they speak about assimilation,” Jahjah said.



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