

Belgium: right-wing Vlaams Blok benefits from hostility to government

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Regional and European elections on June 13 have dealt a serious blow to Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt.

While exposing further the escalating social tensions, the elections are setting the scene for a further rightward shift in Belgian politics. For the first time it has been suggested that other parliamentary parties may enter talks with the racist Flemish nationalist Vlaams Blok (VB). This comes barely two months after a Belgian court convicted the party of a systematically racist campaign against immigrants.

In Dutch-speaking Flanders, the economically dominant north of the country, Verhofstadt's Flemish Liberal Democratic Party (VLD) was beaten into third place in the regional assembly by the Christian Democrats and VB. At the regional election, VB took nearly a quarter of the votes in Flanders.

Many dismissed this simply as a protest vote against Verhofstadt. Verhofstadt himself insisted that the European results (in which the VLD polled 13.56 percent, again placing them third behind VB, who took 14.34 percent of the vote) were "not as bad as all that". The VLD retained its three seats in the European assembly. VB also took a third seat.

The Flemish Christian Democrats (CD-V) took four seats at the European assembly, as did the social democratic Socialist Party (PS) in francophone Wallonie. In the poorer southern region the Reform Movement (MR), the VLD's sister party, took three seats, as did the Flemish social democrats.

The humiliation suffered by the VLD was further compounded when Britain vetoed Verhofstadt's appointment as next president of the European Commission. Verhofstadt was the favoured candidate of the French and Germans. He had supported their opposition to unilateral US military action against Iraq,

which did not endear him to the most open supporters of Washington within the European Union. London regards him as a European federalist.

This rejection has further compromised his position in Belgium. The Belgian daily *Le Soir* openly asked if this was the end of his political career, while *La Libre Belgique* described the obstacles to his continued involvement in domestic politics.

Verhofstadt had not been able to put a gloss on the VLD's poor showing in the regional elections, where VB continued to extend their influence. VB received 24 percent of the vote in Flanders. Around one million people voted for them, out of a Flemish population of some five and a half million. As well as substantially increasing on their 19.9 percent showing at last year's general election, they took 32 seats in the 124-seat regional assembly.

There was clearly an element of protest in the voting. In Wallonie the far-right Front National (FN) polled most in areas with high unemployment. One FN voter in Charleroi told reporters, "A vote for the FN scares the traditional parties. It is a warning cry ... I don't want the FN to get into power." The fact that popular protest takes such a right-wing form is a cause for serious concern, however. The FN was also able to maintain its share of the vote in rural regions that have historically provided the bedrock of fascist movements. In Charleroi its candidate received 16.9 percent of the vote, an increase on the 12 percent it gained at the general election.

Across Wallonie, the PS increased its majority. It also moved ahead of MR to become the largest single party in the Brussels region.

In Flanders the leading electoral list was the centre-right alliance between the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD-V) and the Nieuw Vlaams Alliantie (NV-A).

Many commentators have noted that this makes VB the largest single party in Flanders.

Since 1989 the other parliamentary parties have maintained a cordon sanitaire around VB. Under this agreement, no mainstream party was to cooperate with VB or form a coalition with it. However, after the general election VB was increasingly dictating the tone and terms of public debate. In the absence of any political perspective to oppose them, the cordon sanitaire amounted to little more than a safety fence for the VB.

As soon as the election results were posted, CD-V leader Yves Leterme stated adamantly that he would not be entering into any coalition with VB and that he would maintain the cordon sanitaire. Leterme is charged with forming the next Flemish administration. With VB holding a quarter of the seats, Leterme is faced with building a three-way coalition to keep it out of office. The Flemish Greens (Agalev) have already said it will not enter a coalition with the CD-V, and most commentators expect an alliance with the VLD and the social democrats.

Jan Renders, head of the ACW (another party within the CD-V/N-VA list), quickly rejected the possibility of any coalition with VB. Renders warned that any deal with VB would cause meltdown for the CD-V.

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Renders' comments, though, were made the same day that Leterme held meetings with leaders of the VB. Leterme said that he was seeking "clarification" on elements of the party's programme.

There is little to clarify. VB advocates ending immigration, and repatriating North African immigrants. It calls for the division of Belgium along racial lines, with the formation of an ethnically pure Flanders. In common with other hard-line proponents of free enterprise, it has adopted a social programme aimed at ending democratic rights and smashing organisations of the working class.

When a Ghent court found VB in breach of laws against racism earlier this year, it noted that the party "systematically" portrayed immigrants as freeloading troublemakers in order to drum up support for "a collective expulsion" of foreigners. The party was only able to stand in these elections because its appeal against the conviction is still pending.

That appeal is due to be heard in November. If the appeals court upholds the Ghent court's ruling, VB could be cut off from state funding. However, the party's president Frank Vanhecke said that the ruling was pushing it to "new legal pursuits". There have been proposals to cut some statements from the party's manifesto, and perhaps change the name of the party.

There are also the first indications that the cordon sanitaire is beginning to fray, precisely because VB offers the mechanisms for a rightward shift in domestic politics. There was public criticism of Leterme, but his position is not an isolated one. Verhofstadt, for example, told Flemish papers *Het Volk* and *Het Nieuwsblad* that he believed it was time to open a frank dialogue with VB in order to expose the "simplistic" weaknesses of their politics.

Boudewijn Boukaert of the liberal think-tank Civitas told *Le Soir* that VB's claims of undemocratic treatment would be proved correct if it were denied a place in government. Citing the example of Jorg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, Boukaert advocates allowing VB a role in government as they would "have extreme problems and would pay the price at the next elections."

An indication of the direction the Belgian government is likely to take can be seen from a recent letter to unemployed people. In order to reduce the number of long-term unemployed—currently standing at 171,288—the National Employment Office wrote to 90,000 people under 30 who have been without work for 15 months, telling them to find a job within four months. Those who are not successful risk losing part of their unemployment benefit.



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