

Belgium: Losses for ruling coalition as far right make gains

Paul Bond**23 October 2006**

Last week's municipal elections in Belgium revealed a deepening political crisis across the country. The parties of the national ruling coalition of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt fared badly ahead of next year's federal elections.

In Flanders, the economically dominant Dutch-speaking north of the country, far-right Flemish nationalists made gains from Verhofstadt's Flemish Liberal Democratic Party (VLD). The VLD took only 19 percent of the Flemish vote, leaving them behind the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD-V), which took 32 percent and the far-right Vlaams Belang (VB-Flemish Interest—formerly the Vlaams Blok).

Verhofstadt's national coalition partners, the Socialist Party (PS), lost control of several former industrial centres in Wallonie, the French-speaking south, and also lost ground in the capital, Brussels. Embroiled in corruption scandals over misappropriation of funds, the PS maintained its lead in Wallonie, despite serious local setbacks.

The Walloon far-right National Front (FN) made some inroads as the PS's vote declined. The PS retained power in Charleroi despite losing 13 percent of the vote and their absolute majority, while the FN gained an extra seat with 9.51 percent. In Mons, home of the PS President Elio di Rupo, the PS lost 10 percent of its vote, but just held onto an overall majority. FN's vote increased to 8 percent in Mons for the first time. In La Louviere, the PS lost nine seats, ending its absolute majority. The VLD's francophone sister party, the Reform Movement (MR), gained one extra seat, as did the Democrat Humanist CDH, but the FN took three seats. The FN also gained its first council seat in Liege, where the PS vote increased.

Much of the media attention focused on Belgium's second city, Antwerp, the heartland of the VB party, where the party's leader Filip Dewinter stood for mayor against the incumbent Patrick Janssens of the Flemish

Socialist Party (SP.A). The VB changed its name from Vlaams Blok two years ago after judges ruled that it was an openly racist organisation. It campaigns for a separate Flemish state, opposes immigration, and supports tax and benefits cuts. It remains a racist party. Its ambition is to separate Flanders, now the economic centre of the country, from the smaller and poorer Wallonie. The VB has campaigned on a law-and-order platform, accusing the francophone parties of being soft on crime and immigration.

Campaigning under the slogan *Belgie Barst!* (Belgium explode), Dewinter told reporters in Antwerp that Belgium is "full." In a city with a large immigrant population he said that "Too much is too much." VB calls for cutting benefits to jobless immigrants. Arguing that "Europe is Rome, Greece, the Enlightenment, and...the Jewish-Christian roots of our culture," Dewinter campaigned amongst Antwerp's orthodox Jewish community, whom he described as "allies against the main enemy of the moment...radical Islam." In the run-up to the election, party chairman Frank Vanhecke denounced artists appearing at three anti-racist music festivals promoted by the newspaper *De Standaard*. He said they would be "spitting in the face" of VB supporters, and threatened that their sales would fall if they performed at the concerts.

Across Flanders as a whole, the VB took 20.6 percent of the vote, becoming the second largest party behind the CD-V, and pushing ahead of the VLD. This was up from the 14.9 percent they polled in the 2000 municipal elections, but down 4 percent on their showing in 2004's regional elections. In Antwerp, they took a much higher percentage of the vote. In Schoten, on the city's outskirts, Marie-Rose Moral took 34.7 percent of the vote for the VB. Dewinter himself polled 33.5 percent, just short of the 35 percent the party had set itself as a target.

Dewinter was beaten into second place by a massive

upturn in the SP.A vote. Janssen's party, which had polled 20 percent in 2000, this time took 35.7 percent of the vote. It increased its number of seats on the 52-seat council from 10 to 22. This seems in part to have been a concentrated vote against the VB. Hostility to the anti-immigrant party was focused by the murder of a Malian nanny and her ward in the city centre by the nephew of a VB MP earlier in the year. Janssens declared that the result "shows that it is possible to stop VB."

The liberal media seized on Dewinter's showing as evidence that the VB had been beaten. *Het Nieuwsblad* led with "No Black Sunday." *Le Soir* ran the headline "The rise of the far right is not inevitable," with editor Beatrice Delvaux writing, "Belgium can breathe again." Certainly, this determination to oppose the growth of the far right is significant, as is the slight fall in the VB's poll in Antwerp.

The sense of relief, though, is somewhat misplaced. Although beaten into second place, Dewinter's personal vote in Antwerp increased. (In municipal elections, the "personal preference" system allows voters to choose both a party and an individual.) The SP.A took 22 seats, whilst the VB retained its 20 seats. Dewinter said that the SP.A had not won any votes from the VB, but had gained votes from its own coalition partners, the Greens and the VLD. He described Janssens as a "political cannibal" who had "eaten his own children." Dewinter blamed the vote against the VB on the extension of voting rights to immigrants.

The decline in the VB's standing in Antwerp, and the stagnation of its vote in Ghent (Verhofstadt's constituency) and Mechelen, needs to be seen against its dominance in smaller cities. Outside of Antwerp, the VB polled the most votes in seven municipalities, showing an average increased vote of between 6 and 8 percent. The party now has some 800 councillors across the region, and has increased its number of provincial councillors from 54 to 87. The VB's chairman Frank Vanhecke boasted that the party was "the biggest winner" in the elections.

For all the euphoria based on the claim that coalitions have been able to keep the VB out of high office, the VB increasingly dictates the agenda for Flemish and national politics. Flemish authorities have latterly introduced measures to limit the use and influence of French in the region. Other Flemish parties are also calling for greater powers to be devolved to the region, home to some 6 million of Belgium's 10.5 million population. Before the election, the CD-V leader Yves Leterme had aroused anger in Wallonie by demanding greater powers for

Flanders.

The oppositional vote for the SP.A has also underlined the instability of the coalitions within Belgian politics. This has become a big issue in Wallonie, where the unilateral abandonment of a pre-election coalition arrangement on the eve of polling has led to a local jockeying for coalition partners.

In Schaerbeek, the Green (Ecolo) candidate Isabelle Durant announced a change in agreement almost as soon as the results were declared. Ecolo had previously been part of the "Olivier" coalition with the PS and the CDH. This coalition, which had just been declared victorious in Schaerbeek, would have returned the PS's Laurette Onkelinx as mayor. Onkelinx is minister for justice in Verhofstadt's national cabinet. Instead, Durant signed a new agreement with the liberal Democratic Front of Francophones (FDF, a member of the MR group of parties). This has kept the FDF's Bernard Clerfayt in office as mayor for another term.

In retaliation, some PS candidates immediately scrapped their "Olivier" coalitions and negotiated new agreements to marginalise Ecolo. In Brussels City Centre, the PS announced a coalition with the CDH. In Ixelles and Molenbeek, the PS signed agreements with the MR rather than Ecolo. In Forest, the PS and Ecolo agreed to continue their coalition, leaving an opposition coalition of the MR and the CDH, whilst in Charleroi the PS will govern with the support of both the MR and the CDH.

Nationally, Verhofstadt has already hinted that the VLD may look at new coalitions with the Christian Democrats if it cannot arrest its decline.

These opportunist manoeuvres only add to the justifiable alienation of the electorate from official politics, on which the VB feeds. None of the parties advance policies to address the essential social concerns of working people, or seek to remedy the depredations heaped on them by big business. Rather, the SP sits in government imposing them. This leaves the field clear for the fascists to scapegoat immigrants for all of Belgium's problems.



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