

Flemish nationalist gains in regional elections renew pressure on Belgium

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19 October 2012

The victory of the separatist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) in last weekend's regional elections has again increased pressures threatening the break-up of Belgium.

N-VA leader Bart de Wever immediately demanded that Prime Minister Elio di Rupo "prepare for confederalist reform" ahead of the 2014 national federal election. The N-VA is looking to use its successes in the regional election to consolidate its position in both regional and federal governments.

In these elections, the N-VA polled around 30 percent across the whole of the Flemish region, winning 20 of the 35 districts. In three of the five electoral districts, the party topped the poll. In Antwerp, the party took 38 percent of the vote, easily beating the incumbent social democratic mayor Patrick Janssens.

De Wever will become mayor of Antwerp, the biggest city in Flanders and the country's second city after Brussels. Brussels, although located within Flanders, is largely French-speaking and has separate regional status in the Belgian electoral and government systems.

Governed by a social democratic mayor almost continuously since the Second World War, Antwerp has been the heartland of Flemish nationalism. In recent elections, the far-right separatist party Flemish Interest (VB, Vlaams Belang, formerly Vlaams Blok) has dominated the city's political landscape. VB set the political agenda for the political mainstream, even while isolated by other parties with the so-called *cordon sanitaire*.

VB's vote fell in Antwerp, prompting party leader Bruno Valkeniers to comment, "For many years we served as the icebreaker and now other parties are making the gains."

There is some truth in this. Sections of the liberal press have sought comfort from VB's relative decline, but the ascent of the N-VA points to a mainstream success for its political programme. The N-VA was only formed in 2001 as a right-wing split from the nationalist party, Volksunie (VU). VB had also emerged as a split from VU in 1978, advancing a right-wing separatist opposition to VU's increasing acceptance of federalism.

The N-VA's results were an advance on its significant showing in the 2010 federal election, when it took 28 percent of the vote. N-VA won 27 of the 150 parliamentary seats then, making it the single biggest party. But its insistence on greater regional autonomy contributed to the 541-day period during which no government could be formed. When N-VA was invited to begin coalition negotiations, de Wever said he was happy to allow di Rupo, from the French-speaking south (Wallonia), to conduct the negotiations if it would provide the means for increasing Flemish autonomous power. While the press were looking to di Rupo to save the country, de Wever was telling *Time* magazine, "In my party programme, you can read that it is not a country worth saving".

The N-VA was not invited to join di Rupo's unstable six-party coalition when it was finally formed last December. The coalition quickly agreed on some constitutional changes, devolving certain financial responsibilities from federal to regional level. Among other things, the coalition has proposed transferring control of unemployed workers from the federal unemployment fund to regional employment agencies.

The nationalists have long cited financial differences between the regions to justify their separatist perspective. Unemployment in Wallonia is roughly double that in the north, and the separatists regularly

appeal to rhetoric that the Walloons are lazy and welfare-dependent. A recent study by the VIVES institute of the University of Leuven calculated that, with interest, Flanders transfers €16 billion annually to Wallonia.

The separatists are seeking to cut these financial ties to consolidate the interests of the regional ruling class. The separatists are seeking to win over the upper layers of the middle class by promising further cuts in social welfare to the south. De Wever told his final election rally that the Flemish “have had enough of being treated like cows, only good for their milk”.

The reality of the economic situation is that all bourgeois parties are advocating austerity measures and budget cuts. Central to di Rupo’s coalition agreement was a commitment to spending cuts, job losses and tax increases. The government has already imposed €13 billion (US\$16.9 billion) of cost cuts and tax hikes. As budget talks begin this week, it is reported that the government will need to find €800 million of further savings to meet its public sector deficit target for this year.

The government had pledged to cut the deficit from 3.7 percent of GDP last year to 2.8 percent. The Federal Plan Bureau revised its economic forecasts last month. Having previously forecast growth of 0.1 and 1.3 percent this year and next, the Bureau is anticipating the economy shrinking by 0.1 percent this year, and expanding only 0.7 percent in 2013. To achieve a deficit of 2.15 percent in 2013, the government will need to find a further €4-€5 billion.

The Flemish nationalists claim that all cuts can be made by axing welfare to the south, but there will be a destruction of social provision in Flanders, too.

Various commentators have tried to play down the significance of the N-VA gains by stressing that these were regional, not federal, elections, and by claiming that the voting had little connection with popular hostility to the austerity measures.

Acknowledging the gains made by the nationalists, di Rupo pointed to the next federal election, saying “2014 is 2014 and this is 2012”.

But the other parties in di Rupo’s coalition fared badly in these elections, particularly in Flanders, clearly indicating discontent with the government’s austerity programme. This was reflected in the increased vote for the Workers Party of Belgium (the PvdA+/PTB is

bilingual and national rather than regional). In Wallonia, which has shown relative electoral stability over the last period, the former Maoist tendency increased its vote in Liège. It also increased its vote sharply in Antwerp, taking four seats in the city with 8 percent of the vote.

As in recent moves in Scotland and Catalonia, Flemish separatist programmes offer no alleviation from the burden of the financial crisis. Their role is to sow divisions in the working class and weaken opposition to the ruling elites. Further, they express clearly the contradictions of European unification under capitalism. The partial surrender of national decision-making powers to the European Union (EU) has gone along with strengthening the “autonomy” enjoyed by various regional bourgeois cliques. This has led to demands for the secession of mini-states able to access EU funds and attract global investors.

Belgium has always been an unstable formation, tolerated by its larger neighbours chiefly because it provided a convenient buffer between them. Drives towards its division bring with them the prospect of increased rivalry and conflict across Europe. Belgium poses the urgent need to unite the working class internationally and across language borders on the basis of socialism.



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