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What do the European Commission, Belgium's federal government and the country's regional governments all have in common? Their terms end at the same time. While holding the elections for the respective assemblies on the same day has a practical advantage, it reduces the capacity to identify which level of power is competent for which matter and, inevitably, weakens the democratic system. The European elections receive relatively little attention, in a country currently holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Traditional parties in power facing a radical opposition

Since October 2020, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo has led a federal government made up of no fewer than seven parties from the four traditional political families: the liberals – Open VLD/MR (Renew); the socialists – Vooruit/PS (S&D); the Greens – Groen/Ecolo (Greens/EFA); and the Christian Democrats, on the Dutch-speaking side of the linguistic border only – CD&V (EPP). The opposition is therefore composed of the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA, which belongs to the ECR group and is currently the biggest party in the Chamber of Representatives); the radical right (Vlaams Belang; ID); and the radical left (PTB/PvdA; GUE/NGL), together with Les Engagés (EPP) – the French-speaking Christian Democrats – and DéFI (which has no representation in the European Parliament), in addition to two independent MPs.

The fact that, in October 2020, De Croo presented his government's programme to the Chamber of Representatives in the Brussels hemicycle of the European Parliament, due to COVID-19 restrictions, was a subliminal message: his government presented itself as resolutely pro-European. The coalition agreement mentioned Europe nearly 130 times. This comes as no surprise from a government composed of those political colours. Belgium, a founding member state heavily reliant on the internal market, must keep on pleading the case for (further) European integration.

In the Belgian federal structure, one should also look at the political dynamics within the regions, which play a prominent role in the Presidency of the Council of the EU, too, by chairing some formations of the council, a unique situation in comparison to other federal member states. An N-VA/CD&V/Open VLD coalition leads in Flanders; a PS/Ecolo/DéFI/Groen/Open VLD/Vooruit coalition is in charge in Brussels; and a PS/MR/Ecolo one runs Wallonia. Without commenting further on who is in the opposition at this level, let us at least note that at regional level too Vlaams Belang (in Flanders) and PTB/PvdA (in Flanders and Wallonia) sit in the opposition. Interestingly, Wallonia is one of the few regions in Europe without any radical right party. Migration is a topic barely discussed there. Like the federal government, the regional governments take a pro-European stance, but with distinctions.

An overshadowed European election campaign

On June 9th, 2024, the Belgians will head to the polls to cast their votes in three elections: regional, federal and European. Although Belgium finds itself at its most European moment since 2010, holding the Presidency of the Council for the 13th time, the European election is gaining the least traction of the three.

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In addition, the rotating presidency has the peculiarity of exposing the diversity of positions among all the levels of government of the country in relation to different EU issues. This situation has also been actively used by the radical right and radical left parties in their ongoing campaigns to mark their differences from the governing parties, notably for the former on migration, and for the latter on "the austerity measures dictated by Europe".

While holding the elections for the respective assemblies on the same day has a practical advantage, it reduces the capacity to identify which level of power is competent for which matter. The risk of confusion (which also exists when the European election is organised on its own, as demonstrated in other contributions) is reinforced by campaigns where candidates at different levels meet and debate together, and feature on the same electoral leaflets. It is also compounded by the fact that many candidates (voluntarily or not) make proposals on topics that do not belong to the realm of competence of the level of power they are candidate for, or by candidates who currently sit in a different assembly than the one they are now running for. While we cannot assume that the results would be different were the European election organised on its own, this situation weakens the democratic system by not shedding sufficient light on each assembly where representatives sit, and by diluting the possible democratic and educative value of election campaigns.

Such a "mega election campaign" also pushes the political parties to make choices on where the money should be allocated as a matter of priority. As the parties do not perceive a possibility of significant power

gain in the European elections (Belgium is sending only 22 MEPs out of the 720), they tend to naturally prioritise the federal and regional ballots, as the results of those have an impact on whether they can join a government coalition; whereas the results of the European election do not even have a direct influence on which political party will get the position of European commissioner. For this very reason, it is also the federal and regional levels of power that will attract most of the media attention *after* the elections. In addition, candidates for the European Parliament make up a small minority of all candidates currently running for office, which makes them relatively less visible in the public space. When casting their vote, Belgians are likely to vote for the same political party in the European election as the one chosen for the two other elections, rather than the other way around. Therefore, the political parties allocate relatively fewer financial resources to the European election campaign – an attitude that somehow reflects how Belgians take the EU for granted, requiring no further effort, despite its crucial importance to the Belgian economy.

Traditional features, and one novelty

According to the latest Eurobarometer, when asked how likely it is that they would vote in the European election if they were held "next week", 75% of Belgians indicated that they were likely to vote, slightly above the EU average (71%). Taking into consideration that voting is mandatory in Belgium, this number is not that high. This can be explained by three main factors: (i) a lack of knowledge about the elections, (ii) a distrust of the political institutions and (iii) repeated *contra legem* announcements by major political figures that not voting would incur no fine. These announcements are worrying as they weaken the rule of law and, in turn, the strength of Belgian democracy and the trust in the institutions.

The constituencies for the three elections are different: at district level for the regional election, at provincial level for the federal election, and at community level for the European election. Belgium is one of four member states that do not have a nationwide constituency for the European ballot. Instead, it has three constituencies: one for the Flemish community, one for the French-speaking community and one for the German-speaking community. This makes the political space within which the campaign for the European election takes place even smaller than the size of the country, at a time when some in the EU are arguing in favour of an EU-wide constituency. Consequently, it is likely the analysis of the results of the upcoming European elections in Belgium will not allow one to draw conclusions on what the *Belgians* think, but rather on what the Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking Belgians think, respectively. Political parties must inevitably opt for candidates who are well-known in their respective communities, and therefore choose well-established politicians or popular figures from other sectors (e.g. media, business or academia). Against this background, some names of lead candidates come as no surprise: the very popular Sophie Wilmès for MR (prime minister in 2019-2020, very visible during the COVID-19 pandemic), following Charles Michel's unexpected withdrawal; Elio Di Rupo for PS (prime minister in 2011-2014 and, since 2019, minister-president of Wallonia for the second

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time), Johan Van Overtveldt for N-VA (minister of finance in 2014-2018 and current chair of the European Parliament Committee on Budgets); or Wouter Beke for CD&V (the party's president from 2010 to 2019). However, a certain change of guard is taking place. A career EU politician like Philippe Lamberts is leaving, but well-experienced national politicians are taking the reins of EU politics, further cementing the long-standing Belgian tradition of sending veteran politicians to the European Parliament, notable examples being Wilfried Martens and Guy Verhofstadt. In addition, the political parties use the popularity of those candidates to promote the candidates for the two other levels of power by, for instance, presenting them side by side on electoral leaflets, reinforcing the confusion mentioned previously.

For the very first time, Belgians aged 16 or 17 on June 9th, 2024, will have the right (and obligation) to vote in the European election. Belgium therefore is joining the small club of five member states that allow their citizens to vote from the age of 16 (Austria, Germany, Malta) or 17 (Greece). The European election, however, is the only election for which such a right has been introduced. This decision can be understood either as symbolising that the future of the next generations will be decided at the European level, or as demonstrating the relative lack of importance attached to the election by the authorities, choosing that one to try a new democratic experiment. According to some projections, this decision will likely favour the Green and extreme parties.

Rise of the extremes

With relatively few seats to be allocated, and these being further divided among the different communities (NL 13; from 12 at the 2019 election/ FR 8 / DE 1) and a myriad of political parties, the European election has a relatively high degree of predictability within the Belgian political sphere. On the side of the Flemish community, Vlaams Belang (ID) will likely gain a fourth seat and PvdA/PTB (GUE/NGL), two seats – from 0 on this side of the linguistic border – at the expense of seats held by CD&V (EPP) and Open VLD (Renew) and thanks to the new seat allocated to Belgium. Switching to the French community, PTB/PvdA is likely to gain one additional seat at the cost of Ecolo (Greens/EFA). No change is expected when it comes to the German-speaking community. Such results would mean notably: (i) that 8 out of 22 MEPs elected in Belgium would come from the extremes; (ii) that the PS (S&D) would not be affected by the fact that its two current MEPs made headlines following the "Qatargate" scandal; and (iii) the arrival of 10 new Belgian faces in the hemicycle. This latest number is only slightly lower than for the entire hemicycle, which could see up to 58% of new faces.

It would appear that the pro-EU stance of the current federal government will therefore not result in electoral gains in June 2024, an unfortunate final note to a so far successful Presidency of the Council.