



The new Belgian government torn between neoliberalism and asymmetry

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Bruno Liebhaberg analyses in this article the new Belgian government described by some as “kamikaze” for its fragility. The new federal government is based on an unprecedented coalition between the French-speaking liberal party (MR) and the 3 Flemish parties in power in their Region. The socialists will constitute the backbone of the federal opposition and have a unique opportunity to initiate an essential work of ideological and programme deepening and renewal.

Described by some as "kamikaze" due to its fundamental fragility, the new government that took office in Belgium on 10 October is totally original. Indeed, the coalition of parties making up this government demonstrates the growing asymmetry at the heart of the federal state. Over the last decades, Belgium's capacity to be governed has been based on the dialogue between the two main French and Dutch-speaking linguistic communities, organised politically on a regional level. And yet, more than ever, the election results of last May and the outcome of governmental negotiations at the different levels of power reveal the consolidation of a contrast.

On the one hand, Flanders, which is still prosperous, has been seduced by the neoliberal model embodied by the NVA (New Flemish Alliance). For the NVA, the implementation of this model necessarily implies separatism, i.e. the independence of Flanders and the disappearance of Belgium, both of which remain a statutory priority for this party. On the other hand, despite being affected by structural unemployment for over thirty years, Wallonia remains on the whole faithful to the traditional socialist, liberal and Christian-Democrat parties.

From June 2014, the Walloon and Brussels governments were formed on the basis of an alliance between the French-speaking socialist (PS) and Christian (CDH) parties, with the liberal party (MR) relegated to the opposition. In Flanders the NVA, with almost 32% of votes, the Christian-Democrats (CD&V) with 20% and the liberal party (Open VLD) with 14%, formed a right-wing coalition armed with a very large majority.

The new federal government is based on an unprecedented coalition between the French-speaking liberal party (MR) and the 3 Flemish parties in power in their Region. The MR, with only 20 deputies out of the 61 French-speaking members of the House of Representatives, was awarded the position of prime minister.

After six successive State reforms since the war, this growing asymmetry of the Belgian political landscape is neither fundamentally surprising, nor technically likely to block the institutions. However what is more problematic, on a political level, is the inability of the Christian-Democrat and socialist parties – both once dominant in their respective regions – to continue to ensure, through their almost uninterrupted dialogue¹ within a joint federal government, the balance that had enabled

¹ Apart from some exceptions formed by the "rainbow" and then "purple" coalitions between 1997 and 2007 from which the Christian-Democrats were excluded and which, it should be recognised, enabled considerable progress to be made on the societal level.

Belgium to function until now. The CD&V has, as shown above, been very significantly overtaken by the NVA and the French-speaking PS is at present closely followed by the MR.

The programme announced by the government has a clearly liberal tone. In a difficult budgetary context, due to the crisis, of particular note is an imbalance between the measures affecting the least well-off and those which, if they weren't fragmented, could be conducive to a fair distribution of effort according to each individual's ability to contribute. A certain number of structural reforms are announced. Like several Member States of the European Union - such as France or Italy, where they have eventually just been adopted – Belgium needs these reforms, notably in the areas of pensions, the operation of the labour market and taxation. There are however concerns that, in the elaboration and finalisation of these options, the new government has neither sufficient political capacity nor sufficient political will to promote and rely on the dialogue between social partners. This social dialogue has, however, always been a major component of the Belgian model.

Even more worrying is the allocation of sensitive regalian portfolios such as the Interior, Asylum and Immigration or Defence to ministers from the NVA and, in particular, the fringe close to the Flemish far right which, almost 70 years after the Second World War, still continues to support and justify collaboration with the Nazi occupier.

Socialist opposition will be tough and will make no concessions. Its task, however, will not be an easy one, precisely because of the asymmetric character of the governments. Excluded from the federal executive, the PS is in power in Wallonia, a region which remains reliant on financial transfers from Flanders. Its language of opposition at the federal level will therefore need to remain coherent with the adoption in Wallonia, under its leadership and under the twin federal and European constraints, of policies aiming for a reduction in government deficits.

The PS has announced that it wishes to resolve this squaring of the circle by calling for the reconstitution of the alliance between the party, the unions and the mutuals, that is to say with institutions present in the country's three regions. If this alliance is necessary for the defence of a social security model characterised since 1945 by joint management, it is doubtful whether it provides a sufficient electoral base to guarantee a return to power following a future federal ballot.

The long hegemony of a socialist party capable, since WWII, of garnering scores of up to 40% of votes, has made Wallonia an exception in Europe. This exception is currently called into question by the diversification of the left (the far left entered the Kingdom's different parliaments in May 2014),

as well as by the attractiveness of a French-speaking liberal party which has chosen to redefine itself as a "reforming movement".

In Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, as elsewhere in Europe, the future of social-democracy depends on its renewal. The socialists will be judged on their capacity to define and propose – without taboos, but also without abandoning their values – a new social and societal contract adapted to the challenges of the 21st century. It is the necessary condition to both reconquer and widen several segments of a disillusioned electorate which, feeling abandoned or still hoping to receive support rather than being constrained in its initiatives, is no longer reluctant to vote for the populists or, in the case of Flanders, the nationalist ultra-right wing.

Now that they will constitute the backbone of the federal opposition. Socialists have a unique opportunity to initiate that essential work of ideological and programme deepening and renewal.