

The early signs are that Belgium is heading for more political deadlock over who should form the next government

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Belgium held federal elections in May, with negotiations currently on-going over the makeup of the next government. As [Peter Van Aelst](#) writes, a key concern is that the country could experience political deadlock of the kind which occurred after the 2010 elections, where it took 541 days of negotiations before a government could be formed. He notes that while there appears to be more urgency than there was in 2010, the linguistic cleavage between French and Dutch-speaking parties will still be exceptionally difficult to overcome.



Belgium has built a reputation when it comes to chocolate, beer and cycling. More recently, we are also making a name for ourselves when it comes to government formation – or, more precisely, the inability to make a government within a reasonable amount of time. After the 2007 election it took 194 days to form a government, while the 2010 election led to a world record breaking process of 541 days. So it comes as no surprise that today, one month after the federal elections on 25 May, not a single Belgian expected to have a new government.

Why is the government formation process in Belgium so complicated?

Forming a government in Belgium has never been easy. Belgium is a federal country mainly based on a linguistic cleavage between Francophones and Dutch-speaking inhabitants. Besides Flanders and Wallonia, the two largest regions in terms of population (60 per cent and 30 per cent respectively), Belgium also consists of a third region: the bilingual capital Brussels (10 per cent).

This linguistic divide and the on-going federalisation process have certainly increased the ‘bargaining complexity’ for politicians, particularly as Belgium has no national parties anymore. At the end of the 1960s, the traditional parties split into separate Flemish and Francophone parties. The effect on formation duration was quite strong: until 1968 the average time was 28 days, afterwards it has always taken longer than that to form a new cabinet.

In recent years, the number of parties has further increased, making Belgium one of the most fragmented party systems in the world. Furthermore, the Belgian electoral system provides no national constituency: campaigns are run largely independently on both sides of the language border. After the elections the two, sometimes conflicting, election outcomes are put together and the negotiations can start. As a consequence, in its post-war history Belgium has frequently had difficult processes of government formation, occasionally taking more than 100 days. In



Belgian Parliament, Credit: Christian Stock (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

comparative perspective this can be considered long, but not exceptional. Belgian formation duration used to be similar to that in Austria and Iceland, and clearly shorter than in the Netherlands. It seems that something has changed between 2003 and 2007.

Conflict over constitutional reform

During the 1990s, the linguistic tensions seemed to have disappeared from the top of the political agenda. More recently, however, the linguistic divide has been refueled. In the campaigns of 2007 and 2010, state reform was a prominent issue, certainly compared to the two previous campaigns. The Flemish electoral cartel of [Christian-Democrats](#) (CD&V) and [Flemish nationalists](#) (N-VA), led by Yves Leterme, focused on increased autonomy for the Flemish region. French-speaking parties, however, opposed another constitutional reform. These conflicting positions led to a difficult formation with a new government almost 200 days after the elections.

The Leterme government was never very stable and tensions between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties resulted in early elections in June 2010. These elections made the N-VA the biggest party of Flanders. The unwillingness of the French-speaking parties to take another major step in the reform of the state boosted the popularity of the Flemish nationalists led by Bart De Wever. In Wallonia, the [Parti Socialiste](#) (PS) of Elio Di Rupo became the undisputed leader.

Although PS and N-VA had little in common in terms of socio-economic policy and state reform, they tried for several months to reach a compromise, but without success. During the 541 days of government formation, the Belgian King Albert II asked seven people from five different parties to take up a role as 'informateur', mediator, negotiator, clarifier or (pre-)formateur. The latter role was finally taken up by Elio Di Rupo after almost a year of negotiations. It took him another half year to reach an agreement on state reform and form a new government with six parties. The nationalist N-VA, the biggest party in Flanders, did not have involvement in any of these agreements.

Surviving a year and half without a real government

How did the country manage without a real government for such a long period of time? There are many factors at play. The multi-level character is certainly an important reason. There was no national government, but the regional governments worked perfectly well. Also, the EU, as a supranational government, provided political continuity, while the euro assured economic stability.

Several observers and politicians today warn us that a long period without government could harm the economic and financial position of the country, as happened last time. However, a recent study from the Flemish Institute for Economy and Society (Vives) showed that the increased interest rate in Belgium in 2011 was not strongly related to the ongoing government formation process, but rather to the financial crisis.

Finally, the Belgian parliament also played a positive role in this process. During the absence of a real government, parliamentarians had more freedom than before to go beyond the opposition-government divide and [were able](#) to pass relatively more legislation. In short, Belgium survived and politicians did not feel a real sense of urgency.

The situation in 2014

This time around, is there more of a sense of urgency to form a government? Undoubtedly the answer to this is yes. Bart De Wever and his N-VA party, who triumphed on election day, strengthening their position as the biggest party in Flanders, have taken the lead and seem committed to forming a centre-right government. However this does not mean that Belgium will have a new government soon.

First of all, this is because the Flemish nationalists and their leader are highly unpopular and mistrusted in the French speaking part of the country. This should come as no surprise as they actively campaigned against the biggest French speaking party (the PS), have proposed harsh economic reforms, and hold the long-term objective of abolishing the Belgian state. French speaking journalists have often demonised De Wever and seldom contribute to

a more nuanced view of Flanders' leading politician (in electoral terms at least).

Another complicating factor is the preliminary deal between two francophone parties (PS and CdH) to form the next regional government in Wallonia and Brussels. As a reaction, the N-VA and CD&V made a similar deal in Flanders. The fact that the regional level forms a government before the national level can be considered as proof of the growing importance of the regions. This also implies that government coalitions will probably be asymmetric at both levels. For the time being, however, not a single government is in place and the caretaker governments are here to stay for a while.

At the moment there seems to be a strange paradox in the position of the parties at both sides of the language borders. In Flanders, where ideas about growing autonomy and independence have gained popular support, most parties are willing to form a government and hope the Flemish nationalists 'take their responsibility' as leading party. In Wallonia, where Belgium or at least the status-quo is still intact, parties seem much less eager to become part of the national government (with the Flemish nationalists).

And what do ordinary Belgians think about this, you may ask? They hope we will become world-champion. Never before in my life have I seen so many Belgian flags in the street. A sign of football fever? Or would many Flemings and Walloons silently hope the Red Devils can save the country?

For a longer discussion of some of these issues, see the author's recent co-authored paper in [West European Politics](#)

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