New portal site leads citizens through government services

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE STARTS FROM THE NEEDS OF THE CITIZENS OR BUSINESSES

On 20 February the Flemish Government opened an entirely new website, an event marked by speeches and a big celebration. The new www.vlaanderen.be has become a second-generation portal site, namely one that starts from the needs of the user, in this case citizens or businesses. The previous site was based on the structure of its own services. Citizens or businesses no longer have to find out whether X or Y is competent to deal with their question. The search engine does that. Another striking feature: the site’s search engine effortlessly bridges the gaps between Regional and Federal State services and has links to municipal services (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 21 FEBRUARY

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The main work of the moment is that municipalities, Federal States and the Federal Government are building a tangle of links behind their walls so that citizens can always find their way through all government services, whether they enter the government building via the Flemish or Federal door or that of their own municipality. The Flemish website uses the main phases of life as a guide: birth, nursery, school, work, pension. It is doing this in imitation of Singapore, which launched a similar site in the 1990s. The portal, e-hall and the first few rooms of the website are arranged in accordance with the life-cycle logic. The same is also true of the new Federal website www.belgium.be. But once you are past the first few mouse-clicks, you may well for the time being reach documents of a purely official nature. It will take years for all the government service constructions to be made customer-friendly. There are, however, one or two good examples already. Social Security, Child and Family, the VDAB (Flemish employment service) are the precursors. Tourism Flanders, the Culture Database, the conservation licence window and Mobile Flanders are good examples. Via this website people can also calculate how much mill rate they must pay. There is even a form for submitting complaints, but that … has to be printed out and posted.

Minister-President Patrick Dewael announced that by 2007 Flanders would have all its services and forms on the Web. He also said that he would bear in mind the interests of those people who are not too familiar with computers and the Internet.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE
WWW.BELGIUM.BE
WWW.GOV.SG
Belgium saves honour in Nato committee

With its consistent peace politics, our government is winning the admiration of a significant portion of the press and public opinion in Europe

Belgium, Germany and France imposed their veto against support for fellow NATO member Turkey because sending Patriot missiles and AWACS spy planes created the impression that NATO was preparing for armed conflict and that consequently it was assumed that no further diplomatic solutions were possible. But it became clear at the weekend that it was impossible for Belgium to maintain this standpoint, all the more so because it was placed on the agenda of the Defence Planning Committee, a military body on which France does not sit. Belgium was therefore all alone.

It was difficult for the Belgian Government to capitulate entirely, mainly because on Saturday 50,000 to 80,000 demonstrators had given Belgian politics heart in the biggest anti-war demonstration for years. On Saturday evening Verhofstadt’s government then came up with its own proposal, which its allies only partly accepted. More important than what Belgium had managed to achieve in the NATO committee is the esteem that the spirited opposition of Verhofstadt and Michel triggered in NATO.

With its consistent peace politics, our government is winning the admiration of a significant portion of the press and public opinion in Europe, says Het Laatste Nieuws (18 February). On the contrary, what Belgium has achieved in the Nato Committee is not that impressive, De Standaard believes (FF).

MANU TASSIER • DE STANDAARD • 18 FEBRUARY

The government came up with three conditions. What sign is there of these in the NATO text? That NATO is restricting itself to defensive measures with this decision is explicitly stated, but is not a Belgian achievement: after all, it was already clear that NATO would limit itself to planning purely protective initiatives. According to Belgium, the implementation of the decision must be tested by the UN. This would involve NATO having to let decisions depend on other bodies - and this link was unacceptable to the other countries, as it would affect NATO’s autonomy. Instead of a direct link, Belgium got rather vague references such as: ‘We continue to support the efforts of the United Nations to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.’

Finally, the decision should not be seen as the first step in a war against Iraq. The government refers to the passage that the resolution only concerns the defence of Turkey and any and all military operations by NATO. ‘So it is not a step towards a war with Iraq,’ says Premier Verhofstadt. But one could just as easily say that NATO is keeping its options open.

What is the outcome for Belgium? The government has agreed to a proposal that was on the table for a whole week, without obtaining cast-iron guarantees that NATO will take account of the UN. On the other side, Belgium was still able to sneak in explicit references to the UN.

Our country may well have had to agree to ‘watered-down compromises’, but it only did so after 11 hours of tough negotiations, all alone in NATO, abandoned by its main ally, France. Ultimately, Germany also wanted to put an end to the matter.

Atlantism needs a European leg, Verhofstadt says

According to the prime minister, we are at the beginning of a period in which relationships between the US and Europe must be redefined.

FF EDITORIAL TEAM

On 17 February in Brussels the European Union showed signs of wanting a consensus in the Iraq crisis. In the final text of the fifteen government leaders state that ‘war is not unavoidable’ and that ‘violence must be the last resort’. The fifteen are also explicitly saying that they will support ‘the ongoing work of the UN inspectors’. They are asking that the inspectors be given ‘the time and resources’, which the Security Council considers necessary. For Premier Verhofstadt the chance of a peaceful solution has increased after the Blix report, the peace demonstrations over the weekend, the NATO agreement on Sunday evening and the united standpoint of the European Union.

‘The fact that the weapons inspectors can get more time and resources is more than significant,’ maintains Verhofstadt, who says he hopes that the four European countries in the Security Council will defend this standpoint. The next day [18 February] he explained Belgium’s Iraq strategy in the Chamber Foreign Affairs Committee. According to him, we are at the beginning of a period in which relationships between the US and Europe must be redefined. Atlantism must have two fully-fledged legs, he feels: an American and a European one.

The Flemish opposition party, the N-VA, is accusing the government of electoral calculation (N-VA), but is taking the same pacifist line. The far-right Vlaams Blok is taking Louis Michel to task for allowing himself to be roped into the French anti-Americanism too easily.

But especially the attitude of the Christian Democratic CD&V was notable. Although it is also adopting an anti-war stance, the party feels through its spokesman Pieter De Crem that Belgium should have been more obedient in NATO.

In his reply, Premier Verhofstadt called for Atlantism to be redefined. A day later he explained his vision in a speech as guest speaker in The Hague, which appeared on the opinion pages of De Morgen and De Standaard.
Belgian stance guarantees a peace dividend at the elections on 18 May

A TV spot on CNN and Euronews, a road show with Premier Verhofstadt (VLD) and his Finance Minister Reyners (MR) in New York. All this is intended to promote Belgium with foreign investors. With a corporation tax that has been cut from 40% to 34% and a ruling system that gives foreign investors the possibility of negotiating the taxes they have to pay in our country, the Federal Government is hoping to make our country more attractive than ever before. But more than through any image campaign, Foreign Affairs minister Louis Michel (MR) and Guy Verhofstadt have put Belgium on the world map by vetoing NATO sup-port for Turkey, says De Morgen (15 February). If most Americans were scarcely aware of where Belgium was, all that has changed since the Gulf crisis. The Federal Government does not believe that the veto will put a brake on American investments. In the first nine months of 2002, more than 10% of American investments in Europe were in Belgium, ten times more than in 2000. By cutting corporation tax and introducing the ruling system, the government is hoping to be able to continue this trend. Furthermore, its stance is perfectly in line with public opinion, which is turning en masse against a war with Iraq (FF).

JOHAN CORTHOUTS • DE MORGEN • 15 FEBRUARY

Businessmen and women do not generally let themselves be led by political or patriotic motives. Profit forecasts are much more important to them, the government feels. Foreign Affairs Minister Louis Michel reminded the Americans that they had been at loggerheads with Libya for years, but that American firms were quite happy to do business there. In New York this message was delivered somewhat differently. There, Belgium was compared with the Netherlands, until recently the absolute champion in attracting American investments. And what happens? Our northern neighbours are experienc-ing a sharp fall in American investments. Holland Inc. remains number one, but due to problems of traffic congestion, overly expensive land and uncertainty over the future tax system is losing many of its feathers. Belgium is cheaper for new businesses. So why should Belgium slavishly follow Big Brother America, as the Netherlands has been doing for years, if firms take hardly any account of political criteria in their investment plans? Meanwhile the veto has definitely had an effect on Belgium. The Belgian pacifist standpoint is making opposition particularly difficult and tensions are being avoided in the government. The Green coalition partner can hardly be dissatisfied now Verhofstadt and Michel are making such concerted efforts for peace. With its standpoint the government is also showing every respect for public opinion. 75% of Belgians feel that Belgium should no longer remain a faithful ally of the US and 65% support the veto against military support for Turkey. Based on these figures, the government seems guaranteed a peace dividend at the next elections.
Nine years after the robbery of the century, the impossible seems to have happened again at the Antwerp Diamond Centre. At the weekend, some 123 safes were looted in the underground strong room of the heavily protected building. According to the spokesman for the Diamond High Council (Hoge Raad voor Diamant), Youri Steverlinck, the burglars had inside help. They clearly knew all the codes for the burglar alarm, knew how to get round the hidden security systems and how to open the heavy steel door to the strong room. There was no evidence of a break-in. The safes in the Diamond Centre are let to the 200 or so diamond merchants who have their offices in the building. In the evenings, but especially at weekends they store their diamonds, jewels and cash in them. The haul amounts to tens of millions of euros (FF).

JEAN-CHARLES VERWAEST • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 18 FEBRUARY

One thing is certain: just as with the diamond robbery in 1994, the professional diamond thieves were particularly well-briefed as to the security measures in the building. ‘Details suggest that they had inside help. The security system may well have been breached technologically in this way, but there is always a human factor,’ reacts Youri Steverlinck of the Diamond Council (HRD). Otherwise the heavily guarded building on Schupstraat and certainly the strong room could not have been cracked. ‘To get inside each visitor has to have a pass,’ stressed a spokesperson for the Grunberger family, which owns the Diamond Centre. ‘There are also cameras everywhere and a security officer at each entrance.’ The spokesperson emphatically denies that the security is substandard, or that the security service is undermanned. The burglars most likely struck in the night of Sunday 16 to Monday 17 February. They avoided the timing mechanism of the strong room, which can only be accessed from 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. during the week. The Diamond Centre’s investigators had a déjà-vu experience on Monday morning. Just as with the Antwerp Diamond Circle robbery in December 1994, the safes in the strong room of the Diamond Centre were open and the heavy door undamaged. Ten years ago the burglars, who broke open eight safes, disappeared with 5 million euros in cash, jewels and diamonds. They had the help of two guards, whom they bribed. A few months later the burglars were caught. For the diamond sector this second super-robbery is a blemish on Antwerp’s reputation as a stable and safe trading centre. ‘For many of those firms affected this is a massive blow. They need their stocks to be able to operate. It is their main source of capital,’ says Youri Steverlinck of the HRD.

GUY FRANSEN/MARK EECKHOUT • DE STANDAARD • 19 FEBRUARY

The Diamond High Council can scarcely believe it, but on Tuesday it received inquisitive phone calls from Tel Aviv in Israel in which the other end of the line had difficulty hiding its enthusiasm. What is bad for Antwerp is good for the competing diamond city. Antwerp is still the world’s number one diamond city. In the 1,500 diamond firms in Antwerp, 75 million euros’ worth of stones are traded each day. In the record year of 2002, 26.3 billion dollars’ worth of diamonds were traded in the city on the Scheldt.

Last weekend’s robbery came as a major shock to Antwerp’s diamond merchants, because all the elements point to a robbery with the help of insiders. The Public Prosecutor’s Office did not provide any further information yesterday, but it is clear that the burglars knew perfectly well what they were doing. ‘Someone gave these men the red-carpet treatment. That can be the only answer,’ says diamond merchant Eddy Elzas of Rainbow Gems. ‘The cameras were tampered with, the thieves knew the code to the safe and the sensors on each safe didn’t work. Then you don’t have to be James Bond to commit a robbery.’ For many of the victim firms the theft is a tragedy, for some perhaps even the end. The big firms spread their wares around, some in the offices, some in the safes, some outside the diamond district. They are also well-insured, mostly in London. However, precisely because business is not going so well in the diamond sector, a number of smaller diamond merchants no longer have insurance. ‘I’m certain that of the 120 merchants who had goods stolen, more don’t have insurance than do,’ says Elzas. In a number of smaller firms the staff are technically out of a job following the robbery. It seems almost certain that some of them will go bankrupt as a result.

WWW.DIAMONDS.BE

TAX CUTS BOOST FAMILY INCOME BY 1.3% (2000-2003)

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<th>2001</th>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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<td>-164</td>
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TAX BURDEN ON LABOUR AND WAGES

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<tr>
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<th>LABOUR COSTS [2]</th>
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<td>51</td>
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<td><strong>SPAIN</strong></td>
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<td><strong>THE NETHERLANDS</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

[1] TAXES AND SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN % OF LABOUR COSTS
[2] LABOUR COSTS IN $ AT SAME PURCHASING POWER

SOURCE TID GRAPHICS/WWW.NBB.BE

focus on FLANDERS • 15 February - 21 February 2003 • Number 7
Hysterical reactions against Genocide Act from Israel

The Jewish community in our country has reacted with surprise at the Israeli government’s plans to move the Belgian Jewish community to Israel. The idea comes from Israeli Tourism Minister Yitzhak Levy. He feels that anti-Semitism is assuming unheard-of proportions in Belgium, and has penetrated as far as the highest courts in the land. According to him, the judgment of the Court of Cassation in Brussels, which makes it possible for Premier Ariel Sharon to be prosecuted for his part in the massacres at the Palestine camps of Sabra and Shatila, is evidence of this. Sharon himself, it is said, has already ordered a committee to give priority to Belgian Jews with plans to migrate to Israel. In the meantime, Israeli diplomats in the US have apparently begun lobbying against our country. Chamber Chairman Herman Decroo also received a furious letter from the Vice-Chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Brussels, Gary Litman. According to him, the ‘Genocide Act’ is the reason that American companies are no longer investing in Belgium. And Israeli MP Zvi Hendel wants former Belgian leaders to be taken to court for the crimes they committed in the former colony of the Congo. Finally, Hendel even wants to take King Albert to court because in his opinion the Royal House collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War. Foreign Affairs is reacting with caution and wants to brush aside the strong comments of Levy and other Israeli politicians in order to avoid an escalation. An estimated 42,000 Jews live in Belgium. The Jewish Community in our country has reacted with surprise at the Israeli government’s plans (FF).

‘An over-reaction,’ says Louis Davids, publisher of the Belgisch-Israëlitische Weekblad (Belgian-Israelite Weekly). ‘We’re not living in the 1930s anymore. The Belgian Jews are very much put out by Israel’s reactions to Ariel Sharon’s remarks. As a Belgian I wouldn’t like it if another country decided to prosecute my democratically elected leader. As Jews in Belgium we are therefore struggling with an uncomfortable feeling. But move! I don’t know anyone who is making plans.’

Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 18 FEBRUARY

Our Belgian ambassador in Israel is right to call Israel’s reactions to the decision of the Court of Cassation mildly hysterical. There is nothing wrong with the Court’s decision, which has done nothing more than examine whether the Belgian Genocide Act applies to Premier Sharon. According to the Israeli press, that is evidence that the highest court in the land is being patronised by politics. That argument is nonsense. The Court survived the biggest post-war mass demonstration, the White March (against a ruling in the Dutroux affair, ed.). At that time it proved to be completely independent of the executive and legislative powers. That must even be known in Israel. Discussion of the Act itself is, however, possible. It is in fact right that it would have much greater decisiveness if similar legislation existed in a couple of dozen other countries, or if it was implemented by an international court such as that in The Hague. Today Belgium gives the impression of being the world’s censor, and even though there is nothing wrong per se with this ambition, conventional wisdom teaches that it is advisable for people in glass houses not to throw stones. As long as the judicial apparatus in Belgium is not a model, it is perhaps asking a little too much to drag every person suspected of violating human rights to Brussels. Furthermore, there is also the question of practical implementability: how will a single Brussels examining magistrate ever find out the true facts about Sabra and Shatilla? In short, for the time being the Jewish community in our country has a lot more to fear from audacious jewel thieves than from the Court of Cassation.

Belgian business leaders also against war with Iraq

When the spokesmen of the Association of Belgian Businesses (Vereniging van Belgische Ondernemingen) warned of the harmful economic consequences of the current Purple-Green Government’s Iraq policy, they in no way expressed the view of the average Belgian entrepreneur. This is clear from an e-mail survey conducted by the business magazine Trends among 10,000 Belgian entrepreneurs. Some 71% of entrepreneurs are against war. Furthermore, half of entrepreneurs do not believe that rapid military intervention will benefit their turnover in 2003, against all forecasts by economic analysts.

| HOW SHOULD THE IRAQ CONFLICT BE APPROACHED FROM AN ECONOMIC POINT OF VIEW? |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
|                                  | TOTAL  | FL     | FR     |
| No answer                        | 1.40%  | 0.70%  | 3.90%  |
| Continuation of weapons inspections and diplomacy | 67.40% | 65.20% | 74.60% |
| Brief, targeted military intervention | 27.20% | 29.40% | 19.70% |
| New economic sanctions           | 4.00%  | 4.70%  | 1.80%  |

Source: Trends
Flemish employers should speak with one voice

**The VEV leadership is having to endure increasing competition from an alliance between eight industrial sectoral federations**

Flanders is to see a new co-operation amongst employers. After the Flemish Employers’ Association (VEV) recently entered into an alliance with the Chambers of Commerce, which led to the joint umbrella organisation VOKA, it now wants closer co-operation with the Association of Independent Entrepreneurs (Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemers, Unizo). The aim is to form a front and come up with common standpoints, just like the employees’ trade unions, claim the managing directors Kris Peeters (Unizo) and Philippe Muyters (VEV). The next day both organisations denied they were aiming at one front in De Standaard (19 februari), although they recognize the need to speak with one voice (FF).

STEVEN SAMYN • DE FINANCIELE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 18 FEBRUARY

‘Our main concern is that Flemish employers speak with one voice,’ says Peeters. According to Muyters, that is in the interests of business as a whole. Jef Roos, the VEV Chairman, stresses in a reaction that from when he took up his post he had pushed for better co-operation between the various employers’ organisations. ‘In the Socio-Economic Council for Flanders (Sociaal-Economische Raad voor Vlaanderen, SERV, which advises the Flemish Government, ed.) co-operation with Unizo is fantastic. We want to develop the same thing.’ For the time being, Roos does not want to use the words merger or umbrella structure. The VEV is also busy consolidating co-operation with the Flemish industrial sectors. Two thousand mostly large firms are affiliated to the VEV. The Chambers of Commerce and Industry have 22,000 members, many of which are small businesses. Unizo represents more than 80,000 members and for several years has defended not only the interests of tradesmen, but has also set itself up as the mouthpiece of SMEs and the liberal professions.

JOHAN RASKING • DE STANDAARD • 19 FEBRUARY

The merger with the Chambers of Commerce must give the current Managing Director of the VEV, and the future VOKA number one, Philippe Muyters, greater political elbow room. And that’s how it should be, because the VEV leadership is having to endure increasing competition from Industriebond Vlaanderen, an alliance between eight industrial sectoral federations, with textiles, foodstuffs, chemicals and technology (Agoria) as the heavyweights. In particular, the influence of the umbrella federation Agoria in the employers’ landscape is increasing. The presence of Agoria on the public stage (politically and in the media) is, however, being systematically boosted. This sometimes leads to confusion in the outside world. Thus, Flemish captains of industry are in turn given an unclear role one week by the Industriebond and next week pushed to the fore by the VEV as a mouthpiece.

Last week the VEV leadership had to cope with the public reproach by the foodstuff federation Fevia that it ‘was not properly consulted’ over the Flemish employment agreement. Philippe Muyters got the message. He announced ‘better consultation’ with the sectors and wants to give them a place in the new VOKA decision-making structure. Muyters continues to stress ‘the interest for Flemish business of speaking with one voice’. The way in which employers by the Dewael government were put into a corner in the Flemish social dialogue is strengthening Muyters and Peeters in their efforts to achieve unanimity at the negotiating table. But a large Flemish employers’ front, between the VEV (later VOKA) and Unizo, was yesterday ‘emphatically’ denied by both parties. ‘It’s not good for a single organisation to have to represent both large and small businesses,’ says Unizo boss Peeters.

WWW.VEV.BE
WWW.UNIZO.BE
WWW.AGORIA.BE

Flemish social agreement hits technical problems

Last week the Flemish Government had bad news for the Flemish employers’ organisations. The Flemish employment agreement - limited in scope, with a budget of 150 million euros - concluded on 22 January between the social partners and the Government, is struggling with technical problems. The section on ‘tax cuts’ for employers can no longer be implemented this year, announced Minister-President Dewael (VLD). It is impossible to push through the exemption from the regional Flemish part of the mill rate for businesses (10% of the total) this year, according to the Minister-President. As a result, an imbalance risks emerging between the benefits for employees in the form of social measures (training cheques) and those for employers when the agreement is implemented. Dewael is proposing alternatives for employers: either let the tax cuts take effect a year later (2004) or accept compensations for the green levy that businesses have to pay and which will no longer be deductible once Federal corporation tax has been cut. The Flemish Employers’ Association is anything but ready to discuss the government’s change of course and feels it has been left out in the cold (De Standaard, 17 February). The members of both businesses and trade unions have approved the agreement. Negotiating again with the trade unions is not an option, feels the VEV.
Didier Bellens can use his strategic skill at Belgacom

The appointment of RTL boss Didier Bellens as Managing Director of the national telecoms company Belgacom has been welcomed in the Flemish press. True, Bellens is a French-speaker, but promised to familiarise himself with Dutch in 100 days via a crash course. As adjutant to the wealthy Walloon businessman Albert Frère, Bellens was responsible for the lucrative financial strategy of the GBL holding, for which Frère rewarded him with the highest post in the RTL Group, Europe’s biggest television group. By switching to Belgacom, Bellens is avoiding the blazing row currently raging between the main shareholder of the Bertelsmann group, the Mohn family and Albert Frère, claims De Financieel-Economische Tijd (15 February). With Belgacom, Bellens is inheriting one of Europe’s healthiest telecoms companies, which was converted by his predecessor John Goossens into a smooth-running social company with 19,000 employees. Initially he will have to concentrate on his shareholders, Knack believes (FF).

Guido de Spieghelaere • Knack • 19 February

Belgacom has been privatised, but the Belgian State remains the main shareholder, with half plus one of the shares. The other smaller half is held by the ADSB consortium. Within that consortium, the American SBC Communications holds most sway. All of which means that the Americans are the real boss of the semi-state enterprise. Nor is it clear who still actually wants to keep their money in Belgacom. Not the government, at any rate. A few years ago there was talk of floating on the stock exchange, but nowadays people are hardly interested in shares. The merger talks with the French Cegetel are not unwelcome to the government. For a good price the American SBC would even pull out of Belgacom [and Tele Danmark]. And the small Belgian shareholders will want to hear the cash draw ring soon. That merger with Cegetel is a risky puzzle. Belgacom does business with the French Vivendi, which controls the possible merger partner. But that does not appeal to the British Vodafone, which was also after Cegetel. And Belgacom must remain polite to Vodafone, since it is a major shareholder in its mobile phone subsidiary, Proximus. Belgium must, however, keep its eyes peeled. In a new merger, Belgacom could well weigh its national anchor. In the past (with GBL, ed.) its new boss thought up the operations that led to the sale of national showpieces such as Royale Belge and Bank Brussel Lambert abroad [to French Axa and Dutch ING respectively].

Second edition of ‘Flanders Parties’ on 11 July

Henceforth, ‘Flanders Parties’ will have a theme each year. This year it is poetry

Bart Dobbelare • De Standaard • 20 February

One million people celebrating. That is the goal of the second edition of ‘Flanders Partiest’, which this year has poetry as its theme. Also, last year’s model will be followed exactly. Which means free buses, fifteen free museums on 10 July, border celebrations for neighbours from the Netherlands, Germany and Wallonia and a closing show in the Grand Place in Brussels. The party cheques are also being repeated: an incentive of 200.3 euros for organisers of local parties. Last year around 1,500 were handed out. This year there are just about as many available. And yet there is something new. Henceforth, ‘Flanders Parties’ will have a theme each year. This year it is poetry. ‘But don’t worry, we’re not going to spend eleven days listening to poems, however much I like poetry. ‘Flanders parties’ will be not be a ‘cultural project’ in the narrow sense of the word. ‘Flanders Parties’ will remain eleven days of party,’ says Minister-President Dewael. The organisers hope that everyone will get versifying and publish their poems on the website www.vlaanderenfeest.be. Organisers who print the poems on announcements, posters or even paper towels and bread bags will get an extra pat on the back of 20 euros. ‘Which doesn’t mean that we’re looking for the ultimate celebratory poem. It’s anything but a poetry competition,’ says Culture Minister Paul Van Grembergen (Spirit), who has written a poem himself for the occasion on Iraq, the country of the Tigris and Euphrates. All in all the Flemish Government is investing almost 1.5 million euros in the holiday. 11 July is not yet an official holiday. Dewael wants to make it an
election topic: ‘The proposal has been expertly buried in the National [Feder-al] Labour Council. But if after 18 May the VLD will be willing to negotiate on a new government, we’ll put it on the ne-gotiating table.’

WWW.VLAANDERENFEEST.BE

Diary

MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE


Editor in chief: Frank Vandecaveye
• Advisory panel: Luc Demeester (Lannoo), Rik Van Cauwelaert [director Knack], Koen Clement [Man-aging director, De Morgen], Frans Croes [Director, Trends], Francis Decoster [Information Officer, Flemish Community], Mark Dewerdt [Journalist, Financieel-Economische Tijd], Michael Stabenow [Correspondent, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung], Luc Standaert [Journalist, Belang van Limburg], Jan Van Dorens [Deputy Director, Vlaams Economisch Verbond], Bernard Bulcke [De Standaard] • Focus on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.

CULTURE