Ryanair to fly to Ostend

Ryanair’s arrival a boost for the region around Ostend after the British shipping company Hoverspeed announced that it was getting rid of its ferry service between Ostend and Dover

On 1 May the Irish budget airline Ryanair will begin daily flights between Ostend and London Stansted airport. The scheduled Ryanair flight is a windfall for Ostend airport. Until recently it only handled charter flights and freight flights. Besides, several freight flights with Russian aircraft were recently scrapped because of noise standards. Ryanair’s arrival is also a boost for the region around Ostend after the British shipping company Hoverspeed announced in December that it was getting rid of its ferry service between Ostend and Dover, with the loss of several hundred jobs. Primarily to develop the tourist potential of Bruges, the airport’s name is being changed to Ostend-Bruges (FF).

Bert Lauwers • De Financieel-Economische Tijd • 7 March

Initially Ryanair will be making one daily flight with a Boeing 737-300 with 149 seats. Ostend is setting its sights mainly on British tourists who want to visit Bruges. Ryanair, which before the transaction entered into an agreement with Aviapartner, is known for its tough negotiating policy and demands contributions from the smaller airports it serves. The contributions Ryanair expect at its Belgian base of operations in Charleroi even led to an investigation by the European Commission into distortion of competition and possible illegal government support from the Walloon Region. Ostend does not want to fall into the same trap as Charleroi and is immediately laying its cards on the table so as not to make the European Commission suspicious: in Ostend Ryanair received a discount ‘seen as normal’ of 30% on landing rights, says Paul Catrysse, the division head for airports of the Flemish administration. Catrysse stresses that other companies can also expect a similar discount if they ‘provide an equivalent added value to the airport and the economy of the region’. In return, Ryanair is undertaking to carry at least 450,000 passengers over the first five years, 600,000 in a second period and 750,000 in a third. ‘If these minimum numbers are not achieved, the contract will be re-negotiated,’ says Catrysse.

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INTRODUCTION

The activists of the Forum for Peace Action (Forum voor Vredesactie) had probably imagined the outcome of its action differently. Around 150 of them were clapped in irons by the local police in a parish centre of the municipal district of Melsele on Saturday evening before they could unfurl their banners. In doing so the CD&V Mayor from Beveren wanted to prevent the campaigners from stopping 18 rail transports of heavy American army equipment, which arrived at the Port of Antwerp intended for the Gulf. The police detained the demonstrators for 12 hours and the Mayor hid behind a circular from Foreign Affairs Minister Antoine Duqueusne (MR), which bans any obstruction of military transports to explain away his ‘preventive intervention’. De Standaard questioned the constitutionalness of banning a demonstration, and Het Volk (3 March) wondered why the activists were treated like terrorists. De Morgen (7 March) wonders what Duqueusne was trying to achieve by announcing a totally undemocratic ban on demonstrations as a member of the Purple-Green government, which disapproves of the war. On top of this, not every mayor agreed with this circular. Freddy Willockx, SPA mayor of the adjoining municipality of Sint-Niklaas, immediately let Duqueusne know that his police had better things to do than see to it that the Americans could prepare for their war. Among the campaigners arrested in Melsele was the Green MP Peter Vanhoutte. There is no longer anything unusual about MPs demonstrating, and certainly this is appreciated by the Green grassroots. But the MP now wants the anti-war action to be extended into diplomacy. In De Morgen, Vanhoutte stated that Belgium would be better expelling its American diplomats if the USA decided to go to war against Iraq without a UN mandate and is calling for a blockade of the Port of Antwerp against the transport of war materials. Vanhoutte is far from being the only one against war in Iraq, but his suggestion is a bridge too far, says Het Belang van Limburg (6 March). Making it clear to the Americans that we do not support a war in Iraq is one thing, but there is no need to offend them as well, says the paper. Vanhoutte is also embarrassing his party. Agalev Parliamentary Party Leader in the Chamber, Joos Wauters, called the statement not very wise and feels that the government ‘has thus far defended the peace line superbly in the Iraq dossier.’

Frank Vandeaveeye | editor in chief
Eleven-and-a-half weeks before 18 May it looks as if the parties have begun their election campaigns. Premier Verhofstadt [VLD] sent an open letter to the people in which he explains in as many as sixty proposals what he wants to achieve in the next period of government and in 40 points what his Purple-Green government has accomplished in this last term of office. The letter will be published in all newspapers this week and people can react to it on the website www.openbrief.be or at the VLD’s debate days, to be held in every province in March. Once all the reactions are known, everything will be brought together at the end of March into ‘a contract with the people’, which will form the VLD election manifesto. Economic recovery remains the main concern. Alongside new tax cuts and less bureaucratic red tape for businesses Verhofstadt is also calling for a further cut in corporation tax and personal income tax, more funds for healthcare, a more efficient legal system and a lowering of the voting age to sixteen.

At a joint meeting in the Flemish Parliament in Brussels the SPA-Spirit cartel unveiled its general election slogan: ‘Politics is about people’ (‘Politiek gaat over mensen’). In an interview in Het Laatste Nieuws (1 March), figureheads Steve Stevaert (SPA) and Bert Anciaux (Spirit) explained the slogan. It can be translated as ‘bringing politics closer to the people’. In relation to the USA’s plans for war, Stevaert argues that a government of Liberals (VLD) and Christian Democrats (CD&V) would never have adopted a single bold attitude without the Socialists. Both politicians are at the top of Flemish politicians’ pop poll. But popularity is not something to turn your nose up at, they feel. Stevaert believes that if political opponents find his policy populist, it is a compliment as long as it is good policy. Both politicians have planned a joint election tour of Flanders, but are not prepared to enter into detail. The Greens of Agalev are heading for the elections under the slogan ‘Agalev makes the difference’ (‘Agalev maakt het verschil!’). At a meeting in Ghent they turned their differences of opinion with the Liberal VLD into clear election themes. No linear tax cuts for businesses without guarantees in relation to employment and rational energy use, according to Agalev Secretary Jos Gysels. The Green party itself wants to make the fight against poverty a priority and in so doing is poaching on the SPA’s territory. Gysels also emphasised once again that his party does not want a war in Iraq and above all that the nuclear weapons must be removed from Kleine Brogel NATO base.

Finally, the Christian Democratic CD&V has opted for ‘people and values’ (‘mensen en waarden’) as a baseline for its campaign. These are the building blocks, the foundations of a stronger community, a greater feeling of solidarity, says Chairman Stefaan De Clerck, who had chosen a village café in Gooik that is used as décor for a popular TV chat-show to launch his campaign. De Clerck wants to tackle rising individualism and egoism, but is also in favour of a strict budgetary policy. According to the party, no single measure must endanger the reorganisation of public finances. The party is going for a surplus of 0.9% of GDP from the end of the period of office in 2007, but still wants more money for healthcare and a more alert reaction to unfavourable economic developments than is currently the case with the Purple-Green government. According to De Standaard, a few conclusions can be drawn from the differences in emphasis of the various party campaigns.

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 4 MARCH

One important conclusion is that only the VLD is resolutely proceeding to make the achievements of the previous period of government its own. Hence the aplomb with which the party listed no fewer than forty achievements last Friday. In the same breath, Premier Guy Verhofstadt added sixty new objectives, but these were not dominated by continuity: more tax cuts, allowing more people to find work, so that the economy can grow more, allowing debts to be further reduced. A green light for optimism and entrepreneurial spirit. Last weekend his two coalition partners showed significantly less devotion to the Purple-Green record. The slogan which the SPA-Spirit cartel unveiled - politics is about people - has a striking meekness about it. Clearly the Socialist strategists detect a groundswell of dissatisfaction with an overly self-conscious political style in their incessant opinion polls. Something to which Liberals driven by voluntarism perhaps pay too little attention. The Greens are displaying their suspicion even more clearly. They are even rejecting godparenthood of the active welfare state. ‘Agalev makes the difference’ means that the party is boasting about having been in opposition in the government and is planning to do so again. In this way the Greens are trying to survive if the campaign suddenly degenerates into a titanic struggle. Against this diffuse battle array, the CD&V has produced a manifesto based on ‘people and values’. It is the classic third way, that does not expect salvation from the State or the people, but from safety in family, networks and society. It too is avoiding the choice of a potential coalition partner. This means the voter will be faced with a problem on 18 May. The parties are creating a profile for themselves based on what distinguishes them from the others. But everyone knows that the policy to be implemented will be based on what binds them. This paradox generates into a titanic struggle. Again. In this way the Greens are trying to survive if the campaign suddenly degenerates into a titanic struggle.

WWW.OPENBRIEF.BE
WWW.SP.A.BE WWW.SPIT.BE
WWW.CDENV.BE
WWW.AGALEV.BE
New action against inequality in electoral legislation

THE CHANCE OF THE WHOLE ELECTORAL ACT BEING ABANDONED BEFORE THE ELECTIONS ON 18 MAY AND ALL PARTIES HAVING TO SUBMIT NEW LISTS IS FELT TO BE NOT VERY HIGH BY

In Brabant there has been a return to the old electoral legislation, the ward is limited to the old electoral districts of Leuven and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, there is no electoral threshold and electoral lists of both constituencies are grouped to obtain remaining seats. In the other provinces the new Electoral Act is being applied: the wards have been extended to the entire province, there is an electoral threshold and electoral lists are no longer grouped together. A violation of the principle of equality, claim two parties, which both run the risk to fall short of the electoral threshold. The Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie of Geert Bourgeois and the small anti-pay tampering party Vivant have brought a new action with the Court of Arbitration against the new inequality this has created. It is difficult to assess the chances of the Court of Arbitration again suspending part of the Electoral Act. But the chance of the whole Electoral Act being abandoned before the elections on 18 May and all parties having to submit new lists is felt to be not very high by specialists (FF).

TOM COCHEZ • DE MORGEN • 4 MARCH

According to constitutional specialist Paul Van Orshoven (KU Leuven), several elements suggest that it is unlikely there will be a second suspension. ‘In its previous ruling, the Court explicitly linked the electoral threshold to the provincial electoral description. That may be seen as an impetus to account for the inequality that has now been created.’ A further aspect is that the inequality that has now emerged was caused by the Court of Arbitration itself. If it hurries and suspends the Electoral Act before the elections, there is a real chance of it ‘limiting its judgment to the future’. In that case the status quo will prevail during the coming elections. If the Court of Arbitration suspends immediately, the old regulations would come back into force and on the eve of the elections the parties will be faced with the impossible task of drawing up new lists. The fact that the Court of Arbitration counts politicians amongst its ranks makes this chaotic option less likely. If the Court of Arbitration suspends (part of) the Electoral Act after the elections, this will not affect the results of the elections. Once the Chamber and Senate have approved the credentials, the result can no longer be declared invalid. Any suspension would then only affect the future.

WWW.BELGIUM.BE

2002 RESULTS SOLVUS (EX CREYF’S) (TEMPPING AGENCY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2001</th>
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2002 RESULTS TELINDUS GROUP (TELECOM)

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<td>-14</td>
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<td>Staff</td>
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<td>2,410</td>
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Due to the suspension of the new Electoral Act in Flemish-Brabant, all the Flemish parties had to again split their joint list for Leuven and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde into two separate lists. For the SP.A cartel list this meant that their leading candidate, Social Affairs Minister Frank Vandenbroucke, had to choose between Brussels and his home town of Leuven. In the end he opted for the capital. Spirit figurehead Bert Anciaux is in second spot there. The same Vandenbroucke-Anciaux duo was also at the head of the SP.A-Spirit cartel list unified list for Leuven and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde.

With Vandenbroucke’s electoral shift – from Leuven to Brussels – the cartel wants to make the difference in the larger BHV ward, where 22 seats are up for grabs. The Leuven ward only has 7 seats. People in the cartel believe the Federal SP.A Social Affairs Minister can steal votes from the Francophones in the capital. In Leuven the 28-year-old Alderman for Culture, Education and Integration Policy Saïd El Khadraoui is the new leading candidate on the cartel list. El Khadraoui is the son of a Moroccan father and a Flemish mother and abandoned a diplomatic career in favour of the office of alderman in Leuven. Second on the list will be Leuven’s Social Affairs Alderman Karin Jonflié. Another Leuven Alderman, Carl Devlies, will be the CD&V’s leading candidate in Leuven. The only national figurehead in Leuven will therefore be the VLD’s Rik Daems, Minister for Public Enterprises in the Federal Government.
Janssens (SP.A) and Van Campenhout (VLD) organise clean hands operation in Antwerp

**JANSSENS AND VAN CAMPENHOUT ARE UNHAPPY ABOUT THE DIFFICULT RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CITY ADMINISTRATION AND THE BENCH OF ALDERMEN**

Two weeks ago the Gazet van Antwerpen began a series of juicy stories about outings, costly teambuilding weekends and the creative use of Visa cards among the executive staff of Antwerp’s police force. It subsequently emerged that this had been leaked to the press after a row among police bosses about internal reorganisation. The accusations do not involve huge sums of money and anyway, all the expenses were approved by the Bench of Aldermen. But the city of Antwerp is short of money and gradually the idea spread amongst people of Antwerp that at the very least moral standards had become blurred at Antwerp Town Hall. Last week, SP.A Chairman Patrick Janssens, also his party’s leader on the City Council, felt it was time to act. He felt that the city had been duped by the advertising agency JC Decaux when it decided to entrust the adaptation of the city furniture to the agency. Janssens, together with his fellow Parliamentary Party Leader from the VLD Ludo Van Campenhout, demanded that the City Council organise an audit in which all accusations would be investigated. Mayor Leona Detiège and City Secretary Fred Nolf, both party colleagues of Janssens, are incredibly annoyed by their Party Chairman’s actions. But Janssens and Van Campenhout are pressing on. After all the ‘revelations’ they want everything open and on the table and the last rotten apple out of the basket, to stem the flow of rumours. The fact that heads could roll in his own party is of secondary importance, Janssens states in an interview in De Standaard (1 March). Sound administration takes precedence over political persuasion, says Janssens, a view endorsed by his VLD colleague Van Campenhout. Both are after a clean-hands operation in the Scheldt city (FF).

BART BRINCKMAN - DE STANDAARD - 1 MARCH

On Tuesday Patrick Janssens forced the Bench of Aldermen to withdraw a remarkable deal on the installation of street furniture whereby the city had been duped in an unheard-of and clearly infantile manner. ‘This is laziness, incompetence or worse,’ gibed the SP.A Chairman. In a joint interview with De Standaard, Janssens and Van Campenhout stressed that everything had to be investigated ‘to the bone’. Janssens: ‘A leaking tap doesn’t stop by itself. Some people are accusing me of recklessness. Because I don’t know where it will end. But we do. Ultimately all I want is a professionally run city.’ The two accuse the Bench of Aldermen, under the leadership of Mayor Leona Detiège (SP.A), of not initially being prepared to start an audit into the suspected unethical conduct itself.

The investigation could signal the end for City Secretary Fred Nolf (SP.A). He is suspected of having hooted, among other things, his wedding rings with police money. Janssens and Van Campenhout are unhappy about the difficult relations between the city administration, personified by Nolf, and the Bench of Aldermen. They want rid of the administration’s pig-headed mentality to mainly invest in blocking change. The imminent Federal elections appear not to be undermining the alliance between Antwerp’s leading SP.A candidate Janssens and VLD candidate Van Campenhout as far as the city is concerned. Janssens: ‘At this moment the elections will not be fought on Antwerp-related themes.’ Van Campenhout agrees: ‘If we carry on working quietly in Antwerp’s City Council, then we’ll all win. It’s known as the prisoner’s dilemma.’

Opinion

YVES DESMET - DE MORGEN - 1 MARCH

The only dossier that may still be anything more than tiny is that of the con-
tract with the poster agency JC Decaux, which was negotiated appallingly badly, raising questions as to the competence of the negotiators, or ‘even worse’, as SP.A Chairman Patrick Janssens put it, thereby opening the door to further speculation. Janssens is operating on the premise that it is better to clear everything up rather than to have to continue living in an atmosphere of insinuations, in the fear that sooner or later one or two genuine scandals could appear. An argument that is defensible, but on the other hand - at least as long as this level of clarity has not been achieved - rather contributes to the problem by strengthening the suggestion that the Town Hall and police stations are tinkering with things so much that it is no longer funny, while no evidence of this has yet been produced. Antwerp’s problem is not that some aldermen or police officers may have spent injudiciously a few thousand euros, the problem is much more that there is apparently insufficient leadership to be able to manage a city budget of tens of millions of euros.

Employers denounce increase in municipal taxes

**FF EDITORIAL TEAM**

The local tax burden on municipalities continues to rise. This is evident from an application made by the Flemish Economic Federation (Vlaams Economisch Verbond, VEV) and the Chambers of Commerce to the Flemish local authorities last January. In 2003, around one fifth of municipalities increased their surcharges on personal income tax or on the mill rate. Since the last local elections in 2000 the surcharges on personal income tax have already risen by an average of 7.9%, and those on the mill rate by as much as 20%. The VEV and the Chambers are no longer prepared to allow municipalities to solve their budgetary problems by raising taxes. Nor do they find it acceptable that the Federal and Flemish Governments are continually assigning new tasks, forcing them to put up taxes.
Sauwens calls for regionalisation of employment policy

Regional accounts make it all too clear that in Belgium, regional flows of government money primarily benefit Wallonia.

For the first time the National Accounts Institute (Instituut voor Nationale Rekeningen) is unveiling regional accounts. And this makes it all too clear that in Belgium, regional flows of government money primarily benefit Wallonia. Redistribution via social security and direct taxes ensure that Flanders keeps 60.8% of the 62.4% of primary income. 1.6%, or 2.3 billion euros, goes to Wallonia. But also within Flanders there is talk of a small transfer to, e.g., West Flanders. CD&V MP Johan Sauwens, in a previous life a VU Minister, compared the INR figures from the period 1995-2001 and came to the conclusion that during that period the economy in Flanders grew by 16.1% compared to 11.8% for Wallonia. Without healthcare costs, Wallonia’s social security deficit amounts to 1.17 billion euros, whereas on the Flemish side there is a surplus of 4.52 billion euros. Therefore, the ‘catching up operation’ to which Wallonia’s Minister-President Jean-Claude Van Cauwenbergh refers does not exist, he concludes. The existing financial transfers will not cure the unstable Walloon economy and job market, says Sauwens. He is therefore calling for a separate employment policy and wage negotiations in the North and South. Wages must be lower in Wallonia, he feels (FF).

Opinion

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 5 MARCH

Flanders is better off with a rich neighbour than a poor one, if only because Wallonia is actually our first trading partner. But solidarity with Wallonia has to have a purpose. To make sure that Wallonia can change the economic situation, that there too economic activities pick up and over time reach a level that is comparable to Flanders.

Unfortunately, after years of transfers from Flanders to Wallonia the situation does not appear to be improving. On the contrary. The final result is that via taxes on employment the Flemish economy is being prevented from being able to carry on paying for solidarity with Wallonia. The trend is towards more taxes to provide benefits for more and more people. But through this there is a risk that the Flemish economy will no longer be able to face up to foreign competition. And without Flemish companies there will be no more taxes and therefore no more benefits. This trend must be stopped as quickly as possible. And a first step in this direction is, as Johan Sauwens suggests, the regionalisation of wage and employment policy.

WWW.CDENV.BE

REDISTRIBUTION VIA SOCIAL SECURITY AND DIRECT TAXES

With the stock market flotation and the planned share swap the former CMB will be clearly divided between the Saverys children. Preparations were made for the operation last year. Following the death of father Philippe Saverys in February last year the family holding of the Saverys family, Almabo, went into liquidation at the end of November 2002. At that time Almabo held 46.1% of CMB. The 3.64 million shares of the Almabo holding were divided amongst the private companies of the families of Marc Saverys [Saverco], Nicolas Saverys [Saverex] and Virginie Saverys [Victrix]. This increased their direct interest in CMB to 21.5%, 20.15% and 8.67% respectively. The Saverys family also dissolved the consultative model with the shareholders group based around the Van Damme family. Through its companies, this owned more than 4% of CMB. It is goes without saying that if the splitting off of Exmar is approved, Saverex will become the controlling owner of Exmar and Saverco will gain the slimmed-down and more economically sensitive CMB, possibly together with Victrix.

WWW.CMB.BE

Saverys Family splits up CMB and Exmar

The Belgian shipping group CMB has sold its last 20% in the Antwerp transshipment company Hesse Noord Natie to the Singapore group PSA for the sum of 121 million euros. Last year CMB sold 40% in HNN, for which it received 232 million euros. PSA bought the remaining 40% from the transshipment company Noord Natie. As a result, Antwerp’s largest goods handler is now 100%-owned by PSA. CMB also announced that it plans to split off its gas tanker company Exmar and float it on the stock market. The split is a step in the commercial division between the children of Philippe Saverys, who died in 2002, and could involve a share swap. After the announcements the price of the CMB share rose by 9.3% (FF).

MARC DE ROO • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 5 MARCH

WWW.CDMV.BE
Barely a day after the bad news about the rising number of bankruptcies and closures among medium-sized companies, a new closure was announced in the Port of Antwerp. Bayer and Shell announced their intention to close their joint-venture Bayer Shell Isocyanates (BSI). This will put 271 jobs at risk. Isocyanates are foam plastics that are used as a basis for the production of polyurethane, used in plastics for insulation, seat fillings, etc. The bad news is not entirely a surprise. When Bayer announced a restructuring in October 2002 that would cost 430 jobs, reference was made to the possible closure of BSI. Now this has become fact: the joint-venture will end by June 2003. BSI's production has ceased to be profitable. Not only is there overcapacity on the world market, the Antwerp production site was small and was therefore one of the first to be considered for closure. Bayer has already closed an isocyanate production plant in Mexico, and other sites in Spain and Germany are now being examined by the group. The closure is part of the Bayer Master Plan 2004, in which the group is scrapping 15,000 jobs worldwide. The trade unions at the Bayer's Antwerp site are, however, hoping to be able to save some of the jobs (FF).

The trade unions have thwarted the management’s plan to outsource activities. The unions’ strategy is aimed at a redistribution of labour. Herman Baele of the Socialist trade union refers to the solution that was conceived several years ago for the ABS production at Monsanto in the Port of Antwerp. There the trade unions and management agreed to introduce a five-shift system in which everyone worked 33.6 hours a week. Of the 340 people who worked there, 160 took early retirement. The others were able to continue working, but at a slower pace. Baele believes in a similar solution for the BSI plant. ‘The Renault Act forces management to remain open to such solutions,’ says Baele. For the time being the management is remaining open to all possibilities and is not precluding the ABS solution out of hand. ‘The purpose of consultation under the Renault Act is to allow us to look for possible alternatives together,’ says Bayer spokesperson Lisette Mertens.

WWW.BAYER.BE

Degussa puts investment in Antwerp under review

The strategy of that other German chemicals giant Degussa could well have negative consequences for its Antwerp site too. Chairman Utz-Hellmuth Felcht announced that it had completed most of its restructuring phase. 11% of jobs were scrapped, and a further 1,000 jobs will have to go by 2004. But investment budgets were also scrapped: 400 million euros in 2002 and also in 2003 would cut an initial investment budget by 14%. The Chairman is putting question marks next to an investment of 300 million euros for the expansion of the Antwerp site (FF).

GUY VANDEN BROECK • DE FINANCIEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 5 MARCH

Last year the Antwerp site received a considerable investment, namely for the expansion of the plant for methionine, an amino acid mainly used in chicken feed. This is a project worth 250 million euros with a capacity of 150,000 tonnes. The project has been on ice for a year. Now Felcht is also dubious about the site. There is a real chance that the project in Singapore will be pushed through, despite being designed for Antwerp. ‘The final allocation depends on the social climate in the chemicals plant of Degussa Antwerp,’ said Chairman Felcht in an interview. Degussa mainly wants to expand in China and Brazil.

WWW.DEGUSSA.DE

Bankruptcies do away with more than 5,000 jobs in January and February

FF EDITOR

In January and February 2003, bankruptcies of Belgian companies caused the loss of some 5,100 jobs (De Financieel-Economische Tijd, 4 March). According to the commercial information bureau Graydon, many more medium-sized businesses were declared bankrupt in this period than in previous years. Eight companies with more than 100 employees and 20 with more than 50, to be precise. The worst-affected sectors are the wholesale trade (15.4%), the hotel and catering industry (14.4%) and the building trade (14.1%). The main bankruptcies were those of the printing firm Brepols (455 jobs), the West Flan-
KBC pushes profits up by 1%

FF EDITOR

Last year KBC Bank en Verzekeringen (Bank and Insurances) managed to keep profits stable. The group was, however, forced to accept a reduction in the value of the share portfolio of 501 million euros as a consequence of the stock market crash, but compensated for this with ‘one-off proceeds’, consisting of increases in value on a bond portfolio in the banking division and shares in the insurance division and by dipping into a reserve fund in this same division. The net profit therefore comes to 1.034 billion euros, 1% higher than the previous year. Chairman of the Management Board Remi Vermeiren calls it a ‘decent result in difficult times’ and emphasised that the solvency of the KBC group is still very healthy, twice the statutory minimum in the banking division, three times that in the insurance division. The operational result also rose by 25%. The merger between Cera and KB to form KBC is almost complete. Of the 1,490 offices, 980 remain. By 2005 a further 180 will close. KBC bank has two objectives for the future: consolidate its market position in Belgium in insurance. Not only by cranking up sales, but also through possible take-overs. At present several Swiss insurance groups [Swiss Life and Zurich] Belgium want to pull out of Belgium and have put their branches up for sale. Another priority is the further development of the second market in central Europe. In the former Yugoslavia success in this area is varied. The takeover of the Croat Kvarner Banka threatens to be blocked by territorial disputes between Slovenia and Croatia [De Financieel-Economische Tijd, 6 March]. After all, KBC is viewed as Slovenian by the Croat authorities because it has a 34% interest in the Slovenian bank NLB. Central Europe’s contribution to KBC’s profits has also taken a knock with the loss of the Polish subsidiary Kredyt Bank (97 million euros). There are also opportunities for acquisitions in the region. KBC keeps its eye on the Hungarian Postbank and the Polish insurer Warta.

Agfa records a growth in profits

In 2002 the Antwerp image-processing group Agfa-Gevaert recorded a net profit of 194 million euros, compared with a loss of 288 million euros in 2001. Thanks to the weak economy and the drop in the dollar, turnover fell by 4.6% to 4.7 billion euros. The growth in profits is mainly due to the success of the Horizon restructuring plan, which scrapped 4,000 jobs and boosted efficiency. The figures also show that Agfa is increasingly moving away from being a supplier of products to being a supplier of digital services and solutions, claims De Financieel-Economische Tijd [7 March]. The technical imaging division, which also includes medical solutions, was the largest division for the first time in 2002. The consumer division [the photo market] fell 12.5%. www.agfa.com

Arts decree must restore primacy of politics

Flemish Culture Minister Paul Van Grembergen wants to create order in the chaos of decrees and regulations with which the Flemish Government subsidises artistic life. There must be a single decree, the Minister feels, with a uniform, fair and transparent regulation for all artistic disciplines. But because the cultural sector is based on participation, Van Grembergen has first bashed out a working document on which the whole sector can have its say. The aim is that the final version of the Arts Decree will take account of these comments. But the Arts Decree is primarily an instrument with which the Minister can again put his stamp on policy, claims Knack (FF).

MARC REYNEBAU • KNACK • 5 MAART

Despite the efforts of Van Grembergen’s predecessor, Bert Anciaux (Spirit), the Flemish cultural budget remains a mere trifle. This paucity is making artists afraid that others are getting too much and they not enough. This is how visual artists see performance arts, but in the theatre they feel that too much money goes to the companies and not enough to the actors. With an Arts Decree Van Grembergen is now giving structure to the balance. The problem is that now everything is coming from a single pot, this will only be a source of jealousy. Van Grembergen is still leaving the assessment of subsidy applications to assessment committees people with ‘connoisseurs’. Above this, however, he is installing an advisory committee, that will co-ordinate everything and put things into perspective. Its main role will be as a buffer between him and the sphere of action. Which is good for him, because he is leaving no doubt as to the fact that he will have the final say over all dossiers. Previously this lay to the experts and ministers who went against their advice were quickly accused of interference and favouritism. For Van Grembergen, it is not only
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 14 March: Michael Rose and Sly o’ Robbie, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be

• 15 March: Doors Down, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be

• 16 March: Soulfly, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be

• 14 March: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sportpaleis, Antwerp; info: 0900/26060

• 13 March: Bryan Adams, Sportpaleis, Antwerp; info: 0900/26060

• 15 March: Jackson Browne, Elisabethzaal, Antwerp; info: 0900/26060

• 17 and 18 March: Van Morrison, Elisabethzaal, Antwerp; info: 0900/26060

• 13 and 14 March: The night of the bad taste [a journey through the worst cinema on earth] Ghent and Antwerp; info: 09/267.24.24 www.vooruit.be

• 14 March: Apartment House Ensemble, De Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be

• 16 March: Flanders Symphonic Orchestra conducted by Mid Angius, Britten, Schubert, Rachmaninov, De Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be

• 13 March: Counter Phrases, Coproduction leto - Rosas - Avila - The Kasander Film Company, PSK, Brussels; info: www.sofiil.be www.pkspa.be

• 13 March: Danyle Waro (Réunion), Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be

• 14 March: Renan Capuçon, Guattier Capuçon and Frank Braley with Maurice Ravel, Sonata nr 2, PSK, Brussels; info: www.sofiil.be

• 18 March: François Espinasse (organ) with compositions by Luciano Berio, Gilbert Amy, Pierre Farago and Benoit Mernier, Sint-Michielskathedraal, Brussels; info: www.sofiil.be

• 19 March: Die Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen conducted by Daniel Harding with compositions by I. Stravinsky, WA Mozart and L. van Beethoven, PSK, Brussels; info: www.sofiil.be

• 20 March: Gundeche Brothers [India], PSK, Brussels; info: www.sofiil.be

• 18 to 22 March: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui o’ Les Ballets C de la B / Capilla Flamenca, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.24.24 www.vooruit.be

• 20 March: Enos [USA], De Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.24.24 www.vooruit.be

• 13 March: Jadwiga Rappé and Mariusz Rutkowski with Lieder by Chopin, Lutoslawski, Szymanowski, Schubert and Brahms Flanders Opera, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• 14 and 15 March: Die Zehn Gebote – Christoph Mattheuer and Volkshalle am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• 18 March: Spectra Ensemble conducted by Filip Ratte with compositions by Goethals, Loghèse, Huber and Birkenkötter De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• 20 March: Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Paavo Berglund with work by Shostakowitch, Sibelius and Schumann, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• 12, 13, 20 March: Father murder, the sequel, Stuk, Leuven; info: 016/320.320 www.stuk.be

• 13 to 15 March: Dis-figure Study, Meg Stuart and Damaged Goods, dance, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: 02/201.59.59 www.kaaitheater.be

• 14 and 15 March, Martial Solal Trio, Studio Flagey, Brussels; info: 02/641.10.11 www.flagey.be

• 13 March: Brodsky Quartet (UK), Handelsbeurs, Ghent, info: www.handelsbeurs.be

• 14 March: Maria Amelia Proença [Port], Handelsbeurs, Ghent, info: www.handelsbeurs.be

EXPO

• Until 30 March: Twins, [the fascination by artists, scientists and the public] exhibition, Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguislain.be 09/216.33.95

• Until 31 August: The big Sexperiment, scientific exhibition, Technopolis, Mechelen, info: 015/34.20.00

• Until 29 June: Music Planet, one century of popular music in an exhibition, brewery Belle Vue, Molenbeek; info: www.euroculture.be 02/513/29/84

• Until 6 April: Maria Magdalena, sinner from the Middle Ages until today, exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent; info: 09/222.17.03

• Until 30 March: Synesthetics - Pop o’ Art in Belgium, pop music and visual arts, De Garage, Mechelen, info: 015/29.40.00 www.culturecentrummechelen.be

• Until 13 April: Jacques Charlier and Leo Copers, exhibitions, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be

• Until 20 April: ‘Aobroud’, exhibition with work by Ravel, Richter, Pistoletto and Tapis, Roger Raveelmuseum, Machelen aan de Leie (near Deinze), www.rogerraveelmuseum.be

• Until 30 March: ‘Menelik Akkood’, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the literary life from the 14th to the 17th Century in Brussels, exhibition, City Hall, Brussels

• Until 20 April: Nazolepsy, retrospective exhibition with work by Dave Me Kean, Auditorium Tweebronnen, Leuven, info: www.beeldbeeld.org

• Until 23 March: Silent Painters, exhibition, Caermersklooster, Ghent, info: 09/269.29.10 www.caermersklooster.be

• Until 30 March: Modern and Contemporary Painters from the collection of the museum, KMSK, Brussels; info: www.kmsk.be

• Until 6 April: Lacaton o’ Vassal, Architects, Bordeaux – Paris, exhibition, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• Until 30 March: Drawings by children with a name [Win Delvoye, Roger Ravel, Luc Tuymans and others in their childhood], Academy of Fine Arts, Sint-Niklaas, 03/776.33.00

• Until 4 May: Louis Van Lint, retrospective exhibition, Museum of Elsene, info: 02/374.94.74

• Until 23 March: Vanitas, group exhibition, contemporary Art, De Markten, Brussels; info: 02/513.24.35

• From 1 March onwards: The Groeninghemuseum in Bruges reopened after facelift, info: 050/44.87.12