Flemish Government reaches agreement on building offences

After years of debate, an agreement has been reached within the Government of Flanders on the barring of building offences by the statute of limitation. Although there are exceptions, the new regulation puts an end to the uncertainty for great many families. From the moment the new decree enters into force, the Flemish Administration has five years in which to trace violations or deal with complaints. The new decree is a compromise between the VLD, which wanted to exonerate all building offences committed in the past, and the other parties, who wanted to hear nothing of this. The new decree means that building violations will be a lot riskier in the future, for one thing because anyone building a house will now have to pay a guarantee, which will only be reimbursed after a thorough check has been made of the structural works (FF).

From now on building offences fall under the ordinary felony rule, and will be barred by the statute of limitation after five years. There are three exceptions to the prescription principle: building offences in spatially vulnerable areas, building offences that cause unacceptable nuisance for the people living in the area, and building offences that constitute a serious infringement of the essential zoning plan regulations of a spatial implementation plan or development plan. In these three cases there is no limitation by statute, and prosecution remains possible for years to come. The date of 1 May 2000 is important for the prosecution of building offences. Building offences committed before this date will be judged by the High Council for Repair Policy. For offences committed after 1 May 2000, the regional town and country planning officer remains independently competent. The High Council must give advice to the judge handling a building offence, and the judge must follow this advice. Up until now a judge punishing the perpetrators of a building offence with a fine or prison sentence could only order the building to be demolished. Shortly, instead of this, he will be able to order building or alteration work to be carried out, or order the payment of a sum of money equal to the surplus value that the property has acquired further to the offence. A final new feature is the introduction of a guarantee. Anyone obtaining a building permit for works for which the cooperation of an architect is required will have to pay a financial guarantee. He will only have this reimbursed when the shell of the building is complete.

MARK DEWEERDT • DE FINANCIEEL-
ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 25 APRIL

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the prison warders’ strike, the standard bearer of the SPA campaign, Steve Stevaert has again caused a commotion. Now that Justice Minister Marc Verwilghen (VLD) has announced that he will be releasing a group of prisoners in order to counter the distressing overcrowding in the prisons, Stevaert is advancing ‘the idea’ of abolishing the early release of prisoners serving heavy sentences, which is embodied in the 1988 Lejeune Act. If it were up to him, criminals convicted of serious offences would be forced to serve out their sentence to the very last day. Stevaert’s reasoning is simple: given that serious offenders are released almost automatically after a third or half of their sentence further to the Lejeune Act, judges are already taking account of this when they pass judgement, and are handing down prison sentences of nine years instead of three, for example. If they actually have to serve out their term, the judges will also have to adjust their sentences downwards. In his proposal, prisoners who misbehave in prison risk seeing their sentence extended. That is clearer for all parties – offenders, victims and the judiciary – and is in particular easier to explain to the public, says Stevaert. It also avoids aggression from prisoners disappointed at failing to secure the hoped-for reduction of their sentence. Stevaert is hereby having his eye on a 180° turn, for during this last term of office the Socialists, together with the Greens, blocked a Liberal proposal opposing the reduction of sentences. In the VLD, CD&V, Vlaams Blok and N-VA, the proposal is being dismissed as the umpteenth stunt pulled by Stevaert – as populism, in other words.

Press commentators in Het Laatste Nieuws and De Morgen suspect that Stevaert has let himself be influenced a little too much by ‘Doe de Stemtest’ (Do the Vote Test), an interactive election programme on the public broadcasting channel VRT. The programme was a huge success. It invited the audience to give their point of view about 36 election themes to determine the party with which they feel most closely identified. The results of this test show that 80% of viewers are opposed to the early release from prison of serious offenders. These comments were met with a curt reaction from Stevaert in Het Laatste Nieuws (24 April): ‘When I go out for a drink in a café or pub, I find out far more than anything I could learn from that whole vote test’. Het Laatste Nieuws wonders how Stevaert will go about explaining to people that the actual sentence served for murder is just eight years. De Standaard (24 April) dismisses Stevaert’s proposal as improvisation and suggests that the long-heralded penalty implementation courts should be erected instead, whose job it will be to determine the actual sentence to be served.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
There are four weeks to go before the federal elections on 18 May and of course the results of the opinion polls are being followed with ever closer attention, first and foremost by the politicians themselves. In the third opinion poll conducted by the public broadcasting corporation VRT, De Standaard and the University of Antwerp, the VLD emerges as the big winner (26.4%/up 4.8% on the last elections in 1999), and widens the gap separating it from its nearest rival CD&V (23.7%/up 2.4% on the last elections). Agalev (19.1%/+ 4.7%) also puts in a good showing and becomes the third party in Flanders, by some distance. The Flemish-National party N-VA (4.1%) fails to pass the electoral threshold. The telephone survey was carried out at the end of March among 1,022 people living in rural areas, pensioners and the semi- and unskilled people. The political advertising campaigns in women’s magazines have hopefully already been ordered. Men, people living in rural areas, pensioners and members of the higher social class have a clearer idea already of who they will be voting for on 18 May.

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 19 APRIL

The large number of undecided voters is evident from just about every poll. For example, in the VRT-De Standaard poll, 13% do not want to express any absolute party preference. Thirteen percent is not very much, when you bear in mind that some polls are recording 45% of interviewees as undecided voters. That has to do with the way the question is put. The VRT-De Standaard poll put the question very clearly: ‘Imagine that there were elections today. Whom would you vote for?’ Of the 100 people who did answer that question, only 41% were reasonably certain of their vote. Twenty-seven percent had a slight preference and 31% were ‘total floaters’. Their answer went along the lines of: ‘I have absolutely no preference yet, but seeing as you’re insisting and I have to vote today, I’ll vote for party A’.

Among the voters who are convinced, the CD&V scores best. The Christian-Democrats are certain of almost 12% of the voters. VLD and SPA have fewer voters in the bag - both being more of less sure of 10%. So why is the VLD nonetheless the biggest party in this poll? Because the VLD has far more voters who have ‘a slight preference’ for the party. At the moment 9.8% of all voters have a slight preference for the VLD. Only 5.5% have a slight preference for the CD&V. The task facing the VLD is to convert this ‘slight preference’ into a certain vote. Only if it is successful in doing that will the VLD win the elections. The figures are an absolute disaster for Agalev. The party emerges damaged from the poll and falls below 9%. But only 38% of these are certain voters. A good third of the people who are saying now that they will vote for Agalev do so with the greatest reservation. It will undoubtedly interest the parties and their campaign makers to know who these undecided voters are. It appears that they are chiefly women, and also young voters and the semi- and unskilled people. The political advertising campaigns in women’s magazines have already been ordered. Men, people living in rural areas, pensioners and members of the higher social class have a clearer idea already of who they will be voting for on 18 May.

The most convinced voters are with the Vlaams Blok. Of all the voters claiming now that they will vote for Vlaams Blok, 56% do so with the greatest reservation. The VLD and SP.A have fewer voters in the bag - both being more of that choice.

WWW.STANDAARD.BE/EXTRA/VERKIEZINGEN-GEN2003

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SOURCE: HET LAATSTE NIEUWS

An additional study by Dimarso, the bureau that carried out the VRT-De Standaard poll, reveals that the SPA-Spirit alliance list boasts a remarkably large number of popular politicians. With Steve Stevaert, Bert Anciaux, Frank Vandenbroucke, Freya Vanden Bossche, Johan Vande Lanotte and Patrick Janssens, they occupy no less than six places in the list of the top ten most popular politicians. According to De Standaard (19 April), they represent a solid asset with which to convince the many floating voters who have not yet chosen a party, in the home strait leading to polling day on 18 May.

Another shot in the arm for SPA-Spirit is the survey by Field Research commissioned by Het Laatste Nieuws among ‘new Belgians’ of Moroccan and Turkish origin with entitlement to vote. No less than half (48.9%) of all ‘new Belgians’ who were questioned opted for SPA-Spirit, whilst Agalev, the other party that expressly sets itself up as a defender of their interests, scores barely 5.4% in the poll. The CD&V comes out of the poll as the second party, with 11.7% of the immigrants’ votes, whilst 26.2% of the enfranchised immigrants do not yet know what party they will vote for. Resist, the alliance list of the extreme left-wing PvdA and the Arab-European League and its well-known leader Dyab Abou Jahjah, attain a negligible 1.7% in Flanders. Ninety-three percent of all ‘new Belgians’ questioned announced that they would vote for a candidate of their origin (Turkish or Moroccan).

FF EDITOR
According to the Election Predictor of the Gazet van Antwerpen and Het Belang van Limburg (14 April), it is not the VLD but the Christian-Democratic CD&V that is the biggest party. The Election Predictor asks a group of experts and a group of politicians to predict the election result on 18 May as accurately as possible. The public is also asked to do this, on the website www.verkiezingsvoorspeller.be. According to the experts, the Liberals of the VLD (21.9%) lose 0.7% vis-à-vis the 1999 elections, the CD&V maintains its status quo on 22.2% and SPA-Spirit gains 3.9% (bringing it to 18.9%). The Vlaams Blok (17.4%) also gains ground, climbing 1.8%. Here, too, the Greens of Agalev (9.1%) are the losers (down 1.9%) and the N-VA (4.5%) fails to attain the electoral threshold.

CD&V chairman Stefaan De Clerck created a stir on the very first day of his election campaign (14 April, in Blankenberge). He was quoted textually as saying that the CD&V would not govern with Agalev. With his comment, he would appear to be ruling out in advance the possibility of a centre-left government, for without the Greens, the CD&V and SPA-Spirit will not achieve a majority. De Clerck limits the possibilities of office for his party to a coalition with the Liberals of the VLD or a tripartite with Liberals and Socialists (SPA-Spirit). De Clerck hopes thereby to persuade doubting VLD voters to vote for CD&V. For that matter, De Clerck is opening the door for a first asymmetrical federal government, with Liberals and Christian-Democrats in Flanders and Socialists and Liberals in Wallonia. According to De Clerck, such a formula would be more in accordance with the political balance of power in the country (De Morgen, 15 April). Agalev party leader Jos Geysels sees in this manoeuvre a jerk to the right by the CD&V. He calls De Clerck's statement 'a cordon sanitaire' around the Green party, and feels that the CD&V is thereby increasingly profiling itself along the lines of its German sister party CDU. The SPA's Deputy Prime Minister Johan Vande Lanotte is of the view that De Clerck is revealing the Christian-Democrats' real 'right-wing agenda' with his utterance, and compares the manoeuvre to the strategy of his CDA colleague Balkenende in the Netherlands, who ruled out negotiations for the formation of a government with the Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party), the SPA's sister party (FF).

With his comment, De Clerck is targeting VLD voters who want at all costs to prevent Agalev remaining in power for another four years (in a continuation of the 'Purple-Green' coalition, ed.). Those who want 'Roman Catholic - blue', and therefore centre-right, should simply vote for CD&V - that is De Clerck's real message. The message has already given the party's own labour movement ACW acid ingestion, but De Clerck has not lost any sleep over them for a long time. De Clerck also still has quite a lot of time. If CD&V cannot break the 'Purple-Green' majority now, then it might be possible in June 2004 in the Flemish elections. If on that occasion the opposition succeeds in inflicting greater damage on the majority, then 'Roman Catholic - blue' could become a reality in Flanders, whereupon the possible Verhofstadt II 'Purple-Green' government would have to change colour. The first asymmetrical federal coalition in the political history of the fatherland would then come into view (CD&V/VLD in Flanders and MR/PS in Wallonia, ed.). De Clerck also made a tentative proposal on this, too. If CD&V were able to sit at the cabinet table again, it would immediately want to bring four laws of the Greens back to square one: the 'Fast-track Belgian' law (acquisition of Belgian nationality for immigrants), the drugs law, the withdrawal from nuclear power and even the new high traffic fines. The threat of reversing decisions taken in a previous period of office smacks more of revanchism than sound administration, but in times of election campaigning, if it is not forbidden... anything goes.
Dewinter: Vlaams Blok must become a party of office

If the Vlaams Blok remains excluded from power, he says, there is a risk of its voters quitting

The cordon sanitaire that the democratic parties have established around the Vlaams Blok has of late increasingly presented the right-wing party with a dilemma. On the one hand the cordon places the party in the position of the excluded underdog, in a situation of one against everyone else, which works as an electoral magnet. On the other hand, continued exclusion from office means that the party lacks any perspective. However, a number of smaller parties, such as the Flemish-National N-VA or the Liberal Appeal of VLD dissident Ward Beysen, have recently spoken out against the cordon. They feel that it has a counter-productive effect. Public opinion is changing, too. According to a Dimarso poll commissioned by the VRT/De Standaard, 51% of Flemings are opposed to the cordon sanitaire. Remarkably enough, a third of Blok voters are in favour of the cordon, precisely because the party does well out of it. In a notable interview in De Financieel-Economische Tijd (23 April), the Blok’s standard bearer Filip Dewinter is now announcing a strategic change of course. In his view, the Blok needs to evolve into a party of office, otherwise it risks losing its appeal. The municipal elections in Antwerp in 2006 should force the breakthrough (FF).

Opinion

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE FINANCIËL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 23 APRIL

It is clear that the myth of the cordon has to be dismantled. Therefore more and more party chairmen are saying that nothing more should be said about the cordon sanitaire, but that in practice there would indeed be no question of them forming a majority with the Vlaams Blok. This is perfectly democratic, since on occasions the same is being said about the Greens. There is something here of the ‘hole in the hedge’ with which SPA heavyweight Steve Stevaert created a furore. Stevaert’s position is that the hole in the hedge simply gets bigger if you try to clip it out. That is to some degree what has happened with the Vlaams Blok. Stevaert’s response is as simple as it is straightforward: win votes yourself. In other words, pursue a good policy. But that, too, appears incapable of stopping the Vlaams Blok’s advance. And so rough remedies are resorted to. Have the Blok share the bathtub, but burn the party when it comes to power sharing. That is strategically defensible, though ethically much less so, unless you assume that a party that trumpets ‘Own people first’ is a party just like any other.

Now that the cordon sanitaire is being undermined, the Blok’s standard bearer Filip Dewinter himself is putting forward the most convincing argument in favour of the political buffer zone being kept in place. If the Vlaams Blok remains excluded from power, he says, there is a risk of its voters quitting. In other words, the Vlaams Blok’s leader himself is now saying that the cordon sanitaire is threatening to drain the Vlaams Blok, which was the basic principle espoused by the traditional parties when they set the cordon in place. So is it working after all?

Prison wards’ strikes: opposition smells blood

To allay the most pressing needs, Verwilghen wants to have some 400 East European detainees tried in their country of origin, and aims to extend the use of electronic surveillance

Minister of Justice Marc Verwilghen (VLD) took drastic measures last week in an effort to reduce the overcrowding in Belgium’s prisons. 123 prisoners serving a maximum sentence of 3 years and having already served two-thirds of their sentence, are to be eligible for early release, and prisoners sentenced to imprisonment of up to 6 months are all to be released. The places thus freed up are to be taken by prisoners from the Vorst prison. Verwilghen is hoping that this measure will help get the wards of that prison back to work again, but for the time being he is not succeeding in that respect. The wards are utterly sick and tired of the poor conditions and overcrowding in the prison, and have therefore been on strike since 12 April. According to the wards’ trade unions, the problem of overcrowding calls for structural interventions and not exceptional measures. At the moment there are 677 prisoners in the Vorst prison, although there is room for only 420. During the Easter weekend the federal police and the Civil Aid Service took over the duties of the wards, but on Easter Sunday the strike spread to the prison of Saint-Gilles after a rebellion by the inmates. The wards of the prison of Andenne announced that they would also be going on strike on Monday 28 April. The opposition saw the strike as the perfect opportunity to launch a fierce attack on Verwilghen’s prisons policy. At a press conference (22 April) Verwilghen called the wards’ strike unwarranted. The minister said that under his policy 1,000 extra places had been created for inmates, 1,000 extra members of staff had been recruited, and the personnel budget had grown by a quarter. He also pointed out that over the past year 1,500 convicts had been given an alternative penalty. To allay the most pressing needs, Verwilghen wants to have some 400 East European detainees tried in their country of origin, and aims to extend the use of electronic surveillance. He feels that there is no doubt that the strike is politically inspired, and points to the eagerness with which the opposition party CD&V is throwing itself on the issue (De Standaard, 23 April). His party chairman Karel De Gucht is backing him (FF).
FOCUS ON FLANDERS • 19 April - 25 April  2003 • Number 15

Opinions

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN •
23 APRIL

Politics can be so simple at times. The CD&V has now suddenly discovered the pressing problem of prison overcrowding, and advocates the swift building of a thousand extra cells, plus an increase in the use of electronic supervision. Even assuming that this is a good idea, when would those places be ready? In a couple of years, at best. How do you solve the acute emergency situation in the mean time? The CD&V does not know either, but it cannot do what Marc Verwilghen is doing, for granting early release to a number of prisoners who are approaching the end of their sentence does not go down well with political opinion. Now, Verwilghen has of course been rather foolish. Royal celebrations marking births and marriages have since time immemorial been used as a perfect pretext for the granting of reductions of sentences, and thereby for alleviating prison overcrowding. Nothing prevented Verwilghen from doing the same, and no-one would have been any the wiser. His desire to act more firmly and forcefully than his predecessors means that he is now obliged to empty a number of prisons of their occupants a month before their elections, to the great dismay of readers who write letters to the popular newspapers. According to these readers’ letters, one of the most important political touchstones at this juncture of rightwards shifts, only the large-scale building of new prison cells could provide an answer to the need that has arisen. What do people actually want? American situations? The only pattern associated with new prison cell construction is that these cells are automatically filled, whereupon you find yourself facing the same problem again. The truth is that as long as there are no disturbances in prisons, no policy maker takes any interest in the fate of prisoners, since the average voter would actually prefer simply to throw away the key and regards every cent spent on a prisoner to be one cent too much.

RIK VAN CAUWELAERT • KNACK •
23 APRIL

If we are to believe the specialists, our prisons are scarcely any better than those of an African state with corrugated-iron structures. And the influx of prisoners continues unabated. In Vorst there are not even enough beds, and so the prisoners sleep on the ground or share a damp mattress. The specialists have to obtain toilet paper themselves, since the prison budget no longer allows for this to be purchased. Hygiene is in keeping with this situation. Health care is minimal. Health care workers are paid too late, if at all, since there is no money left. Those who have not yet been paid will simply have to wait until after the next government has been formed. Politically speaking, there is no-one to approach any more. Justice Minister Verwilghen has shifted the blame onto his fellow ministers, the Socialists Vande Lanotte (Budget) and Vanden Bossche (Civil Service Affairs), for they had thwarted his plans on financial grounds. At this point it appeared that Verwilghen himself had not earmarked any funds in his budget for the recruitment of additional warders. The running-down of the prison system is a perfect illustration of the wreck that is our justice system. In the meantime there is one bright spot. It must now be clear that Marc Verwilghen is no longer entertaining ministerial ambitions.

THE OVERCROWDED BELGIAN PRISONS

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SOURCE: DS-INFORMATIEK
Fowl pest strikes Belgian provinces

In the FAVV agency the conviction is gaining ground that the virus spreads in the wind and it turns out that people are also more susceptible to infection than was originally thought.

It is now confirmed: fowl pest (avian influenza) has crossed the border, and has now spread to Belgium from the Netherlands. The disease has been confirmed in three poultry farms in Limburg (Meeuwen-Gruitrode, Hammont-Achel and Kinrooi). The Agentschap voor de Voedselveiligheid (FAVV) (Federal Agency for Food Safety) immediately took the necessary measures. The whole poultry sector in Belgium was brought to a standstill in order to rule out the possibility of any contact between one farm and another. There was a blanket ban on the transport of live poultry and other birds, eggs and chicken manure until after the Easter weekend. The transport of other livestock on farms where there was also poultry was also temporarily prohibited. All birds (including hobby animals) in a radius of one kilometre of the farms were destroyed, whilst in a radius of three kilometres only the poultry farms were cleared. As is the case in the Netherlands, there is an export ban on poultry, hatching eggs and manure until 25 April. Experts are provisionally putting the loss at EUR 6.4 million, a figure that also includes compensation for the affected chicken farmers, who will have 70% of their loss reimbursed. The whole poultry sector in Belgium was brought to a standstill in order to rule out the possibility of any contact between one farm and another. There was a blanket ban on the transport of live poultry and other birds, eggs and chicken manure until after the Easter weekend. The transport of other livestock on farms where there was also poultry was also temporarily prohibited. All birds (including hobby animals) in a radius of one kilometre of the farms were destroyed, whilst in a radius of three kilometres only the poultry farms were cleared. As is the case in the Netherlands, there is an export ban on poultry, hatching eggs and manure until 25 April. Experts are provisionally putting the loss at EUR 6.4 million, a figure that also includes compensation for the affected chicken farmers, who will have 70% of their loss reimbursed.

Therefore a campaign of preventive vaccination against fowl pest was started yesterday for the personnel involved in cleaning out the farms and professional poultry farmers. Today almost 300 families in the affected areas are also to be vaccinated against fowl pest. The minister is taking this precautionary measure after a veterinarian in the Netherlands died of the fowl pest virus. However, there is no question of the poultry itself being vaccinated. That is impracticable. What is more, the existing vaccine is not impervious to water and you would be promoting the spread of the virus by the intense contact with the poultry. There is therefore no question of that,' announced Piet Vanthemsche, head of the FAVV.

A driver for Rendac, the company from Denderleeuw that is clearing away the bodies of destroyed animals, suffered an inflammation of the eye as a result of the fowl pest. The man is being treated, and there is no cause for concern, stated Minister Tavernier’s spokesman. In the Limburg municipalities of Kinrooi and Hamont-Achel, the destruction of some 400,000 chickens went ahead. Two new focuses of infection were discovered at the weekend in Kinrooi, after the fowl pest had broken out last week in Meeuwen-Gruitrode. In Hamont-Achel, the chickens in five farms are being cleared out and poultry belonging to private individuals is also being destroyed.

Fowl pest spreads in the wind

The beginning of the week saw people still fearfully waiting to see whether it would be possible for the fowl pest to be confined to the north of the province of Limburg. On Wednesday 23 April the chicken farmers and the teams of veterinarians had all their illusions shattered. A focus of fowl pest infection was confirmed in a turkey farm in Westmalle, in the Kempen region of Antwerp province. The 18,000 animals were immediately destroyed. Five other farms in a radius of three kilometres around the farm are undergoing the same fate.

A new focus of fowl pest infection was also discovered in the Limburg town of Bree. In this province, the Minister for Public Health Jef Tavernier is now opting for the drastic approach. The buffer zone around the affected farms is being extended to 10 kilometres. A million heads of poultry on 57 farms are being destroyed. The reason for this tougher approach is the about-turn in the FAVV’s opinion. In the agency the conviction is gaining ground that the virus spreads in the wind, although that would appear not to explain the sudden outbreak of the disease in the Kempen region of Antwerp. The FAVV noted that the disease had spread in the Limburg supervision area without there having been any contact between the farms affected. Moreover, the chickens that were nearest the ventilation system were the first to fall sick. But it turns out that people are also more susceptible to infection than was originally thought.

RENAAT SCHROTEN • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 24 APRIL

Tavernier yesterday noted that the problem was also ‘taking on another dimension’ for public health. At a European co-ordination meeting, the Dutch authorities stated that in addition to the case of the veterinarian who died, there were also six known cases of flu in which the fowl pest virus had been detected in the patient’s body. There are also around seventy other reported cases of disorders, chiefly inflammation of the eye, that have been associated with influenza H7, the virus known as fowl pest.

Tavernier said yesterday that sufficient flu vaccines and anti-viral medicines were available in Belgium to vaccinate all those coming into contact with the infected poultry. The Ministry for Public Health is urging that the problems for humans not be exaggerated. People can only be infected after bodily contact with the animals.

WWW.FAVV.BE
New EC staff puts Brussels housing market under pressure

According to Peter Pillen of the Brussels Bureau de Recherches en Aménagement du Territoire, every EU enlargement has hitherto been accompanied by a wave of speculation. ‘But up until now the phenomenon has never involved more than three countries joining at the same time. Now ten are joining. I estimate that this enlargement will result in some 10,000 people coming to Brussels, half of whom will live in the Brussels Region and half in Flemish and Walloon Brabant.’ Pillen thinks that owners are now already taking advantage of the extra demand. ‘I know the property market quite well and I am hearing from all quarters that landlords are hoping above all for an EU tenant. If necessary people are prepared to leave apartments empty for longer in the hope that they will find someone willing to pay the price’. Philippe Janssens of Stadim also thinks that the euro effect in particular will help reduce the number of apartments currently unoccupied and confirms that the EU public servants could cause the average rental price to rise. On top of this, the best of the bottom end of the market is being creamed off by owners who convert their houses into lucrative shelters for refugees. All this is making it more difficult to find anything at a reasonable price in Brussels. Pillen reckons that the accession of the new Member States will have less of an effect on the office market, since that is already growing by at least 200,000 m² a year.

Storekeepers demand anti-ramming posts

Anyone looking for an affordable apartment in Brussels is having an increasingly tougher time finding what they are after. Indeed, for those not prepared to pay more than EUR 500, it’s a nigh-on impossible undertaking. The ‘Eurocrats’ are driving the prices up. On 1 May next year ten new countries will be joining the EU, and many real estate companies are predicting that this will create a shortage on the market. As a result of the enlargement, the European Commission will be taking on 3,900 extra staff and thousands more lobbyists, regional representations and people from the business world will be descending on Brussels. Reports are that the owners of flats are allegedly already anticipating on this (FF).

Van Reeth wants architecture that serves the public space and the users

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Storekeepers demand anti-ramming posts

The owner of a clothes shop in the West Flanders town of Wevelgem, Henk Louf, is taking the matter to court. His store has been broken into no fewer than three times, with the raiders on the shop window, and then cleaning out the store. He has repeatedly urged the local council to give him permission to install anti-ramming posts in front of his store, but he has been turned down on the grounds of a Flemish Community regulation stipulating that the pavement has to be at least a metre and a half wide for wheelchair users to be able to pass. The issue appears to be a highly sensitive matter. Unizo, the association of small-scale self-employed traders, supports the complaint. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt is urging the Federal police force’s anti-theft department (De Morgen, 19 April) to look into the Flemish legislation on the matter, and adapt it where necessary, in order to enable anti-ramming posts to be installed as quickly as possible. According to the federal police force’s anti-theft department (De Morgen, 19 April), all the fuss surrounding anti-ramming posts is exaggerated. Real ‘ram-raiders’ do not let themselves be frightened off by such posts, they say. Some gangsters attach a battering-ram to their vehicle or smash the shop window with a sledge-hammer. However, shopkeepers feel that the psychological effect of such posts should not be underestimated, and claim that they themselves would in any case feel much safer behind them.

Bob Van Reeth, ‘Flemish architectural supervisor’

The supervisor’s brochures state that art and architecture are good for the image of the Authorities of Flanders. Prestige is a handy political sales argument. But it is Van Reeth’s task to do something different. The architectural supervisor promotes monumental architecture, but he is not a government architect who wants to erect monuments for the authorities. He wants architecture that serves the public space and the users. That proves to be very awkward. Good architecture means buildings that are comfortable to live in and made to last. Responsible building means building for perpetuity. In Van Reeth’s philosophy, buildings should be able to stand for four hundred years. He is referring here not to the fixtures and fittings or the function, but the structure itself. Buildings should have the
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strength of monuments. New urban districts should be designed to last literally for ages. The government has to show the right example. It has to learn how to formulate what it wants and it has to make choices. We ask the administrations for an all-in project that is designed to be lasting from the point of view of architecture, environment and urban planning, says Van Reeth. He looks pityingly at the Flemings' stubborn refusal to live more closely to each other. 'It is very strange how in Flanders the collective is regarded as poor.' Van Reeth is aware that it is a lonely battle.

On the subject of people living more closely together, the politicians keep silent and even urban planners have their doubts. But Van Reeth does not give up: 'Yes, it’s remarkable, isn’t it? I’m the only one still clamouring about it and it’s not even my business.'

On 5 May:

• 2 May: The right to dream, exhibition, Brel, 'The right to dream', Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24
• 3 May: • 5 May: Horizons of reality, Russian contemporary Art, Muhka, Antwerp; info: 03/238.59.60 www.muhka.be
• 31 May: • 5 May: Louis Bourgeois and Hans Op de Beeck, exhibition, Galery Xavier Hufkens, Brussels; info: 02/639.67.30
• 7 May: Frank Braley (piano) and Renaud Capuçon (violin), with compositions by Ravel and van Beethoven, De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• Until 8 June: Revolution/Restoration Part I, PSK, Brussels; info: 02/544.08.33
• Until 24 June: Le Peuple de l’Herbe, Stuk Leuven; info: 016/32.03.20
• 2 to 7 May: Too shy to stare, Davis Freeman/Random scream, dance, Time Festival, de Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.24.24 www.vooruit.be
• 6 to 10 May: Donna Rutterford, accompanied, performance Time Festival, de Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.24.24 www.vooruit.be
• 7 and 8 May: First Night, Forced entertainment, Time Festival, de Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.24.24 www.vooruit.be
• 3 May: Nancy Argenta (soprano) and Maggie Cole (harpsichord) with compositions by Purcell, Bach, Händel, Haydn and Schubert, De Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be

EXPO

• From 22 March to 17 January: Jacques Bréf, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Schil aaknaapstraat 50, Brussels; reservation required; info: www.jacquesbref.be 02/511.10.20
• Until 31 August: The big Sexperiment, scientific exhibition, Technopolis, Mechelen; info: 015/34.20.00
• Until 29 June: Music Planet; one century of pop music in an exhibition, Brewery Belle Vue, Molenbeek; info: www.euroculture.be 02/513/29/84
• Until 4 May: Louis Van Lint, retrospective exhibition, Museum of Elsene, info: 02/374.94.74
• From 1 March onwards: The Groeninghemuseum in Bruges reopened after facelift; info: 050/44.87.12
• Until 25 May: Presents from the Muses (Greek exhibition linked to the Greek chancellorship of the European Union), Royal M museum of Art and History, Jubelpark, Brussels; info: 02/742.72.11
• Until 1 June: Horizons of reality, Russian contemporary Art, Muhka, Antwerp; info: 03/238.59.60 www.muhka.be
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• Until 9 June: Projects and objects, Claire Bataille and Paul ibens, exhibition, design museum Ghent; info: 09/267.99.99 design.museum.gent
• Until 30 August: 50 Years of Matchbox; Toys museum, Mec helen; info: 015/55.70.75 www.speeldogsmuseum.be
• Until 11 May: Aluminium by design, exhibition, Wielemanshuis, Brussels; info: 02/544.08.33
• Until 1 June: Social Housing, exhibition, PSK, Brussels; info: 02/507.82.00 www.pkspba.be
• Until 28 September: Beaufort, Contemporary art in the dunes and on the beaches of the coastal towns, open air exhibitions with Jan Fabre, Wim Delvoye, Anne & Patrick Poirier, Ndiy Sperri, Henk Visch, Antony Gormley and others, info: coastal tourist offices www.beaufort.be
• Until 1 June: An arbitrary History, Cia Guo-Qiang, exhibition, SMAK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
• Until 15 June: The City as loft, KACP/ASTOC/Kees Christiaanse, exhibition De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• Until 15 June: David Goldblatt, photographer, exhibition, PSK, Brussels; info: www.vooruit.be
• Until 4 May: De Zotte Schilders (the crazy painters) Late Gothic painters in the tradition of Bruegel and Bosch, Centrum voor Oude Kunst, ‘t Vliegend Peerd, Mechelen; info: 015/29.01.55

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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.

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With thanks to: Concentra nv, De Vijfje nv, de Vlaamse Uitgeversmaatschappij nv, De Persgroep nv, Uitgeverijknijfije tieland nv en Roularta Media Group nv and their editorial teams for supplying the articles.

Translation: Eurologos

Printing: Drukkerij Lannoo nv, Tielt

Subscription rate by post and e-mail: 220 euro

Either transfer the sum to account no.: 472-101001-19 with the KBC in Roeselare
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