Fowl pest in Flanders appears to be under control

The spread of fowl pest in Flanders appears for the time being to have been brought to a halt. In all, eight sources of infection were discovered, and the last of these dates from 28 April. Federal Public Health Minister Jef Tavernier (Agalev) and the managing director of the Federal Food Agency Piet Van Temsche are cautiously optimistic and announced that a number of measures are being relaxed. The transport of birds and the sale of poultry to private individuals are being allowed again. Pigeons can fly again in the safe areas of the affected provinces of Antwerp and Limburg, to the south of the Scheldt and the Albert Canal. But Tavernier warns that caution is advisable. If the slightest source of new infection is detected, the measures will be tightened again. In the meantime the Farmers’ Union puts the loss for the poultry sector at EUR 12 million. Since the pest also affected livestock farming, it will be very difficult for poultry farms to start up again, according to Paul De Winter, a veterinarian with the Farmers’ Union (Boerenbond) [FF].

In the long term the fowl pest will have been a bigger blow to the sector than the dioxin crisis. ‘Affected farms that want to start up again need chicks. There is a fear that there are no longer enough to meet the demand. Chicks are also a good deal more expensive, which does not make the process of starting up any easier.’ The crisis has fewer consequences for consumers. ‘The poultry trade has become such an international business that customers will not notice anything very much,’ according to De Winter.

The first estimates made by the Farmers’ Union point to a total economic loss of around EUR 12 million. ‘For destroyed animals alone, you come to an amount of EUR 6 million,’ says De Winter. ‘Add to that all the day-old chicks and hatching eggs that had to be destroyed, and you get a total figure of 12 million. On top of that there is the fact that the sector has been in a tight corner since the fowl pest broke out in the Netherlands’. The Farmers’ Union is satisfied with the way in which the government has tackled the fowl pest crisis. ‘The approach has been firm, although you could make a few comments about the usefulness of the large-scale and slow clearance operations in Limburg’. WWW.FAVV.BE
WWW.BOERENBOND.BE

INTRODUCTION

The election campaign is well and truly in full swing. Politicians are appearing all over the place, in markets, at the front door, at parties and, of course, in the media. On the Flemish public and commercial television channels, no effort is being spared to use easily digestible ‘infotainment’ to get the general public a little more closely involved in election events. Around 1 May there was an escalation in election promises, which prompted press commentators to remind politicians of the key question – where they think they will be finding the money for all these fine promises in these hard economic times. Furthermore, the issue of what form the government will take after 18 May is evidently looking a lot more exciting for the press. The crisis over night flights, in which Ecolo and Minister Isabelle Durant demanded the tragic leading role, has reshuffled the cards somewhat. Whilst prior to last weekend it looked as though there was a good chance of a continuation of the ‘Purple-Green’ coalition, this chance appears to have slimmed appreciably since then, particularly after Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt stated that his ‘enthusiasm for sharing office with Ecolo in the next government had dropped to below freezing point.’ The fact that the Liberals and Socialists do not have a majority in Flanders without the Greens, and that Verhofstadt praised the Flemish Greens of Agalev for the sense of responsibility they had shown, could also indicate, according to De Morgen, that a coalition with Agalev but without Ecolo is no longer inconceivable. But the official line is that Verhofstadt (VLD) wants to record as good a result as possible, so that the Greens automatically become superfluous to requirements. Remarkably enough it was the French-speaking Liberal Louis Michel who felt he had to give Flemish voters some election advice in a number of Flemish newspapers (De Fi-nanciedel-Economische Tijd, 2 May; and De Stan-nard, 7 May), with the first strategic reflections on the formation of a government. Michel assumes that the largest political families in the country, i.e., the Liberals or the Socialists, will provide the prime minister, even if the Christian-Democratic CD&V becomes the largest party in Flanders. But given that he no longer wants to govern with the Greens, the CD&V could possibly be included as a third party, as far as he is concerned. He also advises Flemings to vote for the CD&V and not the CD&V, otherwise there is a risk of the Socialists becoming the largest family and then Elco Di Rupo (PS) could become the new prime minister. De Standaard (9 May) concludes that the Flemish Government parties are rather uncomfortable with Michel’s comments, since they have more than anything reinforced the idea that the Federal Government will be forged in Wallonia (graph p. 5).

Frank Vandeveeye | editor in chief
Durant causes government crisis over night flights...

**FF EDITOR**

Just before the elections, the ‘Purple-Green’ government is going through a sizeable crisis, thanks entirely to the French-speaking Minister for Transport Isabelle Durant (Ecolo). In a memorandum, Durant gave Michel Damat, head of the federal civil service, the job of scrapping the distribution plan for night flights out of Zaventem over Brussels, as this had been established in the agreement of 24 January. Under the terms of that agreement, three of the 22 night flights would again fly over the Brussels Region from 12 June, in order to reduce somewhat the noise pollution over the Flemish municipalities of the northern periphery. Durant took the decision because the flights brought about too great a risk for safety, and she therefore wanted to wait for the results of a safety study. For example, one of the routes lay right over inflammable ‘Seveso’ depots of the company Shell. The residents of the Flemish northern periphery of Brussels, for whom there had been the prospect of some solace from 12 June, reacted furiously. All Flemish parties demanded that Prime Minister Verhofstadt immediately take action against his minister. The opposition parties CD&V, N-VA and Vlaams Blok called for Durant’s resignation. The N-VA instituted proceedings for a temporary injunction with the Council of State. The majority parties SP.A and VLD declared that they would veto Durant’s presence in a subsequent government. The Flemish Greens of Agalev, such as Environment Minister Vera Dua or local Green politicians Magda Aelvoet and Lode van Oost, were not sparing in their criticism of their French-speaking sister party either. In the early evening of 2 May Verhofstadt stepped in. In a memo, he annulled Durant’s decision and asked her not to take any further steps in the matter. At Durant’s office, it was said that only the minister with responsibility for aviation - Isabelle Durant, in other words - was competent for procedures relating to takeoff and landing at the national airport. But it appeared clear that Durant was also under pressure from the other French-speaking parties in Brussels, for the Brussels city council announced, also on 2 May, that it would contest the distribution plan for night flights over Brussels in the courts.

That Durant should have come in for such severe criticism from the Flemish parties is understandable, in the view of De Financieel-Economische Tijd (3 May). After all, a severe electoral reprimand for all the ‘Purple-Green’ parties (VLD, SP.A and Agalev) in the northern periphery around Brussels seemed inevitable as a result of her decision.

...and is forced to step down

**THE FLEMISH GREEN FORMER MINISTER MAGDA AELVOET DECLARED THAT AGALEV WOULD NOT DO ANYTHING TO STAND IN THE WAY OF ACTION BY THE PRIME MINISTER AGAINST DURANT**

**FF EDITOR**

Saturday was to have been the first day that Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) would devote entirely to his election campaign. However, things turned out rather differently, with the crisis surrounding the night flights over Brussels throwing a spanner in the works. In the afternoon, Verhofstadt announced that he would use all legal remedies to overturn Durant’s decision on night flights within 24 hours. But Isabelle Durant continued to ignore Verhofstadt’s threats. She blew the whistle on Verhofstadt and called the press together.

‘Unworthy’, ‘disgraceful’ and ‘unworthy of a politician’ were just some of the criticisms levelled at Durant yesterday. Bert Anciaux [Spirit] announced that SP.A-Spirit would not form part of a government if Isabelle Durant were a member of it. Verhofstadt whistled Durant back because the government cannot do anything that goes against an earlier decision of the council of ministers during this period ‘in which we have to deal with issues with caution’ [after the dissolution of parliament, ed.]. What is more, with her memorandum Durant was going back on her own press release of 17 March, in which it was stated that ‘the new route will become effective from 12 June’. But Durant was not cowed by Verhofstadt’s order. ‘A Royal Decree from 1994 states clearly that it is the minister himself or herself who may decide on takeoffs and landings’, ran a statement delivered by her spokesman. Earlier in the day Durant had also said that she had taken the decision chiefly ‘for safety reasons’, because the route had not yet been studied in enough depth. This argument was dismissed by Jean-Luc Dehaene (CD&V), mayor of Vilvoorde [in the Flemish northern periphery, ed.], as ‘totally outrageous’.

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‘To clarify all ambiguous issues in the matter’. She explained all the commotion as being ‘electoral and community games’. On 4 May on theVRT programme De Zevende Dag [an edition that scored high viewing figures], the Flemish Green former minister Magda Aelvoet declared that Isabelle Durant has committed an unforgivable blunder and that Agalev would not do anything to stand in the way of action by the Prime Minister against Durant. On the French-speaking side Louis Michel backed Verhofstadt and the PS proposed an alternative route for the night flights over Brussels. At 3.00 p.m. a council of ministers was called, at which Durant was given no choice. She immediately had to accept the alternative PS proposal. She tried to gain a deferment, for she also wanted the agreement of the Government of Brussels and the competent bodies such as the airport management company Biac and Belgocontrol, but it subsequently turned out that the government had already seen this to this. When she emerged from the council of ministers, all her powers in respect of aviation had already been taken over by Laurette Onkelinx, the PS-minister of Employment, and by the time the seven o’clock news came on the air Verhofstadt was able to announce that a royal decree would be published, stating that powers in respect of aviation were being transferred to Onkelinx. In the evening Durant and her party colleague Olivier Deleuze, State Secretary for Energy, tendered their resignation.
Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 5 MAY

Agalev and Prime Minister Verhofstadt come out of the weekend crisis with their positions weakened. Ecolo started the bidding at a high price and is hoping for the bonus that its victim’s role will produce. For this the party was in fact left in total political isolation. The Flemish Greens of Agalev could no longer cover so much irrationality. But it is Louis Michel (MR) and Elio Di Rupo (PS) who have determined the strategy over the last few hours, not the Prime Minister. PS chairman Elio Di Rupo had a conspicuous stab at the title of the weekend’s winner. His compromise proposal, which was rejected by Isabelle Durant, had a threefold objective. One: to offer an outcome to the crisis whereby the ‘purple green’ government would not go down in chaos. Two: to prevent the surging Ecolo to appoint itself as a reborn rival. Three: to show that he and no-one else held the key to any compromise.

In Agalev’s ranks there is bitterness over the way in which Durant made a monkey out of her Flemish sister party. Durant made her position intolerable by shooting down a federal agreement for the sake of her electoral position in Brussels. No argument could be found to defend this, even with the best will in the world. With her resignation, Durant might still be able to score among her own following, but Agalev is footing the bill. The snide remarks about ‘the Greens’ being inexperienced in government have returned with twice the force.

Prime Minister Verhofstadt completely missed the start of his campaign. Once again he let himself be tempted into binding himself to a deadline (24 hours) he could not meet. He made it look as though he was going to handle things. But the truth of the matter was that first Louis Michel and then Elio Di Rupo outlined the strategy. They were not about to let their alliance suffer on account of the night flights issue.

‘Purple’ with or without greens?

T he steps taken by Ecolo minister Isabelle Durant and the crisis that her party has caused in the federal government have resulted in Prime Minister Verhofstadt’s (VLD) enthusiasm for sharing of office with that party again dropping to ‘below freezing point’. Verhofstadt criticises Ecolo for having used the night flights to play Brussels and Flanders off against each other. That did not succeed, in his view, because French-speaking Liberals and Socialists ranged themselves behind the Flemish parties. The Premier is not saying whether he wants to keep the Greens out of the next coalition. The Flemish Greens of Agalev were given a pat on the back. They had behaved responsibly and reasonably, he felt. In the view of CD&V chairman Stefaan De Clerck, the night flight crisis is the proof that ‘the Greens’ are quite simply unreliable as a coalition partner. However, the crisis has not led to a split between French-speaking and Flemish Greens. Jos Geysels, the political secretary of Agalev acknowledges in a number of interviews with Flemish papers that there is a fissure in the relations between Agalev and Ecolo. For Isabelle Durant, the slogan ‘all out together, all home together’ still holds, meaning that they will either join the next government together or will stay out of it together. In Jos Geysels’ view, that seems rather less self-evident, although he has not yet pronounced on the matter. Geysels reminds his Liberal and Socialist coalition partners that they do not have a majority - at least in Flanders - without the Greens. In the government the Ecolo ministers are being replaced by the PS member Yvan Ylieff and the MP member Alain Zenner. Ylieff replaces Durant and is promoted from government commissioner to minister. Zenner, the former government commissioner entrusted with combating tax fraud, becomes State Secretary for Energy and Sustainable Development in replacement of Olivier Deleuze (FF).

Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 6 MAY

The first ‘Purple-Green’ government has tripped over just before the finishing line, or rather, whilst it was running easy, and we will now have to wait and see what effect this will have on polling day. Ecolo is hoping (and this was the only reason why it sought - and got - the dustup in the first place) to see its radical image restored and to win votes in its own constituency: i.e., Brussels residents threatened by Flemings. In a period in which knocking the Greens is the latest political trend, Prime Minister Verhofstadt was not too lazy to play the game. He is gambling that through his ‘decisive intervention, he has been able to make it clear who is still the boss of the purple-green company. It is a gift for the CD&V and N-VA, who will gladly use the crisis as proof that Purple-Green is no more than a little club of quarrel-some amateurs. The biggest losers would appear to be the Greens themselves. This will be especially unfair on the Flemish Greens, who right now could skin Durant alive. Even after the resignation, there is still more that binds Agalev and Ecolo than separates them, says Jos Gheysels, but for the first time the formation of a government in which Agalev takes part and Ecolo does not, should now no longer be dismissed as political folly.
End-of-term report on Verhofstadt I

For the second time the editorial staff of De Standaard has published a report on the federal ministers, after first having done so in June 2002. At that time many ministers reacted rather grumpily and indignantly to the assessment, and further to that report there was even a closed meeting of the ministers' spokesmen to look into how the government could polish up its image. According to De Standaard, it did not really succeed in this, for the final judgement on four years of ‘purple-green' is anything but comforting. Seven of the eighteen ministers score less than 50%, and therefore ought not to return to office after 18 May, in the paper's opinion [FF].

PETER VANDERMEERSCH • DE STANDAARD • 3 MAY

One man stands out head and shoulders above all the rest: Minister for Social Affairs and Pensions Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A). He scores very well in the four parameters on which this editorial team passed judgement, namely vision, efficiency, communication and diligence. 'He is the first minister for social affairs who has made changes to the policy, in the right direction,' according to the editorial team’s decision. With 81%, he achieves a special distinction. Budget Minister Vande Lanotte (SP.A) also attains a distinction, with 72%. The four balanced budgets played a major part in this assessment. With 65%, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) just beats the first French speaker in the ranking, Finance Minister Didier Reynders (MR, 64%). The Premier scored well on vision and was efficient in keeping his team together, but was given penalty points, among other things, for his at times wholly untruthful communication. Reynders' principal achievement was the reform of personal and corporation tax. The fact that the tax administration remains a mess cost him points.

Seven other ministers achieve a pass. In descending order, these are Louis Michel (MR, Foreign Affairs, who was able to garner praise over the last year), Laurette Onkelinx (who was especially good at ‘opposing'), Jef Tavernier (Agalev, Health care, who had little time either to prove himself or to fail], Olivier Deleuze (Ecolo, Energy, who is now going to be in less of a hurry in parliament), Eddy Boutmans [Agalev, Development Aid, efficient but not very inspiring], Luc Van den Bossche (SP.A, Public Service, inspiring but particularly efficient when it comes to his own career planning), and Magda Aelvoet [Agalev, with 50%, a very doubtful case].

The rest of the team has failed, among them the ministers for Justice (VLD member Marc Verwilghen scores 41%) and the Interior (Antoine Duquesne, of MR, brings up the rear with a disgraceful 24%). These are two departements that should have formed the heart of government in the post-Dutroux era. The result: a far too costly and partly unsuccessful reform of the police, and a poorly functioning justice system. Charles Picqué (PS, 40%) was a superfluous minister. Rik Daemels (VLD, 36%) at State Enterprises announced the bankruptcy of Sabena and four years’ wasted time for the Post. The Green Isabelle Durant [Transport Minister, 31%] oversaw the non-policy on night flights and four years’ stagnation at the railways. The Socialist Flahaut [National Defence, 30%] was quite simply disastrous for the army.

WWW.STANDAARD.BE

Bomb waiting to go off in Antwerp city council?

FF EDITOR

On 30 April the Central Office for the Fight against Corruption (CDBC) confiscated documents belonging to the Christian-Democratic CD&V in Parliament. The confiscation occurred in the framework of the large-scale investigation being carried out into possible fraudulent practices by parties represented on Antwerp's city council, about which the public prosecutor's office has received several complaints. One of these complaints concerns a debt owed by the CD&V's Antwerp branch, which was reportedly paid off with money from the police budget. The party branch allegedly supported the candidacy of Luc Lamine as police chief in exchange for a bribe of EUR 175,000 from the police budget with which it reportedly paid off the debt outstanding from its previous electoral campaign. The payments were allegedly effected in instalments and 'conveniently disguised'. With documents in hand, local CD&V branch chairman Muts rebutted the allegations on 2 May. According to Muts, the debts were settled with funds from the national party coffers and via the CD&V aldermen. Both Lamine and the CD&V have lodged a complaint against unknown parties for slander and defamation of character. In the meantime the Vlaams Blok is asking that CD&V members Eric Antonis and Marc Van Peel not take office on 9 May as aldermen on the new bench. Het Laatste Nieuws [2 May] talks of a second possible time bomb waiting to go off in Antwerp's brand new governing body, in addition to the procedure under way against future mayor Patrick Janssens. Thus far there have been made no progress on the issue of Janssens' appointment. According to De Financieel-Economische Tijd [7 May], Antwerp's public prosecutor's office has handed over all documents in which Janssens' name is mentioned to provincial governor Camille Paulus. However, the investigations could drag on for months, which means that it will also be months before the court can guarantee that Janssens does not pose any problem as the new mayor. Governor Paulus is already letting it be known that he will not give any recommendation as long as the current Mayor Leona Detiège (SP.A) has not tendered her resignation. The political situation has thus reached total deadlock again, in the view of Gazet van Antwerpen.
BIAC holds out the prospect of thousands of new jobs

**THE NEXT GOVERNMENT MUST URGENTLY SET TO WORK ON OPENING UP BOTH THE PASSENGER AND CARGO AIRPORTS FOR RAIL TRANSPORT**

**BERT LAUWERS • DE FINANCIËL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 7 MAY**

‘I’m talking of a period of eight to ten years in which 5,000 to 7,000 jobs could be created directly, and the same number multiplied by a factor of 2.5 could be created indirectly,’ Klees said, on the subject of the restructuring of Zaventem. He was referring to the future plans for the plots of land that BIAC bought at the end of 2000. The BIAC CEO did not want to give too much publicity to the investment plans, since the matter is highly sensitive (what with all the fuss that has been kicked up over the night flights over Brussels) and because the elections are just days away. However, he did stress that ‘these are fantastic projects for Zaventem’.

The potential investors, which include international groups with partnerships with Belgian companies, want to secure guarantees from the next government that the number of flights at Zaventem can be increased in the long term. Last year the national airport recorded almost 2,570,000 flight movements [departures and arrivals]. There were 19,575 night flights - 6.6% down on 2001. ‘But perhaps these investors are hoping that within ten years it will be possible to have 30,000 or 40,000 night flights operating,’ Klees remarked. The BIAC managing director did add that: ‘there’s still a lot of negotiating to be done,’ explaining that ‘we have to find a balance between the social and economic motives.’ BIAC is talking to the interested companies about investments on a 25-hectare site at Brucargo, Zaventem’s cargo airport. However, Klees was not prepared to reveal the names of the interested companies, just before the elections on 18 May. ‘But on 19 May I will be happy to give more details. The plans are very definite,’ says Klees.

**WWW.BIAC.BE**
1 May speeches see bidding on the social front

The reality is that the budgetary margin available to the next government will be extremely small

The FF Editorial Team

In the speeches made on 1 May to mark Labour Day, the various big guns of the Social-Democrats set out the central demands of their election programme. SPA party chairman Steve Stevaert said in Lommel (Limburg) that a lot more people think along Socialist lines than vote for the Socialists. He said that over the next few weeks it would be a matter of convincing those who had hitherto not voted Socialist. Stevaert defended his 'free' policy in the field of public transport, reasoning that free travel was paid for by taxes and rich people paid more taxes than poor people, and again emphasised that the SPA wanted to endeavour to have these taxes collected correctly. Stevaert momentarily strayed onto Liberal territory when he said that he could go along with tax cuts for companies, but in contrast to the Liberals he wants companies to invest in training and education in return. He wants to keep the early retirement scheme intact, and also has a plan to put tax deductions for mortgages on an equal footing for the rich and the less well off. The other candidates heading the SPA lists unveiled a part of the SPA programme in their respective home towns: federal Minister for the Budget Vande Lanotte did so in Ostend, Minister for Social Affairs Vandenbergroucke in Bierbeek, Patrick Janssens in Antwerp and Freya Vanden Bossche in Ghent. Johan Vande Lanotte took a leaf out of the Greens' book and advocated the use of wind power, more especially for a windmill park on the Thornton Bank ten kilometres off the coast of De Haan and Wenduine. He said that a park of this kind could account for six to seven per cent of the total energy requirement, whilst the first of the nuclear power stations being closed only produces 4% of Belgium's energy.

Mia De Vits, chairperson of the Socialist trade union ABVV, sang the praises of the 'Purple-Green' government, and opposed the confederal plea made by the 'Purple-Green' government, and opposed the confederal plea made by the Liberals and the Socialist tax deduction on mortgages with which Stevaert is setting out to appeal to the voters. Or are you more inclined to let yourself be spoiled by the substantial extension of time credit and the parental leave that the Greens are proposing! However the CD&V are offering that as well, along with an increase in child allowances on top of that. When election battle reaches fever pitch, it is difficult for a party to keep a lid on its box of promises. Up until now, those making the promises have given two possible sources of financing for their nice ideas: a tougher approach for combating tax fraud and pay-back effects brought about by greater economic growth. The clear-headed voter has every reason to view these two recipes with a degree of scepticism. The fight against fraud has been going on for a hundred years. And if a measure can repay itself in full, Baron von Münchhausen was right when he said that he could get himself out of the quagmire on his own.

The reality is that the budgetary margin available to the next government will be extremely small. It will be faced with a difficult balancing act between the pressing need to keep Belgian public finances under control and the equally serious problem of breathing new life into the ailing economy. The realisation of the previous government’s promises has already been a painful business. There is almost certainly no more money for new sweeteners.

Paul Geudens • Gazet van Antwerpen • 2 May

Wasn’t it touching to see Liberals such as Louis Michel, Karel De Gucht and Guy Verhofstadt trying to hang out the ‘left-wing’ flag on 1 May! The first thing you noticed quite clearly was that party profiles were becoming increasingly blurred. The second observation was that the SPA made a great song and dance about tax cuts for companies. That’s unusual. On 1 May, you expect the Socialists to talk about social security. Right wing has become left wing and left wing is moving to the right. The VLD could do well out of this. It is an old political truth that whichever party can turn its main manifesto point into the central election issue is well ahead of the field. The third noteworthy observation was that promises were again being made left, right and centre. But when we ask who is going to pay for all that, we are fobbed off with explanations like ‘pay-back effects’ (the Liberals) or ‘a better collection of taxes’ (the Socialists). This is a trick that has been used for decades, and one that in practice comes to nought.

Opinions

Ivan Broeckmeyer • De Financieel-Economische Tijd • 2 May

It is a real relief to know that there are still parties with social concerns in this country. Equally gratifying is the observation that everyone wants to see further tax cuts. It will be awkward to choose between the new easing of the tax and premium burden put forward by the Liberals and the Socialist tax deduction on mortgages with which Stevaert is setting out to appeal to the voters. Or are you more inclined to let yourself be spoiled by the substantial extension of time credit and the parental leave that the Greens are proposing! However the CD&V are offering that as well, along with an increase in child allowances on top of that.

When election battle reaches fever pitch, it is difficult for a party to keep a
The number of unemployed people entitled to benefit in Belgium passed the symbolic milestone of 400,000 in April. This means that unemployment is back at the level recorded in April 1998, the year before the ‘purple-green’ government took office. Compared with April 2002 there were 39,493 more unemployed persons, an increase of 10.9%. In Flanders, unemployment in the past month rose more rapidly (+ 19,349, + 15.1%) than in Wallonia (+ 8%) and Brussels (+ 11%). Of the 400,353 unemployed people, 147,853 live in Flanders. Also striking is the rise in corporate failures in 2003 (+ 5%), with large companies especially conspicuous in this trend. Indeed, 29 companies with more than 50 employees have already been wound up this year. Companies that have gone into liquidation account for a quarter of the newly unemployed this year.

**Index of job supply (vacancies in Flanders)**

- 2000: 100
- 2001: 125
- 2002: 150
- 2003: 200

**Evolution of job supply (% in relation to same month of the previous year)**

- 2000: 0%
- 2001: 10%
- 2002: 20%
- 2003: 30%

**Evolution of job supply (index 100 in 1997)**

- 2000: 100
- 2001: 125
- 2002: 150
- 2003: 200

**Source:** The Employment Barometer of De Standaard

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**Literature without frontiers in Brussels**

**Brussels could definitely become the European Capital of the Letters**

From 8 tot 10 May an international literature festival ‘Literary Rendezvous’ is being held in Brussels. The organisers have big plans, and want to see Literary Rendezvous become for literature what Documenta in Kassel is for contemporary art. Indeed, the idea is for the new festival to grow into a two-yearly meeting place for literature fans from all over Europe. The range of famous names on offer certainly points to no shortage of ambition on the part of the organisers. Alongside the Italian Claudio Magris and the Austrian Robert Menasse, prominent figures on the bill include the South African writer and Nobel Prize Winner Nadine Gordimer and her fellow countryman André Brink. In the meantime, the aim is to bring the large international community in and around Brussels flocking to the festival (FF).

**EVA BERGHMANS • ZIPP/DE STANDAARD • 7 MAY**

‘We want to arouse people’s curiosity for international literature,’ says Brigitte Neervoort, who is co-ordinating the new festival for the literary organisation ‘Het Beschrijf’. She admits that she is expecting a public that is already interested in literature. ‘In the course of the preparations, we discovered that there were some strange barriers running through translated literature,’ says Neervoort. ‘Take the two Italians on our bill. Claudio Magris is well known among Dutch-speakers, and Rosette Loy is a favourite among French-speakers. We want to break through those kinds of barriers.’ So, alongside the more famous names like Jens Christian Grondahl, Harry Mulish, Lidia Jorge, Per Nilsson and Jonathan Coe, there are also names that only ring a bell with specialists. These include the Russian Andrei Kurkov, the Hungarian Stephen Vizinczey, the Tunisian Abdelwahab Meddeb, and the Czech Jachym Topol, and Neervoort is counting on the public being prepared to get to know their work. She feels that you do not have to know an author’s work beforehand in order to have some inkling of his discourse. ‘Literature cannot be dissociated from society. We have therefore invited authors from countries that will shortly be joining the European Union. In the meetings involving them, it will certainly not be solely their work that will be under discussion. One of the reasons why we are focusing on South Africa is also because it is virtually impossible for writers there to place themselves outside society.’ It is a nice coincidence that there is an exhibition currently running at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels showcasing the work of the South African documentary photographer David Goldblatt. For that is the second leitmotif running through Literary Rendezvous: namely, that literature can also hit it off with other art forms. But the fact that words are the raw materials for literature immediately constitutes one of the main practical problems at an international festival like Literary Rendezvous. There are no fewer than four official languages: Dutch, French, English and German. Simultaneous translation is provided for some parts of the programme. Neervoort steps lightly over the language barriers. ‘If a major international literary festival can’t be held in Brussels, then it can’t be held anywhere. So many languages are spoken here that Brussels could definitely become the European Capital of the Letters.’ Neervoort also feels that the first edition has to immediately succeed in attracting the international community in Brussels to the festival. The people behind the initiative went...
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