Anti-money-laundering unit to inspect fiscal amnesty files

The ‘Purple’ government is firmly intending, by means of a one-off operation, to bring back to Belgium some of the money that Belgians have deposited in foreign bank accounts. With the European savings directive as the big stick – this will make it possible for the Belgian tax office to ask foreign financial institutions for information about its taxpayers from 2005 – this kind of operation would appear to have a chance of success. Finance Minister Didier Reynders (MR) wants to impose a one-off fine on tax dodgers who bring their money back to Belgium, and wants to make the rates of the fine dependent on the use to which the money is put. What is more, he guarantees that the tax dodgers will remain anonymous in respect of the tax office, but wants to forward the files to the Unit for the Proceeding of Financial Information (CFI), the so-called anti-money-laundering unit. In this way he wants to avoid the system being used to launder money originating from criminal activities. But De Standaard feels that the guaranteed anonymity will be highly relative (FF).

CHRISTOF VAN SCHOUBROEK • DE STANDAARD • 12 SEPTEMBER

The minister, like all the other ministers, wants at all costs to avoid sums of money from criminal activities, such as drugs trafficking or VAT carousels, filtering into the Belgian financial system thanks to the amnesty arrangement. Therefore Reynders is considering having the banks forward all fiscal amnesty files to the CFI. That unit will check that the money is not derived from criminal activities, and, if necessary, send the file to the public prosecutor’s office. In Reynders’ plans, it is also the banks that withhold the tax fine. However, the banks should not count on a financial compensation for their role in the amnesty dossier. ‘The return of the money will bring them considerable additional income anyway,’ says Reynders.

Reynders hopes to be able to round off the matter before the meeting of the council of ministers on 19 September. One of the greatest stumbling blocks is the question of the rates that are to be applied for the ‘black’ and ‘grey’ money that surfaces. Reynders is proposing a rate of 3.6, or 9%, according to the extent to which the money is invested in the Belgian economy. Peter Vanvelthoven (SP.A), state secretary for State Computerisation, does not regard it as a good idea to have the rate dependent on the use to which the money is put. ‘It’s almost impossible to check on that,’ he says.

INTRODUCTION

‘Three wasps, a few beetles and some sliced bread’. That was the order that Flanders’ most famous cyclist Johan Museeuw placed with veterinary Dr Planquaert, in Oostrozebeke, West Flanders, according to the VRT. According to the detectives, ‘wasp’ in doping code language reportedly means Aranesp, a doping product which, like Epo, works on the spinal cord and triggers the production of more red blood cells, allowing the body to assimilate more oxygen. In this same bizarre code language, ‘the wasp stings in the inner tube’ meant, according to Het Nieuwsblad (11 September), that it had to be taken by means of a baster, whilst ‘beetles’ allegedly refer to the testosterone Undesor and sliced bread to growth hormones (De Morgen, 12 September). With the decoding of the code language, there are increasingly persistent signs that the Kortrijk judicial authorities are on the trail of a new kind of large-scale doping in cycling circles. Museeuw and three other professional cyclists (Planquaert, Mario De Clerck and Chris Peers) were questioned for several hours, released again, and then a few days later subject to further questioning. Landuyt himself, who is chiefly known as an inspector at the Waregem Horse Races, and was also recently hired as an inspector with the Federal Agency for Food Safety, remained in detention. On 9 September the ‘attendant with the golden hands’, Herman Versel, was also questioned. The above-mentioned professional cyclists often came to him. He is allegedly an intermediary in a network between Landuyt and his clients, but is above all also an important witness. He, too, remained in custody. Also incriminating is the harrowing testimony of former cyclist Daniel Windels, who kept silent for years, but has now also pointed to Landuyt as the supplier of the cocktails of amphetamines and hormone preparations to which he became addicted and which he was found guilty of taking in 1997. The new doping affair has held the Flemish press spellbound for a week. The report that cyclists could go to a veterinarian for doping initially caused a degree of hilarity, but appears increasingly to be pointing to a link between the hormone and doping circles. Actually this is not that strange, says Knack (10 September). There are no substantial differences between hormone management in mammals and in people. However, it should come as no surprise that detectives had not previously looked in that direction, according to MEP Bart Staes (Agalev). Information from doping investigations goes to the police force’s drugs unit, but never to the unit dealing with the combating of hormone use (Knack).

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Vandenbroucke wants disputes to stop

Vandenbroucke feels that the government must urgently set about making a long-term strategy for the budget and employment.

Labour and Pensions Minister, Frank Vandenbroucke (SPA) launched a warning shot across the bows of the new federal government team. Members of the government must stop criticising one another in matters such as public enterprises, the fiscal amnesty or the Copernicus reform of the federal administration, he opined. The government cannot permit itself a culture of open debate now. He called on Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) to keep a firm hand on the government. He does not like the fact that the debate on fiscal amnesty is being carried out in the press and not in the government, and feels it equally inappropriate that in that debate Minister for Finance Didier Reynders (MR) should again volunteer rates for the repatriation of foreign (whether or not fraudulent) deposits. At the weekend VLD party chairman De Gucht had hit out at Public Enterprises Minister Vande Lanotte (SPA). He criticised the Socialists, claiming that they were set on reversing a number of planned reforms at the National Railways and the Post, and feels that Vande Lanotte (SPA) should not interfere in the work of the managers of The Post Office (Johny Thys) and the National Railways (Karel Vinck). He also attacked Marie Arena (PS) who wants to cancel a number of reforms of the federal administration. Vandenbroucke feels that the government must urgently set about making a long-term strategy for the budget and employment. But next year’s regional elections are looming in the background, and the parties evidently cannot resist the urge to attach more importance to their electoral image building (FF).

BART EECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 9 SEPTEMBER

A red thread running through the trench warfare is time and again a government party attempting to look after its electoral selling proposition in its absolute core business (taxes for the Liberals, civil service and authorities for the Socialists) vis-à-vis the others. This is a strategically understandable reaction barely nine months before the next elections, but one that could be fatal for government unity. If Verhofstadt does not succeed in delivering his coalition from what really is an extremely early electoral fever, he will have an extremely difficult year ahead of him. The test for the viability of the ‘Purple’ coalition will be the budget talks at the end of this month. That Vandenbroucke immediately addresses to Guy Verhofstadt is no coincidence, since the conscientious minister abhors the ‘loose style’ Verhofstadt adopts to lead his government, and doesn’t feel like going through a further four years of open-debate culture. Moreover, the Employment Minister wants to compel recognition of his area of competence by all members of the government as the Purple coalition’s priority, in word and in (budgetary) deed. The SPA member is rankled by the fact that some ministers have already given him to understand that the employment conference, which starts next week, should not cost too much money. But Vandenbroucke’s unexpected attack is also a warning to his own party. Behind the reproach directed at fellow politicians who are not sufficiently concerned with the long term, lurks a finger pointing at SPA Chairman Steve Stevaert. SPA-Spirit’s election victory covered up the personal and ideological discord between Stevaert and Vandenbroucke, but the fact that Stevaert gave up Social Affairs (Vandenbroucke’s portfolio in the previous government, ed.), under pressure from the PS, brought the dispute to the surface again.

WWW.VANDENBROUCKE.COM

Poll: Vlaams blok and Agalev win, CD&V loses ground

According to the first opinion poll since the elections of 18 May, which was commissioned by Le Soir and the French-language public broadcasting station RTBF, SPA-Spirit (the alliance of Socialists and left-wing Liberals) is the largest political grouping in Flanders with 23.8%. The Liberals of the VLD have fallen back from 24.2% to 23.6%. But the real shifts are actually to be found elsewhere. In the first place there is the loss of ground (- 2.8%) posted by the CD&V (18.2%) compared with the result of 18 May. Once by some considerable distance the largest party in Flanders, the CD&V has now fallen back to fourth place and has been overtaken by the right-wing Vlaams Blok (19.9%), which made a 2% progress since 18 May. Even greater is the amount of ground made up by the Greens. According to the poll, they have added 3% to their dreadful result of 18 May, and come out on 6.8%. The Flemish-National N-VA (4.1%) suffers a slight loss of 0.7%. This means that it is still under the 5% electoral threshold, although the application of a threshold is by no means a certainty for the regional elections. According to De Financiell-Economische Tijd (6 September) the VLD stopped pressing for this some time ago, for strategic considerations, because it could drive the Greens into the arms of the SPA-Spirit cartel purely out of a desire for political survival - something that would undoubtedly settle the struggle for political leadership in Flanders. That the poll produces such a poor result for the CD&V does not surprise CD&V chairman Letemere. Last September, according to the same poll, it attained approximately 18.3%, whereas eventually it ended up on 21%, according to the chairman, who said that he did not let his plans be directed by opinion polls.

WWW.LESOIR.BE

** Poll commissioned by MR, executed by same agency

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** OPINION POLL, VOTING INTENTIONS **

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* SPA +Spirit separately
** Poll commissioned by MR, executed by same agency
Deficit of 2 billion in social security system

There are three reasons for the growing deficit: the poor economic climate, the cut in employer social security contributions, and the rise in health costs.

Opinions

LUC VANDER KELEN • HET LAATSTE NIEUWS • 9 SEPTEMBER

Last week the Christian union ACV walked out of the negotiations with De Post and now the ABVV is also ringing the alarm bell on the social security budget. How come? Well, there are trade union elections next year, too. Just like the politicians, the unions have thus started their preliminary campaign. And, much more so than politicians, they have to make themselves heard in the struggle for good - read ‘popular’ - candidates for the electoral lists. The ‘sexiest’ trade union secures the best candidates. The alarm over the EUR 2 billion deficit in the RSZ is therefore not without importance. For the government leaders, this is not news, for the forecasts were already made on the negotiating table during the formation of the government. In other words, account was already taken of them in the global budgetary framework that was worked out then. Moreover, nothing is so unforeseeable as economic growth figures. In any case, one thing is certain. The 2004 budget will be a tough job, even though weeks of talks were already devoted to it during the government negotiations.

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 9 SEPTEMBER

Yesterday the government was forced to concede that a hole had formed in the employee social security system, a hole of as much as EUR 2 billion, in fact. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt is mainly silent on the matter. When he says something, it is that there is no problem. And when there is already a problem, then it’s best not to say anything about it, otherwise you’ll only make it worse, the message continues. For that matter, should a problem arise, I already have the solutions on track, and the social partners just have to fill in a bit. If the economic cycle improves tomorrow, Belgium will be flying ahead again. That’s what he says. Anyone who visits an industrial estate from time to time knows that this is a fairy tale. Companies are not only downsizing because of the economic climate; they are relocating abroad what they can in the way of activities - not just the simple jobs but also the skilled ones. And that’s not just because the costs and salaries are high here, but also because the government is unreliable, the rules suffocate, the sense of entrepreneurship is lacking, and the much-praised skilled manpower is no longer to be found.

EVELYNE HENS • DE FINANCIER-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 10 SEPTEMBER

Prime Minister Verhofstadt, the Federal Budget Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) and the Federal Social Affairs Minister Rudy Demotte (PS) reacted to the news that the social security system was heading for a deficit of EUR 2 billion. That forecast is based on economic growth of 1.8% in 2004. The members of the government point out that a deficit of EUR 1.614 billion in the social security system was taken as a basis during the government negotiations. ‘That deficit was already included in the 2004-2007 long-term plan in the coalition agreement,’ goes the message. Verhofstadt and his ministers add that the way of getting rid of this negative balance has already been agreed upon: on the one hand, by means of the direct allocation to the social security system of the extra revenue from excise duties on tobacco products, and on the other hand, through an increase in alternative financing of the social security system. ‘There are four scenarios on the table, in which the deficit of the social security system varies from EUR 400 million to EUR 2 billion’. The cyclical deficit of EUR 1.614 billion used as a basis during the government negotiations is referred to by the government negotiators as ‘a cautious scenario’.

WWW.FGOV.BE

The Socialist trade union ABVV warns that the National Social Security Office (RSZ) is heading for a loss of EUR 2 billion in 2004, approximately 4% of the total RSZ budget. The ABVV cites the forecasts of the Federal Planning Office. In 2003 the loss allegedly already amounts to EUR 900 million, despite the fact that a reserve of EUR 2.5 billion was built up between 2000 and 2002.

There are three reasons for the growing deficit: the poor economic climate, the cut in employer social security contributions, and the rise in health costs. The poor economic climate means that less revenue is flowing into the social security system’s coffers and the rising number of unemployed people leads to greater expenses. Health care will not amount to 4.5% more in 2004, as provided for in the 2004 budget, but 5.6%, and the easing of the tax and premium burden that companies have been promised will cost an additional 400 million in 2004 (800 million in total).

The ABVV immediately demanded that the government explain how it intends to fill up the RSZ well. The government previously promised that the way of getting rid of this negative balance has already been agreed upon: on the one hand, by means of the direct allocation to the social security system of the extra revenue from excise duties on tobacco products, and on the other hand, through an increase in alternative financing of the social security system. ‘There are four scenarios on the table, in which the deficit of the social security system varies from EUR 400 million to EUR 2 billion’. The cyclical deficit of EUR 1.614 billion used as a basis during the government negotiations is referred to by the government negotiators as ‘a cautious scenario’.

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Will the N-VA be eligible for government allocation?

The need of a cartel suddenly disappeared when the party had the prospect of a financial alternative in the form of an allocation.

First CD&V Chairman Yves Leterme thought that the failure of an N-VA-CD&V cartel for next year’s elections was attributable to the opposition of the N-VA grassroots. But recently he has been openly wondering whether the sudden decision by the N-VA party executive to pass over the idea of a cartel, after weeks of negotiations with the CD&V’s leaders, is not rather inspired by prospects of a Federal Government allocation.

The N-VA did win 200,000 preference votes on 18 May, but due to the electoral threshold they could only turn those into one parliamentary seat; that of party chairman Geert Bourgeois. However, in order to be entitled to government allocations, a party must win a parliamentary seat and a seat in the Upper House (the Senate). Therefore it looked as though the Flemish National party was facing the risk of running out of funds. Bourgeois protested in a letter to the Speaker of the House Decroo (VLD) and pointed to an anomaly in the law on party financing that gives the extreme right-wing Front National, with one parliamentary seat and one seat in the Senate but only 140,000 votes, the right to receive an allocation, whilst the N-VA, with its 200,000 votes, is not eligible for the allocation.

Initially De Croo was not about to make any concessions, but after a second letter from Bourgeois he suddenly did appear to be inclined to bring an adaptation of the law up for discussion. Political analyses in De Financieel-Economische Tijd (6 September) and De Morgen (6 September) suggest that N-VA has gone along with the CD&V’s proposal for the formation of a cartel out of financial necessity and that that need suddenly disappeared when the party had the prospect of a financial alternative in the form of an allocation. According to the newspapers it looks suspiciously as if De Croo bent under pressure from the Liberal party headquarters, be it with the knowledge of the Socialists or not. In this way the VLD would have headed off a rival for the title of largest political formation in Flanders. N-VA party chairman Geert Bourgeois denies that the party finances were decisive in the decision taken by the party executive (FF).

In the Parliament and Senate committee for electoral expenditure, there already appeared to be a majority on the Flemish side in favour of making the public financing of parties more flexible. Public financing gives EUR 125,000 per year, plus EUR 1.25 per vote. But with its 200,000 votes on 18 May, the N-VA falls short by 400,000 votes. Bourgeois complained about the discrimination in a letter to the Speaker of the Parliament and Senate. He argued that the number of directly elected senators had fallen from 106 to 40 since the law was introduced in 1989, and that the electoral law has also changed. Speaker De Croo now wants to see the law amended ‘out of a sense of justice’. The SPA also feels the same on the issue: ‘Every party that attains the electoral threshold deserves an allocation’, thinks senator Myriam Vanlerberghe. The SPA does insist, however, that the electoral systems at federal and regional level should be brought into line. A dissenting voice comes from the opposition party CD&V. They want to gear the financing regulation to the virtual distribution of seats should there have been no electoral threshold. In that case not only N-VA but also Agalev would have elected representatives and both parties, according to the CD&V, should receive an allocation.

Bourgeois can rewrite party financing himself

The Speaker of the House, Herman De Croo (VLD), has asked Geert Bourgeois, chairman and sole N-VA MP, to table a bill himself for the adaptation of party financing. Bourgeois wants to replace the condition that a party must have one directly elected representative in the House and in the Senate, with the condition that one directly elected representative in the House or the Senate suffices. Under this scheme the N-VA would be entitled to party funding but Agalev would fail to be eligible. However, CD&V wants Agalev to be awarded an allocation as well (FF).

BART EECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 10 SEPTEMBER

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Federal support for Antwerp’s chief of police

Federal Minister of the Interior Patrick Dewael (VLD) has been having discreet talks for some weeks with the city of Antwerp on the deployment of a federal crisis manager for Antwerp’s police force, which is being dogged by financial scandals. On 9 September Antwerp’s mayor Patrick Janssens (SP.A), alderman Ludo van Campenhout (VLD) and acting police chief Eddy Baelemans went to Brussels in order to examine, with Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) and Patrick Dewael (VLD), what federal support could be offered to Antwerp’s police force.

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 10 SEPTEMBER

There is now no longer talk of a federal crisis manager for Antwerp’s police. The federal government does not want a tutelage arrangement, whereby the Minister of the Interior, Patrick Dewael, would also immediately become politically responsible for the problems in Antwerp’s police force. Therefore it was clearly stated yesterday that Antwerp has to solve the problems in its police force itself. The federal government thus does not want to get overly involved in the Antwerp horns’ nest, but neither does it want to sit idly on the sidelines looking on. Hence the option to send a federal manager, who should solely deal with the management and personnel policy in Antwerp’s police force. At the end of the meeting Mayor Janssens confirmed that Antwerp would for the most part have to solve the problems in its police force itself. However he also revealed that Antwerp was still asking the federal government to support Antwerp’s police chief Baelemans by appointing someone with, for example, expertise in management and personnel policy. ‘We don’t want a watchdog, but a sounding board,’ was how police chief Baelemans put it. What federal government to support Antwerp’s police force.

A report by the Generate Inspectorate of Local and Federal Police shows that the former Antwerp police chief Luc Lamine was responsible for a ‘peculiar’ type of management. Bonuses for ‘recallability’ (availability outside duty hours) and ‘research’ (among detectives) were used to flesh out salaries improperly. Some officers notched up an incredible number of overtime hours. Police cars were used for private purposes, at a time when there was a chronic shortage of vehicles. But above all, Lamine is accused of allegedly tinkering with the crime figures. For example in 2002 he allegedly insisted that a number of reports that had come in late not be included, and the crime statistics be closed in January instead of February, ‘because a small rise can be sold to the local council more easily’ (Het Laatste Nieuws and De Standaard, 9 September). The Vlaams Blok seized on these so-called manipulations to call for the resignation of the security alderman Dirk Grootjans (VLD). Lamine denies that he tinkered with the figures. From 2002 it was decided that the figures would be closed in January and, so he says, the political establishment was aware of this, as was confirmed by former burgomaster Leona Detiège (SPA). Mayor Patrick Janssens and acting police chief Eddy Baelemans announced in any case that they would be breaking with the past. Baelemans has proposed a number of measures designed to ensure that the police force is managed more efficiently. He also presented favourable crime figures for the first seven months of 2003. Indeed, recorded crime fell by 12%.

GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN • 9 SEPTEMBER

In the period in question, the police force recorded 31,358 offences as compared to 35,696 in 2002. The fall is attributable, to the tune of two-thirds, to the fall in car crime. The number of car thefts and thefts from cars fell by a third. The roadworks on the Leien (the access avenues into the city) mean that it is difficult to park and there are also far fewer cars in the city, meaning less car-related crime. The number of violent thefts accounts for a further 7.3% of the fall. The reason for this is to be found in a new photography system, that is able to identify potential offenders more quickly. Judges in juvenile courts have also introduced a system of house arrest for offending minors. At crucial times they have to stay at home and off the streets. A 5.8% proportion of the fall was due to a smaller number of snatch-and-run type thefts (down from 2,859 to 2,613).

What did rise, however, was ‘assault and battery’, up 4.5% (2,660 offences in 2003). Half of these incidents occurred in pubs, in districts such as De Coninckplein, the Sint-Jansplein, the Bredabaan or the Waalse en Vlaamse Kaai. House break-ins were also up, by 2.3%. Baelemans puts this down to organised groups. The number of bicycle thefts also rose (+13.4%), as did shop thefts (+10.5%). However, the police chief warned against euphoria: ‘The last quarter of every year sees a rise in crime because it gets dark earlier. And then you’ve got the end-of-year shopping period, which attracts a lot of lawbreakers.’

www.antwerpen.be

INCOME OF STOCK EXCHANGE TAXES (IN MILLION EUROS)

SOURCE: TIJD GRAPHICS
**BUDGET**

**Van Mechelen smooths ruffled feathers over Flemish budget**

**FF EDITOR**

Just before the drafting of the budget, for which the Government of Flanders will go into conclave on Sunday 14 September, Minister for the Budget Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) sent out a number of reassuring signals in the Flemish Parliament’s budget committee. He guaranteed that there would not be any major round of savings, even though there is a good EUR 400 million less in the coffers than at the same time last year. The goal remains the budget surplus of EUR 307 million that was assumed by the High Council for Finance. The collective labour agreements in the education and welfare sectors will not be tampered with, and neither will the measures aimed at doing away with waiting lists for the disabled. Because employment has absolute priority, he promised Employment Minister Renat Landuyt (SP.A) a budget for his plans to offer in-depth career counselling to all unemployed persons who have been out of work for more than three months. Where he does want to make savings is something he is less clear on, although he does mention expensive government campaigns and studies, saying that the ministers of the Government of Flanders should not commission any such campaigns or studies at least until after next year’s elections.

He again recalled that the federal authorities still have to pay Flanders some EUR 221 million, since the parameters (inflation and gross national income) for the payment of the federal funds to Flanders were reviewed in Flanders’ favour. They had to be reviewed last year, too, but then it turned out that they were to Flanders’ disadvantage, rather than EUR 200 million. The difference between these reviews provided Van Mechelen with an explanation for the EUR 400 million cash discrepancy between last year and this year.

**PORTS AND DOCK WORKERS**

**Port authority officials opposed to 24-hour dock workers’ strike**

Dock workers downed tools in all Flemish ports on 9 September for an hour during each shift, to protest at the liberalisation of dock handling work. They are opposed to the introduction of self-handling - the loading and unloading of ships by the ships’ own crews, which is what European Commissioner Loyola De Palacio and the European Council of Ministers want to make possible. This would mean that the 9,000 or so Belgian dock workers would lose their protected status, as provided for in the Law-Major. But the European Parliament toned down the Council’s proposal a few months ago in a new proposal that introduces an obligation to obtain a permit for self-handling. Port authorities have to issue these permits, listing the social and employment conditions.

Flemish MEPs played a major role in bringing this directive into being. As a result of this, not so much would change for Belgian dockers. The reconciliation proceedings between Council and Parliament, which should lead to a joint proposal, start on 16 September. In order to put pressure on the negotiators, the dockers are planning a 24-hour strike on 29 September, which is anything but to the liking of the port authorities (FF).

**MARC DE ROO • DE FINANCIELE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 11 SEPTEMBER**

In Belgium, port employers and dock workers have always formed a front against the liberalisation of dock work. But that front appears to be on its last legs. At a press conference yesterday, the Employers’ Association of the Belgian Ports and the Flemish Ports Association clearly let it be known that they did not agree with the trade unions’ decision to organise a 24-hour strike on 29 September. ‘We are wholly behind the unions’ demands. But it is incomprehensible that the unions should be holding another 24-hour strike,’ says Robert Restiau, director of the Flemish Ports Association. ‘This will be the fifth in the space of a year. What is more, it is in the Flemish ports that strikes always receive greatest support. In most other European ports dock workers have been much less willing to take strike action. A one-day strike means a loss of EUR 1 million for the goods handlers, but there are also the losses for the customers, the logistics sector, the shippers, and so on’. ‘The worst thing is the loss of image for Flemish ports’, says Jan Pellens, chairman of the Flemish Ports Association. ‘Various shipping companies have already indicated that they will divert traffic to other ports. They’ve seen that the 24-hour strikes can count on much greater support in the Flemish ports than in the rest of Europe’. ‘We feel aggrieved’, says Marino Vermeersch, chairman of the Employers’ Association of the Belgian Ports. ‘A serious blow is being dealt to the many years of peaceable industrial relations. A meeting is scheduled for 30 September to begin the talks on the collective labour agreement, but we’ll have to see whether it will be possible for those talks to start in the prevailing atmosphere. We’re very concerned. What if the Council rejects the Parliament’s amendments? What if there’s no directive? Will we then have an escalation of 24-hour strikes?’

www.portofantwerp.be
www.portofghent.be
www.portofzeebrugge.be

**SN BRUSSELS AIRLINES**

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(Source: OBA)
**ECONOMY AND CULTURE**

**FOREIGN TRADE**

Ceyssens with Flemish delegation to Saint Petersburg

The Russian economy needs improved efficiency, and that is where Flemish companies can help.

Flemish Foreign Policy and Economic Affairs Minister, Patricia Ceyssens (VLD), left for Saint Petersburg in Russia, on 7 September, with a delegation from the Flanders Export Promotion Agency (Export Vlaanderen), with the aim of breathing new life into Flemish trade relations with the city. Coincidence or not, one week later a sizable Dutch trade delegation will also arrive in the city. The minister is also using the opportunity to inaugurate the Rubens Room - restored with Flemish funding - in the world famous Hermitage Museum (FF).

PETER DE BACKER • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 9 SEPTEMBER

**PATRIMONIUM**

Restoration in Hermitage with Flemish funds

The popular, well-filled Rubens Room was in particularly urgent need of a facelift.

With its 22 paintings and 19 sketches, the Hermitage has the largest Rubens collection in the world, after the Rubenshuis in Antwerp. Some of these works are exhibited with works by lesser gods such as Christoffel Jeger, Jan Widdouck and Lucas Vorsteman, in the Rubens Room. However, the room was in a terrible state: there were cracks and damp patches on the ceiling, the stuccowork was flaking away, the parquet flooring was worn and the ultraviolet rays entering through the windows threatened to do the paintings irreparable damage. Flemish sent its experts to Saint Petersburg, and a restoration plan was worked out together with the local and UNESCO specialists. That plan provided not only for the embellishment of the Rubens Room and the adjoining Van Dyck and Frans Snyders Room, but also the restoration of the paintings. Since Rubens is extremely popular, there was a desire to get the job done as quickly as possible. However, it was not until 2003, coincidentally the city's three hundredth anniversary, for which President Putin, a native of Saint Petersburg, pulled out the financial Stops, that the process was completed. On 8 September Flemish Minister Ceyssens had the honour of cutting the traditional ribbon to open the restored room, together with the manager of the Hermitage. 'Rubens is a very great artist,' said Professor Michael Pjotrovsky, with satisfaction. 'His room must be in good condition. I therefore thank all Flemings for their support.' He added that his museum is the greatest promoter of the Flemish Masters, because the Russian Rubenses are regularly taken on tour internationally. The Hermitage has lent major works to Barcelona, Somerset House in London, and Lille, where a major Rubens exhibition will be the showpiece of the Cultural Capital of 2004. The result is there for all to see: the walls have been given a warm terracotta color, the windows have been fitted with screens, and there is a new parquet floor. Masterpieces such as Bacchus, Roman Charity and The Union of Earth and Water have been hung according to a modern security system.

NICA BROUCKE • DE MORGEN • 10 SEPTEMBER

www.export.vlaanderen.be

www.hermitagemuseum.org
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- **5 to 20 September:** Dambe Festival (Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso), Zuiderpark, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpark.be
- **10 to 17 September:** Meg Stuart/ Damaged Goods, Visitors only, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: 02/201.59.59 www.kaaitheater.be
- **13 September:** Happening of the Festival of Flare, Ode Gand, with House, Music, Abida Parveen (Pakistan) Erkan Ogur (Turkey), Philip Catherine (Belgium), Mafalda Arnaud (Portugal), Harem Fasi (Turkey), Tambours de Gara (Burkina Faso), Oulaad Bambaara (Morocco) Warner & Consort (The Netherlands) Don Fiasco (Belgium), Adeza (Ghana), Gamelan ensemble (Balinese), Acordone with Marco Beasley and Pino Di Vittorio (Italy), Enoch Arden (Belgium), Théâtre Malengreau (Belgium) Kontraste Köln (Duitsland) Savall Jordi (Spain), 2 generations Kuyken (Belgium) Ensemble Explorations with Roel Diettens and Frank Bracy (Lisbon/Franc & Gall) (B) and OXalys (Belgian); info: www.festival.be
- **13 September:** Opening Party De Vooruit with Bal Modern. Das erste Wiener Gummieseorchestor, Senor Conout, De Vooruit, Gent; info: www.vooruit.be
- **14 September:** 11 Gardellino with Bach, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **16 September:** The Cramps, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **16 September:** Klaus Mertens/Bob van Asperen with Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- **19 September:** Anima Etarna plays Liszt, Flagey, Brussels; info: 02/641.10.20 www.flagey.be
- **19 and 20 September:** Hashirigaki by Heiner Goebbels, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **27 September:** Andreas Keller and Maria Husmann (soprano), compositions by JS Bach, G. Kurtag, Flanders Opera, Gent; info: www.festival.be
- **18 September:** Ensemble Nuove Musiche with Thomas Fröhauf; St. Martinskerk, Herzele, www.festival.be
- **18 September:** Brucknerorchestor Lintz, Ensemble Joeri Basij met conducted by Dennis Russell Davis, symphony no. 4 by Bruckner and Kantjijel, Vom Winden bei end, St. Baafs kathedraal, Gent; info: www.festival.be
- **19 September:** Prometeus Ensemble, compositions by Schumann and Reinecke, SSK, Sint-Niklaas; www.festival.be
- **19 September:** The Tallis Scholars conducted by Peter Philips, compositions by Allegri and Byrd, St. Baafs kathedraal, Gent; info: www.festival.be
- **19 and 20 September:** Amgoud, Second Album!, dance, De Vooruit, Gent; info: 09/267.28.28 www.vooruit.be
- **20 September:** 50 years Django Reinhardt with Koen, Waso and Dajo De Cauter, Patrick Saussois and Daniël Colin, De Werf, Bruges; info: 050/33.05.29
- **20 September to 4 October:** Luisa Miller by G. Verdi, director: Guy Joosteen, Flanders Opera, Antwerp; info: 07/22.02.02 www.vlaamseopera.be
- **20 September:** Defteons, Brabantal, Leuven; info: 0900/26060
- **20 September:** Bruce Cockburn, Anciennel Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24
- **21 September:** Hommage à Brel, Filip Jodens and Jean Corti; Stadschouwburg, Bruges; info: www.west-vlaanderen.be
- **21 September:** Jewish Soul Music, Duo Roosenklemmers, Kieszer music, Konterdankklaar, Ostend; info: www.west-vlaanderen.be
- **21 September:** Mozart & Schubert by Arco Baleno Ensemble, Foyer Stadschouwburg, Bruges; info: www.west-vlaanderen.be
- **21 September:** Universum, Ernesto Arrendell & Zoumana Diarra (percussion), Magdalenaalza, Bruges; info: www.west-vlaanderen.be
- **23 September:** Hudson Wayne/Stephanie Borisova/Pavel FAJT, DJ Kira-Kira, Avant Etoiles Polaires, Festival about polar regions (Canada, Iceland, Lapland), De Vooruit, Gent; info: 09/267.28.28 www.vooruit.be

**EXPO**

- **From 22 March to 17 January:** Jacques Brel, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Schildknaapstraat 50, Brussels; reservation required; info: www.jacquesbrel.be 02/511.10.20
- **Until 28 September:** 2003 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, Dries Sorensen, Henk Visch, Antony Gormley and others; info: coastal tourist offices www.beaufort.be
- **Until 28 September:** Marines in confrontation: Seascapes in painting: PMMK, Oostende; info: 059/70/11/99 www.pmmk.be
- **Until 17 August:** Fatal women 1860-1910, exhibition, KM SK, Antwerp; info: 03/242.04.16 www.antwerpen.be/cultuur/kmska
- **Until 28 September:** Jan Fabre, Searching for Utopia, exhibition, Zwart Huis, Knokke; info: 050/61.36.65
- **Until 9 November:** Guided by Heroes, exhibition, Z 33, Hasselt
- **Until 21 September:** Art on Cows, Open Air Exhibition, City Centre, Brussels; info: www.cows.be
- **Until 18 December:** The museum evenings, every Thursday; www.museum-umvereniging.be
- **Until 26 October:** Maya-textile, mirror of a world vision, ethnographical museum, Antwerp; info: 03/220.87.79
- **Until 9 November:** L’Amour toujours, Wedding pictures from the 20th Century in Antwerp, Museum van Volkskunde, Antwerp; info: 03/248.15.77
- **Until 28 September:** Searching for Utopia, exhibition by Jan Fabre, Het Zwarte Huis, Knokke-Heist; info: 050/61.35.65
- **Until 11 September:** 30 November: Urban Dranach and photo and film exhibition on urban life, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **6, 7, 13 and 14 September:** O pen air exhibition Art & Zwalm 2003 (south of Ghent), Flemish and Catalan artists; info: 09/360.65.20 www.kunst-en-zwalm.be
- **Until 2 November:** Fashion, evening and party dress, exhibition, CC, Knokke-Heist; info: 050/60.40.430
- **Until 28 March:** Genovanversaeviceversa, exhibition about Fashion, Antwerp and Genova, Fashion Museum, Antwerp; info: 03/470.27.70 www.momu.be
- **Until 9 November:** John Isaacs (UK), exhibition with sculptures, installations and video-shows, CC, Bruges; www.west-vlaanderen.be
- **19 to 28 September:** Eurantica Antwerp, antiques fair, Bouwcentrum, Antwerp; info: www.eurantica.be

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