1,000 Jobs, no-one can say no to that

The reactions to the plans of the courier firm DHL Express to expand their site at Zaventem are cautious. Almost all parties feel that doubling the number of night flights, which is what the expansion will involve, above Brussels and the surrounding area is not a viable option. After all, DHL Express is responsible for two-thirds of all night flights. Relocating to another airport therefore seems to be the alternative. Bierset airport near Liège is then the best option, especially from a political point of view. In mid-September Premier Verhofstadt was heavily criticised when he unveiled a plan for a second national airport. He must have known more about DHL’s plans at the time, says De Morgen. Suddenly his plan looks much more realistic (FF).

RUUD GOOSENS • DE MORGEN • 12 DECEMBER

In the short term there will be a thousand extra jobs, in the slightly longer term some four thousand extra jobs, so claimed government leaders yesterday. But can that be reconciled with the expansion plan on which Federal Mobility Minister Bert Anvaux (Spirit) has worked on in recent months? And after such an expansion can DHL still remain within the limit of 25,000 night flights a year? ‘If Belgium wants to remain a logistical hub, they will simply have to relocate,’ was the word in Wetstraat 16 (the prime minister’s office, ed.). The government has therefore asked airport operator BIAC to submit a study with alternatives by Monday. This must present a number of options, which can then be put to DHL. No minister is inclined to lose a couple of thousand jobs in these economically lean times. The speculation over alternatives to Zaventem began immediately yesterday. One thing quickly became clear: Ostend is not an option. Very quickly there were only three possibilities: Chièvres, Bierset and Charleroi. In any case considerable investments will be required to turn these regional airports into a viable alternative. On a purely technical level Chièvres would have the best chance, but Bierset appears more interesting from a political viewpoint. This last airport is close to the linguistic border and could therefore create jobs for both Flemings and Wallonians. Also, Bierset is already a freight airport.

www.dhl.be
www.spreadingsplan.be

INTRODUCTION

The banks will play a crucial role in the announced fiscal amnesty. Dexia has already taken the lead and begun organising information sessions. And these seem to be a great success. Thousands of interested people have already signed up. The bank is stressing that it is providing neutral information in the sessions and is not adopting a stance. The business magazine Trends (11 December) hopes the bank means what it says, but nevertheless feels that it is sending out an ambiguous, even misleading message with its advertising campaign. ‘Do you want to know more about the one-off liberating return? Then go and have a chat with Dexia. And be assured we will observe the confidentiality of the confessional. Excuse banking secrecy’ reads the text. According to the weekly magazine, this hides the following implicit message: ‘Should you still decide not to declare your black or grey money, no problem, it will stay safely hidden in our safe’. The magazine feels that by doing this Dexia is trying to have the best of both worlds and in addition to the repentant is also trying to attract the hardened tax-evader. The fact that the bank is continuing to brandish so-called banking secrecy is close to deception of the public, the magazine feels. There is simply no such thing as banking secrecy. At most there is a duty to discretion, which the banks must observe. After all, as soon as there is a reasonable suspicion that a mechanism has been set up to evade taxes the tax authorities can request information on the customer. The judgment of a court in Ghent on 26 November last illustrates this clearly. In this judgment, KBC Bank was ordered to pay damages of one million euros a day if it refused to provide the taxman with information on certain customers. The case involved constructions that were set up with the active support of KBC employees to evade advance levies. Trends claims this is not exceptional. For years banks provided such dubious services and at the same time continued to promise their customers confidentiality, purely out of commercial considerations. The magazine believes it is high time they stopped this and advises the banks to send out only one single message when providing information on the fiscal amnesty, namely that they can count only on a 100% guaranteed redemption if they make use of this fiscal amnesty. That is an absolute condition for the banks themselves to claim absolution of sins, the magazine believes.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

WWW.DE-MORGEN.BE

www.focusonflanders.be

FOCUS ON FLANDERS
THE DUTCH SPEAKING PART OF BELGIUM
PRESS REVIEW

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Weapons deliveries divide Flemish Government

Because under the previous government Flemish ethical objections and Walloon mercantile interests came into direct conflict for the umpteenth time in a weapons export file - this time to Nepal - one of the first decisions taken by the Verhofstadt II government was to transfer power over the export of weapons to the regions. This should guarantee greater government stability at Federal level and give Flanders the chance to implement a more ethically inspired policy in this area. But so far there has been little sign of a Flemish policy. In the absence of a Flemish weapons decree and own manned services Flemish Minister Patricia Ceyssens (VLD), who is responsible for supplying export licences to Flemish weapons manufacturers, still has to stick to the Federal Weapons Act and obtain her information from Federal services. Flemish MP and former minister-president Luc Vanden Brande (CD&V) also criticised the headstrong attitude of Minister Ceyssens, whom he alleged granted weapons licences without consulting her colleagues. Ceyssens responded immediately. She did consult with colleagues, but confidentially, she claimed. Her colleague Sannen (Groen!) confirmed this in De Morgen (6 December). Finally there appears to be anything but unanimity in the Flemish Government and the Flemish Parliament on what export policy to adopt. The VLD feels that the economic interest of Flanders must take precedence. SPA-Spirit and Groen! believe that priority must go to human rights.

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE TIJD • 6 DECEMBER

An appeal is being made to the Federal Government’s Economic Affairs Department to be able to assess whether or not export demands relate to weapons. Certainly in Flanders this is a tricky question, because Flemish industry makes many ‘dual use’ products. In other words: products with civilian applications that can also be used by the military. This is the case for a great many chemical products exported from Flan-
**ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT**

**AVIATION**

**DHL wants to further expand Zaventem activities**

Not thirty, but sixty DHL aircraft would take off each night. According to Mobility Minister Bert Anciaux, that is madness.

The management of the courier firm DHL has prepared an investment plan to expand activities at its European base in Zaventem. A decision will have to be taken on this plan in the first half of 2004. Zaventem is the site of the courier firm’s European Hub (sorting centre) and international co-ordination centre. The plan would create 1,000 new jobs, bringing the number of DHL workers at Zaventem to 3,500. But the plan also involves doubling the number of night flights over Brussels and the surrounding districts. Not thirty, but sixty DHL aircraft would take off each night. According to Mobility Minister Bert Anciaux, that is madness (FF).

RONALD MEEUS • DE MORGEN • 11 DECEMBER

Mobility Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit) yesterday assuaged the concern of a number of airline companies, among them DHL, over the distribution plan for night flights by pointing out that the flight routes could be diverted depending on the weather conditions. But now there is a chance that in the future DHL may well not have thirty flights a night but almost sixty, that could also have repercussions for the agreement. ‘Doubling the number of night flights is madness,’ reacted Anciaux. ‘I believe employment is vital, but I wouldn’t change the distribution plan at all. The Brussels area is limited to 25,000 flights a year, there’s no room for expansions of this size.’

DHL recently invested heavily in its fleet: it bought 34 Boeing 757SF freight aircraft, which according to Commercial Director De Buck create up to 50% less noise pollution than the aircraft currently used by the firm. A subsequent phase in the plan would be to expand activities at the airport. According to De Buck, the preference is for Zaventem, but a move to other airports where DHL has a presence, such as Leipzig, Cologne, Bergamo, East Midlands or Copenhagen, is not being precluded. ‘Zaventem has massive added value for us,’ says De Buck. ‘The capacity is fantastic, we can shift a large proportion of our freight on commercial flights, and we can find plenty of competent workers here. But the discussion on night flights above Brussels will clearly play a major role in the decision.’

Anciaux is promising to examine the alternatives together with DHL.

WWW.DHL.BE

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**NIGHT FLIGHTS**

**Brussels' opposition makes little impression**

Both Anciaux and Premier Verhofstadt seem little worried by the threats from Brussels.

The Minister-President of the Brussels Region, Daniël Ducarme (MR), and his Environment Minister, Didier Gosuin (MR), have reacted with irritation to the agreement that an agreement has been reached in the Federal Government over the spreading of night flights. They feel that the agreement was reached ‘in a rush’, under pressure from the courts, and maintain that Brussels is getting more than its fair share of noise. They want to prove this by setting up a separate noise register. As soon as this is evident in black and white, Brussels residents’ committees and action groups from the Eastern Periphery will take legal action, they are threatening. After all, they believe that as things now stand, the Federal Government is following a minority of tough-talkers from the Northern Periphery. On Friday 5 December there was another incident in the Chamber between the Francophone hardliner Olivier Maingain (FDF Parliamentary Party within MR) and Mobility Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit). Things even went so far that Maingain filed a motion of no confidence against Anciaux. It is extremely unusual for a member of a government party to do such a thing. Nevertheless, both Anciaux and Premier Verhofstadt seem little worried by the threats from Brussels (FF).

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 6 DECEMBER

In the end it seems that Brussels’ objections are having little effect on Bert Anciaux. The Minister refers to the last sentence of Ducarme and Gosuin’s announcement. In this they say that the agreement ‘is a temporary decision that will have to be discussed again over a sufficiently long period once the noise register has been fully assessed and validated’. Anciaux concludes from this that Brussels will indeed accept the agreement. ‘The Brussels MR will change his mind, just give him a little more time.’

In the VRT programme Villa Politica Premier Verhofstadt showed himself to be a supporter of the same theory. He labelled the comments of the Brussels MR muscle-flexing several months before the elections. The MR has come out firmly against night flights.

WWW.SPREIDINGSPLAN.BE
WWW.FLANDEDISPERSION.BE

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focus on FLANDERS • 6 December - 12 December • Number 43
Senate approves immigrant voting rights, VLD goes to Court of Arbitration

On 11 December the plenary session of the Senate has voted the MR proposal for the introduction of immigrant voting rights. The proposal has been approved by a majority of the Flemish SP.A-Spirit cartel, the two dissident VLD-senators Vande Casteele and Vankrunkelsven and - apart from the Front National - all Francophone parties. Now it goes to the Chamber’s Home Affairs Committee and finally to the entire Chamber. The proposal can hardly be called far-reaching. The conditions the text imposes on immigrants in order to be able to participate are too strict for that. The right to vote is limited to local elections, and immigrants must have lived in Belgium for five years, first register, then sign a declaration that they will abide by a number of fundamental freedoms and the Constitution, and they themselves cannot be elected. But the opponents are not giving up the fight. Especially the governing VLD is burning with fighting spirit. VLD Chairman Karel De Gucht announced in Het Nieuwsblad op Zondag (7 December) that as soon as the act has been voted on in the Chamber, his party will ask the Court of Arbitration for the bill to be rescinded on grounds of discrimination. Immigrants will get the right to vote, but obligatory attendance will continue to apply for Belgians, argues De Gucht. Not only coalition partner SP.A, but also opposition parties the CD&V and N.V.A have condemned the VLD’s stance (FF).

HANNES CATTEBEKE • DE MORGEN • 8 DECEMBER

Coalition partner SP.A is not concerned by his comments, but it does find them ‘insipid’. ‘Strange that a chairman of a democratic party is not prepared to submit to parliamentary democracy,’ giberse Senate Parliamentary Party Leader Myriam Vanlerberghe (SP.A). ‘But we’re not worried by the VLD’s threat. The Court of Arbitration will never rescind the act. De Gucht believes the bill is discriminating because immigrants will have the right to vote and Belgians a duty to vote, but we’ve adopted exactly the same procedure as for EU citizens.’ At no stage has the Court of Arbitration commented on the matter,

Pension or benefit paid on bank account

From April next year disabled and retired people who draw a pension or benefit for the first time will have their money paid into their bank account. No more waiting for the postman to deliver their money. The measure is intended to make postmen’s jobs safer. Although the number of attacks on post offices and postmen has dropped, the system remains unsafe, says Premier Verhofstadt (VLD). Pensioners who still wish to receive their money by post can submit a request to that effect. For the 410,000 pensioners and disabled people who currently receive their money via the postman, nothing will in principle change. But the government will try and encourage them to switch to the new system through an awareness-raising campaign. This measure will also benefit the Treasury: after all, transfers benefit for the first time will have their money paid into their bank account.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE BUDGET WELFARE AND PUBLIC HEALTH 12.42% OF FLEMISH BUDGET OVER THE SECTORS

- Flemish fund for social integration and disabled persons
- Flemish fund for infrastructure
- Child and family
- Youth assistance
- Care fund
- Other

SOURCE: DE MORGEN

Opinion

The VLD is behaving like a bad loser. De Gucht and Co. believe they are fighting a lost cause. But to keep up appearances among their supporters, they do not want to give in. In this discussion over immigrant voting rights is likely to drag on for several months, and it may well affect the election campaign. In this way the VLD hopes to inflict electoral damage on the SP.A with immigrant voting rights, which are not actually very popular in Flanders. There was a time when the CVP opposed the abortion act just as stubbornly. At the next elections the Christian Democrats suffered a crushing defeat. The VLD would be better to learn its lesson and follow the good advice of its own media advisor Noël Slangen: settle the matter of immigrant voting rights as quickly as possible without a great deal of debate and then get on with the next issue on the agenda. Otherwise the only party to benefit will be the most extreme - the Vlaams Blok.
Results of conference must create economic basis

According to Minister-President Bart Somers (VLD), it was never the intention to strive for a signed agreement

BART HAECK • DE TIDJ • 10 DECEMBER

‘Neither employers nor workers are in jubilant mood. Nevertheless, they will have to admit that this is the right way. This is the only way a government can provide an incentive to resolve the structural problems of the economy. This text contains the inspiration for each Flemish party for the next legislature,’ claims Bart Somers. The proximity of the Flemish elections in June stamped its mark on the conference. Bart Somers called for concrete measures, which the Flemish Government can still introduce before June. To prove that these will not remain hollow words, everything will be registered on a scoreboard. This morning, senior civil servants of the Flemish administration are working on the final text. They will produce a timetable for implementing the proposals. They will also do this for all proposals made before the conference began. Together with social partners, the Flemish Government will assess how things are progressing on three occasions. The approach of the trade unions at the end of last week resulted in their demands gaining considerably more weight in the final days of negotiations. According to the social partners, the budget is split roughly 50/50 between employer and trade union demands. Of the 114 million euros the Flemish Government paid out for the conference, 33 million euros is going to support for the unemployed, 14 million euros to service cheques for day care and 5 million euros to training. Exports, risk capital and the free starters’ administration will receive 10 million each. The budget for innovation is 20 million. ‘The text’s strength is that it is budgeted for 2004,’ said the Flemish Minister-Vice-President, Renaat Landuyt (SPA). The Flemish Employers’ Association (Vlaams Economisch Verbond, VEV) was largely satisfied with the energy costs, although the Flemish Government’s promise remains vague. An investigation will be carried out to compare the energy costs of Flemish businesses with those in neighbouring countries. The efforts of the Flemish Government to make environmental charges tax-deductible can also count on the support of the VEV.

www.vev.be

Flemish government yields to disabled sector

On Friday 5 December 3,000 employees of disabled institutions and members of disabled organisations marched through Brussels to protest against the deficit of the Flemish Fund for Persons with a Handicap, which pays the sector’s wages (See Focus 42). Minister-President Somers (VLD) attributes the fact that the Flemish Government had not foreseen this deficit in its budgetary control to the late notification it received from the Fund and warned the Fund to make provisions in its budgetary control to the late notification it received from the Fund. The Fund cannot enter amounts for the following year, since the government sees these as surpluses and cream them off. As a result, around 95 million euros left the coffers of the Flemish Fund and returned to the Flemish Government between 1995 and 2000, De Brabander stated. The Flemish Government climbed down and largely complied with the sector’s demands (FF).

SECTOR OF DISABLED

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 6 DECEMBER

The Flemish Government is aware that the stunt it tried to pull last week - transferring debt to the fund that has to pay the money out - will not work. The Government then approved a declaration in principle in which it states, among other things, that it will introduce a regulation oblige itself (and in particular its successors) henceforth to have sufficient funds available from the beginning of the year. It also recognises the problem of arrears and promises a ‘reasonable processing time for files’. It submits to the ‘recommendation’ of the Auditor’s Office that arrears must henceforth be paid no later than ‘the end of the second year following the year of service in question’. Some institutions are still waiting on arrears from 1999. By so doing it is complying with almost all the demands for ‘better management’ recently expressed by the sector. However, the Government did state that it really cannot go any further than paying 60% of the amount of salaries in December; it will pay the remaining 40% at the beginning of January next year. It reiterated all its promises concerning the extension of care capacity and the abolition of waiting lists, next year. There are sufficient funds for this in the 2004 budget, it repeated.

www.vlafo.be
Specialists' advice on introduction of constituencies brings little clarity

Will there be provincial constituencies for the regional and European elections of 13 June 2004 or not? That is a question that will hopefully be answered before long, as the first discussions on the composition of electoral lists within parties are due to begin shortly. The Flemish-national N-VA has prepared a bill on the introduction of provincial constituencies that is backed by the Liberals and Socialists. But it appears less and less likely that the proposal will obtain the required two-thirds majority in the Flemish Parliament. After all, this can only be achieved if the Vlaams Blok votes yes with the SPA, VLD and N-VA. The CD&V will certainly vote no, and Groen! may abstain. The Vlaams Blok is imposing conditions to which the majority parties will never agree. The VLD and SPA believe that if things do not succeed in the Flemish Parliament, the matter must be taken to the Federal Parliament. There is a chance that it will be approved there by simple majority. But even specialists cannot agree on whether this move is constitutional, as was evident from a hearing in the Flemish Parliament on 8 December. Professor Van Orshoven of the KU Leuven doubts that the Federal Parliament has the power to introduce provincial constituencies. His colleagues Veny (University of Ghent) and Vuye (University of Antwerp) agree that it can. Vuye also claims that the Flemish Parliament may introduce the electoral threshold, while his colleague Van Orshoven recommends doing this at Federal level. What is also certain is that tinkering with constituencies less than a year before the elections is in breach of the Code of Good Practice in Election Matters, which was drawn up by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. But according to Professor Jan Wauters of the KU Leuven, the Code is not binding (FF).

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 9 DECEMBER

transitional provision in the Special Act of 16 July 1993 supplementing the Federal State structure. This states: ‘The [Federal] Act establishes the constituencies for the first elections for the Flemish Council [now the Flemish Parliament, ed.], provided the Flemish Council does not adopt a decree for the next elections.’ According to Professor Van Orshoven (KUL), that means that the Federal Government can approve an act on the Flemish elections once and once only. Otherwise it would have read: ‘legislator’ instead of ‘Act’. The provision is a transitional one that lapsed with the first Flemish elections, he claims. Flanders therefore has the power to take decisions on provincial constituencies. Professor Ludo Veny (RUG) does not agree. According to him, ‘Act’ simply refers to the Federal Government. According to Veny, this can still decide on constituencies, since Flanders has not yet adopted a decree on this matter. The discussion on the electoral threshold centres on an article in the Special Act of 8 August 1980 on the Reform of Institutions. According to the text, Flanders has the power to decide how many votes a party must obtain to be allowed to take part in the grouping of electoral lists. That is the division of votes within a province that remain after the directly won seats have been allocated. According to Professor Hendrik Vuye (UA), that is de facto an electoral threshold and Flanders therefore has the power. But Van Orshoven does not agree. ‘My advice is to be extremely careful with this type of construction.’ For the electoral threshold, such caution leads down the Federal path.

Fishermen protest against new restrictions on catches

On 10 December, the European Fishing Action Group handed out around five tonnes of free fish on the quays of the Scheldt in Antwerp in protest against Europe’s plans to further cut fishing quotas and to draw the public’s attention to their problem. With this proposal, the European Commission wants to put a stop to the dramatic drop in fish stocks. Next week the fifteen fisheries ministers will meet in Brussels to discuss the quota for next year. For Flemish fishermen, the European plans mean that they will now be allowed to catch 15% less sole and 40% less plaice. The Flemish Fisheries Minister, Ludo Sannen (Groen!), wants to maintain the quota for sole (FF).

HELENA WILMET • HET VOLK • 11 DECEMBER

What the ministers decide is often a toned-down version of the European Commission’s advice, which in turn is a poor rehash of what the scientists - the biologists - recommend. These biologists, brought together in the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (Ices), observe fish stocks and decide how much can be caught to avoid fishing the North Sea dry. Thus, Ices has proposed a total ban on catching cod, but the European Council of Ministers will undoubtedly not stick to this. The European Fisheries Action Group is asking itself what the European Commission’s real objective is: to destroy Europe’s fishing industry or restore fish stocks. ‘The Commission is basing itself on the reports of biologists who carry out random samples at sea,’ says Marc Aspeslagh from the action group, ‘But these figures are anything but representative. With this action we want to send a signal to the European ministers. The fishermen have already had to give up so much. These restrictions are simply taking the biscuit.’

WWW.ICES.DK
WWW.EUROCBC.BE
WWW.EUROPA.INT/COMM/FISHERIES

focus on Flanders • 6 December - 12 December • Number 43
SN Brussels Airlines expands joint-venture with American Airlines

From next summer, SN Brussels Airlines will expand its joint-venture with American Airlines (AA). American Airlines has operated a flight between Brussels and Chicago since 1989. In May 2004 American Airlines will also begin a Brussels-New York flight for which SN will also sell tickets. Although competitors Delta Air Lines and Continental Airlines already offer flights between Brussels and New York, American Airlines believes that the joint-venture with SN provides added value. Today, AA’s customers can more easily fly on to 16 European and all the African destinations of SN from Zaventem thanks to the existing code-share agreement, says a spokesman of AA in

www.snbrusselsairlines.be

Flanders and Lille 2004 Cultural Capital

Last weekend Lille 2004 ‘Cultural Capital’ began with much celebration and an estimated half a million people on its streets. The concept of cultural capital has immediately taken on a new meaning in Lille. For the first time there will be a programme for the whole region, in which alongside ten northern French towns and cities, several of their Walloon and Flemish counterparts will play a part. Under the impetus of its mayor Stefâan De Clerck, Kortrijk, barely 35 km from the Metropolis, made a contribution with a programme of dance, music and theatre in ‘Het Kunstenland Buda’. Antwerp and Lille are jointly setting up a series of exhibitions on the Antwerp painter Rubens that will run in both cities under the flag of Lille2004Antwerpen. Our fellow countrymen Walter Van Beirendonck (fashion) and François Schuiten (comic-strip artist) are also putting their oars in and Lille Opera is putting on a production in collaboration with the Brussels Munt Theatre. Not by chance are Flemings and French towns and cities playing a part in Lille 2004. Just like Bruges and Ghent, until the fifteenth century Lille was part of the county of Flanders. Then the city lived under the Dukes of Burgundy along with the rest of Flanders and a century later became part of the realm of the Habsburgs. Only under the Sun King, Louis XIV, was the city annexed by France. The common language of the extreme north of France between Dunkirk, Lille, the Leie and the North Sea - certainly in rural areas - was Flemish until the early decades of the twentieth century, when it was gradually replaced by French. And today there is increasing economic co-operation between the Lille region and Flanders. For example, many French cross-border workers come from the unemployment-ravaged region to work in the West-Flanders textiles and carpets industry. But Mayoress Martine Aubry wants to do away with the region’s grey, somewhat dreary image. With Lille 2004 she is taking a big step in this direction (FF).

GEERT SELS • DE STANDAARD • 7 DECEMBER

Lille 2004’s sphere of intervention covers an area similar to that of Ostend to Brussels. The diagonal between the furthest points must be around 170 km. How do you get to grips with that? Artistic Director Didier Fusillier (42) says, ‘We are going to warm up with Don Giovanni, a co-production with the Muntshouwburg. Much less crazy than the name suggests are the twelve Maisons Folie, dotted here and there across the region. No longer are they pleasure houses for the darlings of the court, as in the eighteenth century, but restored properties where artists and locals can meet. These Maisons Folie are of extremely diverse origin, from former industrial premises and churches to empty schools and farmhouses. There are also three Belgian projects: the art island in Kortrijk, Saint Margaretha’s Church in Doornik and Les Arbalestriers in Bergen.

Focus on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German.

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