INTRODUCTION

In contrast to other Member States of the European Union, in Belgium the European elections are being held at the same time as the elections for the parliaments of the regions and communities on 13 June. This has created an even more tense political climate. All the more so because the result of the elections for the Flemish Parliament could well lead to a change of coalition at federal level. So it is not out of question that Belgians might be asked to go to the ballot box again this autumn – for the third time in little more than a year – even if this is not very favourable for their view of politics.

The elections are also an opportunity, we felt, to make our readers a little more familiar with the institutional maze that is the Federal State of Belgium. Focus on Flanders therefore asked several political journalists from Flemish newspapers to outline the context and history in which these elections will take place.

The successive state reforms of recent years and the compromises that Flemings and Francophones reached on each occasion go a long way to explaining the complexity of the Belgian federal model. Mark Deweerdt, political journalist with De Tijd, reveals its history and discusses the consequences for the organisation of the elections.

For the past five years Flanders has been governed by a government of Liberals, Socialists and Greens. Shortly before the election campaign the Christian Democratic opposition (CD&V) formed a ‘Flemish alliance’ with the Flemish-national N-VA that is presenting itself with tough Flemish demands. In the polls they are tipped to win. If they do win they will also demand their place in the Federal Government. Bart Eeckhout, chief of the political editorial team of De Morgen gives his view of what is at stake in these elections.

What applies to the complexity of Belgium applies a fortiori to Brussels, where Dutch- and French-speakers have found a modus vivendi and Flemish and Francophone parties take part in elections in the same constituency. But if through a shrewd exploitation of the foreigners theme a far-right Flemish party also rakes in Francophone votes, and as a result could well gain a majority in the Flemish electoral college, the region of Brussels risks becoming ungovernable. How in Heaven’s name is that possible? Luc Standaert, political journalist with Het Belang van Limburg, explains the ins and outs of the matter.

And, yes, in Flanders they seem to have almost forgotten it, but European elections are also being held. Despite the involvement of two Flemings in these European elections, who are tipped for the post of President of the European Commission, European themes have remained on the fringes of the political debate. They are lost in the Purples’ fight for survival. Whatever the next government looks like, we need not expect fundamental changes in our country’s pro-European course, says Bernard Bulcke, European correspondent with De Standaard.

You will notice, therefore, that for once this issue is not a weekly press review. Rather a convenient introduction to provide you with the missing pieces of the Belgian-Flemish puzzle.

Mark Deweerdt • political editor • De Tijd

The Flemish Community and Region in federal Belgium

A round 4.5 million Flemings are called upon to elect a new Flemish Parliament, as well as their fourteen representatives in the European Parliament, on 13 June. It will be the first time that the elections for the Flemish Parliament do not coincide with the federal elections. In 1999 the federal elections were brought forward by several weeks to take place simultaneously with the regional and European elections.

This time the election campaign could have focused more on themes over which the Flemish Parliament has authority, but up till now it has partly failed to do so. Mostly because a lot of Federal Government members are involved in the regional or European elections and the the election results may also affect the composition of the federal government (FF).
genuine federal structure, put an end to that 'double mandate'. Under the St-Michel Agreement, the Flemish Parliament (just like the Walloon Parliament, the Brussels Parliament and the Parliament of the German-Speaking Community) is elected every five years, on the day of the elections for the European Parliament. However, that would only happen for the first time in 1999, as the St-Michel Agreement allowed the next regional elections to coincide with the federal elections of 1995. Because in 1999 the federal elections were brought forward by several weeks, all elections (federal, regional and European) took place on the same day that year.

On 13 June, therefore, it will be the first time that the elections for the Flemish Parliament do not coincide with the federal elections. That should - or could - have the advantage that the election campaign will, if not exclusively then primarily, focus on topics over which the Flemish Parliament has authority. In the 1999 elections that was not the case. Then, regional policy themes were overshadowed by federal ones and were completely swept away at the end of the campaign by the so-called dioxin crisis (contamination of chicken and pig feed). Only because almost all Federal Government members are involved in the regional or European elections, however, has the campaign for and the main issue of 13 June not remained purely regional.

Powers

Federal Belgium consists of three communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three regions (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels). The regions are responsible for organising domestic government (municipalities and provinces), town and country planning, the environment, nature conservation, water policy, housing, the regional economy, employment, foreign trade, agriculture, gas and electricity distribution, public works, urban and regional transport, motorways and regional roads, ports and regional airports and scientific research.

The communities are responsible for education, culture, radio and television, healthcare, sport, family policy, youth policy, care of the elderly and tourism.

In 1980 it was decided that the Flemish Community would exercise the powers of the Flemish Region. This created a single 'Federated State' of Flanders, with one parliament (Flemish Parliament), one government (Flemish Government) and one administration. In the French-speaking part of the country no such merger occurred, and the Walloon Region and the Flemish Community each has its own parliament, government and administration.

The Flemish Parliament exercises its regulatory powers by means of decrees: regional 'acts', that apply throughout Flanders. Where community powers are concerned, the decrees also apply to Flemish residents of the Brussels Region.

Composition

The Flemish Parliament has 124 members who are elected in six electoral districts: Antwerp, Brussels, Limburg, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant and West Flanders. At the last elections there were eleven electoral districts in Flanders and the six representatives of the Brussels Flemings in the Flemish Parliament were not directly elected, but were taken from the Brussels Parliament.

At the beginning of this year the Flemish Parliament decided to enlarge the electoral districts and merge them with the provinces. In so doing it was following the example of the Chamber of Representatives, which had 'provincialised' its electoral districts for the federal elections of 18 May 2003. One hundred and eighteen of the 124 members of the Flemish Parliament are elected in the five provincial electoral districts. The distribution of the number of mandates among the provinces takes place in proportion to their population. Antwerp has the highest number of seats (33). Then come East Flanders (27), West Flanders (22) and Flemish Brabant (20). Limburg completes the list with 16 seats.

The other six members of the Flemish Parliament are elected in the Brussels-Capital electoral district. As has already been mentioned, up to now the Brussels Flemings were represented in the Flemish Parliament by six of the Flemish members of the Brussels Parliament. Because it was impractical to exercise both mandates effectively, it was decided in 2002 to elect the six Brussels members of the Flemish Parliament separately and directly.

Because the six Brussels representatives do not live in the Flemish Region they can only vote in the Flemish Parliament on matters that fall within the
jurisdiction of the Flemish Community. They cannot vote on regional matters.

Electoral threshold
To be eligible for the allocation of seats a party must have gained at least 5% of the votes in the electoral district. The decision to introduce an electoral threshold is linked to the introduction of provincial constituencies. Large constituencies make it easier for smaller parties to win a seat. To avoid fragmenting the parliament, a threshold has to be imposed which makes it more difficult to get into parliament, say the supporters of the threshold.

In the federal elections of 18 May 2003 the Flemish Greens from the Chamber and the Senate achieved the statutory electoral threshold of 5%. As a result of the electoral threshold, the N-VA won only one seat in the Chamber and the party vanished from the Senate. The electoral threshold encourages smaller parties to form an electoral alliance with a large party. After Spirit, which last year joined forces with the SPA, this time the N-VA and Vivant have hooked up with the CD&V and VLD respectively. The decision of Groen! not to join the SPA-Spirit alliance led to a rift in the party in Limburg. Compared with 1999 the voter will find more women on the lists of candidates. The parties are obliged by law to place as many women on their lists as men.

The first three candidates may not be of the same sex.
In contrast to the Federal Parliament, the Flemish Parliament cannot be dissolved. As a so-called legislative Parliament it is elected for five years, and early interim elections are not possible.

asymmetrical coalitions are difficult
For the past five years Flanders has been governed by a ‘Purple-Green’ government. Initially the coalition consisted of the VLD (Liberal), the SPA (Socialist), Agalev (Greens) and VU&ID (Democratic Flemish nationalists). In 2002 the VU&ID split into the N-VA and Spirit. While the N-VA lent its support to the opposition, Spirit formed an alliance with the SPA. At the end of last year Agalev changed its name to Groen! According to opinion polls, it is unlikely that the Purple-Greens will continue, even if Groen! achieves the electoral threshold. It looks as if the CD&V/N-VA alliance will win the elections, allowing it to form a government with both SPA-Spirit and VLD-Vivant. In theory, the Vlaams Blok will also be eligible for this, but no party is prepared to enter into a coalition agreement with the Blok.

If after five years of opposition the CD&V returns to government, it is highly likely the party will want to ‘break into’ the Federal Government. In a Federal State such as Germany it is not unusual for some Länder to have a different coalition from the confederation. In Belgium it is extremely difficult to form ‘asymmetrical’ coalitions. This has to do with the small number of ‘Federated States’ and with the fact that there are no federal, only regional parties.

An election victory for the CD&V/N-VA will almost certainly have repercussions at federal policy level. There will certainly be a different government very quickly, and perhaps also early federal elections. To avoid such situations, more and more politicians are calling for federal and regional elections to always be held on the same day, although that goes against the ‘federal logic’. Because the Regional Parliaments are elected for five years and the Federal Parliament for four years, and because the Regional Parliaments cannot be dissolved prematurely but the Federal Parliament can, the Constitution must be amended to allow ‘simultaneous’ elections.

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Everything revolves around the colour purple
The Flemish electoral battle has become a federal battle too, as many doubt whether the Federal Government can survive if its coalition partners fail to gain a majority in the Flemish Parliament on 13 June

On 13 June Belgium’s regional elections will be held alongside the European ones, barely one year after the federal elections of 18 May 2003. But from the very beginning of the election campaign the CD&V-NVA opposition has made breaking the Purple government the main issue of the elections. Every content-related proposal on education or housing therefore has to yield to this strategic consideration. The Flemish electoral battle has therefore become a federal battle too, as many doubt whether the Federal Government of Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) can survive if its coalition partners fail to gain a majority in the Flemish Parliament on 13 June. The call to have federal and regional elections held at the same time is therefore currently louder than ever (FF).

BART EECKHOUT • CHIEF OF THE POLITICAL EDITORIAL TEAM • DE MORGEN

On 13 June regional elections will be held in Belgium for the first time without there being federal elections at the same time. In the Federal Belgian State things are thus: the regional elections are held every five years (together with the European), the federal elections every four years, unless the government falls earlier. Nothing abnormal for a Federal State, but in Belgium things are a little different. For some time there has been a discussion in Flanders over the desirability of holding the regional and federal elections on a separate date. Partly because Belgium is a small country, the responsibilities of the various authorities, for example employment and the economy, become mixed up. In addition, in Belgium there are no longer any ‘national parties’, and even the Federal Government is peopled by representatives of the regional parties on both sides of the linguistic border. In the election campaign the distinction between the federal and regional levels is therefore only virtually pre-
All parties are using their federal figureheads to win the necessary votes on 13 June. Federal opposition leader Yves Leterme, Chairman of the biggest Flemish opposition party, the CD&V (Christian Democrats), is the leading candidate in his own province of West Flanders. His adversary Guy Verhofstadt heads the European list for the Liberal VLD, in his own words to have his European policy judged by the voter. Even Verhofstadt’s coalition partner, SPA-Spirit (an alliance of Socialists and progressive Flemish nationalists), is putting all its federal ministers high up the Flemish lists.

Federal government to be changed?

CD&V leader Leterme is not therefore worried about using the Flemish elections as a test for the Federal Government. If the governing parties lose (heavily) at Flemish level, the Federal Government will also have to be changed, he feels. Leterme is putting himself forward as candidate Minister-President for the Flemish Government, but feels it is desirable that if his party is part of a Flemish government it should also get a place in the federal one. However, it seems extremely doubtful that Verhofstadt and his party will simply step aside for the current opposition party. No party, however, likes the idea of letting governments with a different coalition colour take office at federal and Flemish level. If the opposition has a convincing victory in the elections in Flanders, the country risks heading towards long government negotiations and possibly even new Federal Parliament elections in the autumn. In theory, however, Catholic-Red and Catholic-Blue governments are also possible at federal level without new elections, except that the majority is then fairly narrow. A coalition of the three main classic formations - Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists, is also one of the possibilities. That in turn has the disadvantage that in Flanders only the Vlaams Blok, which is heading for a new election victory, would remain in opposition, which would give the far-right party plenty of scope to kick up a rumpus.

Leterme speaks with all the more force because his party has the wind in its sails. According to all opinion polls, the Christian Democratic opposition party will become by far the biggest in the country on 13 June. This turnaround is remarkable in itself. In last year’s federal elections the CD&V recorded another loss, and fell to a new all-time low. There were convincing gains for the governing VLD and in particular SPA-Spirit, while the third outgoing party in government, Agalev (which has now changed its name to Groen!), was swept away and failed to hold onto a single seat in the Federal Parliament. The Greens therefore have their own incentive for the elections on 13 June: simple survival. However, to do this the party has to be able to leap over the electoral threshold of 5%.

The CD&V partly has the alliance with the N-VA to thank for its resurgence, and in the same way Spirit a splitting off from the defunct Flemish-national Volkspartij. But the governing parties themselves also have any thing but flawless year behind them. Agitation over the outcome of the new elections rather paralysed the government’s work. In particular, the discussion on municipal voting rights for non-EU citizens created high levels of tension in the coalition. For a long time and ultimately in vain, the VLD was the only governing party to oppose ‘immigrant voting rights’, but that merely created discord in its own ranks and severe damage among the voting public. It even resulted in Premier Verhofstadt feeling forced to publicly say sorry in an interview for his party’s stance in the voting rights discussion.

Purple still possible?

All that makes the question of whether a Purple government is still possible after 13 June the main theme of the elections. And even this question is more complex than it appears. In Flanders the Purple parties - in other words the Liberals and Socialists - have never actually had a majority. After the last Flemish elections, in 1999, the VLD and SPA (at the time still the SP) needed two smaller governing partners to form a majority in the Flemish Parliament: Agalev (now Groen!) and the VU (since split into Spirit and the N-VA). Also in last year’s elections the VLD and SPA-Spirit it together ‘only’ obtained 47% on the Flemish side. Red and Blue are therefore quietly counting on new co-operation from Groen! Either involuntarily, if by disappearing from Parliament Groen! lowers the mathematical bar for a majority; or voluntarily, by making the difference with a few seats for the continued existence of a Purple-Green majority.

Is there not any intrinsic theme that stands out in the run-up to 13 June 2004? Indeed, there is no shortage of ideas, but there is no issue that is really dominating discussions. This is because all parties are highlighting the same matters, for which they are also proposing largely the same solutions. In the next legislature, all parties want further investment in education, care and housing, from a budgetary viewpoint the key responsibilities of the Flemish Government. One party wants at the very most to devote more money to a different priority than the competition. Another motive in the campaign is the debate on employment, labour cost cuts and tax cuts. The VLD is dominating this debate, but the SPA and CD&V are also in favour of lower labour cost.

Flemish demands

This leaves the demand for more Flemish powers - from the splitting of the bilingual constituency Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde to responsibility for justice and healthcare. This call for a new state reform is mainly being stirred up by the
opposition. However, this discussion is proof par excellence of the complexity of the different political levels in Belgium. ‘Community’ bundles of demands always surface in the regional elections, but it is actually at federal level that decisions are taken on any new state reform.

day morning”, said Stevaert. ‘Now there is clarity. Everyone now knows that the Flemish elections are also about the federal government. Even Yves Leterme, who has always been opposed to simultaneous elections, is now linking everything to everything. Let everyone therefore be consistent, and let’s have all the elections held simultaneously again, just as I have been saying for years’.

Vlaams Blok could cause Brussels’ institutional wheels to seize up

If the Vlaams Blok were to gain an absolute majority in the Flemish Brussels Parliament, no Brussels Government can be formed, since no Francophone party wants to form a government with the Blok.

Brussels is awaiting the results of the elections on 13 June with clammy hands. Will the Vlaams Blok gain an absolute majority in the smallest Parliament in Belgium, that of the Flemish in Brussels, and in so doing ultimately cripple the whole country’s institutions? Although the latest opinion polls suggest the chances of the Vlaams Blok pulling off this difficult feat have shrunk, it has forced Belgium’s politicians to face facts. With nine seats and less than 10% of the Brussels votes, the Vlaams Blok could cause Belgium’s institutional wheels to seize up (FF).

LUC STANDAERT • POLITICAL EDITOR • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG

After 13 June the Parliament of the Flemish in Brussels will have seventeen members (at present there are only eleven), but the party that has half plus one of those seats will be indispensable in the formation of the Brussels Government, as this must have a majority among both the Francophones and Flemish in Brussels. If the Vlaams Blok were to gain an absolute majority in the Flemish Brussels Parliament, no Brussels Government can be formed, since no Francophone party wants to form a government with the Blok. The fact that Brussels lies geographically in Flanders compels the state-reformers of the second half of the twentieth century to develop a very peculiar construction.

Belgium became a country with three regions and two communities (we are not counting the small German-speaking community for the moment). Regions are territory, whilst communities consist of people. The three regions are Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The two communities are the Flemings, who live mainly in Flanders, and the Francophones, who live mainly in Wallonia. And in Brussels live both Flemings and Francophones, and these two must both be able to participate in government. Which is why alongside the Brussels Parliament (actually the ‘Brussels Metropolitan Council’), with responsibility for regional matters, there is a Flemish-Brussels and a Francophone-Brussels Parliament (officially ‘Community Committee’), in which both communities manage their community responsibilities separately, and a ‘Joint Community Committee’ for the ‘bicomunity institutions’. These are institutions that serve the two communities, of which there are many in Brussels.

Protection of the Brussels Flemings

To protect the Brussels Flemings, who are estimated to number 150,000 among roughly 1 million inhabitants of Brussels, the Brussels Metropolitan Government has to include Flemish ministers and must have a political majority in each of the linguistic groups. This protection of the Brussels Flemings is not free gift, but forms a state of equilibrium with the protection of the Francophone minority in Belgium (4 million Francophones against 6 million

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Flemings). The guarantees that the Francophones enjoy at federal level (as many French-speaking as Dutch-speaking ministers in the government, alarm procedure in the Parliament, etc.) have their counterweight for the Brussels Flemings.

Blok gains votes from the francophones

The Brussels institutions were directly elected for the first time in 1989, and straight away this caused a problem: the number of Flemish candidates elected (eleven) was extremely low, lower than expected. According to the Brussels Flemings themselves that is a consequence of the fact that Brussels municipal policy is conducted almost exclusively in French, so that Flemish politicians are not sufficiently well known to the people of Brussels.

With eleven (and between 1995 and 1999 with ten) it is very difficult to man a full Parliament and a government, and questions of legitimacy also begin to be asked. On top of this is the fact that four of these eleven seats are now occupied by Vlaams Blok representatives. In the 1990s both Flemish and Francophone parties watched with distress the rise of the Vlaams Blok. In the 1999 elections the Blok became the biggest Flemish party in Brussels. That does not mean that the average Brussels Fleming is more racist than ordinary Flemings, but that the Vlaams Blok succeeded where no other Flemish party had in Brussels: it won votes from the Francophones.

Lombard Agreement

Flemings and Francophones came together and concluded the Lombard Agreement, Brussels' decodion of the Lambermont Agreement. Among other things, that provided for the expansion of the Brussels Parliament from 75 to 89 seats, 17 of which would henceforth be reserved for the Flemings, regardless of the percentage of Flemish votes in Brussels.

At the request of the Francophones a 'safety clause' was built into the Agreement. Henceforth, the Parliament of the Brussels Flemings would not only include the seventeen Flemish elected candidates, but also the five 'first' not elected. But distributed on the basis of the proportions in the Flemish Parliament, and not that of Brussels. The purpose of this was to dilute the Vlaams Blok.

Unfortunately for the inventive minds that had thrashed out the Agreement, complaints were brought before the Court of Arbitration, the supreme court charged with cutting through institutional knots. The Court of Arbitration nullified the expansion of the Flemish Community Committee. As a result, the 'anti-Blok system' was consigned to the wastepaper basket. From the Francophones side further bills for a new safety clause have been tabled in the Federal Chamber of Representatives during the past two months, but the Flemish parties want nothing to do with them so close to the elections.

Constituency Brussels Halle Vilvoorde

Does this mean that after 13 June the Vlaams Blok will have Brussels under its thumb? Until one or two polls ago it appeared so. After all, the approval in the Chamber of immigrant voting rights also caused a lot of ill-feeling among Francophones in Brussels, and because all the Francophone parties had voted for immigrant voting rights, it looked as if many Brussels Francophones would vote out of protest for the one party which everyone knows is against immigrant voting rights.

But since then another community dossier has landed on the table: the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency, an old Flemish demand which although it is in the Constitution and despite a ruling by the Court of Arbitration has still not been implemented. As a result, Francophone parties can pick up votes for their candidates in Brussels in a large part of Flemish Brabant in the federal and European elections, while Flemish parties cannot do so in Walloon Brabant. However, the efforts of a number of Flemish Brabant mayors to push through the splitting of the constituency before the elections seems to have resulted in the Brussels Francophones returning to the Francophone parties. Meanwhile, in the latest polls on voting intentions the Vlaams Blok no longer gains a majority of the Flemish Brussels Parliament seats.

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Source: De Standaard
As a small country Belgium has traditionally sailed a markedly pro-European course. And a remarkably large number of senior Belgian politicians have played a prominent role in the unification of Europe. So, European themes will occupy an important place in this country in the election campaign, you would think. But nothing is further from the truth. Although the impact of European decisions is increasing, European themes remain outside the political debate. The coincidence of the European elections with the election for the regional assemblies will again ensure that our country's European course remains almost literally 'undiscussed' (FF).

BERNARD BULCKE • EUROPEAN CORRESPONDENT • DE STANDAARD

Belgium and senior Belgian politicians have something going with Europe. Paul-Henri Spaak, Jean Rey, Etienne Davignon, Leo Tindemans, Willy De Clercq, Wilfried Martens, Karel Van Miert, Willy Claes, Jean-Luc Dehaene up to Guy Verhofstadt, all names with considerable European resonance. The former Belgian Ambassador to the European Union, Philippe de Schouteete - another such name - has a nice explanation for the European enthusiasm of Belgian politicians. He refers to the smaller size of our country, and to Belgian disunity.

The technique of compromise

The latter in particular calls for a specific method for the governing of our country. Belgian politicians are extremely well grounded in the technique of 'compromise', and at European level this benefits them greatly. It gives them a head over colleagues from other countries. In European institutions, senior Belgian politicians come across very quickly as past-masters in the devising of compromises. They very quickly recognise the territory of opposing interests and during political discussions can unravel the aspects involved more quickly than others to reconcile these interests. After all, that is just as important for European politics as it is for Belgian politics. This skill comes above all from experience of openness that a small country such as Belgium has. The formation of solid ties with other European states is more than ever, of vital importance. Our markets abroad account for more than our domestic market, especially economically. More than 60% of our economic production goes directly abroad.

It was out of pure self-interest, therefore, that our country was one of the first in Europe to enter into far-reaching agreements with other states, well before European integration got underway. The Benelux arose shortly after the Second World War, including customs union. The Belgian market was always much too small for Belgium's strong industry. That explains why within this country's economic and political elites, after the initial hesitation, agreement was quickly reached to invest fully in a pro-European policy. Public opinion meekly submitted.

Criticism of Europe in socialist campaign

It was all the more striking that in the run-up to the campaign for the European elections on 13 June, questions were asked about this European course for the first time in years. The traditional pro-European talk of the major political parties suddenly sounded less in unison. In particular the Flemish Socialists, but also their Francophone comrades, changed the traditional, pro-European tone. It was the first time in fifty years of European integration that there was even fundamental criticism of Europe, despite the Maastricht efforts of the 1990s and the Mansholt revolt of European farmers. This time the 'unilateral and over-simplified liberalisation' was attacked. 'This Europe' threatens social achievements, it was said.

This criticism grafted itself onto the general scepticism in public opinion towards the expansion of the European Union by ten new countries and the fear of the consequences of this: job losses or rising crime.

Coincidence of elections

And yet it looks as if even now the direction of policy will not fundamentally change. Worse still, even now a broad Flemish debate on Europe, which was hoped for on the occasion of a new constitutional treaty, has not at any time broken loose. This is primarily due to the coincidence of the European and regional elections. After all, on 13 June voters not only have to elect 24 new Euro-MPs. The representatives in the five Parliaments of communities and regions will also be appointed. The political parties and the media have chiefly mobilised public opinion around these elections. This is because the regions and communities have very specific responsibilities that lie 'close to the people'. They appeal more readily than questions on the number of seats in the European Parliament or the method of voting in the European Councils of Ministers. After all, the regional elections are about environmental policy, welfare, housing policy, culture, economic expansion, town and country planning and education.

In the media it is these themes that have gained the upper hand. To the

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SOURCE: DE STANDAARD
many tens of questions that were put to the voting public in the popular election programme ‘Doe de Stemtest’ (‘Take the Voting Test’) on the public broadcasting channel VRT, those on Europe could be counted on one hand.

**No change of course**

Belgium is therefore not about to change its traditional European course. How could it? There is no alternative. It is also striking that the main players in the European elections, despite the shifts in emphasis, are having trouble joining a debate on Europe. The current Premier, Guy Verhofstadt, has even ensured that his predecessor, Jean-Luc Dehaene, whose party had ended up on the opposition benches, fully supported his European course. During Belgium’s presidency in the second half of 2001 he hired him as a coach when drafting ‘his’ Declaration of Laken. And afterwards he introduced him as Vice-Chairman of the European Convention, with the job of drafting the new constitutional treaty for Europe.

It is almost impossible to think of more powerful proof of the claim that nothing has changed and nothing will change in the immediate future in our country’s European course.

It even looks as if for both of them it is precisely that pronounced European enthusiasm that is blocking their way to high European office.