Confusing budget figures are delaying negotiations

Puzzling reports on the state of the Flemish government finances have been circulating for several days. Even before the elections on 13 June the Flemish administration announced a deficit of 509 million euros for the coming term, as a result of which only one and a half billion is left to play with for new policies. In April the Social Economic Council for Flanders (SERV) still estimated this margin at 3.7 billion euros. According to the report submitted by the Audit Office to Leterme the budget deficit far exceeds 509 million, as a number of expenses were not included. But suddenly better news was announced. The actual figures of the Flemish administration showed that the budget deficit only amounted to 388 million. According to outgoing Budget Minister Van Mechelen (VLD) his successor should have no problem eliminating this deficit. A financial commission of experts from the three cartels ready to form the next government, will scrutinise the figures this weekend (FF).

LUC VANDER KELN • HET LAATSTE NIEUWS • 25 JUNE

The Audit report is based on a ‘Worst case scenario’. It arrives at an ‘indirect debt’ for payments the Flemish government is still supposed to make up to 3 billion, one billion more than the figure calculated by the Flemish government. Minister Van Mechelen calls this figure ‘laughable’. ‘Many items are overestimated or counted twice. Because of the slow economy the indirect debt has increased by a good 500 million euros, to 1.8 billion euros. That I do admit.’ The minister contest reports that the financial situation of the Flemish government is precarious. ‘How is that possible? Our accounts gain more interest than they have to pay out. We have not taken out a single loan in 5 years.’ How can the Flemish administration reduce the deficit by 120 million to 388 million in one week? Simple really - the original figures date from February/March. According to Van Mechelen the matter is easy to solve. 100 million extra revenue, 150 million less expenditure and 100 million less budget surplus (404 million financing surplus for 2004 is planned, etc.). He is of the opinion that the Flemish budget situation is fundamentally sound, i.e., a debt of 2% of the Gross Regional Product, whereas for the Federal Government this amounts to 100% of GNP.

INTRODUCTION

Yves Leterme’s negotiation memorandum for the formation of a new Flemish government includes careful hints as to which direction this government will take. It is a summary of the priorities of the three cartels, N-VA-CD&V, VLD-Vivant and SPA-Spirit. Its content is remarkably similar to the policies contained in previous Leterme’s ‘De Morgen’ and ‘De Tijd’ (24 June) considers it rather significant that, other than ‘enterprise’, all priorities (welfare, education, housing and employment) are of a social nature. However, in order to realise them Leterme will need to have a huge amount of additional funds that Flanders will receive in the coming years, as a result of the Lambermont state reforms, will be nowhere near sufficient to fulfil all these commitments, as the ‘impossible to circumvent’, after yet more elections. The choice is considerable as the memorandum is quite clear in its intentions. Let’s hope that the Vlaams Blok will not be faced with a ‘community’ deadlock, and possible new federal elections in the autumn, which Flemish demands the government would submit at the negotiations between the Regions. In fact the French speaking press and politicians are annoyed because Wallonia, personified by PS leader Eliol Di Rupo, is being blamed by some Flemish politicians for the progress of the Vlaams Blok in Flanders. De Morgen is not happy with this. This anger threatens to result in a resolute ‘non’ to all Flemish demands at the negotiations. If Leterme does not stick to his guns, as he promised before the elections, the Blok will be ready to confront the CD&V cartel with its electoral promises. If he does all the same, we might well be faced with a ‘community’ deadlock, and possible new federal elections in the autumn, maintains the newspaper. De Tijd (25 June) takes it even further. If the French speaking community wants to prevent the Vlaams Blok from becoming ‘impossible to circumvent’, after yet more electoral gains, they would be advised to make concessions as soon as possible. The choice is considerable as the memorandum is quite clear in its section entitled ‘more Flanders’, i.e., the immediate division of Brussels/Halle/Vilvoorde, the transfer of powers to Flanders on healthcare, family policy, science and railway infrastructure to Flanders and increased authority on taxes, traffic, employment, security and justice.

Frank Vandeveeye | editor in chief
Flemish Government Formation

Talks with Vlaams Blok to no avail

CW chairman, Jan Renders, predicted that CD&V would never survive a cooperation agreement or coalition with the Vlaams Blok.

Following its spectacular election victory the Vlaams Blok was invited, for the first time in the still early political history of Flanders, to take part in informative talks in the run up to the formation of a government. CD&V chairman, Yves Leterme, who was asked to set up a government, defended the initiative out of respect for the many who voted for the Vlaams Blok on 13 June. Following two hours of ‘unproductive’ discussions Leterme reaffirmed that the gap between his cartel and the Vlaams Blok is too wide. According to the CD&V chairman the Blok’s policies are based on the premise of conflict, whereby all problems are reduced to a division of Belgium. He cannot consider a government that incorporates the Vlaams Blok. Even a CD&V-N-VA minority government, which is supported by the Blok in the Flemish Parliament, is not feasible according to Leterme. He is of the opinion that the breaking points, set by the Blok as a condition for support in the Flemish Parliament, are unacceptable. Leterme already received a stern warning from the Christian labour movement, ACW, which has considerable influence within CD&V. ACW chairman, Jan Renders, predicted that CD&V would never survive a cooperation agreement or coalition with the Vlaams Blok (FF).

The warning proved to be unnecessary. Before and after the infamous discussions Leterme maintained that he would stick to the ‘cordon sanitaire’, the quarantine around the Vlaams Blok. Nevertheless the CD&V leader considered the discussions with the Vlaams Blok ‘extremely useful’. He discovered that ‘a limited number of proposals’ from the Blok are similar to those of the CD&V—for example on education and the integration of immigrants—but the gap remains as wide as ever’. At any rate Leterme believes that boosting the economy is not a priority for the Blok, they do not propose to use government funds for this purpose.

Worse than that, the Blok is quite open about the fact that it maintains the premise of conflict. ‘All problems are reduced to a division of Belgium. Not only do they want a complete split in social security, they also want to cut any form of solidarity with Wallonia, except for that foreseen by European subsidy funds. Our opinions on this subject are completely different. The Blok cannot be a coalition partner.’

With respect to the proposed support for a CD&V minority government, Leterme states: ‘They are proposing this on the condition that we implement their breaking points, which are built on their conflict model. We are not prepared to be held hostage by these breaking points. We need an effective government.’ Vanhecke, Dewinter and Annemans were disappointed about the ‘unproductive discussions’. Dewinter: ‘The ‘cordon sanitaire’ remains the be all and end all for CD&V. I am most indignant about this. Leterme will form a tripartite government, whereby we will be the only opposition party. This way he is laying the foundations for our next election victory.’ Leterme: ‘Indignant? I did not notice this during our discussions.’

www.yvesletterme.be

Slow dismantling of Cordon sanitaire around Blok

There is a good chance that, after the municipal elections of 2006, the Vlaams Blok will be part of the government in some Antwerp communities.

The efforts of the democratic parties to limit the growth of the Vlaams Blok in recent years have failed. The option of Vlaams Blok government involvement, so that ‘it burns its fingers’ (as successfully applied by the ÖVP in Austria with Haider’s ‘Freiheitliche’) is becoming increasingly popular. However, not a single party has been won over for Vlaams Blok government involvement, simply because none of the parties would survive this, concludes Jan Renders, leader of the influential Christian labour movement, the ACW. Nonetheless, there is a good chance that, after the municipal elections of 2006, the Vlaams Blok will be part of the government in some Antwerp communities. This is demonstrated by a survey carried out amongst Flemish mayors by political scientist, Johan Ackaert (FF).

The survey showed that half of the mayors would completely rule out a coalition with the Vlaams Blok. 21% considers a coalition feasible, 18% considers cooperation possible, subject to specific conditions. Barely 12% did not reply. Looking at it province by province, the Limburg mayors are least, and the Antwerp mayors most, inclined to cooperate with the Vlaams Blok.

Ackaert also looked at the link between a mayor’s reply and the number of votes and seats gained by the Vlaams Blok in his/her locality. Mayors in communities where the Vlaams Blok gained a lot of votes, and has a considerable representation in the council, are more inclined to cooperate. More remarkable is the fact that the Blok gained more votes in communities where the mayor did not want to reply to the survey. SPA mayors are completely averse to cooperation. N-VA mayors are most inclined to cooperate. CD&V mayors have divided opinions. Less than average are against cooperation as a matter of course, but the number with an unconditional yes is also lower. Ackaert cautiously concludes that, after the council elections in 2006, participation of the Vlaams Blok in some municipal executives cannot be excluded.
Opinion

STEFAN HUYSSENBROUCKE • DE TIJD • 19 JUNE

The unexpected may yet materialise. If the Block decides to exchange its boxing gloves for velvet ones, some form of cooperation may be feasible after the next elections. But the question remains whether the Block is interested in cooperation. The party does give that impression. Just recently it offered to support a minority cabinet and has prepared a minimum programme for government participation. Furthermore, its figurehead, Filip Dewinter, bandies about that he intends to go for the mayor’s chair of Antwerp in 2006. These are most probably feigned manoeuvres, because government participation is linked to specific risks for the party, which it is not prepared to take for the time being. More so, even though the Block raises a hue and cry every day about the quarantine, what the party fears most is that the quarantine be lifted.

Founder Karel Dillen justifiably once referred to the ‘cordon’ as a life insurance policy for his party and it is far from certain that the party will survive, or continue to grow, without the protection of a buffer zone. The efforts made by the party to become acceptable are not aimed at power sharing but at increasing its electoral basis. Until the reverse is true the Block’s official strategy will remain a strategy of opposition. The party wants to continue to grow until it cannot be circumvented, not to force entry into the government but to be able to block its institutions.

S

how confidence, take responsibili-
ty”, is the topic of the memorandum
sent by Yves Leterme, investigator for
the new cabinet formation (CD&V), to
the VLD-Vivant, CD&V/N-VA and
SPA/Spirit cartels. Leterme also sent a
memorandum to Groen! chairperson,
Vera Dua, but in several newspapers
she quite clearly states that her party
has made up its mind about the opposi-
tion. The memorandum is to be used as
a basis for the government negotiations
due to start on 25 June. According to
Leterme the 22-page document should
not be seen as a way of settling scores
with the past. The social objectives of
the Vilvoorde pact, that were defined by
the previous Purple/Green government,
will also become a guideline for the
new team. Enterprise and employment
will be given top priority. But
Leterme aims to implement a change in
style. His new government should have
more credibility than the previous one
and be more realistic. Promises that
cannot be held, incomplete plans or
prohibitive proposals are not an option.

The budget will probably become the
main stumbling block. The Flemish ad-
ministration already predicted that the
2004 budget will be problematic.
Leterme, therefore, does not exclude
the possibility that ‘excessive and less
essential expenditure’ planned for 2004
will be scrapped. Leterme did not ex-
actly know how much. He received the
analysis of the budget situation from
the National Audit Office on Wednesday
afternoon and wants to study the
text in detail first (FF).

During the campaign Leterme continu-
ously emphasised the implausibility of
purple. His memorandum consequent-
ly starts with a plea for credible politics.
Maybe a change in style from the previ-
ous Purple/Green team. But not a de-
parture from content, or at least not im-
mediately. ‘A new government term
does not imply a settling of scores with
the past. The new team will build con-
structively on the previous initiatives,’
writes Leterme. He clearly refers to the
Vilvoorde pact. The emphasis is obvi-
ously on enterprise and job creation. A
reduction in income tax for example is
reserved for those sectors where it is
productive, i.e., the care sector and re-
search personnel. Furthermore, the
memorandum also includes repeated
pleas for less regulation.

It does not mention extra child benefit
in September, a CD&V idea, probably
because child benefit first has to be-
come a Flemish power. The memoran-
dum contains many Flemish high-
lights, including, for example, a
Flemish justice section. A rapid split
Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde of course.
Another remarkable fact is that he
takes on the SPA idea with respect to
maximum invoices for non-medical
costs and that he aims to strengthen the
link between care insurance and in-
come. Free basic education is a long-
term aim. Leterme even adopts the idea
to allow car tax discounts for safe dri-
vers. He is introducing road toll stick-
ers instead of traffic tax, so that foreign-
ers will also have to pay for our roads.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE

FLEMINGS ON HOLIDAY (IN %)

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SOURCE: VRIND

focus on FLANDERS • 19 June - 25 June 2004 • Number 26
Since 13 June the Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia regions seem to hold the key to the country’s political future. Elio Di Rupo (PS) and Yves Leterme (CD&V) are now pulling the strings and the federal power base in the Rue de la Loi has to resign itself to decisions being made at Place des Martyrs (Flemish government), the Walloon Elysée in Namur and the Rue du Duc, the seat of the Brussels government, according to De Morgen (19 June). The federal level has paved the way to this situation by organising the elections for regional and federal parliaments at different times. When, on top of everything else, Groen! decided not to participate in a Flemish government the situation became even more precarious. The only possibility to form equal coalitions in the various governments of this country (Christian democrats, Socialists and Greens) and, at the same time keep the Liberals in opposition in Flanders thus maintaining a democratic opposition, was foiled. Yves Leterme (CD&V) and Elio Di Rupo (PS) now have no other choice but to go their own way. As a result the composition of the new government will depend on the new regional governments. In Flanders the situation will necessitate a tripartite of Liberals, Socialists and Christian democrats and on the French-speaking side Elio Di Rupo in particular is watching this with great disappointment (FF).

Elio Di Rupo (PS) is losing sleep because not only has asymmetry become a fact, but the hope that it would be kept under control, if sufficient democratic options remained open on both sides of the language barrier, has also evaporated.

For the PS it was clear on Monday morning. Groen! would join CD&V and SP.A and push VLD into opposition. That would allow Di Rupo to set up his olive tree coalition in Brussels and Wallonia, and the Liberals would remain as a sizeable democratic opposition alongside the Vlaams Blok. However, events took a different turn. The PS is clearly in shock about what they refer to as the ‘irresponsible selfishness of Groen!’ They are convinced that, in exchange for the hope of future personal gain, Groen! has brought the Flemish political scene, and the entire country, a step closer to instability.

CD&V, SP.A and VLD are now saddled with each other in Flanders, or - the worst case scenario - CD&V with the Blok, and PS with MR and VLD. The latter has also led to consternation at the boulevard de l’Empereur (PS headquarters). VLD lost the elections but did not have the slightest hesitation in deciding and proclaiming without any form of consultation with the coalition partners, that if Verhofstadt decided ‘to go European’, Patrick Dewael (VLD) would move to 16 Rue de la Loi. ‘Unstoppable arrogance,’ according to the PS. Under normal circumstances this would result in a profound political crisis. Today the question who will become federal prime minister, is a mere detail compared with the higher national interest at stake. The Blok in a Flemish government is akin to the beginning of a Balkan state of affairs. And the few remaining other options, the Blok in opposition against a tripartite or in opposition with ‘support’ for an orange/red or blue minority cabinet, are maybe only a prelude in the eyes of the Walloons. A major fracture has appeared under democracy and Belgium since last week.
French speaking politicians refuse to be the scapegoat

PS chairman, Elio Di Rupo, in charge of the formation of a new government in French-speaking Belgium, does not object to an expansion of the Federal Government with Christian Democrats. Di Rupo refers to a possible entry of CD&V in the Federal Government as a matter for the Flemish parties, but underlined that the PS is not asking for anything at federal level, other than the correct implementation of the coalition agreement.

This conciliatory language is in sharp contrast to the reaction of some French-speaking politicians and critics in Francophone newspapers (La Libre Belgique and Le Soir), who do not accept that they have been made scapegoats for the undeniable progress of the Blok in Flanders by some Flemish politicians.

First of all there was a statement from Hugo Schiltz (Spirit) on the VRT that every time Di Rupo says ‘basta’ the Vlaams Blok gains another 5,000 votes in Flanders. This was followed by statements by Marc Van Peel (CD&V) and Jean-Marie Dedecker (VLD). Flemish politicians are blamed in particular for the accusation that the French-speaking community imposed immigrant voting rights on the Flemish, which resulted in a wave of protest votes for the Blok. According to the former premier of the Brussels region, Jacques Simonet (MR), the Flemish liberals should be blamed specifically, as they turned the issue of immigrant voting rights into ‘an electoral drama’ (FF).

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 23 JUNE

The French speaking politicians and media are understandably annoyed when they feel that the Flemish side is leaving them to carry the can. The imposition of immigrant voting rights, the refusal to divide Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, the opposition to reform in the labour market, to justice and youth policies, were ostensibly the reason for a multitude of Flemish voters being driven into the arms of the Vlaams Blok and that’s that.

If only it was as simple as that! Then again how simplistic is it to imagine that the subtle Belgian equilibrium is immune to a political fact such as the inexorable progress of the Vlaams Blok. Elio Di Rupo (PS chairman) and Charles Picqué (Brussels PS) are quite right in their assumption that the Flemish parties have failed with their policies and are now being presented with the bill. That does not mean, however, that the results of this failure are not perceptible throughout the whole of Belgium.

In order to gain more room to manoeuvre the Flemish government is planning to take out large-scale loans, stated Yves Leterme, investigator on behalf of the future government. This is a spectacular departure from the budget discipline of the past few years. This conceptual U-turn is endorsed with the argument that other governments will have to take tougher measures. This way Flanders is drawing on federal and Walloon funds long before any kind of communal negotiations have taken place.

This announcement clearly demonstrates the futility of endless debate on government participation by the Vlaams Blok and the conditions subject to which this might take place. In reality the Blok is already participating by forcing others to oppose each other more fervently.

Dutroux receives maximum sentence

The Crown Court in Arlon has sentenced Marc Dutroux to life imprisonment with ten years detention during His Majesty’s pleasure. This implies that the sentence will be extended by ten years should Dutroux be released on parole against all expectations. Dutroux was found guilty of three murder charges and the kidnapping, rape and imprisonment of six young girls. His wife, Michelle Martin, received a 30-year prison sentence. Michel Lelievre, who assisted Dutroux with the kidnappings received 25 years. Michel Nihoul was merely sentenced to five years imprisonment. The public prosecutor had asked for at least ten years, but the jury and the judges decided that five years was sufficient (FF).

Opinion

DOUGLAS DE CONINCK • DE MORGEN • 23 JUNE

After three months and three weeks the Dutroux trial has finally come to an end, almost nine years to the day it all started—the kidnapping of two eight year old girls in Grâce-Hollogne. Last night the atmosphere in Arlon was quite euphoric. The same applied last Thursday after the verdict. Sabine Dardenne and Laetitia Delhez (the two victims, who survived, ed.) celebrated until the early hours with a few journalists, lawyers and members of the police force in that particular small bar. Euphoria, because it is all over. That would be the main conclusion. It is over. There will be no more journalistic arrivists arriving in Belgium from abroad asking how it is possible that a trial took so long to complete. The feeling of ‘what are they trying to hide!’ no longer applies. The feared overdose of sourness with respect to the complete functional failure of the police and judicial services—then, back in 1996, and relating to those events—is a thing of the past. The never ending bickering between magistrates, detectives and journalists has lost its foundation. There is not much left to fear.

Under the circumstances the trial in Arlon was the best possible outcome. Under the circumstances. It was based on open debate, with the presiding judge approving everything based on the idea that he could definitely not be accused of trying to hide anything. Those who observed the debate in detail could not but decide that the criticism of the preliminary investigations was not only justified, but in particular too carefully formulated. What was clear in August 1996, either remained clear or became less clear.
Major road works on the Antwerp ring road start

Whether or not the chaos will materialise will depend on whether road users will resort to the alternatives on offer, such as trams, buses and trains or bicycles.

Works on the Antwerp ring road started this week and is heralding two years of traffic chaos in and around the port. The outer ring road will be closed for renovation work in the direction of the Netherlands. All slip roads and exits will be closed with sole access to through traffic to the motorways via narrow lanes on the Inner ring road. The managers of the ring road, the Flemish Region, could no longer postpone major renovation work as the road surface is worn to a frazzle, which could result in serious future traffic safety problems. This most important traffic artery in Flanders has a huge impact on the local economy. Apprehension with respect to poor accessibility for example has already affected the commercial rental market in Antwerp, reports De Tijd [22 June]. Local entrepreneurs and politicians have been harping on for many months. The government is left with a major headache, irrespective of the unprecedented ‘nuisance reduction’ measures it has implemented. Whether or not the chaos will materialise will depend on whether road users will resort to the alternatives on offer, such as trams, buses and trains or bicycles (FF).

Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 22 JUNE

The initial question is not what is the government doing - it has already implemented some measures - but what the public and industry is planning to do. This is a test case. The operations around Antwerp are merely a preliminary of what Flanders can expect, with or without additional work, in five to ten years time, i.e., virtual standstill. The contribution of the Flemish administration for the coalition agreement of the next Flemish government demonstrates that, if nothing changes, the number of car journeys will increase by 36%, the mileage even more, i.e., by 40%, over the next ten years. How do we tackle this? If the Flemish population and industry do not change their ideas on mobility, the country will come to a standstill in the next five to ten years. Because of the road works ‘Antwerp at a standstill’ is merely five years ahead of the rest of Flanders. There is but one alternative, mass conversion to public transport, or at least to car pooling and park & ride. Or even better - less movement by living closer to the workplace. The same applies to commercial road transport, more use of the rail network, inland waterways and most of all less and more efficient movement.

The question now is whether the inhabitants of Antwerp and those travelling in and out of the city will take up the challenge, and whether the government and transport companies will take advantage of consumer reactions to maximum effect. The road transport situation - which is huge in and around Antwerp - is less favourable. Not many alternatives are on offer. Rail transport is not yet sufficiently user friendly to promote the massive switch to rail. Inland shipping is on the up and up.

WWW.WERKENANTWERPEN.BE

Interbrew reinforces its position in China

FF EDITOR

The Belgian company Interbrew has acquired a 70% interest in the Chinese brewery Shilang Brewery Company. With the inclusion of Shilang, Interbrew has acquired a 50% market share in the province of Zhejiang, on the east coast, south of Shanghai. Based on its production capacity Interbrew maintains to be the number two in the whole of China after Tsingtao, a brewery allied with the American Anheuser Busch. Overall the Belgian brewery is purported to cover approximately 30% of the entire Chinese market with a production capacity of 30 million hectolitres and 17 breweries. Interbrew paid 53.2 million dollars for Shilang.

WWW.INTERBREW.BE

FillFactory sold to Cypress

Fillfactory, a technology company based in Mechelen and specialised in image sensors, has been taken over by the American chip manufacturer, Cypress Semiconductor. FillFactory is a spin-off of the world-famous Louvain research centre for microelectronics, Imec. Cypress paid no less than 82 million euros in cash, which means that the shareholders including the Belgian private investors IT-partners, Capricorn, Partners@Venture and the Imec vehicle Imidec have made a killing (FF).

BERT BROENS • DE TIJD • 23 JUNE

FillFactory was founded at the beginning of 2000 by eleven experts from Imec, the renowned Louvain micro-electronics research centre. The company is specialised in advanced image sensors based on standard technology (CMOS). In essence image sensors are cameras on a chip. FillFactory has managed to build up a considerable reputation with products for professional applications. Its sensors are included for example in the top range of digital cameras marketed by Kodak. Rapid growth led to contemplation of its shareholder- ship. ING went in pursuit of a buyer. ‘18 candidates were found. We decided that Cypress was the most appropriate candidate,’ states Luc De Mey, General Director of FillFactory. The Mechlin company will develop image sensors for digital cameras for the consumer market and for camera phones on behalf of Cypress, which is quoted on the New York stock market. Until now its limited size prevented it from tackling the consumer market. Cypress already manufactured components for digital cameras and mobile phones with built-in cameras, but did not have the necessary in-house image sensor expertise.

‘The rapid growth of the digital camera and camera phone market and the many applications of FillFactory products justify the take over cost,’ states Tony Alvarez, top manager at Cypress. FillFactory employs 43 people and clocked up an operating profit of 2.4 million euros and turnover of 17.7 million euros in the past year.

This year De Mey is aiming for a turnover of 25 million euros. By the end of this year the workforce should have increased by about 20 people.

WWW.FILLFACTORY.BE

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WWW.FILLFACTORY.BE
G uy Verhofstadt will not transfer to the European Commission. EU leaders have postponed the decision on the new EU chairman to the middle of next month. Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder supported the candidacy of the Belgian prime minister, but met with strong opposition from Tony Blair. In order to topple Verhofstadt's candidacy Blair, totally unexpectedly, introduced his own counter candidate, the conservative Chris Patten. The discussions were quite acrimonious. Blair's accusation was that Chirac and Schröder were mainly using Verhofstadt's candidacy to allow them to continue pulling the strings within the European administration. Chirac and Schröder on the other hand contested this as proponents of further political integration in Europe. Many countries felt that Verhofstadt was too pro-European, too federalist and too anti-American. The discussions on the succession of Romani Prodi rather seemed like a replay of the European rift at the time of the Iraq crisis. In addition to Great Britain, seven other countries refused to endorse the candidacy of Verhofstadt, i.e., Poland, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. During the night of Friday 18 June Verhofstadt finally conceded and announced that he was withdrawing his candidacy (FF).

RUUD GOOSENS • DE MORGEN • 21 JUNE

According to the prime minister Friday was a 'historic' day. Whereas journalists were awaiting a reaction from the VLD member on his failed promotion, he elaborated on the approval of the European constitution. 'Our initial efforts in Laken [under Belgian EU chairmanship, ed.] were finally rewarded today,' stated Verhofstadt. 'For the first time ever Europe has a constitutional foundation.' According to Verhofstadt the discussions demonstrated 'unity within Europe'.

But Verhofstadt was well aware that he would have to make a statement on the succession of Romano Prodi. As we know the prime minister constantly reiterated in recent months that he was not a candidate. But everyone knew that France and Germany were promoting him, with his approval and cooperation. 'The decision on the commission chairmanship has been postponed,' affirmed Verhofstadt. 'I was asked to take up this challenge by many of my colleagues. I am very grateful for that, but have informed the Irish chairmanship that I am no longer available.' According to the prime minister this would only lead to further chaos. 'I do not wish to create weeks and weeks of uncertainty,' insisted the prime minister. 'I aim to continue my work as prime minister. I will continue to implement the reforms.' But Verhofstadt did not completely hide the fact that he had hoped to obtain a European promotion and that he was somewhat disappointed. He denied, however, having carried out an extremely busy lobbying campaign in recent weeks and months in order to convince his European colleagues of his particular qualities. The truth is that I have travelled no more or no less than usual. I have been extremely busy with the preparations for the intergovernmental conference.' He did admit that there were 'occasional' discussions on the chairmanship, but only 'during the last few days before the summit'.

Even though he is no longer in the race for Prodi’s succession the Belgian Government will maintain a ‘constructive’ approach. If Jean-Luc Dehaene had a chance he could count on Verhofstadt's support, suggested the latter. 'If it could be a Belgian, I would wholeheartedly lend my support.'

www.verhofstadt.be

Commercial channels unite

They would like to see the authority over the VRT transferred to the Culture Minister

Commercial television has been broadcasting in Flanders for 15 years, Large commercial radio stations for three years, but they feel that they are still being treated unfairly by the government. Therefore Flemish commercial radio and television channels have united into the ‘Private Omroep Federatie’ (Private Broadcasting Federation). This will enable them to join forces in the alleged unfair competition with the public broadcaster VRT. They would like to see the authority over the VRT transferred to the Culture Minister and the Media Minister henceforth being in sole charge of the private broadcasting companies. This way they still have to turn to the main shareholder for the VRT (The Flemish Community) with their complaints and there are still some overlapping interests, but at least the Media Minister will no longer be expected to defend opposing interests, states POF (FF).

DE STANDAARD • 24 JUNE

This is not the only problem, states Jan Caerts of 4FM. ‘We do have joint objectives. First of all the broadcasters should be able to build up sufficient economic clout. Secondly, we need a level playing field, a healthy relationship between public and private broadcasters, so that everyone can play their part. Thirdly, the broadcasting regulations need to be made more transparent. And finally, Flanders should be allowed to adopt a pioneering role in the development of digital radio and television. This, for example, is currently inhibited because the VRT does not need digital broadcasting licences, but private broadcasters do.’

All Flemish commercial radio and TV companies have been invited to join the federation. But not everyone has accepted the invitation. A number of regional stations, and the music channel MTV/TMF, have refused to join. In fact TMF is going to develop programmes in conjunction with the VRT, which will
be broadcast via the music channel, Donna and Studio Brussels. It appears that the federation has been established as a front against the public broadcasting corporation. The first seeds were sown during the press conference when a number of commercial channels protested against the start of Sporza, the VRT’s temporary sports channel. VRT chief, Tony Mary, is not happy with the establishment of the federation. ‘A situation in which a professional organisation is created against a competitor, is unique in the world. If we do use too much revenue and make too much money with advertising, the new government will, if necessary, immediately close down the VRT.’

CULTURE

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 10 July: Summertime: HNK Symphony Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy with Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky, Concertgebouw Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
• 17 July: Summertime: Piotr Anderszewski, piano with Bach and Chopin, Concertgebouw Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be

Summer Festivals:
• 1 to 4 July: Rock Werchter with Korn, Metallica, Monster Magnet, Ben Harper, Pixies, PJ Harvey, Lenny Kravitz and David Bowie, Werchter; info: www.rockwerchter.be
• 2 to 4 July: Polé Polé Antwerp [left bank of the Scheldt] with Electro Coco, Caribbean Brassband, Chico Cesar and others; info: www.polepole.be
• 3 July: Na Fir Bluesfestival, Rivierenhof, Deurme with Dr. John, Mississippi Mud, Durango and others; info: www.openluchththeater.be
• 8 July: Suzanne Vega. Openluchtheater Rivierenhof Deurme; info: www.openluchththeater.be
• 9 to 11 July: Cactus Festival with Macy Gray, Patti Smith, Elvis Costello, Heather Nova, Sergent Garcia, Minnewaterpark, Bruges; info: www.cactusmusic.be

EXPO

• Until 28 August: The Realm of the Dragon, exhibition, St Pietersabdij, Ghent
• Until 17 October: Animals in Architecture, Museum of Architecture, Brussels
• Until 5 September: Speaking Sculptures, the Songye, Museum of Africa, Tervuren; info: www.afrikamuseum.be
• Until 3 October: Marcel Breuer, Design & Architecture, exhibition CIVA, Brussels; info: www.civa.be
• Until 22 August and 5 September: SMAK exhibitions: Juan Uslé, Open Rooms and Sam Durant with ‘12 Signs. Transposed and illuminated, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
• Until 1 August: The invention of Landscape, exhibition, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp; info: www.rubens2004.be
• Until 22 August: Flee from the War, historical exhibition, Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres
• Until 30 June: Models by Ludwig Vandevelde, Groeningemuseum, Bruges; info: www.bruge.belmusea
• Until 31 July: the Brueghel track: exhibitions on locations in Bruegel’s paintings, Brussels

• Until 5 September: Sam Durant, 12 Signs, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be
• Until 26 September: Olympic Games for animals, Museum of natural sciences, Brussels; info: 02/627.42.38 www.natuurwetenschappen.be
• Until 26 September: The Thomas Neyrinck Collection, exhibition, Bellevue museum, Brussels; info: 070/23.37.28
• Until 18 August: Honoré d’O and Toon Tersas, Muhka, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be
• Until 27 September: The fall of the New Troy, exhibition Venetiaseae Gaanderien, Ostend; info: 059/56.20.15
• Until 3 October: Armando, exhibition, Museum Constant Permeke, Jabbeke
• Until 12 September: Copyright Rubens, KMSK, Antwerp;
• Until 29 August: Not Done!, exhibition, MUHKA, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be
• Until 29 August: Unvarnished, photo exhibition by Carl De Keyzer, PMMK, Ostend; info: www.pmmk.be
• Until 29 August: Vic Gentils, exhibition, PMMK, Ostend; info: www.pmmk.be
• Until 30 September: Witslag, Roger Raveelmuseum, Machelen-Zulte

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