Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde: postponement is no longer an option

There was briefly speculation this week that in a vote in the Federal Parliament on the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency, the Flemish Liberals would vote against in order to avoid a government crisis. After all, a Flemish majority approving the split would then prompt the Francophones to invoke the ‘alarm bell procedure’ and cause a government crisis. According to De Standaard the VLD, through its parliamentary party chairman Rik Daems, has now unambiguously confirmed that it will vote in favour of the split, if it comes to a vote. However, the party of course wants to do everything to avoid it coming to that. On the morning of Wednesday 20 April Deputy Prime Ministers Johan Vande Lanotte (SPA) and Didier Reynders (MR) will report to the Internal Affairs committee. One way out of the BHV problem in the shape of an amendment to the constitution, aimed at avoiding the crisis, was rejected not only by CD&V but also by Spirit, one of the coalition partners in the federal government. The BHV is now heading for a climax in the view of both De Standaard and De Tijd (FF).

BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD • 15 APRIL

During an informal chat with the press, Daems indirectly confirmed a report in De Tijd that the government wanted to defuse the crisis via an amendment of the constitution. Verhofstadt is thinking of a de-facto Flemish Brabant constituency being created with joint lists in B-H-V and in Leuven. During the previous electoral reform that idea was part of the introduction of provincial constituencies. But the Court of Arbitration subsequently dismissed the arrangement for Brabant as unconstitutional. An amendment to Article 63 of the constitution would enable that objection to be offset. During the plenary session of Parliament yesterday Verhofstadt did not deny that his proposal had been on the table. CD&V parliamentary party leader Pieter De Crem then reprimanded the Prime Minister. ‘No Flemish party whatsoever will accept a solution in which the constituency is not split. For us a solution for the judgement by the Court of Arbitration only leads to a split. All other matters are unacceptable. That is one of the spearheads of the Flemish coalition agreement,’ he stated. Of course De Crem could only speak for himself. But Spirit, which unlike CD&V is in office in the federal government, also made mincemeat of Prime Minister Verhofstadt’s idea.
Council of Europe examines linguistic situation in Brussels hospitals

Minodora Cliveti will be paying a visit to a number of hospitals

Today, Wednesday 13 April, the Romanian Minodora Cliveti is making a visit to Brussels. Under the authority of the Council of Europe’s Social Affairs Committee, she is coming to look into the linguistic situation in Brussels’ hospitals. This makes her the fourth representative in seven years to have been commissioned by the Council of Europe to take the pulse of the linguistic problems in Belgium. Previously the Swiss Dumeni Columberg came to examine the position of French-speakers in the Flemish periphery around Brussels, at the proposal of the Francophone politician Georges Clerfayt (FD). His report, in a considerably toned-down version, contained the recommendation that Belgium should ratify the Framework Treaty on the Protection of National Minorities. Then the Austrian commissioner Lili Nabholz-Haidegger came to look into the protection of national minorities. She arrived at the conclusion that only the German-speakers formed a national minority, whilst Flemings in Wallonia and French-speakers in Flanders should be considered as regional minorities. She also urged Belgium to ratify the above-mentioned Framework Treaty. But the Flemish Government remained opposed to this, and in 2002 lodged a petition with the Council of Europe, in which it complained of the linguistic situation in Brussels’ hospitals. It stated that doctors, nurses and social workers barely spoke any Dutch, with all the consequences and risks that this entailed for Flemish patients (FF).

MARK DEWEERT • DE TIJD • 12 APRIL
The Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee sent the Latvian Boriss Cilevics to Brussels in 2003. From conversations he deduced that the fact that Brussels hospitals were ‘de facto French speaking’ constituted a serious problem. Because it was not a legal but a health problem, the committee decided, at Cilevics’ proposal, to refer the matter to the Social Affairs Committee. By order of this committee, Minodora Cliveti is coming to carry out a thorough study of the linguistic situation in Brussels’ hospitals and emergency wards. She will be speaking to those who submitted the petition, a number of Flemish and Francophone politicians (including Minister-President Yves Leterme) and the French-speaking directors of Iris, the umbrella organisation of Brussels’ public hospitals. Cliveti will also be paying a visit to a number of hospitals and to a department for emergency medical assistance. In her travel bag there is also a ‘counter-petition’ drawn up by a number of Francophone politicians from the Flemish periphery. They complain that the province of Flemish Brabant invites women aged over fifty for a free breast scan, but that these invitations are drafted only in Dutch. Cliveti has an appointment to talk to them, too.

Flanders lags behind in the field of e-government

The minister announced an action plan aimed at doing away with the arrears in two to three years

Flanders is a year and half behind Wallonia and three and a half years behind the Federal Government in the field of e-government, according to the Flemish Administrative Affairs Minister Geert Bourgeois (N-VA). The minister announced an action plan aimed at doing away with the arrears in two to three years. At the beginning of 2003 the previous Flemish Government opened the revamped portal site, which was supposed to be the cornerstone for e-government in Flanders. Via this site services were meant to be swifter, more efficient and more customer friendly. But two years later the new minister found that the e-government team that had been in charge of the project had left. A new team and a new project leader are now in place (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS AND BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD • 13 APRIL
BGeert Marcelis, the new e-government co-ordinator: ‘We are basing ourselves on various measurements made by international firms. The federal authorities are leading the way, among other things thanks to their good results on social security. Wallonia has put almost all its forms on the web and also makes it possible for citizens and companies to wrap up matters on the Internet. Flanders has fine spearheads, such as the Flemish Information Hotline [Vlaamse Infolijn], which was again praised in the Accenture report, but the back office and infrastructure have lagged behind. We’re barely ready when it comes to electronic document flow and the handling of requests via the website’. An explanation of this lost ground is left vague. An eminence grise among international consultants, who knows the situation in Flanders, said yesterday that Flanders was leading the way up until five years ago, but then made a few wrong decisions. ‘Although that was visible, the organisation was left to do as it pleased, until it was too late.’ Minister Bourgeois recognises that a few years are needed before Flanders can return to a prominent position again. He is asking his colleagues for extra money for the coming years. He is working with two units: co-ordinator Marcelis, and the Vlaamse Infolijn. In the coming months attention will be focused mainly on the back office and the infrastructure. In the short term he wants to link databases such as those for study grants and family allowance. That will render 230,000 paper certificates superfluous. He thinks he has bought the right infrastructure (the ’service bus’) and software for this.

focus on Flanders • 9 April - 15 April 2005 • Number 15
Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) unexpectedly suffered from some heart problems during the Easter holiday, and after a minor operation on the coronary artery, was forced to take things a bit more easily. In any case he is not planning to let himself be hounded by the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency, the problem that has placed French-speakers and Flemings in diametrically opposed positions for around a year now, and for which there seems to be no solution in sight. In his first interviews since the Easter recess, Verhofstadt let slip that for Flemish voters, and thus for himself, too, Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde was not worth a government crisis. A solution is difficult because the Flemings are making demands and the Francophones are not asking for anything in return, said the Premier. However, it is not Prime Minister Verhofstadt who is leading the negotiations, but Institutional Affairs Ministers Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) and Didier Reynders (MR). The two ministers have since February been involved in a ‘confes- sional’ procedure whereby they are examining the political leaders and attempting to reach a compromise. But for the time being this appears not to have borne fruit. According to Vande Lanotte, failure to find a solution for ‘BHV’ does indeed mean a federal crisis. The CD&V-N-VA alliance, which is in office in the Flemish government but in the opposition at federal level, has in the meantime been cranking up the pressure. By way of protest some of their MPs in the Flemish Parliament are abstaining in the voting on Flemish policy documents, much to the displeasure of the VLD. But both the VLD and the SP.A-Spirit alliance now feel that the discussion of the bills should be resumed in the Federal Parliament on 20 April, although both SP.A and VLD feel that it should not come to a vote. For then the Flemings would approve the splitting of BHV and the Francophones would invoke the ‘alarm bell procedure’, with a government crisis ensuing as a result. That would not be of much use for the Flemings, says VLD chairman Bart Somers. If the government falls, BHV remains undivided. (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT • DE TIJD • 9 APRIL

The Verhofstadt government has been dragging the BHV issue in tow for seven months now. The waiting for white smoke has lasted long enough. The dénouement cannot be put off any longer. Three of the four parties in office – VLD, sp.a-spirit and the PS – are ready to sign an agreement, although the Flemish Liberals are looking mistrustfully in the direction of CD&V/N-VA. They still fear that the alliance wants to use the BHV issue to drive Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt out of Rue de la Loi 16. The fourth coalition partner, the MR, opposes an agreement. The umbrella party remains the hostage of its FDF wing, which under no circumstances is prepared to go along with the splitting of the BHV constituency. The French-speaking Socialists have indicated that the whole MR, including the FDE, must jump on board. FDF chairman Olivier Maingain made it clear again on Thursday that for the time being he was not planning to do so. In Le Soir he said that the Francophones had never been in such an advantageous position for refusing the principle of the split, because the Flemish parties were scared stiff of a crisis and early elec-
tions.

In the days to come the three partners will no doubt be cranking up the pressure on the French-speaking Liberals, if necessary with the threat of driving them out of the government. If the MR abandons its hedgehog position, the way to a compromise lies open. Any fall-out from the agreement affecting the Flemish governing coalition will then depend on how CD&V and the N-VA react. If the MR remains uncompromising, the removal of that party from the federal government, to be replaced by CD&V and the cdH, seems inevitable. What will then happen to the VLD? Will the party stay on board or will So-
cialists and Christian-Democrats choose to distribute the federal portfolios amongst themselves? VLD chairman Bart Somers has since said that in such a scenario his party would also leave the Flemish coalition. CD&V/N-VA and sp.a-spirit would then have to invite the Greens to form a new major-
ity with them. Officials at the Groen! party headquarters are taking account of the fact that such an invitation may arrive in the coming weeks. ■

Leterme still counting on support of SP.A and VLD for the splitting of BHV

20 April marks the beginning of the discussions on the Government bills [tabled by the Government] and the private Member’s bills [tabled by members of parliament] in the com-
tent federal committee on the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constitu-
tion. Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) is still counting on the VLD and SPA splitting the BHV in the federal parliament. That was the answer he gave to a question by the Vlaams Belang in the Flemish Parlia-
ment on 13 April. He regarded the fact that the House would begin the discussion next week as wholly in accord with the Flemish coalition agreement. During question time Leterme also made it clear that he expected the VLD to vote for the split, even if that jeopardized the federal government. ‘I am reckoning on every Flemish majority party carrying through what was promised in the Flemish coalition agreement’, said Leterme. The Vlaams Belang regarded the answer as inade-
quate. The parliamentary group left the hall and in vain called on CD&V and the N-VA to do likewise, so that the numbers in Parliament remained sufficient for voting on the policy doc-
uments at hand.

WWW.VLAAMSPARLEMENT.BE

focus on flanders • 9 April - 15 April 2005 • Number 15
Leon Van Rompaey: a government that wants to save too much ends up spending more

Rudy Demotte (PS), Social Affairs Minister, is not impressed by Van Rompaey’s argument

On 13 April the Federal Parliament approved the bill for the new Health Act, which gives a legal basis to a series of savings in health insurance. The law is aimed at saving around EUR 500 million this year and making structural reorganisation possible in the longer term. The law puts pressure on doctors to adopt more rational prescription behaviour and introduces a fixed price for routine operations. It also makes it possible to organise public invitations to tender for generic medicines without patent protection. Leon van Rompaey, senior executive at Docpharma and chairman of the Belgian producers of generic medicines is of the view that the government would do better to continue reimbursing the old medicines at the same amount and applying that same reimbursement to generic medicines. Rudy Demotte (PS), Social Affairs Minister, who has been authorised until 31 December to intervene unilaterally if the health care budget goes off track, is not impressed by Van Rompaey’s argument (FF).

Van Rompaey demonstrates with statistics that the number of medicines used (reimbursed) has barely risen over the last twenty years (roughly 1% a year), but that expenditure for those medicines has continued to grow in that same period – by almost 8% a year. A detailed analysis of the historical statistics shows that the expenses begin to rise more markedly whenever the government tries to put pressure on the prices of medicines, says Van Rompaey. ‘The government is so bent on ‘catching’ the pharmaceutical industry that it fails to see that it is not operating efficiently. It thinks that every reduction in price means a reduction in expenditure.’

How is it going about its work? The government encourages the arrival of generic medicines – cheaper copies of medicines that are no longer protected by a patent. Then it decides that it will not reimburse the older medicines to as high a level as the generic ones. That prompts the producers of that old medicine to replace that old medicine with a new, more expensive one. However, the government simply reimburses these more expensive medicines normally. Many patients and doctors nonetheless think that the new medicine is better; it only costs slightly more than the generic one and less than the old medicine. So they switch over to the new one. The end result is that the government pays more. This kind of approach encourages companies, doctors and patients to choose new expensive medicines. ‘Don’t make old medicines more expensive,’ implores Van Rompaey. ‘Keep the reimbursement of the old medicines and apply that to the generic ones, too. That will not cost you, the government, any more, you’ll curb the arrival of more expensive medicines and prompt patients to choose generic medicines for these will then be free, or practically free.’

Study confirms very high Belgian wage costs

According to a study carried out by the consulting firm Mercer, Belgium has the highest wage costs not only in Europe, but the whole world. Belgium is closely followed by Sweden, Germany, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom, but the average net salary in these countries is a good deal higher. The major differences lie in the amounts of social security contributions, and benefits granted to employees such as pension schemes and hospitalisation insurance, according to De Morgen (11 April). The average wage cost of a Belgian employee is EUR 53,577 per year, or on average EUR 20,000 more than in the United States. Of that amount the employer pays on average EUR 12,667 in social security contributions, whereas Japanese employers only pay EUR 5,183 and American employers only EUR 2,196. On top of this comes a further sum of EUR 4,383 in Belgium by way of other benefits – double the respective amount in the USA. According to Mercer, the disadvantages of this high wage cost are obvious. Not only does it deter foreign investors, but it also gnaws away at employee purchasing power and leads to an exodus of economic activity to the east. In Latvia an employee costs 11 times less, on average.
Di Rupo claims Wallonia suspends more unemployed people than Flanders

But he did not refute the Flemish criticism that unemployed people in Wallonia and Brussels simply were not receiving any individual job offers from Forem

Eljo Di Rupo, chairman of the PS, regards as unfounded the Flemish criticisms that unemployed people in Wallonia are hardly subject to any monitoring. He says that in the last few months there have been more sanctions against unemployed people unprepared to work in Wallonia than in Flanders. Di Rupo backed his statement with figures from the RVA, the Federal Employment Office. Those sanctioned by the RVA included far more Wallonians than Flemings.

But in so saying he did not refute the criticism expressed last week by De Standaard which reported that unemployed people in Wallonia and Brussels simply were not receiving any individual job offers from Forem, the Wallonia Employment Office, and therefore could not be penalised. On Sunday federal Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht (VLD), speaking on the VRT programme ‘De Zevende Dag’, reiterated the criticism of the lax approach adopted in dealing with the unemployed (FF).

During the second half of 2004 the RVA invited 8,997 people to come for a talk. 46% of them were Walloons and 34% Flemings. In the end 3,534 unemployed people came for interviews in the second half of last year, whilst for the others this was deferred until 2005. Those who had been unemployed the longest and had been for an interview were able to prove to the RVA that they were making efforts to find a job (among them 1,064 Walloons and 1,258 Flemings). But there are also 479 unemployed people who have not re-acted to the call. They have therefore been sanctioned and are losing four weeks’ benefit. Di Rupo is hardly proud of the fact that there are far more Walloons than Flemings among the 479 who have been penalised: 321 compared to 114 (the remaining 62 being from Brussels).

But actually with the figures Di Rupo is avoiding the real issue. This is more about the fact that the Walloon Employment Office, Forem, is no longer offering the unemployed people on its books individual job offers. Di Rupo answers that question in a more veiled manner. For 2002 the situation had become untenable for companies, he says. If they had a vacancy, Forem would send them several hundred unemployed people every time – sometimes as many as a thousand. This resulted in companies wasting a lot of time. Since then the technique has changed. Now when there is a job offer, it appears on the web site and the unemployed people are invited to view that job offer on the computers in the Forem office.

Nonetheless, this does not appear to be a genuine individual offer of employment for the unemployed. To avoid such discussions, Di Rupo is advocating more and better consultation between the various authorities – something that should already happen at the next inter-ministerial conference for employment. Its task will be to examine the figures and standardise the flow of information from the VDAB, Forem and the RVA so that at least everyone is talking about the same thing. ‘Perhaps we have not talked with each other enough. But acting as though this is a story of ‘goodies’ against ‘badies’, of Flanders against Wallonia, is wrong.’

The Flemish VDAB and its Walloon counterpart Forem provide support services to the unemployed in a different manner. Flanders works with individual job offers, whereas Wallonia offers situations vacant collectively via free local papers and web sites. This means that the Wallon office cannot forward a list with the names of people who have turned down a job offer, to the RVA, which monitors and sanctions unemployed people. On 13 April a meeting was held between the competent ministers to introduce corrective measures. After the meeting, Minister Vanden Bossche (SP.A) said that she would not be interfering in the way unemployed people are supervised in Flanders and in Wallonia. ‘That is a regional competence. I do not want to, and am not able to impose an identical system, but in order to guarantee that unemployed people are dealt with in the same way, a working group will establish specific rules’. The aim is for the RVA to receive the same data on unemployed people in Flanders and Wallonia. The question remains as to how Wallonia’s Forem will go about securing the names of people turning down job offers bearing in mind its collective approach.

BELGIAN SOLUTION FOR UNEQUAL APPROACH TO UNEMPLOYED

A s of 1 July last year unemployed people have had to prove to the RVA that they are looking for work. In an initial phase the monitoring system is aimed at young unemployed people under the age of 30. From July this year it will apply to people in their thirties as well, and from next year to people up to the age of 50. Interim figures show that one in six of the young unemployed people monitored by the RVA had already found a job, and that 70% were making good enough efforts to find work. There were more suspensions among Wallonians than among Flemings, but that is because youth unemployment is higher in Wallonia. The Flemish and Wallon employment offices, VDAB and Forem respectively, pass on their data to the RVA but this is not done in the same way. Federal Labour Minister Vanden Bossche (SP.A) now wants her federal RVA to receive the same data from the two regions (FF).

STEVEN SOMERS • HET LAATSTE NIEUWS • 14 APRIL

The Flemish VDAB and its Walloon counterpart Forem provide support services to the unemployed in a different manner. Flanders works with individual job offers, whereas Wallonia offers situations vacant collectively via free local papers and web sites. This means that the Wallon office cannot forward a list with the names of people who have turned down a job offer, to the RVA, which monitors and sanctions unemployed people. On 13 April a meeting was held between the competent ministers to introduce corrective measures. After the meeting, Minister Vanden Bossche (SP.A) said that she would not be interfering in the way unemployed people are supervised in Flanders and in Wallonia. ‘That is a regional competence. I do not want to, and am not able to impose an identical system, but in order to guarantee that unemployed people are dealt with in the same way, a working group will establish specific rules’. The aim is for the RVA to receive the same data on unemployed people in Flanders and Wallonia. The question remains as to how Wallonia’s Forem will go about securing the names of people turning down job offers bearing in mind its collective approach.

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Reduced gift tax leads to boom in revenue from registration fees

**FF EDITOR**

The 1,203 notary’s offices in Belgium last year collected almost EUR 2.5 billion in registration fees (+13%) on behalf of the government (De Tijd, 13 April). In Flanders the growth figures for registration fees are striking. These are collected when houses are sold and purchased, when mortgages are taken out, when company deeds are executed, and in the case of gift and inheritance tax. The growth in income from registration fees is chiefly attributable to the reduction in gift tax, which has prompted Flemings to make more use of gifts in inheritance affairs. But also the carry-forward regulation for registration fees in the event of the purchase of a subsequent house has caused the revenue to grow. This arrangement enables Flemings to deduct that part of the registration fees paid in a previous real estate transaction from, for example, the purchase of a new house.

Total growth in registration fees in Flanders amounted to 16.6%. This is considerably higher than in Brussels (+7.3%) and Wallonia (+11%), as revealed in the annual report of the Royal Federation of Belgian Notary’s Practices. According to Pierre Nicaise, chairman of the federation, all Flemish provinces register double growth figures. However, he is expecting growth in Brussels to resume this year, because Brussels, following Flanders’ example, has also reduced gift tax.

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Internet survey should launch the debate on the public broadcasting service

**MEDIA MINISTER GEERT BOURGEOIS (N-VA) HAS CALLED ON THE ADVICE OF THE FLEMISH MEDIA COUNCIL**

Next year the management agreement between the public broadcasting corporation VRT and the Flemish Authorities comes to an end. In this agreement the government formulates what it expects from the public broadcasting corporation with measurable objectives as regards programming range, quality and reach. For the preparation of the new agreement for 2007-2011 Media Minister Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) has called on the advice of the Flemish Media Council. This will back its opinion with scientific research. A survey among the Flemish public to sound out what people expect of the public broadcasting corporation also forms part and parcel of this. The survey has already been announced in an advertisement in newspapers on 9 April, and a little later in magazines as well. Respondents can give their answers on the web site www.vlaanderen.be/vrt or ask for a form for completion from the Flemish Information Hotline (Vlaamse Inforlijn). However, the three questions raised are not exactly remarkable for their clarity and simplicity, and are the target of ridicule in De Standaard (11 April). The first question runs as follows: ‘To what degree does the way in which the VRT fulfils its key tasks meet your expectations in respect of a public broadcasting service?’ A link to the broadcasting decree and the previous management agreement invites respondents to look for these key tasks in the dozens of web pages. It becomes even more difficult when the viewer is asked ‘what the specific traits of the public broadcasting service consist in’. Nonetheless people at the VRT have complete faith in the results of the survey. The public broadcasting company is even calling on viewers to co-operate in the survey (FF).

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Opinion

**PETER VANDERMEERSCH • DE STANDAARD • 13 APRIL**

Is a debate on the role of the public broadcasting company necessary? Of course it is. For should more than two hundred million euros in taxpayers’ money go to a broadcasting corporation every year so that it can purchase football rights that the commercial broadcasting companies also want? Shouldn’t the public broadcasting company be free of commercials? Should there be more cultural programmes on the VRT? Isn’t a strong public broadcasting company a guarantee of high-quality commercial broadcasting companies?

For that matter, this is a debate that is currently raging in our neighbouring countries. The Dutch State Secretary for Media, Mady Van der Laan, announced a few weeks ago that the public broadcasting corporation in her country would no longer be allowed to broadcast pure entertainment programmes from 2008 onwards. The British government also extended the BBC’s licence a few months ago.

So let the debate take place in Flanders as well. But let’s not make it a simplistic one, based on three questions. Tell the people about the digital future of TV and the role of Telenet and Belgacom. Talk about the European directives. Dare to examine the enormous financial interests of the commercial channels. And point to the daily and ongoing surveys: the viewing and appreciation figures.

So, yes to a lively and gripping debate, and no to a foolish survey that will not contribute anything to the debate. That is an ill-understood form of democracy – and the shirking of responsibility.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE/VRT
Local internet television
on the rise

LOCAL INTERNET BROADCASTERS CAN LIVE ON AN ANNUAL BUDGET OF BARELY EUR 25,000

FF EDITOR

Now that regional television is a well-established phenomenon in every Flemish province, a few pioneers now also appear to be forcing the breakthrough of local Internet television. Thanks to the ever cheaper digital cameras and the growth in the number of families who have a fast Internet connection, more and more municipalities and small towns are starting up their own on-line television channel aimed at the local community, reports De Morgen (13 April). The advance of Internet television can be compared with the flourishing of local radio stations in the 1980s. Just as when the broadcasting equipment suddenly became affordable and local radio stations sprang up like mushrooms, so the budgets for the setting up of a local television channel with broadcasting equipment are increasingly becoming a viable proposition, according to one of the people behind a local initiative in Ghent. Local Internet broadcasters can live on an annual budget of barely EUR 25,000. They broadcast local news from the municipality, for which even the regional television channels operate on too large a scale. The programmes are financed by local traders and financiers who pay to have their logo on the screen for a year. Larger cities are even seeing neighbourhood television channels appearing, such as the Victoria Deluxe channel in Ghent.

WWW.TVKUURNE.BE
WWW.NTV.BE
WWW.VICTORIADELUXE.BE

EXHIBITIONS

Corpus ’05, the successor to Brugge 2002

THE WHOLE EVENT IS BUILT AROUND THE THEME OF THE BODY. THE MAIN ATTRACTION IS AN EXHIBITION FOCUSING ON THE FLEMISH PRIMITIVE HANS MEMLING

ARMAND PLOTTIER • DE MORGEN • 13 APRIL

Three years after Bruges held the title of Cultural Capital of Europe for a year, the popular tourist city is presenting the follow-up, with Corpus ’05. Bruges wants once and for all to rid itself of its image as an open-air museum offering little in the way of contemporary culture. What’s more, since 2002 Bruges knows how to programme cultural events several months on end. With a street-party on the opening day, some large-scale exhibitions, theatre, dance and literary readings, the organising non-profit-making association Brugge Plus aims to establish a genuine cultural summer festival. As the title indicates, the whole event is built around the theme of the body. The main attraction is an exhibition focusing on the Flemish Primitive Hans Memling.

The big draw of Corpus 05 will undoubtedly be the exhibition ‘Memling and the portrait, or portrait painting in the Renaissance’ in the Groeninge Museum, on Memling’s impact on the development of European portrait painting in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. This exhibition is being staged in co-operation with the Frick Collection in New York and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid. But there’s a lot more on the programme in Bruges than just the Memling exhibition.

At the presentation of the programme, mayor Patrick Moenaert (CD&V) thus said that Corpus 05 had consciously opted ‘for a festival-like atmosphere with space for events for the general public, but also for the experimental’. According to Moenaert the public can expect ‘surprising meetings and surprising forms of art at unusual locations’.

‘When Brugge 2002 came to an end, the non-profit-making association Brugge Plus was created. This non-profit-making association acts as a partner intermediary between the city services and the players in the cultural and tourist sector. Manfred Sellink, artistic co-ordinator of Corpus and head curator of Musea Brugge, had EUR 2.5 million at his disposal for this programme.’

Veerle Mans, director of Brugge Plus: ‘Putting the programme together was a balancing act. Culture was of course given priority, but the tourism part was also important. As far as that is concerned, we have tried to make our programme especially attractive for Flanders.’

The organisers are counting on 100,000 visitors for the Memling exhibition. ‘For Soul’ [an exhibition with work by contemporary artists such as Antony Gormley, Roger Ravel, Luc Tuymans, Anish Kapoor and Bill Viola] are we aiming for 20,000 to 30,000 visitors. We should also be able to reach 20,000 visitors for Tussen huid en orgasm [Between skin and orgasm] [with Pipilotti Rist, Man Ray and Anne-Mie van Kerckhoven, among others]. Six top restaurants from the Bruges area are also involved in the festival.

‘We should also quickly mention that fans of music, with for example an opera by Francesco Cavalli in the Concertgebouw, dance, with the Body Stroke festival, or literature, with a reading by the writer Eric de Kuyper, will also have more than enough to keep them happy during Corpus’, concludes artistic co-ordinator Sellink.

WWW.CORPU05.BE
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