Survey: more support for unions than for government

The end-of-career debate in Belgium has reached a crucial point. On 8 October the negotiations can succeed or fail. On that day the government, unions and employers will meet for decisive talks. But first there was the general strike of 7 October, which brought public transport and large parts of the Belgian economy to a standstill. By striking, the Socialist ABVV union wanted to put pressure on the government in the last direct line of the negotiations. The government, unions, employers and commentators were given plenty of chance to express their opinion in the media over the end-of-career issue and the opportunity of a strike. But what does the average Flemish think? Het Nieuwsblad/Het Volk commissioned a survey of 991 Flemings. This revealed that 40% of Flemings are behind the strike and only 25% agree with the government’s approach (FF).

WIM WINCKELMANS/FRANS DESMET
HET NIJEUWSBLAD • 7 OKTOBER

Whatever the outcome of the negotiations, the result will not be greeted with applause. Flanders is and remains particularly divided over the end-of-career issue. Among working people and semi- and unskilled workers there is much more sympathy for the contentious strike than among the elderly and highly skilled. Among people with no more than a diploma in lower secondary education, 55% support the ABVV’s strike. Among graduates that percentage falls to barely 21%

Even when asked if we will all have to work longer, there is a sizeable gap between the highly skilled and the semi- and unskilled. Among the highly skilled, 69.3% are convinced, compared with only 34.6% of people with a lower secondary education diploma. The over-60s are also aware that people will have to work longer, but a majority of the working population is opposed to the idea.

Even if older people and the highly skilled are precisely those categories that will either no longer be troubled by the measures to work longer, or those who can cope more easily with having to work longer. In any case the end-of-career debate remains a highly sensitive subject.

The government has clearly not managed to make a convincing majority of the population more aware of the problem. The approach of the government itself gets the fewest points among public opinion.

GRAPHICS PAGE 2 AND 7

INTRODUCTION

Three days after France, Belgium also had to suffer another general strike, with all the associated chaos and economic damage. The strike, which was called by the Socialist trade union, brought large areas of the country to a standstill. There were no trains, and only sporadic trams and buses. In the ports of Zeebrugge, Antwerp and Ghent the strike was total. There the three unions had joined forces. In the provinces of Antwerp and Limburg hardly any post was delivered. There were also general strikes in major industrial firms such as Bekoart and the assembly plants of Volvo (Genk), Ford (Genk), Opel (Antwerp) and Volkswagen (Vorst).

In addition, many people who wanted to work were unable to do so because pickets had blocked the entrances to business parks and industrial estates. The employers’ organisation Unizo condemned the actions in the strongest possible words and kept a small army of bailiffs ready to haul ‘illegal’ flying pickets at the entrances to business parks before the courts. Union solidarity among the rank and file did not prevent the leaders of the ABVV and ACV from each following their own strategy, or the sharp exchange of words between ACV Chairman Cortebeeck and ABVV boss Verboven on the eve of the strike. The ABVV went into a huff over the ACV’s advert in the papers on 6 October, in which the Christian union listed ten reasons why it was not striking. Verboven blames the leaders of the ACV for not allowing the strikers any success and for actually wanting to break the strike. Verboven maintained that the strike would encourage the government to be more compliant in the negotiations. Conversely, the Christian union blames the ABVV for striking while negotiating. Worse still, for having obtained a set of guarantees from the government for the content of early retirement, but acting as if they had not heard this.

De Morgen is also immensely annoyed by the attitude of the ABVV, because it simply continued to demand things (alternative financing of social security, maintenance of early retirement) on which agreement had been reached in social negotiations. The ABVV continues to demand that benefits and pensions must be increased, but cannot explain how that is possible with fewer people, who, in addition, stop working earlier, says De Morgen. The paper instead praises the ACV, which is aware of the problem of the ageing population and displays a sense of responsibility, despite the fact that the Christian union politically finds itself farthest from the Socialist-Liberal government. Het Nieuwsblad (6 October) also claims that the ABVV’s leaders are displaying little sense of responsibility. Young people are well aware that they will have to work longer and will have to contribute to the large medical bills of the elderly. As a result they are sick of the short-sightedness of the ABVV union talk, contained in the paper, which even sees it in the germs of a serious generation conflict. Mainly disappearing comments in the Flemish press, therefore, and since no majority party, not even the Socialist SPA and PS, agree with the ABVV, the union seems to have marginalised itself in the negotiations, is the general view.

Frank Vandeveeye | editor in chief

CONTENTS

Social policy and politics
Career end: socialist union strikes, Christian union doesn’t and says why 2
What ACV wants and what it got 2
Social security: satisfaction about proposal 3
A few Belgian MP’s didn’t support Verwilghen, Why? 3
Di Rupo replaces Van Cauwenbergh as Walloon minister-president 4
CD&V celebrates sixtieth anniversary 4

Economy
Voka conference: innovate is the message 5
Belgacom bid for Telindus suffers difficult start 5
Suez wants to sell interest in Elia 6

Public Health
Medical tourism in Ghent and Antwerp 6

Culture
Europalia-Russia: Avant-garde painting in Russia before 1935 7

focus on FLANDERS • 1 October - 7 October 2005 • Number 37
ABVV strikes, ACV doesn’t and says why

In its advert in the newspaper ACV gives ten reasons why it is not striking. It sums up the guarantees it has apparently received from the government

Through adverts in all the papers the Christian trade union (ACV) informed its own supporters and the public at large why it was not striking. At the same time it did the Socialist ABVV union, which did strike on 7 October, a very bad turn. The Socialist union continues to maintain that striking is the best way to put pressure on the government and that not enough progress has been made in the negotiations. The ABVV is also convinced that many members of the Christian and Liberal trade union will strike out of solidarity with the ABVV and in so doing ignore their leaders’ directives. The gulf between the two unions at the top appears insurmountable. The ACV believes it is impossible to strike and negotiate at the same time. In its advert it gives ten reasons why it is not striking. They are the end-of-career guarantees it has apparently already received from the government. However, according to the ABVV, these promises are far too vague. We will know what finally comes of these guarantees after Saturday, 8 October. Then the parties will negotiate to a finish (FF).

LIESBETH VAN IMPE • DE MORGEN 6 OCTOBER

Given how the negotiations have progressed it comes as no real surprise, but by striking the ABVV has allowed itself to be pushed into a corner all alone. The ACV is critical but constructive, the ABVV adopts a rearguard stance and refuses to budge an inch. It creates a paradoxical situation: the ABVV lashes out the hardest against a government of which its natural political partner is part, while the ACV – allied to the main opposition party – makes it rather less difficult for the government. It says a lot about the gap that has developed within the various divisions. Even the PS risked dropping its own trade union with the interprofessional agreement. And when the Purples came to power the ACV did not need much time to realise that a CD&V in opposition is not the most suitable negotiation partner. Six years after Verhofstadt took the oath, relations between ACV boss Luc Cortebeeck and the Premier appear excellent. He must be about the only CD&V member Verhofstadt can get along with. The difference between the two unions is at the top. The ACV’s rank and file are grumbling just as much as the ABVV, and a great many green jackets are also expected at the strike. However, it is the leaders that make the difference. Cortebeeck is going to his supporters with a difficult message: something will change, and it’s up to us to defend what is really important. The opposite is true at the ABVV. After the presentation of the exploratory memorandum Verboven said nothing. He wanted to consult his supporters first. After the meeting Verboven said what the federations within the trade unions wanted to hear. Apparently it had quickly been made clear to him that he would not survive a different position at the top. Verboven’s negotiating mandate is simple: nothing can change. The ABVV has manoeuvred itself into a marginal position. In a certain sense the ABVV has even made things easier for the government. It has adopted such an uncompromising position that even the PS is not tempted to join ranks with its union.

WWW.ABVV.BE
WWW.ACV.BE

What the ACV wants and what it really got

With its newspaper campaign the Christian trade union mainly wants to show that it has got everything it wanted. But in government circles the ten guarantees the union managed to pull out of the fire are being presented as an extremely ‘voluntaristic’ reading of the negotiation texts, claim De Standaard and De Tijd (6 October). For example, the ACV gives the fact that early retirement is still possible at 58 as the first reason. But for the government, early retirement at 60 will be the rule. There will, however, be exceptions for people with a long career or a strenuous job. Employees can currently take early retirement from 58 after a 25-year career and exceptions are possible for strenuous jobs. What the trade unions have obtained is the right to early retirement in the case of restructurings, although that is at the age of 51 or 52. A second minor victory is the payment of a group insurance or pension fund from 60. Originally the government wanted to raise that to 65. But in general early retirement schemes are being scaled down. The Canada Dry scheme, a redundancy scheme that resembles early retirement scheme but is still slightly different because the employer pays the redundant employee an extra premium on top of unemployment benefit, is being made impossible.

What's your opinion about the strike? What's your opinion about the government's approach? Should we work longer in the future?

4.1% NO OPINION 1.9% NO OPINION
55.1% DISAGREE 50.7% DISAGREE
40.8% AGREE 47.4% AGREE

WWW.ABVV.BE
WWW.ACV.BE

Het Nieuwsblad
Trade unions satisfied with social security proposal, but socialist ABVV still to strike

ACV leader Cortebeeck said he was glad that the burdens were shifting from labour to capital. The ACV therefore decided to cancel the strike planned for 10 October.

The Federal Government has failed in its discussions with social partners to get the ABVV to change its mind. The Socialist union still intends to strike on Friday 7 October. The talks on the end of career and early retirement are making slow progress and the ABVV intends the strike to increase the pressure on the government. Nevertheless, the government’s proposal for an alternative financing of social security was welcomed by the unions. Christian trade union leader Cortebeeck said he was glad that the burdens were shifting from labour to capital. The ACV therefore decided to cancel the strike planned for 10 October. Reactions in employers’ circles were measured. The government’s proposal allocates 15% of movable income a year to social security (FF).

EVELYN HENS • DE TIJD • 5 OCTOBER

The Federal Government intends transferring 15% of movable income to social security. This is designed to provide around 400 million euros. The measure is to be enshrined in law. The government also confirmed that expenditure in healthcare has to be financed more from general funds and less from social security. These two structural measures are designed to provide social security with greater financial room to move.

The government also outlined the contours for index-linked benefits. It is setting aside 15 million euros for this in 2006 and 160 million euros in 2007. From 2008 there will be a structural mechanism to make benefits index-linked. The team of Premier Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) is basing itself on the hypotheses of the Committee for the Ageing Population (Vergrijzingscommissie). This assumes that benefits will rise by 0.5% per annum, which will cost 225 million euros.

The Federal Government confirmed that there will be a tax cut for low wages, older workers, research and development and shift work. But it remained vague about the extent of the operation. It did, however, let it be known that employers’ minimum wage contributions would be completely abolished, and that tax cuts would increase progressively for workers over the age of 45.

The social security talks may have gone smoothly, but the same cannot be said of the end-of-career negotiations. These are making particularly slow progress, forcing the government yesterday evening to reach for the confessional procedure. Premier Verhofstadt (VLD), Didier Reynders (MR), Laurette Onkelinx (PS) and Freya Van den Bossche (SPA) heard the trade unions and employers separately on their breaking points. For the unions, the proposals on businesses in restructuring, the stricter access to conventional early retirement and the less beneficial tax regulation for pseudo-early retirement schemes are unacceptable. ‘This part of the story remains unclear,’ said ABVV leader Verboven yesterday. ‘This justifies our strike on Friday.’ The Federal Government promised social partners it would come up with a new proposal on Saturday 8 October. On that day the government wants to have an agreement on social security, index-linking of benefits and pensions. It remains to be seen whether unions and employers will be inclined to compromise further one day after the ABVV’s 24-hour strike. All the more since it looks as if the strike will go ahead, and not only with ABVV members. Increasing numbers of reports are trickling in that members of the Christian and Liberal unions will be lending their support to the ABVV strike.

MPs in Council of Europe do not understand Belgian opposition to candidacy of Verwilghen

In the first round of voting in Strasbourg for the position of Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe the Belgian Marc Verwilghen (VLD) achieved the worst score of the three candidates. The Pole Nowicki got 89 votes, the Swede Hammarberg 78 and Verwilghen himself 65. In the second round he got only 33 votes and Hammarberg eventually won the vote. What is remarkable is that the Christian Democrat Luc Vanden Brande (CD&V) and PDF member Eric Libert voted against him. Worse still, the latter even conducted a vigorous campaign against Verwilghen and in a letter to MPs called on them not to give their vote to a member of a party (the VLD) that refuses to ratify the framework convention on minorities (of Francophones living on Flemish territory, ed.). Vanden Brande voted against Verwilghen because under his chairmanship the Christian Democratic parliamentary party of the EVP accepted the recommendation to support Nowicki. The VLD members Stef Goris and Paul Wille who were present did not know what to do with their indignation. Within the national delegations people asked themselves how it was possible that a number of Belgians present had not voted for a fellow countryman. If this unwritten rule had been respected, he would undoubtedly have achieved a better result, says Verwilghen himself. During the days before the voting all sorts of speculations did the rounds about a scramble among VLD ministers if Verwilghen would have stepped down as Federal Economic Affairs Minister. De Tijd claimed to know that in that case his place would be taken by the current Flemish Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen and that Jean-Marie De Decker would then join the Flemish Government. In particular, the latter makes no secret of his ministerial ambitions. But now Verwilghen failed to become commissioner, he will simply remain a minister, confirmed Premier Verhofstadt’s spokesman (De Standaard, 5 October).
On 30 September the Minister-President of Wallonia, Jean-Claude Van Cauwenbergh (PS), resigned because his firm of solicitors is involved in the scandal surrounding the social housing company La Carolorégienne. Van Cauwenbergh himself denies any involvement, but acknowledges that the scandal has undermined his authority. On 3 October his party Chairman, Elio Di Rupo, announced that he would be taking over as Minister-President of the Walloon Region himself and would combine that job with the chairmanship of his party. Above all, Di Rupo wants to address the Marshall Plan for Wallonia, which he himself set up. Di Rupo also announced that he wanted to make a clean sweep of PS representatives who fail to observe the rules of professional ethics. An internal audit committee is being charged with carrying out an investigation. Di Rupo did, however, make it clear that he wanted to take part in the federal elections in 2007, so that a possible move to the federal prime ministership is not being ruled out by political commentators. This leaves the way open for a duel for the premiership with Yves Leterme, the current Flemish Minister-President, claims De Standaard. Meanwhile the CD&V Party Leader in the Flemish Parliament, Ludwig Caluwé, announced that Yves Leterme will lead his party’s negotiations after the 2007 elections. For the time being Leterme is not prepared to say whether that also means he will head the CD&V list in West Flanders in 2007 (FF).

**Politics**

**Regions and State Reform**

**Di Rupo replaces Van Cauwenbergh as minister-president**

Di Rupo and Leterme are currently the most popular politicians in their region. They get on well with each other, and maintain a good contact. Both like a no-nonsense style that contrasts sharply with the animated, bombastic style of current Premier Guy Verhofstadt (VLD). Both also share a latent but nonetheless present ambition to become first minister. ‘Why couldn’t a Walloon become premier? I don’t see the problem. There are 4.3 million Francophones and 6 million Flemings: it seems to me no more than logical for the Francophones to provide another premier after thirty years,’ declared Di Rupo at the beginning of September. ‘First let me do my job as Minister-President,’ Leterme invariably answers in the meantime to questions about his political future. But last Sunday Ludwig Caluwé, the CD&V’s Party Leader in the Flemish Parliament, stated out loud what everyone is assuming: after the federal elections Leterme will take the lead in the government negotiations. If the CD&V achieves scores of around 30% in the federal elections, then there is no doubt that there will be renewed claims for the old familiar Rue de Loi 16. Just like Leterme, Di Rupo is now mainly focusing on welfare in his own back yard. While for Flanders ‘the knowledge economy’ is the magic charm, Di Rupo is counting on his Marshall Plan. In contrast to Leterme, however, Di Rupo needs Federal Belgium and its ‘regional solidarity’. Leterme sees things differently: ‘It is impossible to develop our own economic policy further without being given additional (currently still federal) levers,’ he argues.

In 2007 the Minister-Presidents will have to get on with each other come what may if they want to form a Federal Government. And then there is obviously still the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde problem that will have to be resolved. Finally, both Minister-Presidents will face the same electoral risk in the 2007 federal elections: their credibility will be up for discussion if they present themselves as candidate premiers too without being given additional (currently still federal) levers,’ he argues.

In 2007 the Minister-Presidents will have to get on with each other come what may if they want to form a Federal Government. And then there is obviously still the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde problem that will have to be resolved. Finally, both Minister-Presidents will face the same electoral risk in the 2007 federal elections: their credibility will be up for discussion if they present themselves as candidate premiers too without being given additional (currently still federal) levers,’ he argues.

**CD&V celebrates sixtieth anniversary**

On 1 October in Antwerp the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of their party. Amid great interest, the party’s former leaders were treated like royalty for the occasion. Alongside former premiers Leo Tindemans, Wilfried Martens, Mark Eyskens and Jean-Luc Dehaene, honour was also conferred upon former minister-president Luc Vandendael Brande and former chairmen Frank Swaelen, Herman Van Rompuy, Marc Van Peel and Staafan De Clerck. In his closing speech, CD&V Chairmen Jo Van Deurzen said that no one can now deny the fact that Flemish Christian Democracy is alive and kicking and once again holds the political reins in Flanders. Van Deurzen also referred to the excellent results in the latest opinion polls, which show that the CD&V/N-VA cartel is the largest political formation in Flanders. The ‘celebration’ was remarkably serious, with some papers such as De Standaard and Het Laatste Nieuws even calling it dull. But the party is clearly not embarrassed about its ‘dull’ image. ‘No chatter, no newspaper stories, administrators don’t have to be amusing,’ said Minister-President Yves Leterme, to be met with approving applause.

**WWW.CDENV.BE**
ECONOMY

VOKA conference: innovate is the message

Too much knowledge is currently left behind at the university and is not marketed

A ccording to the Flemish employers’ organisation Voka, Flanders urgently has to improve its competitive strength. Businesses must innovate more quickly and work more closely together with the government and universities. In this way they will get the most out of knowledge. Without innovation our businesses will encounter problems, thereby putting jobs at risk. Too much knowledge is currently left behind at university and is not marketed. Voka made this analysis at its annual conference in Brussels (FF).

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 5 OCTOBER

Whilst it is true that Voka Chairman Verhoeven put forward the employers’ plea for dramatically lower taxes on labour, fewer corporate taxes and a more efficient and slimmed-down government, he also made other proposals. Verhoeven called for a university faculty where logistics, spatial planning and quality of life are researched together. In densely populated Flanders these three aspects are inextricably linked together, he feels.

The Voka Chairman also presented a special programme for Asian investors. ‘We must offer Asians the comfort and facilities their culture demands, and we must deal with them with the right mentality.’ In his speech Verhoeven referred emphatically to the Asian markets. ‘For years we have exported products and services all over the world, and seen our welfare grow as a result,’ he said. ‘These new nations are now demanding their place on the world market.’ A Voka study presented yesterday by Managing Director Philippe Muyters reveals that employers see the rapidly growing economy in China and India as the biggest threat to their profits. In the eyes of the business community, the fact that these countries are innovating more and more quickly constitutes the second biggest danger. Most companies react to the increasing competition by seeking new customers in existing markets. Most innovative businesses react differently, says the study. They encourage customers and staff to come up with ideas, they make use of external knowledge centres and also spend money to develop admittedly risky new markets and products.

‘It’s not enough simply to gamble on efficiency,’ said Muyters, summarising the study. ‘We have the erroneous tendency to work independently. We also have to look beyond the Flemish market and those of our neighbours.’

WWW.VOKA.BE

Belgacom bid for Telindus suffers difficult start

It is the entire Board of Directors that has to issue an official opinion. A negative opinion will make the Belgacom bid hostile

T elecoms operator Belgacom’s bid for network integrator Telindus is not running particularly smoothly. The biggest shareholder, the Cordier Group (a syndicate of shareholders based around the Cordier family, Mercator, TrustCapital and the Walloon investment company SRiW), which holds 23% of the shares, looks like turning down the offer. But it is the entire Board of Directors that has to issue an official opinion. The Cordier Group occupies 4 of the 11 seats on this Board. A negative opinion will make the Belgacom bid hostile. Meanwhile 13% of the Telindus shares have already been traded on two business days and the price has risen to 14.2 euros a share, well above the bid price of 13.5 euros from Belgacom. De Standaard holds orders for hedge funds responsible for the price explosion. Consequently, for the time being the telecoms operator cannot buy any shares above its bid price, unless it increases this (FF).

PASCAL DEN DOOVEN • DE STANDAARD 4 OCTOBER

Telindus has also appointed several corporate banks [De Groof, CSFB and KBC Securities]. Their task is to assist the firm in its defence strategy. The Board of Directors has to draft an opinion on the bid by Thursday at the latest. There are various delicate issues to consider. Is Belgacom’s bid positive for the staff, creditors and shareholders of Telindus?

In the past few days the directors have not once sought to contact Belgacom. This silence underlines the gulf between Telindus and Belgacom. According to some, Telindus has had like-minded operator in the past. In this way Telindus intended acquiring the necessary critical scale to develop its international presence profitably. That could be one of the reasons behind Belgacom’s approach. The former state monopolist has had its eye on Telindus for a while but up to now has been rebuffed. For the time being Belgacom can do nothing other than watch from the sidelines. Telindus’ Board of Directors has to deliver its opinion by Thursday at the latest, which will also appear in Belgacom’s bid prospectus. The supervisor would then pass judgement on the prospectus within three weeks whereupon the bid would run for 20 days. A counter-bid can be made up to two days before the Belgacom bid expires. Despite criticism of Belgacom’s bid price, observers have noted that the price is acceptable given the problems Telindus is having in countries such as Germany, China and Italy. Because almost half the value consists of Mobistar shares, in practice a bid for the activities of Telindus has to be not 5% but 10% higher.

WWW.TELINDUS.BE
WWW.BELGACOM.BE

focus on flanders • 1 October - 7 October 2005 • Number 37
Medical tourism catches on

In recent years there has been a new trend in the OCMWs (public social welfare centres) of cities such as Ghent, Mechelen and Antwerp. De Morgen (1 October) calls it ‘medical tourism of people without papers’. They allow themselves to be treated in a hospital at the expense of the local OCMWs. In most cases the OCMWs only find out what treatment was involved when they get the bill from the hospital. The hospitals cannot turn the patients away because they claim to need urgent medical attention. But often they are not after emergency treatment but interventions that require advance planning, such as deliveries or even plastic surgery and in-vitro fertilisation (IVF). In 2003 the Jan Palfijn Hospital in Ghent provided assistance to 8,301 people without papers, and last year the figure was 11,097. The numbers are expected to rise by a further 30% in 2005. What is striking is that half the patients came from Bulgaria, mainly women who came here to give birth. ‘Word-of-mouth advertising in Bulgaria has established a medical tourism to Ghent,’ says Ghent OCMW Chairwoman Rita Uyttendaele. They come here with a tourist visa and then apply to the OCMW for payment. The OCMW only finds out what treatment was involved at the time of payment, because medical confidentiality must be respected. Home Affairs Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD) points out that there is no longer a classic visa requirement for Bulgarians and Romanians who are in the EU’s waiting room (FF).

Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 1 OCTOBER

OCMWs are increasingly faced with medical bills for treatment whose direct medical benefit can be questioned. For example, it appears to be common practice for Bulgarian women to come to Belgium on a tourist visa, wait until it has expired and then ask the OCMW to pay for their delivery from the newly acquired illegal status. Until further notice it is not yet one of the core tasks of the OCMW to finance IVF treatment and plastic nose surgery, or deliveries of tourists who have ‘out-stayed their welcome’.

Suez wants to sell interest in Elia

Most municipalities have now decided to accept the bid of Suez to sell their Electrabel shares. The income is likely to be around 477 million euros in cash and 140 million euros in Suez shares.

FF EDITOR

The French parent group of electricity producer Electrabel, Suez, is prepared to scale down its interest in Elia, which manages the Belgian high-voltage network, to less than 25%, so that it no longer has a blocking minority, announced Suez boss Gérard Mesdrallet at his talks with Federal Government leaders this week. This is good news for the government. With an eye on freer competition between electricity producers it wants to loosen the grip of former monopoly holder Electrabel distribution via the high-voltage network. Most municipalities have now decided to accept the bid of Suez to sell their Electrabel shares. The income is likely to be around 477 million euros in cash and 140 million euros in Suez shares. In the Flemish Parliament, MPs of the majority parties advised the municipalities to use the money to buy out Electrabel as much as possible from the capital of the energy networks. Not only from Elia (high voltage) and the intermunicipal companies (low voltage), but also from gas distributor Fluxys.

As far as this last network is concerned Suez is proving obstructive. Through Electrabel it owns 57% of Fluxys and for the time being is not willing to let go. Most MPs in the Flemish Parliament also advised the municipalities to sell the Suez shares they received. After all, the interest is too small to be able to participate in decisions in the energy group, speakers claim.
Europalia-Russia: overview of Russian avant-garde in Bozar

IN WHICH FOUR TEAMS OF ARCHITECTS TOOK PART: THE LONDON FIRM ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS, THE PARIS FIRM JAKOB+MAC FARLANE, THE DUTCH DUO NEUTELINGS

The 20th Europalia Festival officially begins this week in various Belgian cities, with Russia as the guest country. Vladimir Putin himself came to open the festival. In his wake a large number of Russian orchestras, ensembles and musicians have come to our country to give concerts. Russian theatre groups and dance troupes are also joining in, with the ballet of the Bolshoi Theatre in February as the peak. However, a number of interesting exhibitions form the pièce de résistance of this Europalia Russia. In the KMSK (Cinquantenaire) the visitor can journey on the Trans-Siberian Express and discover fascinating facts about the many cultures and towns he encounters on the more than 9000 km long trip to Vladivostok. From Tsar to Emperor and Avant-Garde from Russia are running simultaneously in the PSK. The first exhibition shows 300 objects that illustrate a period from Russian history, more specifically that from Ivan the Terrible to Catherine the Great (1547-1796). But for art-lovers ‘Avant-garde from Russia’ is undoubtedly the most fascinating. It provides an overview of the innumerable movements in painting, which instigated an artistic revolution parallel to the social upheavals in Russia that would last until the dogma of the Socialist regime was introduced under Stalin in 1934. Major avant-garde artists such as Kandinsky, Tatlin and Malevitsj can be seen in Bozar, alongside lesser known jewels from small Russian museums that are on show in the West for the first time (FF).

MARC RUYTERS • DE TIJD • 5 OCTOBER

In the beginning of the twentieth century the Russian avant-garde mainly took its inspiration from French cubism and Italian futurism. But the Russian avant-garde would colour and influence daily society much more than these two Western European art styles. ‘Avant-garde in Russia, 1900-1935’ was produced by French curator Jean-Claude Marcadé, an expert in the genre, and by Evgenija Petrova, Director of the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg. Many of the three hundred works come from that museum, but more comes from numerous small, provincial museums. ‘Art was alive in everyone,’ explains Marcadé. ‘Avant-garde was a celebration, an escape from harsh realities.’ ‘With this exhibition we will not only show the works themselves,’ says Petrova, ‘but we will show the entire process of movements and evolutions.’ And that promise delivers the goods. The visitor is treated to scenes from the film ‘October’ (1928) by Sergei Eisenstein, a first hint of the exhibition’s multimedia conception. Because not only visual art, but also music, film, architecture, theatre and literature were deeply influenced by the avant-garde and each occupy their own place in the whole.

The first room presents the pre-avant-garde: early work by later greats such as Malevitsj, Larionov and others who rocked the establishment with their own interpretations of the prevailing trends (from realism to impressionism). For example, neoprimitivism combined Western impressionism with Eastern iconic art. Painters such as Larionov and his life partner Gontsjarova were inspired by children’s drawings and folk art and created a crude but colourful style. Malevitsj, Tatlin and Filonov did something similar by combining cubism with primitive elements.

But the real non-figurative art, that would lead to the two major trends in the Russian avant-garde (constructivism and suprematism), found its way from 1910. Kandinsky was one of the major thinkers and painters in this development, Larionov developed rayonism, Tatlin the concrete abstract, and with his ‘Black Square’ in 1923 Malevitsj would finally make everyone think (for a moment) that the absolute end point of painting had been reached. In the large central room, where the top works of this avant-garde hang, it is striking how all that abstract work also holds a powerful beauty.

UNTIL 21 FEBRUARY 2006 IN BOZAR, INFO: 02/507.85.82, WWW.EUROPALIA.BE

---

How important is the role of the unions?

- 78.7% IMPORTANT
- 21.3% NOT IMPORTANT

Is the strike too often used as a lever?

- 30.0% JUST OFTEN ENOUGH
- 57.3% TOO OFTEN
- 12.6% NOT OFTEN ENOUGH

Send your email-address to info@focusonflanders.be and receive a password for www.focusonflanders.be
**CULTURE**

**EXPO**
- From 5 February onwards: *The Memory of Congo*, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.kmsk.be
- Until 23 December: Masterpieces from the Russian treasure room, KMSK, Antwerp; info: www.kmsk.be
- Until 2008: *Art at the Frontline 1914-1918*, Royal Army and Military History Museum, Brussels; info www.km.marl-mra
- Until 31 December: *Art nouveau and Design 1890-1930*, wkm, Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 www.kmkg.be
- Until 23 December: *The art nouveau front as a complete work of art*, Museum for Architecture, Brussels; info: 02/642.24.75
- 17 September to 20 November: Contour, second bi-annual exhibition of video art, Mechelen; info: 070/22.80.00 www.mechelen2000.be
- Until 13 November: Retrospective *Betti Nefes* (photography), Museum of the Botanique, 02/218.37.32 www.botanique.be
- Until 31 December: Between Photo and Film, exhibition, KMKG, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: www.kmkg.be
- Until 4 December: *The big umbrella* by Alexandros Mitr, SMARK, Ghent; info: 09/320.42.06
- Until 9 January: *Panamarenko*, retrospective, KMSK, Brussels; info: 02/508.32.11 www.kmsk.be
- 13 October to 18 december: *Iconocity*, exhibition by Aglai Konrad, Photographic impressions of Feking, Kairo, Chicago, Mexico City, De Wozar; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- Until 22 January: *Avant-garde from Russia 1900-1935*, exhibition, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be www.europalia.be 02/507.85.95
- Until 21 February: *From Tibet to Emperor*: 300 objects that illustrate the period from Russian history from Ivan the Terrible to Catherine the Great (1547-1796); Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be www.europalia.be 02/507.85.95
- Until 30 April: *Path, exhibition, Museum Ghislain*, Ghent; info: www.museum- ghislain.be
- Until 26 February: *The Trans-Siberian Express*: Fascinating facts about the many cultures and towns on the route, Vladivostock, KMSK, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/742.72.11

**Focus on Flanders** provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 87, 9000 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail. The website www.focusonflanders.be contains an electronic archive of published articles.

**Translation:** Eurologos
**Printing:** Drukkerij Lannoo nv, Tielt
**Responsible editor:** Luc Demeste, Marke
**48 issues**
**Subscription rate printed edition + 2 e-mail subscriptions + password to search the archive (www.focusonflanders.be): 23.45 euro
**Transfer the sum to account no.: 473-1010001-19 with the KBC in Roeselare Or give us the number and expiry date of your credit card (Visa/Eurocard): Telephone: 051/44 43 99 Fax: 051/40.11.53
E-mail: frank.vandecaveye@lannoo.be