Belgians spend one third of budget on home

In 2004 the average Belgian family spent 30,607 euros, which is 4% more than in 2002. Deducting inflation leaves a real increase of 0.4%. The figures are taken from the household budget study of the Federal Public Service for the Economy carried out among 4,000 Belgian families. The information will be used to put together the index basket which is intended to give a picture of developments in consumer prices. The basket determines when wages and social benefits are adapted.

For years now housing - owned or not - has weighed heaviest in the average family’s budget. Including heating, lighting, water and fitting out the house, almost one third of the budget is spent here. Telecommunications and one’s own car are the fastest-growing expenditure items in the family budget. It is also striking that in 2004 the average Flemish family spent 2,751 euros more than the average Walloon family (FF).

CHRISTOF VAN SCHOUDBROEK • DE STANDAARD • 21 DECEMBER

In total the average Flemish family spent 31,954 euros in 2004, compared with 29,203 for a family in Wallonia and 27,761 euros for a Brussels family. In Brussels the average household even spent 1.5% less in 2004 than in 2002. In Flanders consumption followed the average growth percentage of 4%, while last year the average Wallon household consumed 6.1% more than in 2002.

In 2004 a Belgian family spent an average of 30,607 euros. That is 4 more than in 2002. The higher consumption drive in Flanders is explained by the higher disposable incomes of Flemish families. In 2004 an average Flemish family had 37,062 euros to spend, while the same family in Wallonia had to make do with 33,242 euros, and in Brussels with 30,991 euros. Last year the income of an average Belgian household was therefore 35,165 euros.

In 2004 21% of the budget went on the home. Among renters the rental cost was examined, among owners the rental value. 15.8% of the average family budget was spent on food, drink and tobacco. Transport accounts for 13.4% of the average family budget, slightly more than in 2002.

The ten new Member States had to have their share of the pot, so that of the 15 old Member States had to be cut, said the Premier. Leterme calmed the farmers by promising that around half the lost investment and modernisation support for farms would be compensated for from other rural development departments.

If possible, the blow was even harder to take following the World Trade Organisation summit in Hong Kong. There, Europe agreed to abolish export support for European agricultural products by 2013 - the end of its next budget. Again according to the Boerenbond Europe failed to obtain any conclusive guarantees that America would also effectively reduce its export subsidies.

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Flemish sugar beet growers, dairy farms and cattle breeders in particular will experience the agreement personally. People were already aware that the guaranteed European sugar price would be cut. The measure will hit the Flemish sugar beet grower in the purse and force up sugar imports. On top of that, dairy farms and cattle breeders will now also have a hard time of it. The first because subsidised exports of dairy products are no longer possible and the European dairy mountain will grow as a result. The price of milk will therefore inevitably take a dive too, affecting dairy farmers’ income. The outlook is just as gloomy for cattle breeders. As soon as the taxes on beef imports are removed, they can expect imported meat that costs half as much as its European counterpart.

Environmentalists have a very sombre view of the future. Without the billion euros of European support, farmers cannot survive, he claims. His verdict is grim: Europe has allowed agriculture to be slaughtered in Hong Kong (Het Nieuwsblad, 19 December).

FRANK VANDECAVEYE • EDITOR IN CHIEF
Frank Vandenbroucke has plan for reform of special education

Education Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SPA) wants a thorough reform of special education. According to the Minister, many children with behavioural disorders such as ADHD, mild learning disabilities or a mild mental handicap do not belong in special education. All too often schools pass children that are difficult to handle on to special education, he feels. The Minister wants to replace the classification according to eight classic types of problem (severe learning disabilities, mild mental handicap, etc.) by broader clusters.

The current classification is failing because autistic children, for example, do not fit into any of the categories. The Minister wants to return children who do not require a lot of extra supervision to ordinary education. Of the 1.1 million Flemish schoolchildren, 45,000 are currently in special education (FF).

If the Minister has his way, the types will in future be replaced by clusters. Four in total: one for children with learning limitations, one for children with functional limitations and one for young people with interactive limitations. The fourth cluster will in fact be formed by the rest. ‘By doing this we want to make it clear that ordinary children can also need care or extra support,’ explains Vandenbroucke. ‘I’m thinking of children who are temporarily battling with psychosocial problems or who have fallen behind for whatever reason.’ Not only do the clusters make it easier to classify the children, they also ensure that schools become rather more accessible to special education.

Children belonging to level one or two will go to ordinary education in any case. In principle, level four is intended for children who need so much support that an ordinary school cannot cope with them. The pivotal point is level three: here people are given a choice. ‘Parents can opt for both an ordinary and a special school,’ explains Vandenbroucke. ‘Obviously these ordinary schools will receive the same support for that child as special ones. Something which is not currently the case.’

Since it can be financially attractive for a school to have as many pupils as possible given the label ‘care level three’, Vandenbroucke’s plan includes one or two filters. ‘In almost all cases, level-three pupils will not be able to get a diploma,’ he says. ‘These are children who we do not at all expect to reach the final attainment levels. Parents must be aware of this.’ In most cases it will be the job of the Centre for Pupil Support (Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding, CLB) to determine who is assigned to which care level.

Although the Minister stresses he is neither opting for a fully inclusive situation [support in ordinary education, ed.], nor for a strengthening of special education - ‘it’s an and-and situation,’ claims Vandenbroucke - the logical consequence of the plans will still be that the number of children following inclusive lessons will rise. ‘In any event the sharp rise we’ve seen in special education in recent years will abate.’ The currently available text is a memorandum for discussion. Vandenbroucke wants to have the new plans examined from 1 September 2009.

Source: FOD Economie - DS-Infografiek

**FAMILY BUDGET OF THE BELGIAN**

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Source: FOD Economie - DS-Infografiek

**TELECOMMUNICATION IS CONSTANTLY RISING**

(Imagery of consumption)

SOURCE: FOD ECONOMIE - DS-INFOGRAFIK

Focus on Flanders • 17 December - 22 December 2005 • Number 48
SP.A targets Flemings’ hunger for building

‘The slogan for the elections is ‘everyone’.
It emphasises the basic Socialist idea that ‘everyone counts’

At the SP.A conference in Bruges, Chairman Johan Vande Lanotte fired the starting shot for the campaign for the local elections in 2006. The slogan for the elections is ‘everyone’. It emphasises the basic Socialist idea that ‘everyone counts’, not only the wealthy, therefore, but also average families. Translated to a local level, this brings the housing market into the picture. Here, for example, the SP.A has rent subsidies up its sleeve for average families, which will be paid with taxes on unoccupied and run-down properties. But the absolute eye-catcher in the election manifesto is the idea to compulsorily sell one third of the housing plots at 60% of the market value, thus making them accessible once again to less well-off families. In so doing the party is taking advantage of the building land that has become steadily scarcer and more expensive and is now unaffordable for more and more families. VLD Spatial Planning Minister Dirk Van Mechelen, who recently announced that municipalities can free up additional housing development areas, is against the idea. According to him and his party, it will force up the price of the remaining plots (FF).

ISABEL ALBERS • DE STANDAARD
19 DECEMBER

The SP.A wants to avoid the building land that is shortly to be freed up in a number of housing development areas to go solely to wealthy families. The party’s chairman therefore wants one third of the housing development areas to be sold at 60% of the market value to average-income families. He did not comment on what the income limit for these families would be. According to Vande Lanotte the municipalities can implement this immediately on their own initiative. ‘It’s the municipalities that free up plots. We will only grant permission if the owner is willing to sell a third of his land at 60% of the market value or offer it to the municipality.’

Ideally the SP.A wants to have that enshrined in a decree by the Flemish Parliament, but the other coalition parties do not support the proposal. A housing fund must be set up to tackle urban cancers. The SP.A wants each municipality to introduce much stricter taxes on unoccupied and run-down properties. Vande Lanotte wants to use that money to pay for rent subsidies and ensure that less affluent families can still rent a decent house. The Flemish Region must then set aside a euro for every euro invested in this way by the municipality. In addition to housing, Vande Lanotte is also pushing the abolishing of energy and nuisance taxes (on balconies for example) to the fore as election themes for next year. In so doing he is further embroidering the Stevaert line.

Nor has the ‘free story’ gone away. The SP.A wants every home to get a free energy audit in the next few years. ‘Otherwise it won’t happen,’ says Vande Lanotte. The region, energy suppliers and energy producers must contribute.

WWW.S-P-A.BE

Poll La Libre Belgique: government parties win slightly winst

The three-month opinion poll carried out by La Libre Belgique/Het Laatste Nieuws/VTM reveals that voters, at least in Flanders, are not punishing the government parties for the Generation Pact. The poll was carried out among 2,000 Belgians in face-to-face interviews between 1 and 10 December. That was shortly after the strong trade union protest against the Generation Pact. The Flemish Socialists even rose from 19.9% in September to 20.5% in December. The other Purple party, the Liberal VLD, gained half a cent, rising to 18.9%. Admittedly that is still 1% below the result of the regional elections in 2004. But it is clear that the Flemish Liberals are gradually getting back on their feet. The opposition cartel of the CD&V-NVA, which is part of the Flemish Government, lost half a per cent, falling to 26.3%, but retained the lead. The cartel is hotly pursued by the Vlaams Belang, which fell 0.7% to 25.4%. The environmentalists of Groen! won 0.4% to 7.3% of the vote. Of the government parties, only the Francophone PS took a beating, but that was probably due to the housing company scandals in which the party became embroiled. The party fell from 35.8 to 32.4%.

What is also remarkable is that after this turbulent autumn, confidence in both the Flemish and Federal Governments has risen. 36% of those questioned again had confidence in the Flemish Government, compared with 29% for the Federal Government. The Flemish Government gained 5%, the Federal 2%.

In the pop poll of most popular politicians Premier Verhofstadt is at number one (35%). He is just ahead of Flemish Minister-President Leterme (34%) and SPA Chairman Johan Vande Lanotte (26%).

WWW.LALIBRE.BE

<table>
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<tr>
<th>intentions to vote in Flanders (Poll La Libre Belgique; in %)</th>
<th>opinion poll sept. 2005</th>
<th>opinion poll dec. 2005</th>
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<td>CD&amp;V/N-VA</td>
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<td>25.4</td>
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<td>VLD-Vivant</td>
<td>18.4</td>
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<td>Groen!</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<td>Andre</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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SOURCE: HET LAATSTE NIEUWS
The Russian gas company Gazprom wants to store natural gas underground in the Antwerp Kempen. Gazpromexport, the export arm of Gazprom, is studying an underground gas depot together with the Leuven Energy Group. The project has been christened Belgian Underground Gas Storage (BUGS) and an exploration application has already been submitted to Energy Minister Marc Verwilghen (VLD). The underground depot will serve to cover peaks in gas consumption and act as a strategic buffer in the event of an interruption to the gas supply. In Flanders the gas company Fluxys already has a gas depot in Loenhout, near Antwerp. This is situated at great depth in porous soil strata (FF).

If the results of their investigation are positive, BUGS and Gazprom are prepared to invest 200 million euros in operating an underground natural gas reservoir. In mid-April 2005 Minister Verwilghen signed an agreement in principle with Gazprom in which he gave his support to the BUGS project, provided the Russian gas company is active on the Belgian market. The Russian gas giant’s interest in underground storage possibilities in Belgium is all to do with the ambition to sell significant volumes of Russian gas in Benelux and the UK over the coming years. Thanks to enormous gas fields in Siberia, Russia controls one quarter of the world’s gas reserves. The benefits for Belgium of an increase in gas supplies from Russia are considerable security of supply and more competition.

The fact that the Antwerp Kempen is now being considered as a store site is the result of the presence of large underground reservoirs. As a matter of fact, one of these underground reservoirs - in the municipality of Loenhout - has been used to store natural gas for years. The gas reservoir is operated by the Belgian gas transmission company Fluxys. Fluxys, a subsidiary of the French utilities group Suez, is systematically increasing the capacity of this underground depot. The target is a storage capacity of 1.5 billion cubic metres. This is equivalent to 7.5% of Belgium’s annual gas consumption. However, based on test bores carried out at the beginning of the 1980s, BUGS and Gazprom are assuming that much more gas can be stored in the Antwerp Kempen than has hitherto been suggested by Fluxys. They estimate the additional capacity at 0.6 to 1.5 billion cubic metres. They have engaged the Flemish research institute Vito to carry out further geological studies.

Belgium also needs extra gas stocks. Stocks play a key role in increasing supply security. Belgium’s stocks are currently good for 12 days’ supply. In large European countries such as Germany, Italy and France the storage capacity provides a buffer of more than 80 days.
KBC invests eur 3 billion in branches in Central Europe

For years Central Europe has been KBC’s sign-board onto the rest of the world. And if the banking insurer has its way, that’s how it will stay. Over the next two years KBC wants to use the capital surplus on its balance sheet to invest an extra 3 billion euros in the region, which is as much money as the bank currently puts into Central Europe. On average, economic growth is 2 to 3% higher there than in Belgium. Most of the fresh money, 1.4 billion euros, will be used to buy out the minority shareholders of the existing Central European subsidiaries and - if possible - to increase the interest in Slovenian subsidiary NLB from 34 to 51%. In addition, KBC is also earmarking 1 billion euros for new take-overs. Willy Duron, Managing Chairman of the KBC Group, explicitly mentioned the setting up of a new branch in Romania and a take-over in the Balkans.

KBC also wants to buy a second bank in Poland, but the group does not expect to be in a position to do that until 2008-2009. KBC is also putting 100 million euros aside for faster organic growth in the region, partly through new bank branches in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

KBC wants to use the rest of the capital surplus on the balance sheet to reduce the holding’s debts and buy and nullify its own shares in 2006, for which 500 million and 1 billion euros respectively are being reserved.

www.kbc.com

MARKET POSITION IN BELGIUM & CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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<tr>
<th>Market share [ranking]</th>
<th>Banking business</th>
<th>Life insurance business</th>
<th>Non-life insurance business</th>
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<td>Belgium</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>11% (2nd)</td>
<td>4% (7th)</td>
<td>4% (6th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>5% (8th)</td>
<td>5% (7th)</td>
<td>11% (2nd)</td>
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<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>21% (2nd)</td>
<td>8% (4th)</td>
<td>4% (6th)</td>
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<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>6% (4th)</td>
<td>4% (9th)</td>
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<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>43% (1st)</td>
<td>6% (5th)</td>
<td>6% (5th)</td>
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</table>

SOURCE: KBC.COM

2005 was a good year for Belgian shares

Investing in Belgian shares proved profitable in 2005. The Bel-20 rose 17.9% and the Brussels stock exchange performed just as well as the stock markets of Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt and better than the Dow Jones. Also, anyone who had the fortune or foresight to invest in top shares such as Option or CFE saw their stake more than double. Other shares, such as those of photo-developer Spector or image-processing company Agfa, took a dive, as did analogue photography. De Morgen summarises the tops and flops.

Firms allow audits to make energy savings

Flemish Energy Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V) feels the new covenant with the medium-sized firms is a significant contribution towards satisfying climate policy.

In the past six months the Flemish Government has entered into audit covenants with 217 industrial firms that are in the middle bracket in terms of energy consumption (0.1 to 0.5 petajoules a year). Firms that have signed up thus undertake to allow experts to track down possible energy savings and to follow their advice. 180 large firms that consume more than 0.5 petajoules earlier entered into a benchmark covenant, committing themselves to being among the best in the world in terms of efficient energy consumption by 2012.

By signing the Kyoto Treaty, Belgium undertook to reduce emissions of CO2 by 5.2% by 2012 compared with 1990. In 2004 Flanders recorded another increase of 3.6%. There is still a long way to go, therefore. To be precise: 6 million tonnes less CO2 must be blown into the Flemish air by 2012, according to De Standaard (FF).

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FREDDERIC PETITJEAN • DE STANDAARD • 20 DECEMBER

‘Firms that sign up are undertaking to have an audit carried out to map how and where the firm can save energy,’ says Peeters. ‘These results lead to an energy plan. That plan, which must be submitted by December 2006, will be drawn up by an energy expert. The agreement is a voluntary undertaking between the government and a firm for a period of eight years. If a measure from the plan would result in a saving of at least 15%, the firm is obliged to implement that measure. If, for example, it appears that a firm can save at least 15% by installing new lighting, the firm undertakes to actually fit this lighting.

In return the Flemish Government will not charge participating firms any specific energy or CO2 over the next eight years. Peeters will also make every effort to exempt firms from equivalent Belgian or European taxes, ‘obviously in consultation with those policy levels’.

The energy audit agreement itself has actually been tested by the European Commission against the rules for public aid. It was approved without a problem. The total reduction in emissions by the various audits is estimated at 252 kilotonnes of CO2 a year, a drop of 15%. The total energy saving is around 4 petajoules a year. That is about the same as 112.5 million litres of gas oil, enough to heat 41,000 homes.

BELGIAN EXPECTS CLIMATE EFFORTS FROM INDUSTRY

Belgians are aware of climate change, are familiar with the Kyoto Protocol, but are not sufficiently aware that they themselves can contribute their bit towards reducing this. They believe it is up to industry to make an effort. A survey by the Federal Public Service for the Environment shows that 71% of those asked felt industry was the main culprit. Road freight (8%), passenger traffic (5%) and households (2%) are held to be much less responsible. But the actual proportions are quite different. Industry only accounts for 34% of air pollution, heating buildings 22% and transport 18%. It appears obvious to Belgians (69%) that industry should make the greatest effort. Transport (14%) and households (4%) can make far less of an effort, they believe. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Their own buying behaviour is not much guided by energy considerations, except when buying insulation and energy-saving lights (FF).

KATRIEN VERSTRAETE • DE TIJD 21 DECEMBER

According to Federal Environment Minister Bruno Tobback (SP.A), too few people realise they can do something in the fight against climate change, such as floods, hurricanes and heatwaves. ‘We have to make the public more aware of the impact of their behaviour on climate,’ he says. He is calling for free energy audits in which the public receives an explanation of energy-saving measures in their own homes. At the start of next year a website will be opened up on the energy-saving possibilities of certain products. Tobback is also promising to give more publicity to state aid for high-efficiency glazing and boilers, roof insulation and energy-saving cars, as Belgians’ awareness of this is also poor.
Fleming mainly reads crime novels and thrillers, at least according to an investigation of borrowing behaviour in Flemish libraries carried out for the Flemish Centre for Public Libraries (Vlaams Centrum van Openbare Bibliotheeken, VCOB) in 2003. That study, in which 32,000 visitors (18+) to 165 libraries took part, reveals that 30% of Flemings regularly visit a library. In the six months of the study they borrowed some 442,000 fiction and non-fiction books, comics, CDs and DVDs. 25% of the borrowings are audiovisual media, 60% books. And of these, two thirds are fiction. The investigators divided the readers of these books into 11 reader types. Among readers, fiction-phobes are best represented. They are mainly looking for information for their work or study. But there are avid fiction readers: the adrenalin-seekers (16.4%, borrow thrillers and detective novels) the romantics (11.7%, borrow romantic popular love stories), the young literaties (16.4%, read better literature). Among non-fiction readers, the homebodies dominate (45%). They often visit the library on behalf of their children, are less well educated and generally borrow books on the house and garden and cookbooks. Other non-fiction readers are the wanderers (13%), who borrow travel guides and atlases and the self-taught, generally older, male and not overly well educated (FF).

Bruges crime writer Pieter Aspe is by far and away the most borrowed fiction author in our libraries. In the six months of the study, 3,799 borrowings of his titles were recorded. This means that he alone accounts for 2% of all borrowings within fiction. That genre is easily the best represented in Flanders, with 40%.

As regards literature, the popular novel heads the way, with Jef Geeraerts (5th) and Herman Brusselmans (21st). For the literary novel we have to wait for Kristien Hemmerechts (19th), Hugo Claus (41st), Amélie Nothomb (47th), Tom Lanoye (66th), J. M. Coetzee (79th) and Louis Paul Boon (86th). Within the non-fiction category, around one fifth of works borrowed are atlases, travel guides and reference books on countries. In second place (12.4%) is anything to do with handicrafts, odd-jobs and home economics. Medicine and health (10.3%) is at three.
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- **4 to 14 January**: Semele by WF Haendel, Opera in 3 acts, libretto after Metamorphoses by Ovidius, conductor: Michael Hofstetter, director: Robert Carsen, Flanders Opera House, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
- **26 and 27 December**: The Nutcracker by Pjotr Tchaikovski, Choreography Vassili Vajnnonen performed by the Sint-Petersburg Ballet, Concertgebouw, Brussels; info: www.concertgebouw.be

**EXPO**

- **From 5 February onwards**: The memory of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.175-25.be
- **Until 26 February**: The Trans-Siberian Express: fascinating facts about the route to Vladivostock, KMSKG, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/742.72.11
- **Until 8 January**: Sabena, Air Nostalgie, Photo Museum, Antwerp; info: www.fotomuseum.be 03/242.93.00
- **Until 31 December**: Rubens, Jordaeans and Van Dyck, Arenshuis, Bruges; info: www.brugge.be, 050/44.87.12
- **Until 29 January**: Exhibition: Toys in girls’ hands, Toy museum, Mechelen, info: 015/55.70.75 www.speelgoedmuseum.be
- **Until 5 February**: The Blue Rose – Symbolism in Russia, Museum of Elsene, info: 02/515.64.22
- **Until 31 December**: Extravagant, rediscovery of the Antwerp Mannequins, KMSK, Antwerp; info: 03/238.78.09 www.museum.antwerpen.be/kmska
- **Until 8 January**: Something, exhibition, Sixty anonymous photographs. Something that turns up without being invited, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- **SMAK exhibitions**: Until 8 January: Sergei Bratkov and Sven ’t jolle. Until 15 January: Giovanni Anselmo, Carsten Nicolai and Rindfleisch/Rapeduis, SMAK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be (09) 221 17 03
- **17 December to 26 February**: Intertidal, Vancouver Art and Artists, exhibition, MUHKA, Antwerp, info: www.muhka.be
- **Until 31 December**: The Rijksmuseum comes to the Scheldec. masterpieces from Holland’s most famous art museum, KMSKA, Antwerp; info: www.museum.antwerpen.be/kmska
- **Until 31 December**: The KMSKA hosts: Le Tour de France, a journey through the French art in its collections, KMSKA, Antwerp; info: www.museum.antwerpen.be/kmska

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

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