Flemish property boom is over

According to figures from the network of estate agents, ERA, sale prices for houses rose by 7.6% in 2005 and those of apartments by 5.3%. Compared with 2004, price rises appear to have slowed down considerably. That year the percentage increases were 9.5% for houses and 17.5% for apartments. According to Ian Cook, boss of ERA Belgium, the Flemish property boom is over.

And yet there are still major regional differences. In East Flanders the rise remains relatively high, while in the provinces of Antwerp and Limburg it fell sharply. A house in Flanders now costs on average 183,000 euros, an apartment on average 134,000 euros (FF).

Property prices will not fall across the board, says the ERA. Estate agents are expecting a soft landing for the Flemish property market, with prices continuing to rise slightly. ‘It will still be some time before prices start to fall,’ says Iain Cook. ‘There has never been a property bubble with artificially high prices in Belgium, unlike elsewhere in Europe. So we should not expect a general fall in prices. We’re heading towards a healthy, rather quieter market.’

It is not only price developments that point to a cooling off of the property market. There are two other indications. Houses are taking longer to be sold and the difference between the initial asking price and the final sale price is growing. The difference between asking and sale price has risen from 8 to 9.3%. The reasons for the cooling off are the recent slight rise in interest rates for mortgages and the fact that wealthy people who buy property as an investment are once again opting to buy shares, claims Cook. The effect of the fiscal amnesty is also gradually being felt. This measure from 2004 brought about a return of capital, most of which was pumped into apartments on the coast. In 2004 prices for coastal apartments rose by as much as 23%. Last year that fell to 7.6%. The rises in the prices of apartments have also been smoothed out by the building explosion in the new-build apartments sector, which according to Cook threatens to cause a surplus supply.

EMMANUEL VANBRUSSEL • DE MORGEN • 19 JANUARY

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of French in Flanders is visibly declining, especially among young people. If that used to be an impression mainly given by French teachers or temping agencies, there are now more and more concrete indications. Thus on 18 January De Morgen unveiled the heading that as many as 69% of Brussels Dutch speaking teachers had failed the compulsory French examination. After all, from the third school year French is a compulsory subject in Brussels Dutch Language Primary Education and has to be learned by teachers. These teachers generally stand in front of a class in which most pupils are French-speaking or multilingual. Nothing is therefore as annoying as a class where the pupils speak better French than the teacher, believes the Minister with responsibility for Dutch-Language Education in Brussels, Guy Vanhengel (VLD). Flemings therefore only have themselves to blame. The cause of this decline? Vanhengel concludes that knowledge of French has been on a downward trend for some time in Flanders, at the expense of English. Vanhengel’s conclusion is all the more striking because it is often assumed that Flemings in the capital speak French, while the Francophones have almost no knowledge of our language. In recent times there has been an unmistakeable turn in the tide and the Francophones are making up for their arrears, claims De Standaard (19 January).

That same day a professor of linguistics at the University of Antwerp published the results of a test in the Gazet van Antwerpen which confirm the downward trend. Since 1986 he has regularly been subjecting candidate French students to the same initial test. While the average result was 55% in 1986, that has steadily fallen to 40% in 2005. In the first undergraduate year, he has to teach the French which students should actually have learned in the final year of secondary education, he claims. Obviously the overpowering presence of Anglo-Saxon culture in media & entertainment also has an effect on the world of young Flemings that cannot be underestimated. French “chansons” in the hit parade, French blockbusters in the cinema, these have become rare exceptions. The time when Delon, Belmondo, De Funès and Cathérine Deneuve were just as popular here as American stars is long gone, concludes De Standaard.

Nonetheless, French remains the second national language for Flemings and is an absolute necessity for many jobs. But in the business world experiences with knowledge of French are no different from in education. SN Brussels Airlines or the NMBS (Railways) have shown a downward trend for 10 years (De Standaard). In Het Laatste Nieuws temping agencies tell how jobs for which complete bilingualism is a requirement have become bottleneck jobs and Limburg business leaders tell how they lost contracts due to the lack of French among their staff. Flemish Education Minister Vandenbroucke (SP.A) has already warned that too often Flemings assume that they were born polyglots. It looks as if in fact they have rested too long on the laurels of their famed multilingualism.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

focus on FLANDERS • 14 January - 20 January 2006 • Number 3
Flemish government pumps €320 million euros into labour market

Most of this money (€30 million euros a year) will go towards an employment bonus for employers who hire people over the age of 50.

On 16 January the Flemish Government presented its plan to help more young people, elderly people and foreigners find a job. ‘Together for more jobs,’ as the set of measures has been labelled, will cost 79.5 million euros a year and run until 2009, costing a total of 320 million euros over the full four years. Most of this money (30 million euros) will go towards an employment bonus for employers who hire people over the age of 50.

Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) has designed this measure as a concrete interpretation of the intention behind the Federal Generation Pact, which is intended to encourage people to work for longer. Via the existing Job Channel (Jobkanaal) the employers of Voka and Unizo undertake to fill 5,000 Job Channel vacancies a year with the elderly, foreigners and people with a disability. This is done by only making the vacancies available to these groups for a period of three weeks. It is the first instance of positive discrimination on the labour market, says Vandenbroucke. Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) pointed out that the Flemish Government is thus opting for a positive incentive instead of compulsory employment quotas for employers. Both unions and employers support the ‘more jobs’ plan, although the former fear the focus on the elderly could threaten jobs for young people and foreigners (FF).

Katrien Verstraete • De Tijd • 17 January

The new employment bonus for employers when hiring over-50s will apply for one year and amount to 400 to 1,000 euros a month, depending on how much the employee is paid. In addition, 4 million euros a year will go towards updating individual vocational training (IVT). The system will be made more flexible, tailored to the employee. There will be more and better trained counsellors. Individual vocational training via a temping agency will henceforth be limited to the over-50s, foreigners and people with a disability and linked to a series of conditions. After six months the IVT contract must result in an open-ended contract.

Counselling and assistance for older unemployed people. The Flemish Government is to provide more help for the over-50s to find a new job. 5 million will be spent on ‘experience clubs’, where over-50s looking for work can come together to receive application training and information. There will also be 50 new consultants for the ‘50+ clubs’ and 50 job coaches.

Social economy. 5.6 million euros is being earmarked for the expansion of sheltered workshops. The aim is to create 400 extra jobs, 18% more than at present. There will also be better counselling for people with a disability and employees caught up in corporate restructurings.

Career counselling. The Flemish Government is to pump 8 million euros a year into improving competences in businesses. Discussions will be opened with social partners on additional training for employees.

Young people. On top of the Flemish and Federal young peoples’ career plans already announced, the new Flemish jobs plan sets aside 5 million euros for 200 extra first-time jobs for poorly educated young people.

Diversity on the shop floor. The aim is that for 3 weeks the employer will use Job Channel as the only recruitment channel for vacancies. Via Job Channel, jobs will only be offered to the over-50s, foreigners and persons with a work disability.

Vlaams Belang labels Job Kanaal ‘anti-Flemish racism’

The Vlaams Belang is filing a complaint with the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism against the Flemish Government’s Job Channel (Jobkanaal) project. The party calls the government’s decision to give priority to foreigners for three weeks with some vacancies ‘a crude form of anti-Flemish racism’. Conversely the party fully understands priority also being given to older unemployed people over 50 and the disabled. Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) denies the measure is discriminatory, calling it a positive action that can help 2,000 foreigners a year find a job (FF).

Peter De Backer • Het Nieuwsblad • 19 January

The Vlaams Belang has labelled the Job Channel discrimination against native Flemings. According to Vlaams Belang MP Filip Dewinter the elderly and disabled are simply being dragged along as ‘cover’ and the Flemish Government wants to force employers to recruit a ‘specific quota’ of foreigners in a roundabout way. He calls this ‘anti-Flemish racism’.

In the Flemish Parliament Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) dismissed the criticism. ‘Discrimination is banned, but positive actions are not,’ says the Minister. Vandenbroucke laid into the Vlaams Belang: The Job Channel also benefits our own people’, he said, because more employment for foreigners contributes to integration. ‘But clearly the Vlaams Belang does not like seeing vacancies being filled by the elderly and foreigners because it undermines their demagoguery.’

Jozef De Witte, Director of the Centre for Equal Opportunities, also sees the Job Channel as a positive action that is perfectly legal. ‘After all, a study grant is not discrimination. Inequality is a reality and so sometimes you have to take action. It’s also in the Flemish interest not to leave this reservoir of manpower unused.’
Notional deduction has desired effect on American investors

Premier Verhofstadt’s promotional tour to the US is beginning to bear fruit among American investors. On the fourth day of his tour the Premier was able to announce three new American investments in our country. The American pharma group Johnson & Johnson, parent company of Janssen Pharmaceutica, is planning 100 million in extra investments this year. In addition the American IT firm EMC is planning a new research centre in Mechelen together with Alcatel, the Flemish Ubizen and the Flemish research institute IBBT. Finally, Verhofstadt also announced that the Bank of New York would be developing a European subsidiary in Brussels. The notional interest deduction around which Verhofstadt and his Finance Minister Reynders (MR) have based their roadshow, appears to be having the desired effect.

It allows investors to fiscally deduct interest costs on equity capital. The possibility of making prior fiscal agreements with the Belgian taxman also remains a trump card for attracting foreign investors. According to Reynders, these benefits have put Belgium back on the short-list of American investors. The notional deduction was thought up as a replacement for the favourable fiscal rate which European coordination centres of major international firms enjoyed in Brussels. That system was condemned by the EC as unlawful state support. The interest deduction ensures the fiscal rate is actually cut, but depends on the equity capital (FF).

PIETER BLOMME • DE TIJD • 20 JANUARY

Reynders: ‘8,000 people work in the coordination centres. Furthermore, the people who come and work in these headquarters are highly qualified. In a next phase it is a smaller step to set up a distribution centre, for example.’ According to tax specialists, some Belgian companies will have to pay almost no taxes as a result of the introduction of the notional interest deduction. Reynders echoes that: ‘According to calculations corporation tax will on average fall from 33.99% to approximately 25%. But companies with large amounts of equity capital will pay a much lower rate, perhaps only 2 to 3%.’ Reynders does not deny that this will significantly reduce revenue from taxation. He estimates the impact for tax revenue at 566 million euros. But, he adds, we should also not forget that each new investment provides revenue which was not formerly there.

Bush and Verhofstadt best of friends again

Premier Verhofstadt (VLD) was delighted after his talks with President Bush in the Oval Office of the White House. Not only did the talks last twice as long as planned – 75 minutes instead of 30 minutes — the mood also appeared excellent. Afterwards the President waved Verhofstadt off with a ‘Goodbye, buddy’ and announced that they would go mountain-biking together at their next meeting. Verhofstadt even left the White House with a yellow jersey from Lance Armstrong, one of the many the Tour winner gave to Bush. Verhofstadt then spoke to the Belgian and American press on the steps of the White House. He described their talks as productive and said relations were much better than a year ago, when the Iraq question had driven a wedge between the US and Belgium (FF).

American-European relations have improved considerably over the past year, ‘but there are still three controversial issues,’ said Verhofstadt. Europe and the US must adopt a common line in the Middle East and especially where Iran is concerned, ‘and certainly not let themselves be enticed into conflict as with Iraq.’ Together they must ‘gradually turn up the pressure on Iran to reach a negotiated solution,’ claims the Premier.

The second point was the lingering discussion on the development of a common European defence policy. Verhofstadt is proposing organising new seminars on the subject and Bush is adopting this idea. Europe’s defence must be autonomous, but at the same time a pillar of NATO, while NATO must develop into a global network of alliances.’ Bush does not have a problem with this, as long as Europe guarantees that European defence does not obstruct American interests.

Anti-Americanism is on the rise in Europe and that became a third point for discussion. Verhofstadt says Guantamano will have a major role to play in this. In this military prison on Cuba the US is holding several thousand suspected terrorists, sometimes for years and in terrible conditions, without any charges being brought against them. Verhofstadt: ‘The suspects must quickly be brought before the courts and convicted or set free, as is only proper in a constitutional state.’ Bush promises that these trials will take place.

Bush and Verhofstadt also agreed to start negotiations immediately on a new mutual fiscal treaty. This comes down to allowing the 1,600 American companies in our countries to export their dividends to the US without also being taxed here. In return, Belgian companies in the US will then avoid a similar double-taxation. Verhofstadt sees such a new ruling - combined with the new notional deduction of interest he is promoting here - as an argument to attract more American investors again.

FRANS DESMET • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 18 JANUARY

www.premier.fgov.be
Belgium and Netherlands make arrangements to prevent Dutch immigration rules being circumvented

As part of the process of family reunification, foreigners living in the Netherlands may only bring over children up to the age of 18 and partners. In Belgium, conversely, adult children, grandparents and grandchildren can also be brought over. Before long, foreigners who want to move to the Netherlands will also have to learn Dutch in their own country and take a course in community education. They can then sit an exam in their country’s Dutch embassy. Only those who pass may enter the Netherlands. Those bringing over a family member must also have a monthly income of at least 1,300 euros and pay a further 430 euros for the necessary entry and residence papers.

More and more immigrants are therefore trying to circumvent this strict rule via Belgium. Dutch foreigners are settling temporarily in Belgium, finding work and a home here and then having their family or partner come over under Belgian rules. Then they move back to the Netherlands. Because they are coming from another EU country they do not need to take the integration course. The Netherlands and Belgium now intend tackling the abuse of this so-called Belgium route, which is what Belgian Home Affairs Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD) and his Dutch colleague Greta Verdonsdik did this weekend at an EU meeting in Vienna. Dewael does not, however, intend adopting the strict Dutch rules.

Verhofstadt has ten-point programme for rest of legislative period

On Friday, 13 January Premier Verhofstadt unveiled an ambitious work programme which his Federal Government must complete before the Federal elections in 2007. October’s local elections must not hamper his government’s work, is the message. The Premier presented a ten-point programme under the heading ‘Making our country more competitive, more social and safer’. It introduces reforms to reap the full benefit of the early economic recovery, claims the Premier. The programme contains something for both Liberals and Socialists. At the top of the list is the competitiveness of Belgian businesses. To increase this, Socialists and Liberals agree, all-in pay settlements are the best instrument. Such settlements ensure that wages grow less quickly if the index increases more quickly than expected and inflation rises. The Socialist government partners have no fundamental objections to this brake on pay rises. In exchange their ministers can take measures against discrimination on the labour market, against poverty and considerable attention will be paid to vocational training and employment. Other Socialist pet subjects are sustainable energy, the fight against fiscal and social fraud, the democratisation of Internet and broadband use, safe traffic and where consumer affairs are concerned fair commercial practices for all (FF).

STEVEN SAMYN • DE STANDAARD • 14 JANUARY

An initial set of measures concerns the economy. The social partners must consult with each other to improve the competitiveness of our economy. Efforts will also be made to make government more efficient. The government does not want to proclaim any more great theories on this, but presented five concrete projects. The management of government buildings will be optimised and there will be reforms in the customs services, the Vehicle Registration Department (Dienst voor Inscrhrijving van Voertuigen) and the emergency services (100, 101 and 102). A drugs agency will also be established to speed up the registration of drugs.

The most striking aspect of the section on work is ‘equal pay for equal work’. That is essential, it is claimed, because differences in pay between men and women are unacceptable. Discrimination against foreigners and the disabled on the labour market must also become a thing of the past. Research into renewable energy will be encouraged. Discussions on the closure of nuclear power stations are awaiting a study, which must be ready by the beginning of 2007.

As well as economic measures, social measures will also receive attention. The Premier reiterated that his government would address the fight against poverty. 15% of Belgians are living below the poverty line. There is also an ambitious new programme to tackle problems of debt. Consumer credit rates must be brought back to reasonable proportions.

Consumer Affairs Minister Freya Van den Bossche (SP.A) is going to step up the fight against questionable commercial practices. Prices must be in proportion to the services provided, consumers must be given clear information on prices, etc. The Purples are adopting the ‘Operation Small Change’ of former SP.A Chairman Steve Stevaert. In the run-up to the Federal elections of 2003, Stevaert proposed using the revenue from the fight against fiscal fraud to reduce taxes for all. That will now happen. Finally, the Road Traffic Act will not be reformed yet again, but simplified, partly to enclose the wild growth on traffic signs.
Cancer study creates unrest in north Limburg

According to an extrapolation, 1,300 cases of lung cancer could be directly caused by contamination. The study is causing a wave of panic in the region.

According to a long-running study by the universities of Leuven, Louvain-La-Neuve and Hasselt, there is a clear link between environmental pollution by cadmium and the number of cases of cancer among people living near the former zinc melting plants in the North Limburg municipalities of Overpelt, Lommel and Balen. The study was published on 16 January in the medical journal *The Lancet*. Between 1985 and 1989 investigators measured cadmium levels in the urine of a group of residents and in the soil in their gardens. This information was systematically compared with information from residents of a less contaminated area nearby. Cadmium levels were twice as high in both the soil and the urine of those living near the melting plants. This appeared to go hand in hand with a one-third increase in the risk of cancer. The risk of lung cancer even appeared four times as high, the same risk factor as for smokers. This is because cadmium from the ground can enter the body via the lungs in the form of contaminated household dust. According to an extrapolation, 1,300 cases of lung cancer could be directly caused by contamination. The study is causing a wave of panic in the region, which is home to around 50 to 60,000 people. Up to now cadmium has mainly been linked to kidney disease. Umicore, the company that has inherited the old zinc smelting plants, points out that no cadmium has been produced since 2002 and that its programme to clean up the factory sites and the surrounding area is going according to plan. Umicore’s share on Euronext Brussels fell by 3.23% once the news became known. Umicore was quick to announce that it was not expecting any individual claims for compensation (FF).

The study created a wave of panic in the region and a barrage of questions to local mayors. Competent Flemish Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V) called all those concerned together yesterday for a crisis meeting. At this meeting the main player in the saga, the company Umicore, explained how the clean-up was progressing.

In 1997 an initial covenant was entered into between the Flemish Government and the company that inherited the old zinc factories that are responsible for the historic contamination. A second covenant followed in 2004. The 1997 covenant concerns the cleaning up of the industrial sites and the adjacent residential areas. The 2004 covenant relates to the cleaning up of the wider environment. ‘On the one hand there are the emissions currently being released and then there is the historic contamination,’ says Managing Director Thomas Leysen. ‘Since the end of the 70s emissions of cadmium have been in line with statutory provisions. Today we even satisfy the strictest European standard, which will come into force in 2012. As far as our historic legacy is concerned, we have made significant progress. The clean-up of the industrial sites is almost complete. The cleaning up of the adjacent residential areas is going according to plan and should be finished within two years. The study setting out priorities in connection with the cleaning up of the wider environment should be ready in June 2006. But we also want this to progress as quickly as possible. We want the work to be complete within two to three years.’ For the time being the new study appears to have changed little in terms of timing. There will be another meeting in mid-February. This will examine whether the new study changes the priorities. At the same time the Limburg cancer register will also assess the study. Extra measures may then be taken. ‘We don’t want to panic,’ says Kris Peeters. ‘We will seriously assess whether there are scientific arguments for introducing additional measures in the short term.’

**source: De Morgen**
**Strike against Ports Directive shuts Flemish ports**

The day after the violent demonstration by European dockers in Strasbourg, the European Parliament debated the second version of the European Commission’s Ports Directive. The first version had already been rejected by the European Parliament in 2003. The debate revealed a majority is now in favour of also rejecting the second version of the Ports Directive. MPs are refusing to accept that former Commissioner Loyola de Palacio could table a new version after the first had been rejected. In particular the permission for ships’ crews to load or unload their ships themselves without the help of dockers is unlikely to be met with much sympathy. Dissatisfaction with self-handling was also the main reason for the protest by dockers who fear for their jobs. The demonstration in Strasbourg paralysed Belgian ports. Around 3,000 dockers had made the trip to Strasbourg. Whether the protest actually did their cause any good was not only called into question by Euro MPs, who condemned the violence. The Flemish port authorities and sections of the press also condemned the 24-hour strike. In Flemish seaports dockers are also further protected by the Major Act (wet-Major), which obliges port authorities to draw from a pool of recognised dockers. Dissatisfaction with self-handling was also the main reason for the protest by dockers who fear for their jobs. The demonstration in Strasbourg paralysed Belgian ports. Around 3,000 dockers had made the trip to Strasbourg. Whether the protest actually did their cause any good was not only called into question by Euro MPs, who condemned the violence. The Flemish port authorities and sections of the press also condemned the 24-hour strike. In Flemish seaports dockers are also further protected by the Major Act (wet-Major), which obliges port authorities to draw from a pool of recognised dockers.

**Opinion**

**JOHAN VAN GEYTE • GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN • 17 JANUARY**

Antwerp’s port employers are unhappy with the trade unions’ approach. These claimed that the action was purely directed against the politicians and not against the port authorities, but the operators were still the chief victims of the day of action. In December dockers’ federations from, among others, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and France agreed to take genuine coordinated European action. And what happens! Flemish ports were quiet on Monday, but it was pretty much business as usual in Rotterdam and Dunkirk.

The strikers should make no mistake. The European Commission may well have had to back down, but the competition remains. Also, other ports have nothing like the protection of the Major Act, which reserves port work in Antwerp for qualified dockers. Traffic is already moving from Antwerp to Vlissingen because of the more flexible working conditions there.

In few sectors is competition as international as in the ports sector. For some time now decisions on trade flows have no longer been taken at home, but in Singapore, Hong Kong or Denmark. Bosses of megacorps are placing their pawns there according to the lowest costs and greatest flexibility. The unions had better take this into consideration.

WWW.PORTOFANTWERP.BE

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**BEL20 breaks record**

On 16 January the Bel20 index, the most important indicator of the Brussels stock market, broke its record. On Monday evening it closed at 3,691 points, 10 points more than on 6 January 1999, the previous record. Since March 2003 the Bel20 has risen by 159%, an average of 4.7% a month. Most other investment products do not even achieve that return over an entire year, concludes De Tijd. What’s more, on average the smaller Belgian shares are still outperforming those on the Bel20. That panache may well be likely to continue, but not for much longer, claims the business paper. The incentives to invest in the stock market have gradually been exhausted. The spectacular drop in interest, for example, has reached its limit (FF).

**Opinion**

**PIERRE HUYLENBROECK • DE TIJD • 17 JANUARY**

Stock market prices have also risen more sharply on average than operating profits over the past 15 years. In turn, operating profits have grown faster than the economy. That cannot last for ever: results and stock market prices are a major factor in the economy, and it is impossible for key components of a system to continually grow more quickly than the system itself. Sooner or later operating results and stock market prices have to converge towards an average. That average cannot be much more than the average annual growth of the economy: 2.5 to 4%. However, that does not need to be tomorrow. Technological progress and the rise in productivity can still play a favourable stock market role for a while, certainly now most businesses have put their own houses in order.

WWW.EURONEXT.COM
Uproar over possible bird flu in Brussels

For a while it was feared that the first victim of bird flu had been discovered in Western Europe. On Friday evening a Russian freelance journalist who had made a documentary on the eastern Turkish province of Van, where the bird flu is causing havoc, and who was staying with his parents in the Brussels commune of Uccle, suddenly felt ill with flu and presented himself in the A&E department of a Brussels hospital. The man himself feared bird flu and an A&E doctor confirmed that he was in fact displaying the symptoms. In accordance with the procedure he was immediately transferred to Saint Peter’s Hospital in Brussels, the only hospital with the equipment to treat patients with bird flu. There he was isolated and lists drawn up of people who had been in contact with him. On Saturday Health Minister Rudy Demotte (PS) was able to break the good news to the massed foreign press that the test results had revealed it to be a case of ordinary seasonal flu and not the flu caused by the H5N1 virus. The final tests on Sunday also confirmed this. For Influenza, the interministerial commission for bird flu, the events showed that the outlined procedures are effective (FF).

Minister Demotte is satisfied with the way the suspected case of bird flu was handled. ‘This was a true-to-life exercise. I’m very pleased we were able to preclude bird flu within 24 hours.’ Piet Van Themsche, the Interministerial Commissioner for bird flu, also denies that Belgium panicked. ‘This was a highly suspicious case,’ says Vanthemsche. ‘The man had only returned from Turkey on Thursday evening. For his report he visited farms and the hospital where a patient lay. And even though he said he hadn’t had any direct contact with patients or chickens, we couldn’t take the risk. We therefore tracked down everyone he’d been in contact with.’ To be even better prepared for a genuine outbreak of bird flu, Demotte and Vanthemsche want to organise a large-scale exercise this spring. The exercise will be intended to highlight any problems there should be an actual outbreak of bird flu among people in our country. The exercise will involve all those concerned from the medical world. An earlier European Union exercise was limited to 20 people in the government’s crisis centre.

www.rudydemotte.be
www.influenza.be

Preponderance of VRT radio stations under pressure

The era of the massive preponderance of VRT radio stations appears to be over. In 2002 the then VRT radio stations occupied 84% of the market of radio listeners. Today that market share is 67.4%, according to the latest figures from the Centre for Information on the Media (CIM). Since commercial stations have been able to broadcast across the whole of Flanders, the competitor Q-music from the rival Flemish Media Company (VMMA), the umbrella organisation of the TV channels VTM and Kanaal 2, is the new successful channel. Together with the other commercial station 4FM they now have a market share of 20.4%. The VRT hit station Donna has lost more than 5.5% of its market share. The regional family station Radio 2 has hardly been bothered by the commercial competition and remains the unassailable market leader. The other VRT stations, the information channel Radio 1, the cultural station Klara and the youth station Studio Brussels are even making good their losses of the past (FF).

Following its sharp drop, Donna (14.2%) is no longer number two in the Flemish radio market. In the same period its main rival, Q-Music, saw its market share grow from 14 to 15.1%. ‘This has exceeded our wildest expectations,’ says Peter Bossaert, Director of Q-Music ‘Our formula of lots of music, high-profile events, strong image campaigns, falling stars and Deckers & Ornelis has clearly caught on. Q-Music is the result of a real radio dream team,’ claims Bossaert.

In contrast to Q-Music, the second national private station, 4FM, continues to stagnate. The radio of Talpa, the group of the Dutch media giant John de Mol, rose by one or two tenths of a point to 5.3%. According to Director Bart Brusseleers, however, these figures prove that the modernisation programme begun last year is beginning to bear fruit. Since then 4FM has chosen ‘only the biggest hits’. 'The listening figures prove that the commercial radio market in Flanders has reached maturity,’ says Mark Coenen, Market Strategy Director of VRT radio. Despite Donna’s losses, Coenen is still fairly satisfied with the public broadcasting company’s results. After all, Donna’s falling market share is largely offset by the growth of the other public stations. The most noticeable gain was made by Klara. The cultural network grew from 1.8% in the spring to 3.3%. Studio Brussels has also caught right back up. At the start of this year the VRT’s youth station fell to an historic low point (5.3%). Now Studio Brussels is again at 7%. Radio 1 has made good the loss of past months, rising from 8.5 to 10%. Coenen says that is a particularly good performance by an information station, as ‘news-driven radio stations the world over are finding it difficult to survive in the face of increasing digital and online competition’.

And then there is the phenomenon that is Radio 2, which remains the unchallenged market leader with 32.8%. Every day 1.4 million Flemings tune into the VRT’s ‘family station’.
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- **24 January:** Scottish Chamber Orchestra with Piotr Anderszewski, piano and Alexander Janiczek leader with Sergey Prokofiev and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
  - Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **24 January:** Wannes Vande Velde, AB, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
- **24 January:** Cosi Fan Tutte by WA Mozart, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.deventer.be 09/267.28.28
- **24 January:** Handelsbeurs, Ghent and Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.handelsbeurs.be and www.zuiderpershuis.be
- **25 January:** Silje Nergaard (Norway), jazz, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **25 January:** English Baroque Soloists, English National Opera and Trio Tango; Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **25 January:** Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists conducted by John Eliot Gardiner with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
- **26 January:** Charlotte Vanden Eynde, Beginnings/Endings, dance; De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be 09/267.28.28
- **26 January:** Deep Purple, Vorst Nationala, Brussels; info: www.vorstnationala.be
- **26 and 27 January:** The Nights, Festival with Beckett, Mozart, Charms, Bach, Beat Poetry and performances, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- **27 January:** Sol Gabetta & Henri Sigfridsen, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **27 January:** English Baroque Soloists, John Eliot Gardiner conductor with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Symphony nr 39, 40 and 41; Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **28 January:** Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne with Christian Zacharias piano, conductor with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Concertos for piano, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **28 January:** Blindman, Mozart machine, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **29 January:** Antoine Tamestit alto, Markus Hadulla piano with Franz Schubert, György Ligeti and Benjamin Britten; Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **29 January:** Depeche Mode, Sportpaleis, Antwerp; info: www.sportpaleis.be
- **29 January:** Belgian National Orchestra conducted by Eri Klas, Jean-Claude Van den Eynden piano with Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergey Prokofiev and Johannes Brahms; Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **29 January:** Bob Moir, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **29 January:** Orchestre des Champs-Elysées conducted by Bruno Weil with symphonies by WA Mozart, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **29 January:** Quatuor Turner with Jérôme Hatai (piano) with Mozart, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **29 January:** Foo Fighters, Vorst Nationala, Brussels; info: www.vorstnationala.be
- **30 January:** Koninglijk Concertgebouworkest conducted by Mariss Fjansons with Dmitry Shostakovich Symphonie nr 7; Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **1 February:** Florestan Trio with Schumann, Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- **1 February:** The StringS, Quatuor Arriaga, Flemish Radio Orchestra conducted by Koen Kessels; sample and insanity, Capella di voce, Sportpaleis, Antwerp; info: www.sportpaleis.be
- **1 February:** Florence Nightingale with symphonies by WA Mozart; Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **1 February:** Huelgas Ensemble conducted by Paul Van Nevel with compositions by Claude Lejeune [le Printants, 16th century], Flagey, Brussels; info: www.flagey.be
- **1 February:** Chinese Folk music and poetry, Chen Lei-Ji, Fleuve Jaune, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- **2 February:** Jean Van Doren (Deputy Director, VOKA-VEV), Bernard Bulcke (Journalist, Belang van Limburg), Jan Van Doren (aging director, De Morgen), Frans Crols (Director, Cauwelaert (director Knack), Wim Coessens (Manager, Express)
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**EXPO**

- **Until 2008:** Art at the Frontline 1914-1918, Royal Army and Military History Museum, Brussels; info: 02 737 78 33 www.klm-mra.be
- **Until 30 April:** Pain, exhibition, Museum Ghislain, Ghent; www.museumghislain.be
- **Until 26 February:** The Trans-Siberian Express: fascinating facts about the route to Vladivostock, KMSGK, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/742.72.11
- **Until 5 February:** Europalia Russia: Katharina Prospekt, The Russians by the Fashion designer duo A.F Vandervorst, Fashion Museum, Antwerp www.momu.be
- **Until 29 January:** Exhibition: Toys in girls’ hands, Toy museum, Mechelen; info: 015/55.70.75 www.specogodemuseum.be
- **Until 5 February:** The Blue Rose – Symbolism in Russia, Museum of Elsene, info: 02/516.64.22
- **17 December to 26 February:** Interstellar, exhibition, MUKHA; Antwerp, info: www.mukha.be

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E-mail: frank.vandecaveye@lannoo.be

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Editor in chief: Frank Vandecaveye

**Advice panel:** Luc Demeester (Lannoo), Rik Van Cauwelaert [director Knack], Wim Coessens [Managing director, De Morgen], Frans Crols [Director, Trends], Jan Denayer [Information Officer, Flemish Community], Mark Deweerdt [journalist, De Tijd], Michael Stabenow [Correspondent, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung], Luc Staendraet [journalist, Belang van Limburg], Jan Van Doren [Deputy Director, VOKA-VEV], Bernard Bulcke [De Standaard]

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Telephone: 011/14-11-52
Fax: 011/14-51-53
E-mail: frank.vandecaveye@lannoo.be