

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 15 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN BELGIUM JUNE 13 2004

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Key points

- Since 1999, European Parliament elections in Belgium are organised on the same day as the regional elections. This enhances even more the second order status of the European elections.
- Federal issues pushed aside regional themes; and European issues were hardly even mentioned.
- The election campaign was dominated by the questions whether the federal ‘purple coalition’ would survive and whether the Flemish Christian Democrats (Christen Democratisch en Vlaams: CD&V) would be able to become the largest party of Flanders again.
- The Flemish Christian Democrats, forming an electoral alliance with the regionalist New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie: N-VA) party, became the number one party in Flanders. In Wallonia and in Brussels the Francophone Socialist Party (PS) became ‘incontournable’ (unavoidable, at the centre of political life). For both parties this victory was also mirrored at the European level.
- Both Liberal coalition parties, the Flemish Liberal Democrats (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten: VLD) and the Francophone Reform Movement (Mouvement Réformateur: MR), suffered losses compared to the last regional and federal elections. At the European level they were able to stabilise their position.
- The Flemish Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij Anders (from italic to normal): Sp.other), in an electoral alliance with the regionalist party Spirit, did not increase its support as much as expected. At the European level it gained enough votes for one extra seat.
- After a major defeat in the 2003 federal elections, the Green parties managed to maintain representation in the regional parliaments. However, compared to 1999 the losses were heavy at both the regional and EP levels.

- The elections were, once again, a triumph for the extreme right party Vlaams Blok, at the regional as well as European level. The right wing extremist Front National obtained a surprisingly high score in Wallonia, albeit lower than the Vlaams Blok in Flanders.

Background

The most relevant background as far as these European and regional elections were concerned was the political situation at the federal level. After the 1999 elections (federal, regional and European) coalitions were formed at all levels between the Liberals, Socialists and Greens. This was a totally new type of coalition, removing the Christian Democrats from power for the first time in more than 40 years. They had been able to keep that position because of their clear leading position in Flanders (the northern region of Belgium).

The 2003 federal elections thus were a first attempt by the Flemish Christian Democrats to make a comeback. It failed, and the Liberals and Socialists went on governing together. Yet a number of things had changed compared to 1999. Both in Flanders and in Wallonia (the southern region) the Socialist parties did extremely well. In Wallonia, where the Socialists never lost their number one position, the party was able to improve its score for the first time since long since they first went into government. In Flanders, the Socialist Party (SP.other) had formed an alliance with the progressive regionalists of Spirit, and this cartel came very close to the Flemish Liberals of VLD. There was thus much more tension between the northern and southern Liberals and Socialists than during the 1999-2003 legislature. The Green parties lost heavily in 2003. The Flemish Green party Agalev lost all its seats in the federal Parliament and the Francophone Greens of Ecolo kept only 4 of theirs. They had been blamed during the campaign both for having made policy too green and for not having been green enough. For the extreme right Vlaams Blok, the 2003 elections were once again a success, and the Front National also slowly grew in Wallonia. The former regionalist Volksunie had split into two new parties: Spirit that formed an alliance with the Socialists and the more radical New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) that continued to function on its own. It managed to reach the 5% threshold in only one province, which meant that it won one single elected MP.¹

The 2004 elections came after the first year of this new federal government and, therefore, the main questions were primarily posed at the federal level. Would the Francophone Socialists retain their strong position? Could the Liberals in Flanders keep their number one position? What would happen to the Greens this time?

¹ For more on these elections see: M. Van Assche, "The Belgian Federal Elections of 18 May 2003", *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 13*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2003 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/oernbelgiump13.pdf>.

Flanders

After the elections of 2003 the liberal VLD became the biggest party in Flanders, but now closely followed by the Socialist-Spirit cartel. The coalition continued governing but the power balance had clearly changed. Moreover, the economic situation in the country did not allow for easy compromises anymore between the liberal and socialist partners. The prospect of new elections in 2004 paralysed the government even more. To show decisiveness and credibility, the Prime Minister had organized a number of very high profile “super cabinet councils”. On these occasions, long term plans were established in major policy fields.

While at the federal level the Greens had been dropped (they had lost all their seats), they remained in the Flemish regional government where their presence was mathematically needed to keep the Christian Democrats in opposition. The Flemish regional government did not achieve a great deal anymore. It spent the entire year basically waiting for the new elections. The Liberals had changed a number of ministers in the regional government, clearly saying that this was the team (‘the new generation’) preparing for the next regional elections. This enhanced the image of the Flemish government as a second order government, dominated by the “real” leaders pulling the strings at the federal level.

Yet it was precisely the Flemish Liberals who were getting an increasingly bad press. The government reshuffle was not highly appreciated, and, on top of that, the party engaged in a number of internal conflicts. The major one was related to the granting of local voting rights to non-European foreigners. The Flemish Liberals did not want this, but its three coalition partners at the federal level did and were able to put together a majority for it in the federal parliament. The Flemish Liberals were deeply divided between those fighting hard to stop these voting rights and those trying to avoid tensions with the federal coalition partners. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt in particular wanted to save the government rather than the Liberal Democrats’ position. All this ended in the defenestration of the group leader in the Senate (Hugo Coveliers) by the party president and of the party president (Karel De Gucht) by the Prime Minister. Meanwhile the Prime Minister kept on saying that the federal government was working hard and well.

“Steve is God”, the front page of a Flemish news paper cried out loud the day after the 2003 elections, referring to the popular leader of the Socialist party Steve Stevaert and the triumph of the Socialist-Spirit cartel. To increase the power of his party even more during the next election, Stevaert opted for three strategies: the formation of a broad, progressive cartel; good governance at both the federal and the regional level; and avoiding major clashes with the possible future coalition partners, the Flemish Liberals and Christian Democrats.

The first strategy was directed towards the moribund green party Agalev. The party lost all of its seats in the federal chambers on May 18. In the aftermath of this huge loss, the two regional Flemish ministers, Vera Dua and Mieke Vogels, as well as the party leader Jos Geysels resigned. The appeal from the Socialist party to form a progressive cartel was more attractive than ever. During the year to come, several senior politicians would

indeed leave Agalev to join the Socialists, including one of the new regional Flemish Green ministers. The new party leader, Dirk Holemans, was not able to bring the party on the right track again and a disastrous opinion poll of October 2003 warned the party that there was not much time left to move ahead. In November 2003 the cartel proposal was rejected with a firm “no” by the party congress. And with a new name (Groen!), a new party leader (Vera Dua), and a “back to basics-campaign” the party set about the fight for its survival.

The Christian Democratic CD&V also came out the worse for wear in 2003. Here the party leader, Stefaan De Clerck, was also offered up on the altar. Yves Leterme, a politician with a rather dull but reliable image, was appointed leader in June 2003. But the Flemish Christian Democrats did not really succeed in presenting themselves as a credible alternative for the governing partners. It was rather the worsening perception of the performance of the purple government that made the party rise again in the polls. And after the decision, in February 2004, to go to the elections with the New Flemish Alliance (see below), the party had a new dynamic and went into the 2004 elections with the clear ambition of becoming the largest party in the Flemish region. The New Flemish Alliance, the successor to the Flemish nationalist party Volksunie, announced on Valentine’s Day that it would form a cartel with the Flemish Christian Democrats for the regional and European elections. The disastrous result of May 2003 did not give the party a lot of latitude. It defended the independence of Flanders (or at least far reaching autonomy), but this idea of a larger Flemish autonomy was also the position of most other parties. In December 2003, after another poor result in the elections, the “party for a basic income for all” Vivant decided to form a cartel “with one of the parties in power”. Eventually, the Liberals were the chosen.

After the elections of 2003 and with the triumph of the Flemish Socialist-Spirit cartel on the front pages one often forgot to mention that the elections were once again a victory for the extreme right. Since 1981 the Vlaams Blok did not once experience a setback. The party continued softening its profile and managed to attract new faces. Meanwhile, the other parties made life very easy for Vlaams Blok: they brought the party’s core issue—voting rights for non-European immigrants – high up the political agenda. In April 2004, however, the tide seemed to turn. The Court of Appeal in Ghent judged that three non-profit organizations closely linked to the Vlaams Blok were “in an undeniable and systematic way instigating xenophobia”. Besides the moral implications of this judgement, this sentence could have major financial consequences for the party, as the law explicitly denies state subsidies for racist parties. The Vlaams Blok itself reacted fiercely to this judgment, and launched a campaign defending “freedom of speech”. Opinion polls showed that the judgment by the Court was likely to attract new voters for the Vlaams Blok, sympathising with its underdog position.

Wallonia

In 2003 the Francophone Socialist Party (PS) made up for its bad result at the previous elections and broadened the gap between it and the second party in the region, the liberal Reform Movement party to 8%. The party was able to do this thanks to its party leader

Elio Di Rupo, who initiated a major renewal process and a non-formalized co-operation with the Green party Ecolo in a convergence of the left (“convergence à gauche”). The party found itself in a very comfortable position in Wallonia for the 2004 elections. However, in the Brussels region, the Reform Movement remained an important stumbling block. For years the Reform Movement has been the strongest party in Brussels, thanks to the support of the Francophone nationalist party FDF (Front Démocratique Francophone). This made the Francophone Socialists decide to start pre-electoral negotiations with Ecolo and the Francophone Christian Democratic party (Centre Démocrate Humaniste: CDH). The Socialists had already made it clear during the successful 2000 local elections that they would hunt the Liberals in Brussels: it traded its Liberal partners in several Brussels municipalities for “olive tree coalitions” involving themselves, Ecolo and the Christian Democrats. Another issue that concerned the Francophone Socialists a great deal was the growth of the extreme right party Front National (see below).

The liberal Reform Movement has been trying for decades to dethrone the Francophone Socialists. The party continued its efforts to form a broad people’s party and attracted two parliamentarians from the Christian Democrats after an unanswered appeal to the party to form a “pôle des libertés” against the “pôle de gauche”. Unfortunately for the Reform Movement, one of its parliamentarians got involved in a case of tax fraud. This was only the beginning of a lingering malaise: the minister-president of the Brussels Government and minister in the French Community government, Daniel Ducarme, also had to resign when it turned out that he had not paid his taxes for a number of years. Moreover, the jostle for cabinet seats in the Brussels’ institutions – the Reform Movement changed Premiers four times in five years – only worsened the image of the party.

Ecolo was severely reprimanded by the voters in 2003. But in contrast to its sister-party Agalev, the party was able to retain 4 seats in the federal parliament. In Brussels Ecolo was the second largest party after the Reform Movement. In July 2003 the party congress opted for a more pragmatic leadership. But the party lost its fresh, young and trendy image to the Socialists.

In September 2003 the Francophone Christian Democrats re-elected Joëlle Milquet as the leader of the party. Milquet had clearly succeeded in making people forget about the Old Guard. She turned the old confessional party into a humanist party but nobody was really able to define what exactly this new party stood for. Besides that, its Flemish sister-party CD&V had mentioned on several occasions that it would not, as it did before, throw in its lot with the Francophone Christian Democrats.

The Front National increased its vote in 2003 by 1.6% compared to 1999. This was enough to win two seats in parliament and, related to this, extra state subsidies. The growth of the far right is not that obvious in Wallonia because Front National, in contrast to Vlaams Blok in Flanders, is a badly organised party with an uncharismatic leader. Actually, the extreme right grows in Wallonia “in spite of FN” and not “thanks to FN”. On the other hand, studies show that Wallonia has even more potential for an extreme

right vote than Flanders (a higher degree of xenophobia, higher distrust of the political establishment etc.).

Europe

Following the enlargement of the EU, the Convention on the future of Europe and the negotiations about a European Constitution, Europe was very much present in the Flemish and Francophone media. And Prime Minister Verhofstadt even opened a discussion on the organisation of a consultative referendum on the European constitution. But the participation of the Belgian representatives in the Convention illustrates very well the ambivalent attitude of Belgian politicians towards the EU. Politicians were quarrelling for weeks to get a mandate in the Convention. The leaders of the Flemish Liberals and the Francophone Socialists, for example, reserved a seat for themselves in the Convention meetings, although they did not have the required position to be elected. But when the meetings finally took place, those who fought hardest for a mandate, were the main absentees.

During the EP's most recent term, European mandates were not treated with a lot of respect either. Several parties moved their office holders from one policy level to the other, without any concerns for the continuity of the work in the European Parliament. The Flemish Socialists had five deputies taking its two seats during the past term, the Francophone Socialists six for three seats, Reform Movement and the Vlaams Blok four for two seats, the Flemish Liberal Democrats four for three seats, and Groen! three for two seats. Moreover, within the EP, representatives moved from one group to the other, following party changes at the national level.

Conduct of the campaign

Flanders

The media coverage of the elections was enormous in Flanders and opinion polls influenced the campaign more than ever before. Officially, the Flemish Liberals and Socialist-Spirit coalition chose to continue in a purple coalition. But it soon became clear that this year's elections would be a confrontation between the Liberal party and the cartel of the Flemish Christian Democrats and the New Flemish Alliance. The Socialists-Spirit kept quiet and tried to keep a position "in the middle of the bed". The voters would decide then with whom it would continue governing. This low profile actually meant that the cartel was not very visible in the campaign. Only one week before the election date the party presented its "9 spearheads for governance" and that was already too late to influence the agenda. Moreover, a Socialist bus trip to the Netherlands "to show people what the results are after two and a half years of conservative government," did not have the desired (media) effect.

The polls were not very positive for the Flemish Liberal Democrats-Vivant, predicting heavy losses. On the other hand, opinion polls predicted a spectacular victory for the Christian Democrats and New Flemish Alliance, with close to 30% of the votes in

Flanders. These forecasts caused major unrest amongst the Liberals and a boost for the Christian Democrats and New Flemish Alliance' confidence. Without really proposing any policy choices, the latter suddenly became the party of "respect", "credibility", "decisiveness" and "good governance" rather than a colourless and dull player. The Flemish Liberals-Vivant warned the voters that a victory of the Christian Democrats and nationalists would result in sky-high taxes, a destabilisation of the country because of asymmetrical coalitions at the federal and the regional level and radical nationalism. "It is me or the chaos", Prime Minister Verhofstadt stated. The Liberals also warned people that with the Christian Democrat-New Flemish Alliance Belgian soldiers would have been involved in the Iraq war.

The Socialists-Spirit and Vlaams Blok enjoyed this cat-and-mouse game between the Liberals and the Christian Democrat-New Flemish Alliance cartel. But in contrast to the former, the Vlaams Blok pursued a very tough campaign. Initially, the party campaigned against voting rights for migrants and the "weak resistance of the Liberals against the Walloon dominance" in this area. It was not really difficult to fight the Liberals because they brought their own weak points on the agenda. People did not sense on the individual level that taxes were brought down, and unemployment was only increasing. Besides that, the frequent changes of ministers in the Flemish government enhanced the image of a "pygmies cabinet". Once the verdict of the Court of Appeal was given Vlaams Blok launched a second attack against "the establishment": Vlaams Blok in the defence of "freedom of speech"! The party announced it would go to the highest appeal court against this judgement and meanwhile it would not abstain from any of its controversial statements or proposals. Moreover, the Flemish media did not exclude the party from any debates, notwithstanding the harsh verdict. A third campaign theme of the Vlaams Blok concerned, not surprisingly, "the huge money transfers to Wallonia". Besides that the party warned against a "Di Rupo-government" (the Francophone Socialist leader) at the federal level.

Spirit and Vivant were not able to leave their mark on the campaign. Groen!, on the other hand, was in the middle of the picture. With its "Groen is van doen" (Green! is necessary)-campaign, the party asked voters to guarantee some variety on the left side of the political spectrum. This appeal seemed to work. The party was constantly hovering around the 5% threshold but the last poll, about one week before the election date, was very encouraging. Only the European threshold remained hard to reach.

Wallonia

There was no central theme in the election campaign in Wallonia. Both the Socialists and the liberal Reform Movement promised to do "what is best for the region". Ecolo and the Francophone Christian Democrats did not succeed in bringing an issue onto the agenda. The Christian Democrats focused on better education, for the socio-economic recovery of the region, and criticised the multitude of ministerial mandates in this field: in the French-speaking community three ministers are responsible for education policy. But all other parties agree that this should change, so this did not distinguish the party from its competitors. The real fight was between the Socialists and the Reform Movement for the

power in Brussels. And the only other question was whom the Socialists would choose to govern with. The Socialists were very friendly with the Christian Democrats during the campaign, which supported the rumours about a coalition change in Wallonia and Brussels. The Reform Movement presented itself as the only alternative to the dominance of Socialists. Ecolo and the Christian Democrats were portrayed as “branches of PS”. Opinion polls predicted that the Reform Movement would be severely beaten in Brussels but not in Wallonia.

The most important unknown factor was probably the score of Front National. Certainly now that Ecolo became more and more associated with the Socialists, the Front National was the only alternative for protest voters. Everybody feared a breakthrough of the party but, in contrast to what happened in Flanders, the issue was kept quiet, in the hope that this would prevent another victory for the far right party.

Europe

As usual, Europe was only covered very marginally during the election campaign. There were plenty of occasions though, to take up the issue. But the proposal of the Prime Minister to organise a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, supported by European and national politicians of other parties, died a silent death. Elio Di Rupo, the leader of the Francophone Socialists, blocked the proposal immediately. Besides that, most of the parties did not agree internally on this matter. Probably also the negative attitude of the Belgian population towards enlargement (45% of the Belgian interviewees were against enlargement in the autumn 2003 Eurobarometer) made the parties decide not to take any risks. One of Flemish Socialists-Spirit’s nine spearhead points was “A Social Europe in the European constitution”. But, as noted above, these nine points did not attract much attention.

The Flemish Socialists tried to bring Europe on the agenda in February 2004. The new vice-president of the party Caroline Gennez wrote in a booklet “Dear Europe” that “Europe is a capricious lady with too much attention for economy, the protection of the free market and competition.....(while)....social consciousness is clearly not her thing”. Actually, the party did not say anything new. Together with most other parties in Belgium, the Flemish Socialists criticised the weak social policy of the EU for a long time and continue to do so. And not that long ago, deputy Prime Minister Vande Lanotte had said that “this is not our Europe anymore”. But then as now, these critics were not shouting down the basic pro-European attitude of the Belgian political elite. Moreover, all other parties, the Flemish Socialists included, immediately condemned these critics. Of course, this rigid reaction does not allow any real debate about the EU. This is a pity because, according to the June 2004 European election barometer 65% of Belgian voters say that their European vote depends of the level of information they get on the issue.

The only relevant Eurosceptical party in Belgium, Vlaams Blok, campaigned against the possible entry of Turkey into the EU with a picture landscape of minarets on its website. But this attracted even less attention than the Flemish Socialists’ initiative. Moreover, in

an opinion poll of April 2004, the Flemish population said it was not against Turkish accession.

The only thing that put the European elections in the picture was the composition of the lists. In Belgium, for the European elections, parties present their candidates on a single list for the entire language community whereas during other elections (except the Senate) lists are presented per province (Flanders) or even smaller districts (Wallonia). It is very tempting for parties to put their most popular candidates on the European list, whether they are real European candidates or not. One of the main issues in this year's campaign in Flanders was the presence of "fake candidates" on the lists. The Flemish Liberal Democrats decided to play their master card: the federal Prime Minister Verhofstadt. The Flemish Socialists-Spirit and the Flemish Christian Democrats-New Flemish Alliance explicitly chose not to participate in this "deception". The former asked the leading lady of the socialist trade union, Mia De Vits, to head the list. For the Christian Democrats former Prime Minister and former vice-president of the Convention Jean-Luc Dehaene was leading. Mia De Vits though did not want to deny that she would accept a Flemish ministerial post. It was only under pressure from the other parties that her party leader announced that she would stay in the EP for a full term. For Guy Verhofstadt his position at the top of the list was also meant to support his candidacy for the presidency of the European Commission. The Prime Minister wanted to challenge Dehaene in a "Titans clash" but the latter was not willing to debate with a "fake candidate".

In Wallonia the Reform Movement put the federal minister of foreign affairs, Louis Michel, at the top and the Socialists, Christian Democrats and Front National chose their party presidents. But in Wallonia, the discussion on "fake candidates" did not play out at all.

The Green parties went into the elections with senior MEPs Pierre Jonckheer for Ecolo and Bart Staes for Groen! The decision of the European Greens to go into the elections with a real European list and a single green campaign, did not receive major attention. The voters most probably hardly realised these changes happened.

Polls predicted that the cartel of the Flemish Christian Democrats-New Flemish Alliance would also be very successful at the European level. It was even expected that it would take away votes from Vlaams Blok. The Socialists and Liberals were not expected to suffer losses. The position of the Greens was more uncertain. But even these predictions did not come really into the picture.

Analysis of the results

Flanders

As Table 1 shows, as expected, the cartel of the Christian Democrats and New Flemish Alliance won the election, but not with the impressive results the polls predicted. Compared to 2003 the cartel won only 0.3% more votes, and compared to 1999 there was a 4% gain. For the first time since 1985, Christian Democracy once again increased its

share of the votes in Flanders. But all parties remain rather small, which means that – as long as Vlaams Blok is excluded – no winning coalition with two parties can be formed.

Table 1: Election results Flanders, 1999 – 2003 - 2004

	2004 (% votes)	2004 (seats)	2003 (Federal Chamber)	1999 (% votes)	1999 (seats)
Liberal Democrats (VLD)	-	-	24.6	22.0	27
VLD-VIVANT	19.8	24	-	-	-
Christian Democrats (CD&V)	-	-	21.3	22.1	28
CD&V-N-VA	26.3	34	-	-	-
Socialists (SP.A)	-	-	-	15.0	19
SP.A-SPIRIT	19.7	24	23.9	-	-
Volksunie(VU-ID)	-	-	-	9.3	11
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	-	-	4.9	-	-
VL. BLOK	24.0	29	18.1	15.6	20
GROEN!	7.6	6	3.9	11.6	12

The Liberals scored better than expected from the polls and the loss in the number of seats was not too significant. But the party lost the important symbolic fight for the number one position with Christian Democrats-New Flemish Alliance.

The Socialists-Spirit had expected a much better result. The party increased its votes compared to 1999 but that was anyway a bad year for the Socialists. Moreover, the cartel did not exist yet then. Compared to 2003, the loss was important for the party. The failed attempt to include the Greens into the cartel was very much regretted subsequently. Many of its “green voters” of 2003 probably, indeed, decided that it was more important to support the survival of Groen! The green candidates on the Socialist-Spirit lists could not make a difference.

Groen! became “necessary” in Flanders. The party rose from its ashes and can form a group again in the Flemish parliament. With 7.6% of the votes and 6 seats, Groen! can play a role in Flemish politics, but it announced that it would not govern because “governing with New Flemish Alliance is one step too far for the Greens”. Besides that, compared to 1999, the losses were heavy: the party lost half of its seats in the Flemish parliament.

The main victory in Flanders was for Vlaams Blok, with an increase of 6% within only one year. “One million people discharged us from the trial”, the party leaders shouted with joy. The party was catching up impressively on the countryside as well. The leaders of Vlaams Blok asked the Christian Democrat-New Flemish Alliance cartel to respect the voters and take them into the new coalition.

Wallonia

As Table 2 shows, the Socialist Party handsomely won the elections ahead of the reform movement, both in Wallonia and Brussels. It was now “waiting for Elio” and which partner(s) he would chose to govern with; and he decided it would not be the Liberals. This puts the Francophone Socialists in a very powerful position. All major parties in Wallonia are now governing with Socialists, on the regional or federal level. On the other hand, the Reform Movement promises it will not make life easy for the Socialists in the federal government.

Table 2: Election results Wallonia, 1999 – 2003 - 2004

	2004 (%votes)	2004 (seats)	2003 (Federal Chamber)	1999 (% votes)	1999 (seats)
Socialists (PS)	36.9	34	36.4	29.4	25
Reform Movement (MR)	24.3	20	28.4	24.7	21
ECOLO	8.5	3	7.5	18.2	14
Christian Democrats (CDH)	17.6	14	15.4	17.1	14
Front National (FN)	8.1	4	5.6	4.0	1

Ecolo did slightly better than in 2003 but the losses compared to 1999, about 10%, were heavy. The Christian Democrats increased their votes compared to both 2003 and 1999, and the same goes for Front National. The success of the extreme right is not an exclusive Flemish phenomenon anymore.

Europe

However, notwithstanding its important growth, Front National was not able to win a seat in the European Parliament. One of the green seats went to the Francophone Socialists. Both the Reform Movement and Francophone Christian Democrats easily defended their own seats. We have to bear in mind that the French-speaking part has one seat less this year, compared to 1999.

In Flanders Jean-Luc Dehaene’s success was reaching mythical proportions. With more than 650,000 preferential votes he carried off an extra seat for his Flemish Christian Democrats. Vlaams Blok converted its victory also on the European level in an extra seat, as did the Flemish Socialists-Spirit cartel but with a less impressive score. Besides that, we have to mention that the predecessor of New Flemish Alliance and Spirit, Volksunie (VU-ID) also had two seats in the 1999 parliament. One of these moved over to Groen! when the party split up, the other to Spirit. Groen! succeeded in passing the threshold in these elections as well and sent Bart Staes back to the EP.

One Belgian seat is reserved for the German-speaking community. The Christian Democrats always won this seat, and that is how it is again now.

Table 3: Election results European Parliament, 1999 – 2004**Flanders**

	2004 (% votes)	2004 (seats)	1999 (% votes)	1999 (seats)
Liberal Democrats (VLD)	-	-	21.9	3
VLD-VIVANT	21.9	3	-	-
VIVANT	-	-	1.7	0
Christian Democrats (CD&V)	-	-	21.7	3
CD&V-New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	28.2	4	-	-
Socialists (SP.A)	-	-	14.2	2
SP.A-SPIRIT	17.8	3	-	-
Volksunie(VU-ID)	-	-	12.2	2
VL.BLOK	23.2	3	15.1	2
GROEN!	8.0	1	12.0	2

Wallonia

	2004 (% votes)	2004 (seats)	1999 (% votes)	1999 (seats)
Socialists (PS)	36.1	4	25.8	3
Reform Movement (MR)	27.6	3	-	-
Liberals (PRL-FDF)	-	-	27.0	3
ECOLO	9.8	1	22.7	3
Christian Democrats (CDH)	15.2	1	13.3	1
Front National (FN)	7.5	0	4.1	0
VIVANT	-	-	2.4	0

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Notwithstanding the prominent presence of Europe in the media and several efforts by politicians to start a debate on Europe, the issue was carefully avoided again. European issues were not even second order during this year's election campaign. The federal level dominated the regional elections and the European lists were just another tool in the national level campaign. Once again, the only relevant Eurosceptical party in Belgium, Vlaams Blok, proved that it did not need the European issue to score well. It is not clear yet if the Belgian parties will re-open the discussion about a referendum on the European constitution. Nobody seems to be prepared to break the pro-European elite consensus. The initiatives taken to start a debate were too weakly defended and rather exploratory. Besides this, the issue risks eroding internal party cohesion. Another unknown factor was the reaction of the population. Up until now, the parties did not directly question the population and this kept the Belgian permissive consensus intact.

The country is confronted with some major challenges these days. For the first time ever, Belgium will have asymmetrical coalitions at the regional and federal policy level. The Flemish Christian Democrats promised not to disturb the coalition of liberals and socialists on the federal level and try to "break in," which could lead to new federal

elections. The Reform Movement, on the other hand, will not spare the Francophone Socialist Party. On the other hand, the Socialist Party is the only winning party at the federal level, so the real power now lies there the balance has, therefore, changed since the federal elections of one year ago. While Flanders will be governed by a coalitions of the Christian Democrats, New Flemish Alliance, Socialists, Spirit and Liberal Democrats, with the dominant party in a cartel with a Flemish nationalist formation

The growth of Vlaams Blok did breath new life into the discussion on the usefulness of the cordon sanitaire against the extreme right in Flanders. Flemish Christian Democrat president Leterme negotiated (for one hour) with the Vlaams Blok but decided that his party would not govern with the extreme right. The Vlaams Blok will find itself in a very comfortable position in opposition now, with all the other major parties in government and an ‘incontournable’ Socialist Party at the federal level. The extreme right is becoming an increasingly bigger concern in Wallonia as well and this mainly for the Socialists because it is in the old industrial and poor Socialist-strongholds that Front National gets its adherents. Besides that, studies show that Wallonia has even more potential than Flanders for an extreme right success. The region is only lacking a well-organised and charismatic leader.

Voices were raised again against the separate conduct of federal and regional elections. Even the main opponent, the Flemish Christian Democrats, is now changing its mind. This could have a positive effect on the European elections as, most probably, they will not be linked anymore then to national level elections. One proposal is to organise them on the same day as the local elections. This will certainly enhance the visibility of the European elections tremendously.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>