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'Can Vivaldi keep the country together?'

After 493 days of negotiations, Belgium finally has a new government. Daniel Kopp in Brussels on why that won't put an end to the country's polarisation

Belgium finally has a new federal government. What's the coalition now governing the country?

On Wednesday, after 493 days of negotiations, seven Belgian parties – the Flemish and Walloon Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals as well as the Flemish Christian Democrats – came together to form a so-called Vivaldi coalition. With the formation of the new government, it just failed to surpass the record 541 days of negotiations in 2010/11. This time, it took a mere thirteen attempts with various negotiators from different parties to agree on this broad centre-left to centre-right coalition.

The leader of the Walloon Social Democrats, Paul Magnette stepped aside to allow, despite representing the strongest force in the coalition, the Flemish Liberal Alexander de Croo to head the government as prime minister. This has to do with the precarious political situation between the more left-wing Wallonia in the south and the more right-wing Flanders in the north of the country. The Flemish nationalists of the N-VA, which emerged from the May 2019 elections as the strongest party with 16 per cent, were – according to their view – "excluded" from the coalition, despite various attempts at rapprochement also with the Social Democrats. This is therefore a similar situation to 2010/11, when they also emerged victorious from the elections, but were not represented in the social-democratic – and Walloon-led – government under Elio di Rupo.

According to Magnette, he decided to give up the post of prime minister and leave it to de Croo, as "it is better for the stability of our country to have a Flemish prime minister". Next to de Croo, the Flemish Social Democrat Frank Vandenbroucke made a surprise political comeback as the new Deputy Prime Minister.

Given that the two strongest Flemish parties are not part of the new government, what could the political and societal consequences in Belgium be?

The ordeal that Belgian democracy and its federal system is facing becomes clear from the reaction of the party that emerged from the last election as the second strongest force, the far-right Vlaams Belang. When the formation of the Vivaldi coalition was more or less clear a few days ago, Vlaams Belang mobilised 4500 supporters for a protest action in Brussels last Sunday under the slogan "Not my government". When you now consider that, according to the last poll in June 2020, Vlaams Belang would become the strongest force in the country, if new elections were held, and push the N-VA to second place, you can understand the other parties' fears when it came to new elections.

In the opposition, Vlaams Belang and the N-VA can now outbid each other with Flemish nationalist and self-victimising rhetoric – because of the "exclusion" from the government – and will, in that way, try to push the other parties around. As such, the N-VA member of parliament Theo Francken didn't hesitate for long and, in a protest for the media, hung the flag of the Flemish nationalist movement – a black lion on a yellow background – in front of his house on the day the coalition was announced. He questioned the democratic legitimacy of the government, in which Flanders is underrepresented, and noted that it would only "fuel separatist thinking" (which he himself likes to fuel).

This situation will most likely accelerate both the political fragmentation and the social polarisation of the country – North-South and left-right. If these trends continue, after the next elections in 2024 it could become even more difficult to form a government. One can only hope that the new government will find a response. Perhaps consequentially, the coalition agreement includes the promise of the seventh state reform since 1970.

Until now, Belgium has been led by an interim government under Sophie Wilmès. Therefore, it has not been able to steer a clear political course. How does the new government intend to face the major crises of our time? And is the social-democratic signature visible here?

On the same day that the coalition was announced, Belgium was classified by the German government as a high-risk area because of the rapidly rising corona figures. This highlights what the Belgian daily Le Soir called the "historical responsibility" of the new Belgian government. It is still confronted with an economic, social and health crisis.

Accordingly, despite the liberal and Christian Democratic

participation in the government, the austerity policy of the previous government under Charles Michel is out of the window for the time being. The coalition agreement does not make any commitment to a balanced budget or to the EU's Growth and Stability Pact, which is currently suspended anyways. Instead, an investment plan based on the European Commission's "Green Deal" is supposed to revive the economy and make it more resilient and sustainable.

The social-democratic signature can above all be seen in the social sphere and health. For the latter, more investments and fairer access to health services are the priority. In the social sphere, the government intends to tackle the difficult political issue of pensions – with a promise to progressively increase the lowest pensions to at least €1,500 per month. Even if some details are still unclear, this would certainly be a major success in terms of social policy. All in all, however, many points in the coalition programme are still very vague. The coming months will show how stable – and how progressive – Vivaldi can govern and if it can keep the country together.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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