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'Social democratic parties will only survive if they build bridges'

Former MP Frank Vandenbroucke on what the polarising Belgian elections mean for the country – and social democracy

On 26 May 2019, elections for the four regional, the federal and the European Parliament took place in Belgium. Since the results were announced, pundits have already spoken of a "tsunami", "earthquake" or "two Belgiums", as Belgium's most populous region Flanders voted overwhelmingly for right-wing parties, while Brussels and Wallonia turned to the left. In the country's federalised system, it's notoriously difficult to build stable coalitions on the national level. Daniel Kopp spoke to Frank Vandenbroucke to make sense of the results.

The most striking development of these elections seems to be the (re-)surgence of the far-right Vlaams Belang in Flanders, which – with 18.5 per cent – trebled their result compared to the last elections. Previously, the more moderate Flemish nationalist N-VA managed to draw support from Vlaams Belang. How was this reversed?

Vlaams Belang spectacularly re-entered the political scene. The N-VA probably lost a significant number of voters, which they were able to tease away from Vlaams Belang in previous elections. Two factors may explain this.

First, as a partner in the federal government, N-VA was not able to deliver on these voters' expectations with regard to immigration and asylum seekers. It's obviously easier to launch slogans about the control of immigration and asylum than to achieve such control in practice. In government, the N-VA was responsible for immigration and asylum policies. Its secretary of state, Theo Francken, persisted with bold public communication on the problems of migration and asylum – arguably he did so to reassure this part of the N-VA electorate on his policies. But the gap between his relatively brutal rhetoric and his actual achievements must have fostered renewed support for Vlaams Belang.

Second, a few months before the elections, N-VA left the federal government because of the so-called Marrakech Pact. The clash about the Pact not only damaged the overall credibility of the governmental coalition, but also put migration high on the agenda – without offering any practical solution to the issues at hand. In short, it seems that we have been confronted with a classical case whereby politicians in office are perceived as powerless and ineffective and voters reaffirmed that they preferred the "original" (Vlaams Belang) over the "copy" (the Francken-variety of N-VA), notably because the "copy" must have been perceived as ineffective.

Since 1991, the democratic political parties in Belgium have agreed on a "cordon sanitaire", meaning they would not cooperate with the far right. But this time, the N-VA has announced it would be open to discussing possible coalitions with them. Is it possible that we'll see Vlaams Belang in government?

This seems impossible. Even if N-VA would want to opt for a Flemish regional government with Vlaams Belang, together they don't have a majority in the Flemish regional parliament. All the other parties represented in the Flemish parliament refuse to enter into a coalition with Vlaams Belang.

While not as massive as in other European countries, social democratic parties in both the Flemish and the Walloon part of the country have lost support. Who did they lose voters to – and why?

It's too early to say to which parties the Flemish and French-speaking socialists lost voters. In Flanders, both the far-right (Vlaams Belang), the extreme left (PvdA-PTB) and the Greens made progress. Hence, it's a plausible that the Flemish social democrats (sp.a) lost voters to these three parties, but we know from earlier research that the patterns of shifts between parties are more complicated.

In Brussels and Wallonia, the French-speaking socialists (PS) presumably lost both to the Greens and the extreme left (PvdA-PTB). The PvdA-PTB, a party which has its origins in the maoist extreme left of the 1970s and 1980s (comparable to the Dutch SP), added 8 seats to its current 2 seats in the federal parliament.

What was the social democrats' campaign strategy? What worked, what didn't?

My answer can only be tentative and personal, hence one should read it with caution. Both the sp.a and the PS focused on traditional themes related to purchasing power, pensions and decent work; they also wanted to 'move to the left' and to be seen as moving to the left.

The parties worked hard in the campaign, doing their utmost to impose their agenda on the campaign debates, with considerable success (for instance, with regard to pensions). I, for one, was not very enthused by the content of our program, for several reasons.

The sp.a wanted to focus on a limited number of simple high-profile proposals, such as the reduction of VAT on the electricity bill and a drastic increase of the minimum pension and the minimum wage. Thus, the dominant sp.a rhetoric had a materialistic flavour that sits uneasily with the salience of climate change among younger voters. A share of the voters may have also perceived the program, which combined a drastic increase of minimum pensions with a rejection of the increased pension age, as very costly in the longer term, if not a free lunch.

The turn to the left was even more outspoken with the PS; I'm afraid that the leftist program the PS proposed has been seen as the "copy" to which the "original" of the PvdA-PTB was preferred. More fundamentally, it will be impossible to deliver on these programmes in the long run: it's a kind of doping that may help to focus a campaign, but returns as a boomerang when one enters a government.

What do the Belgian social democratic parties need to do in the future to win back support?

Fundamentally, our social democratic parties are confronted with the same dilemmas we see in many European countries, such as being torn between an electorate that's cosmopolitan and an electorate that's concerned about the impact of migration. Social democratic parties will only survive if they build bridges between segments of the population with different sensitivities towards questions of migration and climate change. In a highly polarised political debate, this is extremely difficult. It requires a leadership with a strong and enduring credibility (hence my worries about promises on which one cannot deliver). Yet, it's the only way out.

Between 2010 and 2011, Belgium was without government for 589 days in a row – a world record. This time, it seems like it will also be difficult to build a stable governing coalition on the federal level. Do you think we'll see another government crisis? And what should the left parties do?

The formation of a Belgian federal government will be difficult, not only because in Wallonia and Brussels left-wing parties – I include the Greens here – dominate, whilst in Flanders right-wing parties have the upper hand, but also because of the fragmentation of the political landscape. This means that a parliamentary majority necessitates

many parties. If the left parties would enter the federal government, they should pursue policies that contribute to a reduction of the “us” versus “them” polarisation that increasingly characterises the Belgian political landscape. This polarisation thrives on the considerable socio-economic disparities between the regions. Hence, it's the fundamental challenge to have policies that contribute to more economic convergence between the three regions.



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Frank Vandenbroucke was a member of the Belgian Parliament from 1985 to 1996, and again from 1999 to 2011. As a minister in successive Belgian federal governments, he was responsible for social security, health care, pensions and employment. Since November 2015, he works as a professor at the University of Amsterdam.

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