

Real European Elections at Last?

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On 25 May 2014 the eighth European elections will take place. In this contribution we look ahead to these European elections in Flanders. Firstly, we shall consider how these elections were managed in the past and suggest a few reasons why it was difficult to find them interesting. Then we shall discuss the context, which has changed radically since the last European elections in 2009. The eurocrisis put the EU onto the front pages, even in the popular media. Next we shall look at what issues are likely to feature in the debates running up to the European elections in Flanders. In the final section, we shall consider what image the political parties will try to convey in these debates.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS UNTIL NOW

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The European Union has changed fundamentally in the 35 years since 1979 when the European Parliament was first directly elected. One of the most important developments has involved the European Parliament itself. It has grown from being an advisory body into being a fully-fledged legislator. The Parliament is fully involved in most European decisions and ultimately has to judge the end results. So it is paradoxical that the turnout for European elections has steadily declined. In Belgium voting is compulsory, but in other countries the trend has been the same: fewer and fewer voters have been turning out for European elections. Either people do not know that the European Parliament has become powerful and important, or they do not believe it.

As elsewhere in Europe, European election campaigns in Flanders have seldom been dominated by European issues. It is quite usual for regional, even federal elections to be held at the same time, and it has been regional (or national) issues that have dominated the debates. Parties usually include a European section in their manifestos, but it is rarely given much of an airing.

The situation in other countries has been much the same. European elections have been a kind of secondary election or a popularity contest for the parties in power. The genuinely serious problems which European politicians have to struggle with, such as expanding the EU, the future of agriculture, climate change ..., may occasionally get a mention but they seldom dominate.

In the past thirty years, the EU extended its powers quite considerably. Until the early 1990s Europe's impact on people's daily lives was fairly limited. Since then its impact has grown spectacularly, but it has happened without any great debate about it. The general public seems not to have much knowledge of or insight into how the EU has developed or makes its decisions. But neither have many opinion-makers, journalists or teachers. So it has been easier to say nothing about Europe, even during elections.

In Belgium, it has been even more difficult than in most countries to have a proper debate on Europe because for a long time the political parties were largely in agreement. In essence, there was a consensus among the political elite in favour of more Europe. Belgian politicians from every political grouping have played an important role throughout history in building up Europe and the people have also long been among the most enthusiastic supporters of integration. For decades, the euro-barometers have shown this. Perhaps the enthusiasm has lessened over the years, but in its place has come a kind of permissive consensus: a belief that Europe supposedly can do no wrong. And because that belief is widely held in Belgium, for many years every debate on Europe has been exceptionally soporific. Politicians agreed with each other and there was rarely much real conflict.

The extreme right-wing Flemish Bloc [Vlaams Blok] was the first party of any significance to adopt an explicitly critical attitude to Europe. But the party did not give the European theme any priority. Occasionally something might be said about Turkey's entry into the EU or about a failure of democracy, but the Flemish Bloc, or the Flemish Interest [Vlaams Belang] as it became, has never given Europe much prominence.

In the build-up to the European elections of 2004, Caroline Gennez, then chairman of the Flemish Social-democratic party, the Sp.a, attempted to lift the debate to a higher level. She published a booklet entitled *Beste Europa [Dear Europe]*, which she described as euro-critical. It was particularly interesting as an attempt to transcend the sterile debate about being for or against Europe, or for more Europe versus less. Traditionally, the great majority have been on the same side, namely for 'more' Europe, which rather cuts down the space available for genuine debate. For Gennez the arguments about more Europe or less were outdated. The discussion ought to be about 'What now for Europe?'. In her booklet she summarised a large number of issues where, in her opinion, European politicians had made the wrong choices. However, it also contained numerous half-truths and was inconsistent in a number of areas. Decisions which she criticised turned out to have been supported by her own party in the European Parliament or in the Council of Ministers. Bart Staes, MEP for the Greens, was one of several who took Gennez to task about this. The booklet lacked sufficient content and depth and consequently fell rather flat. But for the first time an attempt had been made to make it clear that 'more' Europe was not necessarily 'good' Europe: 'more' Europe can be filled from the left or from the right, and it is up to politicians to decide which it will be.

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During the European elections of 2009 two ex-prime ministers and political heavyweights, Jean-Luc Dehaene and Guy Verhofstadt, battled it out as 'list leaders', leading candidates, for the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (Open VLD) respectively. They attracted most attention in the few debates that were held specifically on Europe. But as regards content, there were as usual few real differences. (They both wanted a stronger Europe, with greater powers and a clearer voice in the world). Disagreement was primarily about strategy: Verhofstadt wanted to make the leap forward sooner rather than later, while Dehaene was more cautious. In fact the most dissident voice in that period was that of Derk-Jan Eppink, a Dutch journalist who had a prominent position on the rather small right-wing populist Dedecker List. He described himself as a 'eurorealist', wrote a book about it, and attacked in particular the European passion for regulation. But he too failed to dominate the public debate. As usual, the popular media paid little attention to the European election campaign.

DIFFERENT CONTEXT, NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

Meanwhile, almost five years later, the context has changed considerably. Since early 2010, the euro crisis has put the EU almost permanently in the news. Even the popular media now report on the bail-outs for countries with budgetary problems, the imposed cut-backs and the future of the euro. Recently it has become clear to what extent national and regional politicians have to operate within guidelines laid down by Europe. Debates on the budget are overshadowed by what Europe dictates.

In socio-economic discussions on wage levels, employment or ageing, there are constant references to ever stricter European guidelines.

The question of solidarity with the peripheral countries and the usefulness of the emergency funds that were created, have been debated at length in Flanders. The parallel with the domestic debates about the relationship between Flanders and Wallonia gave them a familiar ring. Moreover, it was very easy to echo the populist line: southerners are lazy and corrupt and end up in debt. Northerners, who are thrifty and responsible, who work hard and save, are now expected to bail them out. The reality, of course, is infinitely more complicated than the simplistic twist that some of the media have given it.

The euro crisis has seriously damaged the popularity of the EU. Even before the crisis, eurosceptic parties were doing well in many member states. These are parties that question the value of integration or want less European interference at the national level. Every opinion poll has shown that since the euro crisis, euroscepticism has grown dramatically, though not everywhere for the same reasons. In the south, the EU is associated with rigid budgetary discipline and the disastrous social consequences it has had. In the north, the EU is associated with the transfer of huge subsidies to the bottomless pits in the south. But once again: the reality is far more complicated. The situation in Spain or Ireland cannot be compared to that in Greece; what is seen as support for the south largely ends up in northern banks; and the fact is the northern economies have done very well out of the southern states who are now in debt. These more sophisticated insights are seldom given an airing, so the judgement of public opinion remains based on the simplistic assumptions peddled by the popular press.

However, the savings which the EU insists upon affect both north and south even though in different measure. The powers of the EU to impose economies have increased considerably. The euro crisis was initially interpreted by the European leaders, many of whom at the time were of a centre-right persuasion, as a crisis caused by too many debts and too large deficits. Consequently, all kinds of measures were agreed to enforce budgetary discipline across Europe. A treaty to that end was drawn up and legislation passed to enforce it. The European Parliament, where centre-right parties are in the majority, endorsed the policy. Only since the end of 2012 has the focus shifted slightly as it became apparent that the passion for economy was having a negative effect on economic growth. Cut-backs lead to unemployment and a reduction in tax revenue. Measures to encourage growth figure more prominently on the agenda, though the reality is limping some way behind, and the budgetary straitjacket that was imposed on the member states has, at least for some, been relaxed a little. The pressure to economise, however, is as great as ever and that includes spending on the social services.

Left-wing parties like the Greens and Social Democrats (Sp.a) have been very critical of the course adopted by Europe which has largely been mapped out by the centre-right parties, both at the level of heads of states and heads of government as well as in the European Parliament. In Belgium, it was in particular Paul Magnette, chairman of the Walloon Socialists (PS), who heavily criticised the policy of retrenchment. Christian Democrats and particularly Liberal politicians distanced themselves from Magnette's position and called on him (in vain) to toe the European line and defend it.

Another aspect that Magnette touched on concerned the democratic character of European decision-making. He criticised the European Commission, which has to approve the economies being made by the member states. In particular, Olli Rehn, the commissioner concerned, was targeted. 'Who knows Olli Rehn?', wondered Magnette to illustrate the lack of democracy. The Flemish Social Democrats have not put it quite so bluntly, but largely share Magnette's views.

Thanks to the euro crisis the EU is now frequently in the news. There is controversy over the decisions that have been made and the political parties have clearly differing viewpoints. That offers some chance of a genuine debate.

EUROPEAN ISSUES IN FLANDERS FOR 2014

There is no shortage of EU related issues. The trade agreements which it enters into; climate change; the future of agriculture; the role of human rights in foreign policy... All of them are European preoccupations. The European Parliament plays an important role in these issues and one hopes that they will figure in the programmes of the political parties. In the next few months, however, the main public discussions and debates will revolve around a smaller number of topics, and more specifically around issues on which we can expect disagreement between the Flemish parties.

Cut-backs and solidarity

In the first place there are the subjects relating directly to the euro crisis. Left-wing parties will stress that the EU has been dominated in the past by right wing parties who imposed an agenda of retrenchment that has had a negative effect on growth and employment. Opposition to budgetary discipline will probably be prominent in left-wing programmes everywhere in the EU. The economic right-wing will then argue that it is precisely a lack of budgetary discipline that has undermined confidence in the financial markets causing the eurozone to falter.

Much good sense but also much nonsense will be spoken on the question of solidarity with the member-states on the periphery. Is it necessary to hold the eurozone together? Was it sensible to create emergency funds and shore up the problem countries? Is it in our interests in the north or are we throwing money into a bottomless pit?

During the campaign, the role of the banks might also be discussed, although on this issue most of the Flemish parties are in agreement: there should be more European control over the banks, and abuses such as excessive bonuses must be abolished.

An instrument of torment

As in other member states the question could also arise in Belgium whether European regulation of day-to-day matters is desirable. This refers to legislation dealing with consumer protection, the quality of foodstuffs, environmental standards, agricultural regulation and so on. Since the 1990s, the EU has issued thousands of regulations which lay down in minute detail the standards which certain products have to meet. Europe is regarded in some quarters as an instrument of torment, which interferes in all kinds of things without its being immediately obvious what the purpose of the intervention actually is. From the size of pig sties, or the rear lights of tractors, to surprise-Easter eggs for children, there are European norms that must be met. Not only products but also production processes are to some extent regulated by Europe. Dozens of laws prescribe how European businesses must safeguard the health and safety of their employees. They cover things like handling poisonous products, driving and rest periods for bus drivers, minimal levels of protection during pregnancy, protection against noise pollution etc. These regulations often arouse opposition. Certainly in the United Kingdom, large sections of the public believe that the EU should not concern itself with such matters.

In essence, it boils down to a left-right divide. Supporters of the free market are annoyed by European interference and the amount of red tape which stands in the way of free enterprise. Right-wing parties argue for European restraint, perhaps the reversal of previous agreements and the curtailing of European powers. On the other side of the debate are those who fear that an unregulated free market leads to a lowering of standards and less protection for consumers, environment and employees. Left-wing parties in general argue for even stricter European regulations, including agreements on taxation. Europe must ensure a level playing field: in the single European market, competition should only be permitted when there is fair taxation for all and everyone enjoys a wide range of social and economic rights. Otherwise, countries and businesses will compete in those areas which are not yet harmonised, with the risk of sparking off a race to the bottom.

Electing a President for the European Commission

A particular issue which might crop up during the campaign is the level of democracy in the EU. Traditionally it has been difficult to broach this in public debate because it is fairly technical and one soon becomes bogged down in such things as consultation procedures, rights of initiative, comitology etc, and also because the main Flemish political parties are largely in agreement.

But this time there is one aspect that deserves special attention: immediately after the European elections, discussions will begin, as usual, about who is to be the new president of the Commission. The heads of state and government leaders will have to propose somebody while bearing in mind the verdict of the European elections. Finally, the European parliament will have to vote on the new president. The European political 'families', (Social-democrat, Christian-democrat, Liberal, etcetera) will have already come to an agreement on who will be their particular candidate during the spring campaign. In this way, they intend to present the heads of government with a *fait accompli*: the largest political family, or the grouping with a parliamentary majority, will then propose their candidate. It will be very difficult for the heads of government to ignore this parliamentary action. So in the coming months, the party groupings must organise a kind of pre-election. It will be a novelty and each will do it in their own way. But one can expect the ultimate front-runners to be politicians with a fairly high profile. In the past, candidates for the presidency tried to keep a low profile so as not to make too many enemies. This time, things could be quite different because they will now be given a high profile during the 'pre-elections'.

If this plan goes ahead, it offers the prospect of some interesting debates. The front-runners of the main political groupings can take part in television debates that would be broadcast in every member state. The national leaders would then explain why the leader of their own particular grouping would be a suitable president of the European Commission. In Flanders therefore, a vote for the CD&V would also be a vote for the European Christian Democrats' presidential candidate. Whoever votes Sp.a would thereby support the candidate which the European Social Democrats had chosen as their front-runner. The European elections would in that way take on a much more 'European' character.

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In the meantime every party is buzzing with names; and yet it is still not entirely certain that things will proceed as planned. In the largest political grouping, the European People's Party, to which the CD&V belongs, a number of caveats can be heard. Political leaders like the German chancellor do not like the idea of being confronted by a diktat from the European Parliament. In other political groups, picking a front-runner could give rise to bitter internal feuding. However, most parties will certainly go ahead with the plan and the coming weeks will show whether the reluctant European People's Party will follow suit.

THE FLEMISH PARTIES

In Flanders, the election contest will probably be overshadowed by the Flemish and federal elections. The Flemish nationalist party N-VA (which is in the Flemish government, but in the opposition at the federal level) and the future of this country will be the central issues. But as well as that, there are plenty of interesting European issues for the Flemish parties to discuss.

The CD&V will play their traditional role in the centre. It will defend the European response to the crisis, which was drawn up by leaders like Christian Democrat Herman Van Rompuy, the President of the Council of Europe, and MEP Marianne Thyssen. It will defend solidarity, the setting up of emergency funding and the retrenchment programme. At the same time, it will emphasise that in future the EU must focus more on growth, but that it is far from easy to reach agreement with every country.

In recent years, leader of the European Liberal family in the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt,

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has frequently clashed with President Herman Van Rompuy. His criticisms are not so much an attack on the decisions reached by the EU (emergency funding, retrenchment) as on the delays in reaching those decisions and the fact that are inadequate. We can expect Verhofstadt to be again in fine voice during the election campaign arguing for a more ambitious EU, though it will not necessarily be entirely clear what we should expect from this more vigorous Europe of which he dreams. In the past, the Open VLD has defended a left-wing agenda on some levels (e.g. arguing for communal debt-management and Eurobonds) but when it comes to budgetary discipline its economic programme is right-wing.

The Social Democrats of the Sp.a and the Greens will be sharply critical of the choices made by Europe. They will target the cut-backs and the economic programme and emphasise their negative effects. They will argue for a stronger but also completely different approach which will highlight left-wing concerns: the EU must do more about unemployment and combating poverty. It will be difficult to detect any major differences between their programmes. However, an extreme left-wing party such as the PVDA+ is likely to go considerably further and even call into question European integration, the euro and the common market.

The extreme right Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest] has traditionally taken a critical course. It will probably criticise solidarity with states on the periphery as well as the common currency. Furthermore, they also dislike the EU's passion for regulation and its policy of expansion.

How right wing, Flemish nationalist N-VA politicians will conduct themselves in the debates on Europe is more difficult to predict. Europe is not the N-VA's central concern. In the past, MEP Frieda Brepoels was the European face of the N-VA. In the European Parliament she was a member of the same political grouping as the Greens and voted with them on most issues. She has now stepped down and the N-VA is preparing a full European programme. In this it will almost certainly argue that Flanders should have a greater voice in European affairs, but it is not yet clear what kind of Europe it has in mind. What will be the N-VA's attitude to emergency funding, and solidarity with the peripheral member states? Will it paint the EU, even more than in the past, as an instrument of torment which interferes in matters which should be left in Flemish hands? It is a real possibility, if only because it will have seen that such an approach has been electorally successful in other countries. N-VA politicians are happy to be seen in the company of British Conservatives who are also highly critical of European interference. If the N-VA chooses that route, it will be the first time in Flanders that a major party will defend a programme that argues not only for a different Europe, but for a manifestly diminished Europe.

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CONCLUSION

The European election in Flanders will be fought, as in the past, under the shadow of the Regional and Federal elections taking place on the same day. But there is a real chance that European issues will be taken more seriously than in the past. The eurocrisis has put the EU on the front pages and in Flanders the parties cannot agree on how the crisis should be dealt with. So now there is something to debate, which has not always been the case.

Moreover, other countries too are paying more attention to Europe. Parties that strongly reject European interference and want to be masters in their own house are doing very well. A recent Gallup poll suggests that in the next European Parliament the extremist and the eurosceptic parties will return in greatly increased numbers. Whether in Flanders, any parties apart from the extreme right Vlaams Belang will play a fully eurosceptic card remains to be seen. The N-VA might possibly use it to win the support of those who want less interference from the EU.

Finally one should keep an eye on the plans of the major European political groupings to select

in advance their candidate for the presidency of the European Commission. Whether they will all succeed is still unclear. One wonders how far it will feature in the discussions between the Flemish political parties. In any case it will be an interesting attempt to give the elections a more 'European' flavour.