

## Belgium

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Table 1. Cabinet composition of Verhofstadt III

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For the composition of Verhofstadt III on 1 January 2008, see Rihoux et al. (2008: 893).

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### Changes in Parliament

As a result of Herman Van Rompuy (CD&V) becoming Prime Minister, he was replaced as Speaker of the House of Representatives by Patrick Dewael (VLD, outgoing Deputy Prime Minister of the Leterme I Cabinet) in this position. This does not mathematically change the partisan balance in the House, but it does constitute a political loss for the CD&V.

### Institutional changes

According to a first agreement reached on 25 February, some complementary prerogatives are to be transferred from the federal government to the regions in the field of industrial policy and housing. The agreement also provisions new measures to strengthen interregional cooperation. In principle, the plan was to pass a second package of devolution changes before the summer recess, but this did not occur due to continuing disagreements on the matter.

### Cabinet report

The interim Verhofstadt III cabinet, which was formed in December 2007 (Rihoux et al. 2008: 897) was scheduled to last until no later than 23 March,

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Leterme I

A. <i>The party composition of Leterme I:</i> Date of investiture: 20 March 2008		
Party	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats	Number and percentage of cabinet posts*
<i>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams/Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie</i> – Christian-Democrat and Flemish/New Flemish Alliance (CD&V/NV-A), Flemish-speaking	30 (20.0)	6 (27.3)
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	23 (15.3)	5 (22.7)
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Flemish-speaking	18 (12.0)	4 (18.2)
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	20 (13.3)	5 (22.7)
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-speaking	10 (6.7)	2 (10.0)
B. <i>Cabinet members of Leterme I:</i>		
Prime Minister/ <i>Eerste minister/Premier ministre</i> : Y. Leterme (1960 male, CD&V)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Institutional Reforms/ <i>Vice-Premier ministre, Ministre des Finances et des Réformes institutionnelles</i> : D. Reynders (1958 male, MR)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health/ <i>Vice-Première ministre, Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique</i> : L. Onkelinx (1958 female, PS)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Home Affairs/ <i>Vice-Eerste Minister, Minister van Binnenlandse zaken</i> : P. Dewael (1955 male, Open VLD)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Institutional Reforms/ <i>Vice-Eerste Minister, Minister van Justitie en Institutionele Hervormingen</i> : J. Vandeuren (1958 male, CD&V)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Employment and Equal Opportunities/ <i>Vice-Première ministre, Ministre de l'Emploi et de l'Égalité des chances</i> : J. Milquet (1961 female, CDH)		
Minister of Foreign Affairs/ <i>Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken</i> : K. De Gucht (1954 male, Open VLD)		
Minister of Small and Medium-sized Companies, the Self-employed, Agriculture and Science Policy/ <i>Ministre des PME, des Indépendants, de l'Agriculture et de la Politique scientifique</i> : S. Laruelle (1965 female, MR)		
Minister of Social Integration, Pensions and Urban Policy/ <i>Ministre de l'Intégration sociale, des Pensions et des Grandes villes</i> : M. Arena (1966 female, PS)		

- Minister of Defence/Minister van Landsverdediging: P. De Crem (1962 male, CD&V)
- Minister of Climate and Energy/Ministre du Climat et de l'Énergie: P. Magnette (1971 male, PS)
- Minister of Development Cooperation/Ministre de la Coopération au développement: Ch. Michel (1975 male, MR)
- Minister of Civil Service and Public Companies/Minister van Ambtenarenzaken en Overheidsbedrijven: Inge Vervotte (1977 female, CD&V)
- Minister of Enterprise and Simplification/Minister voor Ondernemen en Vereenvoudigen: V. Van Quickenborne (1973 male, VLD)
- Minister of Migration and Asylum Policy/Minister van Migratie- en asielbeleid: A. Turtelboom (1967 female, VLD)
- The seven Secretaries of State are:
- Secretary of State of Mobility (attached to the Prime Minister)/Staatssecretaris voor Mobiliteit (toegevoegd aan de Eerste Minister): E. Schouppe (1942 male, CD&V)
- Secretary of State of the Coordination of the Struggle against Fraud (attached to the Prime Minister)/Staatssecretaris voor de Coördinatie van de fraudebestrijding (toegevoegd aan de Eerste Minister): C. Devlies (1953 male, CD&V)
- Secretary of State, adjunct to the Minister of Finance/Secrétaire d'Etat, adjoint au Ministre des Finances: B. Clerfayt (1961 male, MR)
- Secretary of State charged with the Preparation of the European Union Presidency (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/Secrétaire d'Etat chargé de la Préparation de la Présidence européenne (adjoint au Ministre des Affaires étrangères): O. Chastel (1964 male, MR)
- Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty (attached to the Minister of Social Integration, Pensions and Urban Policy)/Secrétaire d'Etat à la Lutte contre la pauvreté, (adjoint à la Ministre de l'Intégration sociale, des Pensions et des Grandes villes): F. Laloux (1969 male, PS) resigned on 20 April 2008 and was replaced by Jean-Marc Delizée (1959 male, PS)
- Secretary of State for the Disabled (attached to the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health)/Secrétaire d'Etat aux Personnes handicapées (adjointe à la Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique): J. Fernandez-Fernandez (1972 female, PS)
- Secretary of State of Budget (attached to the Prime Minister) and Secretary of State of Family Policy (attached to the Minister of Employment)/Secrétaire d'Etat au Budget (adjoint au Premier Ministre) et Secrétaire d'Etat à la Politique des familles (adjoint à la Ministre de l'Emploi): M. Wathelet (1977 male, CDH)

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Note: \* Including seven 'Secretaries of State' (deputy/junior ministers).

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Van Rompuy I

Party	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats	Number and percentage of cabinet posts*
<i>A. The party composition of Van Rompuy I:</i>		
Date of investiture: 30 December 2008		
<i>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams</i> – Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Flemish-speaking	23 (24.5)	6 (27.3)
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	23 (24.5)	5 (22.7)
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Flemish-speaking	18 (19.1)	4 (18.2)
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	20 (21.3)	5 (22.7)
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-speaking	10 (10.6)	2 (10.0)
<i>B. Cabinet members of Van Rompuy I:</i>		
Prime Minister/ <i>Eerste minister/Premier ministre</i> : H. Van Rompuy (1947 male, CD&V)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Institutional Reforms/ <i>Vice-Premier ministre, Ministre des Finances et des Réformes institutionnelles</i> : D. Reynders (1958 male, MR)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health/ <i>Vice-Première ministre, Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique</i> : L. Onkelinx (1958 female, PS)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs/ <i>Vice-Eerste Minister, Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken</i> : K. De Gucht (1954 male, Open VLD)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Civil Service, Public Companies and Institutional Reforms/ <i>Vice-Eerste Minister, Minister van Ambtenarenzaken, Overheidsbedrijven en Institutionele Hervormingen</i> : S. Vanackere (1964 male, CD&V)		
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Employment and Equal Opportunities/ <i>Vice-Première ministre, Ministre de l'Emploi et de l'Égalité des chances</i> : J. Milquet (1961 female, CDH)		
Minister of Justice/ <i>Minister van Justitie</i> : S. De Clercq (1951 male, CD&V)		
Minister of Small and Medium-sized Companies, the Self-employed, Agriculture and Science Policy/ <i>Ministre des PME, des Indépendants, de l'Agriculture et de la Politique scientifique</i> : S. Laruette (1965 female, MR)		
Minister of Social Integration, Pensions and Urban Policy/ <i>Ministre de l'Intégration sociale, des Pensions et des Grandes villes</i> : M. Arena (1966 female, PS)		
Minister of Defence/ <i>Minister van Landsverdediging</i> : P. De Crem (1962 male, CD&V)		

- Minister of Climate and Energy/*Ministre du Climat et de l'Énergie*: P. Magnette (1971 male, PS)
- Minister of Development Cooperation/*Ministre de la Coopération au développement*: Ch. Michel (1975 male, MR)
- Minister of Enterprise and Simplification/*Minister voor Ondernemen en Vereenvoudigen*: V. Van Quickenborne (1973 male, VLD)
- Minister of Migration and Asylum Policy/*Minister van Migratie- en asielbeleid*: A. Turtelboom (1967 female, VLD)
- Minister of Home Affairs/*Minister van Binnenlandse zaken*: G. De Padt (1954 male, Open VLD)
- The seven Secretaries of State are:
- Secretary of State of Mobility (attached to the Prime Minister)/*Staatssecretaris voor Mobiliteit (toegevoegd aan de Eerste Minister)*: E. Schouppe (1942 male, CD&V)
- Secretary of State of the Coordination of the Struggle against Fraud (attached to the Prime Minister)/*Staatssecretaris voor de Coördinatie van de fraudebestrijding (toegevoegd aan de Eerste Minister)*: C. Devlies (1953 male, CD&V)
- Secretary of State of the Modernisation of the Finance Department, of the Environmental Tax Policy and the Struggle against Tax Fraud (attached to the Minister of Finance)/*Secrétaire d'Etat à la Modernisation du Service public fédéral Finances, à la Fiscalité environnementale et à la Lutte contre la fraude fiscale (adjoint au Ministre des Finances)*: B. Clerfayt (1961 male, MR)
- Secretary of State charged with the Preparation of the European Union Presidency (attached to the Minister of Foreign Affairs)/*Secrétaire d'Etat chargé de la Préparation de la Présidence européenne (adjoint au Ministre des Affaires étrangères)*: O. Chastel (1964 male, MR)
- Secretary of State of the Disabled (attached to the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health)/*Secrétaire d'Etat aux Personnes handicapées (adjointe à la Ministre des Affaires sociales et de la Santé publique)*: J. Fernandez-Fernandez (1972 female, PS)
- Secretary of State of Budget (attached to the Prime Minister) and Secretary of State of Family Policy (attached to the Minister of Employment) and regarding aspects of Personal and Family Law (attached to the Minister of Justice)/*Secrétaire d'Etat au Budget (adjoint au Premier Ministre) et Secrétaire d'Etat à la Politique des familles (adjoint à la Ministre de l'Emploi) et en ce qui concerne les aspects du droit des personnes et de la famille (adjoint au Ministre de la Justice)*: M. Wathelet (1977 male, CDH)
- Secretary of State of Struggle against Poverty (attached to the Minister of Social Integration, Pensions and Urban Policy)/*Secrétaire d'Etat à la Lutte contre la pauvreté (adjoint à la Ministre de l'Intégration sociale, des Pensions et des Grandes villes)*: J.-M. Delizée (1959 male, PS)

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Note: \* Including seven 'Secretaries of State' (deputy/junior ministers).

when Leterme was to take office as Prime Minister, hopefully putting to an end almost a year of stalemate after the 10 June 2007 elections. The talks were difficult; even more so because Leterme was suddenly hospitalised for several days in February. Eventually, a governmental agreement was reached after a full night of negotiations on 18 March. Basically, each of the five partners was able to put its stamp on the agreement between a broad coalition that, because it contained both liberal parties (Open VLD and MR), both Christian democratic parties (CD&V and CdH) and the French-speaking socialists (PS), encompassed diverging ideological positions.

The Leterme I Cabinet was sworn in on 20 March. It kept the essential balance between its five constituent parties, with a few name changes in ministerial and deputy ministerial positions. The fact that Marie Arena (PS) left her position as Minister-president of the Government of the French-speaking Community to become Minister in the Leterme I Cabinet did, however, have a more important impact: she was replaced in her position by Rudy Demotte (PS) who had been Minister-president of the Walloon Region since 2007, which meant that, for the first time, these two leading francophone executive positions were held by the same person. This is in line with the willingness of many Walloon politicians to bring the overlapping territory-based federal entity of the Walloon Region closer to the language-based federal entity of the French-speaking Community. The rationale is also to create a strong French-speaking pole able to counterbalance the Flemish pole created by the merger of the Flemish Community and the Flemish Region in the early 1980s.

One of the first deals passed by the new Cabinet was to agree on a set of limited complementary institutional reforms (see previous section). However, the whole political year remained overwhelmingly characterised – if not paralysed – by the centrifugal tensions (both in party political terms and in Flemish- versus French-speaking terms) that undermined the federal cabinet, and indeed the functioning of the Belgian federal system. By June/July, it became obvious that Leterme would not manage to reach an agreement on a more ambitious ‘second package’ of devolution of prerogatives to the regions (which the CD&V had promised in its 2007 campaign, in cartel with the NV-A) – not least because of the continuous pressure by the Flemish radicals of the NV-A.

On 14 July, Leterme submitted his resignation to the King, who rejected it and instead installed a committee of three ‘royal mediators’: François-Xavier de Donnea, Raymond Langendries and Karl-Heinz Lambertz. All had occupied high political positions at the federal, regional or community levels, and none of them was a Fleming (one was a Bruxellois, one a Walloon and one a German-speaker). Their task was to ‘examine how guarantees could be offered

so as to engage in a credible institutional dialogue'. Basically, this was a way of helping Leterme I to buy some time. Eventually the mediators presented a report to the King on 19 September that basically concluded that full negotiations should be held between June 2009 and June 2010. Three days later, the radical Flemish NV-A broke its arrangement with the CD&V, thereby further weakening Leterme's position as he had been the main person behind the formation of this alliance (Rihoux et al. 2008: 892–893).

The tensions were further reinforced by 'Fortisgate', which was eventually fatal to the Leterme I Cabinet. On 26 September, the share price of Fortis (the country's largest bank and financial group) collapsed. Despite its management's claims to the contrary, the Fortis banking group had major holdings of subprime securities on its books. In 2007, Fortis embarked on a massive recapitalisation effort to finance the takeover of the Dutch ABN Amro bank. This takeover and the bank's exposure to the subprime sector were the cause of this crisis. In an attempt to solve the crisis, the Leterme Cabinet agreed to sell off activities of the banking holding company without seeking the advice of its shareholders. A sizable number of small shareholders united to bring their case before the Brussels Commercial Court, but their case was rejected on 18 November. However, on 12 December the Brussels Court of Appeal vindicated their approach and suspended the sell-off and eventual sale of the Fortis group. As it turned out, the Leterme Cabinet had attempted to exert pressure on high magistrates, both at the Commercial Court and at the Court of Appeal.

This led to the resignations of Minister of Justice Jo Vandeurzen (CD&V) and Prime Minister Leterme, and to the resignation of the Cabinet. These were presented to the King on 19 December, and the resignations were accepted by him on 22 December. On the same day, he nominated Wilfried Martens (CD&V, former Prime Minister in the 1980s) as 'explorer'. Martens quickly found a solution, especially within the CD&V, and by 29 December Herman Van Rompuy accepted the invitation to become 'formateur'. Van Rompuy, Speaker of the House of Representatives after the 2007 elections, was a well-respected figure on both the Flemish and the Francophone sides, and had been involved in many previous community and institutional negotiations in the last two decades. The next day, on 30 December, he formally announced the composition of the new cabinet.

The new cabinet preserved the party composition of Leterme I, with basically the same balance of portfolios (albeit with a few changes in ministerial personnel), and with the CD&V keeping the prime ministerial position. In spite of his involvement in Fortisgate, Minister of Finance Didier Reynders (MR) also kept his position. The government was given a vote of confidence by the Chamber of Representatives on 2 January 2009.

## Issues in national politics

The party system in 2008 became more fragmented than ever due to changes on the Flemish side. First, two electoral alliances broke up in spite of the risk for the smaller partners that they would not pass the electoral threshold of 5 per cent – the root cause for forming these alliances in 2003–2004. The alliance between the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the conservative Flemish separatists (NV-A) broke up on 22 September because the NV-A could not accept the willingness of the CD&V to start another round of negotiations on state reform with the francophone parties without strong guarantees. During the long and difficult federal government formation in 2007 (Rihoux et al. 2008: 895–897), the NV-A vetoed agreements that Flemish and francophone parties reached; it now wanted to torpedo yet another compromise. This time the CD&V resisted this blackmail and ejected the NV-A from the Flemish government. The break disappointed most of the CD&V rank-and-file, who had radicalised their Flemish positions during the five years the alliance lasted. Hence, as surveys showed, from being the CD&V's close ally, the NV-A now became its main electoral competitor.

In addition, the alliance between the Flemish socialists (SP.a) and the progressive Flemish nationalists VL.Pro (former SPIRIT rebaptised as Vlaamse Progressieven in April 2008) broke up. After the disappointing results of the alliance at the 2007 general elections and a further decline in the polls, tensions had been building up, not least because the SP.a could not repeat its generous offers of eligible places on the alliance lists. The incumbent party president, Bettina Geysen, resigned in November after publication of excessive expenses declarations in her previous job as manager of public television. She was replaced in December by Senator Geert Lambert. Soon after, the party's historic leader, Flemish Minister Bert Anciaux, decided unexpectedly to join the SP.a, followed by several Flemish MPs. VL.Pro decided to continue as an independent party, now rebaptised as SLP (Sociaal-Liberale Partij) and led by Lambert. The defection of Anciaux to the SP.a created considerable resistance within the rank-and-file of the latter, as Anciaux pushed to change the Socialistische Partij-Anders into Sociaal-Progressief-Alternatief. Several former party leaders argued against dropping the reference to 'socialism' (a course of action that had not been submitted for endorsement to a party congress), which further undermined the authority of the young party president, Caroline Gennez, and her party's score in the polls.

The Flemish liberals' (Open VLD) main challenge was the rise of a populist-liberal dissident party, Lijst De Decker. The LDD and its leader Jean-Marie De Decker surged in the polls. He managed to create a relatively solid party organisation. His populist stance also seduced a significant share of



the electorate of the Vlaams Belang, which may as a result suffer its second major defeat in 2009. In order to soften its aggressive image, the VB elites produced a new party leader, Bruno Valckeniers (to replace Frank Vanhecke, the party leader since 1996). This outsider could not prevent the publication of many stories about internal conflicts between different factions and party leaders, while hitherto the party had always managed to maintain an image of cohesive collective leadership.

The Flemish greens (Groen!) did not manage to exploit their opposition role vis-à-vis the Flemish and federal government, but surveys indicated that they stayed well above the 5 per cent electoral threshold danger zone.

Compared to the Flemish parties, the Francophone parties did not undergo strong internal changes. Only within the MR (a federation between Liberals, the FDF and dissident Christian Democrats) were there structural tensions. The FDF leader Olivier Maingain sometimes managed to contest the party president's (Reynders) decisions, but only regarding ethno-linguistic issues. The Socialists (PS) did not plan any structural changes in spite of a repetition of political scandals involving senior PS officers (see below). In all polls, the francophone greens (ECOLO) began to soar spectacularly, profiting as sole francophone opposition party from the unpopularity of the incumbent federal government. The new co-presidents (Isabelle Durant and Jean-Michel Javaux) further professionalised the party's communication, managed to keep ideological disputes under control and prepared the party for future government participation.

In terms of substantive topics, the main issue on the political agenda (as in most other countries) was the financial and economic downturn, which hit all regions of the country – particularly affluent Flanders, which relies a lot on multinationals and export-gearred, high-tech industry, as well as highly capital-intensive economic activities.

In addition to being a year of financial instability, 2008 was also notable for jumps in inflation. In July, it peaked at 5.91 per cent only to drop to 2.63 per cent in December. Towards the second part of the year, all economic indicators (growth, employment, etc.) turned severely negative, with even more negative expectations for 2009. Nevertheless, a collective bargaining agreement was signed on 22 December, with both employers and labour representatives agreeing to compromises in terms of wage increases, minimum guaranteed wages and work flexibility.

On the judicial front, the Charleroi 'soap-opera affairs' and the political-financial scandals involving the local PS carried on – this time involving the municipal cooperative in charge of waste collection and disposal. In Huy, another Walloon city, Mayor Anne-Marie Lizin (PS) stood accused of misappropriating funds.

On the security front, Bertrand Sassoïe, a former member of the CCC (Communist Fighting Cells), the terrorist organisation of the mid-1980s, was arrested on 5 June together with Wahoub Fayoumi, a journalist for the RTBF (the French-speaking television station) and two other people. The latter three were released a few days later, but not Sassoïe, who is still regarded as highly suspect by the Belgian police authorities. Eventually, the examining magistrate ordered on 29 July what is called a ‘*mainlevée*’ – an exceptional release procedure precluding any appeal from the Public Prosecutor’s Office.

Finally, the issue of undocumented immigrants continued to cause some political tensions and demonstrations, as the implementation of the cabinet agreement of March 2008 concerning a regularisation programme for undocumented immigrants failed to occur. In this context, the Belgian state, which was already condemned twice (in 2002 and 2006) by the European Court of Human Rights for ill-treatment of refugees, was condemned again in 2008.

## Sources and further information

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### *On the Internet:*

- Belgian Federal Portal: [www.belgium.be/en/index.jsp](http://www.belgium.be/en/index.jsp) [global official portal for Belgium]
- Detailed electoral results: [www.ibz.rrn.fgov.be/index.php?id=4&L=0](http://www.ibz.rrn.fgov.be/index.php?id=4&L=0) [official results, all elections]
- See also, on many specific institutional and political topics, the well-documented analyses in the weekly publications of the *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* catalogue: [www.crisp.be/catalogue/](http://www.crisp.be/catalogue/)