



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Belgian elections focus on how to deal with the far-right



One of the more startling election billboards that can be seen around Brussels these days certainly belongs to the far-right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang, or Flemish Interest.

The party's local slogan, loosely translating as Our Brussels Again, raises more questions than it answers, certainly for the predominantly Francophone population of the Belgian capital. It does, however, set out the far-right's ambitions for the upcoming elections.

Vlaams Belang, which is beyond the pale for other major Belgian parties who condemn it as extremist, has reasons to be cocky.

Belgian **opinion polls** consistently show it coming out on top in the Flemish region when the country votes on 9 June, not only for the European Parliament but also for the federal and powerful regional assemblies.

Vlaams Belang is set to replace another Flemish nationalist but slightly more centrist party, New Flemish Alliance, N-VA, as the dominant political force in the region. The result could have far-reaching consequences for Belgian unity and underscores the rightward drift in much of Europe.

## Two parts of the country diametrically opposed

For the first time, Belgium could be faced with a right-wing Flemish nationalist, anti-immigrant and relatively Eurosceptic majority in its important Dutch-speaking region. In the French-speaking Walloon region, on the other hand, the longtime dominant social democratic PS party is facing a challenge from a more left-wing Workers' Party.

Thus, the two parts of the country could end up diametrically opposed on issues such as migration, ceding more powers and money to the regions and European cooperation.

**The far-right Vlaams Belang will significantly improve its position**

But it's early days and Belgian federal coalition negotiations are usually complex and lengthy. One thing, though, seems certain, if opinion polls are not wildly inaccurate, the far-right Vlaams Belang will significantly improve its position. The way other Belgian parties deal with this will determine the country's politics and could be felt around Europe.

The Our Brussels Again slogan mirrors Vlaams Belang's Our Flanders Again election billboards that can be found around the Flemish countryside. In the Flemish region this can work on multiple levels.

First, it serves as a not-so-subtle anti-migration dog-whistle. Second, it clearly references the nationalists' desire to take power 'back', both from the federal government in Brussels and from the European Union.

In cosmopolitan Brussels, though, with its own separate assembly and its French-speaking majority, the slogan sounds more like a provocation than an election promise.

## The cordon sanitaire

Economic and political divergences exist on top of the long-standing language divide in the country. The Flemish region is significantly better off than the Walloon region and both Flemish nationalist parties, Vlaams Belang and N-VA resent 'subsidising' the Walloons.

They also both want more freedom to set their own rules. For the N-VA this means calling for a confederate system, while Vlaams Belang aims for full independence.

The Flemish region has steadily drifted more to the right, with the N-VA winning elections since 2010 and in this cycle the far-right Vlaams Belang possibly being ascendent.

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In the Walloon region, the social-democratic PS has been long dominant. The power of the PS in Belgian politics is seen as a potential reason for the two Flemish nationalist parties to start cooperating and form a joint Flemish regional government after the elections on 9 June.

That is why one of the main questions this year has been whether the ban on cooperation with Vlaams Belang, the so-called cordon sanitaire that all parties, on both side of the language divide, have maintained, will survive if that party wins the Flemish elections.

N-VA, faced with not being the dominant party in the Flemish region for the first time in more than a decade, had appeared to waver. But mid-May, Bart de Wever, the party leader and popular mayor of Antwerp, put an end to the speculation with a “downright no” to the question of whether he’d consider joining a Vlaams Belang government.

De Wever, speaking on national tv, was singularly empathic in his rejection, giving voters a clear distinction between his nationalist party and the far-right: “I hardly agree on anything with that party. I don’t like their style either.”

## The Belgian example

The N-VA’s leader’s step is particularly significant in the light of developments in Belgium’s northern neighbour, the Netherlands, where far-right firebrand Geert Wilders has managed to forge a coalition agreement with three more centrist parties.

His far-right PVV’s win in the Dutch elections

last November and its progression towards leading a government have been watched in Belgium with a mix of dread and anticipation. It was seen as a possible path for Vlaams Belang to follow.

In the Dutch campaign, the then governing liberal-conservative VVD party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte remained on the fence about whether it would cooperate with Wilders if he came out on top. The VVD also tried to match his anti-immigrant rhetoric.



*The importance that Belgium’s political class attaches to the cordon sanitaire, as opposed to the Dutch collaborationist approach, might determine the next government, both on a regional and federal level - Belgian Parliament*

Both moves are now widely seen as tactical mistakes that **cleared the way** for Wilders as it gave him legitimacy and also erased the distinction between the centre- and far-right.

De Wever, despite his party lagging badly behind Vlaams Belang, has clearly decided to take a different approach.

The importance that Belgium’s political class attaches to the cordon sanitaire, as opposed to the Dutch collaborationist approach, might determine the next government, both on a regional and federal level.

N-VA, despite losing votes, is making a clear play to be included in both. It will hope to wrench concessions from the Walloon parties and others on granting the Flemish region more autonomy as a means of countering the rise of a far-right, secessionist Vlaams Belang.

On a European level, where the far right is also expected to make gains, not just in Belgium and the Netherlands but also in bigger member states such as France and Germany, the Belgian example of a cordon sanitaire could become significant too.

The leader of the Liberal Renew faction in the European Parliament earlier this month hinted at a move to expel the Dutch VVD from its ranks for breaking the cordon sanitaire. Flemish liberal leader Hilde Vautmans commented: “As liberals, we don’t believe that governing with extremists will benefit the welfare and freedom of our citizens.”