

# EU-28 WATCH

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# EU-28 Watch

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## On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: [www.EU-28Watch.org](http://www.EU-28Watch.org).

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## Editorial Team

Publisher: Prof. Dr. Mathias Jopp  
Executive Editor: Dr. Katrin Böttger  
Managing Editors: Nicole Koenig, Marco Siddi  
Editorial: Joris von Moltke  
Layout: Juliane Eichblatt

Contact: [info@EU-28watch.org](mailto:info@EU-28watch.org)  
[www.EU-28watch.org](http://www.EU-28watch.org)

Institut für  
Europäische Politik  
Bundesallee 23  
D-10717 Berlin  
Tel.: +49/30/88.91.34-0  
Fax: +49/30/88.91.34-99  
E-mail: [info@iep-berlin.de](mailto:info@iep-berlin.de)  
Internet: [www.iep-berlin.de](http://www.iep-berlin.de)

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## Belgium

Clément Jadot and Camille Kelbel

Centre d'étude de la vie politique (CEVIPOL)

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### 1. Euroscepticism and European Parliament elections

*Europe: out of sight, but not out of mind*

Although largely receptive to the EU, Belgium's political landscape does not present a unified pro-European front and some differences deserve to be highlighted. At least three different potential debates coexist in Belgium. Firstly, parties tend to adopt different positions on the founding values of European identity. While some parties such as populist and far-right parties are more likely to adopt culturally exclusive criteria, others defend broader liberal values. Secondly, Belgian parties disagree about the institutional framework of the EU, and the degree of sovereignty they want to share with the European level. Thirdly, the choices made and the public policies enacted by the EU also lead to different reactions among parties depending on their respective ideologies. Accordingly, over the past years, the attention of parties in Belgium was first and foremost focused on European economic governance and the Euro-zone crisis management. In this regard, the situation has not really changed since the 2009 elections, although some parties tend to adopt a tougher tone on the topic. This is the case for instance for the French-speaking Socialist Party (PS), which has strongly criticised the budgetary control prerogatives of the Commission, or both of the Green parties (ECOLO and Groen), which have rejected the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) at the federal level.

If not overly salient, the campaign for the EU Commission Presidency was quite widely relayed by the media in Belgium, essentially for two reasons. First, being the capital of Europe, Brussels was at the heart of the campaign, at least at the beginning. Second, media's attention was also driven by the fact that one of the candidates, Guy Verhofstadt, is a former Prime Minister of the country. Notwithstanding that the election of a new European Parliament will also be followed by the designation of a new President of the European Council to replace Herman Van Rompuy, also a former Belgian Prime minister.

*Far away from hard Euroscepticism*

Both from a citizens' and an elite's perspective, Belgium is a pioneer of the European integration process. As repeatedly shown by Eurobarometer surveys, a large majority of the Belgian population supports the EU with a score consistently above EU average. Similarly, European Treaty ratifications were never really challenged by political parties. Up to now, the largest divide within the national parliament concerned the European Defence Community Treaty back in the 1950s, with 'only' 75.5 percent of Belgian MPs supporting it.

Historically, objective reasons explain Belgium's favourable stance towards Europe. Its open economy, locked between France and Germany, suggests that the country is largely benefiting from common rules at the EU level. Belgium is also a small country with no strong stand or pretension at the international level. After the failure of its 'neutrality' policy in the two world wars, it resolutely engaged itself in the transatlantic multilateral defence strategy. Furthermore, at the national level, there is no strong sense of national belonging.

Over the past two decades, Euroscepticism was first and foremost expressed by the *Vlaams Belang*, the Flemish main far-right party, although speaking of "hard" Euroscepticism was not obvious

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(Deschouwer, Van Assche). In Belgium, even EU opponents seem to recognize the positive effects of integration. In addition, the latest elections have proved very unfavourable to the *Vlaams Belang*, as it had already been the case a few years ago for the *Lijst Dedecker*, the Flemish Populist Party. Hence, despite a slight increase of radical left and populist parties in the south of the country, Euroscepticism in Belgium is probably at its lowest in many years.

#### *European elections: between 'super-poll' and compulsory voting*

Compared to other member states, European elections in Belgium do not well accommodate the concept of 'second-order national elections' as generally accepted. Turnout is very high due to the fact that voting is compulsory (around 90 percent for the 2014 elections of the European Parliament). The federal state is organised at different and sometimes imbricated levels of power, which makes protest voting hard to construe. Indeed, in Belgium, different governments coexist at the regional and national levels, while often formed by different coalitions of parties. Moreover, no clear shift of voters towards small and/or radical political parties can be observed between national and European elections. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that Europe is rarely at the top of the political agenda and that the general consensus around European issues greatly limits its coverage by the Belgian media. Furthermore, in 2014, the decision to hold the federal, regional and European elections on the same day made the election to the European Parliament even less visible to a majority of the Belgian people, as most media and political attention has been drawn away by the other two contests.

#### Links:

- Karlheinz Reif, Herman Schmitt, '[Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results](#)', March 1980
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## **2. The EU's Neighbourhood**

### *Small brother is watching you!*

Although Belgium's open economy is first and foremost oriented towards other EU member states, Belgium has built strong economic relations with third countries, among which Russia occupies an important place. More specifically, because of its prominent weight in some particular sectors such as chemical products or equipment and manufactured goods, Russia is often seen as an economic partner that cannot be overlooked. The strategic significance of trade between Belgium and Russia was, for instance, highlighted by a visit of King Philippe, at that time Prince of Belgium, together with an outstanding delegation of Belgian entrepreneurs in 2011. Nonetheless, in spite of this trading potential, political relations between Russia and Belgium remain puzzling. The country is regularly criticised by Belgian political elites for its lack of democratic accountability and for its foreign policy at the European borders or during international crises such as in Syria. Most of the criticisms tend also to be directed towards Vladimir Putin and what is often considered as an authoritarian rule. However, Belgium, being a small country without strong ambitions on the international scene, mostly relies on the EU level to settle international political issues. In comparison to some other EU countries, Belgian energy dependence on Russia is rather limited, which tends to limit the saliency of the debate.

### *Going with the EU flow*

Belgium has unanimously condemned Russia for its interference in the Ukrainian crisis. Overall, it supports a common line oriented towards more political solutions and mutual dialogue between the Ukrainian peoples and, indirectly, between Europe and Russia. In general, the Belgian political landscape tends to be rather unified on international issues and, regarding events in Ukraine, all the major parties have accepted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' line of incremental sanctions as negotiated at the EU level. Within the parliament, different points of view were nonetheless raised on the possibility of adopting economic sanctions towards Russia. While it is globally accepted that sanctions should be careful enough not to lead to a backfiring on Ukrainian citizens' and Europe's interests, both the N-VA (Flemish nationalists) and the Open-VLD (Flemish liberals) expressed their willingness to adopt strong sanctions. This was also the position of Green parties, although to a lesser extent.

#### *Turkey in the EU: Yes, but...*

The debate over Turkey's accession to the EU has largely faded away in recent years - and somewhat unsurprisingly so, given the relative stepping back of Turkey itself. Although the issue had never been as salient as in other EU member states (such as France or Germany), the position of individual parties, of the government and of public opinion deserves renewed attention. The official position of the government and of mainstream parties has almost always been that of favouring negotiations. Albeit insisting on the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and adding to them the need to insure the integration capacity of the EU, no mainstream Belgian party is openly against the accession prospect. More in-depth accounts suggest that the green and liberal party families have probably shown the most enthusiasm. In addition, it should be mentioned that the two current leading parties in Flanders, the N-VA and the CD&V do not oppose accession of Turkey as such, although the former has taken a more general stand on the need to stop EU enlargement in general. Finally, only the main far-right parties (*Lijst Dedecker*, *Vlaams Belang* and *Parti Populaire*) have openly discarded the accession to Turkey on grounds of identity, or in other words of the often-mentioned lack of European vocation of the Anatolian peninsula. Their stronghold on the issue might also be one factor having impacted the currently rather discrete stand of other parties and actors.

### **3. Power relations in the EU**

#### *German bandwagoning?*

As a first note, it should be highlighted that Germany remains one of the main economic and political partners of Belgium. In 2012, Germany was the uncontested first destination of Belgian exports worldwide, closely followed by France and the Netherlands. Belgium's exports to Germany amounted to EUR 60.5 billion that year. At the same time, Germany ranked second in terms of supply to Belgium. The country's share in Belgium's total imports of goods amounted to 14.1 percent (Agence pour le commerce belge). Although Belgium's closest political partners remain the other two Benelux countries, in particular because a more balanced relationship is possible, Germany as EC founding member also constitutes one of its privileged allies. The proximity of the two countries' political systems is often cited, all the more in a context of uncertainty surrounding the nature and future of the EU, and in particular the notion of "federalism". In 2014, commemorations of the hundredth anniversary of WWI have drawn considerable media and public attention to the Belgo-German relations. In addition, important cultural links persist in particular through the German-speaking community in Belgium's Eastern cantons (and given the fact that German is one of the country's three official languages).

The position of Belgium on Germany's role has largely been developed in response to economic and financial measures that have been often-attributed to and embedded by the latter. On the one hand, as part of 'Northern Eurozone', Belgium has occasionally been associated with measures imposed

upon 'Southern members'. On the other hand, austerity measures - and in particular those imposing stricter conditions on those member states receiving financial assistance - have led to protests among left-wing parties and movements within Belgium, most blatantly in the period surrounding debates on the so-called Fiscal Compact or Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG).

Along the same line, pressures have further come from the Socialist Party (PS) which has demanded adjustments to what it considers as austerity measures put forward by Merkel's Germany. Belgian Socialist Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo has notably called on the German Chancellor not to interfere in the economic policy of the country, insisting that each member state should decide on how to reach the stability objectives that have been set in common. While Berlin often denounced the Belgian system of income indexation and other social benefits, Prime Minister Di Rupo sees it as a 'social tradition' of the country, which should not be questioned as such. In his view, Europe does not need to take inspiration from a single social model such as the German one, but rather develop its own European model backed-up by the then 27 member states.

*"A Belgian always pays his debts"*

In addition to above-mentioned positions, which largely revolve around the austerity debate and the role of Germany therein, the position of individual Belgian parties and actors deserve further attention. As a first note, it should be underlined that debt reduction has constituted one of the top-priorities of the Belgian government over the past two decades. That being said, criticisms of individual actors towards the EU have tended to put 'austerity' measures at the centre of their grievance. This holds in particular for Paul Magnette, who, as president of the Parti Socialiste (PS), has proved quite vehement against austerity measures, an endeavour largely backed up by the PS's Flemish 'sister party' - the Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a). In the context of an increased saliency of EU issues, including economic issues for public opinion, political parties seem to have devoted increased attention to the EU policies to combat the crisis. Interestingly, these opinions diverge substantially, with economically right-wing parties generally supporting the monetarist austerity policies, and by contrast, left-wing parties being vehemently opposed to them. This has sometimes been seen as a main breaking point in the pro-European consensus among Belgian parties as well as a major starting point from which parties have more systematically elaborated positions on EU issues. In short, the austerity v. growth debate has largely impacted party competition in Belgium, and could mark the end of a pro-European consensus based mainly on indifference.

The process of ratification of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG) constitutes a more concrete and revelatory case in the debate. It has been the object of intense negotiations and largely revealed opposing visions in Belgium. The ratification process has been particularly slow, which is at least partly attributable to the complexity of the Belgian political system (ratification involves the various state assemblies, including both houses at the federal level, the regional parliaments in Wallonia and Brussels, the Flemish parliament, and the parliaments of the French-speaking and German-speaking communities). In fact, the treaty automatically entered into force following a majority of Eurozone member states' ratification, before the Belgian ratification could be settled. Along with far-right parties, although on very different grounds, the Belgian Greens have arguably raised the most criticisms against the Treaty out of fear that it could trigger even more anti-social and austerity policies. This appeared as particularly problematic at the time since the French-speaking green party ECOLO was also, as member of coalitions at the regional level, taking part in executives which had to adhere to the fiscal stability treaty. In the end, both green parties - ECOLO and Groen! - voted against the ratification in the federal lower Chamber, while ECOLO did support it in the regional Parliament in Wallonia. The debate has accordingly been postponed until concrete applications of the TSCG - including legislative transpositions - pave the way for intense discussions on eventual limitations.



### *'L'Europe à la carte?' Not on the Belgian menu*

Political actors have extensively responded to the UK exit possibility as formulated by British Prime Minister David Cameron. Didier Reynders, the liberal Belgian Foreign Minister, has rejected any possibility of *à la carte* Europe, which appears in line with most other EU governments. At the same time, he acknowledged relevant points underlined by the UK government including the issue of the EU's democratic legitimacy. Former Belgian Prime Minister and head of the liberal group in the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt denounced the risks posed to the single market by eventual renegotiations for the convenience of only one member, or, more generally, unilateral claims to treaty adjustment.

Economic actors, first and foremost the *Fédération des entreprises de Belgique* (FEB, the federation of Belgian companies), have quickly warned against such exit as a threat to Belgian trade. The share of the country in Belgium's total exports of goods currently amounts to 6.5 percent. They do not only fear that if the UK leaves the EU, rules and norms enacted might negatively affect exchanges, but also indirectly that other countries might follow in asking for special treatment, leading *in fine* to a fractioning of the single market. The same goes for the main Belgian employers' association, which has voiced the wish to support the UK government in possible EU reform negotiations so that the latter would obtain the best possible deal and refrain from an exit.

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