

Almost five months after the parliamentary elections last June, there is still no new government in sight in Belgium. Bart De Wever, leader of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and entrusted by King Philippe with forming a government, has now asked the head of state to relieve him of his duties for the second time since the end of August. Once again, the King has rejected this request and asked De Wever to try to prepare the ground for a solution by Tuesday of next week.

One thing seems certain: the chances of the so-called Arizona government consisting of the N-VA, the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), the French-speaking centre party "Les Engagés", the French-speaking Liberals (MR) and the Flemish Socialists (Vooruit) becoming a reality have diminished considerably. While MR leader Georges-Louis Bouchez had rejected De Wever's ideas as a basis for negotiations in August, Vooruit leader Conner Rousseau has now put his foot down. While Bouchez demanded more consideration for the wealthy at the time, Rousseau, in contrast, is now accusing De Wever of wanting to go easy on the "super-rich" and multinational corporations.

It is not without a certain irony that Rousseau is now rejecting a basis for negotiation that he had accepted in the summer - considerations in largely identical form. However, the Vooruit chairman is now arguing that De Wever has not made concessions to the socialists and that he therefore cannot accept De Wever's package of proposals, which he perceives as right-wing, as a basis for further talks.

Rousseau made harsh accusations in an interview with the Flemish television station VRT. Rousseau said that his party was prepared to take responsibility, but then added: "if the content is right and the burden is shared fairly." The party leader particularly criticised De Wever's plans to limit traditional unemployment benefits to two years and the planned cuts to the system of linking wages and salaries to the inflation rate. "We feel pushed out. The conditions are not right," said Rousseau.

MR boss Bouchez recently added fuel to the fire with the accusation that Rousseau had "mised" the other negotiating partners. The Vooruit boss told the VRT: "If only Bart De Wever and I had been at the table, we would have had a government long ago." It is the relationship of trust between De Wever and Rousseau, which has existed for several years, on which the hopes are based that the porcelain that has been smashed in recent weeks in the talks about the "Arizona" alliance can still be mended. The fact that the N-VA and Vooruit have formed alliances in Antwerp and other Flemish cities could be seen as a sign of hope. On the other hand, it has recently become clear in Ghent, where the majority of the Vooruit party base rejected a coalition with the N-VA, that there are still considerable reservations among the socialists against a too close alliance with the Flemish nationalists.

There is already speculation in the Belgian media about other possible alliances. The option of replacing the Socialists with the Flemish Liberals (Open VLD) seems politically obvious. However, the new government would then only be able to rely on a wafer-thin majority of 76 of the 150 parliamentary seats. In addition, the party of the current caretaker Prime Minister Alexander De Croo was so badly punished in the parliamentary elections in June that it would be difficult to convince the Flemish Liberals, the only party to have been in power for a quarter of a century without interruption, to return to government.

In purely mathematical terms, a six-party alliance of Liberals and Socialists from both parts of the country as well as CD&V and "Les Engagés" would have a comfortable majority of 81 seats. However, the French-speaking Socialists (PS), who were forced out of government in the Walloon region by an alliance of MR and "Les Engagés" after the recent regional elections, are also clearly in opposition in the federal parliament. In addition, the relationship between Bouchez and PS party leader Paul Magnette now appears so fractured that an alliance between the two parties seems out of the question.

De Wever still has a week to sound out the possibilities for a government under his leadership. However, "Les Engagés" party leader Maxime Prévot, who was able to calm the waves in the "Arizona" camp in the summer, may also be given a second chance in the coming week. The record for the duration of government formation in Belgium is still 541 days. De Wever and the other top Belgian politicians are still a long way off that. But this week, the mark of 150 days without a fully functioning government will be broken - at a time when it is not only the European Commission that is keeping a wary eye on Belgium because of its out-of-control public finances.

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