

Why forming a government in Brussels is so difficult - is the language

By Reinhard Boest

While at the federal level in Belgium, the potential partners in the "Arizona coalition" are still hoping to reach the finish line before Christmas, negotiations on a new regional government in Brussels are at a complete standstill. Six months after the regional elections and two months after the local elections in the 19 Brussels municipalities, the light at the end of the tunnel seems more distant than ever (and this time we are not talking about the tunnel of metro line 3).

Instead of negotiations on politics: the language issue is back

Although the region's financial situation is disastrous and the growing mountain of debt currently amounts to 22 billion euros, the dispute is not about where to make savings or where else to find money. Nor is it about important projects for the region. They haven't even got that far into negotiations yet. Instead, we are seeing the return of fundamental conflicts that were thought to have been overcome since the founding of the Brussels-Capital Region in 1989: the "community issue" - i.e. the dispute between Dutch speakers and Francophones.

It is now becoming clear how imperfect and impractical the compromise on which the institutions and procedures with which the Capital Region has to work are based is. This is particularly true when elections lead to fragmented parliaments in which it is increasingly difficult to form majorities, even in "normal" times and despite the Belgians' reputed special ability to compromise.

Brussels-Capital Region: late and imperfect

The first of six state reforms in 1970 provided for the creation of three regions in Belgium: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. But it was not until ten years later, with the second state reform in 1980, that the regions of Flanders and Wallonia became capable of taking action, including the transfer of responsibilities for finance and a number of other policy areas from the federal level. It took almost another decade before agreement was finally reached on the rules according to which the Brussels Region was to function; until 1989, the "agglomeration" was administered by a three-member college of ministers responsible to the federal parliament (there was no regional parliament as yet).

The Flemish in particular resisted giving Brussels the status of a fully-fledged region for a long time. This was not least due to the fear that their language would then no longer play a role in the region. Until the 19th century, "Brabants" or "Brabançon", a Dutch dialect, was the colloquial language. Since the foundation of the Belgian state in 1830 with Brussels as the capital, this was increasingly replaced by French - which also became the official, judicial and military language. The establishment of European institutions and the political headquarters of NATO also fuelled this process. Today, French is undoubtedly the lingua franca in Brussels.

Language regime in Brussels: too much protection for Dutch?

A key feature of the statute that the Brussels-Capital Region received as a result of the third state reform in 1988 is therefore the institutional safeguarding of bilingualism, as was already established in 1963 when the language borders were drawn. The corresponding law of January 1989 therefore provides for fixed quotas for the two language groups for both the parliament and the government. Of the 89 members of parliament, 72 are elected on French-speaking lists and 17 on Dutch-speaking lists.

While this distribution hardly corresponds to the actual weight of the respective language, the law even provides for almost parity in the composition of the government. In addition to the Prime Minister (who has not yet been appointed), the government includes two ministers from each language group. In addition, there may be a maximum of three state secretaries, at least one of whom must be from the Dutch language group. Parliament may increase the number of government members - but parity must be maintained, which is probably why this has not happened before. In any case, a government needs a majority in both language groups in parliament to take office.

After the elections in June 2024: total blockade

This strict corset has contributed significantly to the fact that forming a government after the elections in June has been so difficult. The Dutch-speaking group in parliament is so fragmented that the search for a majority was almost impossible: the 17 seats are spread across eight parties. There are a number of "no go's", i.e. parties with which one or other partner in their own or the other language group does not want to work together under any circumstances: this applies to the Fouad Ahidar list (3 seats), Vlaams Belang (2 seats) or the left-wing PVDA (1 seat). Under these circumstances, a coalition must include at least four Flemish parties: Greens (Groen, 4 seats), Socialists (Vooruit, 2 seats), Liberals (Open VLD, 2 seats) and Christian Democrats (CD&V, 1 seat) or the Flemish Nationalists (N-VA, 2 seats).

However, as described above, there are only three posts in the government for Flemish politicians. The only CD&V MP did not want to accept the solution found for the "fourth partner" by the lead negotiator on the Dutch-speaking side, the current regional transport minister Elke Van den Brandt (Groen). Instead, the N-VA will now participate. If anyone had hoped that negotiations with the francophones could now begin, they were disappointed: "poisoned arrows" have now come from all sides, which have now caused so much disgruntlement that nobody knows if, when and how things will continue.

Poisoned arrows from all directions

The blockade on the Dutch-speaking side prompted representatives of the Défi party (formerly the Francophone Front, FdF) to suggest that it would be possible to take majority decisions in parliament without the Dutch-speakers, such as electing a government. Shortly after the elections, the leader of the Francophone Liberals (MR), Georges-Louis Bouchez, also questioned the minority rights of Dutch speakers. The weakening of the Low Emission Zone (LEZ) pushed through by a francophone majority in the newly elected parliament in September was a clear affront to the green transport minister.

On the other hand, well-known demands from the N-VA were met with displeasure by the francophones. The N-VA is in favour of reducing the number of municipalities in Brussels - currently 19 - and reforming the police force. As soon as it became clear that the N-VA would be on board on the side of the Dutch-speakers, Brussels PS leader Ahmed Laaouej pulled the emergency brake and suspended further participation in the negotiations for the time being. The N-VA is still a red rag for many francophones in Brussels, as it is suspected of ultimately striving for joint administration of Brussels by Flanders and Wallonia instead of an independent region.

But without the PS, the francophone side lacks a majority. Both the Ecolo Greens and Défi want to withdraw from the government after the heavy loss of votes in the election, and the far-left party PTB is taboo for the other two coalition partners (MR and Les Engagés). What's more, there is also friction between the PS and MR in other areas. This is particularly noticeable in the unresolved issue of who will be the future mayor of the municipality of Schaerbeek. The Socialists also want to introduce a rent cap in parliament, which could then be passed with a left-wing majority against the

MR. Blockade and mistrust are therefore currently total, and the Brussels MR chairman David Leisterh, who aspires to the office of Prime Minister, can at best continue to sound out the situation instead of finally holding concrete coalition talks.

The dilemma of the Socialists

Brussels' political veterans such as former PS Prime Minister Charles Piqué or long-time minister Guy Vanhengel from the Flemish Liberals are warning that a further escalation could ultimately jeopardise the continued existence of the region because it is no longer capable of acting. So it all depends on how the socialists behave. They are probably aware that it won't work without them. However, they are obviously finding it difficult to come to terms with the fact that they are now to be junior partners in a more right-wing government instead of the leader of a left-wing majority as in previous years.

The Socialists want to be a strong opposition at the federal level, but as part of the Brussels government they would be dependent on the help of a federal government possibly led by the N-VA to solve the region's financial problems or implement important infrastructure projects - an almost impossible political balancing act. Even Piqué is advising his party colleagues not to refuse to talk, but rather to make counter-demands that are unpalatable to the Flemish, such as the urgently needed improvement of relations with the surrounding region towards a kind of Brussels metropolitan region.

On paper, the Greater Region was legally adopted in 2012, but in practice there is little sign of it. The plan is to improve coordination, not least in terms of transport policy, between the municipalities of the former province of Brabant, which are now spread across the Brussels Region and the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant.

No way out: snap elections

One way out of the political impasse remains blocked for the time being: unlike a German parliament, a Belgian regional parliament is allowed to get involved in foreign policy (and can also block EU agreements) - but it cannot dissolve itself. The Belgian constitution is very clear on this: only the federal parliament has this right, the regional parliaments are bound by their five-year term of office. It is therefore to be hoped that the parties will sit down together after all. The MR in particular should be interested in finally moving from the opposition to the government bench.

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