

Group photo with a few ladies - and without Georges-Louis Bouchez

By Michael Stabenow

Georges-Louis Bouchez has once again managed to draw attention to himself. Will he or will he not be a minister in the Belgian Arizona coalition led by Flemish nationalist Bart De Wever? With this question, the leader of the French-speaking Liberals (MR) kept the public on tenterhooks until shortly before eight o'clock on Monday morning - just over an hour before the scheduled start of the swearing-in of the 16 members of the government by King Philippe in the Brussels City Palace.

Shortly before eight o'clock on Monday, Bouchez spoke by telephone on the French-language radio station RTBF. He said he would not join the government, but would continue to lead the party. This came as a surprise, as there had been growing indications on Sunday that the 38-year-old law graduate was to become one of De Wever's five deputies as well as Minister of the Interior and that this would - in contradiction to the MR rules of conduct - be cumulative to the office of party leader.

The prospect that Bouchez, a politician with only a sketchy command of the Dutch language, could become responsible for the country's internal security also caused irritation. What ultimately prompted the often impulsive politician to change his mind initially remained unclear.

Bouchez told RTBF that it had been conceivable to appoint an interim MR chairman in his place. However, he then explained: "I know my personality. If it had been a question of putting someone in my place and wanting to instrumentalize everything behind him, then that would have been honest and respectful of the person nominated by the voters."

At least Bouchez revealed that - in contrast to the Belgian public, who were kept in the dark until immediately before the defense - the four MR ministers and the royal palace had been informed of the personnel decisions the evening before. As the MR politician had once again succeeded in stealing the show from others, the personnel tableau of the new government was somewhat pushed into the background. On Monday, there was the usual photo with head of state King Philippe: a group photo with few ladies - and without Georges-Louis Bouchez.

On Sunday night, the leaders of the five Arizona parties - the Flemish Socialists (Vooruit) and Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the centrist "Les Engagés" alongside the N-VA and MR - reached an agreement on the distribution of portfolios. There were initially no surprises when it came to the ministerial appointments - until the RTBF channel reported in the evening that Bouchez might not be part of the government after all.

At this point, it had already been confirmed that 46-year-old "Les Engagés" leader Maxime Prévot would take on the role of Foreign, European and Development Aid Minister as one of De Wever's five deputies and relinquish the post of party leader. In addition to its leader Prévot, the party is sending 51-year-old Vanessa Matz to the government as Minister for Digitization and Public Affairs. In addition, 62-year-old Jean-Luc Crucke, a former MR politician who was considered an opponent of party leader Bouchez, will take over the portfolios for climate protection and mobility.

Apart from De Wever, the cabinet has a total of 14 ministers (half Dutch and half French-speaking), but no state secretaries. All five of De Wever's deputies, who will play a key role in the government as members of the so-called core, are men; only four cabinet members are women. There are no names on the list of ministers with an immigrant background.

The Flemish socialist Frank Vandenbroucke was confirmed as Deputy Prime Minister and head of the healthcare department. He had already held these posts in the Vivaldi coalition under the liberal

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo since 2020. Unlike in the Vivaldi coalition, the Flemish Socialists refrained from appointing a woman from their ranks to the government. The largely unknown, 45-year-old Rob Beenders from the province of Limburg will take over the portfolio for Consumer Protection, Equal Opportunities and Combating Social Security Fraud.

Vincent Van Peteghem from the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) remains one of the deputy heads of government. The 44-year-old politician was previously responsible for finance and will now head the budget department. His party colleague Annelies Verlinden, who is two years older, will move from Home Affairs to Justice.

Van Peteghem's successor as Finance Minister and one of De Wever's deputies will be former Flemish Prime Minister Jan Jambon, who will also be responsible for pension policy. The authoritative 64-year-old N-VA politician was already Belgian Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister between 2014 and 2018.

On the political right flank of the new government is the new Minister of Defense, Theo Francken (N-VA), who is also responsible for foreign trade. The 46-year-old politician, who likes to make snappy remarks - also in French - and has recently become increasingly involved in defense policy issues, was already considered a right-wing hardliner from 2014 to 2018 as State Secretary for Asylum and Migration. "We must make our country and the West defensible again," Francken wrote on the short message service X on Sunday. The asylum and migration portfolio now falls to Francken's 45-year-old party colleague Anneleen Van Bossuyt from Ghent.

On Monday morning, the MR leader finally revealed the names of the cabinet members coming from the ranks of the French-speaking Liberals. One of the deputy heads of government will remain the 49-year-old Daniel Clarinval, who was previously responsible for SMEs and agriculture. He will assume responsibility for the economy, labor and agriculture. Eléonore Simonet, who is only 27 years old and comes from a Brussels political dynasty, will take over Clarinval's responsibilities for SME policy.

Bernard Quintin, born in 1971, is no stranger - a career diplomat who has been Foreign Minister since the appointment of Hadja Lahbib last fall and will now become Interior Minister, probably due to Bouchez's decision not to join the government. By contrast, 33-year-old MR politician Mathieu Bihet from Liège, who will be responsible for energy policy in the government in future, is a relatively unknown quantity.

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