

In Belgium, one party wants to be “different” – and is torpedoing the formation of a government in Brussels

By Reinhard Boest

Political parties in Belgium seem to have a limited shelf life. This is clearly evident in their names. With the exception of the Socialist Party (PS) in the French-speaking part of the country (and in the German-speaking community), all parties re-established in Belgium after the end of the Second World War have changed their names, in some cases several times. New names were introduced as a result of the linguistic division of the country in the 1960s and 1970s. After that, the renaming was less motivated by a reorientation of content and more a reaction to declining interest among citizens, i.e., above all, declining support at the ballot box. Most recently, the former Francophone Christian Democrats took this path, operating under the name “Les Engagés” since 2022 (see <https://belgieninfo.net/eine-neue-farbe-in-der-belgischen-parteienlandschaft-tuerkis/>). And according to party leader Paul Magnette, the Socialists (who are currently riding high in the polls) are also set to make the change at the end of 2026. At the end of the ongoing process of programmatic renewal, there will be a new name: “Les Socialistes.”

The Flemish liberals: from “Parti Libéral” to “Anders”

Is it this deficit that also underlies the latest “re-founding”? In any case, something has been ‘different’ (“anders”) since this week. Frédéric De Gucht, who has been chairman of the Flemish liberals for several months, gave his party “Open Vld” this name.

It is the fifth name change for the party, which was founded in 1846 as the “Parti libéral” and was then more left-liberal in orientation as a counterweight to the “Parti catholique” (which is no longer the case today). The Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang (PVV), founded after the war, was followed in 1992 by the “Flemish Liberals and Democrats” (VLD), with the addition of “Open” in 2007. The party's heyday is long gone. Between 1999 and 2007, it was the strongest party in Flanders ahead of the Christian Democrats and led a coalition government at the federal level twice under Guy Verhofstadt. After that, its election results declined steadily; since the 2024 election, it has only held a third of the seats it had in 1999 in both the Chamber and the Flemish Parliament, and is now only the fifth largest party in Flanders.

Nevertheless, it was able to provide the prime minister once again between 2020 and 2025 with Alexander De Croo. Since then, it has been in opposition in the federal and Flemish parliaments. Only in the Brussels regional government, which has been acting since the June 2024 election, does it still hold the finance minister position with Dirk De Smedt.

What will change with “Anders”?

The renaming was actually supposed to come at the end of a process of reorientation in terms of content. At least, that was De Gucht's announcement when he took over the party leadership from Eva De Bleeker in October 2025. Now he is pushing ahead with a new “brand” in a publicity-seeking move – and leaving the content vague for the time being.

“We will do politics differently,” he said at the party's New Year's reception. “We are starting with a blank sheet of paper. No dogmas, no taboos – but big ambitions.” The “Open” from the previous party name is to become the “theory of the three O's”: “Ontplooien, Ontvetten, Ondernemen” (develop, purify, undertake). The label “liberal” is thus disappearing from the name.

What the “renewal” means in concrete terms remains to be seen. The newspaper “Le Soir” points out that in the past, other Flemish parties have adorned themselves with the suffix ‘anders’ (different), such as “Agalev” (Anders Gaan Leven), the predecessor of today's Greens (Groen) or sp.a (now Vooruit). Apparently, it did not help.

First announcement from “Anders”: no participation in a Brussels regional government

Since his election as chairman, it has been clear that De Gucht is focusing his attention on his party's role in Flemish and federal politics and wants to break the negative trend. Participation in the government of the Brussels-Capital Region does not seem to fit into this concept. It is clear that, despite its limited influence in the Brussels Parliament, the party is needed for a coalition majority, whether in a center-right or center-left configuration. The demands have been clear since before De Gucht took office: tough austerity measures for the regional budget and the inclusion of the Flemish nationalists (N-VA) in the government majority. No agreement could be reached on this, neither in the negotiations led by the French-speaking sister party MR nor, most recently, in Yvan Verhoudstraete's (Les Engagés) attempts to cobble together a center-left government.

Verhoudstraete has to throw in the towel

This Tuesday, Verhoudstraete actually wanted to enter into in-depth talks with the partners who were being considered for a coalition government in Brussels without MR: apart from Les Engagés, the French-speaking and Flemish socialists (PS/Vooruit) and Greens (Groen/Ecolo), as well as the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) and DéFi, the party that sees itself as the voice of French speakers in the capital, which was once very powerful but has since shrunk considerably in voter popularity.

However, Benjamin Dalle, the (only) CD&V representative in the Brussels

Parliament, was quickly called back by his party leader Sammy Mahdi. De Gucht and his party colleague De Smedt, acting finance minister of the region, declined Verougstraeten's invitation and wanted to discuss a 2026 budget within the framework of the caretaker government at most. Although Anders and CD&V only hold three of the 89 seats in the regional parliament, their withdrawal makes it impossible to achieve the constitutionally required majority among Dutch-speaking representatives.

Verougstraete had to face the consequences. He admitted that his mission had failed, but not without strongly criticizing the stance taken by De Gucht and De Smedt. "I understand the frustration of the people of Brussels," he said in a statement, explaining: "Our region does not need vetoes, it needs solutions." Other negotiating partners also criticized the stance taken by "Anders." In particular, they found it incomprehensible that "Anders" Finance Minister De Smedt would rather work out a budget with the incumbent PS Prime Minister than in a coalition with Verougstraete.

So now we are back to square one – almost 600 days after the election. No one knows what will happen next. "Ask Frédéric De Gucht," was the response after the negotiations failed. Not so "different" after all...

Translated with DeepL.com (free version)