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THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY 2001

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FOREWORD

In the context of its series of studies devoted to the European debate within the country holding the Presidency of the Union, it is only natural that Notre Europe should be interested by Belgium, which shall assume this role between the 1st of July and the 31st of December 2001. This, however, could simply be a routine task, even more so because our countries have developed during each of their presidencies their own specific visions, the diversity of which continues to be one of Europe's riches. Nevertheless, for the particular case of Belgium, there are two specific details worth bearing in mind:

The first is that this presidency takes place during a crucial moment with regards to the construction of Europe. The presidency should, in effect, conclude with a "Laeken Declaration", the name of the place where the European Council of 15th and 16th December 2001 shall be held, and which shall be the cite of the "grand debate" called for at the Nice European Council. This date with destiny is not simply linked by chance to the European calendar, but results from a deliberate desire on the part of Belgium to be present at this rendez-vous with the future. The idea of a Laeken Declaration was born out a joint communiqué of the three Benelux Prime Ministers (30th August 2000), which took up the suggestion of the Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, expressed several days earlier (21st August 2000). To a certain degree, Belgium actually choose to make its Presidency the key to the future construction of Europe.

The second detail is that although Belgium is a small country it is accustomed to holding big presidencies. Lieven de Winter and Huri Türsan explicitly address, in their solid study, the key points of this paradox: a quasi institutionalised identification with the European project, a difficult internal experience with the construction of a form of "co-operative federalism" that respects particularly difficult and uncompromising identities, and an incontestable know how in the art of compromise and soft governance. For my part, I would like to salute the dual recollection of the founding fathers of Europe: a "small" country can be a big country for Europe once it has mastered the alchemy of compromise between the Franco-German couple which has never exercised the functions belonging to a leadership; the construction of Europe is made through an amalgamation of future visions (the Laeken Declaration) and the relentlessness of the day to day (the 16 priorities of the Belgian Presidency).

After having thanked the authors for their excellent work which also provided me, incidentally, with the opportunity to put the record straight on issues close to my heart, I shall finish on a hopeful note and with a gesture of confidence. Confidence towards a country with a great European tradition, blessed with high class diplomacy, inspired by the founding fathers of Europe.

Jacques Delors

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, European Union presidencies of the European Council have been events which have launched and re-launched the debate on the future of Europe. This tendency escalated with the Nice Treaty, which even the persons involved in its making have been hard pushed to defend. Whatever high-level European decision-makers may maintain, any sober assessment of the last few years of the peak events concerning the European integration process is increasingly pervaded by qualifications of "disappointment" and "failure". What is more alarming, scepticism is increasingly voiced by convinced European integrationists and not just "Europhobes".

On the other hand, the so-called post-Nice process announced by the makers of the Treaty also provoked the liveliest debates on the future of Europe in recent years. Politicians and civil societies are not only having their say in debates about what kind of Europe they want and their expectations from it, but the interest seems to be constantly growing thus contributing to a positive rise in hopes. The tide of gloom that pervaded Europe seems to be gradually changing.

Against this background of simultaneously negative and hopeful tides, the programme of the future Belgian Presidency (during July 1-December 30 2001) was announced on 2nd May 2001, two months before it was due. It contained a self-proclaimed "ambitious and detailed programme with clear goals for every policy domain and for every European Ministerial Council". Even more ambitiously, the debate on the future of Europe, the methods to be employed and the timetable (as declared in Nice) was announced to be the main focus of the Presidency. Furthermore, the Presidency wants to expand the post-Nice agenda through "specific questioning on everything pertaining to the future of Europe", into a global project for Europe. For PM Verhofstadt "Such a debate should include not only the member states, but also the candidate member states, national parliaments, the European Parliament and the broad public opinion.... No element of the debate determining the future of Europe can be excluded: the organisation of competence, the financing of the European Union, the decision making procedures, the institutional architecture and the interinstitutional balance, the role of the regions, the treaty structure, a modernised *méthode communautaire* and the role of social dialogue and of civil society."¹ This broad and deep debate is to culminate in the adoption of

the declaration of Laeken in December 2001, which should elaborate a path and an agenda for a new Intergovernmental Conference that can reform the institutions by 2004.

This ambition is, on the one hand, due to the Euro-enthusiasm and activist style of Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Foreign Minister Michel, and their personal inclination to pursue bold debates, taking "daring" or "undiplomatic" positions, in opposition to the much more prudent approach of their predecessors.

On the other hand, Belgium's ambition to play an leading role in "promoting an ever closer union is deeply embedded in the continuity of the integrationist role Belgium has played in post-WWII Europe" (Kerremans and Beyers, 1998). There is a direct line that passes from Paul-Henri Spaak at the Messina conference (and his chairing the committee that drafted the EEC and EURATOM treatiesⁱⁱ); to Davignon at the birth of the European political co-operation; to Eurofederalist Leo Tindemans's report (1976) outlining a project for the future of the integration process and the urgent need to reform European Community institutions; to Dehaene's contribution to the Three Wise Men Report (eventually buried) to the Helsinki summit in 1999. There has not been deviation in the government, elites and the population at large with regard to this consensus in integrationist attitudes (de Schoutheete, 1992).ⁱⁱⁱ

As one of the founding members of the European Economic Community between 1958 and December 2001 Belgium will have held the Presidency of the Council of Ministers eleven times and for the fifth time since the institutionalisation of the European summit meetings and their renaming as the European Council (in 1977, 1982, 1987, 1993 and 2001). In the cases previous to the upcoming presidency, Belgium has a record of "success" in holding this role, at least as far as it has contributed positively to events that marked its term. Again as far as actors can take the credit for the successes of their times, the Tindemans report at the end of 1975 contributed to the endorsing of EMU; in 1987 Martens endorsed the Delors I budget; while in 1993 Dehaene invested immensely in the implementation of the TEU.

Hence, Belgium has a good track record not only in terms of policy breakthroughs but also of managerial capacities. The last presidency was especially appreciated to the extent that Commission President Delors spoke in 1993 of a "rare happiness" of the Commission to work with the Belgian presidency, and the Parliament and the international press praised Belgium's competence and diplomatic skills (Franck & de Wilde, 1994).

The expectations from the upcoming 2001 presidency are also high, given its timing. It comes soon after a low-accomplishment Nice Council at the end of 2000 and a low-ambition Swedish Presidency. Belgium also chairs during the entire year 2001 the Eurogroup at a

crucial time before the physical introduction of the Euro and the disappearance of national currencies (as Sweden is not yet part of the Eurozone). Finally, with the upcoming enlargement of the Union and the current rotation rules, it may take another decade before Belgium will be presiding the European Council again. Thus, 2001 is presented as a most important, historic, exceptional event, much more so than it previously Presidencies were.

In this study, our aim is to interpret the priorities of the Belgian presidency from the perspective of their embeddedness in social and political structures, actors and culture, the country's tradition of European policies and also conjunctural events. To set the background of our analysis we, therefore, start by exposing in section two, the Belgian Programme for its upcoming Presidency. Next, we examine the long term context of this politics and its roots in Belgian history.

In section three we study the institutional complexity of the Belgian political system and its multilevel EU decision-making process. In the following four sections we analyse the positions within political parties (section four), interest groups, (section five), the civil service (section six), and the public at large (section seven). Our penultimate section (section eight) emphasises the latent functions of the presidency for current national politics, before we present our conclusions.

II. EXPLICIT OBJECTIVES OF THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY

A. Introduction

On May 2, 2001, two months before the official start of its turn at the Presidency of the European Union Council of Ministers, the Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, Foreign Minister Louis Michel and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Annemie Neyts presented the Belgian Presidency's programme for the country's six-month term. The programme outlined an unprecedented list of 16 priorities, covering a wide range of policy domains in which it wishes to make progress.

The priorities of the Belgian presidency emerge from four sources:

1. Matters that are already part of the European agenda and need to be followed up during the Belgian presidency;
2. Recurrent international problems such as those related to Russia, the Middle East and the Balkans;
3. Matters to which the six coalition partners (the Flemish and Francophone Liberals VLD & PRL-FDF, the Socialists SP and PS and the Greens Agalev and Ecolo), ministers and public opinion attach particular importance, and are announced in the government agreement such as employment creation, common social standards, environment, fiscal harmonisation, liberalisation of public enterprises and services; institutional reform; citizenship, etc; and
4. Long term concerns which stem from the Belgian policy paradigm regarding European integration.

The length and scope of the priority list stems also from the way it was compiled. Each of the 15 ministers was asked to communicate to the PM a single theme relevant to their competencies and the broader EU-agenda that they would like to place on the priority list. This method of large ministerial freedom of policy initiation is common for the current government,^{iv} and partly explains the high number of priorities and wide spectrum of values. On the other hand, all the themes belong to the common European agenda, and there is none in which Belgium has an exclusive vested interest, excluding the fact that making a multilevel complex European federal model work is considered as a test for the viability and survival of its own political model.

B. The Belgian Presidency Programme

Under four main themes the programme identified headings in which the Belgian Presidency wants to achieve tangible results, in close co-operation with the European Parliament, the European Commission and all Member States.^v

Theme A. Internal Policy Domains

1. The introduction of the Euro.

The smooth introduction of the Euro issuing from a successful preparation for bringing the Euro coins and notes into circulation and the creation of a common European regulation of stock markets.

2. Indicators relating to the quality of work.

Reflecting the concerns of Socialist and Green coalition partners, liberal PM Verhofstadt promised that a strong social dimension would pay special attention to the development of the European social model. The Government placed special emphasis on the quality of work, larger participation of employees with regard to economic mutations, equal opportunity, modernising social protection, combating social exclusion and poverty. It referred to the task given to it during the European Council of Stockholm in March 2001, of refining and establishing the qualitative as well as the quantitative employment indicators, a policy instrument promoted by the Socialist Minister of Social Affairs and Pensions.

3. Modernising social security and the sustainability of pensions.

The achievement, by the end of 2001, of an agreement on some common goals that guarantee a sustainable security for pensioners and guarantee at the same time its financing, a theme on which the Socialist Ministers of Budget and of Social Affairs and Pensions have recently taken ambitious initiatives.

4. The external aspect of the fiscal package.

The further implementation, in co-operation with the Commission, of decisions which were taken at the end of 2000 about the fiscal package (savings tax, tax regulations for businesses, interests and royalties). The negotiations with third countries, and especially with Switzerland, are to be continued with a view to a final agreement on the draft directive concerning savings tax in 2002.

As tax fraud is endemic, the government hopes that by harmonising tax and savings regimes, capital flight would decrease and thus facilitate the reduction of domestic tax rates, a central electoral pledge of the Liberals.

5. An impetus to a common asylum and migration policy.

Pursuing the Tampere summit programme's aims (1999), the Belgian Presidency seeks to establish a common area of freedom, security and justice while respecting the principles of openness, freedom and hospitality, solidarity, non-discrimination, respect for human rights and human dignity and respect for the value of a multi-cultural society. It promised to assess the progress at the European Council of Brussels-Laeken in December 2001. It also intends to give priority to the establishment of a common asylum and migration policy where the rights of protection granted by the Geneva Convention should be respected. It announced combating illegal immigration, as a priority first and foremost regarding trafficking in and the smuggling of human beings. The candidate Member States should be included in strengthening the common rules for controlling the external borders of the Schengen area.

While high on the public agenda, the issues of immigration and refugee policies are a source of disagreement within the current coalition (especially between Greens and Liberals). Therefore putting it on the European agenda could help to reduce domestic pressures for finding a solution to a problem that inherently transcends national borders.

6. A permanent European unit of magistrates: Eurojust.

As a consequence of the crisis of the justice system under the previous government, justice reform is one of the main objectives of this government. It is determined to reach a political agreement in the second semester of 2001 regarding the setting up of Eurojust, a permanent unit of magistrates with power of enquiry, established in Brussels. Its purpose is the

strengthening of co-operation between the Member States in criminal matters, as well as fighting international crime.

7. Sustainable development and the need for a better quality of life.

This typical Green issue is defined as one of the major concerns of the Belgian Presidency for sustainable development. This "new" strategy (to be approved by the European Council of Göteborg in June 2001) is to direct the whole of the policies of the European Union towards sustainable development in its three aspects (economic growth, social cohesion and protection of the environment).

8. The European Food Authority.

The establishment of, by the end of this year at the latest, a permanent European food authority as an independent agency rather than a body with merely an advisory capacity such as proposed by the Commission. It aims to strengthen controls on the complete food chain, namely through Europeanising the CONSUM programme ("Contaminant Surveillance System"), the Belgian programme that monitors the agricultural food chain, that was set up after the dioxin crisis of 1999.

9. The Community patent.

The creation of a European area for research and innovation and work actively towards this goal and reach a political agreement regarding the Community patent in the second semester of 2001 as well as a common position on the sixth framework programme for research and development.

Theme B - Enlargement

10. Enlargement

The Belgian government declared it saw enlargement as the restoration of the European identity which touched the very soul of the European Union, defined as sharing common values such as political democracy, respect of human rights, social protection of the weak,

protection of minorities, market economy and peaceful co-existence within the rule of law. The Presidency, together with the Commission, intended the accession negotiations to proceed according to the timetable approved by the European Council of Nice in December 2000. Discussions on wide orientations will be held at the European Councils (especially the informal one of Gent on October 19, 2001). The Presidency aims to treat each applicant state on its own merits and on the basis of a complete and effective implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

Theme C. External Relations

The main target of European external relations is stabilisation of the European continent and of strengthening the European voice in the World.

11. The European Security and Defence Policy.

The Belgian government recognises that European public opinion favours a further development of Europe's own defence identity.^{vi} The Council of Laeken in December 2001 must declare the European Union operational in terms of crisis management as the operational implementation of the European security and defence policy pre-supposes a balance between gradual capacity increases, development of instruments and political support for the European foreign policy.

To make this possible, a second conference would take place during the presidency to examine the capacities necessary to achieve the Headline Goal in 2003. The presidency would also continue negotiations with a view to reaching a permanent agreement on co-operation between the European Union and NATO.

12. Russia.

Special attention to relations between the European Union and Russia, including an action plan for the implementation of the EU-Russia common strategy.

13. Central-Africa.

A greater involvement of the European Union in the peace process in Central Africa and the region of the Great Lakes, in which the country has a long history of involvement. Along with the competent authorities, the Presidency wants to draw up an inventory of humanitarian and rehabilitation needs in crucial sectors such as public health, education, infrastructure and justice, as well as needs concerning the democratisation process.

14. The Balkans.

The Belgian government declared that its Presidency would pay special attention to this region and wished in particular to pursue the process launched at the Zagreb Summit. Essential to that process was regional co-operation and economic development. The presidency would attempt to move forward with the negotiations on stabilisation and association treaties with the countries of the region. During the second semester of 2001, such an agreement could be concluded with one or more countries.

15. The Middle East Peace Process.

In close co-operation with the High Representative, the Presidency aims to continue the actions of the Fifteen and encourage the parties to resolve their disputes through dialogue and negotiations so that the peace process could be taken up again. In this feat it would keep close contacts with the United States and all the parties involved in the region.

Theme D. The Future of the European Union

16. Towards an "ambitious" declaration in Laeken

The future Presidency declared: "The Belgian Presidency was given the task in Nice to draw the parameters of this (debate of the future of Europe) by the end of 2001 in the Declaration of Brussels-Laeken, which in its turn should lead to a new Intergovernmental Conference in 2004 ... The Declaration of Brussels-Laeken must state the agenda on the debate on the future of Europe, the methods to be employed and the timetable".

The government announced that it intended to stimulate the European debate through specific questions posing on everything pertaining to the future of Europe.^{vii} It referred to the themes found in the "Declaration on the Future of the Union" which was approved in Nice, as themes which must be dealt with in the debate. The Belgian Presidency, however, showed plans to go beyond Nice and widen the agenda into a global project for Europe.

To add a ranking of priorities to 4 large themes and the 16 points referred to above, the Belgian Government also identified six main themes for the Presidency. The Laeken declaration appeared last but not least among the 16 points and ranked as number 1 among the abbreviated 6 themes.

1. Deepening the debate over the future of Europe.
2. Improving quality of work, advancing equal opportunity and combating exclusion and poverty.
3. Promoting sustainable economic growth and a common economic policy.
4. Creating a European area of freedom, security and justice.
5. Promoting sustainable development and improving quality of life.
6. Enlarging the European Union and strengthening its external dimensions.

The government recognised that with the Treaty of Nice, the door had been opened "once and for all" for the biggest enlargement operation in the history of the European Union. Calling it more of a mutation than a transformation, the government defended the essentialness of already beginning to think about how the European Union should look after enlargement, which competences it must have, how it should be financed, which institutions it must have, the manner in which it would take decisions, and so on.

This programme, the main tenets of which we have cited above, concluded reiterating that it intended to stimulate the European debate through specific questions posed on everything pertaining to the future of Europe. At the same time, it expresses caution against too strong optimism: "the Belgian Presidency under no circumstance wishes to attempt to formulate answers for all these subjects. But it does hope that during the European Council of Brussels-Laeken, a declaration can be approved which will ask the right questions and in this way open the necessary doors for a wide, profound debate in the years to come."

C. Historical pro-integrationism aimed at trade liberalisation and political integration

As we maintained above, European affairs constitutes a policy sector on which traditionally the main elites have agreed upon throughout the entire 20th century. Belgian political elites have generally defended a pro-integration stance, in the beginning more for instrumental reasons than for teleological attachment to federalist ideals. First, elites agreed on the failure of the pre-WWII neutrality policy, and the need to prevent Belgium from serving as battle field for its main neighbours, France and Germany, and to appease them through international co-operation. Although being the main architect of the pre-war neutrality policy, after the war foreign minister P.H. Spaak swiftly endorsed a foreign policy of Europeanism and Atlanticism.

Secondly, in the 1950s, the EC was mainly understood as a multilateral trade system. There was some initial opposition from the left, i.e. socialist parties and trade unions as well as from the right, i.e. employers that feared public intervention in the economy (Coolsaet, 1998). More recently, Europe is seen as a instrument to adapt the country's increasingly open economy to globalisation while preserving some features of the European socio-economic model. The importance of institutionalising free trade for the country's export oriented economy, is also accepted. Belgium was and is still the champion of openness of the European national economies (with the average of imports and exports representing 74% of the GNP in 1999).

Traditional party elites (socialists, Christian-democrats and liberals) have, for many years pleaded for more transfers of competencies towards the EU, a stronger role for the Commission and Parliament and more use of qualified majority voting (QMV). However, since the acceptance of federalism as a model for the reorganisation of the Belgian state, federalism has also become a more pronounced and coherent theme in its positions towards European integration.

In spite of these high principles, Belgian political elites have usually adopted an incremental and pragmatist strategy, supporting progress towards deepening, even when progress seems minimal and all Belgian presidencies have focused on priorities that advance European integration with a federal Europe as the final target. For Belgium, community institutions and policies have served until now as a multiplier of its foreign policy influence, a possibility that may decrease with the ongoing enlargement of the community (Franck, 1998).

D. Small country with few national interests

One of the norms of the presidency is that the presiding country is expected when dealing with controversial matters, to ignore its national interests in the matter. It should take up a neutral position in debates, even if national interests are at stake, and if necessary sacrifice national interests when a compromise is within reach. Hence, problems can get unblocked during the presidency of a non-integrationist country, simply because its hostile position to a compromise is neutralised by the non-partisan role it has to play, it has to make an "exemplary concession".

It is easier for Belgium to put aside its national interests, as there are very few problems on which Belgium has unique Belgian interests, for which it is difficult to construct coalitions with equally interested other partners. Such unique specific Belgian interests are the problem of the seat of the EP and the expansion of Brussels as the European capital. Hence, Belgium can act more easily as an uninterested pursuer of the common interest.

Apart from its small size, the internal costs for giving up national interests are low as Belgian nationalism is weak. Therefore, it clings less to outdated notions of sovereignty, nation-state, national identity, contribution to civilisation, etc. The lack of resistance to the transfers of powers to the European level is paramount to the parallel process of the dismantling of the Belgian state from below. Belgian parties are little concerned with maintaining a strong Belgian state and national identity, as this is a fundamentally contested concept amongst Belgian elites, although much more accepted by the population at large. Eurobarometer surveys consistently indicate that Belgians rank lowest for national attachment (77%, Eurobarometer, 51, 1999) and second lowest in national pride (66 % in the 1982-2000 period, De Winter, 2000).

At different degrees, the parties place the interests of their own region before Belgian common interests. As the Belgian state is clearly too small for many functions, and too large for others, it is easily stripped of unnecessary outdated prerogatives. Hence, the principle of subsidiarity is applied radically, upwards and downwards, stepwise dismantling the middle level .

E. Preserving Rights of Smaller countries

A supranational federal Europe is viewed by Belgian elites as a way to preserve, to some extent, the interest of small countries against the hegemony of large states. In spite of pleas for supranationalism, Belgium has held on to intergovernmentally inspired principles of the smaller countries keeping a Commissioner and the bi-annual rotation of the presidency. The restricting of the use of minority languages in EU institutions is also considered unacceptable. With this concern Benelux solidarity in the Union is indispensable to Belgium and to this end the government has invited a Dutch and Luxembourg top-level diplomat into the Belgian presidency team.

F. Mediation and Compromise skills

The Belgian pro-integration attitude did not develop accidentally. It follows logically from and is congruent with the domestic system of the country's government. The Belgian political system is often characterised as a proto-type of consociational democracy in which the reaching of a consensus over a large number of interested players is the essential decision making rule (Lijphart, 1981, 1999). Compromising, bargaining, package deals, pacts, proportionality, non-zero sum game, asymmetry, pragmatism, temporality of compromises are all part of this game. Given the large diversity of opinions and interests, Belgian politicians know that too strong an attachment to principles can only lead to either blocking of the decision making, or face-losing compromises.

Many important Belgian compromises that pacified conflicts on the main cleavages such as the school pact and cultural pact have emerged from elite bargaining in which consensus was even purchased by large public subsidies come organisational and spending autonomy to the conflicting camps. Efficiency, economies of scale, democratic control and responsibility, are often sacrificed for attaining consensus. One of the main reasons for the impressive public debt (141% of the GNP in 1993, 111% at the end of 2000), is this tendency to manufacture consensus in a deeply divided society. The Belgian model may have worked satisfactorily until the outbreak of the economic crisis of the 1970s, but clearly has become unaffordable since the 1980s (De Winter, 1996)

A second skill is finding new, ad hoc solutions to institutional problems. The Belgian state may call itself a federal state, but it is extremely complex, asymmetrical, provisional, etc. and some even question the label federal instead of confederal.

Thirdly, given the large pro-European consensus amongst elites, Belgian diplomats and civil service get substantial leeway from their political principals, rarely get precise detailed instructions from their superiors, and are usually backed by them when the outcome is positive, i.e. a compromise has been found (Beyers & Kerremans 1994). With the cumulative experience of being a founding member, Belgian civil servants and diplomats have a long experience in EU decision-making (some since the early 1970s), and are socialised into the values and practices of integrationist consensus seeking.

As for leadership styles, Belgian PMs are clearly *primus inter pares* within the Belgian Council of Ministers. Their influence is a function of their capacity to formulate compromises on which a consensus can be generated. They lead by actively promoting consensus between many veto-players, not only between the numerous coalition parties, but also beyond. The Belgian cabinet is not only collegial but also collective. Ministers are not policy dictators that have a large autonomy over their department. They are strictly monitored by their colleagues, especially by the respective vice-PMs that have a large staff at their disposal to guarantee that each minister is operating within the limits of the governmental agreement that has spelled out in detail the content of each departmental policy. This agreement, that sometimes is over hundred pages long, includes a specific chapter on European policy.^{viii} Hence, Belgian ministers are socialised in taking into account, and even anticipating the reactions of their colleagues. This collective consensus seeking style of decision-making is evidently congruent with decision-making at the EU level.

G. Fault lines of Slow transposition of European directives

Ironically, Belgium does not have a good record regarding the swift ratification of major treaties (it was the last member state to ratify the Amsterdam Treaty), reacting to demands for information from the Commission, to requests for transposition of European Directives in national law nor their correct implementation. Hence, it is found guilty of infringements more than average by the Court.

One of the main causes of this implementation deficit is the country's federal structure (see below). The endless state reform has gradually transformed the former unitary state into a

fully-fledged but complex federal one. The largest delays were in fact suffered in the transition period between the two main reforms, of 1988 and 1993.^{ix} Apart from the federal level, we now find three regions and cultural communities. As many competencies are shared, for some Directives, up to six executives and seven parliaments can be involved in the ratification and transposition process. On the other hand, the federal state remains solely responsible and sanctionable for delays, even when these are clearly due to dysfunctions at the sub-state level. It is with these concerns in mind that different systems of co-ordination between the federal and sub-national levels have been set up. In addition, co-ordination is often required between departments at the same government level.

As a moderately corporatist country, the tradition of social concertation requires the involvement of a large number of concerned interest groups in the transposition process, usually through the compulsory advice of specific bipartite or tripartite advisory councils, such as the National Labour Council. Also the Council of State has to formulate its advice on proposed pieces of legislation.

Co-ordinating the contributions of all these participants is a complex task. Many of these participating institutions have autonomous agenda setting power, and are suffering considerable delays also for non-European matters. Nevertheless these delays can also be easy alibis for not implementing undesired EU decisions.

III. BELGIUM'S MULTILEVEL EU DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Several waves of constitutional reform have transformed the former unitary state into an asymmetrical, *sui generis* federal model. Since 1993, Belgium is a full-fledged federal country based on three partially overlapping linguistic Communities (Flemish, French and German) and three socio-economic Regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia), with numerous connections between them (for example the fusion of Flemish Community and Region). Each subnational entity has its own directly elected legislature, an executive headed "minister-president", and a civil service.

These substate levels control about one-third of overall public spending. Regional competencies include urban planning, environment, local government, housing, as well as parts of the following sectors: agriculture, economy, energy, employment, public works, transportation, science and research, and international relations. The communities' competencies include nearly all educational matters, culture, parts of health policy and welfare assistance to families, the disabled, the elderly and the young. Thus, many policy issues decided at the EU level touch upon policies where the regions and communities are competent, exclusively or shared with the federal government. Therefore Belgium must actively involve its regions and communities in EU policy making (for a detailed analysis see Kerremans, 2000).

This widespread involvement not only stems from the division of competencies, but also from the particularly strong empowerment of the subnational levels in the Belgian federal model. First, there is no legal hierarchy of the federal over the subnational polities. Federal laws or executive orders are on equal footing with regional/community laws (decrees). Thus federal institutions do not have any authority of supervision over the regional/community authorities. In addition, since 1993 these subnational units can conduct their own foreign relations (including the conclusion of agreements and treaties with foreign governments and regions). Hence, for the policy sectors for which also Europe has become competent, the subnational units are entitled to participate in Belgium's involvement in EU policy making.

In terms of formal involvement, the approbation of the substate parliamentary assemblies is required for all Treaty reforms. Thus reforms of the founding treaties have to be approved by seven legislative assemblies: the federal House and Senate, the Councils of the French-speaking and of the German-speaking Community, of the Walloon and Brussels region, and the Flemish Parliament. They are also directly involved in the transposition of EU

directives into their legal system in all policy fields for which they are competent. At the executive level, the consent of the regional/community executives is required before Belgium can take position in the Council of Ministers, for all matters falling under the subnational executives' competencies (exclusive or shared).

In practice, for policy sectors in which they have exclusive competencies, the Belgian delegation consists of subnational ministers only, based on a rotation agreement between the relevant regions/communities.^x But as art. 146 of the TEC treaty requires that this involvement be exercised jointly in order to be able to bind the entire country, the subnational minister must voice unanimity positions between the regions/communities concerned. If no consensus can be reached between each and every entity, the Belgian representative has no right to take a position in the Council and must abstain from voting (and thus cannot exercise any influence on the end result). On the other hand, while subnational entities can conduct their own EU policy in areas of exclusive competence, the Belgian State remains legally liable (for instance to the Court of Justice) in case these subnational entities do not fulfil their legal obligations, such as implementing EU directives. The complexity of the intra-Belgian decision-making explains the often slow implementation of directives, for which Belgium formally has to carry the blame.^{xi}

While every competent decision entity has thus full veto power, not taking a position in the Council would harm all entities, and thus for the large majority of issues, consensus is eventually reached. These consensus requirements have necessitated the setting up of various sector-specific, complex and evolving mechanisms of co-ordination between the federal and subnational levels, in the executive, legislative and administrative field, as well as the consultation of civil society actors.^{xii} In all sectors, the Directorate of European Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Relations is the central coordinating centre, usually flanked by various specific co-ordination or concertation committees. For some sectors (like the environment and agriculture) additional formal agreements of co-ordination have been signed leading to stable and well resourced arrangements, in others, co-ordination is less formalised, infrequent, and often based on the goodwill, expertise, horizontal and vertical networking and personal relationships of a few civil servants at different levels and departments.

This complex intra-Belgian intergovernmental decision-making does not only represent an enormous challenge for the federal and subfederal units to participate effectively in decisions at the EU level. It also socialises its politicians and civil servants into complex, multilevel joint decision making similar to the *comitologie* decision-making mode in the EU. Hence, the feasibility or failure of multilevel consensual decision-making in Europe is an

important stake for the Belgian model, as this decision mode constitutes a central feature of the Belgian co-operative federalism. The success of a multilevel Europe is seen as a guarantee against the breakdown and complete separation of the country (Beyers & Kerremans, 1997).

The current Belgian presidency offers the regions and communities different opportunities for involvement. Representatives of the subnational entities are included in the PM's task force for running the presidency. For the first time in EU history, subnational ministers will act as the chairman of European Councils of Ministers in the different regional and provincial capitals. These summits will be seized for displaying the regions' prominence in the Belgian and EU decision making. They will also host several informal meetings. Secondly, a variety of activities are organised, that underline the role of "constitutional regions" in the EU, defined as "as sub-national entity with a package of powers granted to it by its country's constitution, which has a government and parliament of its own and can promulgate laws autonomously and often even at the same level as the sovereign states" (Dewael, 2001). The prime-ministers of Catalonia, Scotland, Bavaria, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Salzburg, Wallonia and Flanders signed in Brussel a Political Declaration (28/5/2001) calling for direct involvement in the IGC 2004 and subsidiarity and handed it to the Belgian PM. Scientific conferences and seminars related to the regional summit themes will be organised. The Belgian PM will meet with the presidents of the EU's constitutional regions regarding the division of powers between the EU, the Member states and the regions, while it also scheduled a political meeting of these presidents chaired by the Walloon PM. The communities are responsible for a considerable part of the cultural activities organised in connection with the presidency.

Although they were not directly involved in the final drafting of the Belgian priority agenda, they have formulated some general orientations and specific positions on priorities and issues that to some extent are reflected by the Belgian presidency priorities. These include *Kompetenzabgrenzung* that recognises the competencies of the regions within a multilevel Europe. Wallonia stresses the challenge of the continuation of structural aid to Walloon sub-regions in the case of enlargement, while Flanders is a more unconditional supporter of enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries.^{xiii} The Flemish and Frenchspeaking communities also stress their role in the development of the knowledge-based society, as formulated at the Lisbon summit.

Having exposed all these features, it is important to underline that up until now regions are generally not sufficiently equipped in terms of information, expertise and

networking, for their participation in Belgian decision-making in EU matters, and therefore their role in the presidency will probably be more symbolic than substantial.

IV. DEBATE AMONG POLITICAL PARTIES

A. The Belgian party system: highly fragmented, but cohesive on Europe

There is a large consensus between political parties on European issues. This consensus is surprising for several reasons. First, the consensus position is quite radical from a comparative viewpoint, i.e. a federal European political union is the end goal for all parties (apart from the right-extremist Vlaams Blok). Hence, it is not a blurred position on which most parties can converge easily. Secondly, the party system is highly fragmented with usually more than ten parties represented in parliament, representing a public opinion divided on many cleavage lines, on which different parties try hard to formulate an original position that legitimates their *raison d'être*. On Europe, this search for a distinctive position does not seem to occur. Thirdly, foreign policy issues, although not part of the main cleavage structure, have been at different times an issue of intense public debate, and some have led to mass mobilisations, like the instalment of "Euromissiles" in the 1980s (Stouthuysen, 1992; De Wilde d'Estmael & Franck, 1996). In addition, consensus on the EC was not perfect at the moment of the take-off of the integration process (Coolsaet, 1998). Finally, the wide openness of the economy signifies that a large majority of the working population is active in sectors that directly depend on the EU-regulations and further integration. Hence, the number of affected people, including the number of losers in the process, is larger than in more insulated economies.

B. Parties and cleavages

From a two party system during most of the 19th century when the Catholic and Liberal parties opposed each other across the religious divide, the Belgian party system turned to a three-party type with the Socialist breakthrough and the emergence of a socio-economic cleavage at the end of the century. It remained that way until the 1960s, when the number of parties represented in Parliament started to increase dramatically. The linguistic-regional parties [*Volksunie* (VU) in Flanders, *Rassemblement Wallon* (RW) in Wallonia, and *Front Démocratique des Francophones* (FDF) in the Brussels region] came first and even entered governmental coalitions in the 1970s. The growing saliency of the linguistic and regional

cleavage divided the Christian-Democrat, Liberal and Socialist parties, and each traditional party split into two organisationally and programmatically independent Flemish and French-speaking branches [into the *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP) and *Parti Social Chrétien* (PSC) in 1968, the *Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (VLD) and *Parti Reformateur Libéral* (PRL) 1972, and 1978 the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) and *Parti Socialiste* (PS) respectively]. At the end of the 1970s emerged the separatist and anti-migrant *Vlaams Blok*, and the Green parties (*AGALEV* in Flanders and *ECOLO* in the Francophone areas).

This fragmentation thus expresses a multitude of cleavages and policy dimensions: left-right, catholic-secular, regional-linguistic, materialist-postmaterialist, system-antisystem and mono- multiculturalism (De Winter and Dumont 1998). It is important to understand that there are no national parties left in Belgium. All parties are homogeneously Flemish or Francophone, and only run for office in the twenty Flemish or Francophone constituencies (with the exception of the bilingual Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency). This explains the centrifugal dynamics of party competition on the linguistic conflict dimension (De Winter and Dumont 1998), and often inherently non-linguistic/regional issues (like prohibiting tobacco publicity) are translated or distorted into community divides.

However, on European issues, there is a large consensus between parties belonging to the same party family, and therefore their more detailed positions are presented below by ideological tendency.

C. Accents within large consensus

There is a strong party consensus on a more integrated Europe. Also, most parties stress in their European programme their adhesion to their European party federation, its common programme and election manifesto^{xiv}, the important role their leaders play(ed) in these Europarties, and the benefits of this transnational party co-operation.

1. Christian-democrats

The Christian-democrats that predominated the post-war party and governmental scene like to present themselves as the party family that is historically most committed to the ideal of European integration, as the driving force behind the take-off of the process 50 years ago. Belgian Christian-democratic leaders (for instance Tindemans and Martens) are pictured as main contributors to this process, while also referring to other Christian-democratic

Europeanists (Adenauer, De Gasperi, Schuman, Kohl). They stress on the one hand the traditional Belgian view of Europe as a guarantee for peace and on the other hand as a macro-economic framework (free trade and an integrated market) guaranteeing economic prosperity as well as social justice and solidarity (the Christian-democratic model of a "social market economy"). A federal Europe was and remains the end objective.

This basic integrationist position translates itself into supranational institutional objectives such as more qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council, the extension of the European Parliament's co-decision powers, giving full nomination power over the Commission as well as making the Commission stronger and more efficient, support for enlargement under conditions of increasing supranationalisation of decision-making. They defend the use of enhanced co-operation between a smaller group of more integrationist countries. They also stress the need to preserve the position of small countries. The PSC has recently pleaded for a directly elected Commission President, and a "German-inspired" bicameral system.

In terms of competencies, the CVP pleads for supranationalisation of the second and third pillar and their extension to environmental policies. The CVP and PSC also basically defend the current CAP, given their traditional close links with farmers (represented in Flanders by a powerful peak organisation, the Boerenbond).

The pro-European stance of the Christian-democrats undoubtedly has had an impact on the overall Belgian governmental positions. They have been uninterruptedly in government in the 1958-1999 period, quasi monopolising the cabinet leadership, and held most of the time the Foreign affairs portfolio. In addition, given the very strong grip of parties on the recruitment and especially promotion of civil servants (3 out of 4 higher civil servants are party members), and the CVP-PSC long reign, about 6 out of 10 higher civil servants are Christian-democrats. Furthermore, traditionally their grip has been even stronger on the diplomatic service. Thus, the European cells within the ministerial cabinets of the current PM and his main EU-ministers include many experienced Christian-democrat diplomats.

Within the Belgian Christian-democrats, tensions have grown regarding the enlargement strategy of the European People's Party (EPP) to rightist parties, like the British Conservatives and *Forza Italia*. Under the impulse of centre-left Belgian EPP MEPs, a faction was created (the Schuman group) that wishes to maintain the centrist character of the EPP. They opposed the strategy of unbridled enlargement of former prime minister Martens, leader of the EPP party and parliamentary group. In the end he lost the support of the workers' wing of the CVP, which killed his ambitions for leading the CVP list for the 1999 European

elections. Hence, CVP and PSC leaders follow with concern the evolution of these tensions inside the EPP, given the continuing calls for a reshaping of the Belgian political landscape into a centre-left and centre-right bloc, an option that may split the factionalised Christian-democrats. Hence, the question of European alliances may serve as a catalyst in the question of national re-alignment in Belgium.^{xv}

2. Social-democrats

For the Socialists parties (PS and SP), European integration is a means of achieving social justice, and therefore their attitudes towards this process fluctuated to some extent with the (potential) instrumental value of integration for developing a social-democratic welfare state.

The failure of Belgium's pre-war neutrality policy and the openness of the Belgian economy excluded a national road to socialism since the beginning. Certain early integration initiatives (like the European Defence Community and the Schuman plan) received only mixed support. But since 1955, internal opposition to further European integration initiatives vanished, although the party was more reactive than pro-active towards this process. Only in the 1970s, and curiously at a moment when the party underwent an ideological anti-capitalist radicalisation, it started taking a pro-active stand, seeing a politically integrated federal Europe as a crucial instrument for developing socialism (or at least keynesian interventionism) that had become ineffective at the level of the nation state (Delwit, 1995).

Hence, the current party line^{xvi} sees the EU as an instrument to preserve or partially restore a social-democratic welfare state (the Rhineland model), as only a politically integrated Europe can provide protection from (or attenuate) the menaces of internationalised capitalism. Institutionally, this requires extension of QMV in the Council and of the EPs competencies, but they are more critical of the role of the Commission. They also hold that deepening should precede enlargement and that allowing "reinforced co-operation" between core countries will be essential. Although favourable to most of the Schröder proposals, the SP opposes the principle of *Kompetenzabgrenzung*, as too constraining for further integration.

In terms of EU policy competencies, the social-democratic parties defend the expansion of (supranational) powers to social, environmental and redistributive policies (also at the European level), a policy of European public investments, and thus expansion of the EU budget. They favour a decrease of emphasis on the CAP, farmers traditionally not being part of the social-democratic clientèle. In line with their central role in the politisation of defence

policy in the 1980s (Stouthuysen, 1992), they also stress the EU's role in peace, defence and development, a shift from traditional atlanticism to Europeanism (De Winter, 1993). More recently, they stress the need for co-operation in the field of immigration and refugees.

3. Liberals

The Belgian Liberals (VLD, PRL) see globalisation not as a menace, but as an opportunity, and Europe is conceived as a basically Liberal project of market liberalisation (De Winter, 2000). Hence, they value the impact of Europe on the restructuring of national economies and enhancing their competitiveness, favouring privatisation and liberalisation of different sectors, reduction of labour costs, flexibilisation of labour market regulation. This traditional entrepreneurial societal model has recently been expanded to "a competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy" with a social and environmental dimension. Still, they remain wary of an expansion of EU competencies in the fiscal, social and environmental domains unless it improves market efficiency. They oppose redistributive measures at the European level.

Hence, basically, the Liberal parties are rather pleased with the current degree of integration, and more Europe should in the first place create a more business friendly environment. Still, like the other traditional parties, a federal Europe remains the end objective. They do favour more supranationalism in the Council, a European constitution, extension of the role of the EP, and place more emphasis on deepening than on widening. Both parties also address the democratic deficit, pleading the empowerment of the European citizens, for instance by Euro-referenda. More recently, the VLD pleads for fully integrating the constitutional regions into the EU institutional framework.

In terms of policy competencies, they call for supranationalism in internal security, justice, immigration policy and the CFSP. The Flemish liberals are quite critical of the CAP. The francophone liberals, that have a larger support among farmers, also defend the "protectionist" CAP and regional policies, and display a larger concern for social issues.

4. Greens

The Green parties (Agalev and Ecolo) share with the socialists an emphasis on social justice, environmental issues, pacifism and internationalism, but adopt more radical positions, that makes them more sceptical about the current levels and state of integration.

Also for them (three level) federalism is the end objective: they demand more supranationalism through QMV in the Council and extension of the EP's legislative role, further empowerment of the Court of Justice, enhancement of parliamentary control over (a more powerful) Commission and a European constitution. Their concern with enhancing the democratic quality of the EU puts deepening before widening. They call for deepening the rights of EU-citizens, expanding the rights of EU-residents and a more humane immigration and refugee policy.

In terms of EU-policies, they criticise the lack of solidarity, promotion of employment and public service, national, European and global redistribution, and environmental protection. They want CAP to pay more attention to small scale environmentally sustainable farming. They defend stronger EU competencies and harmonisation in the social, fiscal and environmental sector. They call for an active involvement of social partners in the development of a social Europe. They want the EU to exert a social and ecological correction of globalisation, for instance within the WTO by introducing the Tobin-tax. They oppose the formation of a European army, and prefer military co-operation to take place within the framework of UN or OCSE-led peace operations.

5. Flemish nationalists: the Volksunie and the Vlaams Blok

The VU sees the EU as an opportunity, rather than as a menace widening the gap between decision-making centres and the peripheral ethnic group they want to empower. As founding and core member of European federation of autonomist parties (the European Free Alliance - Democratic Party of the Peoples of Europe-) their vision on Europe had a determining impact on the EU-positions of other regionalist parties (Lynch, 1996; De Winter & Türsan, 1998). Its position is a combination of strong support for a multilevel federal Europe, voicing a number of criticisms regarding the lack of recognition and empowerment of regions in the current EU framework. Institutionally, it calls for a directly elected Senate of the Peoples and Regions (a combination of the Council of ministers and a directly elected Committee of the Regions); the election of the Commission as EU government by the two chambers; the right of initiative of European, national and regional parliaments as well as the Committee of the Regions; the splitting of the Belgian votes in the Council of Ministers between Flemish and Francophone votes.

Concerning the allocation of competencies between Europe, the states and the regions, the VU pleads for transferring massively entire policy sectors to the European level which are

generally competencies that are currently exercised by the Belgian level, but whose scope is too transnational or comprehensive to be efficiently exercised at the regional level, such as defence and foreign policy, monetary and fiscal policy, large scale public works, environment, security, and also social and employment policy and interregional re-distributive policies. In spite of the frequent references to the subsidiarity principle, there are few proposals for the expansion of the competencies of the regions at the cost of the EU. Intergovernmentalism is only defended for cultural and citizenship matters and European decisions that hurt vital interests of the region. Special emphasis is placed on preserving regional cultures, languages and identities (De Winter, 2001).

The separatist and xenophobe *Vlaams Blok* is the only real outsider on the European dimension. Not only because it rejects the maintenance of the Belgian state within an integrated Europe, but also the idea of a federal Europe itself (Spruyt, 1995, 2000). It sees Flanders (including Brussels) and Wallonia as two separate EU member states, but in a confederal Europe of culturally and ethnically sovereign homogenous nation-states.

Furthermore, it rejects the ideas of a social Europe, a single currency, European re-distributive policies, and EU competencies in the field of culture and education. It favours the dilution of current supranational policies, the restriction of EU-citizenship, protectionism against social dumping and de-localisation. It pleads for the reduction of the role of the Commission and Parliament and for the empowerment of a purely intergovernmental Council. It favours enlargement to only a limited number of "genuine" European countries. On the other hand, it does defend a common security and foreign policy. Finally it calls for a withdrawal of the European institutions from Brussels, due to its frenchicising impact on Brussels and its Flemish hinterland.

D. Items and causes of dissension

Thus, apart from the *Vlaams Blok*, there is a broad and stable consensus amongst Belgian parties with regard to the federal conception of EU institutions and the principles of economic integration, of a common foreign and defence policy, the primacy of deepening over widening,

Some parties stress more EU integration as a goal in itself i.e. a federal united states of European peoples with a new, European identity and a multilevel division of competencies based on the principle of subsidiarity (Christian-democrats and Volksunie), while others stress

more the EU's instrumental value in reaching other main societal projects: a democratic, socially equitable and environmentally sustainable society (Greens and Socialists) or a liberalised economy (Liberals) (Beyers & Kerremans, 2001^{xvii}). Hence, the main dissension is rather on the additional features of this politically and economically integrated Europe, each party family adding classical concerns of its core ideology: European identity, social justice, less state intervention, sustainable development, subsidiarity. These core ideological ingredients make parties opt for specific European policies along the lines of national left-right and postmaterialist cleavages. Thus, there does not seem to have emerged a Euro cleavage regarding the degree of institutional and policy integration between the main party families.

While on most other issues policy divisions are frequent within the same party family, there are remarkably few differences between Francophone and Flemish wings on EU-issues. The former stress the importance of EU regional policies, given the fact that Walloon provinces receive considerable EU-aid (representing currently two-thirds of the population). However, most of this aid will be "phased out" by 2006. The PS also pleads for an institutional empowerment of the regions with the European framework (Senate of the Regions). Most Flemish parties are preoccupied with maintaining Dutch as one of the working languages of the EU, and the chances for survival of the cultural production of small national cultures. The Francophone parties, especially the Liberals, put emphasis on the *francophonie*, the co-operation between Francophone countries, and the preservation of French culture.

Only the issue of the implementation of article 8b of the Maastricht Treaty and the European Directive (94/80/EC) granting suffrage to EU citizens has caused a clear linguistic divide, given its potential impact on linguistic relations in and around Brussels. The Flemish parties are concerned that the unrestricted voting rights for European citizens would further undermine the position of the Flemish minority in Brussels, and the expansion of Francophone and foreign culture into the Flemish hinterland. Most employees of European institutions are believed to speak and understand French better than Dutch, and therefore will tend to reinforce the Frenchspeaking parties and civil society. The Flemish Parliament in 1994 voted a motion calling to make local suffrage for EC-citizens conditional on, amongst others, paying local taxes and length of residence. Due to many divisions amongst Flemish parties and with their Francophone colleagues, and after being taken to the European Court by the Commission, the constitutional clause granting suffrage for local and provincial elections was voted only in 1998, while it should have been transposed into national legislation by 1996.

There are some north-south differences regarding the scope of the European, national and regional levels. For some Flemish parties, European integration may have a decisive impact on the maintenance of the Belgian federal state. In the CVP, a majority defends a three-level system of governance, with the Belgian level being weakened from above and below, but for a minority this weakening process should gradually lead to the eventual disappearance of Belgium. This prospect of the withering away of the Belgian state also suits the VU, allowing it to defend Flemish independence without explicitly calling for separatism. All Francophone parties agree upon further enhancement of EU as well as regional competencies, but would like to keep Belgium as a relevant level of government and essential part of their national identity, thereby not excluding the promotion of European as well as regional identities.

E. Behavioural components

The strong consensus in opinion is also reflected in the parties' voting behaviour on basic EU-issues. The SEA treaty was approved by all parties in 1986, although several groups expressed discontent as they aimed at higher levels of integration, and of the democratic deficit in Europe. In fact, this position made the Greens and the Volksunie decide not to vote for the TEU treaty (1992), calling for more social and environmental competencies and an enhancement of the role of the regions. These parties refused to vote for the Amsterdam treaty for similar reasons of lack of expansion of EU competencies in various areas. But also in many of the other parties, the approval of the treaties are accompanied by calls for much more supranationalism. Hence, voting patterns on the treaties do not reflect a pro-or anti-European cleavage, apart from the Vlaams Blok, whose voting record does reflect a genuine rejection of a supranational Europe.

As a consequence of the large consensus on European issues, campaign for European elections are probably even more "second order" than in other countries (being less important than general elections and conditioned by the latter, Reif, 1985, 7-10). The 1999 European elections were entirely obliterated by the themes of the general and regional elections that were held on the same day. Generally, the willingness of Belgian parties to invest their politically experienced personnel in the EP has been declining since the first direct election of 1979 (Dewacher & De Winter, 1979; Verminck, 1985; Fiers, 2001). Only one out of five MEPs elected in 1999 had previous national parliamentary experience. Many candidates for

the EP were equally running for the regional and federal parliaments, and several declared to be eager to give up their EP seats for a position in the regional or federal executive.

The consensus on and second order nature of EU-politics for Belgian parties was also noticeable at the presentation of the agenda of the Belgian presidency on May 2. Most political parties did not even issue a press statement. There was however some turbulence amongst majority parties, mostly due to procedural reasons. First, for fear of press leaks only the leading members of the government (the *kernkabinet*, or inner cabinet) were informed of the final agenda, three hours before the presentation of the agenda to parliament. Hence, the collective nature of cabinet decision-making was violated, a not uncommon practice in the current government. Secondly, after the PM's presentation (which paradoxically had attracted a high numbers of MPs, but hardly any journalists), several MPs attempted to ask questions, but the PM dodged this demand and the debate was postponed to the following week, upsetting many MPs and MEPs. Thirdly, the Walloon PM was surprised that the regional governments were not consulted for establishing the final agenda.

Criticism regarding the content was voiced by the Socialists. The SP protested against the fact that Verhofstadt supported the idea of *Kompetenzabgrenzung*, considering this as a constraint on further integration. The PS announced a separate press conference the following week on expanding on the social policy agenda, which it found was not sufficiently emphasised in the PM's presentation.

V. DEBATE AMONG INTEREST GROUPS

There is an equally strong pro-European consensus amongst the main interest groups as there is among political parties (Beyers, Decoster & Dierickx, 1998, Beyers, 2000). They are critical of the power of the Council for its lack of democratic legitimacy and too strong focus on national interests. Most groups favour a stronger Commission and even a European executive autonomous from the member states, albeit with some concerns regarding its democratic legitimacy. There is consensus on radically expanding the influence of the parliament for the sake of democracy, for expanding the scope of the EU in more policy sectors, especially regarding employment and social policy (apart from employers and small business associations), the environment, consumer interests, foreign policy and development policies. Also EMU is widely supported. More controversial are regional policy, defence, justice and police, culture and education. Finally, there are hardly any differences between Flemish and Francophone organisations, the latter placing slightly more emphasis on social aspects.

Generally, only the large socio-economic organisations have outspoken views on Europe, and the Belgian presidency. In the main trade unions^{xviii}, the Christian-democrat ACV-CSC and Socialist FGTV-ABVV, consensus on Europe has traditionally been high. Some of their historic leaders have also played important roles in the development of European trade unionism. Generally, they ally themselves on the positions of their political representatives but stress more issues of social Europe, employment policies and empowering trade unions in the EU decision-making process. For instance, in view of the Belgian presidency, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) presented on April 23, a memorandum drawn up by the ACV-CSC and FGTV-ABVV. The memorandum calls for more ambitious social policies, reinforcing the role of the social partners in Europe (organising a Summit of European Social Dialogue), integrating of the charter of fundamental rights into the treaty, the setting up of indicators regarding poverty, quality of work, equality between women and men, the harmonisation of taxes, the safeguarding of the public sector, the introduction of QMV for social and fiscal policies. The ETUC plans to organise demonstrations for the Ghent and Laeken Summits, as well as for the Ecofin Council in Liège. The Belgian railway unions, that are concerned about the government's implementation of the EU civil service liberalising directives, have in their May 1st rallies threatened to render "the presidency unforgettable", by bringing the country to a standstill during the presidency summits.

The main Belgian employers' organisation VBO-FEB perceives the Belgian presidency as the event of the year, and calls for special attention to the problem of the smooth introduction of the Euro, the mobility and transport problem, e-government, and the European patent. Thus it is quite satisfied with the priorities set by the Belgian presidency. The peak association of the small and medium-sized enterprises (UNICE) criticised the Belgian agenda, for lacking of any reference to SMEs and to the practical implementation of the "European Charter of SMEs" approved at the Feira summit. On the other hand, it underlined its general support for further integration.

Despite these swift reactions of the main socio-economic interest organisations towards the Belgian agenda, more comprehensive research amongst a wide variety of interest associations indicates that three out of five interest groups in Belgium are inactive with regard to position taking on EU matters, although they are aware of the relevance of the EU level for their interests (Beyers, 2000, Beyers, Decoster & Dierickx, 1998). Socio-economic groups are most active, and have specialised staff to follow up EU issues. The survey indicated a remarkably low number of contacts between Belgian interest groups and crucial EU decision makers, like the Commission or within the Belgian representation in the Council machinery (permanent representation, sectorial ministers and the ministry of Foreign Affairs) while less relevant actors (national and European MPs, the media and national political parties) are approached more frequently. Hence, generally Belgian interest groups do not make efficient use of channels of influence available to them, despite their physical proximity to "Brussels".

VI. CIVIL SERVICE

The surveys of Dierickx, Beyers and Kerremans (1998) on the political culture of civil servants in Europe revealed that of all the national civil servants that are involved full-time in the decision-making of the European council, the Belgians nourish the strongest European supranationalist values. However, they also are the least pleased with their own national administrative infrastructure and the feedback they receive. They complain about the lack of co-ordination of positions of different ministries, insufficient training of civil servants in charge of European matters in their department, and unclear instructions (Beyers & Dierickx, 1996). This combination of pro-integrationist political culture, lack of organisational self-esteem and resources and suboptimal backing from their national authorities on the one hand enhances their diffuse trust in Commission proposals, but on the other hand encourages a reactive attitude, awaiting and endorsing initiatives from the Commission. This in spite of the fact that a pro-active could be fully played as Belgian Euro-civil servants also appear to enjoy a high professional esteem amongst their fellow colleagues.

VII. PUBLIC OPINION ATTITUDES

As seen above, the Belgian political and socio-economic elites display strong integrationist attitudes. As is the case with other countries, however, a considerable gap has been found between public and elites attitudes in recent years (Top Decision Makers survey, 1996). In fact, while Belgian elites are amongst the most pro-integrationist of the member countries, the gap with public opinion appeared to be the largest.^{xix} However, there are signs that the Euro-cleavage between elites and masses that was apparently emerging during the 1990s, was an epiphenomenon to a larger confidence crisis.

A. Citizenry: diminishing permissive consensus or nationally embedded distrust

The integrationist profile of the Belgian political and societal elites generally resonated for a long time a moderately Europhile public opinion, measured in terms of citizens' attitudes. The classical tool for measuring attitudes towards Europe are the questions included in the Eurobarometer. Until 1995, more than half of the Belgian citizens felt that EU-membership was a good thing, which is more than the EU average (by about 5%), while it generally fluctuates with the overall European average over time. Likewise, very few (less than 10%) felt that the EU was a bad thing (until 1995). Also instrumental support (the fact that one's country has benefited from EU membership) was in that period large, in absolute and comparative terms.

Thus, although it is exaggerated to speak of a consensus, EC-membership was evaluated positively by a large majority in the 1973-1995 period and was always above the EC average, although not as much as in three other founding members, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy (Martinotti and Stefannizi, 1995; Eurobarometer Trends 1974-1994). In the 1995-1999 period, the Belgian scores not only follow the downward trend of the EU average, but also sharply fell below it, to approximate levels obtained by traditionally Eurosceptical publics like the British.

This erosion of EU-support has been interpreted by on the one hand a structural trend of decline of the "permissive consensus" in Belgium^{xx}, and on the other hand, the result of a number of specific events haunting the image of the EU (Beyers, 1999; Bursens, 1999). These include the BSE-crisis, the fraud and corruption cases at the EU-level during a period in which the public opinion was very 'corruption sensitive', the closing down of the Renault-

Vilvoorde factory, the innovative European-wide mobilisation around it and the incapacity of Belgian - including Vilvoorde's most famous inhabitant, PM Dehaene- and European authorities to affect this decision. The budgetary austerity measures of the second Dehaene government (1995-1999) that exploited the Maastricht convergence norms as legitimation for taking these unpopular measures contributed to the decline.

Most recent data indicate, however, a return to a high level of support, and therefore the question is posed to what extent this erosion was not a spill-over of the loss of confidence of Belgians in their own political system in the second half of the 1990s, due to a series of events that eroded the citizens' trust in their national institutions: a series of corruption affairs involving top politicians, judiciary and civil servants, fraud involving top industrialists, the Dutroux paedophile murders and child disappearances and the blunders made by justice and police in this affair, several food quality crises. Thus, the 1998 Eurobarometer (EB51) indicated that the trust of Belgians in their main political institutions (parliament, government, bureaucracy, police, justice, parties) was about the lowest in Europe, but trust in European institutions remained slightly above the EU average.

However, it seems that this period of erosion of trust has come to an end, or at least has been reversed since the end of 1999. The most recent figures (EB54, autumn 2000) indicate that 62% of the Belgians believe that EU membership is a good thing (EU average = 50%), and 59% believe that Belgium has benefited from membership (EU = 47%). Also on most other support indicators, Belgium scores again clearly above average: 57% of Belgians declare trust in the EU commission (EU = 46%)^{xxi}, 72% supports the Euro (EU = 55%), 73% supports a common foreign policy (EU = 65%), and Belgians support most (84%) a common defence and security policy (EU = 73%). A majority (51%) has a positive image of the EU (EU = 43%), while 58% is satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU (EU = 43%).^{xxii} Also, after Luxembourg (21%), Belgium (19%) has the highest proportion of inhabitants that see themselves in the future as "only European", or "European and national" (EU = 12%, EB53).

Table : Attitudes towards European Integration (Eurobarometer 54, Autumn 2000).

	Membership good thing¹	Benefit from membership²	Trust in the European Commission³	Support to the euro⁴	Support tu a commom Foreign policy⁵	Support to a common Defence Security policy⁶	Support to enlargement⁷
B	62	59	57	72	73	84	45
DK	51	65	39	41	52	56	56
D	48	39	36	47	72	79	36
GR	61	72	52	70	80	83	70
E	63	64	62	68	68	76	58
F	48	46	49	32	72	79	35
IRL	75	86	63	39	59	57	52
I	59	49	61	79	77	82	59
L	79	70	60	75	74	80	46
NL	71	61	52	64	66	78	40
A	38	38	41	53	67	65	32
P	61	69	52	57	57	71	52
FIN	39	39	46	45	45	47	45
S	34	25	35	26	55	57	56
UK	28	30	24	21	36	51	31
EU	50	47	46	55	65	73	44

¹ Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Union is ...? (a good thing/a bad thing/neither goodnor bad) [A good thing]

² Taaking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union? [Benefited]

³ And for each of [the following European institution], please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend no to trust it? - The European Commission [Tend to trust]

⁴ What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each proposal, wether you are for it or against it. "There has to be a European monetary union with one sigle currency, the euro". [For]

⁵ What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each proposal, wether you are for it or against if. "The member states of the European Union should have one common foreign policy towards counties outside the European Union" [For]

⁶ What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each proposal, wether you are for it or against it. "The European Unon member states of the European Union should have a common defence and security policy" [For]

⁷ What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each proposal, wether you are for it or against it. "The European Union member states should be enlarged and include new countries. [For]

Hence it seems that public opinion has returned to the normality of the pre-1995 period. Belgium ranks currently on most indicators around the fourth or fifth place, usually behind its more integrationist Benelux partners and Ireland. Only regarding enlargement, Belgium scores around the EU average (44%), which is probably not so much out of line with the elites' position, which stresses deepening over widening. In addition, enlargement may have connotations of unbridled immigration come organised crime and decline of regional subsidies, which are high on the public agenda.

There is strong evidence that the so-called declining permissive consensus is primarily an artefact of the crisis of trust in national political actors and institutions. If one compares the evolution of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Belgium and in the EU (1993-2000, 10 Eurobarometers between 1993 and 2000), the two variables are very strongly correlated for the Belgian population^{xxiii}. This means that satisfaction with democracy in the EU drops and rises simultaneously with satisfaction with national democracy. For instance, in 1995, 62% and 61% respectively were satisfied with EU and national democracy, which fell to 34.8% and 30.1% in 1997, to attain a new peak of 63.7% and 62% in 2000.^{xxiv}

The temporary cleavage between elite and mass opinion on Europe has not led to protest mobilisation. Only 5% of demonstrations in the 1990-1997 period were related to EU-policies, and nearly all were linked to traditional socio-economic concerns such as agriculture, employment, social security). Hardly any were entirely linked to pro- or anti-integration issues (Walgrave, 1997). This lack of mobilisation is due to the low saliency of the issue to the Belgian public, as well as the general pro-European attitudes of the elites of most socio-economic pressure groups, the main engine of protest mobilisation in Belgium (Burstens 1999).

Finally, as far as regional differences are concerned, the most recent European Values Survey indicates some systematic differences with regard to territorial identities, showing the strongest attachments to Europe amongst the Francophone inhabitants of the Brussels region, and the least amongst the Flemish, the Walloons being closer to the Brussels position. The same holds for the frequency of "feeling European", the intensity of these feelings, and the gratification of belonging to Europe (Doutrelepoint, Billiet & Vandekeere, 2001)

B. The Media

There is hardly any public debate about the institutional type of integrated Europe that is most profitable to Belgium (and/or its regions), the policy competencies of this Europe, nor its size (which new member countries). This in spite of the fact that some aspects of foreign policy have led to vivid debates and even mass protest mobilisation (Stouthuysen, 1992; De Wilde d'Estmael & Franck, 1996).

Ironically, while Europe is increasing its impact, media reporting on EU decision-making seems to become scarcer. European issues usually only get high media attention when they can be linked with national issues or concern. Otherwise, European issues are not considered commercially attractive, and most European correspondents have to fight hard to insert articles on Europe, even in the quality papers and public television.^{xxv}

For instance, during the 1999 European Parliament election campaign that coincided with the general elections (and first regional elections) and the outbreak of the dioxin crisis, hardly any media attention was paid to European themes, apart from the European pressures for resolving this crisis. The Belgian presidency would occasionally be mentioned when a particular problem, for which no solution could be found at the Belgian level due to intra- or intergovernmental dissension was explicitly referred to the European level, to be addressed especially during the Belgian presidency. The actual presentation of the agenda was only mentioned in the middle of the main evening news broadcasts.

VIII. LATENT FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESIDENCY FOR NATIONAL POLITICS

Belgium is neither the first, nor will it be last member state to try to profit from the holding of the Presidency for promoting domestic concerns.

A. Promoting "model state Belgium"

The 1990s do not only represent a period of political scandals and crises in the eyes of the Belgian population, its external image was also badly damaged. The current government is well aware of this image, and invests numerous efforts in order to restore the country's tarnished reputation, through symbolic as well as substantial action.

The current government has promoted the idea of restoring "model state Belgium", as evidence that "Belgium is back". Evidently, also the Belgian presidency will be used to present the country from its best sides.^{xxvi} The final summit will be held in the glass houses and saloons of the Royal Palace of Laeken, where government leaders will meet. Although formally the King will only be present during a state dinner, the royal décor will contribute to the colour of the event. The presence of the popular royal couple, and the newly wed crown-prince Philip and his wife Mathilde (who will have given birth to their first child), is expected to boost Belgicist feelings and add glamour to the summit. While the city of Brussels has a predominantly negative connotation (even within Belgium), Laeken represents glamour, beauty, national unity and European diversity.

B. Promoting an unedited governmental team

For the current government also the issue of governability of a coalition without the Christian-democrats is at stake. Verhofstadt is the first non-Christian-democrat PM since 1974. Hence, European leadership has nearly always been embodied by Christian-democrat, or even more, CVP Prime-Ministers. In addition, the Foreign ministry has been occupied by the CVP or PSC (26 years in the 1958-1999 period). Finally, Christian-democrats have always claimed to be the natural leaders of European integration in Belgium as well as in the EU. Hence, for the new "purple-green" or "rainbow" coalition, it is a matter of prestige to prove that European matters can be coped with as well as, or even better by a coalition

without the Christian-democrats, in a policy sector in which the latter had gained most visibility and credibility.

In addition, the presidency is a unique opportunity for the Liberals to adopt a prominent and competent profile in foreign affairs, as most key positions in the Belgian EU-presidency relevant areas are held by Liberals: the PM, the Foreign Affairs minister and secretary of state for European Affairs, and the Minister of Finance (chairing the Eurogroup). The saliency of the issues of refugees, immigration and security will put the spotlights also on the Liberal ministers of Interior and of Justice.

C. Promoting government stability

The EU had several positive effects on the stability of the current government. First, being able to defend Belgian interest at the EU-level during the 1999 dioxin crisis speeded up the government formation process, which was unusually short, in spite of the fact that this multilevel bargaining process involved eight parties (Dumont & De Winter, 1999)! Secondly, the promotion of Verhofstadt as key European player came at a welcome moment for the coalition, that about halfway into its legislative term had not managed to make breakthroughs in many core policies, due to opposition between mainly Socialists/Greens vs. Liberals. Thus, in spite of these profound antagonisms, there is a clear consensus in the coalition that the government can not afford a major crisis before the end of the presidency, for the sake of its national and international image and its ministers' responsibility for running the Councils.

Hence, the hasty presentation and the ambitiousness of the Presidency agenda reflected the more urgent internal political agenda and was part of an attempt to draw the media attention away from the coalition's internal conflicts about constitutional reform^{xxvii} even at the risk of annoying the current Swedish Presidency, as in fact it did. This action reminded the coalition parties that the enormous task of the presidency was rapidly approaching and thus, that the issue of constitutional reform should be settled soon, or be postponed until after the presidency.

On the other hand, EU related concerns to some extent also undermine the coalition's stability. Its ideological heterogeneity often forces the Belgian government to adopt ambiguous positions on EU-matters, especially those relating to socio-economic policies, like liberalisation of public services. Verhofstadt also has the tendency to enthusiastically seize new political opportunities, which the European domain offers abundantly, thereby

overlooking consultation with and causing friction with other competent ministers and the coalition partners in general.

Finally, in Belgium, being respected by one's European colleagues is generally seen as the ultimate proof of statesmanship, for political promotion within the national polity and for an international career. For instance, Dehaene's status and popularity was rather low in his first years in office. He acquired the status of an important statesman after his successful European presidency in autumn 1993, that led to his candidacy for the presidency of the Commission before his eventual defeat at the 1994 Corfu summit. Likewise, Claes became secretary-general of Nato after his performance as minister of foreign affairs during the 1993 presidency. In spite of his being only recently prime minister, Verhofstadt has already become a visible core European player due to his central role at the Biarritz and Nice summits. But also for less ambitious politicians, presiding a sectorial council, especially if held in one's own constituency, signifies visibility and proof of importance.

IX. CONCLUSION: REASONED SPECULATIONS ABOUT THE STAKES IN THE UPCOMING BELGIAN PRESIDENCY

With high expectations derived from its reputation of previous Presidencies, and the vastness of the particular agenda of problems to be solved in the post-Nice and pre-Euro period, it would be a risk (and is not our task) to venture into speculations about the actual performance of the Belgian Presidency. Nevertheless, based on our preceding analysis of the linkages of Belgian domestic and European politics, we shall end this study by pointing out some contingent scenarios for the Belgian Presidency. Obviously, these scenarios depend also on the absence of an unforeseeable accident (whether of a domestic or European nature).

The Belgian Presidency programme met widespread criticisms for being too "ambitious", on the one hand for the unprecedented long list of its priorities, and on the other hand, for the high aims of its last and prime priority, the debate on the future of Europe culminating in the Laeken declaration. In this article, we have maintained that the Presidency programme can be perceived from two points of view. From one perspective, the programme is far from being ambitious and realistically addresses a list of accumulated and unresolved issues on the European agenda, much like most European Presidencies. From the second view, it is more ambitious than most recent Presidencies.

Referring back to our analysis of the programme, we believe that the first fifteen priorities can be seen as constituting a manageable, reasonably low-risk "business as usual" programme. The issues they treat, will mainly address a list of unfinished business, and some new items on the European agenda. Furthermore, many of the priorities are ripe for decisions and need to be managed well, which Belgium is experienced in doing having learned from its previous Presidency experiences and having the support of staff trained for the tasks of management.

In this domain, Prime Minister Verhofstadt committed himself and the government to making progress on each of the priorities, and in order to evaluate this progress, he promised to present a scoreboard which at the end of the term would show how much had been achieved. With many targets that will probably be met without major difficulties, the method of the scoreboard could allow Belgium to end the term showing a positive result and conclude its Presidency by having enhanced its domestic and European image.

The truly ambitious and also more daring objective is the last priority in the programme (or first theme depending on how we look at it). Since several years, the EU is working in compressed time, which puts pressure on the feasibility of long standing (common

external policy) or new engagements (enlargement). Time seems to be running out for the "step by step strategy that has had its success in the past and a new strategy for Europe needs to be developed before the next wave(s) of enlargement. The project of enlargement has rendered the question of the future of Europe unavoidable.

With this debate on the future of Europe, the Belgian government may have created its own trap or may contribute to the entrenching of the future of Europe debate in the subsequent Presidencies until 2004. A wide and profound debate on the ultimate goal of European unification might open Pandora's box and release more and more Eurosceptic voices. While, normally Belgium has allies that share its federalist concerns, with the upcoming 2002 French spring and German autumn elections^{xxviii} the time is not right or ripe for taking big steps forward and for a coherent declaration to emerge from Laeken.^{xxix} Paradoxically, for its main concern i.e. pursuing its political projects on the European arena, Belgium is unfortunate with regard to the timing of its Presidency.

The Belgian government does not take internal risks to promote a strongly integrationist programme, given the large consensus amongst political and socio-economic elites, and a permissive public opinion, reflecting Belgian pro-integration genetic history and the interconnectedness of its European and domestic politics. However to pre-empt external risks, the programme expresses ambition as well as caution, stating that it may already be a success if the Presidency just manages to ask the right questions for opening the doors to a wide and profound debate in the years to come.^{xxx}

Even if the picking up of the debate on the future of Europe were to fail (which could easily be blamed on the timing or lack of integrationist will of other member states), Belgium can fall back on the grid of the 15 other points. The results could be presented in the glamour that the government plans to add to the grid.

In addition, whatever the success or failure of Laeken, the Presidency will serve many latent functions to the government in national politics, i.e. the restoring of the image of Belgium and its leaders.

The two major objectives do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can be mutually reinforcing. In that case, the Belgian Presidency manages to score sufficiently and achieve the aims it has set itself both in its managerial role and in that of contributing to advancing its federalist policy aims. Whether a federalist small country, cherishing the credo that "what is good for Europe is good for Belgium" (Maurer, 2000) can contribute to creating a virtuous circle for Europe to emerge from the "muddling through" politics it has fallen into in recent years remains an open question.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Guy Verhofstadt, "Speech for the European Newspapers Publishers Association (ENPA), Brussels, 10 May 2001.

ⁱⁱ Even before the EEC, Belgium was one of the original six countries that endorsed the European Coal and Steel Community. The even earlier Belgo-Luxembourg Economic Union (BLEU) set up in 1921 and the subsequent Benelux Customs Union founded in 1948 had facilitated this move.

ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, many Belgian leaders have played important roles in European institutions and parties, like Van Miert and Declercq in the Commission, Martens in the European People's Party, the Volksunie in the European Free Alliance.

^{iv} While in the previous governments, decision-making was much more collective, and most initiatives had to be approved beforehand by the collective council, Verhofstadt leaves much more room for initiative to the ministers of his six-party heterogeneous coalition, which often creates open conflicts, strife, defeats and embarrassing compromises (Dumont & De Winter, 1999).

^v The Belgian government has integrated this document into its government site from which the following points are taken. <http://www.eisnet.be>.

^{vi} In order to answer the question of how important a security and defense policy is for the European citizen the Belgian Minister of Defence André Flahaut engaged teams to carry out a comparative survey (Manigart, 2001) in the 15 countries of the European Union to check to what extent European citizens share the goal of further integration in this field. The study revealed that: three out of four Europeans out of ten (74 %) are in favour of setting-up a European army. Among the most favourable countries are the EC-founding members, except Germany.

^{vii} The main public relations instrument to start promoting a public debate on Europe was inaugurated on March 7, 2001 <http://www.europa.eu.int/futurum>.

^{viii} These chapters usually start with a general clause in which they declare their attachment to the deepening of the Union in a federalist perspective, followed by a series of principles, procedures, intentions, policy initiatives, etc., like sticking to the principle of one commissioner per country and maintaining Dutch as an official EU-language.

^{ix} The current government placed a "government commissioner" (a new type of junior minister) in charge of substantially upgrading Belgium's record, who managed to reduce the number of outstanding files by 40%.

^x Also in the case of shared competencies between federal and subnational levels, all entities have to reach a consensus obligation before the Belgian representation can take a position.

^{xi} The 1993 constitutional reform granted a Right of Substitution to the federal level, allowing the federal government or parliament to take the necessary implementation decisions for subnational entities that failed to implement a directive and for which Belgium was judged responsible by the ECJ.

^{xii} A general Co-operation Agreement between the federal government, regions and communities was signed in 1994, which constitutes the main framework for co-ordination.

^{xiii} Both regions have concluded bilateral co-operation treaties with numerous enlargement candidates.

^{xiv} The PS did not draft a specific programme for the 1999 European Elections, and used only the manifesto of the PSE.

^{xv} The election and conduct of the new Berlusconi government is sure to bring this issue of the identity of the EPP back on the agenda of the CVP and PSC, especially given the chance that this alliance will be criticised by the other Belgian parties (cfr. the previous announcement of the Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel that he would treat an FI-AN-LN government the same way as the Austrian ÖVP-FPÖ government).

^{xvi} Note however, that most of the party positions on Europe were after 1954 not subject to a wider intraparty debate, and that some ministers and party leaders played an essential role in formulating the party line (especially Spaak in the entire 1930-65 period, and later Simonet, Spitaels, Claes and Van Miert). Since a few years, the PS and SP try to develop common positions regarding main EU matters.

^{xvii} The analysis is based on the content analysis of Beyers & Kerremans (2001), of party documents regarding the EU drafted in the 1990s, complemented by our own interpretation of the most recent documents following the Nice summit and the drafting of the Belgian presidency agenda.

^{xviii} The smaller Liberal trade unions welcome the agenda, but want to include the development of a European social model, the quality of employment and of life as top priorities.

^{xix} In terms of support for EU-membership (96% vs. 42%) and perceived benefit from membership (95% vs. 38%). They are the elites most in favour of expanding the power of the European parliament, support most the

single currency , and find most (after Luxembourg) that the EU's role on the world stage is too small.

^{xx} Note that the Belgian scores started moving downwards towards the European average already since the early 1990s, but underwent a sudden boost in 1993-1994, most probably due to the attention drawn to the Belgian presidency cum the speculations about Dehaene's candidacy for the Commission presidency, boosting his and the EU's popularity.

^{xxi} Also for all other main EU-institutions, the trust of Belgians is clearly higher (10%) than the EU-average (EB53, table 2.8).

^{xxii} The number of respondents that could not answer these questions, or did not manage to lean to one or the other alternative is also lower than average in the latest Eurobarometers, so that the thesis of a passive, uninformed but permissive population does not hold (Burstens, 1999).

^{xxiii} Pearson $r = 0.97$. Other surveys (VRIND, PIOP-ISPO) also indicate a serious crisis in the 1996-1999 period, but a surprising comeback afterwards. The Flanders Regional Indicators VRIND survey of 2001 indicates a strong increase in trust in 17 institutions for 2000, compared to the 1996-1999 period. Also political apathy and cynicism has declined considerably between 1998 and 2000.

^{xxiv} Percentages calculated excluding the Don't Know category (source: Eurobarometers 39, 40, 41, 41.1, 42, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53). Also at the level of individuals, there is a strong association between satisfaction with national and European democracy (spearman $r = 0.78$ in 1997) which is much higher than the overall association for all EU-member countries (0.59).

^{xxv} There are only a handful of Belgian journalists specialising full-time in EU matters.

^{xxvi} Belgium will invest much more than at the previous summit: 1.35 billion BEF, instead of the half billion in 1993 when budgetary constraints were more stringent.

^{xxvii} Coalition collapse was eminent due to the *Volksunie's* deep and ongoing internal crisis about its *raison d'être* as Flemish ethno-regionalist party (De Winter & Türsan, 1998).

^{xxviii} As for the German government which is a natural ally of the Belgian government in its reflections on the European Union and whose leaders do not hesitate in proposing radical reform, it also is affected by its pre-electoral internal considerations. Nevertheless, together with the two other Benelux countries the role of Germany may contribute to forming a European "clan" of federalists (Zecchini in *Le Monde*, May 3, 2001).

^{xxix} Already the matter of fiscal harmonisation, although on the priority list, has been subdued in order not to negatively influence Tony Blair's election campaign.

^{xxx} An additional constraint is the fact that second semester presidencies are about a month and a half shorter in real time than the spring one.