



Country Issue: Belgium



The Relaunch of Europe

Mapping Member States' Reform Interests

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Institut für Europäische Politik (Institute for European Politics, IEP) is one of the leading foreign and European policy research centres in the Federal Republic of Germany dedicated to the study of European integration.

Further information on the project can be found here:

www.relaunch-europe.eu

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Contents

2 THE RELAUNCH OF EUROPE

3 BELGIUM

Social Union

European Economic and Monetary Union

European Defence Union

Asylum and Migration

Polity

White Paper Process

6 LEGEND

7 REFERENCES

THE RELAUNCH OF EUROPE

MAPPING MEMBER STATES' REFORM INTERESTS

The Relaunch of Europe. Mapping Member States' Reform Interests (RelaunchEU) is a project conducted by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) that surveys the implementation prospects for twelve concrete reform proposals. It covers the policy areas of Social Union, Economic and Monetary Union and Defence Union as well as asylum and migration policy and the EU's institutional set-up. Furthermore, it analyses the support for flexible integration and the positioning towards the five scenarios presented in the European Commission's »White Paper on the Future of Europe« of spring 2017. It covers the positions of national governments and of relevant progressive political parties, which received a minimum share of 5 % of the votes in the previous European or national elections.¹

The study follows two main objectives: (1) It demonstrates the scope of action for prompt reforms of the EU in the selected policy areas while also taking into account which member states would, under certain conditions, be willing to implement the specific proposals. (2) It empirically determines which member states could belong to an avant-garde group willing to deepen integration.

Researchers from think tanks and research institutions in the member states of the EU-27 compiled information to determine the position of governments and progressive political parties towards the twelve reform proposals. This qualitative analysis reflects the country experts' views and is based on documents such as coalition agreements, government or party programmes, position papers, press releases, interviews, op-ed pieces, and official documents. It presents a snapshot of the discussions within the governments and parties. In order to keep the country issues short, internal debates and deviating opinions cannot be covered in detail. Positions are subject to change, especially following elections and the formation of new governments. The snapshot was taken at the end of September 2017. More recent developments could not be included. Notable exceptions are the country issues of Austria and Germany, which were updated following the latest coalition negotiations.

The study's results are published in English on the website www.relaunch-europe.eu. It presents maps for every actor and reform proposal, 27 country issues and an analytical paper. The paper compares the positions of all actors in all member states of the EU-27 on the twelve concrete reform proposals and presents five flagship-projects, which bear the chance for a relaunch of Europe.

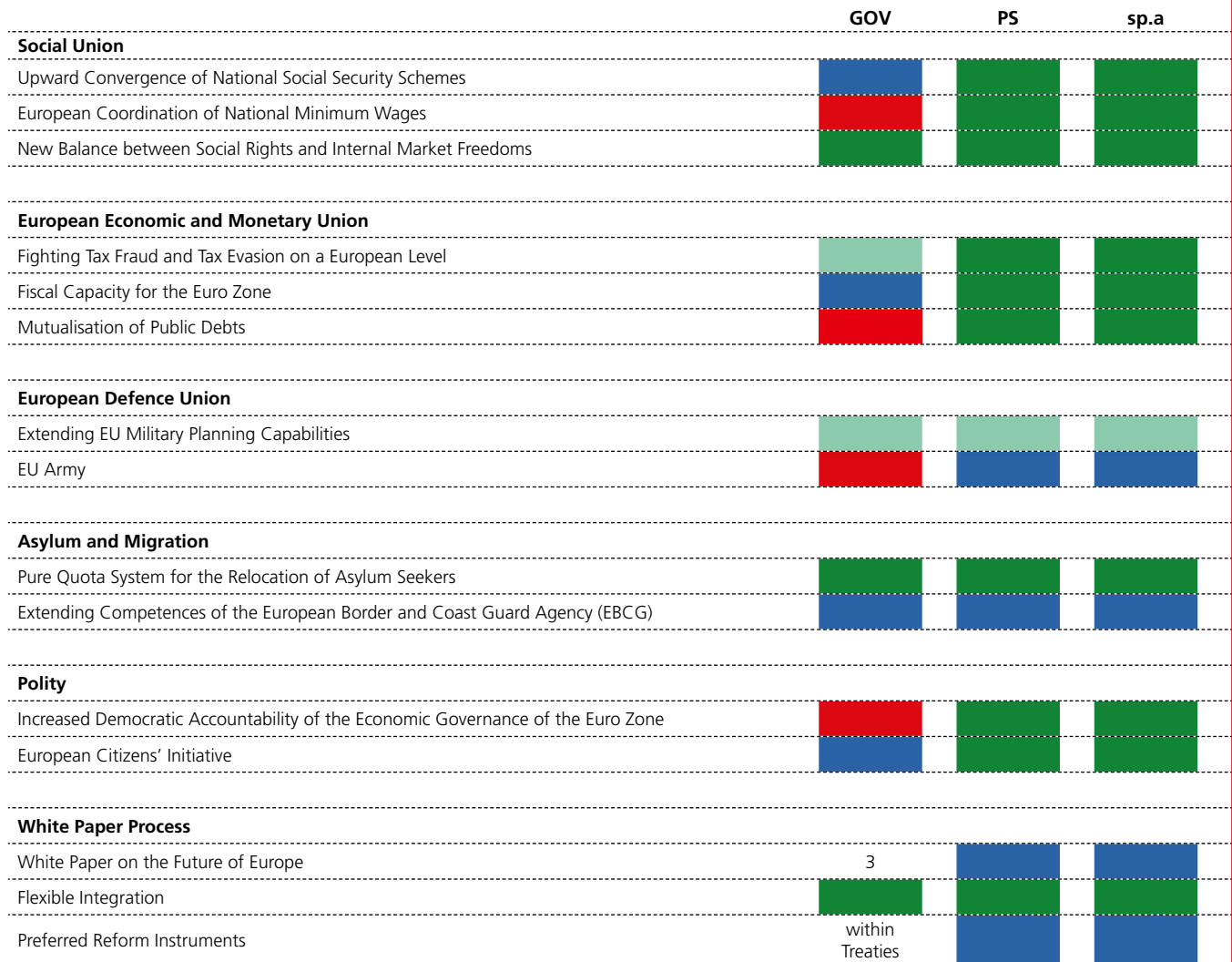
¹ If a party fulfills this criterion, but is not a relevant actor in the national public debate anymore, it was deleted from the sample based on the judgement of the projects' country expert.

BELGIUM

After elections in 2014, a centre-right coalition was formed by the New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA) with the Christian Democratic and Flemish (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams*, CD&V), Open Flemish Liberals and

Democrats (*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*, VLD) and the Reformist Movement (*Mouvement Réformateur*, MR). The Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*, PS) and Socialist Party Differently (*Socialistische Partij Anders*, sp.a) are in opposition.

Support of the Belgian Government, PS and sp.a for Deepening EU Integration



Legend

- support for
- support under conditions
- against
- neutral

- GOV** National Government
- PS** Socialist Party
- sp.a** Socialist Party Differently

- 1 – Scenario 1: »Carrying on«
- 2 – Scenario 2: »Nothing but the single market«
- 3 – Scenario 3: »Those who want more do more«
- 4 – Scenario 4: »Doing less more efficiently«
- 5 – Scenario 5: »Doing much more together«

SOCIAL UNION

Although the Belgian government is in general supportive of adding a social component to the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), there is no specific position on an **upward convergence of national social security schemes**.

According to its coalition agreement, any efforts in this regard are secondary compared to reform initiatives to reinforce the coordination of economic policies and should not touch upon national competences. Both the PS and the sp.a support upward convergence of social security schemes. In particular, the PS' proposals to achieve the goals set by the strategy »Europe 2020« aim at improving social dialogue by establishing a tripartite European platform or at maintaining and reinforcing EU legislation concerning health and security at workplaces as well as consumers' rights. With regard to social benefits, the PS rejects discrimination on grounds of nationality. The sp.a also disapproves of a race to the bottom in terms of social security standards and is in favour of establishing an EU-wide unemployment benefit system. The government clearly rejects the **European coordination of national minimum wages** and in particular a uniform European minimum wage. From its point of view, it is not useful to adjust national minimum wages across the EU, as member states' capacities differ considerably in this regard. The Belgian level of sectoral minimum wages is one of the highest in Europe. For the government, the competence to set minimum wages is a national prerogative. Contrary, the PS and sp.a are clearly in favour of introducing an EU-wide minimum wage in order to guarantee a decent income for all EU citizens. To fight social dumping, the PS calls for a minimum level equivalent to 60 % of the national median income. As Belgium has the third highest number of posted workers in the EU (185,000 in 2016), the government is also concerned about social dumping. Therefore, it is in favour of a **new balance between social rights and internal market freedoms** and resolutely supports initiatives to reform the current posted workers' directive. Regarding the Laval case of 2007, the government stated that the principle of free movement of workers should not question fundamental social rights. PS and sp.a also favour rebalancing social rights with internal market freedoms in order to offset negative effects such as social dumping and downward pressures on social standards. Thus, the PS demands far-reaching reforms e.g. concerning the posted workers' directive, the implementation of a European social investment package and a European coordination of national services for monitoring the application of labour law.

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND MONETARY UNION

Belgium was long considered a tax haven, attracting multinationals by offering extremely generous tax rulings and opposing EU initiatives such as the Anti-Tax-Avoidance-Package of 2016. However, the government's position has changed and it supports initiatives that aim at **fighting tax fraud and tax evasion on a European level** by increasing transparency and

the exchange of information on tax rulings. Nevertheless, it still stresses member states' sovereignty concerning economic and fiscal policy. With regard to the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base (CCCTB), the Finance Minister declared in 2017 that it is too early to take a determined position, since budgetary repercussions have not been fully examined, yet. The Prime Minister is eager to introduce Tobin-type taxes at EU level on financial transactions. Furthermore, any EU action has to be accompanied by international measures e.g. of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Supporting the fight against tax fraud and tax evasion at EU level, PS and sp.a ask for more transparency, a total ban of »letterbox companies« and EU legislation that would force corporations to pay taxes in the country where business activities take place. Both parties are not opposed to a certain degree of tax harmonisation in the EU. Although generally in favour of deepening the EMU, the government has no specific position on a **fiscal capacity for the euro zone**. Nevertheless, it supports the Commission's investment plan for Europe and asks for its continuation and extension. In order to boost the EU's resilience against financial crises, completing the Banking Union is seen as a top priority. PS and sp.a support the establishment of a fiscal capacity for the euro zone, financed e.g. by common corporation or environmental taxes. That requires a new euro zone governance. The EMU would be able to introduce for example an EU-wide unemployment insurance. The PS considers the so-called Juncker plan as a first step in the right direction, but far from sufficient to boost the economy and employment levels. The government opposes any measures that would result in a permanent transfer union. In this context, it rejects the **mutualisation of public debts** and consequently Eurobonds. It calls for a balance between responsibility and solidarity, thus promoting an approach based on fiscal consolidation by respecting the principles of the Stability and Growth Pact and investments in order to enhance economic growth in the EU. In contrast, the progressive parties support the voluntary mutualisation of public debts, e.g. through Eurobonds.

EUROPEAN DEFENCE UNION

Generally speaking, the government is in favour of **extending EU military planning capabilities**, as long as they do not compete with NATO or duplicate its structures. A more pragmatic approach of cooperation is preferred, using existing structures, means and concepts in line with the EU Global Strategy and taking into account regional initiatives such as the cooperation between the Benelux countries. The establishment of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) is supported, as it reinforces the European pillar within NATO. However, it is too early to move forward on the ideas of EU headquarters for executive military missions and operations or an **EU army** while the level of ambition remains unclear. Meanwhile, Belgium pragmatically promotes closer cooperation of European armies and the establishment of the European Defence Fund. The PS supports the deepening of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in order to rationalise military structures as

well as coordinate joint development and acquisition of defence equipment and, thus, enable strategic independence. For this purpose, EU headquarters are seen as very useful in order to improve transparency, supervision and funding of military operations, to establish an effective and operational European reaction force and a common training programme. However, the European Parliament's role in this policy area has to be strengthened. The sp.a is in favour of a deeper CSDP, as it would reduce national military spending. Apart from that, it particularly stresses that there is a need for a strict democratic control over the export of weapon and military expenses at EU level. Beyond this, none of the parties has a clear position on establishing an EU army.

ASYLUM AND MIGRATION

Being a destination country, Belgium supports the idea of deepening the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) based on the principle of solidarity aiming at a fair distribution of refugees amongst member states. Thus, the government is clearly in favour of a permanent **pure quota system for the relocation of asylum seekers** that takes into account a country's capacity to host asylum seekers as well as prior efforts. Consequently, Belgium supported the emergency relocation scheme in 2015 and the Minister of Foreign Affairs described non-implementation as a refusal of European solidarity. However, the government would agree to a financial compensation mechanism funded by member states unwilling to take in asylum seekers. Both, the PS and sp.a, call for a permanent relocation system as agreed in 2015 and, furthermore, the establishment of an agency in charge of the distribution of asylum seekers. They demand financial sanctions for countries unwilling to host asylum seekers. The PS has especially criticised the security dimension of the current EU migration and asylum policy and the inhumane conditions at so-called hotspots in transit countries or countries of origin. Thus, it highlights the need to replace the Dublin system with a proper CEAS based on justice and solidarity instead of prolonging the mere juxtaposition of national policies, as promoted by states defending their own interests and sovereignty. In order to improve the control of the Schengen area's external borders, the government has welcomed the establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG). It immediately offered to contribute staff, jointly with the other Benelux countries. Its position concerning **extending competences of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG)** is not specified. Similarly, the progressive parties have no official stance on this issue. However, the PS has rejected the former agency Frontex for being more concerned with security issues and returning asylum seekers than respecting their international right to asylum.

POLITY

As regards **increasing the democratic accountability of the economic governance of the euro zone**, the government sees completing the euro zone as a necessity to

increase its efficiency and legitimacy. Therefore, the existing EU institutions need to be reinforced by deepening the euro zone as the core of a multi-speed Europe. To this end, structural reforms, budgetary discipline and the efficient implementation of current policies by using existing instruments and rules are needed. However, the Finance Minister discouraged the idea of new institutions for euro zone governance, e.g. a special committee within the European Parliament, or treaty changes. PS and sp.a, in contrast, clearly support the introduction of new institutions to increase the democratic accountability of euro zone governance. In detail, they ask for the establishment of a democratically elected assembly of Members of the European Parliament from the euro zone countries, which would control a newly created euro zone government. Though the reform of the **European Citizen's Initiative (ECI)** was an important topic during the 2010 Belgian Council Presidency, the government has not actively contributed to the debate on current reform efforts. In contrast, PS and sp.a are supporting the European Commission's initiative to reform the ECI, considering it a useful tool to increase citizens' political participation. However, rather than discussing specific proposals for improving the ECI, the PS is debating on whether the ECI as an instrument is able to compensate for the EU's democratic deficit.

WHITE PAPER PROCESS

Regarding the scenarios presented in the **»White Paper on the Future of Europe«**, Belgium clearly promotes scenario 3, »those who want more, do more«, while PS and sp.a have no clear preference for any of the five scenarios. In line with the joint Benelux position, the government is resolutely in favour of **flexible integration** in policy areas where a significant number of member states is willing to advance EU integration. In order to overcome the paralysis in EU decision-making and operation harming the European project, the government campaigned in favour of a multi-speed Europe. Nevertheless, non-participating member states will not be »second order« countries and are free to join. PS and sp.a are also rather in favour of the idea of flexible integration, although they are internally divided on its scope. There is clear support for further political and economic integration of the euro zone. However, other party members go even further by proposing that member states like Hungary and Poland should withdraw from the EU voluntarily in order to advance EU integration within the core of Europe. Otherwise, there are concerns about further disintegration. While the progressive parties are indecisive on how to advance EU integration, the government favours reforms within the treaties and currently considers treaty changes as unnecessary.

Legend

Actors Covered by the Study in each EU Member State

- *National Government*: including its members from one or more political parties, the Head of State or Government, relevant executive ministers and administration.
 - *Progressive Parties*: They include all parties that are represented either in the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) or that are members of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and have gained a minimum share of 5 % of the votes in the last national or European elections. They also include La République en Marche (REM) in France.
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Concrete Reform Options in Different Policy Areas

Social Union

1. *Upward Convergence of National Social Security Schemes* to provide Europe-wide protection against social risks and to ensure a decent standard of living for EU citizens.
 2. *European Coordination of National Minimum Wages* to ensure a decent income within the EU to prevent in-work poverty, to promote social convergence and to avoid social dumping across the EU.
 3. *New Balance of Social Rights and Internal Market Freedoms* to compensate the current precedence of internal market freedoms over national social rights.
-

European Economic and Monetary Union

4. *Fighting Tax Fraud and Tax Evasion on a European Level* for a fair allocation of tax burdens among natural and judicial persons.
 5. *Fiscal Capacity for the Euro Zone* to provide stabilisation against economic shocks through public expenditure in the euro zone.
 6. *Mutualisation of Public Debts* to tackle the problem of a sharp increase in public debts in some member states as a result of the euro zone crisis.
-

European Defence Union

7. *Extending EU Military Planning Capabilities* also for executive military missions and operations.
 8. *EU Army* establishing a permanent multinational military force under European command.
-

Asylum and Migration

9. *Pure Quota System for the Relocation of Asylum Seekers* which would replace the Dublin system.
 10. *More Competences for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG)* expanding the current EBCG tasks in terms of »shared responsibility« between the EBCG and national authorities.
-

Polity

11. *Increase Democratic Accountability of the Economic Governance of the Euro Zone* to make its institutions more responsive to EU citizens.
 12. *European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)*: revision of the ECI regulation to make the instrument more citizen-friendly and effective in order to strengthen the participative democracy in the EU.
-

White Paper Process

13. *The White Paper on the Future of Europe* by the European Commission presents five possible scenarios for the future course of European integration.
14. *Flexible Integration*: limiting the application of certain rules to certain EU member states.
15. *Preferred Reform Instrument*: Treaty reform, reforms inside or outside the Treaties.

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