


Despite on-going coalition negotiations, regionalist parties remain the clear winners of the 2014 Belgian elections

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Belgium held federal, regional and European elections in May, with parties currently involved in negotiations over the formation of a new government. Régis Dandoy writes on the electoral results of the country's regionalist parties. He notes that while much of the attention has tended to focus on the success of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) in Flanders, every region in Belgium witnessed the presence of at least one regionalist party. He argues that when these parties' results are taken together, it is clear that regionalist parties were the clear winners of the elections overall.



In a previous [EUROPP article](#), I discussed the impact of the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA) on the electoral campaign of May 2014 in Belgium. This party managed to determine the campaign agenda by stressing issues related to the linguistic and community conflict opposing Flemish and French-speakers and by demanding a further state reform that would grant more autonomy to Flanders. Yet, the N-VA is not the only party that stressed this type of issue during the 2014 simultaneous regional, federal and European elections. Each region in Belgium witnessed the presence of at least one regionalist party.

Belgium's regionalist parties

Political parties are often classified in political families, mainly based on their ideologies. The political family of regionalist parties unites parties that defend the interests of a region (a region being defined as a geographic and political unit at the sub-national level). Yet, even if they all aim at defending 'their' region, each regionalist party has its own vision on the way these regional interests are best defended: it may entail a larger political autonomy for the region or even the return to a more unitary state. Ideologies of regionalist parties are based on demands that vary from the mere defence of cultural rights up to full independence, via the setting of a decentralised or federal state.

According to this definition, no less than four main regionalist parties participated in the 2014 elections in Belgium. It is obviously the case of the [N-VA](#) (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* – New-Flemish Alliance) which was Belgium's largest party after the last federal elections (2010) and the last local and provincial elections (2012). As such, the N-VA is a fairly recent party created in 2001, upon the ashes of the historical Flemish nationalist party, [VU](#) (*Volksunie* – People's Union). Since 2009, the N-VA participates in the Flemish regional government, and since 2012 in a number of municipal and provincial executives.

Another historical regionalist party, the [FDF](#) (*Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones* – French-speaking Federalists Democrats) participated in the 2014 elections. After important successes in elections in the 1970s and 80s in Brussels (the party received as much as 31.9 per cent of the vote in 1971), the regionalist party created an alliance with the mainstream right-wing party [PRL](#) (*Parti réformateur libéral* – Liberal Reforming Party). In 2011, the FDF decided to leave the alliance and run for elections on its own. The Brussels party participated for the first time in the 2012 local and regional elections and managed to enter several municipal executives. Yet, compared to its previous election participation, the FDF decided to also run in the Walloon region.

In the Brussels region, [ProBruxsel](#) was one of the surprises of the 2009 regional elections. This party, which presented lists in both Dutch- and French-speaking electoral colleges, obtained 1.75 per cent of the votes and should have entered the Brussels regional parliament but it did not pass the electoral threshold. Given the change of the electoral legislation for the 2014 elections, which allow party grouping and therefore eases the passage of parties through the electoral threshold, the party hoped to obtain its first seat(s) in Brussels in 2014. The party only participated in the regional elections.

Finally, **ProDG** (*Pro Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft* – Pro German-speaking Community) is the party that represents the interests of the German-speaking minority in Belgium, concentrated in nine municipalities in the East of the Belgian territory. Under the name **PDB** (*Partei der Deutschsprachigen Belgier* – Party of the German-speaking Belgians), the party participated in all regional elections since the creation of the region in 1974, obtaining its best electoral results in 1978 with 30.1 per cent of the votes. Since 2009, ProDG participates in the German-speaking regional government. Given the size of the electoral districts, it is not surprising that ProDG did not participate in the federal elections.

Regionalist parties in the 2014 Belgian elections

As Table 1 shows, regionalist parties were the clear winners of the 2014 elections in Belgium.

Table 1: Vote share across Belgium for regionalist parties in the 2014 Belgian elections

<i>Election</i>	<i>Regionalist party Vote share in 2014 (%)</i>	<i>Vote share in previous election (%)</i>
Federal Elections	22.1	17.5
Regional Elections	21.8	8.4
European Elections	18.1	6.2

Note: Figures are rounded to one decimal place. Although the 2014 federal, regional and European elections were held on the same day, this was not the case for the previous elections.

In the European elections, they obtained together 18.1 per cent, which is an increase of 11.9 per cent compared to 2009. But their best performances are located at the regional and federal levels, whose representatives were elected on the same day. In the regional and federal elections, they all together obtained respectively 21.8 per cent and 22.1 per cent. In comparison, the largest party family – that gathers the socialist parties **sp.a** and **PS** – obtained 20.5 per cent of the votes in the federal elections. Table 2 shows the results obtained by regionalist parties within each region at the 2014 elections.

Table 2: Regional vote share for regionalist parties in the 2014 Belgian elections

<i>Region</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Federal elections (%)</i>	<i>Regional elections (%)</i>	<i>European elections (%)</i>
Flanders	N-VA	32.4	31.9	26.9
Brussels	FDF	11.1	13.1	7.1
Brussels	N-VA	2.7	2.0	1.9
Wallonia	FDF	1.8	2.5	2.3
German-speaking community	ProDG	-	22.2	13.2
Brussels	ProBruxsel	-	0.8	-

Note: The table shows the percentage vote share within each region, not the overall vote share across the whole of Belgium.

In the Flemish region, the N-VA not only confirmed its position as the largest Flemish – and Belgian – party but

again increased its vote shares compared to the last elections. The party reached about 32 per cent of the votes in the federal and regional elections, but 'only' 26.9 per cent of the votes in the European elections. In terms of seats, it means 33 seats in the federal assembly and 43 seats in the Flemish regional parliament.

Consequently, the N-VA now leads the negotiation for the government formations at both federal and regional levels. It is more likely that the party remains in the Flemish cabinet, and maybe manages to obtain the position of regional minister-president. The presence of the N-VA in the federal cabinet will probably more depend on the willingness of the French-speaking parties to accept the Flemish regionalists than on its electoral weight.

In Wallonia, the FDF received poor election results and did not pass the electoral threshold. The Walloon regional parliament remains the only regional parliament in Belgium that does not witness the presence of at least one regionalist party. On the contrary, the FDF can be considered as one of the winners of the Brussels regional elections as the party obtained 12 seats in the regional assembly and 13.1 per cent of the votes.

This result opened the doors to the negotiations for the formation of Brussels regional government, together with the PS and the cdH. The party only obtained 7.1 per cent of the Brussels votes in the European elections and 11.1 per cent in the federal ones. Compared to its results in Flanders, the N-VA did not perform well in the Brussels region and the party finished fourth among Flemish parties. With only 3 seats, it is likely that the party will not be part of the Brussels cabinet. Even if the party presented lists in both linguistic electoral districts, ProBruxsel did not manage to have significant results and even lost more than its votes compared to 2009.

In the German-speaking community, ProDG became the second largest party and managed to obtain 22.21 per cent of the votes. This result is the best obtained by the party since 1986 and eased the negotiation for the formation of a German-speaking government that would include the regionalists. After only a few days of negotiation, the German-speaking cabinet was formed between ProDG, PFF and PS and the leader of ProDG became the first regionalist minister-president in the history of these German-speaking territories. In comparison with its electoral and political successes, the party obtained poor electoral results in the European elections (13.23 per cent) and did not manage to win the seat attributed to a German-speaking representative.

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