

As questions abound about the monarchy's role, Belgium's new King Philippe must now convince the public of his legitimacy and credibility.

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On Sunday, King Albert II of Belgium abdicated in favour of his son, Crown Prince Philippe. **Benjamin Leruth** looks at the challenges facing the new king in the lead up to 2014's 'meta-elections', that will see Belgians go to the regional, federal and European polls. He writes that while King Philippe is now more popular than he was in previous years, partially from his own efforts to win popularity, a growing Republican movement ahead of the elections may pose a challenge for the new king.



On this year's National Day (Sunday 21 July), King of the Belgians Albert II (79) abdicated in favour of his eldest son and Crown Prince, Philippe (53). Albert II justified this decision by saying his age and health no longer allowed him to carry out his functions. Even though international media sometimes linked this abdication to recent royal scandals (i.e. his allegedly illegitimate daughter Delphine Boël requesting [DNA tests](#) and dowager Queen Fabiola being accused of [tax evasion](#)), this situation had been anticipated by national newspaper *Le Soir* in March 2012. A similar scenario was expected at the end of 2010, but a severe political crisis obliged the King to change his plans. Even though Belgium is a constitutional monarchy with very limited political power given to the monarch, this abdication could have serious political consequences for the upcoming meta-elections scheduled on 25 May 2014 (at the regional, federal and European level).



European Council President Herman Van Rompuy meeting HRH Prince Philippe of Belgium
Credit: President of the European Council (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

Throughout his 20 years of reign, Albert II faced a series of political challenges for which he sometimes had to play the role of mediator. This was particularly the case during the recent series of political crises (between 2007 and 2011), when he had to play a proactive role by holding regular consultations with party leaders, by accepting and sometimes refusing resignations, and by appointing several political figures as *informateur*, *préformateur*, *clarificateur*, *explorateur*, *démineur*,... until current Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo was appointed to form a government in May 2011. The King has been praised by numerous politicians and analysts from all communities for his role in the crisis.

His son, Philippe, is less popular. Often described as “[shy, uncomfortable and sometimes heavy-handed](#)”, an opinion [poll](#) conducted in March showed that his credibility as new monarch might be challenged. In Flanders, 48 per cent of respondents believed he will be a good King, while in Wallonia and Brussels, this percentage is much higher (respectively 58 and 63 per cent). This difference between regions has existed for decades, as the royal family as a whole (sometimes being considered as “too francophone”) is less popular in Flanders than in the South of the country. In addition, Philippe took political positions in the past by openly making negative comments about the Flemish far-right party Vlaams Belang, and has been criticised for not respecting his political neutrality. Nevertheless, it should be noted that ten years ago, less than 30 per cent of the whole Belgian population believed that he would make a good king, so there has been a significant improvement. Recently, Philippe made serious efforts to increase his popularity: according to journalists and entrepreneurs, he became more spontaneous and easy-going during official economic missions; he participated to popular events such as the 20km race of Brussels; and tried to be closer to the population in general. This opinion poll shows that his efforts seem to have paid off.

At the political level, the majority of Flemish political parties recently mentioned their willingness to reform the monarchy in order to give the King a solely representative role. One political party in particular, the Flemish nationalist Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), might put a spanner in the works of Philippe. Indeed, while a majority of traditional political parties (from both the North and the South of Belgium) respect this institution, the N-VA ultimately believes the Head of State should be democratically elected, advocating the establishment of a republic. With the party currently polling at [35 per cent](#) and Philippe being less popular in Flanders than in Brussels and Wallonia, this might have some consequences on the upcoming 2014 elections. Philippe could directly send a positive sign to Flanders by appointing a Flemish Chief of Cabinet to replace the retiring Jacques van Ypersele de Strihou. According to national media, baron Frans Van Daele (close to the Flemish Christian Democratic Party, CD&V) has been shortlisted for this position.

In sum, the new King Philippe faces a series of major challenges, and will have to convince the population (especially in Flanders) that he has what it takes to be a good monarch as his father Albert II and his uncle, Baudouin (who reigned from 1951 to 1993). One year before the elections, and in a country that faced severe political crisis for the past few years, Philippe’s position is rather delicate. It can be expected that Philippe will be rather discreet until the 2014 elections at the political level, mostly exercising his representative role. However, the reform of the monarchy will probably be one of the key issues raised during the electoral campaign, as this constituted one of the symbolic aspects of Belgium that many Flemish parties (especially the N-VA) want to raise in the near future. Should Belgium face a new political crisis following these elections, Philippe might need to follow the example of his father who successfully handled the situation. In that event, Philippe only has one year to prepare himself and gain enough legitimacy and credibility.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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