

As Ever, in Between Elections

Rudi Vander Vennet
Chairman Stichting Gerrit Kreveld

This is the seventh yearbook 'Belgian Society and Politics', entitled 'As Ever, in Between Elections'. It has been published by the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld, a Belgian study centre for social democracy and a think tank for innovative social-democratic analysis and policy. With this publication we try to provide accurate information about contemporary Belgian politics in general, and the position and beliefs of Belgian Social Democracy, chiefly from a Flemish perspective, in particular. Special thanks go to Wim Vermeersch who has served as the editor of this volume and the six previous ones. *Belgian Society and Politics 2013 – As Ever, in Between Elections* contains a wide range of articles which analyze the current events in Belgian politics. We are convinced that they will deepen your understanding of the Belgian political system and its political players ahead of the important, triple elections in May 2014.

These articles have previously appeared in the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld's monthly Journal, *Samenleving en politiek (Sampol)* [*Society and Politics*]. *Sampol* has acquired a reputation for expertise in academic circles and opinion pieces in the media. Starting point in this publication is the Belgian context. Given the asymmetry between Flanders and Wallonia and the special case of Brussels, Belgium exhibits some unique characteristics. After polls in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010, once again we find ourselves in between elections: on 14 October 2012 local and provincial elections were held; on 25 May 2014 we will cast our vote for the federal, regional and European level. We have asked Belgium's finest political scientists for their views on the previous and upcoming elections. This volume also tries to shed some light on the differences between the Walloon and the Flemish Socialists. Both are partners in the Di Rupo I administration (a coalition of 6 parties), but face very different political fortunes next year.

3

Belgium has regained its confidence over the last two years, following an institutional gridlock that had paralysed the political process for more than three years. Belgian politics has become polarized after the election win of the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA) in 2010. Only by sidelining the nationalist party in the Summer of 2011, the so-called 'traditional parties' (Socialists, Christian Democrats and Liberals) on both sides of the linguistic frontier succeeded in building a coalition that could tackle the fundamental issues facing all European countries. A new-found optimism now prevails. Election results will show whether the Flemish coalition parties will reap the rewards of the regained stability or whether the Flemish Nationalists (in the government at the Flemish level, but in fierce opposition at the federal level) will come out as victors. The odds don't look particularly well for the Flemish traditional parties in general and the Social Democrats (Sp.a) in particular.

With the publication of this seventh *Belgian Society and Politics*, but equally through our periodical *Samenleving en politiek (Sampol)*, the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld attempts to inform the interested readers about the political debate in Belgium and Flanders. We try to highlight views and approaches in Belgium, hoping to provide useful insights, analysis and inspiration that may be transferable to other regions. This reaffirms our ambition to be an active participant in the cross-border dialogue on the future of Social Democracy. It is also the reason why we remain a dedicated member of the FEPS, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. We hope this volume may inform, inspire and stimulate debate.