

PS: The Tentative Steps of the Parti Socialiste

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After the October 2012 the francophone Parti Socialiste (PS) ran into trouble following a series of unfortunate events. The first unfortunate episode started with the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012. The PS did not perform badly in these elections, but nevertheless had mixed feelings about it. The second episode included a series of tricky issues in the aftermath of the elections and the losses- both symbolic and real – which the party suffered in the process of forging coalitions deals. The PS was plunged into chaos for about two months. Party elites were panic-stricken in the third episode, trying to defuse the crisis and giving militants their marching orders for 2013 and the ‘mother of all elections’ in 2014. An analysis of a disastrous six months following the elections of 2012.

A DEFINING MOMENT

When the present federal government took office on 6 December 2011, the PS was facing an exceptional situation. First of all, (then) PS party leader Elio Di Rupo was appointed as prime minister. Although the PS has sometimes been depicted as immensely powerful, it is rare to find a francophone socialist prime minister in Belgium. Only two French speaking Socialists had entered “Wetstraat 10” as prime minister so far, i.e. Paul-Henri Spaak in 1946 and 1947, and Edmond Leburton in 1973, only for a brief lapse of time, as it lasted less than one legislative session all in all. Second element: the party chairman became prime minister, which is far from being unimportant for the PS, as the former plays a key role in party affairs. He (or she) is indeed the party’s strongman (or strongwoman), unlike for example the chairman of the Flemish Christian-democratic party (CD&V).

In other words: the PS had to cope with an unprecedented role reversal. And things were not going smoothly, whatever the party leadership said about it at the time. Thierry Giet, a Liège PS member, replaced Elio Di Rupo as chairman. He is indisputably an excellent MP, as his fellow MPs testify, and a highly competent leader of the parliamentary party (Chamber of Deputies). But, aside from not having formal competence in certain matters, to ensure a smooth running of the party business, he lacks a number of skills. He does not feel at ease with the media and when conflicting opinions are raised in the party, he does not manage to impose a particular point of view or decision. It showed, when, in the first half of 2012, conflicting proposals were being submitted concerning the ‘intra-francophone institutional architecture’. PS minister Jean-Claude Marcourt then made a thinly veiled attack on his fellow party member and Walloon ‘minister-president’ Rudy Demotte. And vice versa. The attack was not an isolated incident and revealed a new and very delicate situation. Moreover, the party was also facing tough decisions, given the economic stagnation in Europe and Belgium. It made things even more complex.

THE LOCAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

Such were the circumstances in which the PS was trying to woo voters in October 2012. How to assess the PS's performance in these elections?

Results did not fall short of expectations. The PS delivered a better performance than in 2006 in its strongholds in Le Hainaut, i.e. in cities such as Mons, Tournai, La Louvière, Binche, etc. Moreover, it got an absolute majority in terms of seats in Charleroi, increasing its share of the vote with 9 per cent. In Liège and the Liège industrial area the PS equalled its previous result (2006) or suffered slight losses. So by and large the PS stood 'quite' firm in its strongholds, i.e. in what is sometimes called the socialist 'banana' (the area ranging from Le Hainaut to Liège).

Figure 1: PS election results in the major Walloon towns and cities (local elections 2000, 2006, 2012).

	2000		2006		2012	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
Charleroi	51,37	30	38,43	23	47,69	30
Liège	34,83	20	37,97	21	37,95	22
Namur	35,94	18	28,51	15	28,36	15
Mons	61,35	30	51,55	27	55,16	29
Tournai	43,87	19	40,94	18	42,19	18
La Louvière	55,99	29	41,71	20	50,09	25
Seraing	58,98	28	56,90	26	50,35	24
Verviers	33,28	14	36,67	15	28,84	12
Mouscron	26,46	10	31,18	12	26,66	10
Braine-L'Alleud	25,24	8	21,19	7	*	
Herstal	51,98	21	50,86	20	51,06	20
Châtelet	55,76	21	50,55	20	54,31	22
Binche	34,05	11	39,70	14	57,04	20
Wavre	17,27	5	7,31	1	12,68	4
Courcelles	41,88	14	36,54	12	34,57	13
Sambreville	57,08	19	45,10	16	49,58	18
Ath	67,82	22	59,62	19	52,01	16
Ans	49,13	17	52,76	18	43,04	14
Waterloo	9,64	2	7,77	1	6,10	1
Flémalle	43,34	15	56,86	20	54,65	19
Arlon	26,15	8	30,36	9	26,10	8
Ottignies-Louvain-La-Neuve	15,80	4	13,16	3	14,05	4
Nivelles	34,42	10	35,85	10	33,44	11
Soignies	36,30	11	41,20	14	36,33	11
Andenne	64,00	20	59,10	19	55,29	19
Oupeye	29,42	9	38,06	12	44,89	13
Saint-Ghislain	52,64	17	53,97	17	54,47	16
Chaufontaine	18,34	5	20,58	5	20,25	5
Rixensart	12,04	3	14,47	4	14,64	3
Gembloux	25,45	7	20,21	6	18,80	5

*Electoral alliance with the liberals, mayor's list.

Results were markedly less good beyond those strongholds. The PS lost ground in the Luxembourg province, where Philippe Courard (undersecretary) suffered a symbolic defeat. The PS also lost votes in the Namur province and was defeated in Philippeville and Ciney. In the city of Namur, where minister Eliane Tillieux headed the list, the PS delivered a very disappointing result too, as it equalled its low score of 2006. And in Nivelles, in Walloon Brabant, André Flahaut (Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies) again failed to unseat the mayor.

And finally, the overall result in Brussels was very mediocre. Results in municipalities Vorst, Sint-Gillis, Koekelberg en Anderlecht could be evaluated as satisfactory, but losses were suffered in many municipalities, such as Molenbeek, Brussels, Evere and Elsene. In municipalities located southwest of Brussels, such as Sint-Pieters Woluwe, Sint-Lambrechts Woluwe, Oudergem and Watermaal-Bosvoorde, the PS now has to stand back and watch more than ever. In Schaarbeek too, where Laurette Onkelinckx (deputy prime minister) headed the list for the first time, the PS suffered a blow once again. Its share of the vote there was but a meagre 25 per cent.

THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

And what about the results of the provincial elections? It is particularly interesting to analyze them, because these elections are often perceived as ‘second-class elections’ or ‘by-elections’: voters consider them to be less important and are less familiar with provincial competences; candidates are usually lesser-known; voters often follow their heart rather than their head and ‘punish’ the parties in power. The question of political preferences is, of course, a complex issue in the French-speaking parts of Belgium, as the four major parties govern in coalition at one level at least. But logically speaking, in comparison to local elections, accessibility and reputation of the candidates play a more limited role in provincial elections.

The overall results of the provincial elections show a decline in the number of people voting for the PS. They were less good, not only in comparison with those of the local elections, but particularly with those of the federal elections in June 2010. This was patently obvious in Le Hainaut, where the party indisputably increased its share of the vote with 2.6% in comparison with the previous provincial elections (2006), but suffered a loss of almost 9% in comparison with the 2010 federal elections, thereby equalling more or less its performance in the regional elections in 2009. However, let us also mention the very poor results of the PS in Walloon Brabant, where the party’s performance was even worse than in the disastrous elections in 1999 and 2007.

Figure 2: PS’s share of the vote (in percentage terms) in the federal (F), regional (R) and provincial (P) elections (per province).

	1999	1999	2000	2003	2004	2006	2007	2009	2010	2012
	R	F	P	F	R	P	F	R	F	P
Henegouwen	34,00	34,75	40,39	44,07	41,88	36,94	34,23	40,37	48,18	39,58
Luik	31,05	29,07	35,23	35,62	38,09	34,02	32,10	33,55	35,79	32,84
Waals-Brabant	18,51	19,24	22,12	24,28	24,04	20,13	17,97	18,07	22,48	17,33
Namen	26,89	27,55	31,38	33,50	34,42	28,76	25,95	27,47	32,20	27,82
Luxemburg	21,28	19,98	24,05	26,25	30,87	25,54	21,27	25,61	28,49	23,03

R: regional elections; F: federal elections (Chamber of Deputies); P: provincial elections.

A DISASTROUS SECOND ROUND

So results for the PS in the October 2012 elections were mixed: poor in the provincial elections and

'quite' positive in the local elections. It was less difficult to assess the political consequences of these elections, i.e. the losses which the party clearly suffered in the process of forging coalition deals.

The PS did not manage to become part of the ruling coalition in Namur, the Walloon capital, although it hoped to do so. Moreover, it was only a matter of days before the party was ejected from the ruling coalition in Verviers and Mouscron, two important Walloon municipalities. In Verviers the MR (liberal party) performed poorly and subsequently broke the agreement it had made with the PS to ally itself with the cdH (Christian-democratic party). In Mouscron, where the PS had cherished the faint hope to unseat the mayor, negotiations ended in a deadlock and cdH ultimately formed a coalition with MR. Lastly, in Molenbeek Philippe Moureaux thought to have reached an agreement with cdH and Ecolo (Green Party), but his party ended up being in opposition, as MR, cdH and Ecolo formed a ruling coalition. And in the city of Brussels, where Joëlle Milquet (cdH, minister) was consigned to the opposition benches, the Socialists were blamed for the blunt manner in which this had happened. In short, the handling of coalition deals was pretty disastrous and the party made no effort to deny it. The PS was designated as the loser of the elections, both by its political opponents and by the media, but the party declined to comment.

At the time when the party entered into tough negotiations on the 2013 budget, prominent PS politicians broke their public silence, were making sly little digs at one another and showing signs of weakness and indecision. For example, Philippe Moureaux sneered at the chairman of the Brussels PS 'federation'. The latter then felt his position undermined and proclaimed his intention to make the switch to the presidency of the Brussels regional government; a move which was welcomed by... Philippe Moureaux in an attempt to oppose the nomination of Philippe Close (a City of Brussels PS member) to this post. While the latter, and especially Yvan Majeur, were believed to be responsible for consigning Joëlle Milquet (cdH) to the opposition benches and for the reprisals in Molenbeek. Both aldermen, hard pressed to respond to the allegations, gave the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir* a surrealist interview.

The confusion as to who was to take up key posts in government and in the party was, if possible, even greater in Wallonia. Rudy Demotte, the 'minister-president' of the Walloon regional government, said he was awaiting instructions from the chairmen of the local party branches, who had to be convened by... Thierry Giet, the PS chairman. In short, in the last two months of 2012, the Walloon Socialists were quite edgy about the party's prospects. In addition, the PS had to avoid a clash with the increasingly militant socialist union (FGTB), despite the fact that it had succeeded in averting manipulation of the consumer price index - which allows for inflation compensation - during the negotiations on the 2013 budget. We will come back to that later.

Such were the circumstances in which the PS had to fill a series of key posts in government and the party, and devise a new organizational structure. Elio Di Rupo was urged by his advisers to give these issues serious consideration during the Christmas holidays of 2012. He wanted to close the divide in party ranks. After New Year he gave the party its marching orders for the threefold 2014 elections (federal, regional and European elections).

60 MAKING CHOICES

Both internal and external considerations were taken into account when devising the new organization chart. It was a fairly complex exercise. Eventually, there was a general notion that a temporary solution should prevail and the new organization chart received a fairly friendly welcome. Reshuffles are, of course, highly likely after the federal and regional elections in 2014.

To put it simply, Paul Magnette became the new chairman. He was the obvious choice in the eyes of the PS leadership for four main reasons. To begin with, Magnette can increase the party's visibility in the media, in addition to the visibility which is provided by the prime minister himself and the policies

of his government. Moreover, Magnette can make his voice - and that of the PS - heard in the Flemish media, as he has an excellent command of Dutch. Thirdly, with Magnette (42) serving as chairman, the party also has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is youthful and modern, which is a must, as young Christian Democrats and Liberals have taken over the leadership of their respective parties (cdH and MR). And finally, Magnette has a forceful personality; he does not only appeal to workers - i.e. the classic, popular electorate of the PS - but to highly educated voters as well, and to those voters who are wavering between the PS and Ecolo (Magnette is a former political scientist). However, Magnette can be a risky choice too. The first danger looms in Charleroi, the biggest city in Wallonia, with many families living below the poverty line. Getting it back on the rails is, therefore, an urgent and crucially important task both for the PS *and* for Magnette himself, who is the mayor of Charleroi. It will prove no easy task. There is a second danger looming in 2014, when Magnette will be leading the election campaign and is expected to deliver a good performance. Of course, Di Rupo and Magnette will jointly lead the campaign, but in order to be successful they will have to determine exactly which roles they are to play in it. Moreover, let us not forget that the excellent results of the 2010 election will provide a benchmark against which the results of the 2014 elections will be measured; it makes Magnette's task even more difficult. To use a football metaphor: how to perform better if your team has just won the Premier League title and the Champions League title? Electoral defeat, for which Magnette will perhaps have to take the blame, could prove a handicap in a contest for the leadership of the party in which other candidates will also be running (Laurette Onkelinx, Rudy Demotte or Elio Di Rupo himself).

Laurette Onkelinx is still high up in the party hierarchy. She continues to serve as vice-prime minister, although she cherished - and cherishes - the ambition to serve as party chairwoman. But Elio Di Rupo could ill afford to lose another minister after Paul Magnette had resigned to become the Charleroi mayor. However, Mrs Onkelinx does hold an important post in the organization chart, as she became chairwoman of the Brussels PS 'federation'. That too will prove no easy task. She is not widely considered a Brussels person. Moreover, post-election issues have deeply divided the Brussels PS federation. And let us also not forget that the latter was adversely affected by the decision of Charles Picqué (PS) to step aside as 'minister-president' of the Brussels region. He will not head the list in the 2014 federal elections. In the Brussels electoral district the PS will then have to face fierce competition from political heavyweights such as Didier Reynders (MR), Olivier Mangain (FDF) and Joëlle Milquet (cdH) too.

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Rudy Vervoort has replaced Charles Picqué as 'minister-president' of the Brussels region in May 2013. The choice is deeply problematic. He is not a well-known politician and did not deliver an impressive performance in the local elections (the municipality Evere). As Brussels will be the centre of all attention and he is bound to face a lot of criticism from the Flemish, Vervoort will have to work very hard to assert his authority, to embody an innovative project for the capital and to make the PS indispensable to the Brussels government, even though the election list will contain the names of Emir Kir, the mayor of Sint-Joost-ten-Node, and Fadila Laanan, minister of culture, who are likely to receive large numbers of votes.

Jean-Pascal Labille has replaced Paul Magnette as minister of public corporations and development aid. He lives in Liège, served as secretary-general to the socialist health insurance fund and has been heavily involved in the economic development of Liège and the Walloon region. He was offered the post not to upset the overall internal balance in the party. But the choice of Labille also shows that the Liège PS has enormous difficulty in selecting astute politicians, who are capable of holding ministerial office.

AN EQUATION WITH SEVERAL UNKNOWNNS

Facing a very tense political climate, the PS has chosen to steer a 'federal' course, while trying to pursue two objectives at the same time.

According to the PS it is reasonable to assume that Belgium is still an asset provided one manages to devise the policies necessary to sustain the 'Belgian model of a federal state'. When the negotiations on forming a new federal government had ended in deadlock, there were two conflicting options open to the PS and to Elio Di Rupo in particular: to break off negotiations and confine oneself to the Walloon and francophone cause; or to deem that Belgium does have a future. The first option meant a leap into the unknown, as it entailed huge risks for the Belgian social security system. However, it was a choice that could have enjoyed the support of growing numbers of people in the French-speaking parts of Belgium, who are irritated by the criticism and vicious remarks of certain Flemish politicians, journalists and employers organizations. The second option implied that the PS would have to fight to preserve a social security system based on federal arrangements, i.e. it entailed that tough and painful decisions should be taken to preserve the Belgian federal state, given the political power and influence of NVA and the right-wing views which prevail in Flemish political parties.

TENTATIVE STEPS

The PS has preferred the second option, while simultaneously trying to pursue two objectives. On the one hand, to contribute as much as possible to ensure that N-VA loses ground to the Flemish parties championing the cause of a federal state; on the other, to avoid losing political power and influence by doing so. These are nothing less than irreconcilable objectives. Francophone socialists are, therefore, pursuing a dangerous path. Moreover, these objectives have to be achieved in very tough circumstances.

To begin with, the economic and budgetary situation gives no cause for optimism. Economic growth has almost come to a standstill, as in many other European countries. In addition, public debt remains high and Belgium has to implement EU budgetary 'obligations'. We are not questioning here whether these obligations are sensible or not. The important thing is that EU member states *have* to comply with them and employers, liberal parties and the CD&V are constantly referring to them. Consequently, the PS cannot really satisfy the demands of the workers and the unions; on the contrary, it has come under attack from the employers and the bankers, who actually bear responsibility for the fact that the public debt has risen again.

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How to reach out to the Flemish coalition partners (Open VLD, CD&V and Sp.a) without suffering any damage yourself? That is the difficult dilemma facing the PS, while its opponents, incidentally, don't bother about it or refrain from responding a bit more sympathetic. One should not expect sympathy, of course. This is not the key issue. The thing is that two Flemish right-wing parties, Open VLD and CD&V, are not helpful enough, as they do not provide sufficient clarity, are badly managed and obviously too much of an easy target for N-VA and its chairman Bart De Wever.

Actually, the PS is facing a devilish dilemma, as it is increasingly at odds with the Walloon socialist union and partly also with the Christian union (CSC) over budgetary decisions, the policies of the Walloon authorities and the fact that there is absolutely no room for concessions in overall negotiations with the employers. The unions' leadership does realize the PS has to go it alone and is facing tough times. And it certainly does not want to consign it to the opposition benches (*'politique du pire'*). But middle-ranking union officials and part of the rank and file feel tempted to take strong action, although the balance of forces has shifted to the employers.

The PS has also been put under pressure from a far-left party, the PTB (Parti des Travailleurs belges), which is particularly influential in the Liège industrial area. In 2010 and 2012 the PTB delivered a spectacular electoral result. Moreover, the PTB managed to have access to the media, i.e. the papers of Sud-Presse group and *La Dernière Heure* are often willing to lend an ear to what it is saying. In addition, the PS has also come under attack from the MR (liberal party), which works hard to portray the PS as an archaic party, even at the risk of acting as the mouthpiece for views which prevail in Flanders.

And finally, the real problem for the PS was... their Flemish sister party and coalition partner Sp.a. It was left puzzled by its policies for a long time. Although Sp.a suffered successive defeats in the elections, the party did not seem to draw any lessons from them. The local elections returned disastrous results for Sp.a, while the wins in Bruges and Vilvoorde could not compensate for the losses. This is a problem for Sp.a in the first place, but it does also have major repercussions for the PS, as it allowed Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) to label all PS proposals and policies as left-wing (versus right-wing Flemish policies) and unfit for Flanders (while fit for Wallonia). These differences reinforce each other, resulting in an amalgam, which makes the nationalist narrative (of N-VA) even more attractive and the task of the socialist party even more difficult. Sp.a has now reconsidered its position on different issues and revised its strategy. Relations between the two socialist parties have become more cordial again since spring 2013. The Sp.a presence at the PS party conference, in May 2013, did not go unnoticed, as Johan Vande Lanotte - a leading Sp.a minister and a political heavyweight - took the floor, which is a rare - and therefore remarkable - thing to do at PS conferences. Moreover, the Sp.a has adopted a new ideological manifesto [*Het Vlaanderen van Morgen*], indicating that the party has turned left. If this policy change is not reversed, it will gradually become clear that the current debate about federal policies has been grossly misrepresented, i.e. that it is patently inaccurate to say that this debate is basically between the Flemish employers organization (VOKA) and the Walloon socialist union (FGTB).

STRIKING PROMISES

It is too early to judge the likely impact of this policy change. But the PS will certainly benefit from it in intra-governmental negotiations. It will have to strike compromises in the best way possible, hoping that the economy will start to improve slowly at the beginning of 2014. Will that be sufficient to achieve the above-mentioned objectives? There is nothing more uncertain. The 'mother of all elections' in 2014 is drawing closer. The poll ratings are not particularly positive for the PS, but the campaign agenda has not been set yet and campaign dynamics too are far from clear. The PS knows it is pursuing a narrow path, but once it had decided to preserve the Belgian federal state, there was no other option open to it.

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