

Priority dossiers under the Belgian EU Council Presidency

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Belgium is a federal constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy, with the monarch as Head of State and a prime minister as Head of Government.

The current monarch, **King Philippe/Filip** has been on the throne since 21 July 2013, his heir apparent is Princess Elisabeth, the daughter of the monarch. The King has wide legislative powers constitutionally but is relieved of all responsibility, with his ministers signing the bills and royal decrees. It is the King's task to appoint the prime minister, who is usually the leader of the majority coalition after legislative elections. The King is the symbol of the unity of the nation.

Upon appointment by the King, the prime minister has to be approved by the parliament's Chamber of Representatives. The current **prime minister is Alexander De Croo** of the Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open Vld) party, which sits in the Renew Group in the European Parliament.

After the May 2019 federal, regional and European elections, caretaker governments of the outgoing Prime Minister Charles Michel (elected president of the European Council from December 2019) and then Sophie Wilmès ran federal affairs for a total of 494 days before the establishment of the De Croo government, which is a coalition of seven parties:

- Open Vld (Flemish liberal)
- MR (Francophone liberal)
- Vooruit (Flemish socialist)
- PS (Francophone socialist)
- CD&V (Flemish Christian democrats)
- Ecolo (Francophone greens)
- Groen (Flemish greens)

The significant delay in the formation of the government was due to a collapse of the centre in the 2019 elections. The three traditional political families – socialists, liberals and Christian democrats – lost representation in the Chamber, to the benefit of the Flemish far right (Vlaams Belang, 18 seats, +15), the far left (PTB–PVDA, 12 seats, +10), and the greens (Ecolo–Groen, 21 seats, +9). The socialists (PS–Vooruit, 29 seats, -7, one MP was later excluded from the PS) remained the largest political family, followed by the liberals (MR–Open Vld, 26 seats, -8) and the Flemish nationalists (N-VA, 25 seats, -8).

The government does not have a majority in the Flemish language group. It has 15 ministers and has to consist of the same number of Dutch- and French-speakers, not counting the Prime Minister.

Since 1993, when Belgium became a federal state in a series of state reforms started in 1970, **decision-making powers are divided between three levels of government:** the federal government, three language-based communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three regions (Flanders, Brussels Capital and Wallonia). Legally they are all equal, but have powers and responsibilities for different fields.

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The **federal level** has retained power in areas that concern all Belgians: foreign affairs, defence, justice, finance, social security, public health and home affairs.

The **communities** are competent within language areas for all matters that concern their language speakers, e.g. culture, the audiovisual sector, and education. They are also competent for international affairs in these areas.

The **regions** have authority over the economy, employment, agriculture, housing, public works, energy, transport, environment and territorial planning in their territories.

As communities and regions are competent for international affairs of their internal competences, community or regional ministers can represent the Kingdom of Belgium in various formations of the Council of the EU. A cooperation agreement between Belgium and the Council, governing Belgian representation in the Council, has long been under negotiation.

Due to the country's institutional complexity, the conclusion and implementation of EU level decisions is often a complex and prolonged process under which the different levels of power need to agree. This has been the case, for instance, in the area of the fight against climate change, the ratification of EU trade agreements and Belgian positions on the EU budget.

The **federal parliament is bicameral**, but effective power resides in the 150-member Chamber of Representatives, elected by popular vote for a five-year term. The upper house is the 60-member Senate, indirectly elected for a five-year term. It is a non-permanent assembly serving as a forum for reflection, that is expected to pronounce on proposals if it considers it necessary.

Chamber of Representatives: 150 members

➤ of which government: 87 members

Parti socialiste (PS, in S&D): 19 members

Mouvement Réformateur (MR, in Renew): 14 members

Écologistes Confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales (Ecolo, in Greens/EFA): 13 members

Christen-Democratischen Vlaams (CD&V, in EPP): 12 members

Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open Vld, in Renew): 12 members

Vooruit (in S&D): 9 members

Groen (in Greens/EFA): 8 members

➤ opposition: 63 members

Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA, in ECR): 24 members

Vlaams Belang (in ID): 18 members

Partij van de Arbeid van België - Parti du Travail de Belgique (PVDA-PTB, in The Left): 12 members

Les Engagés (in EPP): 5 members

Démocrate fédéraliste indépendant (DéFI, not currently represented in the EP): 2 members

Independent: 2 members

The **next federal, regional and European elections take place on 9 June 2024**, in the last month of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The country assumes the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the 13th time in 2024, after its previous stint in 2010, when it was conducted by a caretaker government. It is the middle member of a trio with Spain (at the helm in the second half of 2023) and Hungary (taking over from Belgium on 1 July 2024).

POLITICAL PRIORITIES OF THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY

Belgium chairs the [Council of the EU](#) in a period characterised by Russia's ongoing war in neighbouring Ukraine, revived armed conflict in the Middle East, and the combined consequences of the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and climate change.

At the same time, the EU must improve its own institutional set-up to prepare the decision-making structures for the next group of entrants, a task also underlined in the [conclusions of the European Council](#) of 14 December 2023.

The Belgian Presidency will manage these parallel challenges during a mandate the effective period of which is shortened by the forthcoming European elections on 6-9 June 2024, with the last plenary session of the European Parliament on 23-25 April 2024. The Presidency has pledged to make as much progress as possible on ongoing legislative files in negotiations with Parliament, to enable a smooth transition both to the subsequent Hungarian Presidency and to the incoming legislature in July 2024.

Unwavering **support to Ukraine**, with which the EU decided on 14 December 2023 to open accession negotiations, remains at the top of the Belgian list of priorities. In line with the conclusions adopted by EU leaders on the same day, the Presidency will work to support Ukraine economically, politically and militarily while ensuring donor coordination for the country's reconstruction. It will not cease putting pressure through sanctions on Russia, Belarus and other parties responsible.

The Belgian Presidency has organised its work in six areas (the corresponding legislative files are listed thematically below).

Firstly, it focuses on **rule of law** and democracy. Under this umbrella, it will deal with, among other things, the defence of democratic principles based on the package presented by the Commission on 12 December 2023, media freedom and digital transformation. The Belgian Presidency commits to follow up on the evaluation of Council's rule of law dialogue, proceed with the hearings of the ongoing Article 7 procedures, and deal with developments in the area of the general regime of conditionality to protect the EU budget. In this election year, it will also devote attention to the fight against disinformation and hybrid threats.

2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the largest EU extension, when 10 Member States from central and eastern European countries joined the bloc. The Belgian Presidency pledges to take forward the ongoing work on **enlargement**. In parallel it aims to contribute to reflections on how to integrate new members in a manner that strengthens key European policies. The Presidency is ready to facilitate an open discussion on qualified majority voting in the Council on common foreign and security policy issues, and will continue steering negotiations on the revision of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and push for new own resources for the EU. The Belgians also want to stimulate reflections on the next **Strategic Agenda** for 2024-2029 as well as on the future of Europe, and will follow up on the proposal for an agreement to establish an interinstitutional ethics body.

Competitiveness is the second priority area for the Belgian Presidency, with a focus on **industrial policies**, strengthening the internal market, with attention to research and development and the labour market. Reduction of Europe's dependencies to achieve economic security and promotion of EU technological champions will also figure on the Belgian to-do list. On space, the Presidency will support the Commission in enhancing the resilience of space systems and services in the EU.

The third area of focus is Europe's **green and just transition**, with the circular economy and sustainable water management as the Belgian Presidency's priorities in **climate** transition. The Presidency will also work on files related to the security of energy supply, and affordable and climate-friendly **energy**.

Fourthly, the Presidency will concentrate its work in the **social and health** sphere on legislation and activities fostering a more inclusive, gender-equal, fair society. Moreover, it will evaluate to what extent the EU is prepared for future crises, by looking at the security of medicine supplies, and ways to boost the workforce in health and care.

The fifth priority area is **borders and protection of Europeans**: beyond legislative work, the Belgian Presidency wants to work with African partners on migration-related issues, contribute to the efficiency of the fight against organised crime and violent extremism, and work for an integrated EU approach on security and defence.

Finally, the Belgian Presidency wants to work on the **EU's global presence**. It will continue to work on adapting to the geopolitical reality, including the ongoing war on the continent while keeping up the EU's guiding principle of **multilateralism** based on rules and dialogue. In reaction to the explosion of violence in **Israel and Palestine**, the Presidency's immediate focus is on cessation of hostilities and meeting humanitarian needs while working on an EU consensus leading to a negotiated two-state solution.

LEGISLATIVE WORK

The Belgian Presidency's priority is to advance as far as possible on a wide range of files in various stages of the legislative procedure. It will act as mediator in the Council to steer the legislative work and seek compromises among Member States.

Economic and financial affairs

In this field, the Presidency will focus on the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, facilitating work on the legislative proposals on a new set of own resources and finalising the Union's economic governance review (EU fiscal rules). The Presidency will also work to ensure long-term financial support to Ukraine and its reconstruction.

Rules governing Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union, and taking forward the revision of the Bank Crisis Management and Deposit Insurance framework are also in the in-tray of the Belgian Presidency, as are revising legislation related to the Union's Customs Code, concluding work on the Environmental, Social and Governance Rating Regulation, measures aimed at curbing tax evasion, tax avoidance, aggressive tax planning and harmful tax competition, and advancing efforts to curtail money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The Belgian Presidency wants to progress on actions aimed at closing the VAT gap, including the 'VAT in the Digital Age' proposal, taxation rules for cross-border teleworking, and the review of the Energy Taxation Directive.

Justice and home affairs

Among the Belgians' key priorities are progress on the directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, fighting human trafficking, with a focus on detecting and protecting victims, and agreeing on a general approach in the Council regarding the revision of the Victims' Rights Directive. The Presidency also wants to take forward work on preventing and combating child sexual abuse, advance negotiations on the initiative to criminalise all forms of corruption, intensify the EU's efforts to combat organised crime, terrorism, violent extremism and drug trafficking. Rules on passenger name records, the initiative on the recognition of parenthood between Member States, and the regulation regarding the transfer of criminal proceedings within the EU are also on the agenda.

The Belgian Presidency will finalise the provisional agreement reached under the Spanish Presidency on the five regulations reforming EU migration and asylum rules, and will continue discussions on return and reintegration, the future of visa policy, legal migration and the development of the integrated border management. It will also advance proposals for better functioning and resilience of the Schengen area.

Health

Under the Belgian Presidency, health discussions will revolve around three overarching themes: preparedness, care, and protection. On legislation, it will aim to finalise the EU Health Data Space and seek to move forward negotiations for pharmaceutical legislation. In addition, the Presidency expects to present proposals that respond to actual needs when supporting innovation, and that tackle medicines shortages in the EU.

Employment and social policy

To provide a stronger safety net for Europeans, the Presidency will restart negotiations inside the Council on the regulation on EU social security coordination, and will continue legislative work on the Equal Treatment Directive and the European Disability Card before the close of the current legislature. It will work on finding support for an agreement on digital platform workers after the Council failed to validate the provisional agreement with Parliament reached under the Spanish Presidency. It will also follow up on initiatives for the revision of the European Works Council Directive. The Presidency pledges to identify new legislative and non-legislative strategic initiatives to achieve equal opportunity, gender equality and non-discrimination.

Internal market

The Presidency aims to take forward any remaining work on the single market emergency instrument, the proposal for a regulation on prohibiting products made with forced labour and the Net-Zero Industry Act. It will work on the revision of the Late Payments Directive (the SME relief package), contribute to the modernisation of the legislative framework for intellectual property, and complete any remaining work on the modernisation of the framework on industrial design, the directive on common rules promoting the repair of goods, and the regulation on digital labelling of EU fertilising products. The Presidency will strive to make progress on the Green Claims Directive, on the revision of the Toy Safety Directive, the Package Travel Directive and the Alternative Dispute Resolution Directive, as well as on the forthcoming proposal on asbestos in buildings.

Trade

The Presidency aims to finish negotiations on the extended Generalised System of Preferences and review the application of trade tools such as the screening of foreign direct investment. This latter is part of the Presidency's drive to take forward legislation putting into practice the EU's [Economic Security Strategy](#).

Transport

The Belgian Presidency aims to progress on making transport greener, more digitalised and safer. In particular, the Presidency's ambition includes negotiations on the road and maritime safety packages with legislation on requirements for driving licences, better cross-border enforcement of road traffic rules, flag and port state control, maritime accident investigation, ship-source pollution and the revision of the mandate of the European Maritime Safety Agency. It will resume negotiations on the revision of the Single European Sky framework. The Belgian Presidency also pledges to advance or finalise files under the Greening Freight Transport package and make progress on existing or upcoming initiatives on digitalisation of Europe's transport modes, river information services for inland waterways and the improvement of working conditions of transport workers.

Digital, cyber and telecommunications

The Belgian Presidency aims to finalise any remaining work on the AI Act after a provisional agreement was reached under the Spanish Presidency, and on the amendment of the Cybersecurity Act. It will carry on negotiations on the Gigabit Infrastructure Act and seeks to conclude the work on

the Cyber Solidarity Act. The Presidency also intends to discuss the future of Europe's digital infrastructure and how to shape the development of safe networks.

Ahead of the new European legislative term, the Belgian Presidency will conduct a review of EU cyber policy and the institutional landscape to identify the remaining gaps and disparities that need to be addressed.

Agriculture and fisheries

The Presidency aims to launch Council discussions on the common agricultural policy beyond 2027, to ensure food security and autonomy in the future. Discussions on new genomic techniques, the sustainable use of pesticides and the production and marketing of plant reproductive material will also continue. The Presidency also intends to finalise negotiations on the Breakfast Directives.

On animal welfare, the Belgian Presidency is committed to working on the revision of relevant legislation, while on forestry, it will initiate work on the forest monitoring framework.

Environment

The primary focus of the Presidency will be to conclude essential files to put the European Green Deal swiftly into practice. These include the proposal for a Union certification framework for carbon removals and the review of CO₂ emission standards for heavy-duty vehicles. The Presidency will also continue work on the regulation on packaging and packaging waste, the review of the Air Quality Directive and the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, the Green Claims Directive, the revision of the Waste Framework Directive, the regulation on end-of-life vehicles and the Soil Monitoring Law.

Education, youth, culture and sport

The Belgian Presidency will finalise work on the European Media Freedom Act, following the provisional agreement reached with Parliament during the Spanish Presidency. It will also initiate discussions on a forthcoming higher education package leading to the possibility to award joint European degrees.

TOPICAL INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Reform of the Electoral Act

The Belgian Presidency is expected to continue work in the Council on the reform of the EU's electoral law, following Parliament's legislative resolution of 3 May 2022. Unanimity will be needed on this matter. Since there has not been much progress in Council on this proposal, it is no longer feasible to reform the electoral law in time for the June 2024 European elections. Discussions would therefore aim at reforms for the next elections, in 2029.

Conference on the Future of Europe

The Belgian Presidency will take over the follow-up work on the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Complete with 49 proposals to reform the EU, including Treaty change, the report was delivered to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 9 May 2022.

Programming of legislative priorities: Joint Declaration

The Belgium Presidency will carry on with the implementation of the Joint Declaration 2023-2024, which was signed by the Presidents of the three institutions (Parliament, Council and Commission) on 15 December 2022.

This is the last Joint Declaration of the current parliamentary term and there will be substantial pressure on all institutions to **deliver on these key priorities ahead of the European elections**.

FOCUS ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND FIRST-TIME VOTERS

In the 18-month programme of the Council prepared by the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian Presidencies, the trio states that, together with the other institutions, it will maintain efforts to enhance dialogue with citizens. The need for such an approach is one of the clear lessons learned from the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The Belgians will use culture to inform and raise awareness of European policies among citizens and civil society. To enhance public engagement and live up to democratic principles, the Presidency also plans to host citizen panels.

The Presidency will pay particular attention to **young people between the ages of 16 and 18**, who will have the opportunity to vote in the European elections for the first time in Belgium.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

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ANNEX

New initiatives to be presented by the Commission in the first half of 2024

The new initiatives in the Commission Work Programme (CWP) for 2024 due to be presented in the first and second quarters of next year, i.e. **during the Belgian Presidency of the Council**, are:

First quarter 2024

- 2040 climate target (non-legislative)
- Initiative for water resilience (non-legislative)
- EU space law (legislative)
- Strategy on space data economy (non-legislative)
- Initiative to open up European supercomputer capacity to ethical and responsible artificial intelligence start-ups (legislative and non-legislative)
- EU biotech and biomanufacturing initiative (non-legislative)
- Social dialogue: Follow-up to the Val Duchesse summit (Q1/Q2 2024)
- Advanced materials for industrial leadership (non-legislative)
- Initiative on rules on the European Works Council (legislative or non-legislative, in response to a legislative-initiative report from Parliament 'Revision of the European Works Councils Directive')
- European defence industrial strategy (legislative and/or non-legislative)
- Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems (non-legislative)

Second quarter 2024

- Joint Communication on a strengthened partnership with Africa (non-legislative)
- Joint European degree (non-legislative)
- Council Recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education (non-legislative)
- Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system (non-legislative)
- Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews (non-legislative)