

EDITORIAL

Politics in the Low Countries in COVID-19 Times

*Luana Russo & Min Reuchamps**

When the first wave of COVID-19 hit the world in the spring of 2020, it quickly became clear that this virus would become a major worldwide crisis. Unfortunately, as opposed to the SARS outbreak in 2002-2003, COVID-19 did not disappear over summer, forcing countries to longer-term containment strategies, some of which continue to be in place till today. This prolonged state of emergency has had heavy consequences not only on countries' health systems but also on their politics, since the governance of such a major crisis had to rely on extraordinary policies that needed to be created ad hoc. All countries had to enforce some level of limitation to freedom of movement, while, at the same time, sustaining their national economy and employment levels to shoulder the – present and future – financial burden of the pandemic. Once vaccines became available, governments had to both organise an effective, fast and fair system in terms of group prioritisation, vaccine acquisition, distribution and administration, and persuading its citizens to get vaccinated. In other words, the political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic posed political questions and challenges at multiple levels: How long is it acceptable to restrain the free movement of citizens? To what extent can vaccination be enforced? Do some containment strategies violate citizens' privacy? How to deal with citizens who refuse to be vaccinated (especially those that work in healthcare)?

All these questions and many others presented challenges to governments in office all over the world. Their answers varied, sometimes due to the political culture of the country and to the composition of the governments. In fact, the pandemic created a new area of contestation among parties, with those in favour of stricter measures on the one side, and those alarmed by the limitations these measures inflict upon citizens' freedoms on the other.

Because of the different approaches adopted in the Low Countries in response to the pandemic, these countries and their neighbours represent a very interesting case. In this Special Issue of *Politics of the Low Countries* several rele-

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vant aspects of the political implications of COVID-19 are empirically investigated. In the wake of an open call for papers and our usual peer-reviewed process, the Special Issue features four research articles, three with a focus on Belgium and one using a comparative framework, all examining the early stages of the crisis.

The Special Issue opens with a comparative paper entitled ‘The Resilience of Democracy in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Democratic Compensators in Belgium, the Netherlands and France’, written by an international team of authors: Tom Massart, Thijs Vos, Clara Egger, Claire Dupuy, Constance Morel-Jean, Raul Magni-Berton and Sébastien Roché. They investigate how the governments in these three different countries tried to limit the negative effects of restrictions.

The second contribution looks at the party interplay. More specifically, ‘Opposition in Times of COVID-19 – To Support or Not to Support?’ by Britt Vande Walle, Wouter Wolfs and Steven Van Hecke analyses the relationship between governing and opposition parties in Belgium by assessing whether the party type plays a role in deciding whether to support the government coalition (or not).

The paper by Jens Meijen, ‘Performing the COVID-19 Crisis in Flemish Populist Radical-Right Discourse: A Case Study of Vlaams Belang’s *Coronablunderboek*’, focuses on a specific party’s narrative and seeks to understand its strategies vis-à-vis the pandemic by analysing the *Coronablunderboek* published in June 2020 by the Flemish populist radical right party Vlaams Belang.

Finally, the Special Issue closes with an investigation of the role of gender in press’s coverage in Belgium: ‘The Praise for a ‘Caretaker’ Leader: Gendered Press Coverage of Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès in a COVID-19 Context. In this paper, Clémence Deswert’s discourse analysis uncovers the appreciation of traits typically considered feminine (e.g. care) in Sophie Wilmès’ handling of the pandemic.

With the adult population of many wealthy countries now largely vaccinated, politics, parties and politicians will still face challenging times due to strong no-vax movements, and the continuing appearance of new variations of the virus. As editors-in-chief of this journal, we strongly believe that rigorous analyses and empirical insights related to the pandemic are pivotal to the continued reflection on the complex challenges and wicked problems ahead of us. We are, therefore, proud to present this Special Issue and are confident that it will contribute to the ongoing critical, informed and evidence-based academic debate that is so tremendously important and beneficial to society.

The Editors-in-chief of *Politics of the Low Countries*

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