

“The electoral cycle is too short for real political change”

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Following ECOLO’s electoral success in 2019, the Belgian party found itself in governing coalitions at various levels including the federal level where it took 652 days for a government to form. As part of a broad coalition in a complex political scene, keeping the movement and vision behind the party alive and mobilised is a priority. Confronted with the pandemic, how has the party built credibility around social issues and kept climate change on the agenda? We spoke with Mohssin El Ghabri about how the party is navigating the current context, its political ambitions, and the stakes for Belgian Greens in the 2024 elections.

This interview is part of a series that we are publishing in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: You’re currently between electoral cycles, which means that you don’t have any elections on the immediate horizon. You’re in government and confronted with the enormous challenge of the Covid-19 crisis. How does a party like ECOLO approach national issues? What are the issues that shape the public debate?

Mohssin El Ghabri: First let’s bear in mind a key piece of context: Belgium is a federal state with various governments of which we’re a part, something that’s unprecedented. Never before has ECOLO been part of every government but the small government of the German-speaking community. We are indeed between electoral cycles: the next polls will be the combined European, federal, and regional elections, shortly followed by local elections, in June and September 2024 respectively.

As for the national context, politics is completely absorbed with the issue of Covid, managing the pandemic, and all the social, economic and psychological effects of the crisis, with a particular focus on decision-making in the Covid-19 era. It is, I believe, very difficult for constructive, non-populist opposition parties to assert themselves in this scenario, which is heavily focused on decision-making and, in Belgium, on the federal government. It is even more focused on two figures in the federal government, the health minister and the prime minister. The national context has also been impacted by the effects of climate change in the form of heatwaves and flooding. This context is also shifting fundamentally in terms of politics because in the north right-wing and far-right parties represent a majority of voting intentions, and in the south, the PTB [The Workers’ Party of Belgium] is developing a new style through aggressive left-wing populism.

For us, it’s challenging and difficult. Difficult because we’re in the front line, not just at the federal level but at the regional level too: Alain Maron is the health minister for the Brussels

region, and Bénédicte Linard is health minister for the French-speaking community (there are lots of health ministers in Belgium, which in itself caused political controversy, especially during the first wave). We're under pressure from certain sectors who want to re-open because they're really suffering, yet we're not in the driving seat at the federal level. This helps and hinders us: it hinders us fundamentally but helps from a political point of view, because the Belgian political landscape is quite hard to read, including when it comes to apportioning blame. That's why the finger is pointed at the whole political class.

Are you still able to make room in public debate for other issues, whether directly or indirectly linked to the origins of the pandemic?

To answer the first part of the question, the habit that we very quickly got into when the crisis started is, when we're in power, to strive for managerial excellence to ensure that we do the best in the circumstances. In terms of the party, we try to develop subjects connected to the Covid crisis which aren't too far from our fundamentals like climate and the environment. For example, we really tried to explain the crisis through issues of biodiversity and zoonotic diseases. Not just immediately offering solutions, but making sense of the crisis and drawing the link between what's happening today and the risk of it happening again if we continue to destroy the natural shield that separates us from wild animals.

In intellectual and media debate about the crisis, we initially saw several competing framings. The green framing explains the crisis in systemic terms through issues such as biodiversity, whereas the more social-democratic framing emphasises the lack of robustness of our healthcare system, the lack of intensive care beds, and so on. It's the same thing that we do: bring things back to their fundamentals. Judging by the way that intellectuals and journalists have answered this question, our framing has proved more credible. Parties on the right tend to read the Covid situation as a "parenthesis" that will close only for "business as usual" to return better than before.

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We also stressed a conception of health that is much richer and fuller than just associating health with the healthcare system. We wanted to talk about environmental health more generally, as well as the social and environmental determinants of health. Aspects of the lockdown experience illustrated its importance like the fact that it's very difficult to enjoy green space if you live in a big city without a balcony. The lockdown experience is completely different to those of people living in the countryside. We focused more on preventive aspects than remedial ones and environmental determinants of health in particular.

Lastly, we drew parallels between the Covid crisis and the climate crisis. The increasing importance of scientific opinion, which has always been important for us, was clearest during the first wave. We emphasised how scientists should be listened to in the same way when it comes to the climate and biodiversity crises. It worked quite well, but it only works

when we're able to forge alliances with, for example, epidemiologists and virologists who have strong climate and environmental awareness and who systematically draw the link between the two crises. This shouldn't obscure the other side of this reality, which is the questioning of the broader scientific world by populist movements.

How do you build credibility in the public debate and make connections between environmental and socio-economic issues?

What strikes me most when I put my finger to the wind is the strength of environmental issues in public opinion. Environmental and climate concern is much stronger than it was 10 years ago. Quite humbly, ECOLO has played its part in that too. What is reassuring is that this concern has not been diminished by the Covid-19 crisis. Although environmental and climate issues come up less – at least in the French-speaking community – than they did during electoral campaigns a year or two ago, these issues appear to have a life of their own, regardless of the media narrative and the traditional press.

Concern and awareness about these issues are spreading beyond the parts of society that have traditionally been aware of them. For us, it's a case of knowing how to politicise other growing concerns and draw the links between very different issues.

Our goal is to update our proposals on “green issues”. These are environmental and climate subjects and everything related, like sustainable food for example. We are considered the most credible party on those issues. When we negotiate with other parties, we see that they are, in fact, quite weak on substance when it comes to climate and environmental issues. Others, including the Socialist Party, have still not changed their spots on environmental issues, apart from political spin. Government negotiations are the moment of truth because they reveal what other parties' true colours are.

Does this weakness lie in the expertise they bring to the table or rather in their proposals?

Both. In terms of vision, they find it hard to make the connection between environmental issues and economic issues, or between environmental issues and social issues. They have a siloed approach to “green issues”, as well as a lack of expertise. It's part of a general trend. Perhaps it's inherent to the proportional system, which encourages parties to specialise. We weren't at the same level as the Socialist Party on questions of social security or pensions. Building on those issues is one of our goals for the coming years: to not just remain strong and relevant on green issues – in other words, not take them for granted – but to also invest in socio-economic subjects so that we can emphasise our own vision.

After the environment, Europe is a key element in the current debate. The health crisis is of course global in scale, but the European dimension is enormously important. Does Europe also have an impact on political divides in Belgium? Supporting the European Union is part of the Greens' political DNA. How do you promote this dimension in the national public sphere?

There's not really any political divide on European issues. In Belgium, we have a tradition that is broadly favourable towards European integration, with one recent exception, the

PTB, as well as the far right. At some point, the PTB decided it wanted to differentiate itself on Europe by pushing ideas like “we need to leave the treaties”. It’s a bit like what Jean-Luc Mélenchon is doing in France, but with much less success.

However, European issues have been crucial for furthering our agenda. At the negotiating table, ECOLO had the European Commission on its side, which is no small thing in a country with a strong pro-European tradition. Leveraging the Green Deal during federal negotiations was a fairly decisive argument in convincing Liberals and Socialists of the soundness of our proposals on climate, the environment, and biodiversity. Europe has been a considerable help for us over the past year and a half. It’s something that I was not seeing at all 10 years ago.

We had elections in the Netherlands in March, it’s an election year in Germany, and next year in France. These electoral dynamics have an impact both on environmentalism and Europe. How closely does ECOLO follow this?

Germany and France, for obvious reasons to do with changes in European dynamics, are the places where our gaze always falls. Germany has a clear impact on the shifting balance of power as the German Greens could potentially enter government. It marks a turning point for the Greens in Europe, so it’s crucial that we follow it closely, as well as trying to analyse their tactical and strategic choices because their situation is closer to ours than the French Greens’. The German regions that have developed a strong link between industrial vision and the environment are of particular interest. This gain in credibility is something we should really draw inspiration from in Belgium. We still have plenty of room for improvement and there are some quite useful lessons to take away from what’s going on in some German Länder, as well as the federal level.

On the French side, it’s different because we share a French-speaking public sphere. This means that what happens in France has an impact on us. What we’ve seen in France is the Greens growing in strength to the point where they’re the main target for the party in power. If, as a party, Europe Ecology – The Greens [EELV] is caught up in endless controversy, especially in terms of “punitive environmentalism”, that can affect us. On the other hand, if EELV manages to build momentum in the run-up to the presidential election, that’s super positive.

We’ve entered a phase of increasing geopolitical awareness. There’s growing uncertainty at the borders of the European Union. Although it isn’t an electoral issue, does ECOLO have a geopolitical vision, both for Belgium and Europe?

First of all, Belgium doesn’t have a strong tradition of projecting geopolitical power, apart from in the Great Lakes region of central Africa. It’s here that Belgium continues to have major economic interests and political influence. And it’s diminishing with the growing strength of China, the United States and France in the region. On the other hand, Belgium has a strong tradition of multilateralism and investment, both when it comes to European Union foreign policy – with the only wrinkle being the issue of NATO, which remains a thorn in our side – and multilateral organisations, up to and including the United Nations.

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kill it off.

Like European issues, the tradition of multilateralism isn't a subject that divides Belgian political parties, with the exception of the PTB. From this point of view, the Greens are fairly comfortable, in the sense that we stand for multilateralism, policies that promote human rights, and really campaign on these issues. Take, for example, China and the Uighurs. It's an important issue in Belgium, in Dutch and French-speaking communities alike, and we've taken strong stances on it, with parliamentarians leading the way.

Respect for human rights in foreign policy is a strong part of Greens' identity, especially the Belgian Greens. This applies as much to our relations with foreign countries in general as it does to our neighbourhood policy towards countries on the European Union's borders. This concern for human rights can of course be seen in our asylum and immigration policies, where we have been and remain the clear progressive choice because neither the Socialist Party nor the PTB campaign on these issues.

The issue of trade deals is also very important for Belgian Greens. What we want to develop is, on the one hand, our opposition to certain treaties, like Mercosur, but we're also trying to get away from a posture of automatic opposition. It's about developing a framing that allows us to identify what we want in trade deals and avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Finally, for us, the climate is a fundamental geopolitical question and we know that the most relevant level for fighting this battle is European. The European Green Deal and the trends developing in Europe might outwardly project a model image of a greener society. But behind this image lies a very concrete and visible use of climate and environmental (including biodiversity) dividing lines as a pillar of EU foreign policy. Today, talking about climate in cooperation agreements and international fora means talking about homeland security and protecting the physical safety of EU citizens, rather than reducing this to blue flowers, bees and adaptation programmes here and there, like in the past. Climate geopolitics isn't a gimmick and ECOLO fully incorporates this component into its European policy positions in the governments that we belong to.

There's another question: European defence. For you, NATO is a "thorn in the side". But how do you solve this equation of being pro-European and in favour of European strategic autonomy while at the same time existing within the American umbrella and the dynamics associated with it?

Historically, we have opposed NATO, favouring European defence much more, and we believe that the two conflict. The problem lies not so much in terms of building our vision of how things should be. Rather, it's a political question. You can't simultaneously want NATO, want the growth of NATO if necessary, and want the development of European defence strategies. From this point of view, the Trump era brought home the need to press ahead on European defence issues.

What are the main strategic priorities that you want to focus on for elections at every level between now and 2024?

The first is to ensure that the party thrives outside of its participation in government.

Governments have their roadmaps that are negotiated with other parties; we have our own roadmap and we must continue to promote it in public debate. The party can't let participation in government kill it off. It's more an operational objective, but it's so important and requires so much effort that it has actually become a strategic objective. The second strategic objective is to make a success of our participation in government, to succeed in achieving our priorities in federal and regional governments as well as in municipalities where we are in power.

The third objective is to fully engage in the cultural battle. The reality is that the electoral cycle is too short for real political change. We must also engage in fights that aren't limited by election dates. The "cultural battle" means any investment in and building of alliances that would allow us to change how we are perceived and lead to lasting political success.

For example, we hold almost all the transport portfolios in Belgium (except Flanders). Obviously, our policy could be boiled down to the desire to reduce the modal share of the car in transport. But the car isn't just a means of transport: if we want to be stronger than we are today, in Brussels we're at 20 per cent, if we want to get above 20 per cent or so, we will have to move beyond our traditional electorate. We have to go after working-class voters, or those who live in working-class areas (which isn't the same thing in Brussels). In these areas, the car is also a status symbol that you buy when you start working. We need to be able to change these perceptions so that we are stronger, more audible and more credible with these voters. It won't happen in the next two or three years, but we must be able to invest in this now to create the conditions for broader social coalitions in the next five to ten years. So our preferred alliances are with the world of culture and with artists. You can really create interesting things by blending political perspectives with artistic and cultural ones. We're launching many joint initiatives with the cultural and artistic world to build the Green vision through artistic and cultural expression, rather than just through scholarly press releases and well-written texts. We want to change the political grammar in this regard.

Last goal: we want to be stronger from an operational point of view and build on the professionalisation of our organisations. It's about emphasising the fact that operational excellence is at least as important as strategic vision, which is a prerequisite for pursuing and achieving our goals.



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