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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2024 - Belgium

FREE

96

/ 100

Political Rights 39 / 40

Civil Liberties 57 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

96 / 100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Belgium is a stable electoral democracy with a long record of peaceful transfers of power. Political rights and civil liberties are legally guaranteed and largely respected. Major concerns in recent years have included the threat of terrorism, corruption scandals, and rising right-wing nationalism and xenophobia.

Key Developments in 2023

- The government continued to struggle to cope with high numbers of asylum seekers entering the country during the year. Many asylum seekers were left without shelter because federal facilities were unable to accommodate the demand. In August, the government announced that it would no longer provide accommodation for single men in its facilities, giving priority to children and families.
- In September, several public schools in southern Belgium were subjected to acts of vandalism and protests by religious and right-wing groups after the country's French-speaking community adopted new guidelines for sexual education in public schools. The country's

top officials defended the new guidelines and promised to thoroughly investigate the vandalism that had occurred.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The Belgian monarchy is largely ceremonial, although the king retains constitutional authority to mediate the process of government formation. He was particularly active in this role in 2020 as negotiations over a new government stalled. The prime minister, who is the leader of the majority party or coalition, is appointed by the monarch and approved by the legislature. In late September 2020, seven parties forged a parliamentary majority under the leadership of Alexander De Croo of the Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats party, who was sworn in as prime minister that October.

Belgium's multilayered subnational administrative units have their own governments with varying degrees of autonomy. In addition to the three main geographic divisions of French-speaking Wallonia in the south, Flemish-speaking Flanders in the north, and the bilingual Brussels capital region, there are overlapping governments for the French community, the Flemish community, and the much smaller German-speaking community.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

Belgium's federal parliament consists of two houses: the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate. The 150 members of the lower house are elected directly by proportional representation. The Senate is composed of 50 members selected by community and regional parliaments, and an additional 10 members chosen by the first 50 based on the results of the Chamber of Representatives elections. Members serve five-year terms in both houses, and elections are generally free and fair.

In the May 2019 elections, establishment parties lost significant shares of support to parties on the far left and far right of the political spectrum. For example, the right-wing, nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) lost some power, taking 25 seats in the Chamber of Representatives (down 8 seats), but the far-right, separatist Flemish Interest (VB) party won 18 seats, a gain of 15. On the left, the francophone Socialist Party (PS) won 20 seats, down 3 from the previous election, while the Greens—composed of the francophone Ecolo and their Flemish-speaking counterpart Groen—won a combined 21 seats. The leftist Workers' Party of Belgium (PvdA in Flemish, PTB in French) also made major gains, rising from 2 seats to 12. A

total of 12 parties won seats in the lower house. It took until September 2020 to form a new government, a delay that is not historically unusual for Belgium.

In 2019, the German-speaking community launched a system of participatory democracy in which citizens are selected by lot to join a Citizens' Council, which provides input on policy matters. A similar program has been introduced in the local parliaments in the Brussels region, and plans to launch related initiatives in other regions and at the national level were underway as of 2022.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

Despite the complexity of the political system, the electoral laws and framework are generally fair and impartially implemented.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

The party system is robust but highly fragmented, with separate Flemish and francophone political parties representing various positions on the left-right spectrum.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

Belgium's coalition-based politics allow individual parties to move easily in and out of government, and there is a long record of peaceful transfers of power between rival parties at the federal level. However, the 2019 regional and federal elections showed decreasing support for establishment parties and increasing support for far-right, far-left, and green parties across the country. The increasing power of the Flemish right-wing N-VA and the far-right VB makes majority coalitions that exclude these nationalist parties increasingly difficult to assemble. The N-VA and VB became the two largest parties in Flanders after the 2019 elections, and they criticized the formation in 2020 of a federal government that lacked their participation.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4 / 4

The political choices of voters and candidates are generally free from undue interference.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4 / 4

Members of racial, ethnic, religious, and other minority groups are free to participate in national and subnational politics, and women enjoy full political rights. In the 2019 elections, women were elected to 65 seats out of 150 in the Chamber of Representatives; this 43 percent share represented a rise of 4 percentage points from the 2014 elections. The Senate must have a minimum of 20 women senators.

In general, the larger parties incorporate members of minority groups, including in senior positions. In 2019, Belgians elected Petra De Sutter, an openly transgender member of the Groen party, as a member of the European Parliament; in 2020, De Sutter became Belgium's deputy prime minister.

Some Muslims seeking elected office have faced anti-Muslim harassment, including accusations that visible indicators of their religious affiliation, such as hijabs, are incompatible with the neutrality required of representatives of the state. During 2023, Saliha Raiss, a municipal councilor in Brussels, faced significant opposition from the francophone Reformist Party (MR) while seeking nomination to become an alderwoman. The MR refused to support Raiss, a member of the Flemish Social Democrats (Vooruit), because she wears a hijab, which MR president Georges-Louis Bouchez claimed would violate state neutrality. Ultimately, Raiss garnered enough support from non-MR councilors to be elected as alderwoman in September.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

Elected officials generally adopt and implement laws and policies without improper interference from unelected entities.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

Public officials can face heavy fines and up to 10 years' imprisonment for corruption-related offenses, and enforcement of anticorruption legislation is generally adequate. However, recent corruption scandals have drawn attention to abuses involving politicians who hold multiple positions on the boards of public and private entities, with some officials holding more

than a dozen paid positions. The Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), a Council of Europe (CoE) anticorruption body, has repeatedly warned about Belgium's slow implementation of recommended anticorruption reforms.

Two new laws improving whistleblower protections in line with EU requirements were passed in November and December 2022 and entered into force in February 2023. The legislation provides protections in both the private and public sectors.

Several senior officials of the Walloon parliament, including its president, resigned in December 2022 after being implicated in a scandal involving the misuse of public funds. The same month, Marc Tarabella, a PS politician and member of European Parliament, was suspended from the PS following allegations that he had accepted illicit funds from Qatar. Investigations into the so-called Qatargate corruption scandal were ongoing during 2023.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 4 / 4

The law provides mechanisms for the public to access government information, and these procedures generally function in practice. Legislators and other high-ranking elected officials are required by law to regularly disclose their assets as well as paid or unpaid mandates, executive functions, and occupations to the Court of Audit. Information about asset declarations is not publicly accessible, but declarations of interests are published in the official government gazette. In recent years, both GRECO and the European Commission have recommended that Belgium adopt stronger regulations governing interactions between lobbyists and high-level government officials, including members of parliament.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 4 / 4

Freedom of the press is guaranteed by the constitution and generally respected by the government. Belgians have access to numerous public and private media outlets that present a range of views. Internet access is unrestricted.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

More than half of the country's population identifies as Roman Catholic. Freedom of religion is generally protected, but members of minority

religious groups have complained of discrimination and harassment. A ban on the partial or total covering of the face in public locations, which is understood to target Muslims, has been in effect since 2011. The rise of nationalist and far-right parties in Flanders has contributed to the normalization of anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Several high-profile anti-Muslim incidents have occurred in recent years. In one case in 2021, a court ordered a Brussels-based public transport company to pay €51,000 (\$60,700) in damages to a woman who was denied a job because she wears a hijab. The court found that preventing individuals from wearing religious symbols in the workplace constitutes discrimination and disproportionately affects women.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free 4 / from extensive political indoctrination? 4

The government does not restrict academic freedom. Schools are free from political indoctrination, and there are no significant impediments to scholarly research or discussion.

In September 2023, several public schools in southern Belgium were subjected to acts of vandalism and protests by religious and far-right groups after the country's francophone community adopted controversial new guidelines for sex education in public schools. The prime minister has defended the new guidelines, which make sex education mandatory for 11- and 12-year-old students as well as 15- and 16-year-old students, and has asked for the government's experts on extremism to investigate the situation.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or 4 / other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Private discussion is open and vibrant, and freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution, though there are laws banning incitement to hatred and other such offenses, which occasionally lead to prosecutions, fines, and jail terms.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is protected by law and generally respected in practice.

However, in July 2023, the House Justice Committee approved a reform ostensibly intended to target so-called rioters and individuals that use protests as a cover to commit violent crimes. If adopted, the controversial reform would allow the authorities to ban those deemed "rioters" from

participating in future demonstrations. Opposition politicians, civil society groups, and labor unions, among others, have criticized the draft law, expressing concern that it could be used to undermine the freedom of assembly. Despite amendments to the bill made in response to the widespread criticism, the draft law remained highly controversial. As of November 2023, the proposed law remained under consideration and had not been adopted.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Freedom of association is guaranteed by the constitution, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate without undue restrictions.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Workers at companies that employ more than 50 people have the right to organize and join unions and to bargain collectively. Employers found guilty of firing workers because of union activities are required to reinstate the workers or pay an indemnity.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 4 / 4

The judiciary is independent by law and in practice, and court rulings are duly enforced by other state entities.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 4 / 4

The judicial process generally guarantees a fair trial, and the authorities typically observe safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 4 / 4

Although conditions in prisons and detention centers meet most international standards, the facilities continue to suffer from overcrowding and other problematic living conditions.

Drug trafficking and related violence is a problem. In 2022, four people were arrested for allegedly plotting to kidnap Belgium's justice minister, who police believe was targeted due to his efforts to crack down on international drug trafficking. Investigations into the incident remained

ongoing into 2023. Drug-related violent crime remained a problem, particularly in Brussels and Antwerp, during 2023.

According to the Belgian Coordination Body for Threat Analysis (OCAM), the threat from far-right extremism has increased in recent years.

Two people were killed and at least one wounded in an attack by an Islamic extremist in Brussels in October 2023. The assailant, Abdesalem Lassoued, was shot and killed during a “police operation” shortly after the attack. It quickly emerged that Tunisian authorities had issued an extradition request regarding Lassoued, who had been denied asylum in Belgium, in 2022, but the Belgian government did not follow up on the request. Belgian justice minister Vincent van Quickenborne resigned several days after the attack, calling the government’s failure to appropriately respond to the 2022 extradition request “an inexcusable error.”

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of 3 / various segments of the population? 4

Antidiscrimination legislation prohibits bias and acts of hatred and incitement based on categories including gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, some groups, including immigrants, Belgians of African descent, and Romany residents, continue to face a degree of discrimination in practice.

In 2019, UN experts stated that racial discrimination is institutionally endemic in Belgium and called for recognition of the country’s history of human rights abuses during its colonial rule over what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Following debates prompted by the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, King Philippe expressed regrets over Belgian colonial rule.

Despite robust legal protections for the rights of LGBT+ people, LGBT+ individuals sometimes face instances of violence.

A high volume of asylum seekers has arrived in Belgium in recent years, straining the government’s capacity to provide refugees and asylum seekers with government services. Between late 2022 and early 2023, many asylum seekers were left without shelter because federal facilities were unable to accommodate the demand. In August 2023, Belgian authorities announced that single men seeking asylum would no longer be provided accommodation in government facilities.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

The law provides for freedom of domestic movement and foreign travel, and the government upholds these rights in practice.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

The legal framework supports property rights, and commercial activity is regulated without arbitrary interference.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4 / 4

There are few significant restrictions on personal social freedoms. Belgium legalized same-sex marriage in 2003, and in 2006 same-sex couples gained the right to adopt children.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Immigration has increased in recent years, but non-European Union immigrants and their Belgian-born children remain poorly integrated into the labor market.

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