

# Belgium Report

## Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024

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## Executive Summary

Belgium, a country of 30,689 km<sup>2</sup> located in northwestern Europe, is densely populated with 11.7 million inhabitants and is very open to the rest of the world. Belgium continuously works to make this openness its strongest asset.

As a result, Belgium's economy is generally healthy and its quality-of-life indicators are very good, although with a few sticking points discussed in this report. In 2022, the country's GDP reached €54 billion (NBB data). GDP per capita is the sixth highest in the EU (Eurostat data), ahead of France and Germany but below the Netherlands, Denmark, and Switzerland. In real terms, GDP in 2023 was 41% above its 2000 level, compared to about 39% for the Netherlands, 30% for France, 27% for Germany, and 6% for Italy (IMF data). The unemployment rate was 5.6% in Q3 2023, a strong performance by recent historical standards and below the euro area's 6.4%.

Belgium's openness is not only an economic but an institutional matter. The country is home to several supranational institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, and NATO, as well as many multinational corporations and interest groups. Belgium also has a history of migration, with Brussels now home to people from 179 nationalities; about a third of its population is not Belgian.

Belgium is characterized by resilience and a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, particularly for socioeconomic issues. As a small open economy, it must constantly adapt to external competition, a trait ingrained in its socioeconomic fabric. However, this adaptability can also expose Belgium's weaknesses during times of turbulence, such as the COVID and energy crises. The flip side of this pragmatic approach is a tendency toward protracted compromises that rarely provide clear directions or unlock hard decisions. This leads to strong hysteresis and a complex layer of rules, rather than reversing ineffective policies. Belgium's overly complex institutional system often frustrates large swathes of the population, with the best way forward far from clear or consensual.

The COVID crisis provided many examples: the economy resisted well and recovery was prompt, but Belgians discovered they had seven health ministers with overlapping competencies. Coordination across different levels of power

proved difficult, leading to anomalies and inconsistencies before urgency forced collaboration. Eventually, pragmatism prevailed, science was heard, and the social safety net performed well, but it took a government change, endless negotiations, and immense pressure to avert collapse. The current government coalition includes seven political parties with differing ideologies, making decision-making complex. The COVID crisis forced coalition partners from different ideologies to collaborate, and the government is now reaching the end of its tenure. Despite some successes, it leaves many unsolved problems: a lack of foresight capacity, retroactive problem-solving, a failed tax reform, unsustainable judiciary amid growing violence, corruption, and financial fraud, and barely started energy and digital transition systems. Belgium now has one of the highest public deficits in the euro area.

The next elections are in June 2024, and opinion polls predict a highly fractionalized, probably polarized, outcome. Increasing support for far-left (PTB-PVDA) and far-right (Vlaams Belang) parties could make forming a federal government coalition even more difficult. This may pose significant challenges for the next stages of reform when the pragmatic, slow compromise approach might need to be set aside.

## Key Challenges

Belgium is often considered a deeply divided society. Flanders is more affluent and productive than Wallonia, and the economic and political gap between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians keeps widening. This creates significant tension and may lead to the disintegration of the country – not through war, but through the dismantling of social security links, growing disparities in public service provision, and increasing barriers to mobility. Elections will be held in 2024, and it is worth noting that traditional parties representing the historical segments of society (Liberals, Christian Democrats, and Social-Democrats) are losing ground to far-right (Vlaams Belang), far-left (PTB-PVDA), and regionalist (N-VA) parties. The far-right might win the election in Flanders and become the largest party in the Chamber of Representatives, while the far-left is making significant gains in Wallonia and Brussels. This ideological polarization between the regions will make coalition-building increasingly difficult, and finding common ground will be a key challenge for Belgium.

Another challenge is to improve the socioeconomic performance of the country as a whole. This requires a systematic evaluation of each policy and

taking immediate corrective, sometimes radical, measures when needed – contrary to the current practice of sluggish adaptation through compromise. The multiparty government coalition, encompassing a wide range of political ideologies, complicates decision-making and makes cohesive reforms challenging to implement. Belgium has one of the highest public deficits in the euro area, reminiscent of the 1980s when corrective measures were taken. The next government will need to replicate this success. With the second-largest government budget in Europe, expenses must be cut. This will be unpopular since a significant portion of the budget goes to social transfers, healthcare, and tax expenditures. However, freeing up resources is necessary to achieve the digital and green transformation of the country. Currently, Belgium is a weak performer in CO2 emissions per capita, energy efficiency, and modern infrastructure. The tax system requires comprehensive reform and simplification. The current system, riddled with exemptions, benefits those who can navigate its complexities more than those who focus on their core jobs. A simplified and equitable tax system can promote compliance, enhance revenue, and reduce distortions. The incumbent government is the third in a row to fail at comprehensive tax reform. The next one must succeed.

Given its size and central location in Europe, Belgium should not undertake these reforms alone. It should build a coalition of willing eurozone countries to align social and fiscal rules. This coalition can work toward harmonizing exemptions and tax bases to combat fiscal injustice and money laundering. At home, Belgium faces growing mismatches between the skills employers require and those possessed by workers. This weighs down on jobs and wages and hinders the greening of the economy, as new skills and different enterprises are in high demand. Resolving such mismatches requires a more adaptable education system that emphasizes problem-solving and other general skills. The education system also fails non-native speakers, who underperform in both PISA tests and the labor market. Bridging these gaps is essential to tackle political tensions, including racism, and to improve the economy's dynamism.

Clearer signals to the youth about high-demand skills can guide their educational choices, ensuring they are well-prepared for the labor market. Another important issue is ageism. Facilitating mid-career retraining can help workers adapt to changing job requirements, enhancing their employability.

Finally, the current institutional setting must mature toward efficiency. The model of federalism does not provide sufficient authority to the federal level over its federate entities. This often leads to uncoordinated, sometimes contradictory, measures being implemented in each region. Business conditions also differ across regions. For instance, emission standards for

mobile phone masts differ in Brussels and its periphery. Belgium needs simpler and leaner administration, which will not materialize without some form of institutional rationalization. This can only happen through the recentralization of some devolved competencies, though regionalists will claim the opposite.

Amid the challenges posed by external factors such as geopolitical tensions and global warming and internal factors like public debt and population aging, improvements must be assessed based on their capacity to unlock resources aimed at resolving these issues. The required amounts are substantial: Belgium must reinforce public transport, modernize its car fleet, make real estate more energy-efficient, modernize its electricity grid, transform electricity generation, and provide incentives for fuel and energy economy.

In short, Belgium has proven resilient but slow to adapt. Now, it must accelerate its efforts to become more nimble and fit for the future.

# Democratic Government

## I. Vertical Accountability

### Elections

Free and Fair  
Political  
Competition  
Score: 9

Belgium is a parliamentary democracy with a proportional representation system and two linguistic groups, Flemish and French-speaking. There are currently 11 parties sitting in the lower chamber of parliament (Pilet 2021), along with two independent MPs. This is testimony to Belgium’s fair and accessible electoral system, despite a 5% electoral threshold since early 2000 (Reuchamps et al. 2014).

Legal restrictions, such as requiring a certain number of signatures before an individual may run, are fair and are effective in controlling the number of candidates running for election. The same holds for parties, which can be relatively easily registered, possibly in a single district (or electoral “arrondissement”). In practice, of course, such restrictions may represent a higher de facto hurdle for smaller or local parties or candidates. Like in any country, established parties developed enhanced knowledge of registration procedures and of the law’s subtleties.

Given mandatory voting, established parties typically slate candidates with diverse backgrounds (e.g., regarding age and cultural origins). Additionally, there are strong and effective constraints on gender balance in electoral lists which increased the proportion of women MPs which reached 42.7% at the 2019s election (Talukder, 2023). While these rules are abided by the parties, there remains overall a higher proportion of male candidates at the top of party lists, implying a higher chance of being elected and the way candidates are selected is not that clear (see Vandeleene and Van Haute 2021).

Free and Fair  
Elections  
Score: 10

Voting is compulsory for all Belgians aged 18 and above in all first-order elections (EU, federal, and regional levels). At the local level, voting is mandatory in Wallonia and Brussels, and for the first time in 2024, voting will

not be mandatory at the local elections in Flanders. Citizens are automatically registered as voters and receive an official invitation to vote by mail. For the European Elections of 2024, a reform introduced voting rights for citizens aged 16 and 17, with automatic registration, though voting is not compulsory for this age group (elections.fgov.be). Since 2004, non-Belgian citizens with their main residence in Belgium for more than five years can also register to vote in municipal elections. Citizens from other EU countries can register to elect their Belgian European representatives if they decide not to vote in the EU election in their home country.

The European, national, and regional elections are typically held on the same day to facilitate citizen participation. Voting is compulsory by law, and noncompliance can lead to penalties and the loss of political and civil rights. However, in practice, no one has been charged for abstention since 2003 (Le Soir, May 25, 2019). The latest election was in 2019, with a turnout rate above 88% for both the national and European parliaments. V-Dem's Democracy report 2023 ranks Belgium in the top 10% of most democratic countries, above the Netherlands, Germany, and France but below Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

### Quality of Parties and Candidates

Socially Rooted  
Party System  
Score: 9

Belgium's proportional election system, combined with mandatory voting, ensures that many parties run in elections, representing a wide array of preferences. The consociational nature of Belgium, based on Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal pillars, includes nonprofit organizations, political parties, unions, and social security organizations. This system is associated with political parties representing the interests of a significant proportion of citizens in parliament and, although not always, in government (Delwi, 2022). However, the consociational nature can be questioned (Van Haute & Wauter, 2019) as eleven parties and two independent MPs have seats in the lower chamber of parliament. The presence of multiple parties, including far-right and far-left, allows a diversity of interests to be represented and to achieve societal integration in parliament, although it makes governing coalitions difficult (Pile, 2021).

Some parties with unique positions, such as the "Islam" party in 2012 or "DierAnimal" in 2019, ran for election but did not win seats. This reflects the main parties' incentive to incorporate such positions into their platforms as they become salient (Meguid 2005). One growing criticism from elected representatives is that the power of party leaders and technocrats can become overbearing, with party discipline resulting in a top-down chain of command that sometimes restricts individual representatives' freedom of expression.

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Effective Cross-Party Cooperation  
Score: 8

Belgium is a textbook example of consociational parliamentary democracy, characterized by a grand coalition, proportionality, mutual veto rights, segmental autonomy, and cultural public passivity (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). The proportional representation system implies that no party has held a majority since WWI. A de facto constraint is the decentralization trend since the 1960s, which delegates increasing powers to the country's regions, serving different communities: mainly the Flemish-speaking north and the French-speaking south, both represented in Brussels. It is de facto impossible for a French-speaking party to profitably run for election in the north, and vice versa. The increasing fractionalization of the electoral landscape has induced some parties to run together to reach a critical mass, notably the Flemish and French-speaking Greens, the far-left PTB-PVDA, and the Christian Democrats in Brussels.

A self-imposed constraint on cross-party cooperation is the "cordon sanitaire" meant to exclude extreme-right parties since the 1980s (Biard, 2020). This results in lower access to traditional media platforms and exclusion from potential coalitions. Conversely, some right-wing parties want to impose the same "cordon sanitaire" around extreme-left parties, with less success. Over the last decade, the main extreme-right party in Belgium, the Flemish Vlaams Belang (previously Vlaams Blok), has worked to portray itself as less anti-Semitic and distanced from former WWII Nazi collaborators. This "mainstreaming" strategy (Hjorth et al. 2024) adapts challenger parties' rhetoric and political style to the norms and policy positions of dominant parties to be considered credible coalition partners. This has led some "democratic" parties to be less openly reluctant to cooperate with the extreme right.

Like in almost all democracies, the last decades have seen some degree of polarization and personalization of politics. In Belgium, this mainly takes the form of individual politicians overcommunicating on social media and taking ostentatious positions on minor issues. This makes coalition governance harder and has induced many "old school" politicians to retire, claiming they can no longer "work for the population" as they did in the past.



Transparent  
Government  
Score: 6

### Access to Official Information

The Belgian constitution was amended in 1993 to include the right of access to government documents. However, the FOI law applies only to administrative functions and documents in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches (EuroPAM). Banisar (2006, 48) identifies several weaknesses in implementing that framework: “The protection of the right of access to the official documents is not ensured enough... People are not familiar enough with the right of access.” He also points to the civil servants’ lack of training.

Beyond federal-level issues, the federal law only applies to federal entities. The Belgian regions, which are federated entities, have their own freedom of information laws. Mabillard et al. (2023) tested their implementation by sending information requests to a large number of municipalities (each subject to its region’s laws). Their results show that barriers to information disclosure remain widespread, with most municipalities either not responding to the requests, arguing the requests are not specific enough, claiming they do not have the resources to respond, or, in a few cases, asking for fees to disclose information.

Furthermore, academic research is often impeded by individual data protection regulations, leading to a lack of genuinely open data. For example, it is impossible to assess wealth inequality in Belgium because the data are not available, not necessarily for privacy reasons but due to a lack of willingness to make the data publicly available. This restricts the capacity to stimulate evidence-based policymaking or evaluate policy performance.

## II. Diagonal Accountability

### Media Freedom and Pluralism

Free Media  
Score: 8

Media freedom is enshrined in the Belgian constitution and widely respected in practice. Any news medium may be created and is free to express any political opinion unless it is reprehensible (e.g., open racism, calls to violence). Criticism of the government, even if unfair, is allowed. However, the Belgian market is narrow and divided between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking submarkets, limiting the entry of new media. For instance, some satirical/investigative media akin to the French Charlie Hebdo entered and eventually exited. The TV and radio market features large public players,

partly managed by representatives of the main political parties. The head of the main French-speaking public-media organization is appointed by the government and holds a post comparable to that of a civil servant. Nevertheless, the media organization's journalists work largely free from direct control or political influence, even if some reporting may be a bit too uncritical of the government position.

The country's main newspapers are privately owned and run. There are also important private television and radio stations, which operate independently of political parties, though some interpersonal connections exist at the upper management level. The internet has enabled private citizen initiatives to scrutinize public action. Privately held press organizations are largely independent and do their best to scrutinize public activities despite increasing financial pressures. There is limited self-censorship to gain better access to highly visible politicians, but no outright censorship by the government or other public entities..

Pluralism of  
Opinions  
Score: 7

Relatively few actors have an ownership stake in the major private-media companies, which is expected in a small economy with two submarkets (Dutch and French). As a result, the market is relatively concentrated. However, various media outlets (television, radio, print, and web) offer a diverse range of opinions, and most political positions are well represented. The boards of Belgium's two large public-media entities for radio and television (the Flemish VRT and the francophone RTBF) are composed of representatives from most political parties, including opposition parties (from among the main parliamentary parties). There is a "Cordon Sanitaire médiatique" in French-speaking Belgium, which prevents parties, representatives, or movements that do not respect democratic principles and values (including extreme right-wing and fundamentalist religious parties) from having free speaking time on live television. This excludes them from live talk shows and debates. However, journalists have the right and are invited to talk about the far-right and its program, provided they put this political current and its ideas into perspective (Biard 2021). This barrier impacts the diffusion of far-right political opinion on traditional media and can explain the lack of successful far-right parties in French-speaking Belgium.

One issue affecting media outlets is the growing financial stress on print media. Tighter budgets have restricted newspapers' ability to pursue in-depth investigations systematically and have generally diminished some of the public scrutiny a free press is supposed to exert. Most major print press groups, both Flemish and Francophone, face severe financial difficulties as print sales decline and web-based business models fail to sustain a broad pool of professional journalists.

Civil Society

Free Civil Society  
Score: 9

Belgium is known for its extensive civil liberties, as confirmed by the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, which ranks Belgium 8th out of 140 countries for fundamental rights. Notably, Belgium performs exceptionally well in the sub-factors of “Freedom of opinion and expression” and “Freedom of assembly and association.”

However, these civil liberties can sometimes appear endangered, primarily due to political responses to external shocks or events. During the COVID-19 crisis, civil liberties were under pressure, with restrictions on the right to assemble and, consequently, to demonstrate. High tension within the police forces, bordering on exhaustion, resulted in acts of violence both from and against the police. While these were not part of a deliberate policy to restrict civil liberties, they contributed to a gradual erosion of norms.

This trend likely began with the 2001 terror attacks in the United States and accelerated following the 2015 and 2016 attacks across Europe. As early as 2016, Human Rights Watch expressed “grounds for concern” about counterterror measures.

With the end of the COVID-19 crisis, these restrictions were loosened. However, the debate around the effective freedom of assembly has been reignited by the government’s plan to introduce a bill proposed by Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne. The bill would allow judges to ban individuals who commit protest-related offenses, such as assault or property damage, from participating in future demonstrations. Unions and the president of the Human Rights League (LDH) have deemed this bill too stringent, fearing it would “pose great risks to the right to collective action in general.”

Effective Civil Society Organizations (Capital and Labor)  
Score: 9

Belgium’s socioeconomic model is characterized by consensual (neo-corporatist) policymaking, whereby the government consults established stakeholders to facilitate policy acceptance (Pauly et al. 2021). When strategic decisions involve key socioeconomic issues, representatives of social partners – powerful and well-structured employers’ organizations and trade unions – systematically negotiate bilateral agreements, which are then presented to the executive for approval. Unionization rates in Belgium remain very high, with membership rates close to 50% in 2019, one of the highest in Europe.

Technological changes related to service platforms (such as Uber), the internationalization of the economy, trade agreements like CETA, and efforts

by the previous right-wing government to reduce the power of workers' unions have eroded unions' influence. Despite these challenges, unions remain quite powerful.

Belgium has three national union confederations: the General Labor Federation of Belgium (ACOD/FGTB), the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV/CSC), and the General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (CGSLB/ACLVB), with the first two being the most significant. It is common for these three unions to form a "common front." The main employers' organization in Belgium is the VBO/FEB (Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen/Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique), which operates nationwide and includes members from various employers' organizations, each specializing in a particular industry or sector.

Both trade unions and employers' organizations possess well-developed study services with technical expertise, often extending beyond their traditional focus areas.

Effective Civil  
Society  
Organizations  
(Social Welfare)  
Score: 8

A wide range of civil society groups influence policy formation in Europe, and Belgium excels in this regard. Many noneconomic interest associations, including environmental, cultural, religious/philosophical, sports/leisure, and minority groups (such as individuals with disabilities), receive state funding.

The largest groups can make proposals and influence policy effectively. Consociationalism in Belgium ensures that some socially important decisions are made smoothly. For instance, the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2003, euthanasia in 2002, and the extension of euthanasia to minors in 2014 followed intense but dispassionate debates. A recent example involves the introduction of compulsory courses on emotional and relational life in education, which initially met with violent opposition, including school arson and vandalism. Despite significant media coverage, this opposition was marginal and occurred only after the policy had been voted on, in stark contrast to similar issues in France or the United States.

A key reason for this smooth decision-making is the predominance of political parties. Some groups and associations that receive funding either initially have or later develop preferential relationships with political parties or government actors. As a result, social groups, associations, and publicly funded schools often have long-standing ties to political entities. This creates a strong incentive for noneconomic interest associations to propose well-founded policies, as there is a high probability that these proposals will be debated in parliament. The downside of this structure is a dependence on public funding.

Effective Civil  
Society  
Organizations  
(Environment)  
Score: 6

Belgium provides public funding to various civil society organizations (CSOs), and a significant proportion of the workforce is employed in the nonprofit sector. Contributions to CSOs are tax-deductible, with 45% of the amount given being deductible, up to a maximum of 10% of net annual revenues or €392,200. Despite this support, the capacity of CSOs (excluding unions) to design and shape public policies is rather limited. However, CSOs are often consulted by parliamentary commissions and the government, where they can influence the decision-making process (Squevin and Aubin 2021).

Belgium has been significantly influenced by widespread awareness of climate issues. Social movements have emerged in various forms, some more consensual with broad support from the population and politicians but with wide-ranging demands that made political follow-up vague and difficult. Others, more radical, have been less widely supported by the population and often poorly regarded by politicians.

In 2018-2019, young people were at the forefront of the citizen's climate movement, with weekly demonstrations initiated by "climate express" and "coalition climate," supported by young students, propelling environmental concerns to the top of election debates.

With the COVID-19 crisis, the war in Ukraine, and other international events somewhat slowing these largely consensual social movements, the more radical fringe of the climate movement has continued the struggle through civil disobedience actions, such as occupations of zones to be defended in Arlon and blockades of TotalEnergies depots. Meanwhile, the marches continue, though less frequently.

### III. Horizontal Accountability

#### Independent Supervisory Bodies

Effective Public  
Auditing  
Score: 9

Established by the constitution (Article 180), the Court of Audit (Cour des Comptes/Rekenhof) is a collateral body of parliament. It exerts external control over the budgetary, accounting, and financial operations of the federal state, the communities, the regions, public-service institutions that depend on them, and the provinces. Some public firms and nonprofit organizations are also subject to review, such as the Flemish public-transportation firm De Lijn, which was audited in 2013.

The Court of Audit's legal powers grant it considerable independence and broad autonomy to fulfill its mandate. Members of the Court of Audit are elected by parliament. The court's reports are public and presented to parliament along with the state accounts. The body regularly attracts media attention for its critical remarks regarding the management of public entities or services, such as roads in Wallonia or so-called Economic Activity Zones. However, its recommendations and criticisms are seldom followed up with concrete political actions.

Effective Data  
Protection  
Score: 5

In May 2018, the Belgian federal government established the Data Protection Authority (DPA – Autorité de protection des données/ Gegevensbeschermingsautoriteit). The DPA's mission is to protect individual privacy during personal data processing. To enhance efficiency, several pre-existing authorities and services were consolidated under the DPA. The restructured authority, accountable to the House of Representatives, appoints its board of directors politically for six-year terms. Belgium was also one of the first countries to create the function of Secretary of State for Privacy in 2015 (De Busser 2021).

However, the DPA has faced issues related to transparency, conflicts of interest, and governance errors. Notably, the European Commission initiated a serious infringement procedure against Belgium due to DPA member Frank Robben's dual role as the head of a public body handling social security and health-related data. The complaint was withdrawn following Robben's resignation from the DPA in early 2022.

Robben's resignation did not resolve the DPA's issues. In 2020, two whistleblowers alerted parliament about conflicts of interest and governance errors within the DPA, particularly concerning member David Stevens. Parliament eventually dismissed Stevens and one of the whistleblowers. Since then, the secretary of state for data protection has attempted to reform the body, but without success to date.

### Rule of Law

Effective Judicial  
Oversight  
Score: 9

In Belgium, the independence of the judiciary is central to the constitution and the rule of law. The Belgian constitution includes provisions (Art. 159 and 160) for the judicial oversight of unilateral administrative measures. The Conseil d'État (Council of State) is responsible for judicial review, and the Cour de Cassation is the Supreme Court of the Belgian judicial system, hearing appeals in the last resort against judgments and other decisions of lower courts.

While the courts generally operate unhindered, ensuring the capacity to challenge government action, two adverse developments must be noted. One is the chronic underfunding of the judiciary, which limits its capacity for investigation. The second was temporary: during the COVID-19 crisis, the government had to take rapid actions and declared a state of emergency, imposing restrictions on fundamental liberties such as meeting in public or private spaces and operating businesses. During this period, the courts often sided with the government out of urgency, but some officials complained that their independence was under threat. This tension evaporated after the emergency period, and independence was restored. The only serious constraint to effective oversight remains the chronic underfunding of the justice system.

Universal Civil Rights  
Score: 8

Political and civil liberties are extensive in Belgium. Even during the coronavirus crisis, political liberties remained intact. However, civil liberties came under pressure during the crisis, with restrictions on the right to assemble and demonstrate. High tension within police forces resulted in occasional violence, both from and against the police. While these were not part of a deliberate policy to restrict civil liberties, they contributed to a progressive erosion of norms.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the liberties and rights of EU citizens have been fully restored or even improved. For instance, new rape laws enshrining the principle of consent entered into force in Belgium (Amnesty International 2023). However, following the immigration waves of 2015 and 2022, the government has hardened its stance on immigrants and political refugees, leading to an erosion of their rights. Amnesty International also highlights the inhumane treatment of prison inmates due to overcrowding in dilapidated prisons (2023, 92).

Effective Corruption Prevention  
Score: 7

Belgium has extensive financial disclosure legislation to prevent officials from entering situations of conflict of interest. However, these regulations have limited effectiveness due to a lack of control, fines, and transparency in reporting.

In 2013, the OECD published a report on bribery, expressing disappointment at Belgium’s lack of priority in combating bribery. The report highlighted the lack of resources for investigations, prosecutions, and sentencing. The EuroPAM database reveals that the situation remains largely unchanged. In practice, this translates into repeated situations that do not qualify as explicit corruption but are morally unacceptable to the public. A recurrent issue is the creation of semi-public entities run by political appointees who get involved in payment or procurement situations that test the limits of the law. While legal

provisions to reinforce transparency and prevention remain lacking, public scandals and proactive actions by the judiciary are progressively addressing these issues. Recently, the risk of outright corruption has increased due to the global expansion of criminal organizations and shifts in political balances, such as Middle Eastern countries seeking political support in European parliaments. Belgium is particularly exposed to these risks. The Port of Antwerp is one entry point exploited by drug traffickers, and the presence of international institutions in Brussels makes it tempting to lobby politicians. The absence of a well-funded anti-corruption agency in Belgium reinforces these risks.

**Legislature**

Sufficient  
Legislative  
Resources  
Score: 9

Belgium is a parliamentary democracy where the government relies on the support of parliament to function. De jure, the legislature has full authority to monitor and constrain government actions. It can summon ministers and experts, and propose legislation without needing government approval. Parliament frequently establishes special committees or investigative commissions (commissions d’enquête) for in-depth investigations. Since the government is often a coalition of parties holding a parliamentary majority, members of parliament typically play predictable roles: coalition members defend the government’s actions, while opposition members criticize nearly every action. This dynamic is not unique to Belgium and is a common feature of parliamentary democracies (Sieberer 2020; Bäck et al. 2022).

Recurring tensions within coalition parties have facilitated the work of the opposition, enhancing parliament’s capacity to monitor government actions. Not all coalition partners are always willing to defend the actions of a single minister. While Belgium is generally considered an average-to-good performer in legislative oversight (Bäck et al. 2022, Fig. 5), recent performance has been above this long-term average.

Members of parliament are sometimes criticized for having excessive budgets and personnel, with several MPs using their resources to support their parties. MPs are also expected to transfer some of their wages to their party.

Effective  
Legislative  
Oversight  
Score: 9

Parliament currently runs 11 permanent commissions, 14 ad hoc commissions, and 1 inquiry commission. Defense, justice, and interior commissions are chaired by opposition members, while other commissions, such as budget and external relations, are chaired by members of the government coalition but co-chaired by opposition members. They can summon ministers, documents, and experts at will. Chiru and De Winter (2023) show that portfolios are more



often attributed to the opposition when the ideological gap between government and opposition widens, showing parliament’s de facto oversight capacity.

One concrete case that has bogged the government over the course of the legislature is Belgium’s energy policy. In line with the EU’s climate transition strategy, Belgium is actively moving toward electrification and efforts to phase out fossil-based energy. At the same time, it is shutting down its nuclear power plants, insufficiently investing in other dispatchable energies, and has witnessed delays in the expansion of its green but non-dispatchable energy sources (namely solar and wind). This portends a significant energy deficit in the years ahead. Initially, the energy minister dismissed concerns about phasing out nuclear power and relying on imports. Another party in the coalition was from the start strongly opposed to the phasing out of nuclear energy. Opposition parties also constantly challenged the minister in parliament, but this was more a matter of form than of content and she proved able to sidestep the more “painful” questions on this issue. However, the invasion of Ukraine showed that Belgium could not rely on imports, intensifying questioning and challenges that eventually forced the government to redirect its strategy toward investing in nuclear power and accelerating investment in renewable power production.

Effective  
Legislative  
Investigations  
Score: 9

Except during the COVID-19 crisis, when emergency measures tested constitutional rights, the government cannot overstep its constitutional powers without being challenged and corrected by the Council of State (Conseil d’Etat), federate entities, or opposition members in parliament. The Council of State investigates all such requests with complete independence from the government coalition. However, mistakes or unlawful behavior do not necessarily lead to the fall of the government or the responsible minister.

Legislative  
Capacity for  
Guiding Policy  
Score: 8

The number of parliamentary committees in the Chamber of Deputies slightly exceeds the number of ministries. There are 11 permanent committees addressing key policy areas aligned with ministerial portfolios, while 14 special committees focus on specific topics or cross-cutting issues. Committees can effectively monitor ministries, but this monitoring can be underwhelming, as demonstrated by the nuclear safety and electricity supply case. It ultimately took Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the imminent risk of power cuts to prompt effective government action.

While these committees can effectively monitor government actions ex post or amend government law projects, they are less effective at guiding policy ex ante. That role has been taken over by ministers’ cabinets of experts, with almost all legislative proposals being tabled by the government rather than parliament.

# Governing with Foresight

## I. Coordination

### Quality of Horizontal Coordination

Effective  
Coordination  
Mechanisms of  
the GO/PMO  
Score: 8

All government proposals in Belgium go through the Prime Minister's Office and are discussed in a "kern" (core) meeting with the proposing minister, the prime minister, and the vice-prime ministers (one per party in the coalition). This ensures close coordination, sometimes following heated negotiations. If a proposal cannot be agreed upon, it can be vetoed or delayed in an attempt at logrolling.

The PMO contains a "strategic cell" that helps the prime minister evaluate and steer policy across all levels. Each adviser and expert in the cell specializes in one field, assessing only the most important issues due to the team's relatively small size. Given that governments are always coalitions (comprising at least four parties), party advisers of the corresponding minister also play a central role in the lawmaking process.

Before implementation, each government project is submitted to the ministers' council, which meets weekly. The council, composed of a secretariat that scrutinizes each proposal and prepares the agenda, includes 14 line ministers and the prime minister, who debate each proposal. Decisions are made based on political consensus, not a majority vote.

One notable feature of the Belgian system is the coexistence of politically appointed experts who work closely with their minister and professional civil servants who work in the administration. The tenure of politically appointed experts typically matches that of their minister, whereas civil servants can hold their positions for life. Some ministers try to impose a strict chain of command on their ministry, which may occasionally hamper communication across various administrations. However, whenever the government wants to table a proposal to parliament, the coordination process described above must take place.

Either directly or through the council's secretariat, the prime minister can block or impose the redrafting of any proposal if it does not fit the government agreement or conflicts with a coalition party's agenda, or for any other reason. All government members must defend accepted projects on a collegial basis.

This requirement has caused conflicts in the current government, which includes left-wing, right-wing, Christian Democrat, and Green parties. For example, in December 2023, the government could not agree on the appointment of a top civil servant, holding all other appointments hostage, which left several positions unfilled. As a result, the governor of the Belgian National Bank could not see his tenure renewed on time, forcing an external committee to reconfirm the governor ad interim at the last moment. Fortunately, such mishaps are rare..

Effective  
Coordination  
Mechanisms  
within the  
Ministerial  
Bureaucracy  
Score: 7

At the federal level, Belgium, like many OECD countries, allows internal mobility for civil servants, including senior levels, but this is neither promoted nor expected (OECD 2023). This can become a problem when ministries lose responsibilities. For instance, when the single market was created, Belgium had an excess supply of customs officers. Instead of reskilling them for other ministries, many remained in their original administration. Furthermore, Belgium has yet to adopt the approach of formulating learning plans for the majority or entirety of its public sector employees (OECD 2023).

As detailed in "Effective Coordination Mechanisms of the GO/PMO," coordination between ministers is necessary to table a proposal. However, this does not prevent a single minister from using their own administration to develop a proposal unbeknownst to ministers from other parties and revealing it at a later stage. To limit this, experts close to another party are typically embedded in the minister's team.

Concerning digitalization, the Federal Public Service for Information & Communication Technology (FEDICT) is responsible for defining and implementing an e-governance strategy. However, this agency primarily focuses on government-to-citizen (G2C) and government-to-business (G2B) communication, while government-to-government (G2G) interactions are largely overlooked. Although cooperation and coordination are improving within each government level, the federal structure hinders the sharing of a single IT architecture across government levels. Each level is responsible for its digital infrastructure.

However, Belgium fares comparatively well internationally. The U.N. E-Government Survey 2022 ranked Belgium among the countries with a "very high" e-government development index.

Complementary  
Informal  
Coordination  
Score: 9

Apart from official coordination via the PMO, Belgium has a robust unofficial coordination system through two channels: first, ministers’ teams (“ministerial cabinets”) are composed of experts from at least two parties (though most are close to the minister’s party). Second, political parties are very strong and align the actions of all politicians and their teams within the same party. Between formal and informal arrangements, the PMO enforces additional policy coordination across line ministries through meetings with various ministers’ political advisers. The chief of staff within the prime minister’s political cabinet plays a crucial role in policy coordination.

**Quality of Vertical Coordination**

Effectively  
Setting and  
Monitoring  
National  
(Minimum)  
Standards  
Score: 5

Belgian federalism is centrifugal, having evolved from a unitary state to multiple entities with autonomous decision-making power (Faniel et al. 2021). Several core responsibilities of the Belgian central government have been delegated to provinces and municipalities and some core responsibilities have been transferred to regional or subregional levels: to the three regions (Flanders, the Brussels region, and Wallonia), and to the linguistic communities (Flemish, French, and German). Some standards are set at the federal level but implemented locally. This works well for older standards like access to free education, but newer standards, particularly on environmental issues, are more challenging to impose and are sometimes resisted by the regions.

The federal government can ensure that subnational self-governments (i.e., provinces and municipalities) meet national standards, but it cannot do so for federate entities (regions and linguistic communities). The Belgian federal model is one of cooperation: the state has no formal authority over regions and communities, as there is no hierarchy between the federal and regional/community levels. This creates complications, such as any single region being able to block an international treaty, as happened with the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) in 2016, which was withheld by Wallonia alone. It is also difficult for the federal government to impose budget limits on the regions.

Formally, there is limited capacity to impose common standards. De facto, however, coordination is relatively well enforced due to European regulations and the presence of externalities between the regions. Additionally, the ability to publicly accuse or ridicule each other for incompetence provides leverage. While this creates more scandals than necessary, Belgium continues to function and performs well economically.

Effective  
Multilevel  
Cooperation  
Score: 6

Belgium has a federal structure with little hierarchy, known as cooperative federalism. Each level controls its areas of responsibility and cannot be dictated a different behavior by another level (except courts). In this flat structure, various government levels must negotiate any form of cooperation. This proved necessary during the COVID-19 crisis, where cooperation was effective but tedious and open to logrolling. The crisis brought renewed awareness of the need for enhanced cooperation, which has improved somewhat compared to a decade ago, though it depends heavily on the ministers’ personal willingness to exchange and cooperate.

The federate entities (regions) have better capacity to induce cooperation among cities and smaller municipalities. Small municipalities were merged in the late 1970s to save on fixed costs. Today, the regions provide technical expertise and high-powered financial incentives to their cities, enforcing de facto cooperation more smoothly than between the regions and the federal government. Mayors benefit from high levels of autonomy in their choice of Instruments (Ladner et al. 2021).

For example, municipalities have joined forces to establish intermunicipal waste agencies, improving waste management practices and saving costs. The Brussels-Capital Region works closely with its municipalities to improve public transport, leading to better connectivity and accessibility. The Walloon Region promotes cooperation among its cities through cultural events, attracting tourists and fostering community. Many Belgian municipalities have committed to the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, pledging to reduce CO2 emissions by at least 40% by 2030 and to adopt an integrated approach to tackling climate change.

## II. Consensus-Building

### Recourse to Scientific Knowledge

Harnessing  
Scientific  
Knowledge  
Effectively  
Score: 7

Consultation with non-governmental academic experts varies depending on the subject matter. Their influence on final decisions is often limited and marginal compared to full-time ministerial cabinet experts. The executive branch and parliament are able to harness the best available scientific knowledge, but they do not systematically consult full-time academic experts with independent views. They do so only occasionally, and their efforts in this regard do not necessarily foster genuine scientific debate.

In Belgium’s neo-corporatist system, representatives of social partners (employers’ organizations and trade unions) are consistently involved when strategic socioeconomic decisions are made. However, in politically sensitive areas like tax reform, academic and international expertise has minimal influence. Fobe and colleagues (2017) show that Belgium has numerous advisory bodies at federal (250) and regional (46) levels, deeply integrated into policymaking, but these advisory bodies are often valuing experiential expertise over academic opinions due to the consensus-based political system. There are exceptions, such as the National Committee for Pensions, which had one of three subcommittees composed solely of academic experts. Yet, its impact on actual reforms was limited (see, for instance, Devolder and Hindriks 2023). The Belgian Healthcare Knowledge Center is another exception.

The trend of consulting scientific experts increased during the COVID-19 crisis, with the government forming ad hoc groups of expert scientific advisers and numerous coordination committees. However, this trend has not been consistent over time, with scientific experts consulted more sporadically post-COVID-19. A recent example is a scientific committee tasked with evaluating the law on abortion extension (see press article).

**Involvement of Civil Society in Policy Development**

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Capital and  
Labor)  
Score: 8

Belgium is known for its strong culture of consultation and consensus, particularly in relation to socioeconomic policies. Pineda-Hernández et al. (2022) demonstrate that Belgium has both a high bargaining coverage (96% according to OECD data) and a high level of centralization.

In the Belgian political landscape, both trade unions and employers’ associations hold significant representation within the decision-making process at the federal and regional echelons. Their ability to negotiate with each other and the government is bolstered by their representation of a substantial and stable proportion of employees and corporations. Their inclusion in a multitude of committees ensures that their viewpoints are effectively articulated to, and taken into account by, the authorities. Furthermore, they have the capacity to forge binding agreements among themselves, thereby exerting considerable influence over the entire economic terrain of Belgium.

Nevertheless, there are instances where these entities engage in negotiations that result in unbalanced agreements, necessitating the Belgian government to intervene and bridge the ensuing financial disparity. Moreover, the occasional

failure of trade unions and employers’ associations to reach consensus can impede their capacity to shape public policy effectively. This highlights the complexities inherent in the decision-making process and the challenges faced by these entities in their pursuit of influencing policy.

Despite generally positive indicators and outcomes, there are underlying issues eroding the power of social dialogue and the dynamics of social partners. This is evident in the declining share of produced wealth going to wages, indicating a shift in the balance of power between labor and capital to the detriment of workers and trade unions (Hermans 2022).

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Social Welfare)  
Score: 8

As referenced under “Effective Civil Society Organizations (social welfare),” various CSOs in Belgium significantly impact policy. Numerous associations, not primarily driven by economic interests, receive government funding and have the ability to suggest and shape policy. The principle of consociationalism ensures that key societal decisions are made efficiently. This is largely due to the dominance of political parties. Associations and groups that are funded often establish or evolve to have favorable political ties with political parties or government officials. This suggests that social groups, associations, and to a certain extent, publicly funded schools, often maintain long-term relationships with a political faction. This creates a strong motivation for noneconomic interest groups to suggest policies and ensure their proposals are well-argued, given the high likelihood of these proposals being discussed in parliament. A downside of this structure is the reliance on public funding, which politicians can use strategically.

This system may limit the ability of organizations that are truly independent of political parties to participate in policymaking. However, these organizations are not idle and employ various methods to influence political decisions, such as active involvement in public works inquiries, parliamentary interventions, legal challenges against government decisions, and organizing presentations and debates.

Lastly, as highlighted by Pineda-Hernández et al. (2022), social partners play a crucial role in unemployment benefit schemes. They are involved through bipartite social dialogue regarding policy designs or reforms and through direct participation in establishing general rules and managing the unemployment benefits system. This is true even for the Ghent system, whereby unions collect and distribute unemployment benefits. Belgium, however, only has a hybrid or “quasi-Ghent” system, whereby the government is the main provider, but unemployed workers can ask to deal with their union instead of the official unemployment office.

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Environment)  
Score: 6

In the context of climate change, dialogue is less institutionalized and hence less effective. As mentioned under “Effective Civil Society Organizations (environment),” the civil society movement addressing climate issues can be broadly categorized into two main groups. The first group, which enjoys support from politicians across the spectrum, is largely consensual. The second group, often disavowed by politicians, is more radical.

Despite the involvement of the more consensual groups, neither group actively participates in the formulation of relevant policies. Their involvement is typically on an ad hoc and case-by-case basis. For instance, the official website (climat.be) still highlights a series of academic seminars organized in 2018. A stakeholder workshop was also arranged prior to COP 28, providing an opportunity for them to express their views and concerns. However, none of these activities are binding for the authorities.

Nevertheless, recent improvements are worth emphasizing. In the summer of 2023, the federal parliament passed a federal law on climate policy governance by a large majority. This law introduced a committee of independent scientific experts with a consultative role, among other things. Moreover, a coalition of civil society and activists lodged a formal complaint for climate inaction. The justices sentenced the governments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55%.

As a result, civil society organizations (CSOs) are advocating for more consultation and for their opinions to be more effectively considered in the upcoming elections..

**Openness of Government**

Open  
Government  
Score: 6

According to the OECD’s OURdata index, Belgium’s data publication practices are below the OECD average, with data accessibility being a significant issue. This assessment aligns with the experience of academics, who often face difficulties in obtaining access to detailed microdata for Belgium. Data availability is also problematic compared to other countries. Solutions to this lack of availability often come from ad hoc initiatives by academics.

Aggregated data, however, are generally available through platforms like Open Data by Statistics Belgium (Statbel) and the different statistical institutions of the three regions (VSA, IWEPS, and IBSA/BISA). These platforms provide a wealth of information on various topics, making it possible for citizens to access and use government data. There have been



efforts to increase the digitalization of public services, which can be tracked by a website launched by the federal government ([digitaldashboard.belgium.be](https://digitaldashboard.belgium.be)). Although helpful, it hardly allows citizens to hold the government accountable.

One challenge is that one can get lost looking for a particular type of data as different structures and websites are involved. For example, health-related data is available from Sciensano, National Accounting-related data from the National Bank of Belgium, and various other data from Statbel. Although a platform was developed to consolidate these data sources ([data.gov](https://data.gov)), it has usability issues and limitations.

Regarding individual accountability, the complexity of the Belgian system and the overlap of responsibilities make it very difficult to map information into a voting decision. For instance, Brussels performs poorly on labor market outcomes, but it is also the region with the highest rate of non-native speakers and the city where workers must master Dutch, French, and English. Other regions can perhaps rightly blame Brussels for its low performance, while Brussels politicians can easily defend that they work hard and effectively at improving the situation.

### III. Sensemaking

#### Preparedness

Capacity for  
Strategic  
Foresight and  
Anticipatory  
Innovation  
Score: 6

Belgium has not developed a robust culture of anticipatory innovation and strategic foresight. However, it features several organizations that support economic forecasting and expert analysis. Notably, Brussels, as both the capital of Belgium and Europe, houses European institutions with strategic foresight units. Belgium regularly collaborates with these institutions and the OECD for its strategic thinking. Despite this, these remain external bodies, often imperfectly integrated into Belgian government procedures.

The oldest and most competent planning organization is the Federal Planning Bureau, founded in 1959. It has evolved into an expert and independent entity providing economic forecasts at multiple levels, quantitative analyses, technical support for greening the Belgian economy, and independent assessments of the financial sustainability of public finances. Recently, it was tasked with “costing” the main proposals of political parties before elections. Next to this well-structured (yet partly underfunded) bureau, Belgian

governments have created a rather large number of supporting bodies that cover a broader range of topics. However, the distribution of resources can sometimes prevent each body from reaching critical mass, possibly by design, as each remains dependent on its minister and thus remains amenable.

Exceptions to this trend include the “BOSA” ministry at the federal level and the VARIO unit in Flanders, Belgium’s largest and wealthiest region. BOSA provides strategic support mainly for human resources purposes and is expanding its technical capacity, although it cannot impose a methodology on other ministries. VARIO provides strategic analysis for industrial policy and mobility (TomorrowLab 2024).

**Analytical Competence**

Effective  
Regulatory  
Impact  
Assessment  
Score: 5

In principle, RIAs are integral to the legislative process in Belgium, impacting environmental and population decisions. However, in practice, RIAs are often only superficially addressed. The OECD’s 2021 report states: “Belgium has not improved its institutional and policy framework for regulatory quality at the federal level over the last years. Regulatory impact assessment (RIA) is mandatory for all primary and for some subordinate legislation [...] and is usually shared with social partners as a basis for consultation. RIAs for subordinate regulations are however no longer published. Belgium currently does not systematically require an identification and assessment of alternatives to the preferred policy option.” This places Belgium slightly below the OECD average (around 2.4 out of 4 primary law and 1.8 for subordinate regulations), with the quality of some evaluations being underwhelming and performed by ideologically aligned agencies.

Efforts are underway to improve this situation. The BOSA ministry, which offers technical support to other federal ministries, promotes “better regulation” and RIAs, mainly referencing European legislation and initiatives. However, the forms and evaluation reports are outdated, dating back to 2014 and 2015. Belgium’s regions can develop their own RIA rules. Flanders, the largest and wealthiest region, has a dedicated RIA webpage, with most documents dating back to 2012-2015. No similar resources were found for Wallonia or the Brussels Region.

Effective  
Sustainability  
Checks  
Score: 4

In 2007, Belgium added Article 7bis to its constitution, stating that various levels of power must “pursue the objectives of sustainable development in its social, economic, and environmental dimensions, taking into account intergenerational solidarity.” This legislation mandates environmental impact

assessments for any significant policy before implementation. Despite being highly constraining on paper, implementation quality varies, and Belgium’s overall climate policy faces legal challenges.

Belgium’s main problem in achieving its SDG goals is typical of its institutional setup: governments are run by coalitions that have a hard time agreeing on a simple and clear policy direction, and the design of its federal system, one of “coordination” between the federal and federate entities, prevents the central authority from imposing policy targets on regions without negotiation. As a result, while the European Commission’s “Green Deal” assigns a number of targets to achieve, Belgium’s regional and federal levels never managed to agree on how to implement them.

Accordingly, Belgium’s sustainable development strategy encourages multiple actors to take action rather than implementing a coordinated top-down policy. Actions are inventoried on the dedicated website [sdgs.be](https://sdgs.be), which highlights efforts by companies, trade unions, mutual societies, NGOs, schools, youth movements, and citizens. However, this inclusive approach can lead to fragmented outcomes, with varied interpretations of “sustainable” across different state levels.

Effective Ex Post  
Evaluation  
Score: 5

There is no systematic ex post policy evaluation in Belgium, especially for its most important institutional arrangements. However, several bodies conduct ex post policy evaluations in areas such as employment, economic policy, discrimination, and budget (see Varone and Magdalijns 2000). The OECD scores Belgium’s ex post policy evaluation policy at 1.4 out of 4, which is above the OECD average. Hence, while very weak in absolute terms, it appears decent in comparative terms.

Belgium’s numerous quality universities lead to regular academic evaluations of public policies, often commissioned and financed by public bodies. However, these study results are not typically integrated into the process of updating and improving actual policy.

# Sustainable Policymaking

## I. Economic Sustainability

### Circular Economy

Circular  
Economy Policy  
Efforts and  
Commitment  
Score: 8

Belgium is a leader in the transition to a circular economy, achieving high recovery and recycling rates for various waste types. The Brussels-Capital and Flanders regions are recognized as leaders among OECD regions for their circular economy initiatives (OECD 2019). Despite these accomplishments, increased efforts are necessary to enhance recycling and composting. The country has initiated innovative measures in sectors like construction and food to advance the circular economy.

Eurostat data reveals that Belgium has the highest recycling rate of all waste in the EU (87% in 2020) and the second-highest circular material use rate (23.7% in 2021). Although the country's resource productivity significantly exceeds the EU average, its per capita waste generation is slightly above the EU average. However, per capita packaging waste generation is below the EU average. Private investment in the circular economy, as a percentage of GDP, is the highest in the EU. Nevertheless, the gross added value related to the circular economy and the employment rate in circular economy sectors are both below the EU average.

Belgium has implemented ambitious circular economy strategies across all three regions, integrating these with economic development plans. The Brussels-Capital Region adopted a Program for the Circular Economy in 2016, promoting resource circularity, reducing food waste, and supporting urban farming. Flanders launched the Materials Program in 2011, aiming for an economic model with closed material cycles, and introduced the Circular Flanders program in 2017. Wallonia prioritized the development of a circular economy and resource efficiency in its 2015-19 Regional Development Plan. In February 2021, the Walloon Government adopted Circular Wallonia, the region's first circular economy deployment strategy (OECD 2021).

At the federal level, a federal action plan for a circular economy was adopted at the end of 2021. One of the recently approved measures under this plan is the introduction of a reparability and durability index for goods, allowing consumers to understand a product’s reparability and estimated lifespan (see press article). Several inter-regional and inter-departmental bodies support circular economy work, exchanging information and establishing working groups on indicators, requirements for recycled content in products, and legal barriers to circular initiatives through an inter-regional platform.

Initially, Belgium’s circular economy indicators focused on program results, such as the number of enterprises receiving financial support and legislative barriers reformed. More recently, broader economic indicators have been considered, with a focus on consumption rather than production. The Intra-Belgian Circular Economy Platform, together with the Federal Planning Bureau, is in charge of developing a strategy for monitoring the transition to a circular economy using concrete indicators (FAP 2021).

**Viable Critical Infrastructure**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to a Resilient  
Critical  
Infrastructure  
Score: 7

Belgium, a densely populated country, has one of the densest road and rail networks in the world. Despite this, its road coverage continues to expand, making it one of the costliest infrastructures to maintain relative to the country’s size. However, due to a high debt-to-GDP ratio, infrastructure investment has been relatively low both historically and compared to neighboring countries, leading to a visible decline in the Belgian government’s “net capital stock” (Biatour et al. 2017). Despite this, most of Belgium’s infrastructure remains in good condition, close to the EU average.

For a long time, infrastructure maintenance lacked a clear strategy. Reactivity was good, keeping roads and rail at a decent to good quality, depending on the sub-region. However, decisions were typically backward-looking, with maintenance initiated only when significant damage was evident. This approach resulted in sluggish and somewhat disorganized works and building sites (see federal action plan for a circular economy).

One prominent case was the numerous tunnels in Brussels, mostly built in the late 1950s, which were barely maintained due to budgetary constraints. Some had to be closed in emergencies around 2018-2020 due to falling concrete blocks. This prompted the current government of Brussels to initiate a more proactive investment plan.

A similar turnaround is taking place across all regions and at the federal level. Significant adverse events, including climatic catastrophes, massive floods, and infrastructure damage, have driven improvements, aided by the EU's Recovery strategy, which conditions funding on well-developed strategic plans.

Infrastructure management has largely been decentralized, with the federal government and regional governments each having authority over their areas of responsibility. This decentralization led to a relative decline in infrastructure quality in Wallonia (mainly in road and rail) and Brussels (mainly road, although public transport improved), and a relative improvement in Flanders (better roads and large investments in other infrastructure, including digital). Both Flanders and Wallonia developed "2019-2024 plans" containing several multi-year infrastructure renovation measures. Flanders, for instance, has improved the highway networks around its main cities and Brussels (one of the many anomalies of Belgian federalism is that the "Brussels ring" is in Flemish territory, together with Brussels' main airport).

As detailed elsewhere in this report, another crucial turnaround during this legislature concerns electricity production. Previous governments decided to shut down nuclear plants and compensate for the loss in electricity production capacity with green energy, mainly wind farms in the North Sea and photovoltaic production across the country. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has revealed the infeasibility of relying on imports, leading the government to delay the closure of some nuclear plants, invest in Small Modular Reactors, and accelerate the deployment of wind and solar energy.

Other crucial infrastructures have been delegated to corporations, some state-owned (e.g., railways or water supply and management), and some largely privately owned (e.g., telecommunication). This allows the government to outsource maintenance costs and professionalize decision-making. The outcome is good for water (though costly) but poor for railways, which suffer from a lack of funding and flexibility to fulfill their targets.

### Decarbonized Energy System

Belgium has made strides in its energy transition, including deferring the closure of two nuclear power plants by a decade, initiating an energy savings campaign, and offering financial incentives for energy-efficient renovations. However, given its heavy dependence on imported fossil fuels, more efforts are needed to achieve climate neutrality by 2050.

The country is a leader in offshore wind power development, but onshore wind power development faces hurdles due to public acceptance and permit issues. Belgium's renewable energy consumption was only 13% in 2021, and there is

considerable potential for growth, particularly in rooftop solar power. To encourage this, the VAT for solar panel installations in houses less than 10 years old was reduced to 6% until the end of 2023.

Estelle Cantillon, a Belgian economist specializing in sustainability and energy, suggests that Belgium is far from achieving carbon neutrality and lacks adequate preparation. The country's infrastructure is insufficient for technological change and electrification, particularly in terms of smart meters. Behavioral change is also lagging (Paquay 2023).

According to Cantillon, priorities include ending fossil fuel subsidies, setting a higher carbon price, and decarbonizing energy use as much as possible. Currently, fossil fuels still account for more than 70% of energy consumption (see data from our world in data). She advocates for the development of wind power, solar energy, biomass, geothermal energy, and nuclear power. She also emphasizes the need to decarbonize heat, improve energy efficiency, and promote energy sobriety. Reducing fossil fuel usage in buildings is a significant challenge, as heating buildings accounted for 11% of oil demand and 37% of gas consumption in 2020. A large portion of Belgium's buildings are old, with about 80% still lacking energy efficiency. Regional authorities have implemented or are considering strategies to enhance energy efficiency in buildings. These include prohibiting the use of fossil fuels in new constructions, enforcing energy-saving renovations, gradually eliminating financial aid for heating based on fossil fuels, and promoting incentives for low-carbon heating solutions (European Commission 2023). Cantillon further stresses that while progress has been made in decarbonizing electricity, challenges remain in the industrial sector. In 2020, oil and natural gas accounted for nearly 70% of the sector's energy demand. Encouraging electrification and the use of industrial heat pumps in factories with low heat demand could help increase efficiency (European Commission 2023). In terms of transport, significant work is needed, especially in modal shift. The price difference between electricity and gas and fuel oil in Belgium is too small.

Further policy reforms and investments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the energy, building, and transport sectors are necessary. These actions will also help reduce Belgium's high dependency on fossil fuel imports and ensure supply security. The war in Ukraine might have acted as a wake-up call, as Belgium made significant progress in reducing its dependency on Russian gas and is expected to continue its diversification efforts.

According to a McKinsey report, achieving carbon neutrality in Belgium would cost 415 billion euros in cumulative investments by 2050, equivalent to 2-3% of the country's GDP each year.

Policies  
Targeting an  
Adaptive Labor  
Market  
Score: 6

### Adaptive Labor Markets

The Belgian labor market is often described as rigid, partly due to its neo-corporatist structure. The tradition of social dialogue, strong labor market institutions, and a generous social model contribute to a notable lack of flexibility, according to employers' associations. The OECD, in its 2023 recommendations, criticizes the wage-setting mechanism, asserting that while it reduces wage inequality, it may impede job reallocation. The OECD advocates for using sector-level agreements to align wages more effectively with productivity at the firm level (OECD 2023). The European Semester points to low labor market participation and regional disparities as ongoing structural challenges (European Commission 2023). According to Eurostat data, Belgium's unemployment and labor market slack figures are below European averages, while employment rates lag behind at around 72%.

The previous right-wing government implemented measures aimed at stimulating labor market participation. These measures included gradually increasing the retirement age, restricting access to unemployment benefits, and reducing labor costs. Studies at the time, such as those by Bodart, Dejemeppe, and Fontenay (2019), suggested that the impact of these measures was relatively modest. Additionally, the efficacy of these reforms might be diminished, as unemployment insurance reforms tend to correlate with an increase in the number of individuals receiving disability benefits, as evidenced by De Brouwer and Tojerow (2023).

The advent of the COVID-19 crisis prompted a shift in the government's approach, leading to the implementation of measures designed to safeguard specific job categories. Workers were given government allowances or temporary unemployment benefits, similar to measures used during the 2008 crisis, which appeared effective both times. These actions demonstrate the state's capacity to preserve the labor market from short- to medium-term economic shocks.

The current government, formed at the end of 2020, articulated in its government agreement the ambition to achieve an employment rate of 80% without explicitly outlining specific reforms. The agreement underscored a commitment to ongoing training initiatives, particularly through tax breaks for companies investing in employee training. Belgium's performance is mixed in this regard: on one hand, it consistently performs decently in continuing vocational training (which is a legal obligation), with 50.7% of employees reporting that their employer contributes to financing some training. However, only 10% of the adult population reports having participated in a continuing



education program over the last four weeks, which is close to the EU average but significantly lower than figures in Sweden (34.7%), the Netherlands (26.6%), or Slovenia (18.9%). The European Semester stresses that current adult learning incentives may not effectively reach those who need upskilling the most, such as less-educated individuals and older workers (European Commission 2023).

Policies  
Targeting an  
Inclusive Labor  
Market  
Score: 7

Belgian workers enjoy favorable working conditions, with average annual earnings per full-time employee ranking among the top 10 in OECD countries, according to the OECD Better Life Index initiative (OECD n.d.). During the recent inflationary crisis, workers' purchasing power was maintained through a system of automatic wage indexation, which helped avoid an inflationary spiral. Consequently, inflation in Belgium remained in line with the OECD average (OECD 2024).

Belgium is also the only remaining EU member state to offer potentially unlimited unemployment benefits. While previous governments have tightened these benefits and implemented mechanisms aligned with active labor market programs, these measures may not have been sufficiently tailored, as some adverse consequences have been noted (De Brouwer et al. 2023).

A significant weakness of the Belgian labor market is its poor performance in integrating non-native and second-generation migrants. One main issue is the need for extensive linguistic skills: Belgium has three official languages, and a good command of English is also a major requirement in and around Brussels due to the presence of international institutions.

According to Eurostat, Belgium exhibits lower income inequality, reflected in a Gini coefficient below 0.25, and a lower risk of poverty or social exclusion (18.7%) compared to the EU average (around 0.3 and 21.6%, respectively) in 2022. The extensive redistribution and social safety net in Belgium rank the country among the top five OECD performers in terms of the lowest poverty gap after taxes and transfers, redistribution strength, and cash minimum-income benefits (OECD 2023).

Despite these achievements, challenges persist in the labor market performance of women and immigrants. High implicit tax rates on low-wage earners pose barriers for low-skilled second earners, who are typically women. Additionally, the OECD highlights limited participation in lifelong learning among low-educated, low-income groups, and individuals with disabilities, contributing to low employment rates and labor mobility (OECD 2023).

Policies  
Targeting Labor  
Market Risks  
Score: 8

As mentioned previously the Belgian social welfare system is overall rather generous and extensive. However, the gig economy and its increased importance raise new difficulties for the workers involved and their access to social security. The government following actions by the unions and the concerned workers themselves is trying to legislate on the matter. In October 2022, it adopted new legislation ensuring a presumption of salaried status for delivery drivers of certain platforms and the introduction of an obligation for platforms working with self-employed workers to insure them for work-related accidents. However, these two advances have yet to materialize in concrete achievements. What's more, these advances are meeting with considerable resistance from the platforms concerned. Deliveroo and Uber Eats, among others, consider that the presumption of salaried status does not apply to them. They have also already gone before the labor court several times, which has so far ruled in their favor each time.

These workers are nonetheless fairly well represented by unions who are at the front battle on these questions. As mentioned previously, unionization rates in Belgium are among the highest in Europe. Nonetheless, the evolution of the labor market makes it sometimes hard for workers to organize. At the same time, unions blame the government of somehow complicating their work by taking steps against them. A recent example of this trend is linked to the decision by Delhaize (a Belgian supermarket group that was created in 1867) to franchise the majority of its stores making collective bargaining more difficult by splitting the workforce. Moreover, when unions acted against this decision, politicians sometimes broke up picket lines with the help of bailiffs, and the courts issued orders banning strikes and even gatherings in the vicinity of the supermarkets concerned.

### Sustainable Taxation

Policies  
Targeting  
Adequate Tax  
Revenue  
Score: 6

Taxation in Belgium involves the collection of taxes at both the national and local levels. Major federal taxes encompass income tax, social security, corporate taxes, and value-added tax, while local levels involve property and communal taxes. Tax revenue stood at 45.6% of GDP in 2022, the second-highest share following France of the EU according to Eurostat.

The European Semester highlights that high labor taxes discourage work, with the tax burden exceeding the EU average for most wage levels. Some initiatives aim to boost low-wage earners' net income, but they inadvertently increase the tax rate for lower-middle-income earners, creating a "low-wage trap." The High Council of Finance suggests a general employment bonus could alleviate this. However, the "low-wage trap" might deter lifelong learning and working longer hours (European Commission 2023).

Belgium, as a small open economy, faces concerns about potential capital outflow if it opts for taxation. In the pursuit of attracting capital and fostering investment, the country maintains numerous tax loopholes and exemptions to reduce distortionary incentives or to stimulate entrepreneurship. Notably, Belgium ranks 16th in the 2021 Corporate Tax Haven Index by the Tax Justice Network, citing issues in Tax Court Transparency and the existence of loopholes, contributing to corporate taxation avoidance for both income and capital. The European Semester also stresses the complexity of capital taxation leading to distortions in investment behavior (European Commission 2023). The current government aims to address benefit fraud and tax evasion (the first one, as often, being smaller by a sizable amount), but these efforts are considered inadequate by a prominent judge. The judge advocates for bolstering resources in administration and the judiciary, simplifying rules, and eliminating potential gaps and loopholes (see press article).

Finally, the current government was planning a significant tax reform to mitigate the discouraging effects of labor taxation. However, disagreements among the diverse partners in the (broad) government coalition have resulted in a deferral of the reform to the next legislature or, possibly, indefinitely.

Policies  
Targeting Tax  
Equity  
Score: 5

By OECD standards, Belgium's tax structure is relatively inequitable. The tax base is too narrow, placing excessive pressure on labor income. For over two decades, Belgium has had the OECD's highest effective tax and social security wedge on labor, although this is gradually decreasing (see OECD data). This heavy burden on labor income creates incentives for tax avoidance and evasion. Conversely, much capital income (e.g., housing rents, capital gains, and some multinationals' profits) is either inefficiently taxed or not taxed at all. Additionally, the widespread adoption of tax deductions and specific tax programs results in inefficiencies and distortions. Consequently, while horizontal and vertical equity within each income source (i.e., labor, capital, and corporate income) are theoretically guaranteed, differential treatment and a lack of information undermine this principle in practice.

Policies Aimed at  
Minimizing  
Compliance  
Costs  
Score: 6

Tax collection in Belgium is largely automated, with individual tax statements predominantly pre-filled with data from the tax authorities. If this information is accurate, individuals have no further action to take. However, if the data is incorrect or incomplete, the process becomes more complex. Despite efforts by the authorities to simplify tax returns by reducing the number of codes and entries, the total remains high, making tax returns challenging to complete and understand for the average taxpayer.

Additionally, the numerous existing deductions and tax schemes are not only costly for the budget but also tend to create inefficiencies. For example, the

extensive use of reduced VAT rates and exemptions heightens the risk of VAT noncompliance.

Policies Aimed at Internalizing Negative and Positive Externalities  
Score: 5

Belgium performs moderately well in terms of environmental taxes. In 2021, revenues from environmental taxes were above the European average, constituting 2.49% of GDP compared to the EU average of 2.24%. Energy taxes were the primary component, accounting for 1.77% of GDP, closely aligning with the EU average of 1.76%. Transport taxes made up 0.62% of GDP, surpassing the EU average of 0.41%, while taxes on pollution and resources amounted to only 0.11%, slightly exceeding the EU average of 0.08%. Environmental taxes represented 5.72% of total tax revenue, higher than the EU average of 5.52%. Despite this, some significant shortcomings remain. According to a report in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, Belgium allocated €2.79 billion in subsidies for diesel fuel sales, with a substantial portion benefiting foreign companies. Fossil fuel subsidies are estimated at €13 billion, or 2.8% of GDP, leading one expert to assert that “in Belgium, we subsidize fossil fuels more than we tax them” (see press article). Regarding research and innovation, following the 2002 Barcelona European Council meeting, the Belgian federal government implemented tax incentives to bolster business R&D starting in 2005. These tax benefits, in addition to significant direct support (subsidies) from the three Belgian regions, included partial exemption from withholding tax on R&D personnel wages and tax credits for R&D investment and patent income deduction. The popularity of these incentives grew steadily, resulting in substantial budgetary costs, reaching €2,782 million in 2019 (0.59% of GDP), primarily driven by an increase in corporate income taxation benefits. Dumont (2022) suggests that certain corporate tax incentives may lead firms to reduce their own R&D spending. Given the significant portion of budgetary costs for supporting business R&D, enhancing the efficiency of R&D tax incentives by implementing a cap on total public support is recommended.

**Sustainable Budgeting**

Sustainable Budgeting Policies  
Score: 5

Belgium’s public debt-to-GDP ratio exhibited improvement post-2016, briefly dipping below 100% before surging to almost 112% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. Although it has since decreased (estimated at 104.3% in 2022), international institutions, including the European Commission, express high medium- and long-term risks for Belgian public finances. Despite an already elevated debt-to-GDP ratio surpassing the EU average, projections indicate a further increase in the medium term. This anticipated rise prompted Fitch to downgrade Belgium’s rating in March 2023, though the overall rating remains relatively favorable (see Belgian debt agency website).

The European Commission's debt sustainability analysis emphasizes the necessity for significant structural consolidation efforts to stabilize public debt, particularly addressing challenges linked to population aging (European Commission 2022). The 2022 annual report of the Study Committee on Aging forecasts that the budgetary cost of aging will increase by 5 percentage points of GDP between 2022 and 2070, mainly due to rises in spending on pensions and healthcare of 2.6 and 2.8 percentage points, respectively (Conseil Supérieur des Finances 2023).

The European Semester has noted that the full implementation of the 2013 Cooperation Agreement is still pending, affecting the credibility of the overall fiscal consolidation path. The commission emphasizes that Belgium's medium-term budgetary framework falls short of the EU average, lacking a comprehensive multiannual fiscal plan at the national level. Current fiscal rules apply to the federal government, social security sector, and local authorities, but not to the regional level, despite their significant expenditure. Flanders is an exception, as its 2022-2027 multiannual budget incorporates a spending norm for the first time (European Commission 2022).

While the bulk of public debt resides at the federal level, escalating debt ratios at the regional level raise concerns. Revenue autonomy plays a crucial role in debt sustainability, and the federal government possesses more tools in this regard compared to the regions and communities, which lack significant taxation powers. Belgium is also missing green budgetary practices that could improve the budget's transparency and accountability toward green objectives.

### Sustainability-oriented Research and Innovation

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Score: 7

Belgium's R&D policy is shared between the central government, which can offer tax incentives, and the subnational (regional and community) governments, which manage European subsidies and support university R&D and related projects. This arrangement increases subnational accountability but hampers coordination and limits economies of scale.

Since the onset of the financial crisis in 2007, general investment levels across the European Union have either declined or remained stable. However, Belgium has comparatively withstood this negative trend. The Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D (GERD) as a share of GDP in Belgium increased from 1.85% in 2007 to 3.43% in 2022, one of the highest rates alongside Sweden (Eurostat data). Dumont (2022) points out that this increase began in 2005 with the introduction of tax incentives by the federal government, leading to a sustained rise in business enterprise investments in R&D. However,

government and higher education expenditures on R&D have remained relatively low. The author concludes that while there has been a clear rise in applied research and experimental development by companies, this has not been matched by an increase in basic research by higher education and government institutes. Despite the chronic underfunding of higher education and government institutes, Belgium performs exceptionally well on the “Attractive Research Systems” dimension of the European Innovation Scoreboard. In 2023, Belgium’s performance was well above the EU average in indicators such as the number of international scientific co-publications, the number of scientific publications among the top 10% most cited, and the number of foreign doctorate students (European Commission DG-R&D, 2023). The report ranks Belgium among the top-performing countries in the European Union in terms of innovation, alongside Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Other strengths highlighted by the report include “Innovative SMEs collaborating with others,” “Enterprises providing ICT training,” and “Public-private co-publications.” However, the European Semester points to a potentially low contribution of the Belgian private sector in terms of R&D for environmental sustainability. This is evidenced by the low share of environment-related patents in total Belgian patent applications. Additionally, there is a lack of business dynamism in the innovation ecosystem, as indicated by low business creation and destruction rates (European Commission 2023).

### Stable Global Financial System

Global Financial  
Policies  
Score: 7

During the global financial and economic Crisis of 2008, Belgian banks suffered extensively. The Belgian government was more proactive than many of its European counterparts in restructuring banks. However, Belgium’s size limits its ability to restore financial stability independently. Some of the largest Belgian banks are structurally linked to other European banks or have become subsidiaries of larger banks headquartered in neighboring countries, such as ING and BNP Paribas. This situation has led the government to promote international efforts to restore financial stability and combat financial fraud and tax evasion. Despite repeated initiatives to recover revenues lost through tax evasion involving banks in countries like Luxembourg, Belgium remains at a disadvantage.

Belgium actively participated in the creation of the so-called banking union in the euro zone and has sought to improve banking supervision domestically. Various scandals, such as the Panama and Paradise papers, have given new impetus to the government’s efforts to improve banking transparency. Belgian investigative journalists played a crucial role in these projects, working alongside peers from other countries.

In October 2018, Belgium’s judiciary was granted comprehensive access to citizens’ financial records to enhance the fight against financial criminal activities. Previously, investigators could only access citizens’ financial information through banks and credit institutions.

However, some limitations persist. The Tax Justice Network, while highlighting Belgium’s tax haven behavior, also ranks Belgium 26th in terms of financial secrecy, just below Saudi Arabia and above Ireland.

## II. Social Sustainability

### Sustainable Education System

Policies  
Targeting Quality  
Education  
Score: 7

Almost all educational institutions in Belgium are entirely or primarily state-funded. The funding is managed at the community level (Dutch, French, and German), ensuring steady financial support across business and political cycles. Teachers and professors typically enjoy civil servant status, contributing to job security. The education system is effective in quantitative terms, with Belgium’s educational achievements consistently above the EU average in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. However, qualitative measures, such as the OECD’s PISA scores, indicate a continuous decline in performance. Flanders, initially performing better than the French-speaking education system, is also experiencing a faster decline.

Mainly in the French-speaking community, and to a lesser extent in Flanders, the civil servant status of primary and secondary school teachers results in a mix of highly motivated and underperforming teachers, leading to high absenteeism and underwhelming teaching performance despite substantial financial resources.

Tertiary education is organized in a much more competitive fashion and maintains rather high-powered incentives. However, this is accompanied by chronic underfunding, which results in falling teacher-to-student ratios, overcrowded classrooms. Despite these challenges, Belgium’s universities perform well according to most international indices.

Professionals are invited to engage in lifelong learning, but the tax-and-subsidy system does not sufficiently promote it. As a consequence, according

to Eurostat, in 2022, about 10% of the relevant population reported having engaged in lifelong learning over the “last 4 weeks,” which is slightly below the EU average (11.9%), but much below neighboring Netherlands (26.4%), or Denmark (27.9%) and Sweden (36.2%).

While wages and working conditions make it difficult to attract highly skilled educators, Belgium still fares well compared to other EU countries. Since 2019, sustainability has been integrated into the education program from primary school onwards.

Policies  
Targeting  
Equitable Access  
to Education  
Score: 7

Primary and secondary education are free in Belgium. Access to secondary schools is increasingly randomized to prevent privileged access. Tertiary education is offered at a low fee (less than €1,000 per year), but students receive allowances only under dire financial conditions. According to these “accounting” indicators, Belgium’s education policies are fully aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education and training.

In terms of outcomes, the situation is less positive. The OECD’s PISA studies reveal high inequalities in most topics. The spread between high social status and less advantaged families is important: the European Commission’s Semester evaluation (p4) reads “[Belgium] performs very well and is making further progress on all SDGs on productivity [but it] is lagging behind on ensuring that people with a migrant background participate in the labor market and on tackling inequalities in educational outcomes linked to socioeconomic background.” Several hurdles face less favored families: first, the actual quality of education varies substantially across schools, and the knowledge about these is tacit. In other words, one must know how to pick a good school, which requires a good educational background. Second, education is not designed for non-native speakers: the study of languages, in particular, require a lot of parental support, and there is little extra-curricular support. Third, there is little financial support, for measures such as free meals for the poor at school. Fourth, many students end up failing (i.e., repeating) one or more years of schooling, and receive little specific support targeting their improved performance. Professional/technical education is far below the standards achieved in German-speaking countries.

The results of these inequalities in primary and secondary education is most visible at the university level, where all students with a higher secondary education diploma are granted access. Selection takes place in the first year, where fail rates are considerably higher than 50% in most disciplines. Moreover, classroom size can be well above 1,000, implying that external support, for example from private instructors, may be valuable. even if generally not affordable.



The European Commission (2023) identifies these inequalities as an important hurdle to clear in tackling labor shortages.

**Sustainable Institutions Supporting Basic Human Needs**

Policies Targeting Equal Access to Essential Services and Basic Income Support  
Score: 9

Universal access to public goods is ingrained in Belgian culture. Most public goods are offered free or at reduced costs to low-income populations, with significant social transfers in kind (STiKs) for retirees. Electricity providers must offer a “social tariff,” and public transport is highly subsidized for school children and retirees, or even free for the poorest. These generous means-tested STiKs raise concerns about work disincentives (European Commission 2023). Education in Belgium is compulsory and free from the ages of 6 to 18, ensuring that all children have access to primary and secondary education. The government also provides substantial funding for higher education, making it relatively accessible and affordable for all citizens.

Unemployment benefits are not generous in absolute terms, but they do cover minimal living costs. Importantly, they are normally not limited in time, allowing long-term unemployment with continued benefits. Anyone dropping out of the unemployment benefit scheme may apply for social assistance, possibly for medical reasons. That system is also generous, and the number of people on social assistance is now higher than that under the unemployment benefit scheme (De Brouwer and Tojerow 2023a,b; European Commission 2023).

Policies Targeting Quality of Essential Services and Basic Income Support  
Score: 8

Belgium features a very high share of public spending in GDP, in good part thanks to a quite high quality of delivery. In terms of public goods and services, it is closer to the Nordic countries than to the United States (which justifies lower provision in the latter country, compared to Belgium). In terms of tax and job policies, it performs much less well. Access to quality housing is not made universally accessible, with tensions that have increased since the repeated migration crises. In addition, there are long waiting lists for social housing and insufficient investment in new construction in this area. However, house prices remain much below the levels in neighboring countries such as the Netherlands and France. De facto, housing accessibility is therefore quite high. In terms of quality, the housing stock is rather old, and energy inefficient.

Sustainable Health System

Policies  
Targeting Health  
System  
Resilience  
Score: 7

Belgium has a world-class healthcare system but was ill-prepared for the COVID-19 crisis. Since then, it has invested in data gathering, centralization, and flu-like symptoms warning systems. However, like most of its neighboring countries, but probably less so than the UK, Belgium suffers from the discouraging working conditions in hospitals and in GP practices, which induces increasing bottlenecks in access to timely medical appointments, interferes with the quality of care (mainly at night when hospitalized) and may lead to substantial cracks in the system in the medium term.

The country has a highly trained and large medical workforce and, according to data from Eurostat and the OECD, it features the second-highest number of GPs and nurses per capita in the OECD and has well-equipped hospitals. Healthcare coverage is broad, and access to quality care is thus substantial. Containing public deficits has partially been achieved by reducing wages and hospital costs, which may not be viable long-term, especially given the aging population. The “numerus clausus” system limits the number of graduates allowed to practice, leading to underpaid or unpaid long working hours (totaling 70-100 hours per week) for young graduates. This makes medicine and nursing less attractive for the youth.

Belgium boasts advanced flu-like symptoms warning systems, even if it performs less well on several cancer types and expected “healthy life years at birth” is close but below the EU average. Although Belgium was part of the WHO’s influenza preparedness initiative, it did not invest in emergency drills nor had concrete plans ready for the case of an epidemic of COVID proportions. As a result, the 2019 Global Health Security Index for Belgium was very high overall but scored a 0 in “Emergency Preparedness and Response Planning” and in “Risk Communication.” This diagnostic proved painfully relevant during the COVID crisis.

Policies  
Targeting High-  
Quality  
Healthcare  
Score: 8

Trust in Belgium’s healthcare system is very high: “Satisfaction with public services is generally higher than the OECD average. Satisfaction with the healthcare system is particularly high at 90%, significantly higher than the 68% average across OECD countries” (OECD 2023). However, prevention is not Belgium’s strong suit, as highlighted by the GHS evaluation conducted in 2019, just before the COVID crisis. According to OECD data, Belgium spent only 0.3% of its GDP on preventive measures, compared to 0.6% for Sweden, 0.7% for France, and 1% for the Netherlands and Denmark. This low investment reflects in the country’s performance on prevention for several cancer types, with expected “healthy life years at birth” being close to but

below the EU average. Belgium performs much better on the most common cancer types. For instance, from age 50, all citizens receive regular invitations for colon cancer tests, and all women receive invitations for breast cancer screenings. These tests are fully covered by social security.

However, such free tests are exceptions. According to the WHO, (2023, February 28) “catastrophic health spending in Belgium is currently among the highest in western Europe, according to a new report launched today by the WHO Regional Office for Europe. However, concrete steps are being taken to address this challenge [...]. The numbers from 2020 show that 1 in 20 Belgian households experiences financial hardship due to out-of-pocket payments for healthcare.” To address this, the current federal health minister plans to cap the prices of several medical services and tests starting in 2024, despite facing opposition from hospitals and physicians.

There are campaigns to promote a healthy lifestyle and reduce smoking, but these are not the best in class due to their relatively low intensity.

The health minister has also taken measures to improve prevention through enhanced access to psychological and psychiatric support. Additionally, he is promoting integrated care, with preliminary plans to improve coordination between different health providers around the patient. Recent measures have been introduced for specific population groups, such as at-risk mothers and adolescents with eating disorders.

Policies  
Targeting  
Equitable Access  
To Healthcare  
Score: 7

Belgium has a world-class healthcare system, with a large number of physicians, hospital beds, and equipment. However, these numbers are skewed by past investments, which led to overspending and a deficit. This issue is being addressed by policies that reduce the number of graduates allowed to practice medicine, as well as by cuts to wages and personnel. These budget cuts are likely to weaken the healthcare system in the long term. Importantly, this situation is shared with most other European countries and is not unique to Belgium, which currently performs better than, for instance, the UK. The current health minister is well aware of the problem and has implemented several measures to mitigate the risks. However, these measures alone will likely prove insufficient in the decades ahead.

Healthcare access in Belgium is not fully equal, with an increasing portion of the population postponing treatments for financial reasons, according to the Socialist mutual insurance company. However, this is not as severe a problem as in the United States. Belgium’s healthcare system provides near-universal access to a wide range of medical services, with the poorest benefiting from a

“maximum à facturer,” which is a ceiling on total medical out-of-pocket expenses. Coverage includes preventive care (although increasingly difficult to access due to doctor shortages), hospital care (similarly challenging due to financial constraints), and prescription drugs. The system is funded through a combination of social security contributions and taxes, ensuring that everyone, regardless of income, has access to high-quality healthcare. Belgians report high satisfaction with their healthcare system, ranking among the best in the OECD (OECD 2023).

Policies have been implemented to reduce the burden of paying medical fees. Starting in 2024, citizens under 24 years old in poverty can visit the doctor without any cost. Generally, citizens do not have to pay the full cost of medication or medical appointments upfront but only a portion not covered by social security. These policies help to achieve equitable access to high-quality healthcare. Yet, a significant proportion of citizens (1 in 20, mainly young males in poor economic situations) cannot afford or decide not to seek medical care due to costs (<https://www.lesoir.be/280978/article/2020-02-18/un-belge-sur-20-ne-va-pas-chez-le-medecin>).

### Gender Equality

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving  
Gender Equality  
Score: 9

Belgium has a strong commitment to gender equality, affirmed in its constitution in 2002 and supported by the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men. While there is no federal strategy for gender equality, the Federal Plan on Gender Mainstreaming promotes equality at both federal and regional levels and is currently in its third edition (2020-2024). Belgium is a global leader in gender quotas, with strict rules for gender parity imposed on political parties (Vandeleene 2014).

Belgium ranks well in several gender equality indexes, including the World Economic Forum’s 2023 Gender Gap Report, the UN Gender Inequality Index, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), where it ranks 10th, 10th, and 5th, respectively. The EIGE notes Belgium’s strong performance in the “health” and “money” dimensions but a weaker performance in the “time” dimension.

One issue linked to Belgium’s gender norms is labor market segregation. Women are often overrepresented in “care activities” and are more likely to work part-time. They also spend more time on unpaid activities like childcare and housework. De Rock and Périlleux (2023) found that these norms are more deeply rooted for men. Belgium is taking steps to address these inequalities, such as increasing paternity leave from 15 to 20 days in January 2023, but it still lags behind other European countries in this regard.

Belgium performs well in political gender equality due to gender parity at the ministerial level. However, fewer women achieve long-lasting careers compared to men. The forced resignation of the Secretary of State for Equal Opportunities, Gender, and Diversity, Sarah Schlitz, revived debates about a potential double standard for women in politics. A gender gap also exists in the economic sphere, with women underrepresented in decision-making positions in public and private organizations.

A concern is the lack of data on violence against women, including intimate partner violence and sexual harassment at work. Eurostat is currently collecting data, which should be available from 2024 onwards, providing valuable insights into these critical issues.

### Strong Families

Family Policies  
Score: 8

Belgium's family support policies vary based on the individual (mother or co-parent) and their employment status. These policies, which also apply to adoptive parents, focus heavily on women, potentially limiting shared responsibility within households. Maternity leave in Belgium is 15 weeks for employees and the unemployed, including up to 6 weeks of pre-natal leave (with 1 mandatory week) and 9 weeks of compulsory post-natal leave. For the self-employed, it is 12 weeks with only 3 weeks compulsory. This aligns with the WHO Convention No. 183 but falls short of the WHO's 18-week recommendation. Birth leave (for co-parents) is 20 days, available to both employed and self-employed individuals. Wage replacements are generally over 75% of gross earnings. Belgian parents can take parental leave of four non-transferable months per parent per child until the child's 12th birthday, but the wage compensation is relatively low, amounting to €78.24 per month, below Belgium's poverty line. Childcare leave or career breaks also exist as a "Time Credit with motive system," which requires a valid motive, such as caring for a child younger than 8 years, a disabled child up to 21 years, providing palliative care, or caring for a severely ill relative (Fusulier and Mortelmans 2023).

Belgium provides universal access to affordable, high-quality childcare for children below school age and is one of the few countries to offer free access for children under three (Gromada and Richardson 2021). More than half of the children under three participate in formal childcare, above the EU average but below Denmark. For children over three years old, Belgium has the highest participation in formal childcare or education, with over 98% of all children according to Eurostat data. These results become slightly more nuanced when

considering children who spend more than 30 hours in formal childcare or education.

Belgium also provides financial support to families in the form of child benefits. Almost every child living in Belgium is entitled to child benefit, paid monthly. Parents are also entitled to a one-time maternity/adoption allowance for the birth/adoption of a child. The basic amount of child benefit for every child born from 2020 onwards ranges from €164.36 to €181.61 per month, supplemented with additional allowances depending on the situation (EC 2024).

### Sustainable Pension System

Policies Aimed at  
Old-Age Poverty  
Prevention  
Score: 8

The Belgian pension system operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, where current workers' social security contributions finance the pensions of current retirees, and this system will finance their future pensions. The incumbent government has increased the minimum pension levels to €1,500 per month starting in 2024 to address the risk of poverty among the elderly.

To enhance the sustainability of the Belgian pension system, the legal pension has been capped at a relatively low level of about €2500 per month (as of 2023 values). By 2030, the retirement age will be 67. Despite these measures, evaluations, including those from the European Commission's European Semester, suggest that existing measures are insufficient, thereby endangering the sustainability of social security in Belgium. According to the Federal Planning Bureau (2020), population aging could burden the government budget by an additional 3% of GDP by 2070.

The EU-SILC database provides detailed data on poverty and social exclusion risks, primarily based on self-assessment questionnaires. Among those aged 65-74, 7.8% of the surveyed population reported experiencing some level of material or social deprivation; this figure drops to 5.2% for those aged 75 and above. Respectively, 5.8% and 3.8% reported financial difficulties in buying clothing, and the figures stand at 3.5% and 2.6% concerning heating, and 2.1% and 1.2% concerning healthcare.

While current pension levels effectively mitigate substantial poverty, the long-term sustainability of the pension system remains fragile.

Policies  
Targeting  
Intergenerational  
Equity  
Score: 6

The Belgian pension system is organized around three pillars. The first pillar is the legal, publicly funded, pay-as-you-go pension that offers basic coverage, between €1500 and €2380 per month. The second pillar is fully funded and financed by the employer, who invests in private funds. The third pillar is fully funded and financed by the individual, with a tax exemption up to €1270 of savings per year. The universality of the first pillar and the large share of early retirements make it costly: according to Eurostat data, it accounted for 12.6% of GDP in 2021, compared with Germany's 12.2%, Norway's 10.3%, and France's 14.9%

As detailed under the previous indicator, several reforms have been introduced to increase the legal and effective retirement age, cap legal pensions, and tighten accessibility conditions. However, the Belgian pension system is still considered financially fragile and on the verge of being unsustainable by most observers.

### Sustainable Inclusion of Migrants

Integration Policy  
Score: 5

Belgium has a contradictory attitude toward immigration. On the one hand, it has traditionally been quite welcoming to political refugees. This was evident in its initial reaction to the influx of Syrian and later Ukrainian refugees. The government responded by rapidly creating emergency accommodation centers and redistributing families to different cities and villages to promote integration and avoid the creation of ghettos. However, the situation has deteriorated over the last few decades, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks on Brussels and throughout Europe. As in many, if not most, EU member states, popular support for a complete halt to immigration has risen significantly. A year after the Ukrainian wave of immigration, Belgium also showed its inconsistency: there were not enough beds available, and insufficient funding for other migrants, which drove the government to relinquish several of its obligations for "single men" searching asylum.

In general, again like in many other countries, the issue of migration is politically divisive. It precipitated the collapse of the previous government (see previous reports) and almost brought down the current government in the summer of 2021. This was following a hunger strike by over 470 undocumented migrants that narrowly avoided turning into a tragedy. An oral agreement was reached, without collective regularization, but considering all cases as admissible. However, after one year, only one in six people who had submitted a file had been regularized (see press article).

This trend toward less openness on migration issues can be partly explained by the strong presence of far-right and extreme-right parties in Flanders, pushing centrist parties to adopt less universalist postures. In fact, the current Flemish government announced shortly after its formation that it was withdrawing from UNIA (formerly the Center for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism), a proposition that was backed up by the parliament later on (see press article).

Though legally recognized as Belgian citizens, second and third-generation immigrants have also become victims of these tensions. The OECD and the European Semester have repeatedly highlighted the poor performance of Belgian schools, based on PISA scores, concerning the educational performance of students with a migrant background. Another weakness lies in the persistent inability to integrate non-EU immigrants into the labor market. In 2022, the employment rate of Belgians and EU immigrants was above 70%, while for immigrants from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, it was 51.3% and 54.3% respectively (see Statbel website). FPS Employment and Unia (2022) reports that “people of foreign origin are still less likely to be employed, and if they are, it’s often in less durable, lower-quality positions.” According to EU-SILC data, in 2020 the rate of severe material deprivation among foreign-born residents was three times higher than for native-born citizens (8.4 vs. 2.8), which increases to almost four times higher for non-EU-born residents (11.1).

Thus, while Belgium has been a country of immigration and is generally opposed to overt racism and discrimination, its performance in terms of eventual social inclusion and labor market participation is less than optimal.

### Effective Capacity-Building for Global Poverty Reduction

Management of  
Development  
Cooperation by  
Partner Country  
Score: 5

Belgium is internationally recognized for its commitment to supporting countries in fragile situations and promoting gender equality, with a particular emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights. It advocates for multilateralism in addressing global issues and actively participates in the reform of the United Nations. Belgium’s development cooperation has been modernized, reaffirming its partnership with the private sector and promoting “digital for development” in fragile contexts. However, this has resulted in a proliferation of themes without clear priorities or explanations of how these themes interrelate.



Regarding Official Development Assistance (ODA), the National Centre for Cooperation Development (CNCD), which groups more than 70 NGOs, recently highlighted that Belgium, like most donor countries, is not meeting its commitment to allocate 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to ODA. Belgium's development aid increased from 0.44% of GNI in 2021 to 0.45% in 2022, which is less than neighboring countries such as France (0.56%), the Netherlands (0.67%), Germany (0.83%), and Luxembourg (1%). Unlike these countries, Belgium has not included the costs of foreign students and Ukrainian refugees in its aid, except for Flanders. If these costs were included, the rate would have risen to between 0.55% and 0.6%. Moreover, Belgian Cooperation has mobilized additional funding to support Ukraine rather than redirecting ODA budgets as other European countries have done. The current government has agreed to the principle of budgetary growth to reach 0.7% of GNI in public development aid by 2030. However, this budgetary growth could be jeopardized by the upcoming June 2024 elections. In 2020, Belgian cooperation met the international target of allocating at least 0.15% of GNI to the so-called least developed countries. However, the CNCD considers that a proportion of ODA (12% in 2022) is "phantom aid," that is, amounts counted as development aid according to OECD criteria, even though they do not finance projects in partner countries.

In terms of policy coherence for development (PCD), Belgium ranked 7th worst in the world according to the Spillover Index 2023. This ranking is mainly due to poor results in the following indicators: its imports involve the consumption of scarce water, significant SO<sub>2</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and threats to biodiversity. Conversely, it exports a large quantity of plastic waste. Finally, through its tax niches, it contributes to the displacement of multinationals' profits. Despite these challenges, there are some positive aspects of Belgium's development cooperation activities. Wallonia played a pioneering role alongside Scotland at COP 26 by announcing funding of €1 million to compensate for losses and damages in southern countries. The majority of Belgian aid is untied, meaning it is allocated without obligating the recipient country to use the aid for purchasing Belgian goods or supplies. Belgium was the first member state of the World Health Organization (WHO) to make a significant contribution to the COVID Technology Access Pool, aligning with the broader objective of supporting global equitable access to health products and technologies.

### III. Environmental Sustainability

#### Effective Climate Action

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving  
Climate  
Neutrality by  
2050  
Score: 7

Belgium adopted a National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) for 2021-2030 in line with EU Regulation 2018/1999. The plan was updated in 2023 due to a European mandate. The EU's revised climate objectives required Belgium to increase its greenhouse gas reduction target to 47% by 2030, up from 35%. This led to regional disagreements. Brussels and Wallonia accepted the new target, but Flanders capped its commitment at 40%. A partial intra-Belgian agreement was reached in November 2023, enabling the submission of the new plan to the Commission. The Flemish government approved a regional-federal co-responsibility concept, where regions failing to achieve a minimum internal emissions reduction would need to purchase CO2 permits. The federal level would make up for the difference between the fixed threshold and the 47%. Discussions will continue in 2024 but are likely to be limited, as the country is entering a pre-election period (L'echo 2023; Lesoir 2023).

Alongside the NECP, a document outlining Belgium's decarbonization strategy by 2050 was published in 2019. It set clear sectoral objectives and a transversal vision. However, its binding nature is unclear and likely depends on EU constraints. The Buildings, Transport, and Energy sectors aim for complete decarbonization. However, the Industry, Agriculture, and Waste sectors acknowledge that some emissions may be hard to eliminate entirely. For these sectors, the strategy proposes reducing emissions as much as possible and compensating for the remaining emissions through natural carbon sinks and additional carbon removal technologies (FPS Health, DG Environment, Climate Change Section 2020).

A European advisory scientific committee has existed since 2021. In Belgium, the Federal Council for Sustainable Development brings together civil society players, employee and employer representatives, scientists (all with voting rights), and political representatives (without voting rights). However, it does not solely deal with climate change issues. Civil society, such as the Climate Coalition and the Climate Case, actively participates in the climate debate, with the latter having taken legal actions against Belgian authorities for climate inaction. The ruling ordered Belgian authorities to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. Therefore, many plans and positive objectives are made and announced, but implementation is lagging.

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Minimizing  
Environmental  
Health Risks  
Score: 7

### Effective Environmental Health Protection

Belgian policy on protecting the public from environment-related health risks is largely influenced by decisions made at the European level, much like many actions related to climate change and the environment. This is evident in the EU action plan “Toward Zero Pollution of Air, Water, and Soil,” which aims to reduce pollution at its source. The plan includes objectives such as improving air quality and reducing waste, marine plastic waste, and microplastics released into the environment.

As Belgium is a federal state, decision-making power is shared between the federal state, regions, and communities. Each region has developed its own strategy, approved at its respective government level. This suggests a degree of delegation in policy implementation to bureaucracies and executive agencies. However, the extent to which federal and subnational ministries monitor these bodies’ activities and ensure effective implementation of government policies remains unclear (UNFCCC 2022).

In terms of air quality, several cities have implemented low-emission zones (LEZs) that restrict access to the most polluting vehicles. While these measures are effective in reducing atmospheric pollutant emissions, they raise equity issues. For instance, low-income individuals often own small but older cars that they need to go to work. Because of their age, these vehicles are classified as polluting even when their fuel economy is good. Such population groups face great challenges in replacing them with less polluting vehicles.

Air quality in Flanders has been improving for decades in many areas, with most places already meeting the European air quality objectives. In Brussels, a clear improvement in ambient air quality has been observed over the last twenty years. This improvement is attributed to various factors such as the elimination of major emission sources, the reduction of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) or sulfur in fuels, the removal of lead in gasoline, the introduction of catalytic converters in cars, the renewal of the car fleet, and the increasing use of natural gas for heating. However, certain pollutants such as tropospheric ozone, suspended particles, CO<sub>2</sub>, and persistent organic pollutants remain problematic. Despite efforts to change the vehicle fleet (LEZs, new regulations for company cars, etc.), road traffic continues to be one of the main sources of health-concerning pollutants in the Brussels-Capital Region. Heating, on the other hand, accounts for 70% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and 84% of SO<sub>x</sub> emissions.

In Wallonia, soil pollution, a legacy of past practices, remains a challenge. Old industrial sites, former storage places for chemicals or hydrocarbons, and old public landfills have become uninhabitable due to the confirmed or probable presence of hazardous substances in the soil. Managing and cleaning up these polluted areas remains a top priority for several years.

Recently, a scandal involving PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl) substances, specifically their presence in large quantities in the water supply, first in Flanders in the summer of 2021 and then in Wallonia in the fall of 2023, has raised questions about water quality and its potential impact on public health. Similarly, an investigation led by Belgian media (RTBF) revealed that metal recycling companies in Wallonia are releasing significant amounts of carcinogenic dust into their immediate environment, endangering the health of nearby residents. Despite regulations, these companies often exceed pollution limits by up to 600 times, and some have had their limits reclassified as targets, avoiding penalties.

**Effective Ecosystem and Biodiversity Preservation**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Preserving  
Ecosystems and  
Protecting  
Biodiversity  
Score: 7

Home to an impressive array of over 55,000 species, Belgium faces substantial hurdles in biodiversity conservation. A significant proportion of species are at risk, including 35% of freshwater fish species, 28% of bird species, 23% of vascular plant species, and 21% of mammal species (OECD 2021). This situation underscores the urgent need for effective conservation strategies.

Nature conservation in Belgium is predominantly a regional responsibility (OECD 2021, 31). Belgium’s commitment to biodiversity conservation is demonstrated through its participation in the European Union’s Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. This binding strategy, part of the European Green Deal, contains specific actions and commitments aimed at protecting nature and reversing ecosystem degradation.

The strategy is comprehensive, targeting various ecosystems in the air, water, and on land. It includes measures for restoring degraded ecosystems, particularly those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and mitigate the impact of natural disasters. The strategy also facilitates necessary transformative change by unlocking funding for biodiversity, initiating a strengthened governance framework, and enhancing knowledge, financing, and investments.

Progress monitoring for the strategy’s implementation is conducted through two online tools: an online actions tracker and a targets dashboard. These tools

provide real-time information on the state of implementation and display progress toward the quantified biodiversity targets set by the strategy, both at the EU level and in the member states.

Belgium’s national biodiversity strategy was approved in 2006 for a ten-year period and was updated and extended until 2020. However, as criticized by Natagora, a nature protection association, no extension of the plan has been voted on since then.

The Natura 2000 network, a network of nature protection areas implemented by the European Union, covers only 12.7% of Belgium’s territory, a proportion lower than the EU average of 18.6%. This lower proportion could be partially attributed to the density of inhabited areas in Belgium.

Belgium’s overall performance in biodiversity protection is relatively good according to the global Ocean Health Index (OHI). Belgium excels particularly in the “Habitats” dimension, scoring higher than neighboring countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Germany. While its performance in the “Species Protection” dimension is slightly lower, it still surpasses these neighboring countries.

**Effective Contributions to Global Environmental Protection**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to a Global  
Environmental  
Policy  
Score: 5

Belgium has been proactive in addressing climate issues, largely due to regulations imposed by the European Union. This commitment is evident in its National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) for 2021-2030, which outlines actions including objectives for greenhouse gas reduction. Despite the European Union deeming these objectives insufficient, they are expected to impact the global environment due to the transboundary nature of greenhouse gas emissions.

The integration of environmental and climate objectives into all aspects of development cooperation is mandated by the 2013 Belgian Law on Development Cooperation. In 2014, the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD), in collaboration with several development cooperation actors, developed a Strategy Note titled “Environment in the Belgian Development Cooperation” (FPS Foreign Affairs 2022). This strategy serves as a comprehensive roadmap for environmental cooperation, integrating conservation and environmental protection across various sectors such as education, infrastructure, healthcare, agriculture, and food security. Building on this, the DGD formulated a “Climate Vision” in 2018 (OECD 2021).

An internal evaluation in 2021 commended Belgium's diversified, integrated, and relevant climate action. However, it also highlighted limitations, including significant but insufficient results in relation to the climate challenge, potential for further climate prioritization, the lack of a clear vision and criteria, and a need for more concrete climate expertise at the project level. The political implications of these recommendations are yet to be determined.

In terms of assessing the effects of development programs on climate and environment objectives, a supporting tool was developed by the research platform KLIMOS, although its use is not systematic. This comprehensive approach underscores Belgium's commitment to integrating climate and environmental considerations into its development cooperation efforts.

Finally, Belgium's contribution to the Green Climate Fund (the international commitment of \$100 billion for climate-related expenditure) has seen a limited and fluctuating increase since 2014, rising from €142 million to €282 million in 2021, according to Eurostat data. This funding level has been criticized by Belgian associations, including Oxfam, which argues that Belgium's "fair" climate financing should amount to 500 million euros per year. The CNCDD's 2023 environmental report notes that spending on environmental protection has generally been higher during this legislature than the previous one, although it remains relatively limited, accounting for around 5% of public development aid.

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[https://d9db56472fd41226d193-1e5e0d4b7948acaf6080b0dce0b35ed5.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/events/forum/2004/panel\\_handouts/fedict.pdf](https://d9db56472fd41226d193-1e5e0d4b7948acaf6080b0dce0b35ed5.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/events/forum/2004/panel_handouts/fedict.pdf)

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Opdrachten | FOD Kanselarij van de Eerste Minister. <https://www.kanselarij.belgium.be/nl/opdrachten>  
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National and regional governments often rely and collaborate with local governments to improve public service delivery:

Vlaanderen is Sterke Steden – het Vlaamse stedenbeleid | Vlaanderen.be: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaanderen-is-sterke-steden-het-vlaamse-stedenbeleid>

<https://www.uvcw.be/missions/defense>

<https://crac.wallonie.be/le-centre/missions>

Tutelle – Fonctionnement général des communes | Rise 360 (articulate.com) : [https://rise.articulate.com/share/cYfpyPd-fbrjaCxxjUOMuo\\_0RfE2hl0v#/lessons/zE7rm9Y8mGpuRkG79SWtIHpV5SHOBasj](https://rise.articulate.com/share/cYfpyPd-fbrjaCxxjUOMuo_0RfE2hl0v#/lessons/zE7rm9Y8mGpuRkG79SWtIHpV5SHOBasj)

Examples:

Waterafvoer en riolering | Vlaanderen.be: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/waterafvoer-en-riolering>

Lokale besturen en publieke laadinfrastructuur | Vlaanderen.be: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/lokale-besturen-en-publieke-laadinfrastructuur>

The federal government cooperates on a regular basis with regional/community entities:

Samenwerking met federale en regionale overheden | Vlaanderen.be: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/intern/beleid-en-regelgeving/regelgeving-en-besluitvorming/werking-en-besluitvorming-vlaamse-regering/samenwerking/samenwerking-met-federale-en-regionale-overheden>

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<https://www.vlaanderen.be/intern/beleid-en-regelgeving/regelgeving-en-besluitvorming/werking-en-besluitvorming-vlaamse-regering/samenwerking/samenwerking-met-federale-en-regionale-overheden>

Organes et processus de décision (climat.be)

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[https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220920\\_93596677](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220920_93596677)

[https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230825\\_95121625](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230825_95121625)

[https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230302\\_98058535](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230302_98058535)

[https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220831\\_91297366](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220831_91297366)

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#### Effective Involvement of Civil Society Organizations (Capital and Labor)

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<https://worker-participation.eu/national-industrial-relations/countries/belgium>

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<https://climat.be/politique-climatique/belge/nationale/gouvernance-climatique>

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<https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/open-government-data.htm>

<https://data.gov.be/>

Open Data | Statbel ([fgov.be](https://statbel.fgov.be))

<https://ibsa.brussels/>

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<https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen>

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#### Capacity for Strategic Foresight and Anticipatory Innovation

Observatory of Public Sector Innovation ([oecd-opsi.org](https://www.oecd-opsi.org))

[https://www.plan.be/aboutus/institution\\_desc.php?lang=nl](https://www.plan.be/aboutus/institution_desc.php?lang=nl)

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<https://www.vlaanderen.be/departement-kanselarij-buitenlandse-zaken>

Over Vario | VARIO: <https://www.vario.be/nl/over-ons>

<https://www.tomorrowlab.com/cases/mobility-in-flanders>  
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#### Effective Regulatory Impact Assessment

Betere regelgeving en impactanalyse | BOSA (belgium.be)  
<https://bosa.belgium.be/fr/themes/administration-numerique/simplification-administrative/meilleure-reglementation-et-analyse>  
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<https://www.oecd.org/gov/regulatory-policy/Impact-assessment-in-Belgium-June-2015%20fr.pdf>  
Sustainable Development Report 2023 (sdgindex.org)  
Indicateurs de développement durable (vlaanderen.be)  
Belgium country profile – SDGs and the environment – European Environment Agency (europa.eu)  
SDG Index and Dashboards Report for European Cities – CIFAL Flanders (cifal-flanders.org)  
Leidraad voor de opmaak van een reguleringsimpactanalyse (RIA) | Vlaanderen.be  
<https://bosa.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/documents/DTdocs/Simplification/AIR%20Manuel%20-%20FR%20oct2014.pdf>

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Press article on the reparability and durability index for goods: <https://www.dhnet.be/dernieres-depeches/2023/12/22/le-federal-instaure-un-indice-de-reparabilite-et-de-durabilite-des-biens-HTPB24UON5AM3DJG73GAASFRGI/>  
Federal Action Plan for a Circular Economy (FAP). <https://www.health.belgium.be/fr/plan-daction-federal-pour-une-economie-circulaire-2021-2024>

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<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/08/recovery-fund-council-greenlights-amended-national-plans-for-13-member-states/>

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Belgium – Set your infrastructure policies in the right direction [https://infracompass.github.org/ind\\_country\\_profile/bel/](https://infracompass.github.org/ind_country_profile/bel/)

Benchmarking Infrastructure Development – World Bank Group | Economy <https://bpp.worldbank.org/economy/BEL>

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<https://nextgenbelgium.be/fr/>

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Critical infrastructures – Crisiscenter: <https://crisiscenter.be/en/what-do-authorities-do/prevention/critical-infrastructures>

Investeren in infrastructuur | Vlaanderen.be: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaamse-regering/vlaamse-veerkracht/investeren-in-infrastructuur>

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[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG\\_LFSE\\_01\\_\\_custom\\_4665066/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=d88f7aa3-5cfa-4bfa-a913-3e92a647ee06](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFSE_01__custom_4665066/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=d88f7aa3-5cfa-4bfa-a913-3e92a647ee06)

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<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/recovery-dashboard/>

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Graph on the public expenditure, as a percentage of GDP, on active and passive labor market policies in 2020:

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A press article on the overall problem faced by the government with platform companies: <https://www.lecho.be/economie-politique/belgique/general/a-l-aube-du-proces-deliveroo-l-etat-toujours-empetre-face-aux-plateformes-de-livraison/10506265.html>

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