

Belgium Today

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CABINET RESHUFFLE BRINGS NEW PRIME MINISTER AND THREE NEW MINISTERS



Prime Minister
Herman Van Rompuy

"Your message of hope has demonstrated that we should never stop trying to make this world a better place for all." These are the words the new Belgian Prime Minister, Herman Van Rompuy, addressed to President Barack Obama in his congratulatory message sent on the occasion of the President's inauguration on January 20th.

Mr. Van Rompuy, previously President of the House of Representatives, was sworn in as new Belgian Prime Minister on December 30th 2008, a mere three weeks before Mr. Obama took the oath of office. There were

also several ministerial changes in the Belgian government: Stefaan De Clerck replaced Jo Vandeurzen as Minister of Justice, while Guido De Padt became Interior Minister. His predecessor, Patrick Dewael, took up Van Rompuy's earlier position as President of the House of Representatives. Steven Vanackere took over the portfolio of Civil Service Affairs and Institutional Reform and is a Deputy Prime Minister. Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht has, in addition to his current portfolio, also become a Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Van Rompuy, at age 61, is a highly respected politician with a long career of public service. He has been a Member of the House of Representatives since 1995. He was the leader of the Flemish Christian Democratic Party (now the Christian Democratic and Flemish Party (CD&V)) for five years, from 1988 to 1993. He then joined the government of Jean-Luc Dehaene as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Budget, where his main task – a daunting one – was to reduce the national debt, which stood at 132 percent of GDP. It is now approximately 80 percent.

Herman Van Rompuy and his wife have four children and one grandchild. He received degrees in economics and philosophy from the Catholic University of Leuven. Prior to his political career, he worked as an economist at the Belgian National Bank. He has also been a professor of economics throughout his career and has authored seven books.

Given his experience and the respect he commands across party lines, the new Prime Minister is generally considered a true statesman. With the nation facing an economic crisis and with the ongoing political debate on institutional reform, Mr. Van Rompuy will apply his talent and wisdom to confront the challenges ahead.

NEW AMBASSADOR IN WASHINGTON



Ambassador and Mrs. Matthysen
arrived in Washington on February 5

Ambassador Dominique Struye left Washington on January 31 to become Ambassador in Kinshasa; given the historic ties between Belgium and Congo, this is one of our most important postings. He is succeeded by Ambassador-designate Jan Matthysen, who arrived in the American capital at the beginning of February. Mr. Matthysen is expected to present his Letters of Credence to President Obama within the coming months, after which he will assume his full duties as Ambassador of Belgium to the United States.

Jan Matthysen joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1984. He started his foreign service career as First Secretary at the Belgian Embassy in Bonn, followed by an assignment as Counselor at the Embassy in then East Berlin, where he witnessed the reunification of Germany in 1990.

From 1994 to 1997, he served in Belgrade, first as Chargé d'Affaires and later as Ambassador. Following his time in the former Yugoslavia, Jan Matthysen became Head of the NATO desk at the Foreign Ministry in Brussels. From 1999 to 2000, he served as the Acting Head of the General Directorate for Political-Military Affairs. At the same time, he was Senior Advisor on Kosovo to the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative for the Balkans.

In 2000, Matthysen was appointed Ambassador in Ankara, accredited to Turkey, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. In 2004, he moved to South-East Asia, serving as the Belgian Ambassador in Bangkok and accredited to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Burma/Myanmar. He held this post until his current appointment.

Ambassador Matthysen graduated from the University of Ghent in 1973 with a degree in contemporary political history. He is married to Mrs. Agnes Aerts. They have five children.

BELGIAN LUNCH IN DAVOS

Prime Minister Van Rompuy gave a keynote address to some 85 top executives at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 30 entitled "Belgium in the Heart of Europe." Among the audience in the prestigious Steigenberger Belvédère Hotel was Jean-François Cirelli, co-CEO of the French energy giant Suez. Belgian embassies and consulates worldwide, including the Embassy in Washington, had contacted executives weeks in advance to ensure their presence. Lunch guests were treated to specialties by renowned Flemish chef Wout Bru, who came especially for the occasion, and to the finest Belgian chocolates.

Van Rompuy's address was designed to reassure executives that despite the recent period of political instability, Belgium remains open for business and has a lot to offer economically. The Belgian government had been absent from Davos at a high level for a number of years, but is committed to a high level presence in the future. In fact, Belgium wants to be a host country at next year's Economic Forum. Negotiations with the organizers are underway to explore the possibilities of a Belgian musical performance, promotional material in hotel rooms and a display of Belgian flags around the Swiss resort.

The Belgian lunch in Davos was kicked off by Jacques Rogge, chairman of the International Olympic Committee. Rogge discussed the theme "Sports in times of crisis." Also in Davos, Minister-President of Flanders Kris Peeters outlined to a group of foreign business people Flanders' ambition to make the region one of the five best performing European regions by 2020.

Mr. Van Rompuy and Mr. Peeters also met in Davos privately with Lakshmi Mittal, chairman of ArcelorMittal, the Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen, and the Vice President of the NYSE Euronext stock exchange.

INAUGURATION DAY— A MINISTER IN THE CROWD

Like journalists from the rest of the world, Belgian reporters from the main channels and print media poured into D.C. to cover the news story of the year on Jan. 20. But readers of "La Meuse" and other regional newspapers in the southern part of Belgium, less used to reading first-hand reports on world events unfolding on the other side of the Atlantic, might have been surprised to be able to enjoy a daily article from Washington throughout the three days of celebrations. Even more so that the special correspondent was none less than Deputy-Prime Minister and Minister of Labor Joëlle Milquet herself... Present in the US in a private capacity, and with one of her young children, Ms. Milquet braved the cold and the wind on the Mall from 7:00 a.m. on inauguration day to witness live the swearing-in of the new President. Despite the non-official character of her stay, Ms. Milquet – also Chairperson of the CDH party – had a number of meetings with the think-tank community in order to gain better understanding of the economic and social challenges facing the incoming administration. She also met with Embassy personnel and a number of Belgian Washingtonians.

MOST GLOBALIZED...

The Swiss ETHZ Institute has ranked Belgium once again as the most globalized country in the world. Belgium has topped the Institute's KOF-Index since 2004. Belgium has a score of 91.2 points, and shares the first place with Ireland.

The KOF-Index measures the political, social and economic level of globalization on the basis of 24 variables. Data were collected in 158 countries. The economic dimension of the KOF Index measures long distance flows of goods, capital and services as well as information and perceptions that accompany market exchanges. In addition to actual flows of trade and foreign investment, it captures the degree to which a specific country restricts capital and trade flows. The social dimension measures the spread of ideas, information, images, and people, while the political dimension captures the international aspects of government policies. Belgium is ranked 5th for economic globalization, 10th for social globalization, and 3rd for political globalization. The U.S. is ranked 38th in the KOF index.

The 2009 Index shows that globalization is still on the rise, driven by increased economic and political globalization, while social globalization stagnates.

...AND BEST FOR E-BANKING

Belgium came out on top in a ranking of bank websites on the quality of « e-banking ». The study by Ip-label.newtest, a research service on internet matters, compared the sites of banks in seven European countries: Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Spain. In Belgium, Ip-Label.newtest tested the accessibility, stability, and speed of the sites of, among others, Citibank, KBC, Fortis, Dexia, and Centea. The Belgian sites received a satisfaction score of 87,38 points out of 100, the best score of the seven countries examined.

A SPECIAL NOTE FOR TRAVELERS FROM BELGIUM

Security at the Airport

Since special security regulations are in effect at many of America's airports, the Embassy recommends that Belgian travelers strictly follow the instructions of TSA (Transportation and Security Administration) and CBP (Customs and Border Protection) personnel. In order to avoid possible unpleasant situations, such as —in extreme cases —temporary detention at the border or return to the country of origin via the next flight, it is advisable to maintain self control in all circumstances and respect the rules of politeness. It is always a good idea to have on hand a list with telephone numbers of people who can be contacted in case of an emergency (embassy, consulate, family members, friends, lawyer). And, please be sure to travel with the required documents: a valid passport, visa, resident permit, ID card and an approved ESTA travel authorization.

Validity of the Belgian ID Card

The electronic ID card of a Belgian citizen who moves abroad and who has announced his departure to the municipal authorities of his Belgian place of residence, remains officially valid. This card further serves as an ID for the Belgian citizen abroad, whether or not he/she has registered at an embassy or consulate. Bearers of a Belgian ID will not be issued an additional identification card when abroad.

FLANDERS HOUSE OPENS IN NEW YORK



FITS YOU

On February 25 the Minister-President of Flanders, accompanied by the Flemish Minister for Economy and Trade, will formally open Flanders House New York. Ambassador Matthysen will attend.

Located on the 44th floor of the New York Times Building (620

Eighth Avenue) in Manhattan, in a space designed by acclaimed architect Renzo Piano, Flanders House New York is a non-profit organization established as a one-stop source for information relating to investment, trade and tourism, and the history and culture of Flanders.

FHNY will consolidate three US-based operational teams into one central office. Each team will maintain its independence, yet regularly coordinate with the others. These teams are: Flanders Investment & Trade, which works to attract US investment and trade to Flanders and also supports Flemish and Belgian businesses setting-up and investing in the United States; the Tourist Office for Flanders, which promotes the Flemish art cities and Flanders and Brussels as convention destinations; International Flanders, which supports and organizes cultural and other events representative of the Region's rich past and endeavors to strengthen the image of Flanders in the United States.

Within the month, anyone interested in Flanders will be able to find a useful information on contacts, networks and services at www.flandershouse.org

GIFTS FROM BELGIUM IN WOODROW WILSON HOUSE EXHIBITION

Woodrow Wilson was the first American president to travel to Europe while in office. Ninety years have passed since his historic trip, which took place in 1918-19, following the end of World War I, and included Great Britain, France, Italy and Belgium. The Woodrow Wilson House, located in Washington, DC, is commemorating the event with a major exhibition featuring the gifts that were given to the President and Mrs. Wilson by foreign dignitaries.

"101 Wonders: Treasures from the Presidential Collection" will feature several items from Belgium, including a set of 17 decorative plates each of which depicts a different view of Belgium before the war. The plates were presented to President and Mrs. Wilson by King Albert and Queen Elisabeth. Among the architectural monuments pictured in the set are the Royal Palace in Brussels, the Belfry of Brugge, the Cathedrals in Antwerp and Mechelen and St. Nicholas Church in Ghent; other plates feature views of cities and towns such as Nieuwport, Namur, Visé, Dinant and Ieper.



One of three medals presented as a boxed set to President Wilson. Front of each reads "Etats-Unis d'Amérique, La population Belge Reconnaisante 1914-1915" Reverse reads "Stad Antwerpen" Made by F. Baetes Medailleur Anvers-Belgique. Photo courtesy of Woodrow Wilson House.

The exhibition will be on view through November 15.

CULTURAL UPDATE

◀Prolific and tremendously popular novelist Amélie Nothomb was on tour in North America at the beginning of February to promote her latest work, *Tokyo Fiancée*, described as a "spare, elegant novel" (New York Times) and "a light, lovely little romance" (Financial Times). She spoke in Boston, Toronto, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and New York.

◀The NBC mini series XIII, which aired on February 8 and 15, was based on the popular, eponymous Belgian graphic novel by Jean Van Hamme and William Vance. The cat-and-mouse thriller, as NBC describes it, tells the story of an amnesiac assassin with a Roman numeral for a name (played by Stephen Dorff), on the run after assassinating the female U.S. President. Val Kilmer played the Mongoose, XIII's contact and the man behind the conspiracy to re-shape the American government via revolution.



◀Newsweek magazine has ranked what it considers to be the most beautiful train stations in the world and Antwerp Central came in fourth on the list (following St. Pancras, London;

Grand Central, New York; and Chhatrapati Shivaji, Mumbai.) Antwerp Central was built at the end of the 19th century and its magnificent dome was inspired by the Pantheon in Rome.

◀In Steven Spielberg's movie adaptation of *The Adventures of Tintin—Secret of the Unicorn* British actor Jamie Bell (*Billy Elliot*) will play the young reporter and James Bond actor Daniel Craig will play the villain Red Rackham. The film, expected to feature groundbreaking computer animation technology, should be released in 2011.

◀All 65,000 tickets for Madonna's first ever performance in Belgium, scheduled at the Werchter rock festival on July 11, sold out on the first day they were offered for sale.



◀The Metropolitan Museum of Art has acquired *Evening Dress* created by Belgian designer Olivier Theyskens for Nina Ricci spring/summer collection 2007. The gown is made of steel gray heat-crinkled silk organza embroidered with linear chain stitch in white silk and is the gift of Mario Grauso, 2007. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

MEMORIAL MASS FOR FORMER BELGIAN APOSTOLIC DELEGATE TO THE USA

On Tuesday, February 10 a memorial Mass was celebrated in the Cathedral of Saint Matthew the Apostle, Washington DC, for Archbishop Jean Jadot. Born in Brussels in 1909, Mgr. Jean Jadot was sent to Washington in 1973 by Pope Paul VI. He was asked to help carry out the reforms of Vatican II in the American Church. He served as the apostolic delegate to the United States until 1980. Previously, he had been chaplain to troops in the Belgian Congo and had served as a papal delegate to countries in South East Asia and Africa. After his service in the United States, he helped lead ecumenical initiatives. Archbishop Jadot died in Brussels on January 21, at the age of 99.

EVENTS OF INTEREST

Through February 28 — Los Angeles, CA

Chantal Akerman Film Series explores the filmmaker's work in depth, from her earliest films including *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and *News from Home*, through *Golden Eighties*, *D'Est*, and *Sud*, to the recent *Là-bas*, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. For complete listing, please visit: www.sfmoma.org/events/series/1300

Through March 27 — Los Angeles, CA

Daniel Fourneau and Jean-Paul Laixhay, Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of Danielle Kurz, at the Jazz Bakery. Info: www.bakeryartexhibitions.org

Through April 2 — New York, NY

The exhibition *Love is in the Air* includes naïve paintings from around the globe. Belgians represented include Marie-Louise Batardy, Monique Schaar, Agnes Bogaert, Jean Pierre Lorand, Christine Servais and Nadia Becker, at the Gina Gallery. Info: www.ginagallerynyc.com

Through August 2 — Washington, DC

The exhibition *Artists in Dialogue: António Ole and Aimé Mpane* features original site-specific works created at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. Mpane, who divides his time between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Belgium, works in painting, prints, sculpture, video and installation. Info: 202 633-4600

Through early September — New York, NY

The exhibition *One Foot in America: Antwerp, Red Star Line, and Eugeen Van Mieghem* will be on view at Flanders House New York. Info: 718 288-9276

February 27– March 4 — Seattle, WA

Ben X, Nic Balthazar's debut feature (Grand Prize Winner, Montreal Film Festival) about an autistic teenager who devises a plan to change his life and eliminate his tormentors, in Dutch with English subtitles, at Siff Cinema. Info: www.siff.net

March 4 - November 15 — Washington, DC

The exhibition *101 Wonders: Treasures from the Presidential Collection* includes artifacts from Belgium, at the Woodrow Wilson House. (Please see page 3 for details.) Info: 202 387-4062

March 6 — Washington, DC

Grande Fête de la Francophonie, the annual celebration of the French language and francophone cultures and culinary specialties, will take place at the Maison Française, Embassy of France. For tickets (\$ 30) please visit: www.francophoniedc.org/evening.htm

March 15 — Washington, DC

Bouli Lanner's film *Eldorado* (Belgium's Academy Award submission for best foreign language film) will be presented (in French, with English subtitles) at the Smithsonian Institution. For tickets (general admission \$13; Alliance Française members \$10) please visit ResidentAssociates.org or call 202 633-3030

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