

# Belgium Today

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## VAN ROMPUY FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL



On November 19, 2009, European Union leaders appointed the Belgian Prime Minister, Herman Van Rompuy, to be the first full-time President of the European Council. Mr. Van Rompuy officially took office on January 1 and has a two and a half year mandate that can be renewed once.

Composed of the heads of state or government of the 27 EU member states, the European Council became an institution with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on December 1, 2009. The Council defines the general political direction and priorities of the European Union.

## KAREL DE GUCHT GETS KEY EU PORTFOLIO

Former Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht has been given the important Trade portfolio in the new European Commission. He succeeds Baroness Catherine Ashton, who was appointed as the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission.

In addition, De Gucht will be the coordinator of industrial relations with other world powers. As European Commissioner for Trade, he will be responsible for the EU's foreign trade policy and will be the spokesperson for the biggest trading partner in the world.



## STEVEN VANACKERE SUCCEEDS YVES LETERME AS MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS



Yves Leterme has succeeded Herman Van Rompuy as Prime Minister. Steven Vanackere is the new Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade. Steven Vanackere will also continue to fill the offices of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Institutional Reform. Vanackere has taken up his new job on the eve of the Belgian Presidency of the European Union - in the second half of 2010 - and at a time when a new treaty has radically changed the way European diplomacy functions.

Born in 1964, he obtained degrees in Law and Economics, and also studied Political Science. He has been an advisor to Herman Van Rompuy and later Chief of Cabinet of Jos Chabert. From 2000 to 2005 he was Director General of the Brussels public transport company, MIVB/STIB. Steven Vanackere was elected to the Flemish Parliament in 2004 and started his ministerial career in the Flemish government with the portfolio for Welfare, Public Health and the Family in 2007. In December 2008 he joined the Belgian Federal Government as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Civil Service, Public Enterprise and Institutional Reform.

## ASSISTANCE TO HAITI

Belgium was one of the first countries to send doctors and nurses to Haiti. Within 48 hours after the January 12 earthquake, a 33-member B-FAST (Belgian First Aid and Support Team) unit arrived in Port-au-Prince. In their ten-day tour of duty it is estimated that they treated over eight hundred patients and performed more than 120 serious operations.

The security of the field hospital set up by B-FAST was assured by a Belgian military detachment which arrived in the Haitian capital on January 18.

Two diplomats, one from our Embassy, were also dispatched to Port-au-Prince to provide consular assistance to Belgian citizens and their family members. Regrettably, one Belgian died in the earthquake.

The first B-FAST team returned to Belgium on January 26, along with 14 Haitian children who were evacuated to Belgium for adoption by Belgian families. A second team of 28 volunteers expects to remain in Haiti through the beginning of February. In addition to financing these B-FAST missions, Belgium has also donated 8 million euros to the United Nations and the Red Cross for emergency aid.

In the coming weeks Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere will be meeting with his European colleagues to discuss initiatives to rebuild the devastated country.

## FINECO DELEGATION IN DC TO DISCUSS ECONOMIC CRISIS

From January 25 to 28, five members of the Belgian Senate Finance and Economics Committee (Fineco) were in Washington to discuss coordination of financial reform efforts with their American counterparts. The delegation met with officials at the Treasury Department, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, the House Committee on Financial Services, the World Bank and the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

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## EXPLAINING BELGIUM'S POSITIONS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Does Belgium think Georgia should join NATO? Is our foreign policy influenced by a dependency on foreign energy sources? How does Belgium plan to integrate environmental concerns into European agricultural policy?

These are some of the questions students participating in simulation exercises are faced with. During such simulations, students have to represent one specific country in debate and negotiations within an international organization, like the United Nations, the European Union or NATO. These exercises have become a popular way to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real life practice.

To enhance the realism of the exercise, the students are encouraged to have a "live" contact with the Embassy of the country they are representing. Sigurd Schelstraete, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Belgian Embassy, has conducted several briefings for students. Last fall, he received students from Susquehanna University and spoke to them about Belgium and its position on EU-Russia relations. A couple of weeks earlier, he gave a group of Italian students an overview of Belgium's point of view on a range of UN topics. In mid-February he will brief a group from Indiana University of Pennsylvania preparing to represent Belgium in a Model NATO. The Embassy welcomes these opportunities to help young people have a rewarding experience as temporary Belgian Ambassadors.

## BELGIAN POSTAL SERVICE BUYS MSI WORLDWIDE MAIL

De Post-La Poste, Belgium's national postal operator, announced on January 5 that it had acquired a majority stake in MSI Worldwide Mail, a U.S.-based mail and parcel delivery company. MSI Worldwide Mail was created three years ago, with projected sales of \$35 million in 2010. The company is based in Sterling, Virginia.

Through its business unit Belgian Post International, De Post-La Poste will partner with MSI to further expand its retail operations in the US and worldwide. The new relationship, which comes after a record-breaking sales and profit year for MSI, will allow MSI to further invest in additional operations, equipment and strategic acquisition opportunities.

MSI will continue to operate as MSI Worldwide Mail and be managed by founding partners Richard Gerhardt and Christopher Taylor for at least the next five years. All current senior management positions will remain unchanged. MSI will continue to operate with full autonomy, giving MSI the ability to use distribution vendors and postal administrations of its choice.

## THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

(continued from page 1)

Their program in Washington began with a breakfast-roundtable hosted by Ambassador Jan Matthysen on January 25 that was dedicated to "The Financial Crisis and Regulatory Response - Belgian and Transatlantic Perspectives." Participants included Fineco Chairman Wouter Beke, Senator Berni Collas, Deputy Chairman of the Committee, Mr. Jules Muis, former Director General (Audit) at the European Commission, Mr. Peter Kerstens, Financial Services Counselor with the EU Delegation to the US and Mr. Nicolas Véron, Senior fellow at the Brussels-based Bruegel Institute and a Visiting Fellow at the Peterson Institute in Washington.

Senator Collas, who was the *rappporteur* of the Special Parliamentary Committee in charge of reviewing the Financial and Banking Crisis, presented an overview of the way the crisis unfolded in Belgium and of the legislative steps undertaken by the Belgian Parliament and Administration to mitigate its impact and prevent a further downturn in the financial sector. Ambassador Matthysen reminded participants that financial regulatory issues are at the heart of the eighteen-month program of the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian presidencies of the EU, and are also a specific focus of transatlantic co-operation.

## THE BELGIAN FACES OF HEALTH CARE

The Belgian welfare state mentioned twice in the same week in the US national media, and in a positive fashion? Well, that does not occur often, does it? But that is exactly what happened in early January when our "Bismarkian" system (as T.S. Reid describes it in his recent, and readable, best-seller *The Healing of America*) was featured both in the *Washington Times* and on WSJ.com. The former mentioned, in an article about the Federal healthcare expenditure estimates, that the \$7,681 per person spent in the U.S. in 2008 amounted to roughly twice the per capita amount spent in Belgium during the same period, ie. \$4,000. The latter, in a video interview titled "Faces of healthcare, Belgium does it cheaper," skipped the figures and let a couple of Belgium-based Americans explain their experience with the inconceivably cheap (by US standard that is...) and fair Belgian universal coverage.

A politically sensitive plea for a public option? Not really! Indeed, as then Health Minister Rudy Demotte reminded his Brookings Institution audience in 2007, Bismarkian systems - unlike their "Beveridgian" counterparts, mostly rely on private "not-for-profit" economic actors. Let us roll back three years to Rudy Demotte's speech on Massachusetts Avenue: "The organization of the Belgian healthcare system is based on the associated values of responsible partnership, and responsibilities are shared by employees, employers, sickness funds, health providers, and the government." Would such a template be applicable in the US? Some, like Steven Hill of the New America Foundation, strongly believe the Belgian universal health "can work here," and illustrate it with the indisputable achievements of its Massachusetts cousin. Others, like the WSJ.com interviewees of last week, are slightly more skeptical.

In any case, two years to the day after it was made, and with the US healthcare debate reaching its "High Noon" moment on Capitol Hill, Minister Demotte's presentation of 2007 - and his subsequent dialogue with Daniel Benjamin and Harry Aaron of Brookings remains compelling reading. Don't miss it; it is still on the Web at <http://www.brookings.edu/>

## FILMS AND FESTIVALS

◀ Two films by Belgian directors will be shown in the upcoming DC Environmental Film Festival.

On March 23, *Altiplano*, a lyrical tragedy about sacrifice and redemption, directed by Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodward, will be presented at the Atlas Performing Arts Center. The film tells the story of a Belgian cataract surgeon working at an eye clinic in the high Andes of Peru. Nearby, villagers succumb to illnesses caused by a mercury spill from a local mine. When a young man dies of mercury contamination, the villagers turn their rage on the foreign doctors.

Director Frederic Lilien will be in Washington on March 27 to present his award-winning film *The Legend of Pale Male* in Baird Auditorium at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. *The Legend of Pale Male* is the true account of Lilien's tracking of a wild Redtail hawk whose nest, perched on a posh 5th Avenue co-op, starts as a curiosity to a handful of avid bird watchers but becomes an international tourist destination -- a place of pilgrimage. Affectionately known to New Yorkers as Pale Male, the hawk becomes a magnificent obsession and a metaphor for triumph before all odds.

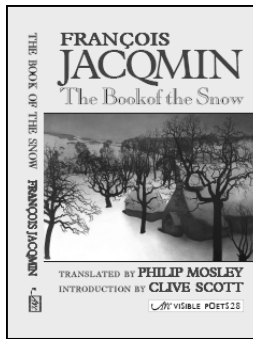
◀ New York will celebrate several renowned Belgian directors in March in a festival called *The Whimsical World of Belgian Cinema* at the French Institute Alliance Française. The highlight of the month-long program will be on March 30 when award-winning Belgian actress Yolande Moreau will present her film *When the Sea Rises*. The festival will also feature the New York premiere of *Largo Winch*.

(Please see *Events of Interest*, next page, for additional information.)

◀ *The Misfortunates*, by director Felix van Groeningen, is Belgium's official entry into the Academy Award's 2009 Best Foreign Language Film category. The film takes a darkly humorous look at a quartet of brothers who enjoy a life of debauchery and lechery without a thought for the consequences. It's told through the eyes of a 13-year-old son and nephew who grows up to be a successful writer. The film is based on the semi autobiographical best-selling novel by Dimitri Verhulst.

◀ *A Town Called Panic*, by Stephane Aubier and Vincent Patar, — the first stop-motion animated feature selected for the Cannes Film Festival (2009) has been submitted to the Academy Awards for consideration in the Best Animated Film category. Three plastic toys — Cowboy, Indian and Horse— scramble to rebuild their house after its accidental destruction.

## FRANCOIS JACQMIN THE BOOK OF SNOW



Philip Mosley, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Penn State University, has just completed a translation of poems by Francois Jacqmin (1929-1992), thus making available to English-language readers for the first time the work of one of Belgium's foremost francophone poets of the twentieth century. Titled "Francois Jacqmin The Book of Snow," the book has been described as a meditation "on our relation to the austere beauty and elemental power of the midwinter scene." The dual language edition from Arc Publications will be available in the United States at the end of March.

Philip Mosley's published works include books on the Belgian cinema as well as translations of a number of Belgian poets. In 2008, he was awarded the *Prix de la Traduction Littéraire* by the French-speaking Community of Belgium for his translations of Belgian authors into English.

## CHRISTIAN MERVEILLE TO GIVE FAREWELL CONCERT FOR CHILDREN

Christian Merveille's singing career has spanned 25 years. He has composed over 400 songs and numerous rhymes. He has written many books and has performed in every French-speaking country, enchanting several generations of children.



Merveille gave his last show in Europe in Belgium, his home country, last December. But his very last appearance on stage — where he will be accompanied by accordionist Philippe Hacardiaux — will take place in Washington, DC. at the Maison Française, Embassy of France, on March 14. (Please see *Events of Interest*, next page, for details).

## REPLICA OF MICHELANGELO'S BRUGES MADONNA ON VIEW AT DC BASILICA



The Church of Our Lady in Bruges contains a marble sculpture of the Virgin Mary created by Michelangelo in 1504. A life-size bronze copy of this art treasure, known as "The Bruges Madonna and Child," is currently on display in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC. It will remain there until April 7.

Twenty four bronze replicas of the statue have been commissioned by DC entrepreneur Lonnie Gaddy, who hopes to find a home for each and plans to donate the unique mold, which Italian craftsmen made more than 70 years ago, to a renowned museum or academic institution for scholarly study.

**EVENTS OF INTEREST**

**Through March 14 — New York, NY**

New ceramic sculptures by Johan Tahon, at the Envoy Gallery. [www.envoyenterprises.com](http://www.envoyenterprises.com)

**Through April 11 — West Palm Beach, FL**

*Habsburg Treasures: Renaissance Tapestries from Vienna*, eight very large wall hangings from the Brussels atelier of Frans Geubels depicting the legendary founding of Rome, at the Norton Museum of Art. [www.norton.org](http://www.norton.org)

**Through May 6 — San Francisco, CA**

The first U.S. retrospective exhibition of Belgian contemporary artist Luc Tuymans, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org)

**Through May 9 — Gainesville, FL**

The exhibition *Project Europa: Imagining the (Im)Possible* (with Francis Alys) considers the relationship of art to democracy in Europe, at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida. 352 392-9826

**Through June 6 — Yonkers, NY**

The exhibition *Bakelite in Yonkers: Pioneering the Age of Plastics* features more than 300 objects made of Bakelite (invented by Belgian Leo Baekeland), at the Hudson River Museum. [www.hrm.org](http://www.hrm.org)

**March 2-30 — New York, NY**

The French Institute Alliance Française presents *The Whimsical World of Belgian Cinema*, with multiple screenings:

- 3/2 *A Town Called Panic*
- 3/9 *Largo Winch*
- 3/16 *Il court...il court le monde*  
*Man Bites Dog*
- 3/23 *I'm Hungry, I'm Cold*  
*Ma Vie en Rose*  
*Toto the Hero*
- 3/30 *Louise-Michel*  
*When the Sea Rises*

For times, and information about purchasing tickets, please visit: <http://www.fiaf.org/>

**March 4-7 New York, NY**

Harmonica master Toots Thielemans, with Kenny Werner, Oscar Castro-Neves and Airto, at the Blue Note. Tickets: [www.BlueNote.net](http://www.BlueNote.net)

**March 5 — Washington, DC**

The *Grande Fête de la Francophonie* will kick off DC's annual, month-long Francophonie Cultural Festival celebrating the cultures of countries where French is spoken. Some 40 participating countries will offer samples of their culinary specialties, and Cajun French music will be performed by Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys (Louisiana), at Maison Française, Embassy of France, 7—11 pm. Tickets (\$30) at: [InstantSeats.com](http://InstantSeats.com)

For a complete list of events visit: [www.francophoniedc.org](http://www.francophoniedc.org)

**March 12 & 13 — Boston, MA**

Harmonica master Toots Thielemans, with Kenny Werner and Oscar Castro-Neves, at Scullers Jazz Club. Tickets: [www.scullersjazz.com](http://www.scullersjazz.com)

**March 14 — Washington, DC**

Christian Merveille (see page 3) sings in French for children at the Maison Française, Embassy of France, at 3 p.m. as part of the Francophonie Cultural Festival.

Tickets (\$10 adults; \$5 children 12 and under) at [www.instantseats.com](http://www.instantseats.com)

**March 23 — Washington, DC**

*Altiplano*, a film directed by Peter Brosens & Jessica Woodward (see page 3) will be shown in the DC Environmental Film Festival, at the Atlas Performing Arts Center.

Tickets (\$5) at: [atlasarts.org/tickets/php](http://atlasarts.org/tickets/php)

**March 27 — Washington, DC**

The film *The Legend of Pale Male* (see page 3) will be presented in Baird Auditorium, at the Smithsonian's American Museum of Natural History, at noon. Director Frederic Lilien will participate in a Q&A with the public after the screening. Free admission. [www.dcenvironmentalfilmfestival.org](http://www.dcenvironmentalfilmfestival.org)

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Embassy of Belgium  
3330 Garfield St. NW  
Washington, DC 20008  
Phone (202) 333-6900  
Fax (202) 333-3079

Email  
[BelgiumToday@diplobel.org](mailto:BelgiumToday@diplobel.org)  
WWW  
[www.diplobel.us](http://www.diplobel.us)



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