Ten years after Dirk Frimout, Flanders has its second astronaut in space, in the person of Frank De Winne. A flawless launch of the Soyuz rocket in Bajkonner (Kazakhstan) at 4.00 a.m. Belgium time on 30 October brought the rocket into an orbit around the earth in just 9 minutes. This orbit is now gradually being adjusted to that of the international space station (ISS) where De Winne and his two Russian colleagues Sergei Zaljetin and Yuri Lontsjakov will arrive in the morning of 1 November. At just before six o’clock on Friday morning the Soyuz capsule is due to dock onto the ISS, a delicate operation, which is entrusted to on-board engineer De Winne, and which experts say is the critical point of the whole mission. The Belgian Government is paying out EUR 15.5 million for the whole operation (FF).

De Winne’s flight falls within the framework of an agreement concluded between the European Space Agency and its Russian counterpart Rosaviakosmos in 2000. The terms of this agreement allow European astronauts to take part in Soyuz missions to the ISS between 2001 and 2006. The space station is a joint venture between the USA, Canada, Japan, the ESA, and Russia. The Frenchwoman Claudie Haigneré and the Italian Roberto Vittori have already taken part in missions. The current Odyssey mission is first and foremost a taxi flight. The Soyuz capsule, which serves as a lifeboat for the permanent crew, has to be replaced every six months. Frank De Winne and his travelling companions are delivering a new capsule and will be returning in ten days’ time. In the meantime, the crew will be carrying out some twenty experiments concerning micro-gravity. These experiments are being carried out in co-operation with the Belgian universities VUB, ULB (the Flemish and French sections of the Free University of Brussels), and KU Leuven, and foreign partners. In a reaction immediately after the launch, Minister Charles Picqué called the EUR 15.5 million a well-considered investment. ‘De Winne’s participation is not just about Belgium’s image. This participation furthers the credibility of our universities. What is more, there is an economic return. Our companies are hoping to be able to market the materials on which the experiments are being carried out. We estimate that the initial investment of EUR 15.5 million will yield a threefold return.’

INTRODUCTION
On Tuesday 29 October the Federal Budget Minister Johan Vande Lanotte announced at a press briefing that the Liberal/Socialist/Green government had succeeded not only in carrying through tax cuts, but also in setting in train a more socially oriented policy. Not only have benefit payments for pensioners, unemployed persons, disabled persons, and those drawing subsistence benefit increased by approximately EUR 1.15 billion, but a whole host of services had also become cheaper or free of charge, according to the minister. Only disabled persons had cause to complain, he conceded, and they should therefore be accorded priority in the next cabinet. However, the most critical problem in social policy is the health insurance system, where spending has risen by EUR 3.33 billion in the space of four years, even though the competent minister (Van denbroucke) has made every effort to make savings by encouraging the use of generic medicines, the avoidance of unnecessary examinations, and so on. In the same breath, Vande Lanotte added that a rise in spending of 6 to 7% per annum in the health insurance system would be inevitable in the future, saying that the ageing of the population and medical developments left no other choice. That same day De Standaard came forward with the figures published by the Centre for Employment, Labour and Training on the activity level in Flanders, Belgium, and the fourteen other European countries. Belgium does not perform well compared with the rest of Europe: only 59.9% of people work among those aged 15 to 65, as compared to a European average of 63.8%. But that figure is kept low because of the poor scores recorded by Brussels (53.9%) and Wallonia (55.4%). Flanders is close to the European average, and viewed in terms of full-time jobs Flanders (66.9%) even does better than that European average. The labour law and compulsory schooling to 18 are factors that put us at a disadvantage, in that people are entering the labour market late. However, they are leaving the jobs market quite early too, and this is problematic. With barely 40% of the over-fifties working, we are trailing behind the leading pack on the European list. However, in the 25-49 age group, 88% of Flemings are in full-time employment, as compared to 81.3% in the Netherlands and 79.7% in Germany. Therefore, Flemings in their thirties and forties are working very hard indeed. De Standaard draws its conclusions from this. The paper says that it is precisely in the field of activity where the Liberal/Socialist/Green coalition has failed. The number of people in work has remained too low to finance the social expenditure. The active welfare state - the adagio of the purple-green government, is not active enough since the activation has failed.

Frank Vandeveeye | editor in chief
Spirit approves cartel with SP.A at party congress

With an overwhelming majority, Spirit, the social-progressive offshoot of the former Volkunion, approved the formation of a cartel with the Socialist SP.A at its conference in Ninove. Els Van Weert, who had been Spirit’s acting chairperson together with Geert Lambert up until the conference, was elected the new chairperson. In her closing address, she vigorously defended the cartel with SP.A and made a notable call on the Christian labour movement ACW to opt for Spirit and to turn their backs on the Christian-Democrats of CD&V. But of course most attention was devoted to the speech by figurehead Bert Anciaux, who was making his first public appearance since stepping down as Flemish culture minister. It was he who had first publicly advocated a cartel with the SP.A, in a conspicuous newspaper interview, which resulted in a minor exodus of Spirit members not in agreement with that course of action. They defected to other parties, chiefly the Liberals and Greens. Anciaux did not fail to point out that those who in the end have remained with Spirit are the only ones who have chosen to follow their convictions. It was the only minister in the Government of Flanders that Spirit can still boast, Paul Van Grembergen, who had the honour of opening the series of speeches (FF).

TOM COCHEZ • DE MORGEN • 28 OCTOBER

‘We have abandoned the political paths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and have thereby also left the safety of tradition behind us. I ask all six million Flemings to do the same.’ Van Grembergen received remarkably sustained applause, because in his list of Spirit’s ‘political fathers’, he made explicit reference to Willy Brandt, ‘because he is able to recognise that a nation has made mistakes and is able to ask forgiveness for that’. Although it was stated several times in the speeches that Spirit had to put the past behind it and head resolutely into the future, the recent past appears to be far from completely digested. Van Grembergen, in particular, sharply criticised the politicians that had walked out and shut Spirit’s door behind them. Bert Anciaux expressed the bitterness positively: ‘Those who have remained with Spirit are the only ones who have chosen to follow their convictions. Therefore I want to carry on with those people’. His decision to step down as Flemish minister is, according to Anciaux, also proof of his faith in Spirit. ‘I would not cling on to power like grim death while the ship that I so believed in was foundering on the rocks. I have not for one moment had any doubts about my commitment to Spirit’.

Opinion

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 28 OCTOBER

Do the electoral considerations not weigh heavier in the scales of this cartel than matters of content? With the greatest of respect for the intrinsic conviction of people in the Spirit and SP.A ranks, the answer can be none other than a patently obvious ‘yes’. Spirit barely scores at all in the opinion polls, and with the introduction of an electoral threshold of 5%, would not secure any elected representatives off its own bat. But in a cartel with the SP.A, in which the SP.A is paying for the arrival of vote-catcher Bert Anciaux in cash in the form of a second place for a Spirit candidate in every province (something which SP.A chairman Janssens refuses to confirm, ed.), Spirit immediately secures five seats. Electoral considerations also prevail in the SP.A camp. The SP.A is a party for which participation in government is a vocation, but this can longer be so if the party continues losing one election after another. The trend has to be reversed, and quick. And in that respect, a cartel with Spirit could well be helpful. What is more, the bar is not so high - having been placed at just 18% for the cartel. Freely translated, that means that SP.A chairman Patrick Janssens will easily achieve his 18%, the figure he had assumed even before there was any talk of the formation of a cartel. Bert Anciaux is his life insurance in this.

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 29 OCTOBER

The VU went under on account of its enlargement. It split into one party for its original public (N-VA) and one for its enlargers (Spirit). When that happened, it left behind elected representatives that defected to CD&V and Agalev, but mainly to the VLD - often without conviction, but out of opportunism. Spirit and N-VA have a more distinct profile than the VU did at the end of its life, that much is true. But a vote for the N-VA could be a wasted vote if that party does not attain the electoral threshold. A vote for Spirit is at once also a vote for another party, the SP.A, not because the latter was the closest in terms of ideas, but because it offered the most. The SP.A let Steve Stevaert develop into a vote-catcher, rejuvenated its executive and, along with Spirit, is also trying to attract the young, educated voters that all the parties want. It is deferring the business of winning back workers from the Vlaams Blok. It erased the stains from its profile, but did not really become any more clearly defined for that.
No more facilities for French speakers, says Dewael

A recent study by the Flemish section of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) on the six facilities municipalities reveals that the facilities for French speakers in six Flemish municipalities in the Brussels Periphery are having an opposite effect than the one intended. They were introduced with the aim of making it easier for French speakers to settle in. But now it appears that as a result of these facilities, French speakers who leave Brussels are moving in large numbers to the six facilities municipalities and not to the other municipalities in the Periphery. In other words, the facilities are encouraging the Frenchification of these municipalities. Minister-President Dewael (VLD) has drawn his conclusions from all this. At the celebration marking the organisation of Vlamingen uit Randgemeenten vzw (the non-profit-making association ‘Flemings from the Periphery Municipalities’), he said that the facilities should die out, as originally intended. And he urged the Flemish members of parliament in the Flemish and federal parliaments not to ratify the European Treaty on Minorities (FF).

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 28 OCTOBER

Facilities do not provide for the integration of French speakers in Flanders, but rather lead to the Frenchification of Flanders. Facilities also see to it that there is no reason for French speakers to learn Dutch, as they themselves say. For this reason, too, the facilities should disappear, says Dewael. But: ‘My political sense of reality forces me to observe that fiddling with the status of these municipalities is easier said than done. The facilities are set in concrete in the constitution. The system can only be changed subject to a majority on the Francophone side as well. In short, if we cannot convince French speakers that facilities do not lead to integration and should be abolished, we will get nowhere’. Letting the facilities die out - i.e., ensuring that nobody uses them anymore - is the alternative. However, the Peelers circular (whereby French speakers were obliged to make a specific application to their local authorities for every official document that they wanted to receive in French), which had that very aim, proves how difficult that is. That letter had the reverse effect, and was like a red rag to a bull, according to Dewael. If the Council of State were to nullify the letter, the Minister-President is not about to publish a new, similar circular.

Dewael hopes that the new Municipalities Act, which provides for different mayoral elections in Flanders and Wallonia, for example, will see to it that the residents of the Periphery become better aware of the fact that they are living in Flanders. Just like the decrease of registration fees, the abolition of the television and radio licence fee, and the introduction of the care insurance scheme. At that point he did not yet mention the new municipalities decree, which reduces the number of aldermen, and which, in the Brussels Periphery of all places, could result in the small number of Flemish aldermen disappearing. Minister Van Grembergen is being approached for a solution to that one.

The first reactions to Dewael’s speech from the Francophone side have not been very encouraging. FDF member Maingain feels encouraged and supported by the notorious Nabholz report (which recognises the French speakers as a minority group in Flanders, ed.) and is asking for the facilities to be extended. The mayor of Wezembeek-Oppem, François Van Hoobrouck, also expressed views along the same lines. However, what the French speakers have picked up on in particular is that Dewael is urging for the European Treaty on Minorities not to be ratified; the Flemish Parliament must reject it, and so must the Flemings in the federal chamber.
Ecolo makes about-turn, but changes its mind

The French-speaking Greens of Ecolo were making things extremely difficult for their Flemish soul mates of Agalev. After having already left the Flemish Greens in the lurch on the arms-to-Nepal affair, it now looked as though they were willing to do the same in respect of the tobacco-advertising ban. No doubt under pressure from the French-speaking Socialists, they were prepared to extend the postponement of that ban by a further year. This would make it possible for another edition of the Francorchamps Formula 1 Grand Prix, which is held in August, to take place. Formula 1 boss Bernie Ecclestone had threatened to remove Francorchamps from the list of international Formula 1 races the moment the ban on tobacco advertising came into force. Thanks to Ecolo’s sudden about-turn in this matter, there would be unanimity on the French-speaking side in favour of granting a deferment of the ban until September 2003. Indeed, all the parties are convinced that losing the Francorchamps Grand Prix would constitute a substantial economic loss for the region around Liège. But in order for a majority to be attained in the Senate, some Flemish senators would also have to be prepared to support the bill granting a deferment. The parliamentary party leader of the liberal VLD in the Senate, Jeanine Leduc, has already stated that ten VLD senators were prepared to do just that. That would give the motion for a deferment a majority of 39 out of 70. Ecolo was however attaching conditions to its change of course. De Standaard wrote that Ecolo was undoubtedly under heavy pressure from PS Chairman Elio Di Rupo, who feels that Belgium does not have to be from PS Chairman Elio Di Rupo, who feels that Belgium does not have to be ahead of the rest of Europe, which will probably only introduce a ban on tobacco advertising in 2006. After all, De Standaard reminded, Ecolo was heading into the elections together with the PS in a ‘pôle des gauches’.

Opinion

BART STURTWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 30 OCTOBER

What has changed in the Francorchamps issue since 17 July this year, when it was last discussed in the Senate? Not much, you might think. The only thing that has changed is that Ecolo has joined PS Chairman Elio Di Rupo’s pôle des gauches. In the French-speaking part of the country, the Greens are not indispensable for the formation of a majority without Christian-Democrats. The Greens of Agalev are necessary for that purpose in Flanders, thus far, that is. Up until now, the Green strategy has consisted in standing by each other through thick and thin, across the linguistic divide. Ecolo has now shifted its rifle from one shoulder to the other, that much is clear. Look at the Nepal affair. Agalev was forced to sacrifice a deputy prime minister and ingloriously abandon all the positions it had adopted because its French-speaking soul mates were not prepared to let anything other than commercial considerations come into play.

BART STURTWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 31 OCTOBER

On Tuesday Ecolo appeared still to be leaving the door open to the possibility of a Formula 1 race in Francorchamps in the summer of next year. On Wednesday that door was firmly slammed shut again. Ecolo says that it is not their fault, but the fault of the motor racing federation FIA and Louis Michel’s MR. It is chiefly Didier Reyners, MR Minister of Finance, who has to take the rap for it. Ecolo had already laid down as a condition that a tobacco prevention fund of EUR 7.5 million would have to be created. Reyners answered coolly that Ecolo was coming up late. In a few weeks Ecolo will therefore vote in the Senate against the bill deferring the tobacco-advertising ban until after the next Francorchamps Grand Prix. ‘Because first people start by wanting a postponement until after 2003, and then it’ll be until after 2004, and perhaps also 2005, and so on’, said federal secretary Philippe Defeyt. The French-speaking Greens know that they will be blamed for killing Francorchamps, because of their attitude. The party is therefore opting for a counter-attack: ‘The law on tobacco advertising dates from 1997, and at the time was supported by the Socialists. All political fans of Francorchamps have been late waking up to the issue’, says Defeyt. The FIA is also being blamed for its policy of delocalisation to countries where tobacco manufacturers are more interested. In an interview with De Standaard, Philippe Defeyt agreed that he had held extensive consultations with Agalev on this matter. In his view, the issue proves that there are still closer contacts between Ecolo and Agalev than there are between Ecolo and PS.

CD&V faces biggest challenge in the elections

The mother of all elections’ was how the 1999 election was described. In Flanders, voters were able to vote four times: for the Flemish Parliament, for the federal parliament, for the Senate (the Upper House), and for the European Parliament. Between September 1999 and January 2000, the Institute of Social and Political Opinion Polls (ISPO) carried out a survey on this among 2,179 Flemish voters. On the basis of this survey, a team of political scientists and sociologists under the leadership of the Leuven professors Marc Swyngedouw and Jaak Billiet made some fourteen analyses. The results of these have been compiled in a book entitled ‘The voter has his reasons’ which was presented to the press on 29 October. These analyses reveal that, despite the major shifts recorded, 1999 did not show such a major break in trends. Christian-Democrats (CVP) and Socialists (SP.A) recorded their lowest score ever, whilst the Greens (Agalev) and the extreme right wing (the Vlaams Blok) achieved their best results ever. But those four trends had already been visible since the nineteen eighties. Now, it is chiefly the CD&V that has reason to be concerned, in the opinion of VUB political scientist Kris De Schouwer. He establishes that the substantial fall in the party’s fortunes is linked to secularisation. Among voters under the age of 35, the proportion of people who are churchgoing Catholics has shrunk to 3%, with the result that the traditional recruitment base has as good as completely disappeared. And according to De Schouwer, given that the CD&V has lost its central power position since the formation of the Liberal/Socialist/Green coalition, it is forced to wrestle its place on purely electoral strength (table p.5).
Keppel Engineering from Singapore buys Seghers Better Technology

SBT will continue to operate as a Belgian company

The Singapore company Keppel Engineering is buying five companies in the Seghers Better Technology (SBT) Group, for the sum of EUR 19.1 million. The trustees in bankruptcy of the different companies have signed an agreement in this respect with the company from Singapore. SBT leaves behind debts of approximately EUR 150 million, according to the trustees’ estimates. That is an enormous amount, compared with a turnover of EUR 117 million in 2001 and a loss of EUR 2.9 million (FF).

GUY VANDEN BROECK
DE FINANCIËLE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 30 OCTOBER

The formal transfer of SBT will take place on 15 November. SBT will continue to operate as a Belgian company. In all, five companies are being acquired: Seghers Water, Seghers Solids & Air, the Seghers Group, and the two companies under Services & Machinery, namely the Van Beneden Group in Puurs and Dinamec in Zele. Keppel had not made an offer for Euro Diesel, amounting to some EUR 23 million, because they hold those assets in pledge. ‘The SBT Group has nonetheless been able to maintain most of its projects during the difficult months prior to and during the bankruptcy,’ says trustee Obbels. ‘We want to keep SBT’s staff, customers, contacts and market position worldwide,’ Keppel Engineering’s General Manager Yick Ping Wong said in a press release.

Keppel Corporation is a 30% subsidiary of the Singapore public holding company Temasek and is active in offshore, infrastructure, and investments throughout the world. It is a deliberate strategy of the company to diversify outside Singapore and is trying to concentrate in the coming years on its three core businesses: offshore, the public utilities sector and real estate. The acquisition of SBT in Belgium is an example of this. In recent decades Keppel Engineering has been active in water purification projects in Asia, including China, where SBT also has a strong presence. In addition, Keppel Engineering is itself a candidate for the construction and maintenance of a waste incineration plant in Singapore. ‘SBT’s know-how will be most welcome in helping us to place Keppel Engineering once and for all on the world map in the environmental market,’ says Yick Ping Wong, the general manager of Keppel Engineering.

The Belgian tentacles of a public holding company from Singapore

In Singapore itself, the parent company Temasek had gradually become too powerful. Almost half of the twenty largest listed companies depend on Temasek, and Temasek subsidiaries account for more than 20% of Singapore’s market capitalisation. With Temasek, Singapore is gradually spreading its tentacles across the rest of the western world. A few years ago HesseNoordnatie came into the hands of Port Sea Authorities (PSA), one of Temasek’s many industrial subsidiaries. The other subsidiary, Singapore Telecoms, has a stake in Belgacom. The conglomerate around the public holding company Temasek constitutes 12% of Singapore’s gross domestic product (GDP). The actual impact is quite considerably greater, however, since Temasek has its say in all major branches of industry. Temasek subsidiary Keppel Corporation wants to concentrate in the coming years on its three core businesses: offshore, the public utilities sector and real estate. The acquisition of SBT in Belgium is an example of this. In recent decades Keppel Engineering has been active in water purification projects in Asia, including China, where SBT also has a strong presence. In addition, Keppel Engineering is itself a candidate for the construction and maintenance of a waste incineration plant in Singapore. ‘SBT’s know-how will be most welcome in helping us to place Keppel Engineering once and for all on the world map in the environmental market,’ says Yick Ping Wong, the general manager of Keppel Engineering.
Sale of nappy manufacturer Ontex to Candover breaks records

ONTEX is the LARGEST MANAGEMENT BUY-OUT IN BELGIAN HISTORY

Ontex, the nappy, tampon, and sanitary pad manufacturer from East Flanders, is being sold. A potential purchaser is the British venture capital fund Candover. Ontex is one of the most important family-owned growth companies in Flanders. The current principal shareholders, the Van Malderen family, are selling their 75% stake. The rest of the shares are listed on the Euronext stock exchange. However, the family will not be giving up total control of the company, since son Bart Van Malderen will continue to run the company and is reported to be retaining a small shareholding (a maximum of 10% of the shares). Ontex is the largest manufacturer of so-called ‘private label’ nappies, which are made for large chain stores such as Aldi and Colruyt. The group has 3,400 employees and is the undisputed market leader in its sector. Ontex’s share value is some EUR 600 million. The acquisition is undoubtedly the largest management buy-out in Belgian history. Candover is also expected to make a public offer at the beginning of next year and to remove the company from the stock exchange listing (FF).

PASCAL DENDOOVEN • DE STANDAARD • 28 OCTOBER

The sale illustrates both the classic reflex of family shareholders to cash in by selling their company, and the limits of the stock exchange as a source of financing. The sale of Ontex to Candover will be the largest Belgian leveraged management buy-out (LBO), i.e., a liabilities-financed takeover by a specialised acquisition fund. Ontex is also the largest family-owned company to disappear from the stock exchange since the wave of stock exchange introductions on the Brussels stock exchange at the end of the nineteen nineties. At that time Brussels experienced a huge ‘SME bubble’, in which Flemish companies were floated at extremely high valuations. The companies concerned included Carestel, Mitiska, Pinguin, Arinso, Keyware, and Ubizen. The recent ‘delistings’, including Glaverbel and the textile group Uco, were old listed companies where in essence existing shareholders pushed their position up. The chip packaging company CS2 disappeared from the stock exchange due to the company’s bankruptcy. In the case of Ontex, however, a sound financial reflex is being played out. Father and mother Van Malderen, respectively aged 62 and 61, are using the sale of their shareholding to safeguard their assets in a tax-friendly manner (zero taxation). By opting for a sale to a financial group, the current management based around their son Bart Van Malderen can remain at the helm. Bart Van Malderen recently said that he wanted to continue, and had other acquisition objectives in mind. On account of the strong growth recorded in the last few years, often coupled to debt financing, Ontex had reached the limit of its growth. Paradoxically enough, the leveraged buy-out will again create possibilities for additional debt financing and takeovers. Large specialised funds such as Candover enjoy credibility in the market and structure the debts in such a way as to ensure that the company’s cash flow is put to optimal use. Ontex is looking at EUR 300 million in debts and a share value of EUR 600 million. That brings the company value to EUR 900 million. The business was founded by Paul Van Malderen, but it is his son Bart who has taken things into a higher gear at Ontex. Between 1998 and the end of 2001, turnover increased by 54.7% to EUR 725 million, and current net earnings rose by 71.5% to EUR 30 million. Ontex manufactures the hygiene products for the most important distributors and is the European market leader. The group has branches in Belgium, France, Spain, Germany, Turkey, and Eastern Europe.

Despite the flotation at the end of 1998, Ontex has remained quite a closed group, with only family members on the board of directors. It is expected that the sale to Candover can be rounded off in the coming weeks. Candover is talking exclusively to Ontex, but the French group PAI (BNP Paribas) is still being kept in reserve. Industrial parties such as the Swedish concern SCA have also looked at the dossier. True to Belgian tradition, there has been active speculation on the stock exchange for some weeks, with at times quite conspicuously high volumes. The share rose in the space of two weeks from EUR 57 to 70, which means that the family will be able to pocket something in the region of EUR 450 million.
Most storm damage covered by fire insurance

The first severe autumn gale on Sunday 27 October exacted a high toll, with five people losing their lives. Gusts of wind of up to 133 km/hour ripped roofs off houses, uprooted trees and brought much road and rail traffic to a standstill. The material damage to houses, companies, and cars is substantial. Flanders had not experienced such a severe storm since 1990. The insurance companies, meanwhile, are awaiting an avalanche of claims. Since 1995, insurance against storm damage has formed part of every fire insurance policy. This fire insurance policy is still not obligatory, but the vast majority of Belgians have one. In addition to that, there is the family insurance policy, for damage people cause to third parties. However, Het Laatste Nieuws draws attention to the small print in the insurance policies. This contains the dreaded exceptions - a list of items that are not covered, such as greenhouses, scaffolding, sheds, and, in particular, damage to cars (not covered by comprehensive insurance) by fallen trees or falling roof tiles (FF).

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In 1990 the Professional Association of Insurance Companies (Beroepsvvereniging van de Verzekeringsondernemingen - BVVO) received 700,000 claims for compensation. That year the gales cost the insurers a little more than half a billion euros. ‘It won’t be quite as much as that this time, but it’s impossible for me to give exact figures,’ stated spokesman Wauthier Robyns. According to the BVVO, the stormy weather was slightly less severe than in 1990. Most damage is covered by fire insurance policies. Robyns provided some clarification: ‘When a tree in your garden falls onto your neighbour’s house, that policy comes into play. After all, the tree is considered as part of the house.’ More than 90% of Belgian families have fire insurance, and since 1995 the insurers are obliged to include storm damage in the fire insurance policy. ‘Only when a case of force majeure can be claimed does the insurance not have to pay,’ says Robyns. ‘But that is not the case here, since only gusts of wind of over 150 km/h are considered to be force majeure, and last weekend no gusts in excess of 135 km/h were measured. Having said that, a justice of the peace may determine that there has been force majeure locally.’ The family insurance policy can also be called upon in the event of storms. This covers damage that people cause to third parties. It is estimated that 85% of the population has such a policy. ‘There will be cases where the fire insurance and family insurance policies overlap. In those cases, we will have to figure out which insurance outstrips the other,’ said Robyns.

66th Book Fair in Antwerp

This year the organiser boek.be has arranged for a theme day for each of the target groups

SASKIA VEREEENOOGHE • TIJD CULTUUR • 30 OCTOBER

‘This year we opted to arrange the programme of special events not around one theme, but around theme days,’ explains Geertruil Schoeters, promotional manager of Boek.be. ‘Those themes have been chosen on the basis of promotional campaigns that Boek.be organises every year or on which it co-operates: the Poem Day, the Youth Books Week, the Literary Spring, the so-called “Doing” Books, and the Summer of Exciting Books. Particularly striking this year is the wide range for youngsters. We’re putting on activities for young people both at the weekend and on Wednesday. Readings are to be held, and there will be theatrical performances and illustrators’ workshops. And on 9 November there will be a children’s theme day based on comics.’

‘As far as the Book Fair’s programme is concerned, there is hardly a day without some literature on the programme,’ Schoeters goes on. ‘We chose to spread the literary subjects over various days. The night sessions on Thursday are also dominated by literature. On 7 November, for example, there will be a poetry night session, incorporating both classic poetry and young talent. The emphasis on so-called “doing” books is reflected in a culinary theme day where there will be a tasting session and discussions on healthy eating and dishes. On the Exciting Books Day, VTM journalist Patrick van Gompel will be talking to authors of thrillers and detective novels. Finally, there is also an extensive range of non-fiction, covering some very wide-ranging topical subjects: 11 September, the stock exchange, and globalisation.’

‘The poster for the 2002 Book Fair is a dynamic image depicting an open book with figures wandering in and out of it,’ explains René van Loon, manager of Boek.be. ‘This illustrates literally and figuratively how accessible books are. The figurative sense lies in the fact that books can lift you up and take you on a walk into the world of literature, language, and text. Books give you the opportunity to walk into unknown

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Two provinces in Belgian Flanders: (West-Flanders and East-Flanders). Short for French Flanders, a former province of the French kingdom on territory taken from the above countship, now constituting the French department Nord. The principal railway station in Lille, capital of the above. That one of the three communities established by the Belgian constitution that corresponds with the Flemish region. From French Flandres, from Dutch Vlaanderen pl, from Middle Dutch Vlander, from Old Frisian, from Proto-Germanic *flaumdra (āœœwaterlogged landāœ), from *flaumaz (āœœflowing, current (water)āœ) (compare Old High German wealtfloum (āœœtransitoriness of lifeāœ), Old Norse flaumr (āœœeddyāœ)), from Proto-Indo-European *plow-m- (āœœflowāœ) (compare Ancient Greek ἱέÎµ-άρρ, ἰήλ (plàrma, āœœdishwater, washing waterāœ)). More at flow. "Waterlogged" refers to the mudflats and salt marshes common to coastal Flanders.