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18 Months After Vote, Belgium Has Government

By **STEPHEN CASTLE**

BRUSSELS — The financial markets have finally done what 18 months of talks, a large protest march and a series of bizarre demonstrations failed to do: broken Belgium's political deadlock.

After an [indecisive election in June 2010](#), the country's fractious political parties could not manage to form a governing coalition until this week, when a credit downgrade and the threat of being engulfed in the euro [debt crisis](#) brought new urgency.

Six parties with enough combined Parliament seats to govern reached a coalition agreement late Wednesday and presented it to King Albert II on Thursday. Barring any new problems, Elio Di Rupo will be sworn in as prime minister on Monday.

A leader of the country's Socialists, Mr. Di Rupo, 60, will be the country's first head of government since the 1970s whose first language is French, a subject of controversy in a country divided between 4.5 million French speakers, who live mainly in Wallonia in the south, and 6.5 million Dutch speakers, who live mainly in Flanders, the wealthier northern region, where separatist parties have gained ground.

Europe's [sovereign debt crisis](#) has brought down the leaders of Ireland, Portugal, Slovakia, Greece, Italy and Spain. By contrast, in Belgium, the bond markets have effectively forced a country without an elected government to create one.

Mr. Di Rupo, the son of an Italian immigrant, will take office committed to cutting 11.3 billion euros (about \$15.2 billion) from the national budget. He has also promised to improve his spoken Dutch, which is glaringly weak in a country where officials and politicians routinely are fluent in both of the country's main languages, and in English, another tongue that gives Mr. Di Rupo trouble.

"If you're looking for public support for a government, it may be a problem when the leader of that government has difficulty speaking the language of the majority," Yves Leterme, the caretaker prime minister who will yield to Mr. Di Rupo on Monday, said on Dutch television.

An editorial in *Le Soir*, a French-language newspaper, said: "Elio Di Rupo speaks Dutch

poorly and will never speak it better. He is — everyone knows — feeble at languages.”

Dutch speakers were once victims of discrimination by the country’s French-speaking elite. Now they provide much of Belgium’s economic dynamism, and often resent having to support the less prosperous French-speaking areas, leading to growing separatist sentiment.

Flanders is where the new government will be most sorely tested. The new coalition excludes the Flemish separatists who won the most seats of any single party in the last election.

It does include the Flemish wings of the Socialist, Christian Democratic and Liberal Parties, and the leaders of those blocs have won increased regional control over economic policy and concessions in a complex voting-boundary dispute. But Lieven De Winter, professor of politics at the Université Catholique de Louvain, said that may not be enough to help Mr. Di Rupo in the north.

“This government cannot be popular, due to the fact that it will have to implement cuts and the fact that the opposition in Flanders will say that everything they do is at the Flemish expense,” Professor De Winter said.

Even so, he said, the new government will probably survive until the next elections are due in 2014 — “not because of its dynamism or popularity, but through the lack of an alternative.”