Following the series of attacks in Brussels in 2016, in which more than 30 people died and more than 300 were injured, the government declared a state of emergency. The liberal immigration policy that had been in place for years was seriously called into question. The trial against one of the suspects is currently in progress. The problem is haunting the country, only recently an assassin shot two policemen and a passing man in Liège. For Belgium’s Prime Minister Charles Michel, the issues of immigration and integration constitute an immense problem for which there are no simple solutions. The second and third generations of migrants are not sufficiently integrated into society and the labour market. The budget cuts following the financial crisis have exacerbated the problem. For Michel, who is elected until 2019, the challenge is to achieve more social inclusion with simultaneous economic growth. Not an easy goal, especially since the divide between the predominantly Flemish-speaking north and the predominantly French-speaking Wallonia in the south remains wide and marked by mistrust. National tax reforms and cuts in unemployment benefits furthered separatist tendencies in Wallonia.

Elections in Belgium are free and fair. Automatic voter registration and the mandatory voting requirement ensure a high turnout. Political parties are largely publicly funded and there is a gender quota. Referendums are illegal to avoid a “tyranny of the majority.”

Freedom of speech

Freedom of expression and of the press is guaranteed. The media is largely independent, although there is a network of personal contacts between some media companies and parties, and the public broadcasters are managed by representatives of the main parties.

While civil rights and political freedoms are well protected, activists denounce that the security laws passed after the attacks of 2016 violate fundamental rights. Police misconduct during arrests has become more frequent, and some rights can simply be revoked for terror suspects.

The welfare state was relatively comprehensive until the financial crisis, but the last two governments cut social spending considerably. Discrimination, for example in the labour market, is a problem for ethnic minorities, especially for the second generation of immigrants.

High-profile corruption cases in the administration, which have been broadly covered in the media, have led to comprehensive reforms. As a consequence, the country now has much stronger integrity mechanisms. Public officeholders must now declare their assets before and after their term of office.

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