Luxembourg: Political Developments and Data in 2021

Another Year Marked by the Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract

Luxembourg politics in 2021 was again largely determined by the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic and its response by public authorities, with an easing of restrictions which was followed by the adoption of stricter measures due to the emergence of the Omicron variant. This sequence caused an outcry in the population, with protests that sometimes became violent. The three-party coalition government was also shaken, at the end of the year, by the decision of three of its ministers to resign from their position. After changes of ministerial personnel within The Greens/Déi Gréng delegation in previous years, this time the turnover (set to become official in 2022) concerned the Socialists/Lëtzebuergesch Sozialistesch Aarbechterpartei and the Democratic Party/Demokratesch Partei. But 2021 was also a particularly difficult year for the historically dominant party of the Grand Duchy, the Christian-Social People’s Party/Chrëschtlech-Sozial Vollekspartei, in opposition since 2013, but still the largest party in Parliament, as it saw its leader forced out of office.

Introduction

The year 2021 was not an electoral year in Luxembourg. As in 2020, national politics was dominated by the Covid-19 crisis and its social consequences. The government was shaken by the resignation of three ministers and accusations of plagiarism against the Prime Minister. The Christian-Social People’s Party/Chrëschtlech-Sozial Vollekspartei (CSV), the main party of the opposition, was negatively affected by the highly mediatised resignation of its President after being charged by members from its own party with potential fraud regarding a personal work contract in a non-profit organization which manages the real estate of the party. Despite position shifts from the CSV, the revision of the Constitution, which began in 2005, went ahead, with Parliament adopting the first reform package concerning the judiciary system.

Election report

There were no elections in 2021.

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By the end of the year, three ministers had resigned, requiring yet another reshuffle (after several prior adjustments) in the Democratic Party/Demokratische Partei (DP)-Luxembourg Socialist Workers’ Party/Lëtzebuergesch Sozialistescht Aarbechterpartei (LSAP)-The Greens/Déi Gréng (DG) coalition government: of the original 17-member Cabinet sworn into office by Grand Duke Henri in December 2018, only 12 would still be in office after 5 January 2022.

Two senior socialist (LSAP) ministers, Dan Kerch (Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Labour, Employment and the Social and Solidarity Economy, and Minister of Sports) and Romain Schneider (Minister of Agriculture, Viticulture, Rural Development as well as Minister of Social Security) announced their resignation at the end of November. Just a few days later, the liberal party (DP) announced the decision of one of its top ministers, Minister of Finance Pierre Gramegna, to also step down from the government. While the official handover ceremony took place on 5 January 2022, the names of the new ministers were communicated and commented on in the media before the end of the year. Romain Schneider would be replaced by Claude Haagen, MP and Mayor of Diekirch. Georges Engel, MP and chairman of the Socialist parliamentary group since 2020, would be Dan Kerch’s successor for the line ministries while the very popular Paulette Lenert, current Minister for Health, would take over his role of Deputy Prime Minister and, therefore, leader of the LSAP in the coalition government. Both outgoing LSAP ministers pointed to personal health issues as the reason why they left government before the end of the legislative term; while Schneider would retire from all political mandates after entering Parliament in 2004 and government in 2009, Kersch would move to the Chamber of Deputies to eventually become an MP (despite being elected twice, in 2013 and 2018, he never acted as an MP, becoming member of the government instead). Contrary to his LSAP colleagues, Gramegna did not invoke health reasons but his preference for discontinuing his stint in politics, which started in 2013 with his appointment as a non-elected figure in government. His resignation arrived at a delicate time for the DP, given Gramegna’s personal popularity, the low standings of the party in opinion polls and the imminent vote of the budget in the Chamber. His successor’s name was also announced in December 2021 and largely commented on, as contrary to the LSAP, which chose experienced politicians to complete the legislative term in government, the DP decided to pick a personality with a similar pedigree as Gramegna at the time of his appointment. Yuriko Backes is indeed a diplomat by training and not active in party politics; she worked at the permanent representation of Luxembourg to the United Nations and later to the European Union, as well as at the Luxembourg embassy in Tokyo. She then served as adviser to both Prime Ministers Juncker and Bettel. From 2016 to 2020 she represented the European Commission in Luxembourg and was then nominated in June 2020 as the first female Marshal of the Grand Duke’s Court.

For Cabinet composition data, see Table 1.
### Table 1. Cabinet composition of Bettel II in Luxembourg in 2021

| Duration of Cabinet | Inception | 5 December 2018 | Dissolution | Still in office at the end of the year |
|---------------------|-----------|----------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| Period covered by table | From | 1 January 2021 | Until | 31 December 2021 |
| Type of Cabinet | Minimum Winning Coalition |

#### A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2021

| Party/gender | Seats in Cabinet | Seats held by women | Seats in Parliament |
|--------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Democratic Party | 6 | 1 | 12 |
| Luxembourg Socialist Workers’ Party | 6 | 2 | 10 |
| The Greens | 5 | 2 | 9 |
| Totals | 17 | 5 | 31 |

#### B. Composition of Bettel II Cabinet on 1 January 2021

See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for Luxembourg or [http://politicaldatayearbook.com](http://politicaldatayearbook.com)

#### C. Changes in composition of Bettel II Cabinet during 2021

No changes

#### D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2021

| Party/gender | Seats in Cabinet | Seats held by women | Seats in Parliament |
|--------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Democratic Party | 6 | 1 | 12 |
| Luxembourg Socialist Workers’ Party | 6 | 2 | 10 |
| The Greens | 5 | 2 | 9 |
| Totals | 17 | 5 | 31 |

Source: [www.gouvernement.lu](http://www.gouvernement.lu), 2021.
Parliamentary report

There were three changes in Parliament in 2021, two of them triggered by the statutory mid-term rotation system of the radical left party The Left/Dei Lénk (DL) MPs: Nathalie Oberweis (whose father was an MP for the CSV) and Myriam Cecchetti (who had previously been alderwoman for The Greens in one of Luxembourg’s largest communes). The new MPs replaced the whole DL delegation in Parliament, which consisted of David Wagner and Marc Baum since the previous rotation during the 2013–18 term. These replacements triggered a further improvement of the proportion of female MPs in the Chamber – in 2018 they held only 12 out of 60 seats (or 20 per cent) before the appointment of female candidates as substitutes for male MPs moving to the government. Overall, from the end of 2020 to the end of 2021, female representation in the Chamber therefore moved from 19 to 21 (or 35 per cent), but further changes were already expected to take place early in 2022 as a consequence of the government reshuffle and the announcement of former CSV minister Françoise Hetto-Gaasch in September 2021 that she would quit Parliament in January 2022.

For Parliament composition data, see Table 2.

Political party report

Political party news was largely dominated by the ‘CSV Frëndeskrees’ case, which put the largest party of the country, already sitting in opposition since 2013, in deeper crisis. The scandal resulted from tensions between the party president elected in January 2019, former MEP Frank Engel and the party’s parliamentary group. The point of no return was reached in mid-March when six CSV MPs decided to denounce their own leader to the public prosecutor’s office for potential fraud regarding a personal work contract with the non-profit organization ASBL, which manages the real estate of the party, the ‘CSV Frëndeskrees’. The contract was suspected to involve a fictitious job. Given the internal upheaval, and in anticipation of his trial later in the year, Engel decided to resign as CSV President. Party members appointed Claude Wiseler as new president in April.

The trial for the ‘CSV Frëndeskrees’ case opened in October. It concerned the legality of the contract signed by Frank Engel, but also the reimbursement of social security contributions related to this job to the former party president with the complacency of a few other important members of both the party and the ASBL. All were acquitted on 9 December. This highly mediatized affair, however, constituted a significant obstacle for the party in its attempt to rebuild, because aside from directly involving its party president, it also put some of its promising young members, who had recently been given top party positions, in the limelight. The CSV modified the party’s statutes in October. This allowed the party to double the number of leadership positions and opened the possibility of having more than one head of party list during the legislative elections. The objective of this doubling of posts was to rejuvenate the party and to guarantee a gender balance in the key positions. Thus, Elisabeth Margue was called upon to take charge of the co-presidency, while Stéphanie Weydert would assist Christophe Hansen in the secretariat general.

The DP also had a difficult year. In January, MEP Monica Semedo (then a member of the DP) was suspended from the European Parliament for two weeks for psychological
Table 2. Party and gender composition of the Parliament (Chambre des Députés) in Luxembourg in 2021

| Party                                      | 1 January 2021 |       | 31 December 2021 |       |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
|                                            | 1 January 2021 | 31 December 2021 |
|                                            | All | Women | All | Women |
| Christian-Social Democratic Party          |     |       |     |       |
| People’s Party                             | 21  | 6     | 21  | 6     |
| Chrschtlech-Sozial Vollekspartei (CSV)     | 35.0% | 28.6% | 35.0% | 28.6% |
| Democratic Party                           |     |       |     |       |
| Demokratesch Partei (DP)                   | 12  | 3     | 12  | 3     |
| Luxembourg Socialist People’s Party        |     |       |     |       |
| Lëtzebuergesch Sozialistesch Aarbechterpartei (LSAP) | 10  | 3     | 10  | 3     |
| The Greens                                 |     |       |     |       |
| Déi Gréng (DG)                             | 9   | 5     | 9   | 5     |
| Alternative Democratic Reformist Party     |     |       |     |       |
| Alternativ (ADR)                           | 4   | 0     | 4   | 0     |
| The Left                                   |     |       |     |       |
| Déi Lénk (DL)                              | 2   | 0     | 2   | 0     |
| Pirate Party                               |     |       |     |       |
| Piratepartei (PP)                          | 2   | 0     | 2   | 0     |
| Totals                                     | 60  | 17    | 60  | 21    |

Source: See the text.
harassment of her assistants. Due to mounting media pressure, the party President Corinne Cahen and Prime Minister Bettel decided to convene the council of elders on this matter. Anticipating a potential exclusion of the party, the young politician handed in her resignation from the DP but did not give up her mandate in the European Parliament, where she now sits as an independent member but still in the Renew Europe group. In April and July, a united opposition in Parliament presented two motions calling for the resignation of Corinne Cahen (Minister of Family, Integration and the Greater Region and party president) over her management of the Covid-19 crisis in nursing homes for the elderly. Thanks to the support of coalition government members, those motions were turned down by the short majority (31 MPs out of 60) supporting the government. Finally, in October, the Prime Minister himself was in the limelight for plagiarism, over 20 years after submitting his final dissertation in public law at the (then called) University of Nancy. The online investigative magazine ‘reporter.lu’ had analysed the document and revealed that Xavier Bettel had copied more than 90 per cent of his work from other sources. The University of Lorraine announced in October that an investigation would be carried out on the content of this dissertation.²

In view of the forthcoming 2023 election, the LSAP reformed its statutes, paving the way for a gender parity-based co-presidency of the party (in its long history, the socialist party only had a single female president, Lydie Schmit from 1974 to 1980). The change would be implemented for the first time in 2022. Double lead candidates placed on top of the list (spitzenkandidat) would also be possible for any level of election (local, national, European), but not compulsory.

For party leadership changes data, see Table 3.

**Institutional change report**

To understand the twists and turns of the constitutional reform process that began in 2005, one has to go back to 2009 and the ambitious proposal presented by the Chamber’s Committee on Institutions and Constitutional Reform after four years of work. The proposal was a comprehensive overhaul of Luxembourg’s constitution, aimed at modernizing and clarifying a text that dated back to 1868 and had been amended on a piecemeal fashion since then (Sauer 2021).

Since 2009, the proposal of the Committee on Institutions and Constitutional Reform underwent multiple changes aimed at integrating the opinions of the Council of State, other national institutions as well as the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. Three controversial potential reforms were put to a consultative referendum in 2015, with all three being rejected (Dumont & Kies 2016). Citizens were then further consulted through a public call for proposals and the holding of a public parliamentary debate in 2016 (Burks & Kies 2021). In 2018, the four largest parties (the CSV, under party president Wiseler, and the three coalition parties) had come to an agreement in the Committee on a complete overhaul of the constitution, a commitment they had all made during the 2018 election. They considered their text as a new, fifth, constitution for Luxembourg rather than a mere (but comprehensive) modification and reordering of the 1868 text, as in the original 2009 proposal. However, in 2019 the CSV decided, under its new party president Engel, to renege
Table 3. Changes in political parties in Luxembourg in 2021

| Party leadership changes in 2021 |
|----------------------------------|
| Christian Social People’s Party  |
| President Frank Engel 1975 Male  |
| Resigned due to an internal denunciation of a potential personal fictitious job on 27 April 2021; new leader  |
| 19 March 2021; new leader on 27 April  |
| Claude Wiseler 1960 Male CSV  |

Source: See the text.
on their agreement with the new text and the commitment to put it to a binding referendum after an information campaign. Given the pivotal role of the CSV in the Chamber to reach a two-thirds majority (it holds 21 seats out of 60), the idea of a new constitution was abandoned. Instead, the government proceeded with four distinct amendment packages (on the organization and functioning of the judiciary, the executive power and the Grand Duke, rights and freedoms and the organization and functioning of the Chamber and the Council of State), which would not be submitted to a binding referendum.

The first reform package concerning the judiciary system was adopted by the Chamber in October 2021. It constitutionalizes the National Council of Judiciary, strengthens fair trial rights and explicitly guarantees judicial and prosecutorial independence (Sauer 2020). The CSV, under party president Wiseler (who had by then replaced Engel), took advantage of an ongoing public petition\(^3\) (requesting a referendum on the constitutional reform) to declare, against all odds, that it would now support a binding referendum on constitutional amendments if that petition reached the threshold of 25,000 signatures required for the binding referendum citizen initiative. That position was highly surprising given the prior decisions made by the party and the confusion between two quite different procedures it relied on.\(^4\) The CSV, however, only indicated that it would only support a binding referendum if there was a popular appetite for it and avoided to take a more active role in this matter, refusing to side with the Alternative Democratic Reformist Party/Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (ADR) and the other small parties to reach the quota of 16 MPs needed to call such a referendum. Eventually, this move was in any case doomed to fail as the public petition the CSV referred to in October received less than 20,000 signatures, and the official citizen initiative launching the actual procedure for a referendum on the first constitutional reform package showed even much less popular interest at the turn of the year.

**Issues in national politics**

As in the previous year (Schmit et al. 2020), national politics in 2021 was dominated by the Covid-19 crisis. The Covid-19 law of 17 July 2020 was amended eight times during 2021. The amendments were made to adjust legislation according to the actual evolution of the spread of the pandemic. In a first phase, when the pandemic seemed to be under control, the amendments reduced the restrictions imposed on people, schools, work, leisure and commerce (see in particular those adopted in May 2021\(^5\) and June 2021\(^6\)). In a second phase, after the emergence of the Omicron variant,\(^7\) the amendments reintroduced stricter measures (see in particular those adopted in October 2021\(^8\) and December 2021\(^9\)). The multiplication of amendments (leading to large confusion among the population), the reintroduction of strict restrictions and the discussion about the possibility of introducing a vaccine mandate caused significant discontent among the population. In October, the Prime Minister revealed that he had been the target of new threats following the announcement of Covid-19 measures that planned to generalize the CovidCheck certificate to enter certain public spaces. Protests against Covid-19-related measures multiplied and became violent. In December, around 2000 hostile protesters gathered (again) outside the Prime Minister’s home and used different public places, such as the steps of the Chamber of Deputies or Christmas markets, for speeches without preliminary permission. Social media groups
played an important role in the organization of those protests, and some politicians also took part in fuelling public discontent (for instance, MP Roy Reding (ADR) participated in a group of vaccine sceptics on the messaging platform Telegram and publicly released private contact details of a journalist investigating his activities; that journalist would then receive intimidating messages). The situation would only calm down after the passing of less restrictive measures against Covid-19 in the first months of 2022.

In mid-July the climate change issue suddenly resurfaced after exceptional rainfalls led to massive floods causing hundreds of millions of damages in Luxembourg and hundreds of casualties in neighbouring regions. The Prime Minister announced in October during his State of the Nation speech that Luxembourg would convene a Citizens’ Council on Climate (Klimat Biergerrot) in 2022. This Citizens’ Council would be composed of a hundred members reflecting the actual demographic reality of Luxembourg, taking both national and foreign residents into account, but also cross-border workers. With the support of experts, these 100 citizens would discuss specific climate issues, develop and suggest potential solutions, and indicate ways to improve the National Energy and Climate Plan if necessary.

The new legislation on press state direct subsidies was adopted in July. It brings more transparency and fairness by modernizing and adapting the existing direct aid scheme to the new digital environment in order to support journalists’ diversity and safe working conditions.

Notes

1. From June to December 2020, the President had been paid a total salary of about €40,000 to fulfil missions such as recruiting new members, finding a new building for the headquarters of the CSV and transforming the ASBL Frëndeskrees into a foundation, which were not performed.

2. Its conclusions came in early 2022, recognizing but contextualizing plagiarism and recommending that Bettel revise his dissertation accordingly; if not, his degree would potentially be withdrawn. The Prime Minister welcomed these conclusions, but decided to accept the withdrawal of his degree by the university.

3. Those petitions can be signed by non-nationals and even non-residents working in Luxembourg and lead to a public debate in the Chamber if they reach 4500 signatures.

4. The confusion is due to the fact that the first constitutional vote – which requires a qualified majority of two-thirds of all MPs (thus 40 MPs) in Parliament – can be followed, under some conditions, by a binding referendum instead of a second parliamentary vote with the same qualified majority. The conditions are that more than one-quarter of MPs (at least 16 MPs) or at least 25,000 voters registered on the electoral lists for parliamentary elections (i.e., approximately one-tenth of all registered voters) request such a referendum (Dumont & Poirier 2004; Sauer 2021).

5. Loi du 14 mai 2021 modifiant: 1° la loi modifiée du 17 juillet 2020 sur les mesures de lutte contre la pandémie Covid-19; 2° la loi modifiée du 19 décembre 2020 ayant pour objet la mise en place d’une contribution temporaire de l’État aux coûts non couverts de certaines entreprises; https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2021/05/14/a369/jo

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6. Loi du 12 juin 2021 portant modification de la loi modifiée du 17 juillet 2020 sur les mesures de lutte contre la pandémie Covid-19; https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2021/06/12/a442/jo

7. En milieu d’année, un sommet entre Luxembourg et Belgique a convenu de soulager les conséquences fiscales et sociales négatives de l’imposition du télétravail pour les travailleurs frontaliers pendant la pandémie. En outre, au-delà de la pandémie, le nombre maximum de jours d’emploi à domicile pour les travailleurs frontaliers belges, pour le paiement de leur impôt sur le revenu en Luxembourg, a été augmenté de 24 à 34 en 2022.

8. Loi du 29 octobre 2020 modifiant : 1° la loi modifiée du 17 juillet 2020 sur les mesures de lutte contre la pandémie Covid-19; 2° la loi du 8 mars 2018 relative aux établissements hospitaliers et à la planification hospitalière; 3° la loi du 23 septembre 2020 portant des mesures concernant la tenue de réunions dans les sociétés et dans les autres personnes morales; https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2020/10/29/a867/jo

9. Loi du 16 décembre 2021 portant modification : 1° de la loi modifiée du 17 juillet 2020 sur les mesures de lutte contre la pandémie Covid-19; https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2021/12/16/a875/jo

10. Loi du 30 juillet 2021 relative à un régime d’aides en faveur du journalisme professionnel; https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2021/07/30/a601/jo

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