



Flanders
State of the Art

Statement on the Coalition Agreement 2024-2029

Government
of Flanders

Madam Speaker,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear People of Flanders,

It is quite an honour to stand here today as the Minister-President of Flanders. We have the opportunity with this team to further shape the nation of Flanders, and lift it to new heights. Over the past months, I have seen politicians around the negotiating table with a clear vision of the future for Flanders. People who have our community's best interests at heart and want to further develop the potential of everyone in Flanders.

A society is never finished; we are constantly evolving. It is up to us and every person in Flanders to make the choices that improve the future.

I want to sincerely thank every negotiator.

We have concluded a strong coalition agreement full of ambition that provides answers to today's challenges.

Because those challenges are considerable. Geopolitical tensions are putting a lot of pressure on the European economy and industry. As an open trade economy, we are the first to feel the effects of this. The world is changing at a rapid pace due to technological innovations. Society is becoming more diverse. Our population is ageing.

We want this Government of Flanders to provide answers to the challenges we face as a society. Making it clear to the people of Flanders that we are a partner in tackling problems together. The Flemish coalition agreement already provides some direction.

This agreement isn't just a mere document or agreement between the parties, either. It is a vision for Flanders, a pact with the people of Flanders.

All the people of Flanders. [///]

We want everyone to be part of and help build our society.

"Working together for a caring and flourishing Flanders" isn't just a slogan; it's a promise to every person in Flanders.

FLOURISHING FLANDERS

A flourishing Flanders is the foundation of everything we want to achieve.

Everything hinges on our prosperity. There can be no well-being without prosperity.

And there is prosperity in Flanders. But we must not rest on our laurels. We've got to communally roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Action area 1: FLANDERS WORKS

Dear Colleagues,

Work is the prerequisite for prosperity. **Getting and keeping** the highest possible number of people in Flanders employed is therefore our priority. There has never been more employed people in Flanders than now. Our employment rate rose to almost 77% by 2023.

But thunderclouds loom on the horizon. Our exports fell slightly during the first six months of this year. This is not surprising, given the economic slowdown or even contraction in certain markets. A subsidy surge within Europe and explosive conflicts near and far are increasing the pressure on our system.

We want even more people in Flanders to work. We know that there is a small group that is hard to reach, or for which a job requires a personalised approach. Therefore, we focus on workable work and provide as many tools as possible to pull people in Flanders out of unemployment. We are also creating 1,000 extra places in the social economy.

We are reforming the VDAB so that the organisation can focus on its core tasks: an efficient activation policy. We are pursuing a proactive policy to help people with long-term ill health and economically inactive people find a proper place in the labour market as well.

If we offer the stepping stones, they should take that first step.

We're aiming for 80% employment.

Action area 2: ENTREPRENEURIAL FLANDERS

There cannot be prosperity without entrepreneurs.

Above all, let entrepreneurs be entrepreneurial. That sounds incredibly obvious, but it hasn't always been an easy task in recent years. A plethora of regulations often discourage today's Flemish entrepreneurs. As a government, we want to be a partner for our Flemish entrepreneurs.

We have been a nation of merchants, thinkers, entrepreneurs and innovators for centuries. We need to keep it that way! Every day, 200 people in Flanders make their dream come true and start their own business. SMEs are the backbone of Flanders's economy.

Through hard work, continuous upskilling and the development of new technologies, our entrepreneurs are showing the Flemish way to Europe's leading team.

Here, as Minister-President and Flemish Minister for Industry, I want to express my explicit ambition to focus on our Flemish industry, from our agriculture to our space industry.

It is crucial that we support them to stay active and expand in Flanders. This benefits those companies, our employment opportunities, our sustainability, and everyone in Flanders.

To paraphrase the famous thinker Harari: *"If you want to play an important and meaningful role in the future, you need to have great adaptability."* That is precisely where our strength lies. Our companies are perfectly positioned to respond to changing conditions, new technologies, sustainability, and a global economy that is in full transition.

However, this is only possible if we do two things. One: we continue to invest in innovation, education and infrastructure. Two: we must give companies as much freedom as possible to do business within a legally secure legal framework.

Together with businesses, civil society and other stakeholders, we are making it better. We are giving confidence as well as responsibility.

We are reviewing our licensing policy with them. We want to achieve fast and legally secure procedures. We are putting a stop to the avalanche of objections to existing activities. The public interest must prevail.

But the government is not beyond reproach either. Flanders must speak with one voice, which is why we will no longer deliver conflicting advisory opinions.

For example, a farmer needs to be able to invest with peace of mind; an industrial player needs to be sure there is room for expansion in the future.

We are tackling overregulation. As Minister-President, I will take the lead for administrative simplification across the entire Flemish public administration. We will do away with complex procedures, cluttering and compartmentalisation. We're involving all the stakeholders here too. Ministers, civil servants, civil society... everyone can contribute to a modern Flemish public administration.

Action area 3: FLANDERS INVESTS

We are at the European top when it comes to investment in research and development. We are taking this a serious step further and updating our target of investing 5% of GDP in innovation.

We continue to support the stars of Flemish innovation such as IMEC, VIB and FTI.

“Flanders is open for business.” We remain attractive for investments, for strategic sectors and for high-tech industries. That is why we are investing even more in our infrastructure in the coming years: ports, pipelines, renewable energy, educational and research establishments, as well as roads. The logistical heart of Europe needs excellent infrastructure.

Action area 4: INTERNATIONAL FLANDERS

Many opportunities lie beyond our borders. We are rooted in Flemish clay, but our gaze is always turned towards the world.

If we want to remain one of the world’s most prosperous regions, we must continue to pioneer.

One in three jobs in Flanders depends on foreign trade. Two percent of all world trade leaves from or passes through Flanders. Our ports are the engine of prosperity. It is actually unimaginable but oh so decisive for the jobs and income of hundreds of thousands of people in Flanders. We are a region, small in surface area, but immense in impact. Over the past five years, Flemish exports have increased by 35%.

Flanders is inextricably linked to the European project. Two thirds of everything we export goes to a European Member State.

We defend the interests of people and businesses in Flanders at the European level. We make our voice heard clearly in our areas of responsibility. We advocate a more important role for the federated states within the European Union.

Action area 5: SUSTAINABLE FLANDERS

We accept our responsibility to meet European and international climate and energy targets.

But we also stress the need to take the Flemish context into account.

Flanders is densely populated and also a pivotal logistics hub. We are fully committed to ambitious climate action, but will not act rashly.

We want feasible and affordable climate measures for society in general. Any decision will weigh up the costs and benefits against the impact on emissions, citizens’ capacity and the competitiveness of our businesses.

Good governance also means adjusting where necessary. Our homes play an important role in energy independence. The more sustainable the property, the better for your own portfolio. People in Flanders know that. If we want to get everyone on board, we need to put Flemish people in charge of their own renovations. We are easing the renovation requirement.

We are investing massively in our public transport systems. We are making our public transport cleaner, more punctual and greener.

Flanders must guard against the effects of climate change. Water is one of the biggest concerns in this regard. We are mobilising resources for the Blue Deal and taking care of our Flemish waterways, giving them more space where necessary. We are supporting renewable energy and opening up a path towards Flemish participation in nuclear energy.

Action area 6: FLANDERS RECONCILES AGRICULTURE AND NATURE

I'm moving from our waters to our land. There's much to be done here. We are working towards a sustainable solution.

Agricultural land remains primarily reserved for our farmers. At the same time, we remain committed to the realisation of more nature and forests; we will not relinquish the 10,000 hectares of forest. We are looking for a connection between agriculture and nature in policies and are transcending polarisation.

Our mission is clear: we want to strengthen the entrepreneurship of farmers and horticulturists as a strategic sector.

Action area 7: A FINANCIALLY SOUND FLANDERS

Dear Colleagues,

We want a Flanders where everyone benefits financially.

We are reducing the inheritance tax. We want people in Flanders to be able to pass on the savings they have worked so hard for to the next generation with peace of mind.

At the same time, we are ensuring a simple and transparent system that distributes the burden equitably, with the strongest shoulders still bearing the heaviest burden by focusing mainly on smaller inheritances. We are closing fiscal back doors. This reform makes all the difference for many people in Flanders.

This team is clearly a government of investment. At over three billion euros, we are investing a historic amount in our society. The choice to allocate more resources to something is always a political choice. And we have made a clear choice in this coalition agreement: for more prosperity, more well-being and more Flanders.

At the same time, it was necessary to scale back certain policies. We will end the job bonus as soon as the federal level makes work pay more.

We are making things fairer. Cleaners deserve better pay, which is why we are increasing the price of service vouchers. Tax deductions are being discontinued. Electric car grants will be scrapped and the road taxation for e-cars will get a fair metamorphosis. Foreign vehicles will have to pay if they drive on our roads.

Let me stress: we will not let go of the balanced budget in 2027. A balanced budget is the guarantee to secure the future of our children and grandchildren.

It concerns Flemish people's money and shows good stewardship. We must not only plan for sunny days, but also be prepared for storms.

We are maintaining course.

Caring Flanders

A flourishing Flanders is synonymous with a caring Flanders.

In this coalition agreement, we place the well-being of all people in Flanders centre stage. We are investing as much as 1.2 billion euros more in well-being during this term of office. We are investing more than ever in tackling waiting lists for people with disabilities and in youth care. The government is the coach on the sidelines, intervening and helping when needed.

Needs change, problems become more urgent or complex. The adage, “We learn, we improve, and we persevere”, has been a guide during these negotiations.

We are investing in our childcare facilities to reduce the child-to-caregiver ratio, create additional childcare places, and improve affordability. As long as there isn't a place for every child, we maintain the priority arrangement for parents who are working or studying.

When talking about our children's future, we also think of the Growth Package. We are indexing the Growth Package and thus contributing to the purchasing power of our families.

The fact that one in five young people struggle with mental health issues is enough to stop you in your tracks. Prevention and targeted help are our first priority. If our young people feel good, then that can only have a positive impact on their well-being and their continued school performance.

When it comes to education, we cannot want anything less than the best. Children and young people should be able to develop according to their own capacities. Curricula are becoming more ambitious and will be created from the bottom up. We are also doing away with workbooks and introducing a smartphone ban in our primary schools.

We are letting teachers do what they do best: teach. Therefore, we are reducing the planning burden.

In doing so, we have one common goal: to make our pupils excel and keep Flemish education at the top of the European league. We need to get everyone over the bar, but will never lower the bar for this.

We are reducing the school costs in practical education. Everyone must have the opportunity to become the best version of themselves.

All teachers deserve the utmost respect too. They want every child to be able to pursue their dreams, but everyone must also take control of their own lives. We cannot leave everything to our teachers. For all pupils to shine, we also point out their own responsibility and that of their parents. That is, children do not go to school hungry, and parents learn Dutch themselves and make sure that their children attend school as much as possible. This is the only way their children can seize every opportunity.

We are guarding the safety of our youth. We will make sure they get to the school gate safely and quickly. Safely by bike or quickly by bus or tram. Road safety is not a luxury, and we owe it to everyone in Flanders.

We also maintain the highest standards for our universities and universities of applied sciences and arts. Every academic year, nearly 75,000 young people in Flanders leave behind their school desks and auditoriums to make their own way in the world. The choices they make will help determine not only the future of Flanders but their own future especially.

It ensures that you can occupy a fully-fledged place in the labour market, and build a comfortable and happy life.

Dear Colleagues,

We need to make it possible for as many people in Flanders as possible to acquire their own homes. Flanders has a strong ownership market. We think every person in Flanders should have a house to call their home, which is why we are reducing the registration duties for the sole owner-occupied dwelling to 2%.

We are taking action in all segments of the housing market. There is more demand in the rental market than there is supply. If we want an affordable, housing-secure, and quality roof over everyone's head, we need to strengthen and give the necessary impetus to the private rental market and the social housing market in addition to the ownership market. This government is therefore providing a historic amount for social housing construction and for the Flemish housing loan, so that people in Flanders who are less well-off can also have a home.

For our elderly, it is not just about care, but about dignity. They have spent their entire lives supporting Flanders. They should be able to rely on the fact that their twilight years will be worry-free. We are strengthening informal care, family care and local initiatives that support our elderly so that people can stay in their familiar environment for as long as possible. We ensure that our seniors can continue to live at home for as long as possible if they wish. Essential services are close at hand in caring neighbourhoods. There will be more tailor-made guidance and we will break the taboo around loneliness and mental health issues in the elderly.

Our government team will fight for everyone. Equality is something we hold dear. The fact that we are still seeing discrimination or aggression towards people based on origin, gender, religion, age, disability or sexual orientation in this day and age is totally unacceptable. So we will continue the fight against discrimination unabated.

Although we have a very low poverty risk in Flanders, every poor person is still one too many. If we lose sight of them, we fail as a community. ///

Although people in Flanders are very supportive and understanding of people who are struggling, they expect aid to reach the most vulnerable. We will deploy social benefits in a more targeted way and work on an adjusted income concept.

TOGETHER

We want to create a flourishing and caring Flanders for everyone in Flanders. Flanders should be a place where everyone feels at home. The “together” component of our agreement is therefore about the DNA of our Flemish society: How do we see Flanders? How do we want to further shape our nation? What is our identity and how can we maintain it?

With each September Declaration, my predecessors offered answers to these questions and helped shape that Flemish individuality.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor Jan Jambon for his leadership over the past five years. He has employed the collective story of Flanders as a binder for our society like no one before him. He has bolstered the Story of Flanders, the Canon of Flanders. People in Flanders appreciated this and we are therefore continuing his work.

Of course, our Flemish Community is synonymous with the Dutch language. It is and will remain the language that connects us. We must be able to understand each other if we are to form a cohesive society. A good understanding of Dutch is the basis of success at school, at finding a job, and the key to fully integrating into our society. Only by mastering our language can one enjoy the equal opportunities offered by Flanders.

We will therefore continue to remove barriers to learning Dutch. We are raising the level of language knowledge in civic integration pathways. Dutch will become an even more important subject at school. Our schools are becoming a true language engine. For instance, three extra hours of Dutch will be taught if pre-primary and primary education results are insufficient.

Of course, a community is much more than just language.

Our values and standards must be endorsed by all members of our Flemish team. No person is an island. Embracing democracy, the rule of law and individual freedom is crucial. But a basic understanding of our society, how it works and its identity, and our culture and history is also important. Wherever possible, we will initiate civic integration pathways in the country of origin.

Culture and heritage are the material externalisation of our identity; they show what we stand for as Flemish people and where we come from. I think we sometimes don't realise just how proud we can be of the rich cultural and creative potential in Flanders.

Therefore, this government will transform our cultural temples into the best condition they've ever been in. Our artists, authors, musicians, dancers and theatre-makers are among the absolute best. Not only are they an inspiration here at home, but also far beyond our borders. Our architectural masterpieces, like Thermae Palace, will be restored to their full glory during this term of office.

But it's not only 'classics' that make Flanders shine; new talent also conquers hearts. Flemish cinema is flourishing, with directors like Lukas Dhont, Adil and Bilall, conquering movie screens at home and abroad.

Flanders is a hotspot for gaming, technology and digital design. We cherish our creative sector and fully support it.

The Government of Flanders also wants to be a partner for all organisations, institutions and associations, and for all artists and volunteers during this term of office.

Flanders has become rich and great because of active citizens who give their best, who support their society. But the government must also bear its responsibility, which is how we will regain the trust of the Flemish people. People in Flanders must be able to see a lot of themselves in their government. That is why a government close to the citizen is important. Respect for local administrations from rural Flanders to our central cities is a central theme of this agreement.

So we must dare to clean our own house. An austere governance culture will be the guiding principle for the next five years.

And therefore, I reach out to you: we are asking Parliament to reform exit payments.

A strong Flemish nation includes a Flemish justice system. Over the past five years, we have taken great steps to further shape our Flemish justice policy and now we will build on this. Victims and their relatives are more central than ever. We are putting more resources into Safe Houses, where anyone experiencing intra-family violence can go for support.

A helping hand for victims is also counterbalanced by a hard-handed justice policy for offenders. We transfer juvenile delinquency to the justice system to implement appropriate policies there too. The people of Flanders have sent a clear signal: the justice policy in our country must improve. Our Flemish justice policy is our response to that. We will continue to ensure the execution of sentences and step up the fight against drugs and juvenile crime.

(CLOSING)

Madam Speaker, colleagues,

You know that I am very fond of the Flemish Parliament.

I sincerely believe in good debate as the basis of our parliamentary democracy. Together with my team, I look forward to Wednesday's debate and our cooperation over the next five years.

I ask you today not only to trust the politicians who made this agreement; above all, I ask you to trust in yourself. Trust in the power of the people of Flanders. Because if we have that trust, if we believe in what we can achieve together, then there is no limit to what Flanders can do.

This team aims to give opportunities and responsibility to as many citizens as possible.

Let our resolve be much stronger than the challenges we face as people of Flanders.

Thank you.
