

# Belgian PM Charles Michel latest to succumb to populist revolt on left and right

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**Brussels** | Belgium's prime minister, under pressure from the right and left, submitted his resignation on Wednesday (AEDT) in the face of a populist revolt over his migration policy, which opponents say threatens Belgian sovereignty.

Prime Minister Charles Michel's problems echo those of other European leaders, including President [Emmanuel Macron of France](#), who are trying to maintain centrist governments in the face of opposition from both flanks.

Right-wing allies of Michel's centre-right government abandoned him earlier this month, angry over his migration policy, which had Belgium join a [UN accord that agrees to share the burdens of immigration](#). Left-wing opponents, meanwhile, demanded more ambitious environmental policies, lower taxes and more affordable prescription drugs.



Protesters face off against Belgium police during an anti-migrant demonstration in Brussels last week. Michel was unable to appease either the right or the left. **AP**

Michel made an impassioned, last-gasp speech to Parliament and asked his left-wing opponents to forge a new alliance that would keep him in office.

"I know that this government doesn't have the confidence of this chamber. I know it. I can feel it," the prime minister told a silent Parliament. "The question is: Do we want to work together on a project taking into account the interests of our citizens?"

But left-wing parties, who have long-standing grievances of their own, were unpersuaded. They called for a vote of no-confidence, and Michel promptly submitted his resignation to King Philippe, the Belgian head of state.

Martin Conway, a professor of European history at Oxford, said the resignation revealed not only Belgium's instability, but also the difficulty of holding a political centre in Europe today.

"It's clever, sensible, technical governance which is really under threat," he said.

## Right-wingers celebrates

Right-wing politicians declared victory and said this served as a warning to leaders across Europe.

Charles Michel's problems echo those of other European leaders who are trying to maintain centrist governments in the face of opposition from both flanks. **John Thys**

"They have to listen to the people," said Barbara Pas, a lawmaker with far-right party Vlaams Belang.

The collapse of a centrist government in the heart of Western Europe would represent a high-profile casualty in the wave of populist and nationalist anger across the Continent. Still, political analysts warned against drawing broader conclusions from a uniquely Belgian political moment.

That is because Belgium is a nation divided by language as much as politics.

Michel, a French speaker, had built a fragile governing coalition with the conservative Flemish separatist party known as the N-VA. That alliance fell apart earlier this month over the N-VA's opposition to the UN migration agreement.

## Election jockeying

Koert Debeuf, a scholar and former adviser to the Belgian government, said the N-VA took up the migration issue as a way to maintain support among conservative voters who had been gravitating toward the far right. He said the current crisis was less about the failure of the Belgian government and more about each party jockeying for position in elections set for May.

"It's the same anti-migration wave that's been blowing through Europe since 2015," Debeuf said. "But this is a game that's going on in order not to lose the elections."

Socialists and Greens, for example, share almost no policies with the right, but used the teetering government to try to push Michel's policies to the left. Left-wing lawmakers implored him to endorse a more progressive social agenda.

Like neighbouring France, which has witnessed the unrest of the economic "Yellow Vests" protests, Belgium has seen demonstrations by people who say that life has become unaffordable for the working class.

The UN pact that created such angst was ratified this month, and will be signed in New York on Thursday (AEDT). It calls for providing migrants with basic services, improving legal paths to migration and using detention as a last resort.

The agreement has recently become a flashpoint for nationalist and far-right groups in Europe, who have called it an effort to impose a globalist agenda on sovereign governments. Over the weekend, the police used water cannons to disperse thousands of demonstrators who protested against the agreement in Brussels.

In the face of rising right-wing opposition to the pact, Michel asked the Parliament this month to vote on whether to support it. The N-VA opposed it, but Michel's remaining partners won support from left-wing parties to support the measure. With that backing, Michel said he would endorse the agreement.

Karen Van Vlierberge, a deputy permanent representative at Belgium's UN mission, said that the position had not changed. "We will vote in favour," she said of the pact.

Supporters have complained that nationalist, anti-immigrant groups have misrepresented the agreement. The pact explicitly recognises state sovereignty and the right of each government to decide its own immigration policies.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary, one such right-wing leader, has dismissed the compact as a "pro-migration document".

Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have also rejected the accord, as has the United States, which initially supported it. President Donald Trump withdrew his support last year, declaring it at odds with his immigration policies.

The king will now consider the resignation, and it is unclear when he might act on it. But the resignation all but guaranteed that the country would be without a functioning government this northern winter and probably until elections scheduled for May next year.

Hours before the resignation, Catherine Fonck, one of Michel's centre-left opponents in Parliament, said that he had brought this crisis upon himself by partnering with the N-VA even as it fomented anti-migrant sentiment.

"The fruit of your government with the N-VA is fear among the population, the fear of people to lose what they have, the fear of migrants," she said. "The N-VA seeks only one thing: to sabotage Belgium."

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