

# Guy Verhofstadt



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## Belgium

### Prime Minister

***Guy Maurice Marie Louise Verhofstadt***

**Term of office:** 12 July 1999 - 20 March 2008

**Birth:** Dendermonde, Province of East Flanders, Belgium, 11 April 1953

**Political party:** VLD

**Profession:** Lawyer

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## Presentation

Since 2009, when the Belgian panorama ephemerally became calmer, the former Prime Minister of Belgium redirected his interests to the European politics.

Hence, Guy Verhofstad was the head of the list off the Open-VLD in the EP elections of 2009, held when the Belgian federal government was a coalition of five parties, the Open-VLD among them and lead by the Christian democrat Herman Van Rompuy. With 12,7% of the votes, Verhofstad's European list obtained three seats, the same number as the social democrats and the Christian democrats.

The Open-VLD was integrated in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which was the third force of the Parliament after the EPP and the S&D. In fact, Verhofstad became leader of ALDE in Brussels replacing the British Graham Watson.

In September 2010 the Belgian MEP who was also honorary president of the Belgian section of the Union of European Federalists and member of the Madrid Club, was one of the Spinelli Group promoters, an initiative launched within the European Parliament with the goal of promoting the notion of a unified Europe with federal criteria in the social, political, and academic spheres of the continent. Other promoters of the Spinelli Group were the green Franco-German leader Daniel Cohn-Benedit, the Walloon ecologist Isabelle Durant and the French socio liberal Sylvie Goulard. Verhofstad's initiative was joined by personalities such as Jacques Delors, Kostas Simitis, Joschka Fischer, Pat Cox and Mario Monti.

In July 2011, at the height of the storm of sovereign debt in the Eurozone, Verhofstad and the Italian Giuliano Amato published a critical article/manifesto against the speculative pressure from the debt markets and with the apparent powerlessness of the governments and EU institutions to address them, giving at the same time, a rap on the knuckles to Germany and other European governments for their reluctance to contribute to the financial rescue of those countries threatened by bankruptcy.

With the title "A plan to save the euro and curb speculators", the signatories diagnosed that "Europe is losing a war between its elected governments and unelected rating agencies. Governments are trying to govern, but the rating agencies still rule. Electorates know this, which is why some European Union member states oppose fiscal transfers to others." And warned "Defaults by the eurozone's most debt-exposed countries would hit banks and pension funds in both the core and the periphery. No one is immune."

"The answer" wrote Verhofstadt and Amato "is not less Europe, but more." Concretely, they urged for the "conversion of a share of national debt to EUbonds", a formula that would "stabilize" the crisis and that had been proposed by the French-German axis of chancellor Merkel and Sarkozy, Jean-Claude Juncker and the Italian Minister of Economy and Finances, Giulio Tremonti.

The article cited as co-authors the former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, the former Portuguese Presidents Jorge Sampaio and Mario Soaeres, Spanish Enrique Barón, British Stuart Holland and the Dutch Jan Pronk, all of them as members of the socio-labour political family plus the Polish liberal Jacek Saryusz-Wolski.

In September 2012, from his seat in the Parliament, the liberal leader attracted media interest when he got into a verbal dispute with the British eurosceptic MEP Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), known for his criticism to the European institutions which they accuse of wasting money. Verhofstad replied that the greatest waste of money was the salary the EU was paying Mr. Farage.

As he was the leader of the ALDE group and president of the ALDE's bureau in the EP, his candidacy to the President of European Commission seemed incontestable. However, another heavyweight of the European politics, the Finnish centrist Commissioner of Economic and Monetary issues Olli Rehn, wanted also to be candidate to the presidency.

The 1st of February 2014 ALDE member parties approved a solution in Brussels with the 79,3% of the votes: Verhofstadt was to be the candidate to the Commission Presidency and Rehn would be candidate for any of the senior positions in the EU, particularly in the economic and foreign policy fields. That formula was agreed by the mediation of Graham Watson, president of the ALDE party, whose bureau Verhofstadt, was also a member.

ALDE's manifesto was approved in the 34th biannual congress at the end of November 2013 in London. It called for "a Europe that works" on job creation, stabilization of financial accounts and transparency.

In the London Congress, the party's president Graham Watson emphasized the achievement of "a simpler

and stronger Union” by “trimming the oversized, unnecessary and costly bureaucracy” while the head of the group warned the “worried” Europeans that they were being “tempted by simplistic and populist solutions offered by especially the left and the right, retreating in their country while the world is globalising.”

“Euroscepticism may be in fashion. Even becoming mainstream. But that doesn’t mean it’s right” Verhofstad added in his speech, where he also confessed he is “obsessed by the loss of influence of Europe in the world. By the loss of wealth because of the crisis. By the loss of sovereignty. Real sovereignty.” At the same time, he identified himself with a federal model for Europe that mean “efficiency”, “democracy” and “accountability” but not a model that would mean “more bureaucracy”, “centralization” or “creation of super states”.

Guy Verhofstad is married with Dominique Verkinderen and is the father of two children; he is author of the monograph *Les États-Unis d'Europe* (2006), of the essays *Een new age of empires* (2008) and *Sortir de crise: Comment l'Europe peut sauver le monde* (2009) and of the book-manifesto *Debout l'Europe!: Manifeste pour une révolution postnationale en Europe* (2012), the latter as a co-author with Daniel Cohn-Benedit.

The statesman has a cast of national awards including the Grand Cross of the Order of the Crown (2007) and the Grand Cordon of the Order of Leopold (2008) from Belgium. In 2002 he got the Vision for Europe Award, granted by the Edmond Israel Foundation (EIF) based in Luxembourg.

In addition to his European political functions, Verhofstad develops corporate activities in the private sector; in particular, he is member of the boards of directors or supervisory of the Dutch society of investments APG (2009), the maritime shipping services company Exmar, based in Antwerp (2010), and the society of investments based in Brussels Sofina (2012). Furthermore, in 2013 he became President of the Governing Council of the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA), an academic institution based in Maastricht.

*(Update to April 2014)*