



Belgium ends four-year impasse to appoint new antitrust president

Bethan John
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Belgium has finally appointed a new president to lead the country's competition authority after failing to name a successor to former head Jacques Steenbergen for over four years.

The enforcer announced on Friday that the Council of Ministers selected Axel Desmedt for the role, who previously spent 14 years as a member of the Belgian Institute for Postal Services and Telecommunications (BIPT) council.

The appointment follows years of delay since previous president Jacques Steenbergen's mandate expired in 2019. Steenbergen continued as president while waiting for the government to appoint his successor but [left the post](#) last year over a lack of clarity about his replacement.

Vincent Mussche, a partner at Liedekerke Wolters Waelbroeck Kirkpatrick in Brussels, said the delay was due to the Belgian coalition government failing to reach a consensus on the proposed candidate.

The French-speaking liberal party Mouvement Réformateur argued that the position should be reserved for a French speaker, Mussche said. Despite being bilingual, they considered Desmedt to be a Dutch-speaking candidate.

The authority's future "looks bright" alongside the "dynamism" brought in by the appointment of prosecutor general Damien Gerard in 2022, he added.

The watchdog has [considered](#) blocking its first merger in the past year and [closed](#) a landmark abuse probe into a below-threshold merger.

Sébastien Engelen, a partner at Contrast in Brussels, said the appointment was "about time".

Desmedt is "appreciated and known as a pragmatic experienced man," Engelen added, although his knowledge of antitrust law remains unclear.

The good results achieved during his time at the BIPT suggest he will "have the strength to successfully steer" the competition authority, he said.

The agency did not confirm when Desmedt will take up the role.

The competition authority said in a statement it was delighted with Desmedt's selection, adding it was key for the functioning of the institution and the continuity of its mission.

A spokesperson for BIPT said: "We wish him all the best of luck and we are looking forward to a fruitful cooperation".

Bethan John

Author | Senior news reporter

bethan.john@globalcompetitionreview.com

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