

# Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg

Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg were three of the founding members of the European Community in 1957. They are neighbouring countries lying on lowland across the Ardennes plateau in north-western Europe, bordered by the North Sea, France and Germany. The three countries share many elements of common history, having experienced repeated periods of cross-border conflict, co-operation and government during their history. The most modern example of this is the *Benelux* Economic Union, founded in 1958, which has acted alongside the European project to bring these countries' economies closer together. This tradition of co-operation has contributed to their keen support for the concept of European integration.

## Recent History

All three countries were seriously affected by the European wars of the first half of the twentieth century. This shaped the political system in these countries after 1945 that placed a strong emphasis upon *consensus*. Politics in all three countries has been dominated over the past half century by the twin forces of Christian and Social democracy. In recent years, this has been supplemented by the rise of Green Parties and the resurgence of radical nationalism in the Netherlands and Belgium. In Luxembourg, the Christian Social Party has been the dominant political group since World War II and has played a role in all governments.

The region is a junction between the cultures of southern and northern Europe. Belgium in particular is culturally divided between the Flemish speaking north and the French speaking south. This has led to prolonged tension in recent decades often fanned by the ultra-nationalist Vlaams Blok party. Tensions culminated in 1993 with the reform of the Belgian constitution to make the country a federal state. In 2007, an inconclusive general election led to prolonged negotiations to form a coalition government and the resulting weak government collapsed in 2008. Herman Van Rompuy of the Flemish Christian Democrats party was Prime Minister until he was appointed President of the European Council in 2009. Divisions in Belgium lingered and the government collapsed again in 2010. One year on from the elections, in June 2011, Belgium was still without a government, beating the Cambodian record for the longest time taken to form a government.

The Netherlands has also seen tension in recent years related to its large immigrant population. For example, populist anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn was assassinated in 2002. However, the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by controversial anti-Islam politician and supporter of Fortuyn Geert Wilders, has become increasingly successful in recent elections, winning four seats in the European Parliament in 2009 and making substantial gains in the 2011 Dutch provincial elections.

## Government Structure

Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg all operate under constitutional monarchies. In the Netherlands, the monarch, currently Queen Beatrix, has purely ceremonial duties. Control of government business is shared between the Prime Minister, the Council of Ministers, and the Parliament, which is called the *Staten Generaal*. The current government is a centre-right *coalition* between the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Christian Democratic Appeal party (CDA). The Prime Minister is Mark Rutte of the VVD. The government came to power in

October 2010, after an inconclusive election in June 2010 led to four months of negotiations to form a government. The VVD and CDA won only enough parliamentary seats to form a minority cabinet, and so the coalition secured the parliamentary support of the PVV.

In Belgium, King Albert also has a mainly symbolic position. Political power is divided between the national government, led by the Prime Minister, and the regional governments. In April 2010, the government collapsed due to disagreements between the Flemish and French parties. An election was held in June 2010 when the New Flemish Alliance (a Flemish separatist party) won the most seats, but not enough to hold a majority. Huge disagreements between French and Flemish speaking parties have led the talks on the formation of a government to break down numerous times. Belgium's political instability was particularly worrying for the EU because it coincided with the country taking over the rotating 6-month Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers (July-December 2010).

In Luxembourg, power is shared between the monarch, Arch Duke Henri, the cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, and the Parliament. The current government has been in power since 2004, having been re-elected in 2009, and is formed by a coalition between the Christian Social People's Party (CSV) and the Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party (LSAP).

## Relations with the EU

All three countries have always maintained a close relationship with the EU. As founder members they have been at the forefront of pursuing European integration. All three are fully signed up to key measures of closer co-operation including the Euro and the Schengen Convention. However, attitudes towards the EU project have altered in recent years, especially in the Netherlands. In 2004, Dutch voters rejected the proposed EU constitution, leading to a crisis within the EU. Nevertheless, politicians in all three countries remain keen supporters of the EU. Luxembourg's Prime Minister Juncker was a particularly strong voice in support of the EU constitutional project, which led to the signing of the Lisbon Treaty (2007).

## Facts and Figures

- The Netherlands is home to some of Europe's largest companies including Unilever and Royal Dutch Shell.
- The region is a European transport hub, largely thanks to the major ports at Rotterdam and Antwerp.
- Luxembourg has the third wealthiest population in the world, with a GDP per head of \$105,044 in 2009, according to the World Bank.

### Technical Terms

**Benelux:** a compound title made up of the first syllables of the three member countries' names.

**Coalition:** a formal agreement between political parties to share power in government.

**Consensus:** political agreement around a majority opinion.

### Links

- <http://www.belgium.be/en/>
- <http://www.gouvernement.lu/>
- <http://www.government.nl/index.jsp>