

# 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 and 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 a 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. However troubles resurfaced in 2007 when an inconclusive General Election led to Belgium's longest ever negotiations to form a coalition government. An interim Government finally took office in December 2007 led by Flemish Liberal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and subsequently his political rival Yves Leterme of the Christian Democratic and Flemish Party from March 2008. However Leterme resigned in July 2008. Belgium's king rejected his resignation and called for negotiations to find a resolution. One option is to divide Belgium, but this would be difficult for the EU because a number of its institutions are based in Brussels. The Netherlands has also seen tension in recent years related to the country's large immigrant population. In 2002 this resulted in the assassination of populist anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn.

## 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*. Dutch

elections, held in November 2006, saw Jan Peter Balkenende's centre-right Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) return with 41 seats, ahead of the main opposition Labour party that won 32 seats. However negotiations to form a **coalition** took time and it was only in February 2007 that a government was formed, with Balkenende as the head of a three-party centrist coalition between the CDA, Labour Party and the Christian Union.

In Belgium the monarch, King Albert, also has a mainly symbolic position. Political power is divided between the national government, led by Prime Minister Yves Leterme, and the regional governments. However, following failed attempts at reform, King Albert is currently encouraging negotiations in the national government, a coalition of the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD) and Socialist parties, formed in 2007.

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 and is formed by a coalition between the Christian Social Party (CSV) and the Socialist Party.

## Relations with the EU

All three countries have always pursued 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, in recent years attitudes towards the EU project have altered, 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 has strongly supported the EU during the recent upheaval surrounding the constitutional project, revived in the form of the Lisbon Treaty.

## Facts and Figures

- The Netherlands is home to some of Europe's largest companies including Unilever, Royal Dutch Shell and ABN-AMRO.
- The region is a European transport hub, largely thanks to the major ports at Rotterdam and Antwerp.
- Luxembourg has the wealthiest population in the world, with GDP per head of \$62,700.

### 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:** general political agreement around a majority opinion.

### Links

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