



European Council: Belgium

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1 Introduction and Executive Summary

Belgium, most central to the Union, even hosting its capital, has not had the most stable of governments. In fact, Belgium managed not to have a government for more than one and a half years. In the European Council, Premier Michel now has the chance to regain the trust of his constituents.

In talks with other European leaders, the Belgian prime minister should

- advocate for a strong Europe,
- be aware of being a "caretaker" government.

This document provides a quick glance at Belgian policy in Europe and should serve as a starting point for research. Please especially take a look at the links and references, as they include a number of very comprehensive articles, data collections and reports.

2 Societal and Economic History

The modern Belgian economy rose from the ashes of World War II in a period referred to as the *Het belgische wonder*, the Belgian Miracle. The miracle was characterised by parallel trends of rising employment and real wages and low inflation, leading to significant improvements in living standards, similar to the German *Wirtschaftswunder*. At the end of 1947, Belgium became the first former belligerent in Europe to reach its pre-war level of industrial output. [1]

In 1947, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg formed the Benelux Economic Union to promote free movement of workers, goods and services in the region. Four years later, the Benelux joined West Germany, France, and Italy to form the European Coal and Steel Community, a predecessor of the European Economic Community (EEC) that later became the European Union (EU). [2]

The most important sectors of Belgium's economy in 2016 were public administration, defence, education, human health and social work activities (22.5%), wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and food services (19.5%) and industry (16.7%). Intra-EU trade accounts for 72% of Belgium's exports (Germany 17%, France 15% and the Netherlands 11%), while outside the EU 6% go to the United States and 2% to both India and China. In terms of imports, 63% come from EU countries (the Netherlands 16%, Germany 13% and France 9%), while outside the EU 8% come from the United States and 4% from China. [3]

3 Political Position

Charles Michel is currently serving as 51st Prime Minister of Belgium. He is the leader of the conservative-liberal francophone *Reformist Movement* party.

Michel had led a four-party coalition government that fell in December 2018 when the largest party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), quit over objections to a UN migration pact. Subsequent

efforts to relaunch as a minority administration failed and Michel submitted his resignation on 18 December after losing a confidence vote. Michel will lead a government of "current affairs", effectively a caretaker administration until the May elections. [5]

In the policy statement of 2016 for now failed administration, Michel promised to "play an active role to bring the European project closer to the direct concerns of citizens", indicative of his clearly pro-European stance. In the wake of the European migrant crisis, Michel argued for European co-operation, while reaffirming Belgium's solidarity with and commitment towards the EU's common borders. [8]

4 Foreign Policy [6]

Belgium is a founding member of NATO. The membership reflects the political decision to guarantee Belgian security and defence in a multilateral framework: Following the Second World War, Belgium has consistently placed its foreign security policy in a multilateral framework, in which NATO is the cornerstone of defence of its territory. That is both in terms of deterrence and defending NATO territory, and conducting peace and security efforts elsewhere in the world. Trans-Atlantic cooperation and consultation related to security and defence with European Allies, the United States and Canada are essential within NATO. Belgium positions itself as a reliable and credible partner within NATO and also advocates for the Alliance to continue to respond appropriately to new challenges and threats. It is important for Belgium to ensure cohesion and solidarity within the Alliance.

Belgium has always advocated a Europe that is geared towards looking after its economic and commercial interests, achieving greater stability and living up to its own democratic values. Belgium believes that Europe's foreign and security policy must foster internal cohesion within the Union and also enable the EU to exert a positive influence in the international arena. This commitment may be expressed in various ways, for example through economic development, humanitarian aid, political cooperation, cultural cooperation, and efforts to bolster human rights and shore up democracy. However, it must also find some expression in the domain of security, through concrete measures to prevent conflicts, swift responses to natural disasters, crisis management and peacemaking and peace-keeping efforts.

Partly thanks to the European Security Strategy of December 2003, the *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP) also includes non-military means. Belgium believes that through this diversified approach, of which military deployment is only one option, the EU is better equipped than, for instance, NATO to tackle the consecutive stages in a crisis management process (from prevention to stabilisation and reconstruction).

In civilian crisis management, Belgium favours a multilateral approach as it offers more opportunities for synergies and a greater impact. Belgium considers the EU to be the first (civilian) security provider and particular attention is given to the implementation of the civilian aspects of the EU-Global

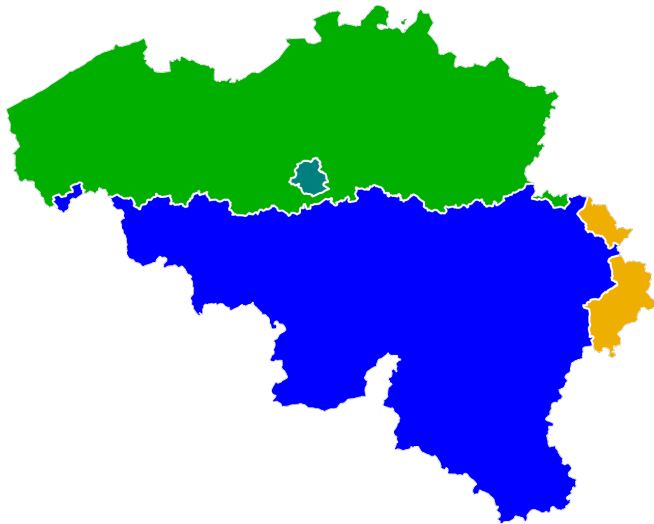


Fig. 1: Language Areas of Belgium. ● Dutch; ● French/Dutch Brussels; ● French; ● German
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Strategy on Security and Defence. When other organisations are better suited or complementary to address or manage a crisis in a region that is a priority for Belgium, or when Belgium has expertise in a specific niche that is useful to these missions, experts can also be deployed to a UN, OSCE or NATO mission. And finally a deployment in a bilateral civilian crisis management program or project is also possible.

The UN peacekeeping mission to Rwanda during the Rwandan Civil War, known as UNAMIR, involved a significant contingent of Belgian soldiers. Belgium, as the former colonial power in the country, sent the largest force of around 400 soldiers from the 2nd Commando Battalion, but withdrew after ten Belgian peacekeepers were kidnapped, mutilated and murdered by the Hutu-dominated government army. [4]

During the Kosovo crisis of 1999, 600 Belgian paratroopers participated in Operation Allied Harbor, a NATO operation to protect and provide assistance to the huge number of ethnic Albanian refugees in Albania and Macedonia. That same year, 1,100 Belgian soldiers left for Kosovo to participate in the Kosovo Force (KFOR), a NATO-led peacekeeping force. [4]

5 Domestic Policy

Unlike any other European Country, Belgium is bitterly split by a language barrier between the largest two groups of Dutch speaking Flemish (57.7%) and French speaking Wallonians (32.3%). The capital Brussels is language-wise shared, although it is located in the Flemish area. Of the total population of 11.3 mln., people of foreign background make up about 25 %.

The 2010 Belgian federal election produced a highly fragmented political landscape, with 11 parties elected to the Chamber of Representatives, none of which had more than 20% of the seats. The separatist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), the largest party in Flanders and the country as a whole, controlled 27 of 150 seats in the lower chamber. The Francophone Socialist Party (PS), the largest party in Wallonia, controlled 26 seats. Belgium beat the world record for time taken to form a new democratic government after an election, at 589 days, which was only recently surpassed by the Northern Ireland executive. On 6 December 2011, a government coalition was finally sworn in, with Socialist Elio Di Rupo becoming Prime Minister of the Di Rupo Government. [4] [5]

6 Recent Developments

Belgium introduced plans for a European tax on commercial aviation, as was reported by *Le Soir*. In a note to its EU partners, the Belgian delegation recommends "fair and correct air transport pricing with regard to its impact on environment." Currently there isn't any tax on kerosene or VAT on airline tickets. More environmentally friendly modes of transport such as the train are more taxed than air transport. Belgium joins the process initiated by France and the Netherlands. [7]

7 References

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