

# Belgium



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## Looking at Belgium:

- Population; 11.68 million people
- Makes up 2.6% of EU total pop
- Placing it in the Medium population range of the current EU

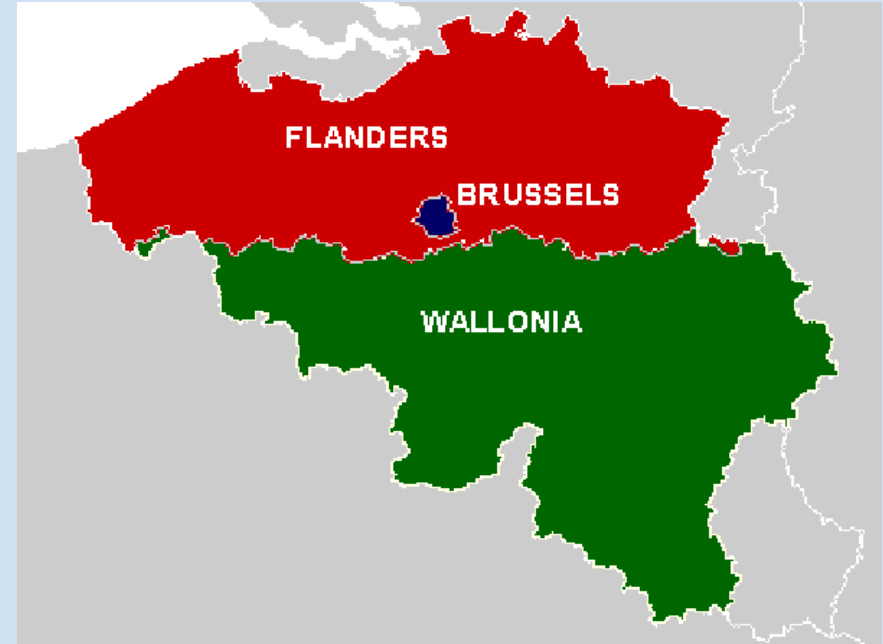
### Geographically;

- Small country - smallest within the EU
- Second smallest sized country out of the Founding members
- Part of West Europe
- Practically engulfed by its neighbors: France, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Germany.
- Geographically a cross-road between two major powers France and Germany
- Central location



# History and Internal Make-up

- Country that comprised of three regions.
- Each region has its own language, culture and identity.
- Regions are highly autonomous
- Completely self-organised
- Each with own government and parliament
- Internal divisions between the regions run deep, reflected in political parties manifestos and ideas.
- Divisions rooted in economic differences and linguistic rights.
- Wallonia and Flanders are further divided into 5 provinces
- Power sharing and delegation is a institutional norm and shows multi-level gov can work



# Flanders

- Flemish region in the north bordering The Netherlands.
- Official language - Flemish
- Largest region, with 58% of the population.
- Flanders is the most economically developed part of Belgium.
- GDP per capita is higher than in Wallonia.
- Consistently more economically prosperous - shipping, exports
- The Port of Antwerp is one of the largest in Europe.
- Key sectors: manufacturing, logistics, chemicals, technology, and port industries.
- Once Flemish not considered official language and was dismissed.
- Had to fight for linguistic recognition
- “Manifesto for an Independent Flanders Within Europe,” a 252-page report issued at the end of 2005



# Wallonia

- Southern region, bordering France, Germany and Luxembourg
- Main language is French, though a small area in the east uses German officially.
- The French language and culture give Wallonia strong ties to France, both historically and culturally
- Historically a strong industrial area that has faced serious decline, making it a strong support of EU economic integration
- GDP per capita remains below the national and EU averages.
- Pro-EU region



# Politics and Government:

- Constitutional Monarchy:

King is the head of state but holds limited prerogatives

- Federal parliamentary democracy:

Designed to reflect country's deep linguistic and regional diversity

Belgium moved to a Federal since 1993 - from a unitary structure

as internal divisions were extensive and needed to be addressed

Within the two regions - Flanders and Wallonia they are divided

again into regions - five each.

- Prime Minister of the federal government:

Bart De Wever

Been critical of some aspects, especially over-regulation,

immigration policy, and centralization of powers.

Belongs to the New Flemish Alliance - Promoting Flemish

nationalism

Biggest party in Federal government and within Flemish

government



Reasons why Belgium was a Founding  
Member of the European Project:

# Peace, Historical trauma + Re-building

- Invaded in both WWs causing massive destruction meaning the experiences of war left Belgium desperate for Peace, security.
- A commitment integration and cooperation was needed in order to rebuild and protect itself.
- Small states like Belgium understood that they needed a collective European project to ensure protection in the new world.
- Idea of integration between France and Germany was essential and viewed by Belgium as a way to ensure peace
- Integration was essential

# Economic

The European project offered;

1. Open markets -

Creation of a common market allowed Belgium to trade freely with all its neighbours, boosting its exports and allowing it to integrate its economy

As a small, highly industrialised nation with limited natural resources, Belgium depended on access to foreign markets for growth and employment.

1. Economic cooperation -

- Deeper cooperation within Europe created a sense of shared prosperity which meant economic interdependence, supporting smaller economies
- Developing an economic strategy within Europe was essential for Belgium a small trade-dependant economy
- Both of these features meant economic interdependence which was essential for Belgium's economy
- Currently sends majority of exports to France - 20%, followed closely behind - Netherlands and Germany

# Political Influence and Stability

- Again its size and its geographical position between both power-houses Germany and France meant Belgium could become a victim of marginalisation with Europe.
- European project offered Belgium equal standing within decision making -
- A platform to exert influence far beyond its size.
- Also important as no longer a colonial power - after the DCR own the battle for independence

## Internally

- Integration also aligned with the direction in which Belgium was heading.
- A country that was accustomed to cooperation and compromising.
- Important to have these values reinforced and further cemented
- These experiences explain why it became such a strong supporter and founder of the European Union

# Mutually reinforcing relationship

What Belgium gained:

- Essential idea - The European project allowed Belgium to punch above its weight.
- Provided an internally divided country a neutral shared identity which supported both sides equally.
- Being European was something shared between all three regions.
- This idea of unity was further cemented with Brussels becoming the de facto capital and becoming the home of the EU.
- Helping to reduce internal tensions and keep the peace.
- Also further entrenched Belgian traditions of federalism and cooperation.



# Mutually reinforcing relationship

What Belgium was able to give;

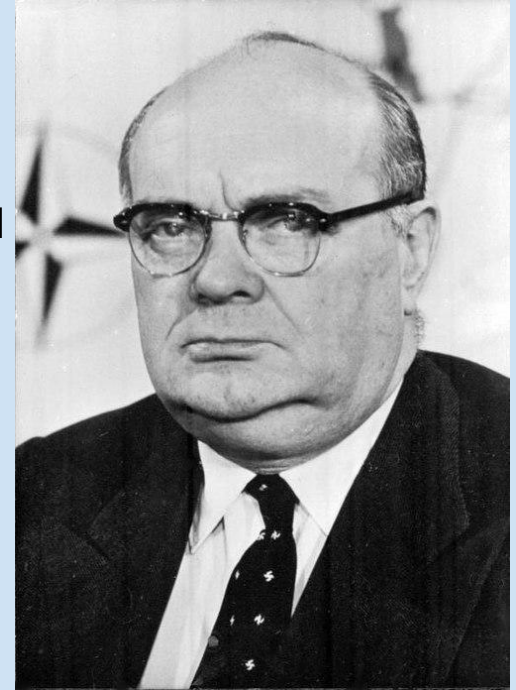
Belgium played a big role in shaping the European project;

- Owing to its history and experience of managing multiple languages and identities under one nation, it was able to guide shared sovereignty and cooperation.
- Belgian leaders, especially Paul-Henri Spaak, were key architects of European institutions.
- Encouraged for strong supranational institutions which set the premise of real EU political power - loyalty and support
- The country understood the vitality of the Project and therefore played a big role in its creation.

# Paul-Henri Spaak

- Very central to the original Project, his leadership fundamentally shaped the institutions.
- As Belgian Foreign Minister and later Secretary-General of NATO, Spaak was a leading voice for European federalism
- Chaired the Spaak Committee, which prepared the report that led directly to the Treaty of Rome, the founding treaty of the EEC.
- Spaak's influence ensured that the EEC was based on strong institutions, a common market, and a Commission with independent authority, not just intergovernmental meetings.

Established the idea that integration within Europe was essential for Belgium but also as a continent.



# Economic Situation

- Considered one of the larger GDPs within the EU
- Belgium ranks sixth in the EU in terms of GDP per capita, well above the EU average
- Contributes 3.4% to EU's overall GDP per Capita
- It is a net contributor country
- Member of Eurozone since 1999

# Belgium's Role within the EU

How does Belgium interact and position themselves within the EU:

The Bridge Builder - plays a very diplomatic role within the EU, positioning itself as a consensus broker, managing competing interests amongst all members.

Balanced between France and Germany often mediates between the EU's two major powers, keeping the balance

Heart of the EU - Role as Host comes with a responsibility of neutrality and support - links to geographical location also

Loyal partner who is consistently promoting EU values and policy

Understands that it is not on the same level as France and Germany, therefore, not trying to be dominant but a **key insider player**

Unlike some larger members, Belgium has never wavered in its commitment to deeper integration.

Belgium sort of perceived as the most EU country - representing the identity of Europe.

## Bart De Wever + EU

- New PM is cultivating a new relationship and role for Belgium within the EU
- Under his leadership he has moved Belgium away from being a consistently loyal state
- He has been critical of some aspects, especially over-regulation, immigration policy, and centralization of powers within EU
- De Wever is openly eager to reduce EU delegation which undermines Belgium's traditional approach
- Key new issue of conflict - He has opposed a plan for a €140 billion loan for Ukraine that would be funded by frozen Russian
- "Belgium has been reluctant to endorse the plan, floated by the Commission as a way to use sanctioned Russian funds to support Ukraine without permanently seizing the cash, because the funds in question are held by the Brussels-based financial firm Euroclear."
- New relationship of caution and pragmatism and ensuring that Belgium agenda comes before the EU's

# Coalition Politics

Belgian politics is characterised by coalition governments, often requiring months of negotiation.

Holds the world record for the longest delay in forming a national government - 541 days

Major parties are split along linguistic lines: Flemish parties and French-speaking parties - making it difficult for coalitions

Coalition culture fosters compromise, making Belgium a natural mediator in EU negotiations.

# Euroscepticism

- Very much Soft scepticism
- Some minor party-based Euroscepticism - some parties display critical views, mainly within Flanders
- Issue itself has extremely low political relevance in the country
- In national elections, parties do not debate their position on Europe
- Eurobarometer figures show a continuing support for European integration among the Belgian population, generally close to the EU average

# Enlargement

## General stance: supportive but conditional

- Since 2006, Belgium has remained broadly favourable
- It views enlargement as a way to extend stability, democracy, rule of law, and economic opportunity to candidate countries.
- Emphasise that enlargement must respect the established accession criteria: candidate states must satisfy the political, economic, and legal standards - Copenhagen criteria
- Enlargement is part of the EU mission and is essential now as it was then
- Balances enthusiasm with cohesion making sure that are not losing cohesion
- Again working as a key inside player

## Dealing with EU challenges: Climate Crisis and Green Transition

Belgium is an active and committed participant in EU climate and energy policy, playing a significant role in shaping the EU's climate agenda

For example, It helped set the EU's environmental agenda for 2024-2029, focusing on climate mitigation, resilience, circular economy, and nature conservation.

It contributes diplomatically to EU-wide discussions, helping to influence policy decisions and strike a balance between ambitious climate targets and economic feasibility.

Which is important for smaller EU states.

Has ensured funding for countries to transitions away from fossil fuels.

Highlights how a small state, is able to 'punch above its weight' and shape and influence EU's policy approach towards serious issues.