The Low Countries: Growing Apart

Belgium and the Netherlands and Their Attitudes to the European Union

The creation of the Benelux made Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg the very cradle of European integration. In subsequent European cooperation initiatives, during the 1950s and 1960s, Belgium and the Netherlands were always involved - and usually they were in the front row. Although that did not mean that their interests always coincided or that they agreed on everything, Belgium and the Netherlands, often with Luxembourg, tried for a long time to act together and with one voice on European issues. Since the early 1990s, however, tensions have been increasingly visible in specific dossiers and recently, in particular, it has barely been possible for them to take joint action. Public opinion and especially the attitude of the political elites in Belgium and the Netherlands have begun to differ starkly. When it comes to major European issues, the two countries have grown apart. In this article we look at the history of Belgian-Dutch relations in Europe, examining the pivotal moments. Finally, we try to assess the course the two countries will follow in Europe in the near future.

The Benelux as laboratory

Back in 1944, towards the end of the Second World War, the Benelux was founded in London by the three governments in exile. The intention was to create a customs union and eventually to realise an economic union as well.

In the 1950s, with the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and somewhat later the European Economic Community (EEC), a much grander and more ambitious project was launched, involving many more countries including France and West Germany.

The Benelux plans were an important source of inspiration for European integration. This was the development of a customs union and a common market at a higher level now. It is noticeable that Belgian and Dutch politicians played a major role at the start of this integration. The plan to build an economic union at the European level came from the Dutch Minister Wim Beyen, for example, and it was the Belgian Minister Paul-Henri Spaak who led the negotiations that eventually resulted in the Treaty of Rome.

Europa Galante
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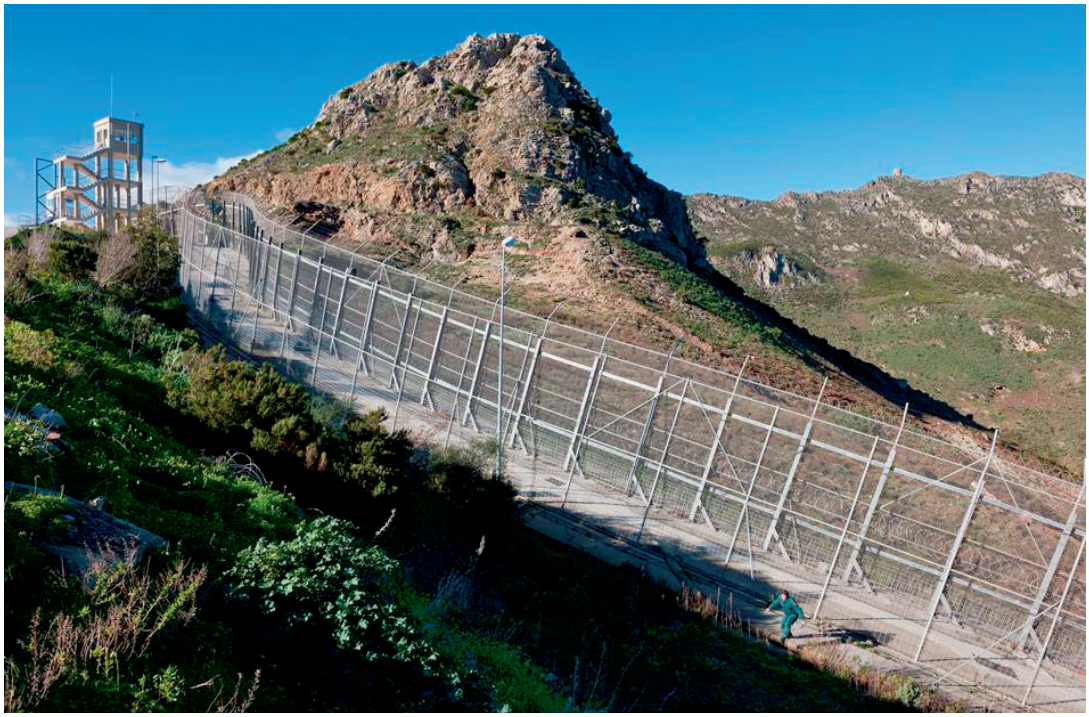
To a certain extent then, the Benelux was quickly overshadowed by these bigger European plans, but it did remain a forum where common positions could be adopted and collective interests defended. Obviously, as export economies, Belgium and the Netherlands were interested in the rapid expansion of an internal market, with strong European institutions to watch over the rules of the game and to prevent the big member states skewing things to their own advantage. They expressed their opinions on important matters in Benelux memoranda.

There were many parallels in the Dutch and Belgian visions of European integration, certainly in the early integration period and in the agenda-setting phase. Nonetheless, there were also some differences in emphasis. For example, the Dutch have always understood the British positions and interests better, while the Belgians have sympathised more with the French viewpoint. As of the 1970s, then, Belgium and the Netherlands cooperated less often in Europe.

The Benelux continued to be a forum for discussing specific matters, such as the water treaties, the high-speed railway line, the deepening of the Westerscheldt, and suchlike. As Europe changed so did Belgian and Dutch perspectives.



Ceuta (Spanish enclave in Morocco)
Mediterranean. The Continuity of Man
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As Europe changed so did Belgian and Dutch perspectives

After the launch of European integration, Belgian-Dutch cooperation gradually became rather less intense. That changed at the end of the Cold War. It soon became clear that there was a large wave of enlargement on its way and that institutional changes were in the pipeline. That meant that Belgium and the Netherlands shared some parallel interests again. The Netherlands certainly wanted to defend the position of the smaller countries, and Belgium was right behind it. The two countries also insisted that expansion of the Union should definitely not occur at the expense of deepening. If necessary it should be possible for a small group to take the lead and to develop a kind of differentiated integration.

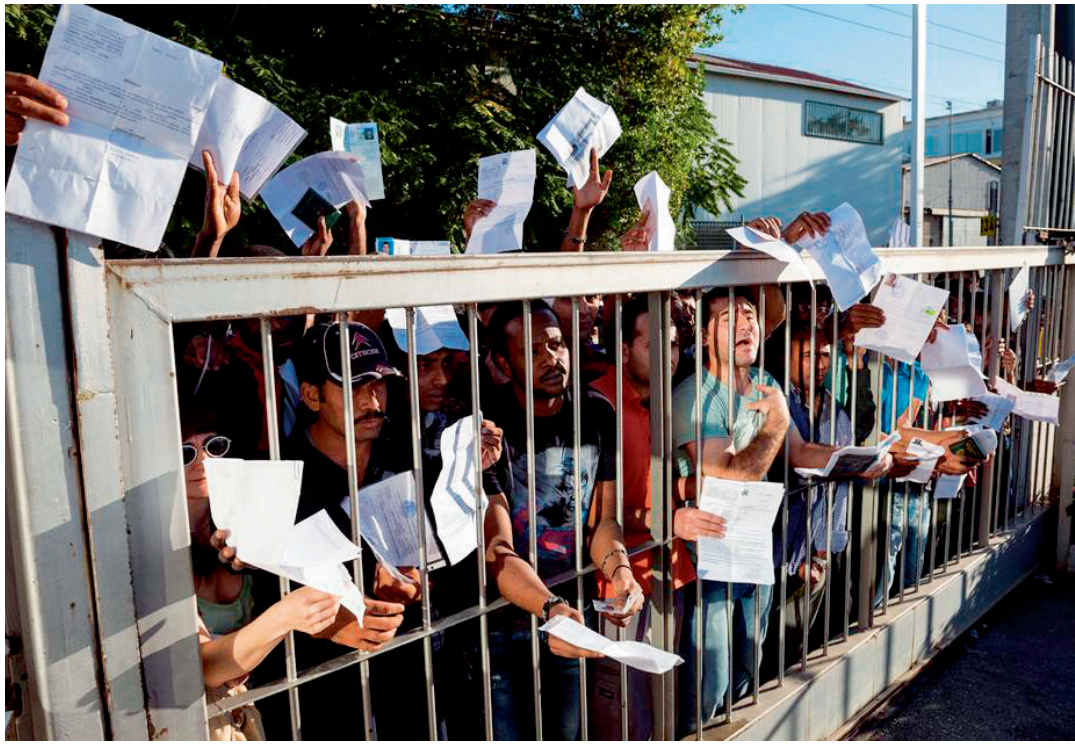
In a Europe with more than twenty member states it would also be necessary to present a common front more often. It would be harder for countries to defend their interests individually, so Belgian-Dutch consultations were reactivated. That might perhaps compensate for the relative loss of power that the expansion of the Union would entail. So there was a regular arrangement to organise joint breakfasts before European Summits, at which Belgium and the Netherlands, usually with Luxembourg, tried to harmonize their positions as far as possible.

At the same time, though, the differences were growing. In the course of the 1990s it became clear that the European Union was having a very concrete impact on people's lives. The fault line between the champions of more or less

Europe gradually shifted to a discussion of 'what kind of Europe'. As long as the discussion was about institutional questions and the defence of the interests of the small member states, it was still possible to reach a Belgian-Dutch agreement, but as soon as specific policy questions were discussed the disagreements became very obvious.

Since the 1990s, for example, a wave of liberalisation has swept across Europe. It gained strength in 2000 when the Lisbon strategy was formulated. Its purpose was to make Europe the most dynamic and competitive knowledge economy in the world. Postal services, railways, telecommunications and many other services were exposed, often in phases, to competition, and member states lost their monopoly on organising them. The Netherlands were amongst the pioneers in this debate and it was a Dutch commissioner, Frits Bolkestein, who launched various proposals in the period 1999-2004. In Belgium these initiatives generally met with a lot of mistrust, especially on the political left. In Wallonia, in particular, people had great reservations about this policy.

Another important source of contention in Dutch European policy in the recent past had to do with the budget. In negotiations on the long-term European budget (and certainly during the discussions on the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 budgets) the Netherlands always championed a smaller budget, less waste and a reduction in agricultural expenditure. This was very different from the



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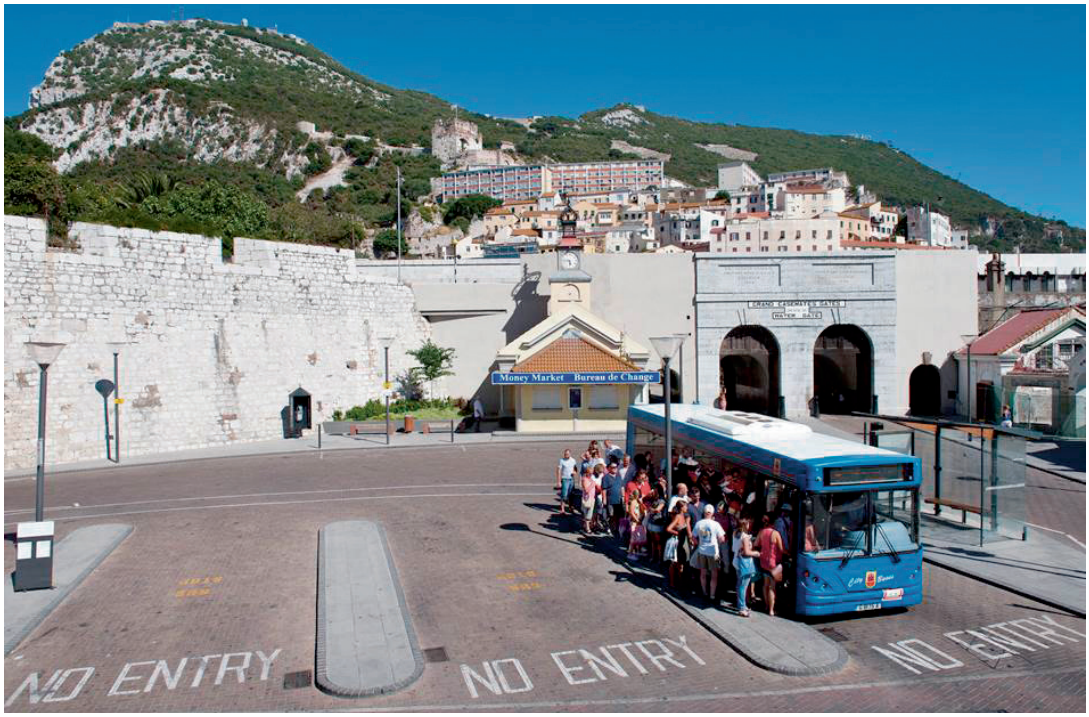

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Belgian point of view. The Belgian government has always emphasised the importance of having a large budget. An ambitious European agenda can only be achieved if Europe has (many) more means. From this philosophy Belgian politicians advocated the introduction of European taxes, as well, while in the Netherlands there was very little enthusiasm for them.

The introduction of the common currency had also exposed some tensions back in the 1990s. The Treaty of Maastricht stipulated that countries must meet strict conditions before they could join the currency union. From the point of view of the Netherlands, membership of the currency union should preferably be limited to the economically strongest countries. Belgium, however, feared a scenario in which the euro would only be introduced in countries like Germany and the Netherlands. Indeed, because of its large government debt, Belgium might miss the boat. When the decision was taken to be flexible about entry into the monetary union, the Belgian government was delighted, while in the Netherlands the decision was received with much gnashing of teeth.

In foreign policy matters, too, Belgium and the Netherlands have frequently found themselves in opposite camps. As far as the Belgian government was concerned, the war in Iraq was a reason to put the expansion of European defence on the agenda, while in the same period the Netherlands was completely behind the British in dismissing any suggestion of stronger European defence, certainly if it would function separately from NATO. Belgium's attempts to set

up European military headquarters, in collaboration with Luxembourg, France and Germany, received a great deal of criticism in other member states, including the Netherlands.

So, since the 1990s, fundamental and ideological differences have appeared between the Belgian and Dutch positions on important European questions increasingly frequently.

A crucial tipping point: the Netherlands says no to the European constitution

In discussions on treaty changes Belgium and the Netherlands still managed, in general, to take common positions. But that changed in 2000, when the Treaty of Nice was negotiated. Under the leadership of their then Prime Minister, Wim Kok, the Netherlands pleaded for greater voting power for the Netherlands in decision-making. Guy Verhofstadt, who had just become the Belgian Prime Minister, eventually had to agree to this, but mutual trust between the two countries suffered very serious damage as a result.

Shortly after the Treaty of Nice, negotiations began for what would eventually lead to the European Constitution. For a while the Belgians and Dutch were able to come up with some joint proposals, but it was clear that some points were only really important for one of the parties. In the Netherlands, fear of a power grab by the big member states was very real; Belgium, however, had no problem making agreements with France or Germany.

On 1 June 2005 61% of the Dutch rejected the European Constitution, with a turnout of 63%. Resistance to the Constitution came from very diverse sections of the population. The far left parties called for a no-vote because they thought that European Union policies were too liberal and therefore asocial, and that the Constitution offered no prospect of improvement. Right-wing groups threw completely different arguments into the fray. They were afraid of a further loss of sovereignty for member states. Many of them may also have seen the referendum as a delayed plebiscite on the expansion into Central and Eastern Europe. Immediately after the referendum the Dutch government let it be known that the European Constitution was 'dead' and that an alternative could only be discussed if it differed in form, content and scope from the Constitution. In particular it should not go as far. That clashed completely with the position of Belgium, where the mantra was still 'what's good for Europe is good for Belgium'. In 2006 Prime Minister Verhofstadt went a step further, by explicitly pleading, in a manifesto, for the foundation of a United States of Europe.

During subsequent rounds of negotiations the European Constitution was recycled in the Treaty of Lisbon. Relations between Belgium and the Netherlands were sorely tested in that period. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders had become very big politically and had founded the Freedom Party. Resistance to the European Union had also become an important issue. The classic Dutch parties began to adopt some of Wilders's viewpoints and to question European developments more explicitly. The Socialist Party (SP), further to the left than the social-democratic PVDA, increasingly took positions on the European theme too. The rise of eurocritical, eurosceptical and out-and-out anti-European parties has put the initially positive basic attitude of the Nether-

lands towards European integration under a great deal of pressure. Public and political support for active pro-European policies has shrunk drastically, and at times even turned completely into an attitude that stands for 'less Europe'. In Belgium the tendency in the population to be much more sceptical about integration has grown but, with the exception of the far-right nationalist party Vlaams Belang, the political parties have continued to wholeheartedly defend integration. Now and then there has been some protest - from the Flemish social-democrats of the SP.A, for example - about the overly liberal course of the Union, but integration as such has never been questioned.

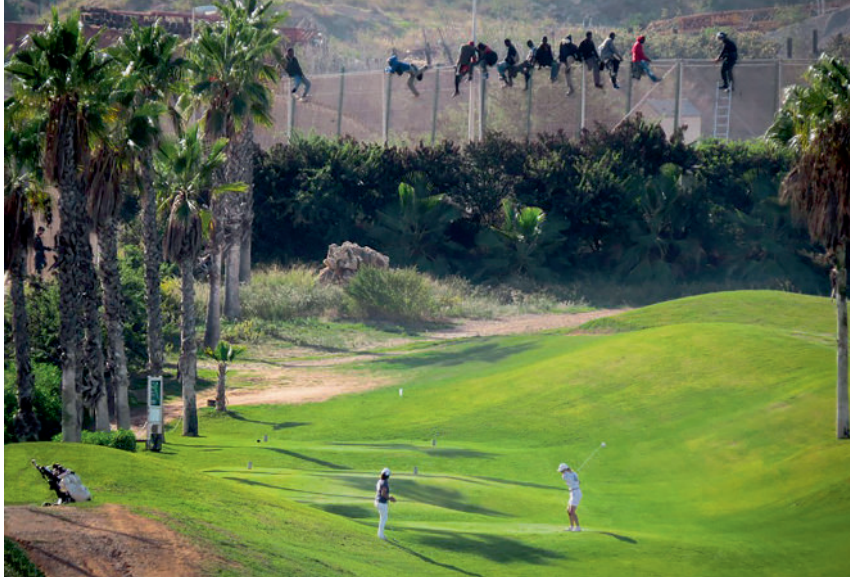
So what's the situation today?

According to the Eurobarometer at the end of 2014, 42% of Belgians were positive about integration. In the Netherlands that figure was 37%. Only 22% of Belgians had an explicitly negative attitude, as opposed to 26% of the Dutch. The Dutch population, then, is more critical of Europe than the Belgian population, though the difference is not particularly spectacular. The days when Belgium had massive numbers of Europe-fans are over. In 2014 there were ten member states in which a larger portion of the population had a positive attitude towards integration than in Belgium.

At the political level, there are still noticeable differences between Belgium and the Netherlands. The general discourse about Europe is more critical and more negative in Dutch politics than in Belgian politics. Belgian political parties continue, with the exception of the far-right Vlaams Belang, to take a basic position that is very positive towards integration. Parties like the ecologists (Groen) or the social-democratic SP.A sometimes fiercely criticize certain policy choices, but do not question integration as such and will never in principle advocate 'less Europe'.

In the run-up to the elections of 2014 the main focus was on the attitude of the Flemish nationalist N-VA. It would have to speak out explicitly on European issues for the first time. Some observers predicted that the N-VA would take a strongly eurocritical direction, but that did not happen. There were a variety of calls for a change of course in Europe, but the N-VA never pulled out all the stops, as Geert Wilders did in the Netherlands. The N-VA politicians who were elected to the European Parliament eventually joined the fraction to which the British Conservatives belong, but they emphasised that they wanted to continue to play a positive and constructive role. The next period will reveal the extent to which they actually do that and what standpoints they take in specific dossiers.

In the Netherlands there is still a certain scepticism amongst the classic parties and a plea for 'less Europe' is much less unusual. Meanwhile, two PVDA politicians occupy important European positions: Jeroen Dijsselbloem is the Chairman of the Eurogroup and Frans Timmermans is the First Vice-President of the European Commission. It is noticeable that they both come under fire in Belgium, and not least from their ideologically related socialist sister parties, because of their limited ambitions. Timmermans is accused of wanting to reduce the impact of the Union by subjecting the European market to fewer rules. Dijsselbloem, on the other hand, is criticised because he pleaded for



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more budgetary discipline during the euro crisis and does not want to develop more solidarity mechanisms at the European level.

Protection of interests

Belgium and the Netherlands have a long history of cooperation in Europe. After the Second World War they stood side by side at the cradle of integration. They had every interest in the creation of a large market and wanted the continent to be organised so that the big countries would not be the only ones to have a say.

As European integration became more important and more substantive decisions had to be taken ('what sort of Europe?'), more and more differences emerged. In the Netherlands political parties on the outer edges of the political spectrum began to define themselves as euro-critical or euro-sceptical, and for a while now the classic parties have to some extent followed suit. Although even amongst the Belgian population criticism is growing, the Belgian political parties continue in general to defend a pro-European course. To what extent the N-VA will continue to do this is yet to be seen. The N-VA will definitely not adopt Geert Wilder's position, but it is possible that it will take a more critical stance, comparable to that of the classic Dutch parties, like the VVD.

In any case, Belgian-Dutch cooperation in Europe is no longer so obvious these days. There have been many incidents in recent years and differences of opinion in all sorts of dossiers. At the same time, Belgium and the Netherlands have not completely grown apart either. The simple fact that Belgium and the Netherlands are neighbours, that they share an important part of their history and as a result know each other well, makes it 'natural' to have regular consultations and, where possible, to look for agreement. The glue that binds Belgium and the Netherlands is, after all, pretty good insight into each other's background, priorities and sensitivities. Fundamental and ideological differences of opinion cannot be swept under the carpet, but they should not prevent the formation of thematic alliances. Indeed, in today's large European Union this is the main way in which interests are defended. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards