Why 80 years of union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg deserves an official Benelux Day

The Benelux Union is the older, but also smaller sister of the European Union and, perhaps because of this, does not always get the attention it deserves. It is important to reiterate why we are proud of this organisation, which has been working for decades to improve and facilitate the lives of citizens and entrepreneurs within the union.

Eighty years ago, on September 5th, 1944, the foreign and finance ministers of three governments in exile in London signed a long-awaited treaty. After all, the plan of closer cooperation between three like-minded countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg was obvious, but it still took a war to remove the last obstacles to achieve a common union.

World War II accelerated the negotiations. The need for prosperity and stability was greater than ever and mutual trust proved sufficient to realise a Customs Union between the three countries. Intergovernmental cooperation made it possible to transport goods between them duty-free and to apply a common tariff to goods coming from outside the Benelux.
In this initial phase of the tariff community, the acronym 'Benelux', logically derived from BElgium, NEderland and LUXembourg, was used for the first time. Cooperation within this new single market not only facilitated trade but also gave impetus to further European integration.

The Customs Union Agreement was the first important step that contributed to the wider process that would eventually create the European Union as we know it today: a political and economic partnership with 27 member states. It was the first, but certainly not the last milestone in the 80-year history of Benelux. On February 3rd, 1958, the Benelux Economic Union was established in The Hague. This new treaty introduced the free movement within Benelux borders of goods, people, capital and services. Fifty years later, on June 17th, 2008, the economic union was renamed Benelux Union, the name we still use today. From then on, the focus was no longer only on the internal market, but also on cooperation in the fields of sustainability and security. This was in line with the gradual expansion of the Benelux cooperation that had developed in practice, and in addition to the intensive political cooperation on foreign policy and defence between the three countries.

As the EU grew ever larger, Benelux had the advantage of allowing the three member states to act as a regional unit within the more complex European Union, which meant that decisions could usually be taken more easily and quickly than with the EU. Thus, the Benelux often proved to serve as a testing ground for Europe. The union developed into a laboratory where innovative cooperation models were tested. If initiatives worked within the Benelux, they could be expanded and also applied at EU level. Moreover, the EU Treaty explicitly states that Benelux is the only region that has the right to deepen mutual cooperation without the EU being an obstacle (Art. 350 TFEU).

The Benelux was at the forefront of creating the largest area in the world where people can travel freely. The groundbreaking Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 by the Benelux

countries, Germany and France, allowed EU residents to travel freely within the Schengen countries. People are checked at the external borders of the Schengen area, by analogy with what had been the norm in the Benelux countries for 25 years by then. 'Schengen' was later subsumed into the EU in accordance with the Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into force on May 1st, 1999.

To this day, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg actively work together to sustainably increase the prosperity of citizens and businesses in the Benelux and at its external borders. Take, for example, the new Police Treaty that entered into force in 2023. This enables the police of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg to cooperate effectively, across borders. Thanks to joint deployment and information sharing, officers can respond quickly and tackle cross-border crime more efficiently than before.

Thanks to legal agreements within the Benelux, ambulance services also operate across borders, allowing help to arrive quickly, no matter which Benelux country you are in. An ambulance from the Netherlands, for example, can quickly respond to an emergency just across the border in Belgium, and vice versa, increasing the number of life-saving interventions.

The automatic recognition of higher education diplomas within the Benelux, since 2015, is also a big advantage. Professionals who completed their education in Belgium, the Netherlands or Luxembourg can more easily, without unnecessary red tape, start or continue their studies in one of the other Benelux countries. In 2021, this diploma recognition was extended by a multilateral treaty with the Baltic States, which had set up a similar system.

Both regions thus occupy a pioneering role within Europe in the completion of the European Higher Education Area. The six countries are encouraging other European countries to join the treaty, which entered into force this year, so that automatic mutual recognition of higher education diplomas can be even more widespread in the future.

These are just a few examples of cross-border cooperation that illustrate the important role Benelux continues to play within European cooperation. An official Benelux Day on 5 September annually reminds us of what we have achieved together and inspires us for the future. It is a day on which we feel connected to our neighbours and look forward to what we can still achieve together.

The future brings challenges such as climate change and digital transformation. But history has taught us that we are stronger together. By joining forces, we can meet these challenges. By breaking down barriers and sharing knowledge, the Benelux region remains competitive in an increasingly globalised world. For Benelux citizens, this means they can more easily work and study across borders. Entrepreneurs benefit from regulatory harmonisation so they can grow and innovate without barriers. Let us use this 80th anniversary of the Benelux to further strengthen our cooperation, celebrate our successes and reaffirm our commitment.

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