

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

The administrative divisions of Belgium reflect the successive spatial frameworks of human activity. Different stages have left their mark in these divisions. The most recent of these has led to the formation of Regions, as a result of growing spatial structure of the Belgian community, a structure based on linguistic and cultural elements.

The main map shows the present-day *communes* together with their names, their boundaries and the location of their administrative centres. The boundaries of the former communes are also shown.

The communes constitute the basic administrative division of the country. They have a rather large autonomy. They elect a local council, nominate a burgomaster and have their own finances, education service and police. The communes - with the limits depicted in the first national atlas - generally reflected the old agricultural territories (with a resulting range from the larger areas on the less fertile soils of the Campine and the Ardennes, to the contrasting smaller units of the more fertile limon region as the Hesbaye). It was in the Middle Ages that the various localities became institutionalized for the first time in so far as they represented ecclesiastical parishes. These became in their turn the communes at the time of the annexation of the country by France, after the French Revolution. The total of approximately 2 500 remained little changed until the main period of reorganization (1961-1976) despite the effects of the growth of the cities, industrialization and urban sprawl into rural areas. The number of communes even reached 2 675 in 1928.

The retention of communes with the same territorial extent that they had in the Middle Ages had become anachronistic. The commune no longer reflected its basic structural relationships and large numbers of them did not reach the threshold population necessary to support the minimum of services. We can cite two extreme cases : Zoutenaie - arrondissement Furnes (Veurne) - with c.25 inhabitants and Groot-Loon - arrondissement Tongres (Tongeren) - which covers only 55 hectares. In 1958, 44 % of the communes had a population of less than 1 000 (ten even less than 100), 84 % not even reaching 5 000 inhabitants. This gave rise to the creation, in 1961, of legal structures permitting the joining together of communes. This came into force on 1st January 1977 as a result of the royal decree of 17.9.1975 (see *Moniteur* of 25.9.1975 with the justification for each amalgamation) and in a drastic fashion reduced the number of Belgian communes, previously 2 359, to 589.

In general, given the lower population density, the spatial amalgamations were more extensive in Wallonia (with an average joining up of 6 communes) than in the more populous Flemish area (average of 3.6 communes). The mean population figure changed from 3 500 inhabitants in 1958 to 16 750 inhabitants in 1987 and the mean surface area from 12 to 52 square kilometres. There remained only one commune with less than 1 000 inhabitants (for linguistic reasons) and by contrast only 108 with a population of between 1 000 and 5 000 (of which only 14 are in Flanders). These amalgamations mean that in the majority of communes the primary structural relationships are all within the new unit, whilst the urban nucleus of population is now clearly located in its own commune. In the greater agglomerations this state of affairs only applies to Ghent (Gent). In Antwerp (Antwerpen), two-thirds of the urban population belong to the central commune; for Liège, scarcely half; whilst in Brussels there was no place at all for the amalgamation of communes. The populous urban zone of Brussels actually extends over 36 communes but the commune of Brussels itself only accounts for a tenth of the total urban population.

On the principal map, the following level is that of the *administrative arrondissement*. These arrondissements have a relatively low importance. The arrondissement commissioner supervises communes with a population of less than 5 000.

The *provinces* indicated on the map are much more important. They have a local elected council, administrative and financial functions of their own. This enables them to look after their own affairs, expressed above all in the realms of education and in the road network. The provinces are administered by a permanent body, chosen by the council, under the direction of a government official - the Governor. The names of the provinces reflect the feudal states of the Middle Ages, but their shape and their political significance are heritage from the French period at the time when they were raised into departments.

The *linguistic status* of the communes and the *Regions* (insets) owe their origins to an adaptation of the administrative units to Belgian linguistic and cultural diversities. Two elements are predominant : on the one hand to reduce the friction between the different linguistic communities by making the administrative units single language, and on the other to give a feeling to each group that it would be best if they could keep their own political and economic balance.

Although the old administrative units, communes, arrondissements and provinces, essentially belonged to a linguistic group, quite a number of them had been bilingual until 1963. The increasing awareness of a cultural heritage and the "tertiarisation" of society, which accords more and more importance to language as a means of communication led to the linguistic legislation of 8. 11.1962 and 2.8.1963. These sub-divided Belgium into *four language regions* (Dutch, French, German and the bilingual Brussels area), fixing language boundaries and adapting the administrative boundaries to this new situation. At the same time however it created two "linguistic inliers" : the French-speaking Comines, not linked to its province, Hainaut, and the other one, Dutch-speaking Fouron (Voeren) also separated from its province Limbourg (Limburg).

In 1987 the situation was as follows : the Dutch-speaking linguistic region (5 686 000 inhabitants) comprises the provinces of Western Flanders (West-Vlaanderen), Eastern Flanders (Oost-Vlaanderen), Antwerp (Anvers, Antwerpen), Limbourg (Limburg) and the Brabant arrondissements of Hal (Halle) - Vilvorde and Louvain (Leuven). The French-speaking linguistic region (3 139 000 inhabitants) consists of the provinces of Hainaut, Namur, Luxembourg, Liège (except the German-speaking area) and the Brabant arrondissement of Nivelles. The German-speaking linguistic region (66 000 inhabitants) consists of nine communes in the arrondissement of Verviers (Liège province). Finally there is the bilingual arrondissement (Dutch - French) of Brussels (Bruxelles-Capitale) (973 000 inhabitants).

With regard to a certain number of communes along the linguistic frontiers and around Brussels, it has not been possible to assign them to one language because there is a relatively large presence of people speaking another tongue (sometimes French, sometimes Dutch). These people have been given "facilities". This means that, for essential activities, whilst the administration is in one language, persons speaking another language can receive documents in their own language, public documents are bilingual and primary schools are permitted to teach in the other language.

The laws of 8.8.1980 and 9.8.1980 (*Moniteur* 15.8.1980) marked the first move towards a Belgian federal regime, having handed over a certain number of national activities with effect from 1981 to new regional authorities : the *Regions* (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia) and the *Communities* (Dutch, French and German). This reform of the State is very complex and it is put into different concrete forms in each of the three linguistic zones.

In principle the Communities are responsible for "personal" matters and cultural activities and the Regions for all that concerns space and economy.

The Communities, like the Regions, have a parliament (Council) of their own and a government (Executive). The latter, in union with the Council, promulgates decrees. These decrees have an equal status as national laws.

The Dutch Community has authority over all the inhabitants of the Dutch linguistic region and for Dutch-speaking people in Brussels. The French Community has authority over all the inhabitants of the French linguistic region and for French-speaking people in Brussels. The German Community has authority over the German linguistic region.

The Flemish Region (13 512 sq kms, 5 686 000 inhabitants) extends over the Dutch linguistic region. The Wallonia Region (16 845 sq kms, 3 206 000 inhabitants) covers the French and German linguistic regions. The Brussels Region (162 sq kms, 973 000 inhabitants) is coincident with the Brussels-Capital arrondissement.

A Flemish Council (with an Executive of nine members) exercises authority over its Region, as well as over its Community and is centred in Brussels. The Regional Council for Wallonia (with an Executive of six members) has its centre in Namur. The Council of the French Community (with an Executive of three members) is centred at Brussels. The Council of the German speaking Community is located at Eupen. The Brussels Regional Council is not yet installed; however by a decision of the national government, three members act as a provisional Brussels Executive.