

1.- BELGIUM AND ITS REGIONS WITHIN EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

1.1.- A CONCENTRATION OF POPULATION AND ACTIVITY WITHIN NORTHWEST EUROPE

At 1 January 1986, Belgium possessed a population of 9,858,895. On a territory of 30,518 sq. km., this represented a density of 323 inhabitants to the square kilometre, second only to the density of population in the Netherlands - 353 per sq. km. - and more than double the average density for the 12-member European Community, which was 142. (1).

Bordering the North Sea along a coastline of 65 km., Belgium possesses land frontiers of 1,379 km., a remarkable length for a country of only 30,000 sq. km. The complex windings of the national boundary are the product of numerous past treaties and agreements, and only rarely coincide with natural features.

Belgium is a country to which access is easy : two-thirds of it consist of plains and low plateaux, and the remaining one-third of somewhat higher plateaux varying between 400 and 700 m. in elevation. Two great rivers provide routes across its territory - the Escaut/Scheldt and the Meuse. Given this ease of communication, the country possesses 15,500 km. of main roads, including 1,500 km. of motorways, 3,900 km. of railways, and 1,500 km. of canals : it is, in fact, a veritable cross-roads in communications between major capitals like Paris (297 km. from the Belgian capital, Brussels), London (228 km.), and Amsterdam (220 km.), or between major economic centres such as Frankfurt-on-Main (400 km.), the great industrial region of the Ruhr (Dortmund is 320 km. from Brussels), or Zurich (660 km.). The port of Antwerp, situated on the estuary of the Scheldt, links Belgium with the waterborne commerce of the North Sea, a commerce which is, beyond question, the heart and focus of Europe's maritime traffic. On the shores of this North Sea are to be found the four greatest ports of the Old Continent : London, Hamburg, Rotterdam (the world's greatest), and our national port of Antwerp, together with a number of secondary harbours.

Within the 10-member Community in 1984, Belgium accounted for 3 % of the population and 4.1 % of the gross domestic product at 1980 prices and exchange rates. On a per capita basis, however, this placed

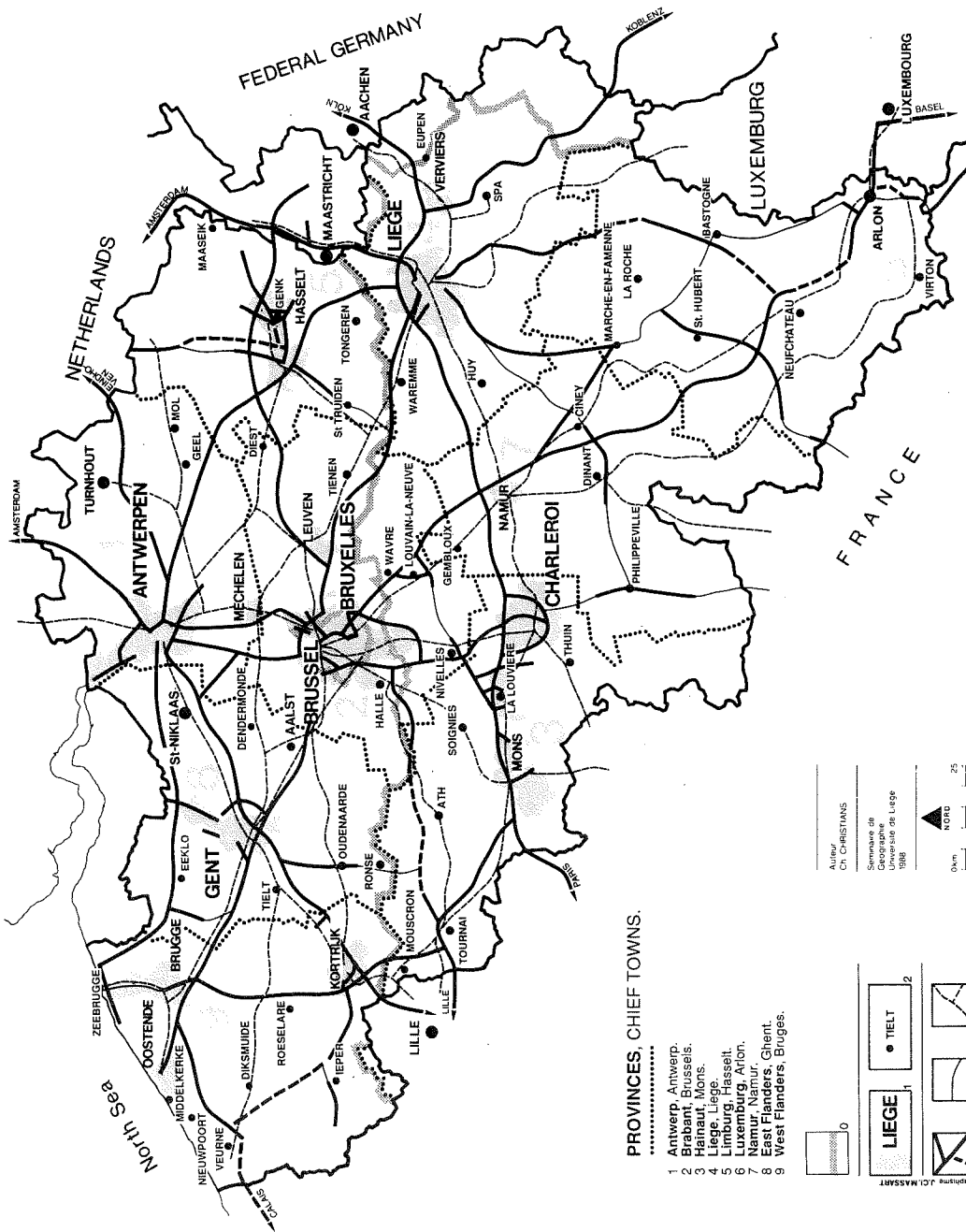
(1) The 12 members were made up as follows : 6 members joining at the foundation of the Community in 1958 (Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), 3 additional members (Denmark, the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom) joining in 1973, one (Greece) in 1981, and 2 (Spain and Portugal) in 1986.

Map 1.- BELGIUM

0. Linguistic limits (North : Dutch-speaking Region,
South : French-speaking Region,
East : German-speaking Region)
1. Major agglomerations and Regional centres
2. Other centres
3. Existing motorways and major roads, in project motorways.
4. Other important roads
5. Major railways

(After Ch. CHRISTIANS, les degrés de priorité des remembrements ruraux en Belgique, in Revue de l'Agriculture, 1971-11/12, Fig. 1, adapted 1988).

1



PROVINCES, CHIEF TOWNS.

- 1. Antwerp, Antwerp.
- 2. Brabant, Brussels.
- 3. Hainaut, Mons.
- 4. Liege, Liege.
- 5. Limburg, Hasselt.
- 6. Luxembourg, Luxembourg.
- 7. Namur, Namur.
- 8. East Flanders, Ghent.
- 9. West Flanders, Bruges.

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 Seminaire de Géographie Université de Liege 1969
 0 km 25 50
 N
 1 LIEGE 2 TIELT 3 4 5 6
 Graphique J.CI MASSART

Map 2.- BELGIUM AND THE MAJOR EUROPEAN CITIES

1. Motorway
2. Motorway (projected)

The Urban Hierarchy

3. Major city of international significance
4. Major city of regional significance

Population

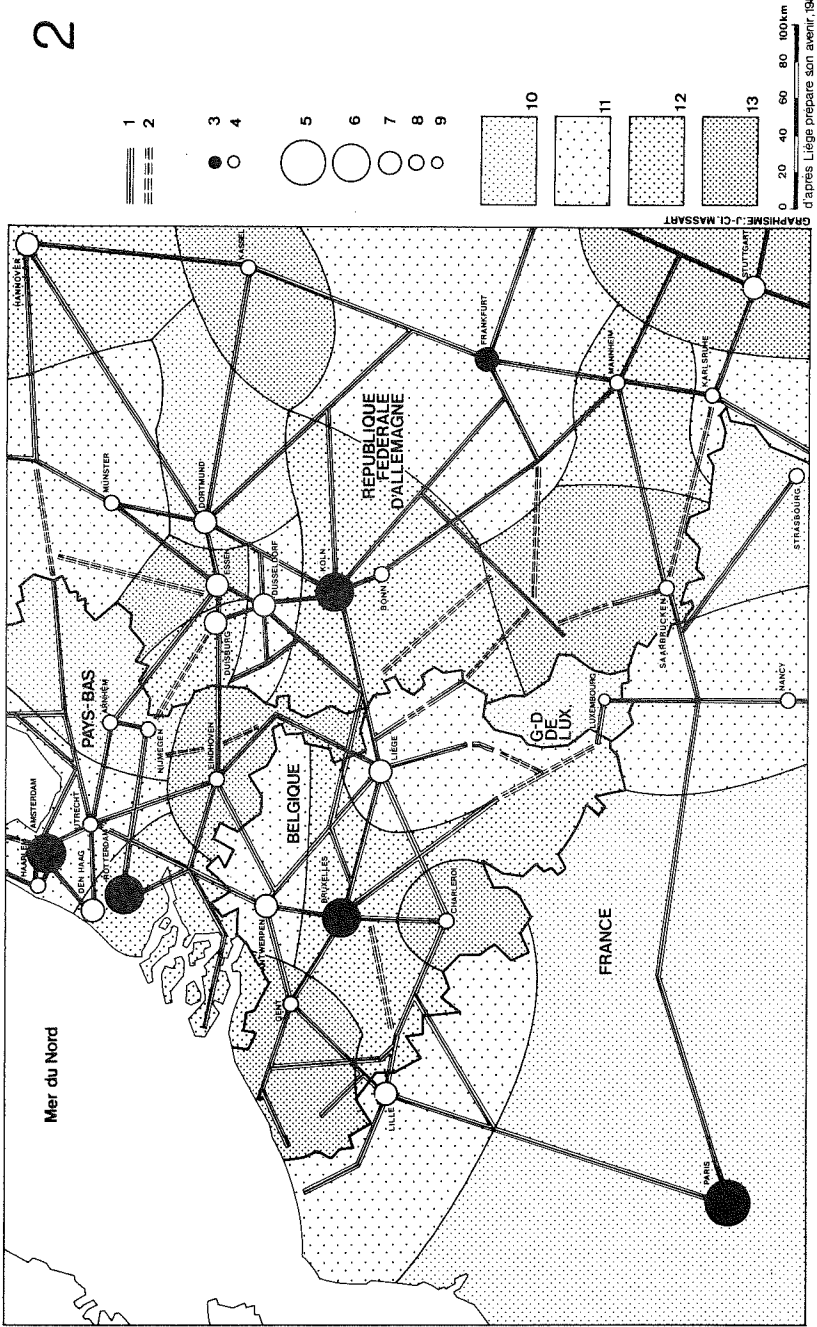
5. Population more than 5 million
6. 1 - 5 million
7. 500,000 - 1 million
8. 250,000 - 500,000
9. Less than 250,000

Zones of Urban Influence

10 - 11 - 12 - 13

(Source : Liège prépare son avenir, 1980, Fig. 16)

2

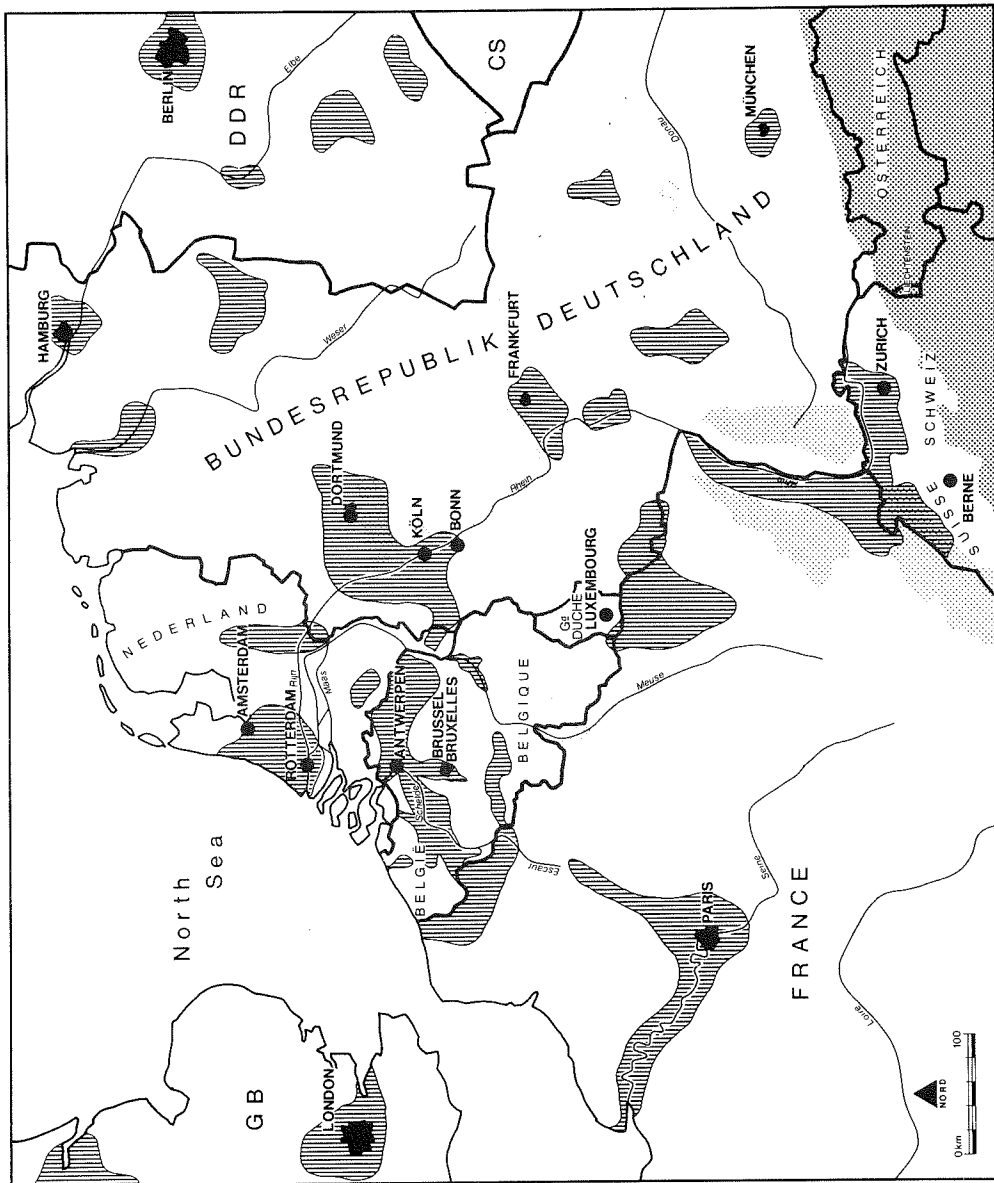


Map 3.- BELGIUM IN RELATION TO THE MAJOR URBAN AND INDUSTRIAL
AREAS OF EUROPE

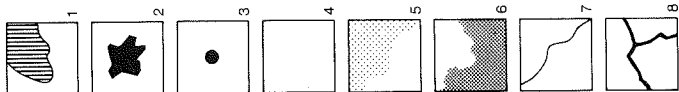
1. Principal urban and industrial regions
2. Major agglomerations of international importance
3. Principal cities of international significance
- 4-5-6. Mountain areas, classified by increasing altitude
7. Principal rivers
8. International boundaries

(Ch. CHRISTIANS, Dept. of Geography, University of Liège, 1988).

3



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 1988



Géopline J.C. MASSART

Map 4.- BELGIUM AND THE MAIN EUROPEAN RAIL ROUTES

1. Major route (electrified)
2. Major route (non-electrified)
3. Principal city of international importance
4. Major city of regional significance

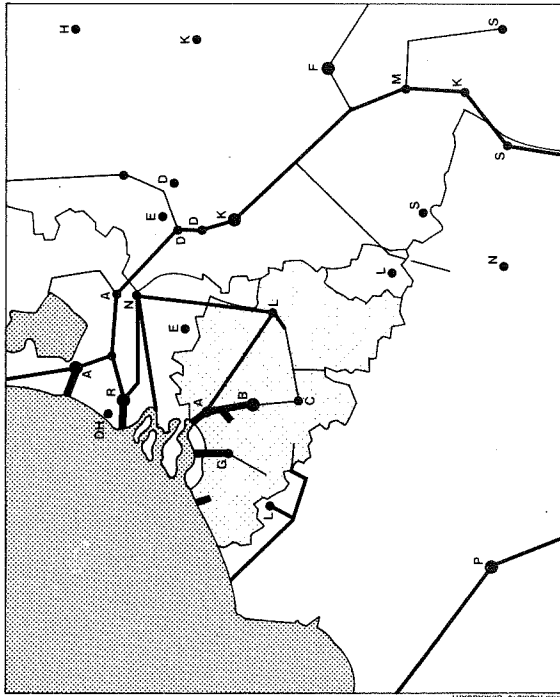
(After Liège prépare son avenir, 1980, Fig. 16)

Map 5.- BELGIUM AND THE MAJOR EUROPEAN WATERWAYS

1. Navigable by ocean-going vessels
2. Navigable by vessels of 2,000 tons
3. Navigable by vessels of 1,350 tons
4. Principal city of international importance
5. Major city of regional significance

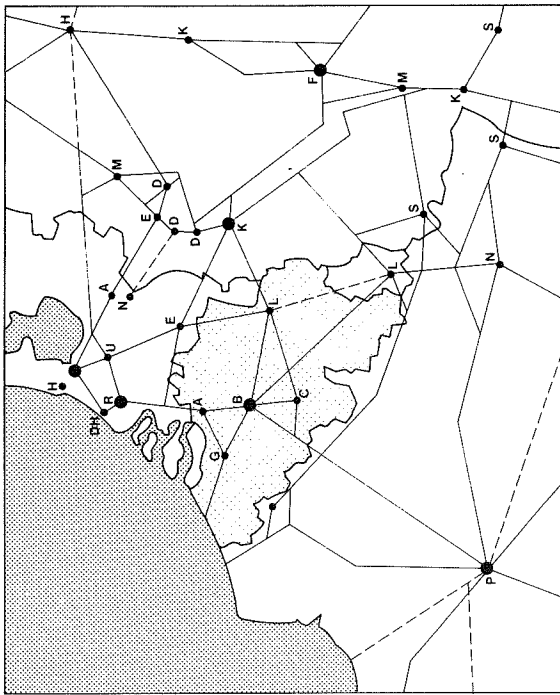
(After Liège prépare son avenir, 1980, Fig. 16)

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d'après Liege prepare son avenir, 1980 planche 16
GRAPHISME: CL. MASSART

4



Belgium only fifth among the member states after Luxembourg, Denmark, Germany and France, in terms of 1980's purchasing power. But by the index of volume of foreign trade per capita Belgium stood first, with B. Fr. 3 million of imports per capita, and more than B. Fr. 3 million of exports, figures which were double those for West Germany and three times those for France and the U.K.

Belgium emerges, then, as a country which must live by its foreign trade. In 1984, the gross domestic product was made up as follows : services 61.3 %; manufacturing a mere 36 %; agriculture 2.7 %. The country is intensifying its tertiary activities, and particularly its commercial services, which account for three-quarters of them.

As a commercial and industrial nation, Belgium is also highly urbanised, with 61 % of its population in 1976 classified as urban : that is, 5,948,000 inhabitants in 5 major agglomerations (Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Ghent and Charleroi), 15 regional centres and 116 towns, to which have been added for classification as urban all communes that have a population density of 700 per sq. km. or above (C. Vandermotten).

Given the wide spread of suburbanisation in the period since World War II, the five major agglomerations and the ten largest regional centres occupied, by 1976, 2,050 sq. km. and their suburbs a further 3,282 sq. km., or no less than 17.5 % of the nation's territory (H. Van der Hagen). The suburban areas contain, of course, a mixture of urban and rural land uses; even agricultural in places. Taking the country as a whole, the areas which are predominantly urban or industrial account for virtually a third of Belgium's territory (Ch. Christians).

This leaves, however, wide rural areas where farming or forestry take precedence, although even there the number of workers employed in service industries of manufacturing far exceeds that of agricultural workers. In such areas, large-scale commuting to the cities and industrial centres has developed.

Overall Belgium, "truly a geographical epitome of Western Europe" (INBEL), forms a passageway for international trade and traffic into the heart of Europe's most densely populated and economically active regions: the great Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta area, Holland, the Rhine-Ruhr region of West Germany, the Saar and Lorraine, Paris and the region of the Lower Seine - all these and, for the future, the north of France where the Channel Tunnel will one day emerge, linking Great Britain to the continent, and setting up a new growth region.

Given its central position among these core areas of commercial and industrial Europe, Brussels has become the base for numerous international concerns, including two at inter-governmental level : the European Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). With the extension of the Community to include nations of the Mediterranean, however, the centrality of Brussels has diminished, and it no longer occupies the focal position which it possessed in the days of the Community of the Six, or even the Nine.

1.2.- BELGIUM : ITS THREE LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES AND THREE ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS

The 1987 subdivision of Belgium into regions gave areal expression to its constitutional recognition of autonomy - albeit still incomplete - for the two language-based communities which together achieved independence from the Netherlands in 1830. These are the present-day Flemish-speakers in northern Belgium (5,676,000 in 1986), and the French-speakers in the south, numbering 3,140,000. To these two groups must be added 66,500 German-speakers, who inhabit a small, strategic area on Belgium's eastern frontier which was annexed from Germany at the end of World War I.

Legacy of the *limes*, the frontier of the Roman Empire, and then of the Germanic invasions which flowed over it in the 4th century A.D., the linguistic frontier that runs across Belgium is a line of continental significance. It separates the Latin cultures of Europe from the Germanic. The line runs from west to east, from north of Tournai to north of Liège, passing just south of Brussels. Beyond Liège, it turns to run north-south, more or less parallel with the German frontier. More locally, the language of the people consists, in the north, of various dialects of Flemish, now in regression and relayed by Standard Dutch; in the south, of Walloon dialects now replaced by French (dialects of Picardy on the west, and of Lorraine on the southeast, extending in each case across the Franco-Belgian borderlands).

Brussels, the capital, has for long been a bilingual city. After Belgium attained its independence in 1830, however, Brussels was subjected to an intense Frenchifying influence through the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. Demographic growth transformed the city (1831 population : 104,000) into an agglomeration of 761,000 inhabitants in 1910, on the eve of World War I, and of 1,338,000 in 1970. Since then, however, the population has declined slightly, to 1,270,000 in 1986. This recent outflow of population, most of it French-speaking, has extended the limits of the urban region ever further, and this has caused problems : the peripheral communes are Flemish-speaking, and the influx of French speaking city-dwellers raises social-cultural frictions, as legally defined. Under the constitution, only the core of the Brussels agglomeration is bilingual; that is, an area of 19 communes which represented the city's extent in the 1950s, immediately after World War II. In 1986, the population of the 19-communes area was 976,000.

The economic supremacy of the French-speaking bourgeoisie in Belgian life in the past was something of which the Flemish-speaking population was acutely conscious. For a century past, the latter has been aroused to the defence of its own - majority - language, and the economic development of the Flemish region in the past 30 years has given fresh impetus and new strength to the movement. From the 1950s onwards, the points of dispute between the two communities became so sharp and so numerous that both increasingly demanded autonomy. A movement in this direction took place through a series of constitutional revisions : autonomy was effectively attained from 1980 onwards. Already in 1963, the linguistic frontiers had been defined on the ground once for all, including those of the officially bilingual region around Brussels.

Within their regions, therefore, the three communities - French-, Flemish- and German-speaking - operate autonomously in their own, single language, in cultural affairs - including international cooperation - some aspects of education, and subjects defined as "personalizable"; that is, where language plays an important part, such as in health matters and tourism. In the bilingual Brussels region, businesses and individuals use either Flemish or French at will. Questions dealing with land use, such as planning, environmental controls and housing, policies for energy or economic development, the rights of communes, all these lie within the competence of what are known as the Regions. The area of Standard Dutch language is administered by the Flemish Region, while the French- and German-speaking areas are administered together as the Walloon Region. The Brussels Region administers the bilingual area around the capital. In each case, administration of communities and regions is in the hands of legislative councils and executives. Flemish Belgium has combined community and region in a single council and a single executive : the Brussels Region, on the other hand, has not yet achieved its own autonomous organs of government. The state government of Belgium, as in most federal systems, retains control of such national matters as central finances, the economy, foreign affairs and defence.

Beyond the linguistic boundaries there exist in every case minorities speaking the other languages, whose interests are more or less protected by local adjustment which breach the strict, single-language regulations. There is, however, no lack of problems caused by these minorities, especially within the Flemish Region, including the now-notorious case of a French-speaking majority in the Flemish commune of Fouron.

It may be considered surprising that so much stress should be laid on the regional problems of so small a country as Belgium. But the divide that separates the components of the nation from one another is such that a subdivision along ethnic lines is essential in spheres of life as varied as demographic data, population density, economic development and socio-political attitudes. It has become a Belgian habit to group together regional data on the basis of the linguistic divisions, including the Brussels Region. More and more often people speak of a "two-speed Belgium", as a way of bringing out the major contrasts between Flanders and Wallonia.

As a matter of fact, the geographer concerned with Belgium's regional geography can only fit the linguistic divisions to a few prominent boundaries of geographically homogeneous regions or urban hinterlands, even though the nation's landscapes bear in many places the unmistakable distinguishing marks of their human occupation. The differences between our linguistic regions are quite distinct but so, too, are those between parts of the same region. One can distinguish a score of geographical regions of the second rank (the first-rank regions being those of continental scale, following the classifications used by F. Snacken), and probably 40 third-rank sub-regions. The second-order city-focussed regions also number about 20, surrounding a corresponding number of towns of regional importance. The wide diversity of landscapes is typically European.