

Benelux (Annual Register 2022)

Belgium

Life in Belgium in 2021 continued to be dominated by the Coronavirus pandemic. Having been one of the most affected countries in continental Europe, although not nearly on the scale of the United Kingdom (and partly due to unfailingly open reporting), the delayed start of the EU vaccination campaign attracted lots of criticism, although a good part of the Pfizer vaccine production takes place in Belgium. Like everywhere, lockdowns and other mitigation measures were heavily debated throughout the year, but largely followed by the population, although some rioting occurred when police broke up an illegal festival in Brussels' Bois de la Cambre in May.

For six weeks in May and June, a manhunt for an elite soldier gone rogue kept the country on high alert. Having appropriated military weapons, including four rocket launchers with ammunition, from the barracks in Leopoldsborg and with a disciplinary record of intimidating a popular virologist, Jürgen Conings went underground, leaving farewell letters in which he threatened the Belgian government and public health officials in what he saw as protest against the corona restrictions. After a nationwide search involving several hundreds of police and military personnel, Conings was found dead on 20 June, apparently having committed suicide. Although no further harm was done, the questions of how a known extremist could have had access to military weaponry and to which extent he could rely on outside supporters in the extreme-right spectrum of the country continue to have repercussions.

Damage on a large scale was inflicted by the devastating flash floods that hit Eastern Belgium, as well as adjacent Luxembourg and Western Germany, in the following month. Caused by the heaviest rainfall in history (271.5mm within 48h were recorded in Jalhay in the province of Liège), large parts of the city of Liège, with more than 200,000 inhabitants, as well as several towns in the provinces of Liège and Limburg, had to be evacuated for fear that a major dam could fail. Apart from vast material damage, which required the rehousing of more than 10,000 people, at least 42 people perished in Belgium. The gas, electricity and potable water supply for tens of thousands of households was also severely interrupted. One of the largest natural disasters in the history of Belgium and widely seen as a harbinger of climate change, 20 July 2021 was declared a National Day of Mourning by prime minister Alexander de Croo.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the year 2021 began with a political bombshell announcement. On 15 January, the Rutte government had to resign in the wake of the childcare benefit fraud affair, a major scandal that had been brewing for a couple of years but escalated towards the end of 2020, when a damning parliamentary report laid the responsibility squarely with Rutte's cabinet. As many as 26,000 families, mostly from ethnic minorities backgrounds, had inaccurately been accused by Dutch inland revenue of fraudulently claiming childcare allowance, forcing many families into poverty and debt in order to repay the benefits, a process in which the authorities had to admit profiling on the basis of ethnic origins had played a significant role.

While remaining in office as a caretaker government, the resignation of Rutte's cabinet, only weeks before the next scheduled general elections, in the Netherlands traditionally held in March, undermined the authority of the government. When only a few days after, on 23 January, the demissionary cabinet imposed a night curfew (*avondklok*), requiring citizens to be housebound from 9pm (later changed to 10pm) to 4:30am, in an attempt to contain the rising Covid incidence rates, this led to numerous anti-lockdown demonstrations as well as to violent riots in many Dutch cities, before the measure was lifted on 28 April. Corona-related riots would also recur later in the year, particularly violently in Rotterdam in November.

At the general elections in March 2021, a record number of seventeen political parties entered the Dutch parliament, facilitated by the Dutch electoral system's pure form of proportional representation, without an electoral threshold as in most similar political systems in Europe. In spite of the scandal, the minister

president's centre-right VVD managed to come out top of the elections with 21.9% of the cast votes (up by 0.6%), followed by the centre-left *Democraten 66* (D66, 'Democrats [19]66') with 15% (+2.8%), the right-wing populist Geert Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV, 'Party for Freedom') with 10.8% (−2.3%) and the *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA, 'Christian Democratic Appeal') with 9.5% of the votes (−2.9%).

The largest increase in their share of the votes (5%, +3.2%) was achieved by the national-conservative *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD, 'Forum for Democracy'), a relatively new political formation (2016) led by the controversial politician Thierry Baudet, who is advocating against corona restrictions, for stricter curbs on immigration, and for the Netherlands' exit from the European Union ('Nexit'). A breakaway from the FvD with a largely similar programme, *Juiste Antwoord 21* (JA21, 'Right Answer [20]21', founded in December 2020, gained a further 2.37%, but among the newcomer parties are also social-liberal formations like *Volt Nederland*, the Dutch branch of a pan-European federalist movement (2.42%), next to numerous one-issue parties. The opposition parties from the left, *GroenLinks* (GL, 'GreenLeft') and *Socialistische Partij* (SP, 'Socialist Party') had to accept the largest electoral losses, achieving 5.16% (−4%) and 5.98% (−3.1%) respectively, whereas Dutch Labour (PvdA, *Partij van de Arbeid*) remained stable with 5.7%, as did the Christian Union (CU) with 3.4%.

The fractured nature of the new parliament naturally led to prolonged coalition forming negotiations. For several months, successive *formateurs* were tasked to sound out various constellations for a viable coalition. Having been accused of not being truthful about his attempts to sideline the critical parliamentarian Pieter Omzigt (CDA, since 2021 independent), who had played a major role in uncovering the childcare benefit scandal, Rutte barely survived a parliamentary vote of no confidence in April. Instead, a motion censuring the minister president about his treatment of Omzigt was passed with overwhelming majority and only Rutte's own party VVD voting against. After nine months, the longest government formation period in the history of the Netherlands, the new coalition agreement could finally be announced on 15 December, consisting of the same parties as the previous government (VVD, D66, CDA, CU). On the same day a new far-reaching corona-lockdown was announced, ending the year 2021 in the Netherlands as it had begun.

A crime case that shook the country was the murder of the most prominent Dutch crime journalist in July. With his TV programmes Peter R. de Vries had successfully elucidated a series of high-profile criminal cases, including the 1983 kidnapping of the brewery industrialist Freddy Heineken, for which he managed to track down one of the fugitive kidnapers in Paraguay. It is suspected that his murder is connected to the so-called 'Marengo-process', the largest process against organised crime in the Netherlands to date, in which De Vries was advising the crown witness. Only the latest in a series of gangland homicides in recent years, the case has also sparked discussions about whether the country is in danger of becoming a European 'narco-state'. Reasons for nationwide celebrations on the other hand were Queen Máxima's fiftieth birthday in May and crown princess Amalia's eighteenth birthday and attending the *Raad van State* (Council of State) for the first time in December.

Luxembourg

Apart from the pandemic, which hit Luxembourg hard and i a. hospitalised prime minister Xavier Bettel in July, the year in the Grand Duchy was dominated by the country's problems with its reputation as a safe haven for shadowy money. In February, *Le Monde*, in collaboration with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and a dozen international media partners, published the OpenLux investigations, which disclosed how international organised crime and dictatorial regimes were exploiting major weaknesses in the Luxembourg's regulatory framework. In June, the European Union initiated legal action against the Grand Duchy for failing to fully implement EU anti-money laundering regulations, which in November was referred to the European Court of Justice. The judgement is outstanding.