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# WHY DID BRUSSELS BECOME THE CAPITAL OF EUROPE ? BECAUSE BELGIUM STARTS WITH LETTER **B** !



**“It had been decided that the new institutions would be chaired in turn by the ministers of each of the six member states. Which country first? The first one in alphabetical order: Belgium.”**

**9 May 1950:** The French foreign minister Robert Schuman makes his famous declaration calling for Germany, France and other countries to jointly control their coal and steel industries. 18 April 1951: the Treaty of Paris creates the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). August 1952, the new institution, which will gradually expand into what is now the European Union, is supposed to start its work. But where?

To answer this question, the foreign ministers of the six countries involved — Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Italy and the Netherlands — gather in Paris on 23 July 1952. A majority among them express the view that Brussels would be a good choice. But one of them is strongly opposed: Belgium's foreign minister Paul van Zeeland. *“I cannot concede Brussels”,* he says, *“My government would be overthrown tomorrow.”* On 25 July at 3am, after 18 hours of uninterrupted negotiations, Luxembourg emerges as the provisional seat of the first European Commission — the ECSC's High Authority. As there is no suitable hemicycle for the ECSC's parliamentary assembly, it is decided that it will meet

in Strasbourg in the building of the Council of Europe — the root cause of today's “travelling circus” of the European Parliament between Strasbourg and Brussels.

**Why was Belgium's government so adamantly against Brussels?** Because it was unconditionally committed to proposing Liège — which none of the other countries wanted. Why Liège? Liège was then at the core of Belgium's steel and coal industry. But there was a far more imperative reason. On 12 March 1950, two months before Schuman's call, a national referendum is organized — the only one that ever took place in the country's history — about the return to Belgium of king Leopold III, still in exile because of his ambiguous attitude towards Germany during World War II. There turns out to be a majority in favour of his return in all provinces, except the most industrialized ones, Liège and Hainaut, home to the majority of the Walloon population.

The national elections of 4 June 1950 give the Christian-democratic party, strongly supportive of the return of the king, an absolute majority. The one-party govern-

ment immediately invites the king to return, which he does on 22 July. But riots break out in Wallonia, even calling for the creation of a Walloon republic. On 30 July 1950, the police shoots at demonstrators in a suburb of Liège and kills four of them. Two days later, king Leopold III decides to abdicate. On 16 July 1951, his son Baudouin becomes officially the fifth king of Belgium. During the ceremony, a deputy from Liège shouts “Vive la République”. He is assassinated one week later. The situation remains tense, the government fears electoral defeat — or worse — in Wallonia. This is why one year later, when the issue of the seat of the ECSC had to be settled, it had to insist on Liège: despite the gentle pressure of other governments, there was no way it could concede Brussels.

### **Why then did Brussels end up emerging nonetheless?**

Because Belgium starts with letter B. Here is the story. In March 1957, after months of negotiation in Brussels, in the castle of Val Duchesse, a far more ambitious treaty is signed in Rome: the treaty that creates the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Community for Atomic Energy (Euratom). Several cities are candidates for hosting them, including Brussels with a proposal for the Heysel site. But no consensus can be reached, and on 1 January 1958, when the new institutions are supposed to start operating, no decision has yet been taken. The first *fonctionnaires* have been hired, but they don't know in which country their offices will be. An emergency meeting takes place in Paris on 6 January but does not manage to overcome the stalemate. Who is in charge of finding a provisional solution? It had been decided that the new institutions would be chaired in turn by the ministers of each

of the six member states, starting with the first one in alphabetical order: Belgium. A few months earlier, Victor Larock had taken over as Belgium's foreign minister from Paul-Henri Spaak, the mastermind of the Treaty of Rome, who had become NATO's second secretary general in May 1957. He was the man in the uncomfortable driving seat.

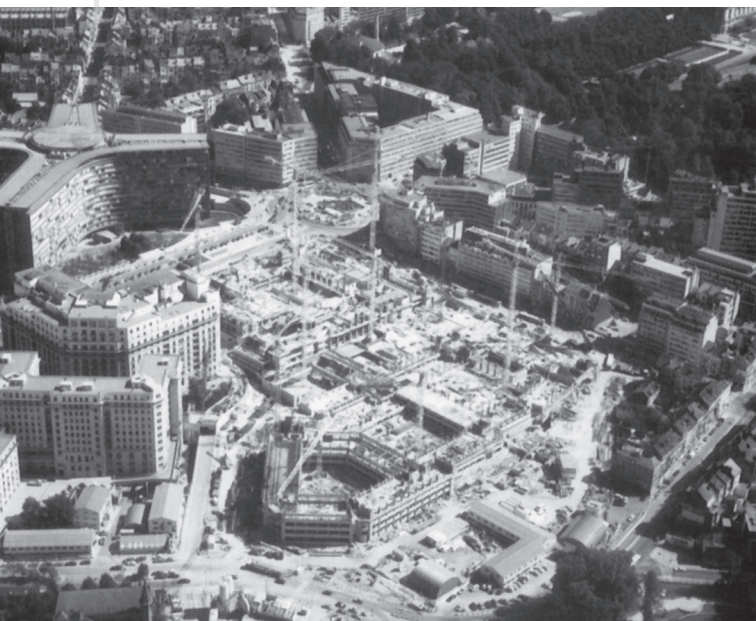
In February 1958, on behalf of the Belgian government, he decides to rent from the insurance company Royale belge (now AXA) an office building in construction on Avenue de la Joyeuse Entrée, next to the Parc du Cinquantenaire, on a location now covered by the seat of the European External Action Services. By the time the presidency moves on from België/Belgique to Deutschland, in the second semester of 1958, the consensus is no greater on the choice of the seat. Moreover, in December 1958, Charles de Gaulle becomes President of the French Republic, and it seems as obvious to him that the seat of the European institutions should be located in what is by far the biggest city of the “petite Europe”, i.e. Paris, as it is obvious to the others that this would be most unwise.

The Belgian government quickly realizes that the uncertainty may last long and that far more office space will be needed. In December 1958, it expresses its interest in acquiring the convent and school of the nuns of Berlaymont, located on the rue de la Loi between the rue Archimède and the boulevard Charlemagne: thanks to the big garden, there would be no need to destroy too many houses in order to make room for a huge office building, that could conceivably be turned into a ministry if European institutions decided to move elsewhere.



*Interior façade of the Berlaymont monastery, 1877*





In exchange, the government offers the nuns the state domain of Argenteuil (in the commune of Waterloo). The deal nearly fails, however, because King Baudouin, decides to get married. As a result, his father, the former king Leopold III, is no longer welcome in the palace of Laeken, and the government offers him, and not the nuns, the domain of Argenteuil. The owner of a neighbouring piece of land comes to the rescue, the nuns' school is built next to the ex-king's new residence, and to the government's relief the Berlaymont building plan — for 3000 civil servants and 1600 cars — can go ahead.

**From then on, the entrenchment of Brussels as the capital of Europe is just a massive snowball process,** with the Berlaymont building operating as a powerful magnet. Even before its completion in 1969, the Charlemagne building grows next to it and hosts first part of the EEC Commission, next the Council of Ministers. In 1967, the High Authority of the ECSC is merged with the Commission of the EEC and moves from Luxembourg to Brussels. Soon these two buildings prove insufficient and more office blocks are built by developers and rented out to the Commission, whose needs keep growing with successive enlargements and the expansion of its powers. After much controversy and hesitation, the Council of Ministers too finds a permanent home along the rue de la Loi, on the location of the rue Juste Lipse, and moves into it in 1995.

In the meanwhile, the European Parliament, officially in Strasbourg, is elected directly for the first time in 1979. It decides to hold its committee meetings in Brussels, and in 1981 it acquires for this purpose the building on the rue Belliard (currently occupied by the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee). In July 1987, a private consortium is allowed to start building a congress centre on the site of an old brewery next to the station of Brussels-Luxembourg. In November 1990, the President of the European Parliament expresses the Parliament's wish to rent and later

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buy the complex. In January 1992, the contract is signed. In September 1993, the European Parliament holds its first plenary session in Brussels. As enlargement proceeds, a growing majority of the members of the European Parliament calls for all regular plenaries to be held in Brussels. Providing adequate compensation is found for Strasbourg, this is bound to happen sooner or later.

Final ingredient: in December 2000, in the corridors of the Nice summit, President Jacques Chirac proposes that from the big 2004 enlargement onwards, instead of being organized in the country of the rotating presidency, the four regular summits of heads of government should be held in Brussels. This marks the end of the myth of the rotating capital. In July 2004, the Commission agrees to have a permanent poster exhibition on the glass fence surrounding the totally renovated Berlaymont under the heading “How Brussels became the capital of the European Union”.

Brussels, as we saw, was never chosen as the capital of the EU. It became the capital of the EU by stealth, in *stoemelings* as the Brussels dialect puts it, essentially because of the inability of the six, then nine, then twelve, then fifteen, then twenty five and now twenty eight member states to decide which city this capital should be. A trivial random fact — Belgium starting with letter B — thus gave rise, first quite timidly, next with growing confidence, to a massive, irreversible *fait accompli*.



Many thanks to all those who supported the call for a dramatic improvement of Schuman roundabout in the May issue of BxlConnect. If you wish to sign the petition, you can still do so on [www.bxlconnect.com/piazzaschuman](http://www.bxlconnect.com/piazzaschuman). And if you have suggestions, you can mail them to [piazzaschuman@bxlconnect.com](mailto:piazzaschuman@bxlconnect.com).