

# Belgium Today

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## A YOUTHFUL 175-YEAR-OLD LADY

Belgium celebrated the 175th birthday of its Constitution on February 7: it was indeed on that date, in 1831, that the National Congress concluded its debates over the text and adopted the Belgian Constitution, which defined Belgium as a parliamentary monarchy.

The original unitary constitution was a well-balanced synthesis of the French Constitutions of 1791, 1814 and 1830, of the Dutch Constitution of 1814 and of British Constitutional Law. Yet, the text was not a mere amalgamation, but an original creation that has served as a model to many constitutions throughout the world.

Though its basic principles still remain in effect, the Constitution was modified a number of times throughout Belgium's history : the first two (1893 and 1920) were aimed at reforming the electoral system, whereas the next four (1970, 1980, 1988 and 1993) pertained to Belgium's evolution from an unitary state to a federal state and therefore reorganized the repartition of powers.

Today, the Constitution contains 198 articles organized under 8 titles :

- Title 1: Federal Belgium, its Components and its Territory;
- Title 2 : The Belgians and their Rights;
- Title 3 : Powers;
- Title 4 : International Relations;
- Title 5 : Finance;
- Title 6 : Army and Police;
- Title 7: General Dispositions;
- Title 8: Procedure to Revise the Constitution.

The King, ministers, congressmen, elected officials, ambassadors and diplomats, magistrates, military, police officers and civil servants take the oath to respect the Constitution, which is above all laws and decrees. Only the international treaties entered into by Belgium are above the Constitution, according to the general principle of law "pacta sunt servanda" (pacts must be respected).

175 years... The event deserved to be fêted. And it certainly was : among other celebrations, H.M. King Albert II received a commemorative medal and a special post stamp celebrating the date of February 7, 1831, offered to him by the Prime Minister and the Presidents of the Chamber of Representatives and the Belgian Senate. The same day, T.R.H. Princess Astrid and Princes Philippe and Laurent attended a special academic session at the Belgian Senate, dedicated to the adoption of Belgium's fundamental legal document 175 years ago.

## EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN LEADERS TO MEET AT BRUSSELS FORUM

From April 28 to 30, the Belgian Government will co-host the first edition of the *Brussels Forum: Transatlantic Challenges in a Global Era*, a new major initiative launched by the German Marshall Fund. This annual high-level transatlantic event will bring leading Americans and Europeans together to debate how the United States and Europe can cooperate on a set of increasingly global challenges that define our agenda in the 21st century. Other sponsors of the event are the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund. The event will be opened by Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt on April 28.

Throughout the weekend, high level representatives from the U.S. and European Governments, the European Commission, the U.S. Congress and the worlds of international finance, industry and ideas, will discuss the most pressing challenges currently facing the United States and Europe around the world. This initial meeting will focus on promoting more democratic and open societies; meeting the challenges of global terrorism and pandemics; confronting economic uncertainty and adjusting to globalization; and developing a new transatlantic approach to energy security. Topical issues on the agenda include peace in the Balkans, the rise of China, and developments in the Middle East.

## BATTLE OF THE BULGE REMEMBERED AT ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY



*Artist's sketch of the "Triumph of Courage" monument to the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge*

A new memorial to commemorate the sacrifices and actions of the soldiers and the veterans of the Battle of the Bulge will be dedicated in Arlington National Cemetery (section 21) on VE Day, Monday, May 8 at 4 p.m. This monument is an initiative of the Association of the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, which the Embassies of Belgium and Luxembourg are happy and honored to support. The dedication ceremony will underscore the respect and the gratitude of the people and Government of Belgium to the valiant men and women who participated in the Battle of the Ardennes, as it is known in Belgium. The event is open to the public. For more details, please call Arlington National Cemetery at 703 607-8000.

## NEW AGENCY TO IMPROVE MEDICINE COMPETITIVENESS

On March 3, the Belgian Government approved a plan by Federal Minister for Public Health and Social Affairs Rudy Demotte to create a new Federal Agency for Medications. The agency's task will be twofold: to control the quality of medicines on the market, and to speed up the registration and reimbursement schemes for new medicines in Belgium so that pharmaceutical companies in the country can continue to compete in research and production activities with foreign competitors.

If the Raad van Stadt/Conseil d'Etat advises favorably, the proposal can be approved by Parliament in time for the agency to become operational next year.

The plan is the latest in a series of steps by the Government to improve Belgium's ability to compete in the biomedical sciences. Recently a *platform for dialogue with the biomedical industry* was created to discuss on a regular basis new proposals in the area of public health, and innovation and employment issues in the sector such as registration and reimbursement of medicines. In addition, the requirement for certain non-EU researchers to obtain work permits has been abolished, and the current reduction of payroll taxes by 50% for researchers will be expanded to include all employees with PhD's.

## U.S.— BELGIUM DOUBLE TAXATION TREATY

In a globalized world, companies and individuals increasingly move and conduct business across borders. Hence the increased need for treaties between national governments which clearly define in which country economic transactions are taxed, and how double taxation is avoided. For the U.S. citizen investing in real estate in Belgium, the U.S. subsidiary in Belgium paying dividends to shareholders, the Belgian music ensemble collecting royalties in the U.S., or the Belgian U.S. permanent resident collecting a Belgian pension, a tax agreement between the Belgian and U.S. administration is no small matter.

Belgium has a very extensive network of double taxation treaties. It was the first country, for example, to conclude a tax treaty (2004) with Hong Kong, a treaty which offers interesting prospects for U.S. businesses doing business in China wishing to repatriate capital.

During their January meeting in Washington, Prime Minister Verhofstadt and President Bush agreed to start negotiations on reforming and modernizing the treaty on double taxation between the U.S. and Belgium, which dates from 1970. As a result, a delegation from the Belgian Public Service Finance will soon come to Washington to have a first exchange of views with the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

From the Belgian point of view, a proposal for the abolition of both the withholding tax on dividends of shares –currently a minimum of 5%- and the withholding tax on interest on loans granted by one company to another company is particularly important. Belgium already offers a 0% withholding tax in many other double taxation treaties. From the U.S. side, more extensive exchange of financial information in the context of the fight against tax fraud and terrorist financing is high on the agenda.

## BREVIA

### Unesco Prize to Antwerp Scientist

Christine Van Broeckhoven, a professor in the Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics at the University of Antwerp, was one of five recipients of the "L'Oréal-Unesco award for women in science 2006." Van Broeckhoven was singled out for her genetic investigations of Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative disorders. It is estimated that there are some 100,000 Alzheimer patients in Belgium. The Unesco Prize, which comes with a cash award of \$100,000, is given annually to leading women scientists in the hope that this recognition will increase their visibility as role models for young women.

### Almost One Mobile Phone per Belgian

Belgium had a total of 9,132,000 mobile phones in use at the end of 2004, according to figures from the Federal Government. At the dawn of the mobile era in 1990 the figure was just 45,000 and five years later it had reached 235,000. Then came the rapid growth to 3.1 million in 1999, 5.6 million in 2000 and 8.1 million in 2002. Taking into account that businesses and some people own more than one, today's figure means that approximately 88.3% of the Belgian population use a mobile in comparison with the European average of around 90%.

### Brussels Best Airport in Europe

The Airport Council International (ACI) has given the award for best European airport to Brussels-National. Brussels was tied for first place with Copenhagen, followed by Zurich and Helsinki. ACI's Airports Excellence Award is based on a survey among 100,000 travelers across more than 70 airports in the world. According to the passenger survey program jointly administered by ACI and IATA in 2005, Korea's Incheon International Airport was the best airport worldwide. Second place honors were awarded to Hong Kong International Airport and Singapore Changi Airport, with Kuala Lumpur International Airport taking the third place title – a remarkable performance for Asia Pacific airports. In the Americas, Halifax came out on top, followed by Ottawa and Denver.

### Proud to be Belgian

A *Reader's Digest* survey conducted in 2005 as part of Belgium's 175th anniversary revealed that eight out of ten Belgians are proud to be Belgian. According to those surveyed, the advantages of living in Belgium include the quality of medical care, social services, living standards and education. The Belgians find Bruges their most beautiful city, followed by Ghent and then Brussels. In terms of architecture, the two most popular structures among Belgians are the Atomium and the Brussels town hall. Rubens and Magritte are the favorite painters, while Jacques Brel and Toots Thielemans ranked as the country's finest musicians. When it comes to food, fries — with either mussels or steak — continue to have the most appeal.

## VIRGINIA UNION UNIVERSITY SEEKS BELLS FOR BELGIAN BUILDING

When the 1939 World's Fair in New York closed, Belgium was an occupied country. The Belgian government in exile decided that the Belgian Pavilion at the Fair, designed by renowned architect Henri van de Velde, would be presented as a gift to the United States.

The Pavilion had been conceived with the idea that it would be repatriated to serve as a school in Belgium, so it was not surprising that a number of American educational institutions submitted proposals for its use. After a competitive process, the Pavilion, which included a bell tower, was donated to Virginia Union University, in Richmond, a Historical Black College/University, while the 35-bell carillon housed in the tower was given to Herbert Hoover in gratitude for his relief efforts in Belgium during and following World War I.



*The Belgian Friendship Building at Virginia Union University was originally the Belgian Pavilion at the 1939-40 World's Fair in New York*

At VUU, the Belgian Friendship Building, as it is now called, was reconfigured for use first as a library, and later as a gymnasium and a drama center. Listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register, the building is now over sixty years old and in need of restoration. Thanks to the vision and tireless efforts of Dianne Watkins, a niece of VUU's first African-American president, a campaign is underway to raise funds necessary to turn the building into a Fine Arts Center.

At the top of Watkins' agenda is a plan to bring bells to the empty tower. "Bells for Peace" is the name she has given to the not-for-profit corporation she has formed to receive donations. She is hoping to provide the tower with 14 bells; these range in cost from \$7,500 for the smaller ones to \$150,000 for the "C" bell, which has a diameter of almost 60" and weighs 4,730 pounds. There are no longer any active bell foundries in Belgium and the Verdin Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, currently the world's largest supplier of bells, carillons and clocks, has agreed to take on the project.

A kick-off event to bring public visibility for "Bells for Peace" has been planned at the end of April. For more information, including how to make a tax-deductible contribution, please visit [www.bellsforpeace.org](http://www.bellsforpeace.org)

## ANTWERP AND NEW YORK CELEBRATE THE RED STAR LINE

For over 50 years, from roughly 1870 to 1935, the Port of Antwerp was one of the most important embarkation points for European emigrants traveling to America. In recognition of the specific role played by the Red Star Line, the shipping company that carried millions of these passengers to the New World, the City of Antwerp has undertaken a series of interesting initiatives.

On the Belgian side, it will renovate three original Red Star Line warehouses where emigrants underwent medical examination prior to departure and where they were disinfected and their papers were checked. On the American side, Antwerp has teamed up with the Ellis Island Immigration Museum to exchange scientific and genealogical research, and with the South Street Seaport Museum in New York to present a special exhibition.



*Red Star Line, postcard, ca. 1900  
Antwerp, Van Mieghem Museum*

The exhibition, which will be on view from April 29 to October 31, is called *Antwerp=America/Eugeen Van Mieghem and the Emigrants of the Red Star Line*. Drawings and paintings by Van Mieghem provide a window on turn-of-the-century Antwerp. Van Mieghem lived and worked near the city's quays, and some of his favorite subjects were the thousands of emigrants, mostly Jewish, who were about to embark on the greatest adventure of their lives.

Simultaneously with the exhibition at the South Street Seaport Museum, a special presentation of Red Star Line will be set up in the entrance hall of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York Harbor. And, in the fall, the musical *Portrait of a Stolen Spring*, which tells the true story of Ukrainian Jews who sailed on the Red Star Line, will be performed at a venue yet to be confirmed.

### SUPPORT NEEDED FOR THE RED STAR LINE RENOVATION

The Red Star Line buildings in Antwerp's South quarter are currently being restored in preparation for their transformation into a museum, visitors' center "and place of reflection and remembrance." It is estimated that this will cost \$8.5 million.

If you would like to help by making a tax-deductible contribution, please send a check made payable to the King Baudouin Foundation United States (KBFUS), which this year is giving priority to fundraising for the Red Star Line project.

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**TEXAS COUPLE HONORED FOR HELPING STUDENT PILOTS**



Ambassador Frans van Daele (left) was in Wichita Falls, Texas, earlier this year to bestow the decoration "Knight in the Order of Leopold" on Dr. Elvie Tolentino and her husband, Tito.

The Tolentinos were honored for their involvement in the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training "Country Sponsor" program. Brigadier General Dany Van de Ven, also present at the ceremony, stated that Belgium has sent student pilots and instructor pilots to this program at Sheppard Air Force Base since the 1980's. In accepting the award, Dr. Tolentino modestly remarked: "We just helped them (the Belgian student pilots) the best we could, so that they would not feel homesick and at a loss in a foreign country."

The "Order of Leopold" was established in 1832 in honor of King Leopold I. It is awarded for extreme bravery in combat, or, as in the Tolentinos case, for exceptional service to the Belgian nation.

**TRIBUTE TO "TOOTS" IN NEW YORK**

Following his Carnegie Hall concert on March 16, the *New York Times* wrote: "There may be no living jazz musician better loved than Jean (Toots) Thielemans, the harmonica virtuoso who came to America from his native Belgium more than 50 years ago." Together with pianist Kenny Werner, the 84-year-old Toots will play in Washington from April 13-15. (See



**EVENTS OF INTEREST**

**Through April 11— New York, NY**

Surrealist painter Henri Desclez exhibits works at the Agora Gallery. Info: 212 226-4151

**Through April 22 — New York, NY**

*Joelle Tuerlinckx: Drawing Inventory*—a new project filled with stretch drawings, floating forms, moving points, and flat shapes— at The Drawing Center. Info: 212 219-2166

**Through April 29 — New York, NY**

*A Day Elsewhere: Think Tank 2* featuring Didier Mahieu, at the Chelsea Art Museum. Info: 212 255-0719

**Through May 28 — New York, NY**

Exhibition *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* includes photos by Hentie van der Merwe, a South African artist living and working in Antwerp. Info: 212 847-0000

**April 4 — Washington, DC**

*Et Puis Bastogne*, a dialogue in the form of letters, real and imaginary, about the landing at Normandy and the end of World War II, in French with English subtitles, at the Maison Française, Embassy of France. Info: 202 944-6091 or culture@ambafrance-us.org

**April 6 - 9 — New York, NY**

Micheline Van Hautem, singer, and Frederik Caelen, accordion and piano, perform *Madame*, an ode to inspirational women, at Danny's Skylight Room in Manhattan. Info: 212 265-8133

**April 13 - 15 — Washington, DC**

Toots Thielemans, harmonica, and Kenny Werner, piano, at Blues Alley. Info: 202 337-4141

**April 29 - October 31 — New York, NY**

*Antwerp=America, Eugeen Van Mieghem and the Emigrants of the Red Star Line*, at the South Street Seaport Museum (see page 3) Info: www.southstseaport.org

**May 11 — Washington, DC**

Vitaly Samoshko, top prize winner of the 1999 Queen Elisabeth Competition for piano, at the Polish Embassy. Info: 202 625-2361 or www.embassyseries.org

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GOVERNMENT CO-HOSTS FIRST "BRUSSELS FORUM"