

'Benelux customs tariff from 1 January' from the Luxemburger Wort (23 December 1947)

Caption: On 23 December 1947, the Luxembourg daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort refers to the Benelux project as an example of how to bridge national divides in Europe.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 23.12.1947, n° 357; 100e année. Luxembourg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "Ab 1. Januar Benelux-Zolltarif", p. 1.

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Benelux customs tariff from 1 January

On 1 January 1948, the Benelux customs tariff will come into force. This will be an event of fundamental importance for our economy, although political controversy still surrounds it. From this day forward, trade between the three signatory states (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) will no longer be subject to customs clearance. As regards goods entering the Benelux region from a third country, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg have agreed to standardise their respective customs duties. Problems that arose during negotiations were largely resolved at the eleventh hour thanks to an agreement between the three countries that they would not, or only fractionally, increase the established duties on a number of imported goods for a period of one year.

[...]

What we would, however, like to point out – without interfering in the party political debate surrounding the Benelux countries – is the quite comprehensible fact that great ideas, in the political as well as in the economic sphere, yes, in the human sphere in general, can be put into practice only if all parties concerned are prepared to sacrifice a carefully balanced part of their own, perhaps fully justified, interests for the benefit of the general interest. For years, we have heard it from all quarters that the greatest evil Europe suffers from is economic disunity. During his memorable speech at Harvard University on 5 June this year, the greatest event of the entire year according to a London-based BBC reporter, the American Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, gave the countries of Europe three postulates in order to overcome this economic crisis and consequent political crisis resulting therefrom: an increase in production, the stabilising of domestic finances and mutual cooperation. It has since seemed that Marshall focused mostly on mutual cooperation in his speech. The Benelux countries, however, did not wait for the Marshall Plan before they were prompted into working together. This had already been laid down in broad terms by our Ministers in London when Europe was in the midst of the war and was so busy trying to cope with brutal reality that, for most people, there was hardly space or time to think about the future. It was a similar scenario to when the Roman Senate discussed in all seriousness whether a request, submitted years before, to purchase a field should be approved, although the Gauls were currently camping on that field outside the city gates!

Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg did not wait for the American State Secretary's speech before making their contribution to Europe's healing process. How many times since then have they been able to acknowledge the fact that their Benelux was being held up as an example, that the Scandinavian countries wanted to follow suit, and that, elsewhere in Europe, the concept of bilateral customs agreements is seriously being considered. One of the nicest compliments was paid to them last Sunday when the French Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault, announced in Brussels: 'Since July 1914 we have been subjected to the passport regime; since then, people and goods have faced enormous difficulties when crossing borders. Despite everything, however, I believe that that harm can be undone. And I am delighted to be able to pronounce a new word, which has enriched our international vocabulary, in Brussels itself, model and example of this remarkable initiative. Benelux now represents a major economic power as well as being a symbol which I admire and which we want to take as inspiration during the negotiations in which we are involved for the creation of a Franco-Italian customs union.'

A symbol I admire! If as eminent a politician as Bidault makes such claims, then it should compensate for the unavoidable labour pains from which the birth of Benelux will also not be spared. We are not trying to deceive ourselves about the difficulties necessarily resulting therefrom. We just measure them against the scale of necessary implementations which will take place sooner or later, and against the magnitude of the European idea, which Benelux will serve from the beginning. As a chance, however modest, for peace.