

The Benelux Memorandum

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The Benelux memorandum

Following on from the many initiatives taken over the previous two years by Johan Willem Beyen, Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs, with a view to reviving European integration on the basis of a general common market, Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Joseph Bech, the Luxembourg Minister for Foreign Affairs, met with their Netherlands colleague in The Hague on 23 April 1955. Adopting the principle of a joint memorandum combining the ideas of Jean Monnet and Beyen, they decided to propose to their European partners a sectoral approach for transport and energy, especially nuclear energy, and the parallel establishment of a general common market.

The Benelux memorandum was finalised on 18 May and officially submitted to the French, German and Italian governments two days later. It laid great stress on the need to extend the scope of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to other fields such as transport, energy and the peaceful use of atomic power. The Three also emphasised the need for an Economic Community based on a common market, to be achieved through the gradual abolition of quantitative restrictions and customs duties. In addition, the Benelux memorandum expressed the three countries' desire for European integration in the social and financial fields. Finally, convinced that independent institutions were a guarantee for the smaller countries, the Three stressed the need for a joint authority with powers of its own. They suggested holding an international conference to prepare integration in the fields of transport, energy, nuclear power and social welfare regulations, and to define conditions and a programme for the general integration of the European economy. The idea was in the air. On 14 May 1955 the Common Assembly of the ECSC had unanimously adopted a resolution calling on the six Ministers for Foreign Affairs — who were scheduled to meet in Messina at the end of the month to renew part of the ECSC High Authority — to entrust one or more intergovernmental conferences with the task of preparing, in conjunction with the Community institutions, treaties that would enable further progress to be made towards European integration.

The German and Italian governments quickly defined their positions in memoranda of their own. The German paper was a compromise between the approach advocated by Ludwig Erhard, the Minister for Economic Affairs, who was opposed to a sectoral 'command economy' and supranational powers, and that of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who was more interested in the political aspects of economic union. Bonn supported the Benelux countries' proposals for the energy and transport sectors, putting the emphasis on the peaceful use of nuclear power. The German memorandum also recommended transitional measures to facilitate the restructuring of national economies and called for the foundation of a European university. The Italian memorandum underlined the need to coordinate economic policies within the future common market. In substance, the three memoranda, which stressed the importance of involving Britain in future deliberations, envisaged a general common market while agreeing to sectoral measures for atomic power and transport. All three were on the agenda for the conference of ECSC Foreign Ministers — the first since the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) in August 1954 — which was held in Messina on 1 to 3 June.