

ANNUAL PLAN 2026

**COOPERATION
WITHOUT
BORDERS**



Colophon

Responsible editor:
Mrs Ariadne Petridis
General Secretariat of the Benelux-Union
Rue de la Régence 39
BE-1000 Brussels
Tél. +32 (0)2 519 38 11

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Policy department of the General Secretariat of the Benelux-Union

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Foreword by the College of Secretaries-General

We are pleased to present our three countries' ambitions and priorities in this 2026 Benelux annual plan, which also reflects their joint work programme for 2025-2028. Together, they strive to make our region safer, more tightly integrated and more sustainable. The Benelux is one of the most competitive regions in Europe and intends to maintain this advantage in the future. Recent political efforts to foster regional integration bear witness to this. At their summit in Luxembourg on 10 September last, the three prime ministers confirmed their 'deep and long-standing commitment to the Benelux Union as a cornerstone of regional cooperation, solidarity and innovation in Europe'.

The close cooperation within this Union, focused on projects that deliver visible and tangible results for the benefit of citizens and businesses, also strengthens European integration. Article 350 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU recognises the Benelux Union in its role as a pioneer and laboratory of the European Union, leading the way for the other Member States. The Benelux is the only regional organisation in Europe that enjoys such a status, and we take advantage of it by concluding agreements that are geared to the scale of our region. We are strengthening our relations with the European institutions and are seeking to develop them further. Finally, effective political and strategic coordination between the three Benelux countries will further enhance their role and impact within the EU.

In 2025, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement, one of the most remarkable achievements of European integration. This agreement, the cornerstone of the free movement of persons in Europe, bears witness to our pioneering role, as this system had already been introduced in Benelux 25 years earlier. Today, these freedoms no longer seem self-evident and deserve all the more protection. This calls for a renewed commitment, particularly to strengthening the internal market, managing migration and combating cross-border crime.

With this in mind, the 2018 Benelux Police Treaty, which came into force in 2023, offers real opportunities to deepen our cooperation.

Security remains a top priority, particularly in the fight against organised crime, human trafficking and illegal migration, and in strengthening social resilience. In 2026, we will continue to implement the Police Treaty, along with joint control operations and operational police cooperation. We are working on the development of an integrated approach to undermining criminality, based on sharing information and, where possible, effective and smart joint control operations within the Benelux territory. Resilience initiatives strengthen our joint preparedness for disasters and crises, including through closer cooperation between crisis centres, the protection of critical infrastructure and better joint management of water and natural resources.

Economic growth and the retention of industry are another priority. By removing unnecessary barriers and working together in the areas of trade, energy, social security, taxation and technology, we are building an innovative and sustainable economy. We also pay special attention to competitiveness and the removal of barriers, including administrative obstacles, for SMEs.

After intensive negotiations, the Benelux Treaty on combating social fraud and promoting decent working conditions was approved at the end of 2025. We hope that its signing in early 2026 will be swiftly followed by ratification, thereby significantly strengthening our cooperation in this area.

Sustainability and the green transition are a central theme in our economic agenda. We are working towards an economy that is as circular as possible and an energy transition that strengthens both our resilience and our competitiveness. Projects involving cross-border infrastructure for hydrogen, CO₂ and wind energy contribute to this objective.

The Benelux plays a key role in supporting European and regional energy cooperation through the Pentalateral Energy Forum and the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC).

The success of Benelux cooperation does not come about in isolation, but rather in collaboration with our neighbouring regions and European partners. We continue to work closely with North Rhine-Westphalia and Hauts-de-France, with whom we signed an action plan in 2025. We are also strengthening our ties with the Grande Région and pursuing cooperation with Lower Saxony. We are forging deeper ties with the Nordic Council and the Baltic states.

Our pioneering role in Europe is also confirmed by the multilateral Benelux–Baltic Treaty on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications. Several European countries are showing interest and a willingness to join, thereby opening up new opportunities for students in Europe.

The Benelux has once again adopted an ambitious annual plan that reflects the determination of the three countries, the General Secretariat and their partners to work together to build a strong, resilient and sustainable Benelux. We would like to thank everyone involved in its preparation for their valuable contributions and look forward to a successful 2026, supported by a new College of Secretaries-General.

We wish you pleasant reading.

The College of Secretaries-General



F.L.T.R. L. Schreinemacher (NL), A. Petridis (BE), T. Köller (LU)

Priorities of the Dutch presidency in 2026



Nederlands Voorzitterschap
van het Comité van Ministers
Présidence néerlandaise du
Comité de Ministres

On 1 January 2026, the Netherlands took over the annual rotating presidency of the Benelux Union from Luxembourg.

The Dutch presidency will focus on three priority policy areas, closely aligned with the core areas covered by the Benelux Union Treaty:

- 1. Economic cooperation and internal market*
- 2. Safety and resilience*
- 3. Future-proof transition, including energy cooperation.*

The Presidency will endeavour to intensify cooperation between our countries and eliminate border barriers wherever possible. This year will see a particular focus on interaction between the Benelux and the EU.

The Benelux's special position as Europe's testing ground will be used to take innovative steps to help strengthen our three countries. This contributes to strengthening the EU, and can provide inspiration for other Member States. As president, the Netherlands will also focus on influencing European decision-making jointly from a Benelux perspective. The Netherlands will likewise explore opportunities for joint or coordinated implementation of EU legislation.

1. ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND INTERNAL MARKET

Economic cooperation within the Benelux Union is a key pillar of the Dutch presidency in 2026. The Netherlands aims to leverage the strong economic integration between the three countries to promote joint growth, innovation and economic resilience. Improving internal market cooperation is a key aspect, with efforts focused on removing unnecessary barriers between the Benelux countries and more broadly within the EU, such as territorial supply constraints. The Benelux countries are jointly advocating for EU legislation to counteract such constraints.

The Dutch presidency is committed to removing barriers that unnecessarily impede the cross-border activities of businesses and citizens. Examples include efforts aimed at the recognition of professional qualifications between countries, enabling cross-border e-invoicing or Benelux efforts to introduce European Business Wallets.

Under the Dutch presidency, the Benelux Union will continue its efforts to promote the multilateral Treaty on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications and to explore the accession of new states to this treaty. Poland is expected to be able to join in 2026. A conference will be organised for higher education institutions in the countries that have signed the treaty.

The legal tools of the Benelux Union are ideally suited to reducing border barriers and promoting cooperation between border regions. The Interreg project 'Schakelpunt Grensbelemmeringen Vlaanderen - Nederland' (referred to in English as the Flanders-Netherlands Border Barriers Schakelpunt) is instrumental in better identifying these obstacles and may serve as inspiration for similar projects in other border regions. In this way, the Benelux is supporting the implementation of the BRIDGEforEU regulation.

2. SECURITY AND RESILIENCE

In addition to the Dutch focus on the competitiveness of the Benelux, another priority seeks to intensify cooperation in the area of resilience, not least in light of geopolitical developments.

The Netherlands' primary focus in this regard is on raising awareness at all levels of society in order to prepare for crisis situations. Joint crisis simulations and knowledge exchange are useful for this purpose. Collaboration between actors engaged in crisis management, such as emergency services and government agencies, is thereby strengthened.

To strengthen our resilience, the Netherlands continues to focus on making optimal use of the instruments of the Benelux Police Treaty. This will enable us to take more effective action against the undermining of society by organised crime. Promoting closer knowledge-sharing within the Benelux on hybrid threats is an explicit part of the presidency's agenda, in close conjunction with the EU preparedness strategy and the European Resilience Coalition.

In addition, the presidency will continue to pay attention to readmission and return agreements, as well as visa exemption agreements for holders of diplomatic and service passports that are concluded within the Benelux framework. In 2025, treaties were signed with Belize, Suriname, and Kyrgyzstan. Both the entry into force of these treaties and the negotiation of new treaties will receive special attention from the presidency.

However, the commitment to resilience extends beyond crisis preparedness or justice and security cooperation. It also includes food security and secure supply chains. Given the three countries' shared security challenges, our interwoven production chains and the role of the Netherlands as an agro-logistics hub in Europe, a joint Benelux approach is essential.

3. FUTURE-PROOF TRANSITION, ENERGY COOPERATION

The Netherlands is convinced that the Benelux Union can play a leading role in strengthening a future-proof economy, with a prominent place for innovation. From this perspective, the Benelux will focus on enhancing sustainable mobility. Among other things, the Netherlands would like to promote cross-border cycle traffic and to take steps within the Benelux to promote autonomous road transport.

The Netherlands sees circularity as an opportunity to combine sustainability and economic growth. Through cooperation within the Benelux, the Netherlands aims to contribute to a fully circular economy by 2050. To this end, it will seek complementarity between EU initiatives and Benelux projects.

Energy occupies an increasingly prominent position in national security strategies and resilience plans. Measures to increase the resilience of the economy, population, and digital and other infrastructure require a comprehensive vision of the strategic importance of energy security.

Regional energy cooperation is key in today's climate. An exchange of best practices for the minimum operational requirements that energy supplies must meet will be used as a basis for practical recommendations.

Regional cooperation can also contribute to a more efficient and faster energy transition to future-proof our energy supply. The Benelux can also play a role in European discussions on energy pricing, market integration, electricity market reform, the development of offshore grid connections and offshore wind projects. This works best through the Pentilateral partnership between the Benelux, France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), whose secretariat is based in the Benelux and which the Netherlands will also chair next year.

1. A RESILIENT BENELUX SOCIETY



SECURITY, MIGRATION, JUDICIAL COOPERATION AND A RESILIENT SOCIETY

Against the background of continued geopolitical instability, resilience has become an indispensable quality. This is because a resilient society is one which is capable of anticipating tomorrow's challenges, adapting swiftly to change and preparing collectively for disasters and crises, enabling a rapid return to normal conditions.

Against this background, the Benelux aims to further strengthen ties and mutual support between the three countries, maintaining its position as a frontrunner in European developments. This is reflected in the full use of the opportunities offered by the Benelux Police Treaty, in a joint approach to migration flows and in enhanced cooperation in the fields of crisis prevention and management. The development of an integrated and administrative security approach in the fight against undermining crime fits into this framework. Combating fiscal and social fraud is another priority for our countries. The Benelux is working intensively in this area by developing legal instruments and cooperation mechanisms. Our cooperation is therefore aimed at providing practical answers and tangible solutions to the security challenges our countries are facing.

1.1. SECURITY AND JUSTICE

Benelux Police Treaty

To maximise the potential of the Benelux Police Treaty, work is underway on two additional implementation agreements (the "second tranche"). These focus on cross-border investigations and the direct consultation of each other's population and other government registers accessible to the police. The first tranche of implementation agreements have now been fully implemented and their use within police forces is being promoted. Negotiations on cross-border investigations and direct consultation of each other's population and other government registers will continue in 2026, with the latter issue to be addressed in stages. The aim is to submit the two additional implementation agreements to the relevant ministers for signature as soon as possible.

With regard to operational cooperation, the registration of cross-border actions will be improved, with a view to the evaluations that are regularly carried out. In addition, there will be an annual review of planned actions for which cross-border assistance is requested, so that the availability of the requested personnel and/or equipment can be verified in good time and to enable the competent services to obtain the necessary agreements.

Finally, targeted training on the Benelux Treaty will once again be provided for operational services in the border region and (joint) communication actions will be organised on cooperation between the police forces of the Benelux countries.

The Benelux countries continue to work on more coordinated and operational cooperation to enhance safety on transport routes (motorways, rail, waterways and aviation).

Initiatives are being taken to further develop and coordinate cross-border cooperation in the eight Benelux 'neighbourhood consultation' forums. 'Neighbourhood consultation' is a cooperation framework between local police chiefs in border regions. By sharing information on cross-border security issues more rapidly and taking joint action, the effectiveness of police cooperation across borders within the Benelux will be enhanced.

Police cooperation with partners outside the Benelux

The General Secretariat supports the *Hazeldonk co-operation*. This partnership between the Benelux countries and France focuses on dismantling criminal drug distribution networks. To this end, the four countries have developed a 2025-2028 operational Action Plan. Several joint actions are organised annually and information is shared in a structured way.

In cooperation with *North Rhine-Westphalia*, the Benelux countries will continue to develop joint projects to strengthen cooperation, for example between control rooms or to combat specific criminal phenomena such as cybercrime.

The General Secretariat will organise a round-table discussion with police representatives from *Hauts-de-France, Grand Est and the German Länder* bordering the Benelux (North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate and Lower Saxony) to benefit from good practices in the border regions and to explore new opportunities for cross-border cooperation.

Aviation passenger information

With the support of the General Secretariat, the Passenger Information Units (PIUs) in the three countries have developed a system of structured cooperation to collect and process air passenger data. The PIUs regularly exchange trend analyses, alerts and sensitive cases so that each partner can quickly access the right information. The countries are seeking to adopt common positions on the European PNR Directive, which regulates the use of passenger name record (PNR) data for the prevention and detection of terrorist offences and serious crime. In addition they are working on common positions regarding the API Regulation, which also requires carriers to transmit passenger data, with the same objective as the PNR Directive, but also for the purposes of border controls.

Human trafficking

There are increasing signs that asylum seekers are becoming victims of trafficking either en route or after arriving in the destination country. Young people and unaccompanied minors in the asylum chain are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation. They are targeted by human traffickers and recruiters who often operate in or around reception centres. This problem also occurs in the Benelux. Building further on 2025 activities, the Benelux countries will analyse and discuss national trends and developments around detection and prevention, and share any best practices with each other. If necessary, they will draw up strategic recommendations for prevention, detection and enforcement with the aim of better aligning the Benelux countries' response to these issues.



Pre-employment screening

In 2026, the European Criminal Records Information System for third-country nationals (ECRIS-TCN) will become operational. Together with Germany, the Benelux countries aim to maximise the opportunities for joint use of this new information system. In addition, efforts are under way to extend the exchange of data for *pre-employment screening* within Benelux to other screening purposes. The aim is to include other EU Member States and the UK.

1.2. MIGRATION AND BORDER MANAGEMENT

Asylum, migration and return: consolidation of activities

The Benelux countries wish to strengthen their cooperation on asylum and migration policy by continuing their *strategic exchanges* and sharing information about significant trends in their territories. The ambition is to align policies across countries and adopt common positions within the European context.

Joint *cooperation with third countries* on return remains a priority for our countries. In 2025, re-admission and return agreements were concluded with Belize, Kyrgyzstan and Suriname. These are linked to agreements on visa exemptions, which allow persons with diplomatic and/or service passports to travel visa-free between the countries. Active negotiations are in progress with a dozen other countries. Negotiations are based on the experience gained and a standard text which was drawn up in 2024. Priority will be given to the cases of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, India, Angola, Namibia, Oman and the Dominican Republic.

Smart controls

In combating illegal migration and cross-border crime, the Benelux countries wish to preserve the achievements of the Schengen Agreement to the maximum extent by hindering cross-border traffic as little as possible. Among other things, they are exploring how to develop and implement (possibly joint) information-driven efficient controls, which do not necessarily have to take place at the border. Such operations are based on phenomenon and risk analyses. To increase their effectiveness, all the relevant services, such as immigration services, must work together.

1.3. CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND CIVIL SECURITY

Resilience

The Benelux countries are continuing their strategic exchanges on a common approach to resilience, with a view to developing concrete projects that bring real Benelux added value. This approach is in line with European and NATO frameworks and emphasises the complementarity between our countries. A workshop will be organised to connect with developments within the EU and NATO.

The Benelux countries recognise the growing importance of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in crisis management, particularly for the protection of critical infrastructure, the continuity of essential services and the resilience of supply chains. A joint reflection will be initiated to identify best practices and assess whether they can be applied at Benelux level, in conjunction with NATO and EU frameworks.

Crisis centres

Further optimisation of the *cooperation and information exchange* between crisis centres in the Benelux countries and North Rhine-Westphalia is achieved through practical communication tests (telephone, e-mail and video-conferencing). This cooperation is complemented by topical analyses, for example in workshops and conferences, and the organisation of working visits for technical operators at the different crisis centres. Furthermore, efforts continue to promote the exchange of knowledge in the area of training and participation in each other's training programmes.

Coordination between the Benelux countries also takes place through the *Network of Directors-General of European Crisis Centres*. This network is primarily aimed at strengthening coordination between national crisis centres, sharing existing expertise and providing mutual support.



Mutual assistance in emergencies

The *mutual assistance agreements between the Benelux countries for emergencies and disasters* between the Benelux countries have recently been evaluated. In light of this evaluation, the Benelux countries will implement the technical agreement on the deployment of a liaison officer in the event of a crisis in a Benelux country as soon as possible.

At the same time, there is the ambition to strengthen collective preparedness by exploring whether integrating a Benelux component in international exercises is an option. Additionally, consideration is being given to further enhancing participation in national exercises by liaison officers from the other countries. The objective is to test the operational coordination and interoperability of national systems by integrating cross-border aspects into existing exercises and promoting mutual participation by observers.

Turning to the *cross-border use of ambulances*, Belgium and the Netherlands will discuss ways to adapt Benelux Decision M(2009)8, as amended by Decision M(2014)1, on urgent cross-border ambulance transport. This decision allows ambulances to be deployed to the other country in an emergency, but does not yet include provisions regarding the hospitals to which these ambulances can then take patients, which is felt to be a shortcoming.

1.4. JOINT ADMINISTRATIVE AND INTEGRATED APPROACH TO UNDERMINING CRIME

Within the Benelux a distinction is made between integrated and administrative approaches to undermining crime, without prejudice to the terminology used at the European level. For activities within the Benelux, the integrated approach refers to a broad and coherent method, making use of all available legal instruments from various authorities and relevant actors. In contrast, the administrative approach focuses specifically on the use of the tools of administrative law, such as screening, revocation of permits, closure of establishments, checks on authorisations and administrative sanctions.

Integrated approach

The countries are continuing to work on strengthening a comprehensive joint approach to combat undermining crime. The key to this approach lies in the cooperation of the various investigative and enforcement agencies (including the police, prosecutor's office, tax authorities, customs, local public administration, fire inspectorate, etc.) using each their own tools. This makes joint action more effective and efficient. In this way the countries are following up on the conclusions of the Benelux Conference on the integral and administrative approach to organised crime held in December 2025 in Luxembourg.

Administrative approach

Belgium and the Netherlands both have national legislation enabling administrative approaches to crime (the DIOB and Bibob legislation, respectively). To make optimal use of this, information from abroad is sometimes needed. To this end, the Benelux Police Treaty permits the provision of personal data and information, where not expressly precluded by domestic law in the requested Benelux country, in order to enable the competent public authorities to take administrative measures to prevent criminal offences and maintain public order and security. In accordance with their national legislation, Belgium and the Netherlands are taking the necessary internal measures to enable the application of the Police Treaty in practice, in particular for conducting security screenings and issuing security advice.

In Luxembourg, the options for an administrative approach are being explored. These changes and deliberations will make it possible to strengthen cooperation in the Benelux on the administrative approach in 2026.

Fireworks and explosives

Cooperation on fireworks is expanding into a co-ordinated approach to tackle the *illegality of explosives and related matters*, in close collaboration with Europol. The fireworks referred to in this context are better classified as explosives, given their explosive power. Raw materials (precursors), production, storage and trade of explosives have partly fallen into the hands of criminal networks. Explosive fireworks are increasingly being used in matters such as drug-related violence, safe-blowing and public order disturbances. The focus is therefore being expanded to tackle the entire chain of illegal fireworks.

The Benelux countries also continue to press for a proper *revision of the European Pyrotechnics Directive* under which the Benelux pyro-pass will be introduced at European level. In addition, discussions will address how national regulations on the storage and sale of fireworks can be aligned through Benelux legal instruments.

What is more, a consumer fireworks ban is due to come into effect in the Netherlands in 2026/2027. Developments in this area will be closely monitored, especially with regard to nuisance caused by *firework tourism in border areas*.

1.5. FIGHT AGAINST FISCAL AND SOCIAL FRAUD

Treaty on social fraud and decent working conditions

Following the signing of the Treaty to improve and strengthen cross-border cooperation in the areas of combating social fraud and social security irregularities, protection of health and safety at work and good working conditions, the countries will take the necessary steps to complete ratification.

The treaty establishes an appropriate legal framework to effectively combat cross-border fraud, unfair competition and social dumping. It lays down the rules for the organisation of joint or coordinated checks and inspections, cooperation on posting of workers, verification of social security affiliation, and cooperation in the collection and exchange of data. In addition, it contributes to promoting decent working conditions and the protection of workers' health and safety.

The treaty will be supplemented where necessary by implementing arrangements in the form of decisions of the Committee of Ministers, administrative settlements or cooperation agreements. To this end, the Netherlands and Belgium commit to signing the bilateral administrative arrangement referred to in Articles 13 and 17 of the treaty, which provides for further agreements on administrative checks. Furthermore, joint actions, working visits and workshops will be organised to exchange good practices, possibly with financial support from the European Labour Authority, subject to approval by the parties concerned.



Cross-border collection of social security contributions

A study day will be organised to improve cross-border collection of social security contributions within the Benelux. This event will provide an opportunity to assess ongoing work at European level and deepen cooperation between the Benelux partners on this issue, in particular by identifying possible pilot projects.

Tax authorities

Tax authorities will exchange information on opportunities to use optimised computer systems and statistical models to modernise working methods.

By monitoring financial flows, detecting tax irregularities and collaborating with justice, customs and police, tax authorities also play a key role in combating organised crime. They will therefore be involved in developing the integrated and administrative approach to crime at the Benelux level (see section 1.4).

To further support *administrative cooperation*, requests for information and administrative assistance, including recovery assistance, will be closely monitored. The three countries will also share their analysis of relevant judgments related to the Directive on Administrative Cooperation (DAC) by the Court of Justice and the General Court of the EU. Where possible, they will coordinate their actions on specific cases at European level.

Excise fraude

The Benelux countries are actively cooperating to combat excise fraud and new forms of fraud by using data analysis tools, in particular by comparing VAT data and data from the European *Excise Movement and Control System*. The countries also inform each other of political and legislative decisions concerning excise duty rates.

Value-added tax

The Benelux countries will jointly analyse the challenges posed by the analysis of data from the *Import One-Stop-Shop* system. The one-stop-shop system (OSS) for value-added tax aims to simplify the declaration obligations and payment of VAT on all distance sales of goods. The shared ambition is to identify technical bottlenecks and set the framework for a harmonised analysis.

In this context, the three Member States are also examining what actions can be taken to make best use of electronic data (obtained through e-invoicing and e-reporting) in the fight against VAT fraud.



1.6. FOOD SAFETY AND VETERINARY MATTERS

European coordination and visibility

In 2026, the Benelux will continue to provide the secretariat for the meetings of the heads of European food agencies. This strengthens coordination between food agencies and underlines the pioneering role of the Benelux countries within the EU.

Monitoring e-commerce

The food authorities of the three countries will continue their dialogue with major online trading platforms to actively encourage these companies to cooperate in complying with food safety rules. The aim is to prompt online platforms to take action in the event of non-compliance.

Strengthening cooperation between laboratories, control and artificial intelligence

Given the growing number of laws and regulations, the volume and complexity of analyses that control laboratories have to perform are increasing. The ambition is to strengthen *laboratory cooperation* by promoting synergies and knowledge transfer between the official control laboratories and national reference laboratories of the three countries.

National audit systems in the three countries will launch an exchange of information regarding the application of EU agri-food chain legislation. The aim is to assess whether the three countries can support each other in carrying out audits, controls and enforcement.

The Benelux countries will strengthen their cooperation to promote and accelerate the use of *artificial intelligence* as a tool in food controls, with a view to protecting consumer health.

Crisis preparedness and resilience

Food safety agencies in the Benelux countries will develop a scenario for a crisis management exercise on food from a health perspective. This will define the timeline, subject and nature of the crisis.

Food contact materials

The work will focus on developing necessary guidelines for the implementation of the Benelux Decision on lead and cadmium in ceramics (M(2024)5). This process must be completed by mid-2026. Thereafter, new themes for cooperation will be identified.

Animal nutrition and health

Technical consultations are being organised between experts from the Benelux and Germany on the interpretation of European regulations on animal nutrition, with a view to adopting joint positions in the European Commission technical groups and developing aligned policies between neighbouring countries.

Cooperation on the *protection of animal health* will be continued and strengthened, including through a strategic meeting of the chief veterinary officers of the three Benelux countries with France and Germany.



2. A ROBUST BENELUX ECONOMY



ECONOMIC INTEGRATION, SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

By removing unjustified barriers and cooperating on trade, energy, social security and technology, the Benelux ensures a robust economy that offers opportunities for businesses and citizens, and stimulates innovation and sustainability. The Benelux is committed to more digital, sustainable and competitive industries, providing the necessary preconditions for supporting companies in the climate transition. Cooperation on the single market is a core theme for the Benelux, both within the Benelux and in the European context. Through strategic consultations on mobility, aviation, internal market, digitalisation and with “SME-Envoys”, efforts are being made both to preserve existing economic structures and prosperity and to facilitate economic transitions in the Benelux. While the EU primarily seeks to promote macro-economic transition, notably through the Letta and Draghi reports, the Benelux complements this approach by focusing on facilitating small and medium-sized enterprises. Synergies between competitiveness and the reduction of administrative burdens form the common thread in achieving this objective. The Benelux is also open to encouraging SME entrepreneurship in the defence industry.

Furthermore, a common positioning of the Benelux countries on topics such as the development of the Benelux and the European Single Market adds value, and some innovative projects can be proactively brought to the fore. Benelux initiatives in the field of education, such as the Treaty on the automatic recognition of qualifications and the recognition of professional qualifications, are also important in this context. The digital and green transitions play a key role in these Benelux activities.

2.1. LABOUR MOBILITY AND RECOGNITION OF DIPLOMAS AND SKILLS

Barriers to cross-border teleworking

The workforce within the Benelux includes 300,000 to 350,000 cross-border workers, amounting to 15-20% of the total number of cross-border workers in the EU. It is therefore important to reduce obstacles to cross-border telework (or hybrid work) wherever possible. This creates flexibility and freedom for companies to attract talent across borders and enables employees to better develop their skills. The countries have reached agreements among themselves and with neighbouring countries, but these often diverge and facilitate teleworking only to a limited extent. A fiscal working group will be set up and a roundtable organised to explore the arrangements that could improve the situation for cross-border workers, without prejudice to existing bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries.

Automatic recognition of diplomas

The multilateral Treaty on automatic recognition of higher education qualifications guarantees that a diploma awarded in one of the Benelux or Baltic countries is automatically recognised by the other signatory countries. The Benelux Union continues its efforts to promote this treaty and explore the accession of new states, including Poland, whose application to join the treaty has now been accepted by all parties. In anticipation of Poland's accession in 2026, a conference will be organised for higher education institutions in the signatory countries.

The Benelux countries will continue to explore how the Treaty and the Benelux Decisions on automatic recognition (M(2015)3 and M(2018)1) could inspire the simplification of recognition of certain secondary education qualifications giving access to higher education. In this context, the Benelux countries will continue their efforts to streamline administrative procedures.

Automatic recognition of professional qualifications

Automatic recognition of professional qualifications remains a key challenge for cross-border mobility. The Benelux Union will continue its work in this area through two different approaches.

The *horizontal approach* is based on European legislation and Directive 2005/36. This approach aims to facilitate the recognition of professional qualifications for regulated professions and speed up recognition procedures.

The *vertical approach* focuses on strategic occupations that are not necessarily regulated, where there is a labour shortage, or on sectors regarded as “sectors of the future”. This particularly concerns sectors related to the green and digital transitions. Activities will focus on improving access to information, transparency of qualifications and developing joint training programmes. In this context, a conference is being organised for vocational education students in the Benelux, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hauts-de-France regions. Support is also provided for the development of micro-certification for digital archiving (see § 2.3) and for new skills frameworks related to the hydrogen economy (see § 3.2).



Information for cross-border workers

The General Secretariat will modernise its information portal and brochures for frontier workers in cooperation with partners in the Benelux and North Rhine-Westphalia and the Grande Région, drawing on the EURES network. The focus is on revising and simplifying the existing brochures and updating and technically modernising the portal. Information is also being prepared for cross-border workers who commute across the French border.

2.2. ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND CROSS-BORDER BARRIERS

Strengthening the single market

Strengthening the single market remains a priority for the Benelux countries and is an important pillar within the Benelux multi-annual work programme for 2025-2028. Following the publication of the Single Market Strategy in May 2025, the European Commission and EU Member States have taken steps to address the 10 key bottlenecks identified by European stakeholders. A study will explore how far Benelux cooperation can address certain obstacles that have been identified.

The Benelux countries are convinced that the single market is a fundamental pillar of competitiveness and should be further deepened. They support European efforts for (administrative) simplification. They will continue their strategic consultations to promote a more digital, sustainable and resilient single market.

SME agenda

Building on the Benelux SME stakeholder meetings and the priorities identified in the areas of administrative burden reduction, digital identity, business transfer, European reporting obligations (CSRD and CSDDD directives) and public procurement, structural exchanges will take place between ‘SME-Envoys’ and SME organisations. European legislation aims to achieve coordinated transposition and the definition of common Benelux positions. For example, inspiration could be drawn from the idea of a European ‘28th regime’, as proposed in the Letta report.

As part of the European priority of simplifying administrative procedures, and with a shared political will in the Benelux countries to make life easier for SMEs, the Benelux will organise a “peer review” workshop on administrative burden reduction for SMEs and SME-friendly provisions. A new working group will be established to compare the intentions and actions of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in this area, identify good practices and determine the most effective common approaches. The aim is to work out harmonised solutions that make life easier for SMEs and strengthen economic competitiveness.

Key Performance Indicators for the internal market

The Benelux countries are working on practical suggestions for improved Key Performance Indicators in the annual internal market and competitiveness report prepared by the European Commission. KPIs should better reflect the obstacles experienced by entrepreneurs and citizens on a daily basis. In the first quarter of 2026, a workshop will be organised to develop these practical suggestions from a technical perspective.

Territorial supply constraints

The 2025 European Single Market Strategy defines territorial supply constraints as one of the “terrible ten” barriers to the single market. The Benelux countries will call for this clear recognition of the problem to lead to concrete action by the European Commission, preferably with legislative action to counter unauthorised territorial supply constraints. Any legislative initiatives must be supported by a solid impact analysis and competitiveness test, with the aim of explicitly cooperating with other EU Member States.

E-commerce and fair competition

The European Union and the Benelux countries are facing a massive influx of low-value e-commerce parcels ($\leq \text{€}150$), mainly originating from countries outside the EU. Safe and sustainable e-commerce is a priority for both the EU and the Benelux countries. Given the challenges posed by e-commerce, coordinated consultations would be a useful way of reaching agreement on effective measures against unfair practices, strengthening controls, improving cooperation between authorities and removing non-compliant products from the market more swiftly. A handling fee, as proposed in the revised EU Customs Code, could be a possible solution. The Benelux countries will also explore how to act jointly in the revision of the EU New Legislative Framework and the Market Surveillance Regulation which will be proposed in 2026.

Public tenders

In light of the strategic challenges facing the European Union and the Benelux countries, public procurement acts as a lever for competitiveness, economic resilience, innovation and environmental and digital transition. It also serves as an instrument for growth and to support the development of economic sovereignty. The Benelux countries aim to improve the exchange of good practices and data to modernise, simplify and coordinate procedures, and to promote the use of qualitative and strategic non-price criteria. Promoting the participation of Benelux companies, especially SMEs, in cross-border public tenders is a priority. To this end, it will be explored how public procurement practices in the Benelux countries can be better aligned to achieve more coordinated, mutually recognised or comparable procedures and practices. This will include examining how data exchange on grounds for exclusion can take place in Benelux in the case of cross-border tenders. A study day on public procurement will be organised, and, given the revision of the European public procurement directives, efforts will be made to reach common positions. The study day will address issues including grounds for exclusion and the accessibility of cross-border public procurement for SMEs.

Encouraging cooperation in the defence industry and innovation

The Benelux countries will jointly organise a ‘Benelux defence industry day’, with the participation of the business community. From an economic and industrial perspective, we will also explore where cooperation across the Benelux can deliver added value, particularly for SMEs.

2.3. DIGITAL AUTONOMY AND INNOVATION

Digital sovereignty and free movement of data

In light of the geopolitical context and of recent European regulations such as the Data Governance Act (EU 2020/0340), and on the basis of our shared values, the Benelux countries will start to explore a common definition of digital sovereignty. In addition, national experts will be brought together to discuss the free flow of data between research centres in the Benelux region. As recently discussed by the three Benelux data bodies (LNDS (LU), ICTU (NL), GDA (BE)), they will focus on data related to health, cross-border mobility, integration of job-seekers and labour shortages, in accordance with the respective national rules.

Artificial intelligence

In the field of artificial intelligence (AI), the focus is on cooperation around *AI factories and antennas*. These are ecosystems that foster innovation, collaboration and development in the field of AI. Knowledge exchanges between the governments and regions involved will facilitate cooperation and coordination between different initiatives in the Benelux.

Efforts will also focus on exchanging information on *algorithmic transparency*—that is, mapping and managing algorithms used by public authorities, and, where necessary, establishing arrangements at Benelux level. This makes use of existing national initiatives, such as the Dutch Algorithm Register, which consolidates all the algorithms used by public organisations.



Online identity and business wallets

Cooperation in the field of online identity and trust services focuses on the development of ‘business wallets’ under the European Digital Identity initiative (2025/0358). The Benelux aims to establish a pilot project centred on these business wallets. A ‘business wallet’ is a digital service that enables companies to share their documents and data, and which is recognised across all EU Member States. Data for a wallet only needs to be provided once. These wallets facilitate cross-border business in a digital context, leading to a reduction in administrative burdens and the enhancement of the digital economy, particularly for SMEs.

Digital inclusion

During the interdisciplinary forum on digital inclusion in November 2025, the Benelux countries confirmed that digital inclusion remains a priority. They will strengthen their cooperation and actively take initiatives that promote digital inclusion.

E-invoicing

The European Directive (2014/55/EU) regulates e-invoicing in business-to-government relations. The Benelux countries aim to promote the opportunities provided by the Directive, in particular for cross-border invoicing. To this end, they issued a recommendation (M(2024)1) in 2024 and organised a study day in 2025. To follow up on the study day findings, an investigation will explore whether there are opportunities in the Benelux to add sector-related fields, for example in construction and logistics, to the *Pan-European Public Procurement Online* e-invoicing network (Peppol). Depending on progress, a second e-invoicing study day will be organised in late 2026.

Interoperability

The Interoperable Europe Act (2024/903) aims to establish a new cooperation framework for public services in the EU to ensure seamless delivery of public services across territorial, sectoral and organisational boundaries. The regulation simultaneously guarantees sovereignty at all levels of government.

The European Commission is currently drafting proposals for technical implementation. Member States have the opportunity to present their own proposals. The Benelux countries will make a start on this jointly with other EU Member States.

Digital archiving

Digitisation of archives improves and facilitates access. This must be properly structured from a legal point of view. The legal analysis of this digitalisation, started in 2025, will be completed and the recommendations made by the Benelux will be transposed in the three countries in an harmonised manner. In order to provide archivists with uniform training and give young archivists the same knowledge framework, the Benelux is developing agreements on micro-certification for digital archiving. This fits within the broader cooperation on professional qualifications (see §2.1).



2.4. SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY AND RESILIENT LOGISTICS CHAINS

Alternative fuels and electromobility

With a view to achieving carbon neutrality in the transport sector (see also below: road freight transport) and to ensure the cross-border connectivity necessary for this, the Benelux countries are discussing the revision of the European regulation on alternative fuels infrastructure and on the European ban on the sale of cars with fossil-fuel engines, not least in light of the impact of potential revisions on purchasing power, competitiveness and employment. The states are seeking common positions in this regard.

Benelux IDRO service

Since 2020, the joint Benelux ID Registration Organisation (IDRO) has provided a practical basis for promoting the cross-border rollout of charging infrastructure. Based on an analysis of the use of existing identification codes and the relationship between IDRO and national IDRO entities, improvements to the operation of the Benelux IDRO are being implemented and shared with neighbouring countries and other EU Member States.

Railways and (cross-border) ticketing

The countries and regions of the Benelux and North Rhine-Westphalia share a strong desire to push for a *modal shift* towards rail transport for both passengers and freight. Cross-border rail traffic between the Benelux countries and capitals is of great importance. The Benelux will continue to focus its activities on *pricing & ticketing*. The successful rollout of an integrated ticketing system (Mobility as a Service, MaaS) for the three-country train in the Dutch South Limburg and German North Rhine-Westphalia region continues to serve as an example for other border regions in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Germany. Attention will also be paid to missing links and interconnection in the cross-border rail network, as well as the expansion to urban networks.

Sustainable aviation

The follow-up to the Benelux Recommendation on sustainable aviation will continue. Closer cooperation is sought with other (regional) partners, such as the Nordic Council, to act jointly in making aviation within Europe more sustainable. Furthermore, the Benelux is exploring how strengthened cooperation can help achieve the European targets for Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF). Cooperation focuses on topics such as the ReFuelEU evaluation in 2026/2027, the broader European financing issues surrounding SAF, and the exchange of experiences and insights on SAF policies and roadmaps. A working visit to local innovative market players will be organised as part of this.

Drones

The Benelux countries will compare their national procedures for licensing cross-border operations. They are also exploring possible ways of simplifying these operations within the Benelux through mutual recognition of flight licences. They will also raise awareness of this issue at EU level, for example by organising a conference.



Autonomous transport

Issues around autonomous transport and autonomous driving do not stop at borders. The Benelux countries are intensively involved in this forward-looking topic and are exploring it from various perspectives, for example from operational and legal angles. The Benelux brings together the right parties to share knowledge, inspire and, where desired, to facilitate cross-border pilots using the Benelux legal toolkit. The focus of Benelux cooperation will be on automated road transport.

Cycling policy

Cooperation focuses on the cross-border harmonisation of cycling infrastructure with special attention to interconnection and safety. Work is under way, for example, to harmonise signage and road markings, and to improve the coordination of cross-border cycling routes. In addition, the Benelux declaration on bicycle theft prevention is being implemented by exploring how we can harmonise the different national bicycle registration databases.



Light Electric Vehicles

The Benelux Union will actively follow up on jointly agreed action points regarding the road safety of Light Electric Vehicles (LEVs), such as bicycles, cargo bikes, and scooters. With a view to the harmonised and safe deployment of LEVs, the three countries will explore the possibility of a joint Benelux framework for technical LEV requirements.

Road freight transport

Where possible, the Benelux takes a pioneering role and supports innovations within the transport sector. A key focus is on maintaining the consistent application of current Benelux regulations, particularly in the context of *the revision of the European Weights and Measures Directive*. Attention continues to be paid to the use of Long Heavy Vehicles (LHVs) on the Benelux territory, focusing in particular on the mutual recognition of driver training courses and the potential admission of LHVs to Luxembourg.

In 2026, the Netherlands will introduce a road toll for goods transport. This will mean the end of the Eurovignette. Belgium has already had such a levy for nearly a decade. Within the Benelux countries, extra attention will be paid to the exchange of information between the parties involved in the experience in Belgium. In addition, the trend towards zero-emission trucks and its consequences will be discussed. This concerns trucks powered by batteries or hydrogen.

In 2025 the long-standing Benelux pilot for the *digital consignment note* was extended until mid-2027, in order to ensure a seamless transition to the European eFTI Regulation (electronic Freight Transport Information) once its relevant provisions become applicable. In practice, the Benelux pilot will therefore continue to exist until the eFTI Regulation has entered into full force.

Hyperloop

On the basis of the “*Hyperloop in Benelux*” study, cooperation will be continued. A working visit to the European Hyperloop Development Centre will be organised and there will be an exchange on the European Commission’s potential legislative initiatives in this regard.

The Treaty of Liège - Road inspection services

In the course of implementing the Treaty of Liège, a further assessment will be conducted into the costs and benefits associated with the potential practical application of Chapter IV of the Treaty, which governs cross-border action and mutual assistance during joint road inspection controls.

These joint road inspection controls take place regularly, and the Benelux countries will continue to support them.

Work is also under way on the potential application of Article 10 of the Treaty, which allows for implementing agreements regarding issues such as the precise tasks assigned to inspecting officers participating in cross-border operations, for instance for the purpose of issuing fines.

Multimodal hubs

The new European Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Regulation 2024/1679 requires Member States to conduct a study of the available transshipment capacity of multimodal freight terminals within their respective territories. This will help determine whether there is remaining capacity to shift traffic flows, primarily from road transport to other, more sustainable modes of transport, or whether additional capacity needs to be created. Given the interconnectedness of freight terminals, ports and industry within the Benelux, and also for efficiency reasons, we are investigating how the Benelux countries can cooperate in these capacity studies.

Cross-border military mobility

Due to the current geopolitical situation, the importance of military mobility is increasing significantly. Divergent regulations between countries in this regard can hinder cross-border mobility. In addition to existing cooperation in various forums such as the EU and NATO, the role and contribution of the Benelux countries in this respect can be further explored by bringing together topical experts and ministers from the three countries.

European Disability Card

The Benelux countries and regions are committed to the swift and coordinated implementation of European Directive EU 2024/2841 establishing the European Disability Card and the European Parking Card for persons with disabilities. The objective is to make the cards operational within their territory quickly, in both physical and digital formats, and to ensure broad recognition to ensure their effectiveness and acceptance.

3. A GREEN BENELUX



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPEMENT AND GREEN TRANSITION

The Benelux region continues to work towards the transition to an economy that is as far as possible circular, in which, among other things, the use and production of resources and agriculture are future-proof. An economy in which citizens benefit from a healthy living environment and in which as much energy as possible is generated by renewable technologies.

In this context, the Benelux Union acts as a hub for regional energy cooperation, both between the Benelux countries themselves and with neighbouring regions. Its General Secretariat provides the secretariat for the Pentalateral Energy Forum. The energy transition must go hand in hand with greater resilience and economic feasibility. Existing structures will be fully mobilised for this purpose in the coming year.

Working with neighbouring regions, we will examine the infrastructure needed to provide adequate and effective capacity to the whole of society. In addition, there is coordination with the members of the Penta consultations on the development of the EU internal energy market, and the resilience of our energy supply and infrastructure will be addressed in all consultations. The Benelux strategic consultations on energy and the Pentalateral and North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) provide significant guidance for the preparation of ministerial meetings. In 2026, these partnerships will continue to be actively supported by the General Secretariat in the implementation of their respective work plans.

3.1. ENERGY AND SECURITY OF SUPPLY

Resilience of energy supply

Energy is increasingly prominent in national security strategies and resilience plans. Measures to increase the resilience of the economy, the population, digital and other infrastructure require a comprehensive vision of the strategic importance of energy. An exchange of best practices on baseline operational requirements for energy supplies will be used as a basis for concrete recommendations on priorities, impact on neighbouring countries, and cooperation. The General Secretariat will provide a platform for this purpose.

Risk preparedness and reliability of electricity supply

The Benelux countries are continuing to cooperate under EU Regulation 2019/941 on risk preparedness in the electricity sector. For the Penta collaboration, they aim to embed the protocols for communication in the event of an imminent electricity crisis, to operationalise potential regional measures for mutual assistance, and to organise a joint Pentex dilemma session with neighbouring countries.

Along with the other Penta countries (Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland), the Benelux countries are committed to following the recommendations of the Penta study on *reliable capacity*. The study maps out the potential benefits of cooperation between Western European countries for both determining the electricity supply required, and implementing capacity mechanisms to ensure that supply.



Regional positioning vis-à-vis the EU energy market and infrastructure

Together with the Penta countries, the Benelux countries wish to contribute to EU proposals for an improved electricity market design and grid package. They intend to explore whether and how countries can lead from a regional perspective. Priority goals include linking both short-term flexibility markets and long-term electricity markets, as well as testing new financing models for electricity infrastructure.

Security of gas supply

Geopolitical tensions affect the price and security of supply of natural gas. Security of supply is essential for a well-functioning gas market. To this end, since 2004 the Gas platform hosted by the Benelux has contributed to the European regulatory framework for security of gas and electricity supply and aims to cooperate on its scheduled revision. In addition, the Platform will continue to monitor the conversion from low-calorific to high-calorific gas and will discuss developments in the decarbonisation of the gas network. The phasing out of Russian gas in the context of REPowerEU will also continue to be followed closely.



3.2. WIND ENERGY, HYDROGEN AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Hydrogen

The Benelux countries will consult hydrogen network operators on progress in developing cross-border infrastructure and interconnections. The future regulatory framework for hydrogen terminals will also be discussed and shared with the neighbouring regions of Hauts-de-France and North Rhine-Westphalia.

Within the Pentalateral Energy Forum, the Benelux countries and their neighbouring partners will explore mechanisms to limit the financial risks associated with infrastructure investments in order to mitigate high network tariffs during the rollout phase for hydrogen. Under the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), the countries will further examine the potential for renewable hydrogen production at sea.

Wind energy

Together with the European Commission and the other countries participating in the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), the Benelux is committed to establishing a framework for the large-scale development of offshore wind energy. Cooperation with the United Kingdom will continue in line with the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2022. The Benelux General Secretariat will continue to act as a meeting platform for electricity network operators, grouped under the Offshore TSO Cooperation (OTC), and the participating countries. It facilitates discussions on developing a regionally aligned portfolio that includes both radial wind farms and cross-border projects connecting multiple countries. These efforts take account of spatial, financial, and environmental constraints. In addition to a more regionally integrated planning approach, further work will be carried out on complementary financing instruments and innovative ways to share costs and benefits.

CO₂

It is essential to assess the need for CO₂ infrastructure within the Benelux. This partly depends on the volume of CO₂ to be captured and on the sites designated for its storage and utilisation in northwest Europe. The European Commission is preparing a regulatory package aimed at developing European

CO₂ infrastructure and the related market structure. This package is expected in mid-2026 and will provide frameworks for cross-border CO₂ transport. Cooperation between the Benelux countries is desirable for cross-border CCS projects that benefit from mutual coordination.

3.3. AGRICULTURE AND NATURE CONSERVATION



Agriculture

In 2026, the Benelux countries will further align and expand their activities on agriculture. Joint priorities include food security, generational renewal, innovation, digitalisation, future-proofing, and administrative simplification. This also includes the economic viability of the agricultural sector, with a view to making it forward-looking and resilient. These themes will be developed further and monitored at expert level through the strategic consultation forum. The General Secretariat will organise an agriculture discussion day to achieve policy alignment and closer cooperation.

Dialogue will also be sought with neighbouring regions, particularly with North Rhine-Westphalia and Hauts-de-France. A joint approach will strengthen the consistent and unified voice of the Benelux within the broader European agricultural policy framework. The aim is to develop common positions.

Invasive species

Cooperation will focus on jointly tackling animal exotics such as the raccoon, muskrat and coyp, along with action plans for the unintentional introduction of non-EU-listed species. A joint application for EU technical support will be prepared for cross-border raccoon management. In addition, a discussion day will be organised to address the action plans.

Air quality

The Benelux countries will continue to work together to improve air quality, building on the political declaration of late 2021, while maintaining dialogue with North Rhine-Westphalia and Hauts-de-France. They are also working on the national implementation of the revised *EU Air Quality Directive (Directive 2024/2881)*, with joint actions and knowledge-sharing at Benelux level to contribute to the efficient application of the directive.

In collaboration with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the Benelux countries have undertaken to introduce the *UN standards for automotive fuels* for exports to middle and low-income countries to improve local air quality and public health. The Benelux will actively encourage European countries and the European institutions to adopt a similar commitment in line with the recommendation (M(2024)4). The Benelux countries' inspectorates will coordinate their enforcement activities.

Belgian and Dutch seaports serve as key hubs for bunkering marine fuel oil for seagoing vessels. The quality of this *bunker fuel oil* is not always adequate. Low-quality fuel oil can cause problems for the engine, crew and the environment. The three countries exchange information on complaints and their follow-up, and on national bunker fuel oil legislation.

3.4. CIRCULAR ECONOMY - WASTE, RESOURCE REUSE AND INNOVATION

Circular economy and raw materials

The Benelux Union aims to contribute to an integrated European market for circular products and secondary raw materials. This involves exploring innovative digital solutions and harmonised frameworks to strengthen the circular economy. Such measures should promote reuse, preserve valuable materials and facilitate cross-border cooperation. However, care should be taken to ensure that the regulations on circular criteria are not made more complex. In preparation for the European Circular Economy Act, expected at the end of 2026, the Benelux countries will exchange views on joint priorities. The following topics have been proposed as priorities for discussion: the current status of the introduction of deposit-refund schemes; improving the textile value chain; the management of critical primary raw materials; data management for the implementation of a circular economy; and, finally, the circular economy in the construction sector and its spatial impact (land use requirements). In order to contribute to the development of European end-of-waste criteria, the Benelux countries would also like to explore whether joint *end-of-waste criteria* can provide clarity as to when waste can be reused as a raw material.

The European 'End-of-Life Vehicles' Regulation is expected to be adopted in 2026. The Benelux countries aim to achieve common or at least coordinated implementation of this regulation.

Cleantech as a sustainable growth sector

Cleantech will be a spearhead for Benelux cooperation as part of its commitment to a sustainable, innovative and resilient economy. The countries will explore how the *enabling conditions for cleantech* can be improved through cross-border cooperation and innovative regulation.

Technologies for renewable energy, circular materials, ecodesign, the bioeconomy and smart grids are key aspects here. Areas of focus may include new techniques for CO₂ capture, novel transport modes such as the Hyperloop (see §2.4), and data-driven optimisation of energy systems. A Cleantech day will be held in 2026, focusing on knowledge sharing, policy alignment and leveraging Cleantech as an engine for sustainable growth.



3.5. RESILIENCE TO NATURAL DISASTERS AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Water agenda

The Benelux Water Agenda follows up and implements the 2024 European ‘Roadmap for Better Transnational Water Security’. Benelux cooperation on the water agenda will be expanded to include North Rhine-Westphalia and the water management body Water en Ruimte Limburg (WRL) in 2026. In 2026, *post-flood reconstruction* will take centre stage through the JCAR ATRACE knowledge programme, and a workshop will be organised in the first half of 2026. This will share practical experiences from across Europe on recovery after a flood disaster and how authorities can prepare to recover faster and better. It will deliver EU-wide recommendations and best practices, complemented by AI analyses of existing and planned measures and their potential impacts.

Scheldt Council

The General Secretariat chairs the stakeholders’ consultation body, the Scheldt Council, within the Flemish-Dutch Scheldt Commission (VNSC), and provides its secretariat. Support for the Scheldt Council will be continued. As the official advisory body to the VNSC, the Council will address issues such as the Agenda for the Future, of which the Long-Term Vision Review 2030 is part. It will deliver an opinion to the VNSC on this in 2026.

Meuse tripartite consultation

Effective cross-border river management starts with regular consultations with neighbouring countries and partners. The General Secretariat will once again facilitate the Meuse tri-partite consultation to ensure optimal information exchange between the Dutch, Flemish and Walloon managers of the Meuse River. Where desired, it will also support the creation of legal agreements between the river basin authorities.

Ports and river consultations

Besides Europe’s two largest ports, the Benelux and neighbouring regions also host a number of smaller, often specialised ports such as Amsterdam, Dunkirk, North Sea Port (Ghent-Terneuzen and Vlissingen), Liege and Eemshaven. These ports play an important individual and collective role in the economy, trade, industry and mobility in the Benelux region. The Benelux will organise a round-table discussion to explore the added value of port cooperation. Ties with river consultative bodies, such as the International Scheldt Commission and the International Meuse Commission, will be further strengthened, and these will be involved in water-related cooperation in the Benelux where necessary.

Climate adaptation

The Benelux countries are increasingly facing extreme weather conditions due to climate disruption. In the run-up to the new EU climate adaptation legislation in 2026, they will continue to cooperate on resilience policies, including “just resilience” and health aspects. There will be exchanges in the Benelux on joint priorities, cross-border adaptation plans, risk analyses, best practices and opportunities to harmonise climate risk analyses, projections and monitoring.



4. BENELUX+ AND BEYOND



COOPERATION WITH BENELUX BORDER REGIONS, BETWEEN BENELUX BORDER REGIONS AND BEYOND

Benelux cooperation takes place in a European context and in relation to its neighbours, mainly its border regions. The Benelux Union continues to actively invest in this cooperation with neighbouring regions and the neighbouring countries themselves, and will further strengthen ties with other regional partners in Europe.

COOPERATION WITH BORDER REGIONS OF THE NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

The Benelux Union and **North Rhine-Westphalia** share a privileged partnership based on political declarations dating from 2008 and 2019. This partnership has developed into close cooperation based on proximity, trust and common interests. This is evident, for example, in the master's programme in Benelux Studies at the University of Paderborn launched in 2024, in which the Secretariat is actively involved through guest lectures and internships. Cooperation with North Rhine-Westphalia will be further deepened and expanded, exploring ways to involve the region at a more strategic level in future Benelux cooperation. In 2026, the key themes will remain energy, mobility, crisis management, labour market, water management and sustainability.

In terms of *sustainability, energy and mobility*, the focus will be on low-carbon hydrogen (see §3.2), sustainable mobility solutions (such as the MaaS project), cycling policy and cooperation on electric aviation (see §2.4). Other priorities include reducing cross-border air pollution and a joint approach to the circular economy (see sections 3.3 and 3.4). *Economic cooperation* focuses on the cross-border labour market, in particular through recognition of professional qualifications and in the area of digital information portals for cross-border commuters (see §2.1) and for the retail trade.

Police and judicial cooperation will continue to focus on operational aspects such as dispatch protocols and mutual support during operations (see §1.1).

North Rhine-Westphalia will also participate in regular exchanges between Benelux crisis centres and in the improvement of operational processes in the event of cross-border incidents (see §1.3). Existing cooperation on food safety, hunting, animal nutrition and invasive species will be continued (see sections 1.6 and 3.3).

A flagship cooperation project between the Benelux border regions and North Rhine-Westphalia is the scientific Einstein Telescope project. The importance of this project was confirmed by the three prime ministers in the Joint Declaration of the Benelux Summit of 10 September 2025. The General Secretariat will monitor preparations for the joint candidacy that will be presented by the Netherlands, Belgium and North Rhine-Westphalia and will facilitate the project as appropriate.

The May 2025 action plan between **Hauts-de-France** and the Benelux Union continues to be implemented. It provides a framework for cooperation around priority themes, such as energy transition (see sections 3.1 and 3.2), management of natural resources and territories (see sections 3.3 and 3.5), transport and mobility (see section 2.4), and education, skills and labour and student mobility (see section 2.1). In the field of energy transition, cooperation will focus on the interconnection of cross-border low-carbon hydrogen infrastructure and on carbon capture and storage. The Benelux Union also hopes to initiate a dialogue with Hauts-de-France on agriculture. In the field of mobility, cooperation with the region will continue, in particular within working groups dedicated to MaaS (Mobility as a Service), sustainable aviation, and climate adaptation.

Hauts-de-France will be invited to attend the transport and mobility steering group as an observer. Work on the recognition of professional qualifications (vertical approach) will also continue and an exchange of good practices will bring together Benelux+ vocational education institutions. We are also exploring the possible integration of the region into the new Benelux platform for cross-border work 'Startpunt grensarbeid' (see §2.1). Finally, the dialogue on air quality will be strengthened ahead of a possible revision of the Benelux Political Declaration signed in November 2021.

To achieve these objectives, regular consultations will be held at technical and official level. The Benelux countries will actively seek and encourage the participation of Hauts-de-France representatives in consultations. To ensure effective cooperation, an annual high level policy consultation will take place between the Benelux and Hauts-de-France, as provided for in the action plan.

The Benelux countries will further develop cooperation with the **Grande Région**. This includes Luxembourg, Wallonia, the French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium, and the Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland and Lorraine (the French Grand Est region). In addition, the Grande Région presidency for the period 2025-2028 will be held by a Benelux region or country. The Benelux Union confirms its willingness to include representatives from the constituent parts of the Grande Région in its working groups on jointly agreed topics for cooperation in our mutual interest. Key priorities will include mobility (see section 2.4), cross-border work (see section 2.1), biodiversity, air quality (see section 3.3) and the industrial, digital and energy transition (see sections 2.3 and 3.1).

Efforts are also being made to strengthen ties with Lower Saxony. This German federal state is the missing link in cooperation with the border regions of neighbouring countries.

COOPERATION BETWEEN BENELUX BORDER REGIONS

There are also collaborative projects between the border regions of the Benelux countries themselves. These cover a multitude of topics and often take place through the European Interreg programme. The General Secretariat recognises the importance of these projects and monitors their development. These projects may be complementary to Benelux cooperation. For example, the General Secretariat works with Interreg's Coordination Point for Border Obstacles Flanders-Netherlands, and the Interreg ETpathfinder Smart Skills Lab project is associated with the Einstein Telescope project (see above). In addition, since 2025 the Benelux has been affiliated with observer status to the Arlon-Luxembourg cycle path and REMOCOSAN projects under Interreg's Grande Région programme.

The Benelux Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (BGTC) was established in 2014 to facilitate cross-border interterritorial cooperation within the Benelux. It enables governments and organisations at all levels to create sustainable cross-border legal structures. In addition to existing BGTC structures, such as the "BGTS Baarle", new projects are being prepared and a new manual for this tool will be drafted. This will be actively promoted in the border regions.

The European *BRIDGEforEU-Regulation* introduces a new procedural framework that allows Member States to resolve cross-border bottlenecks more quickly and systematically. EU Member States are asked to establish national coordination points, whereby it is possible to set up a single coordination point serving several countries. We are investigating whether the Benelux countries can collaborate on this.

The General Secretariat will also participate in the *Netherlands-North Rhine-Westphalia coordination consultation* and the *Netherlands-Flanders administrative border region consultation*.

CONTACTS WITH OTHER EUROPEAN REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Contacts with the **Nordic Council of Ministers** will continue to explore opportunities for cooperation and put them into practice where appropriate. These discussions will cover sustainable aviation (see §2.4) and explore possibilities for staff exchanges between the two organisations.

To increase the number of countries participating in the multilateral Treaty on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications (see §2.1), the Benelux countries will work with the **Baltic states** to raise awareness of the treaty. Discussions will be held with both the Baltic States and the Nordic Council on the topic of knowledge exchange to promote resilience (see section 1.3).



MISSION, VISION, VALUES OF THE BENELUX GENERAL SECRETARIAT

MISSION:

We work to strengthen the internal market, promote a sustainable future and secure a safer society by implementing projects with visible and tangible added value for Benelux citizens, businesses and public institutions.

VISION:

The Secretariat-General is the centrepiece of cooperation within the Benelux Union. The Benelux Union is a pioneer in cross-border cooperation, a model for regional integration and a testing ground for European cooperation, both as a precursor to European policy and as a complement to it.

VALUES:

We are impartial and multilingual, and we work with commitment, a focus on results, professionalism, integrity and team spirit.

