

POPULATION DENSITY BY COMMUNE

The principal map (scale 1 : 500 000) shows the distribution of population densities, calculated at the commune level at the date of the last census (31 December 1970). Total Belgium population 9 650 944 inhabitants, surface area 30 513,95 km². Overall population density : 316 persons per km², one of the highest in the world.

As with all density maps, this one is based on the hypothesis, clearly inexact, that there is a uniform distribution of population over the selected reference area, in this case the commune.

The major difficulty in preparing a map of population density resides in the choice of class limits. The range of densities in the case of Belgium is very great : from 8 inhabitants per square kilometre (commune of Wancennes in the province of Namur) to 21 809 (commune of Saint-Gilles, arrondissement of Brussels-Capital). In addition, the contrasts are accentuated by concentrations : only one-tenth (10,11 %) of the population live on 50 % of the surface of the country, whilst half of the population are concentrated into 8,5 % of the total area.

The class limits of density have been determined as follows : relying on a map showing detailed population densities, we did our utmost to ensure that class limits reflected the most marked differences between neighbouring communes. We also proceeded with the classification, according to their increasing density, of the communes belonging to each of the geographical regions as defined on sheet 50A, « Regional Divisions », of the First National Atlas. This regional study brought out gaps masked in the national list grouping all the communes of the country, also arranged according to their increasing density. In effect this list does not present the slightest break in continuity between density 8 — the lowest — and density 211 : all densities are represented to a greater or lesser extent. The major difficulty lay in reconciling class limits between regions.

After many efforts we arrived at a subdivision into fifteen classes in an increasing progression. Apparently this not only reflects the geographical reality but also shows well both the lowest and the highest densities. Class limits are exact values, underlining the hiatuses — as far as there are some — in the series of communes ranked by increasing density.

The names of the reference localities shown on the map are those of the centres at level 2 (First Atlas of Belgium, sheet 28A).

The map clearly underlines the density contrasts between the Flemish and Walloon regions. It also indicates the importance of the urban and suburban pocket of the Brussels agglomeration, which widely oversteps the limits of the arrondissement of Brussels-Capital. Class 15 (densities 11 616 to 21 809) is, with one exception, only represented in the Brussels agglomeration, this exception being the commune of Borgerhout (density 12 534) in the Antwerp agglomeration.

The Walloon region is characteristically dominated by three density groupings in the lower range; the Ardenne and the Fagne-Famenne depression have densities from 8 to 79; the Belgian Lorraine, almost entirely in class 2, has densities varying from 28 to 79. The Condroz is represented by densities from 28 to 128 with some communes reaching class 4 (129 to 182). Similarly with the low loess plateaux of Hainaut, Brabant and Hesbaye where the same category 4 is the most representative. The industrial axis Haine-Sambre-Meuse — the only densely populated area of Wallonie — appears strongly. It is marked out by the following towns and agglomerations : Mons, La Louvière, Charleroi, Namur, Huy, Liège and Verviers.

In the Flemish region, contrastingly, the higher densities predominate. In dealing at the same time with the Flemish and the Brussels regions, we emphasise an essential trait in the population distribution — to show a triangle of exceptionally high densities, a triangle whose apices are Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. In the area so delimited, the density values rarely go lower than 300, more usually they are between 400 and 1 000. The other Flemish zones with marked high densities are the Kortrijk (Courtrai) area, extending towards Mouscron (on the other side of the language frontier), and the North Sea coast, where the urban character based on tourism is found to be somewhat attenuated as a result of coalescences of communes which had already come into operation in West-Flanders on 31 December 1970.

The more sparsely populated areas of the Flemish region belong to classes 2 and 3 (28 to 128) : these correspond principally to the maritime Polders and the Lower Schelde-area. Interior Flanders, west of Ghent and north of Kortrijk (Courtrai), just as the Antwerp and Limburg Campine (Kempen) areas are zones of relatively low population densities in the Flemish region : generally lying between 130 and 409 these densities are however generally higher than the less densely populated regions in the Walloon areas.

Between 1964 and 1976 the administrative map of Belgium has, at the level of the commune, been thrown into complete disarray. By a series of fusions, the number of Belgium communes, which had reached 2 663 (1961 Census) had been reduced to 2 379 (1970 Census) and subsequently by a series of more important coalescences, to 596 in 1976.

The combination of communes noticeably modified the map of densities to the extent that some rural communes were joined with urban ones. Various contrasts were thus masked. We can take as an example that of the new commune of Knokke-Heist (West-Flanders) created by the fusion in June 1970, of two seaside resorts (Knokke and Heist) with two rural communes of the maritime Polders (Ramskapelle and Westkapelle). The density of the new commune is 484 whilst within the limits of the old ones they were respectively 1 197 for Heist, 659 for Knokke but only 129 for Westkapelle and 97 for Ramskapelle.

By this process of amalgamation there existed, at 1st January 1978, only 13 communes containing less than 2 000 inhabitants, with only one below 1 000 (Herstappe, Limburg province : 103 inhabitants), whilst in 1970 58,64 % of the total number of communes (1 395 out of 2 379) contained less than 2 000 (of which 141 had less than 250 inhabitants).

In order to show this profound modification in the administrative framework — and with concern for the appropriateness of the main map — we have produced, at the 1 : 1 250 000 scale, the map of densities by communes at 1st January 1978. The figures used were those of the population registers of the communes. They were obtained by the algebraic addition of the annual natural and migratory balances. They were evidently less reliable than the Census figures, but the eventual errors should not make any sensible modification to the density values.

On 1st January 1978 Belgium had 9 837 413 inhabitants, with an average population density of 322 inhabitants per square kilometre. For the reasons given above the range of densities is less wide. The lowest density — twenty — is that of two new communes created by fusions : Sainte-Ode and Léglise (Luxembourg province). The highest density — 19 819 — remains that of Saint-Gilles (uncombined commune, arrondissement of Brussels-Capital) where the total population declined from 55 055 to 50 032.

The determination of the class limits was carried out following the principles which had been used for the main map. These limits are not identical with those on the map at 1 : 500 000 scale but they are largely comparable. The population concentration is less marked than in 1970. This is simply the result of the dilution of the high urban densities inside the newly formed combined communes (examples : Mons, Namur, Leuven, (Louvain), Kortrijk (Courtrai) and all the small towns in High-Belgium). The major traits of density distribution continue to show clearly.