

POPULATION EVOLUTION

This sheet is the continuation (from 1947) and partly the synthesis (map D) from sheet 24 of the first Edition of the Atlas.

All the maps make use of information from the National Institute of Statistics. For the years 1846, 1947, 1961, 1970 and 1981 figures are available from the General Censuses; for the years 1976 and 1985 figures were used from the "Mouvement de la Population des Communes". All the population figures were those of 31st December of the year in question apart from 1846 15th October and 1981 1st March. The choice of 1976 has been determined by the fact that on 31st December 1976, for the last time, population figures were available calculated for the communes before the amalgamations of 1977.

When it was possible, calculations were made on the basis of the communes before amalgamation (total 2 359); when these facts were not available, calculations were made on the basis of the communes after amalgamation (total 589). Hence the evolution has been given as detailed as possible with the advantages and complications that this implies.

The period 1846-1947 is summarised here on map D which has been prepared on the basis of the actual amalgamated communes i.e. on the communes after the amalgamations of 1977. This map does not include the communes of the Eastern Cantons (which have been annexed to Belgium after the First World War).

From 1846 to 1947 the population of the Kingdom increased from 4 337 048 to 8 512 195 inhabitants (included here are the 64 499 inhabitants of the annexed Eastern Cantons) i.e. an increase of 96.27 %.

Map D shows clearly the growth regions: the Walloon industrial axis, the Brussels agglomeration with its tentacles in the directions of Mons, Charleroi and Namur as well as the coastal region, the Courtrai region and the Mandel region but particularly the large region extending from Ghent eastwards to the Meuse in Limburg with a maximum growth in the region of Antwerp and in the central Limburg coal mining region. In addition there was a more modest growth in some areas of southern Belgium.

There has been a diminution in the northwest of the country (certain parts of West Flanders, the west and the southwest of East Flanders and the adjacent parts of northern Hainaut), in the eastern part of Walloon Brabant and in great areas to the south of the Sambre and Meuse.

The result of these diverging evolutions has been the shift of the centre of gravity of population (which is situated in the Brussels agglomeration) towards the northeast.

The period 1948-1985 is treated on five maps, respectively 1948-1961 (A), 1962-1970 (B), 1971-1976 (C), 1948-1976 (D), 1977-1985 (F).

On maps A, B and C the communes are presented as they were before the amalgamations of 1977 making use of the data from the General Censuses of 1947, 1961 and 1970 as well as the figures calculated for 1976. Map E is a synthesis of maps A, B and C on the basis of the commune boundaries after the amalgamations of 1977, whilst map F illustrates the most recent evolution after the amalgamations, based on figures calculated up to 31st December 1985.

It is necessary to view the communale figures on each map in the light of the evolution of the total population in the Kingdom, notably 8 512 195 in 1947, 9 189 741 in 1961 (period 1948-61: + 677 546 or 7.96 %), 9 650 944 in 1970 (period 1962-70: + 461 203 or 5.02 %), 9 823 302 in 1976 (period 1971-76: + 172 358 or 1.78 %), 9 858 895 in 1985 (period 1977-85: + 35 593 or 0.36 %).

There is therefore a net decrease in the growth which in the latest years has so much reduced that one can practically speak of stagnation.

In the main the prewar tendency is continuing: growth on the part of the Flemish Region (53.48 % in 1947, 57.58 % in 1985), a continuous relative decline of the Walloon Region (35.29 % in 1947, 32.52 % in 1985) whilst Brussels shows not only a relative decline but also in absolute figures (11.23 % and 9.90 % in 1947 and 1985 respectively).

During the periods 1948-61, 1962-70, 1971-76 and 1977-85 the population of the Flemish Region grew respectively by + 11.24 %, + 6.95 %, + 2.76 % and + 1.98 %, whilst within the Walloon Region there was first of all growth, followed by a decrease respectively + 3.29 %, + 1.83 %, + 1.78 % and - 0.28 %. The same pattern was followed by Brussels with respectively + 6.99 %, + 4.87 %, - 3.08 % and - 6.29 %.

In the regional sector, a certain number of diverging shifts must again be mentioned.

There was at first a recent and marked decline affecting the central areas of the major urban regions. This phenomenon is most marked in Brussels where, initially, the decline remained limited to the core area of the town, to the benefit of the growing peripheral areas; in the latter years the number of declining communes became greater and greater, to the profit of the periphery of the Brussels Region and of the banlieue, particularly to the south and east. The urban core of the agglomerations of Antwerp, Liège and Ghent likewise showed a decline and here also the growth areas moved to the banlieue so that increasingly the urban agglomerations were transformed into urban regions.

In the agglomerations of the Hainaut industrial axis with a less pronounced urban regional structure (Borinage, Centre, Charleroi) and in the Verviers region, there is a more general decrease in population due to industrial regression; in the Verviers region, this decrease is nearly continuous; in Hainaut there are more variations but nevertheless with a predominant tendency of decline. In the urban region of Namur where there is an overall growth, the urban core is in decline. From this point of view Namur differs very little from other middle-sized towns of the country as, for example, Malines, Bruges, Louvain and Tournai where the population figure for the urban core has recently declined after knowing a slight growth.

The northeast of the country remains the largest region with growth continuing in practically all communes; it is in the centre of Limburg (above all Genk) where this is most marked; industrial development has here compensated for the recent regression in employment in the coalfields. Nevertheless there has been a slowing down of growth in recent years throughout the northeast. Otherwise growth persists in the coastal communes, in the regions of Bruges and Courtrai, in the east of East Flanders (where nevertheless there has also been a decline in recent years in the Alost region).

In Wallonia one can note as zones of demographic growth the regions to the south of Liège, Charleroi and, to a lesser degree, the Eastern Cantons and the south of Luxembourg.

The regions with a declining population figure are approximately as large in area as the regions with an increase in population. The decline was continuous in the western part of West Flanders, in the southeast of East Flanders, in the north of Hainaut and in Hesbaye. These are the regions where industrial development remained limited and which are relatively distant from the large agglomerations. In the less populated rural regions to the south of the Sambre and Meuse population decline predominates, with the exception of the territories cited above; the decline in population here is sometimes relatively more marked because it occurs in less populated communes. In recent years a new tendency has appeared: in a certain number of rural communes there is a new and slow increase in population.

In the most recent period (1977-85) changes are generally smaller than those preceding. It therefore becomes necessary to examine to what extent the amalgamations have played a part in this state of affairs, amalgamations by which communes with a diverging population evolution have been joined together.

Finally on map G (without the Eastern Cantons) an indication has been added, namely when each commune reached its highest population figure: either in 1846, or for one of the censuses from 1856 to 1910, or for one of those from 1920 to 1970, or in 1981. It does not concern itself with detailed types of evolution but with an approximative scheme which distinguishes only six categories. This map shows amongst others that certain regions of Flanders and of northern Hainaut have never fully recovered from the demographic depression of the middle of the nineteenth century, that the agricultural regions of Wallonia reached their maximum during the second half of the nineteenth century, that during the last years the industrial region of Wallonia is in regression while the northeast of the country has known very strong progression.