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# Europe's Crossroads: Brussels, Diplomacy, and the Rise of Supranational Power

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** A City at the Crossroads: Geography and Trade Routes
- **Chapter 2** From Guilds to Global Stage: Brussels in the Medieval and Early Modern Era
- **Chapter 3** Courts and Composite Monarchies: Burgundian and Habsburg Brussels
- **Chapter 4** Independence and Nation-Building: 1830 and the Making of Belgium
- **Chapter 5** Urban Palimpsest: Haussmannization, Tunnels, and the Capital's Remaking
- **Chapter 6** Language, Identity, and Federalization: Brussels in a Divided Kingdom
- **Chapter 7** Empire at Home: Congo, Memory, and the City's Colonial Legacies
- **Chapter 8** War, Occupation, and Reconstruction: From Rupture to Renewal
- **Chapter 9** Choosing Brussels: The Politics of Europe's Administrative Seat
- **Chapter 10** Mapping the EU Quarter: Berlaymont, Justus Lipsius, Europa, and Beyond
- **Chapter 11** The European Commission: Mandate, Machinery, and Everyday Governance
- **Chapter 12** The Council and European Council: Diplomacy by Committee and Summitry
- **Chapter 13** The Parliament Between Cities: Lawmaking Across Brussels and Strasbourg
- **Chapter 14** Courts, Banks, and Agencies: Europe's Distributed Institutions
- **Chapter 15** NATO, Benelux, and Layered Sovereignties in Brussels
- **Chapter 16** How Laws Emerge: Trilogues, Comitology, and the Regulatory State
- **Chapter 17** Permanent Representations and the Diplomatic Corps of Europe
- **Chapter 18** Lobbying, NGOs, and the Marketplace of European Ideas
- **Chapter 19** Money and Solidarity: Budgets, Cohesion, and Fiscal Politics
- **Chapter 20** Crises as Catalysts: From the Eurozone to Pandemics and War
- **Chapter 21** Enlargement, Neighborhood, and the EU's External Action
- **Chapter 22** Schengen, Mobility, and Managing a Borderless Space
- **Chapter 23** Civic Life in the Capital: Schools, Squares, and Everyday Europe
- **Chapter 24** Reading the City: Walking Tours, Museums, and Pedagogies of Place
- **Chapter 25** Futures of Supranational Power: Scenarios for the European Project

## Introduction

Brussels is a paradox made visible. At once modest and metropolitan, a former guild town and a present-day nerve center, it houses the routines through which a continent governs itself. *Europe's Crossroads: Brussels, Diplomacy, and the Rise of Supranational Power* traces how this city moved from local markets and craft halls to glass-and-steel complexes where ministers, commissioners, and parliamentarians negotiate the rules that shape daily life for hundreds of millions. This is not a hagiography of institutions, nor a lament for lost localism; it is a study of how place, politics, and power intersect to produce a new kind of capital.

The story begins long before the Berlaymont. Medieval guilds, river trade, and courtly administrations left a durable urban imprint, establishing Brussels as a pragmatic hub where bargaining was as natural as baking. Nineteenth-century independence transformed the city yet again, as boulevards replaced fortifications and national symbols sprouted across renovated squares. These changes did more than beautify: they organized space for the performance of sovereignty and citizenship, laying foundations for the city's later role as a platform for international governance.

No account of Brussels is complete without confronting colonial legacies. The capital's monuments, collections, and street names remind us that wealth, violence, and ideology once flowed between this city and Central Africa. Rather than treating empire as a historical footnote, this book examines how its echoes shape contemporary debates on memory, migration, and global responsibility. Understanding these continuities is essential to grasping the city's layered moral geography—and to appreciating the dilemmas faced by a union that speaks the language of values while navigating realpolitik.

From there, we turn to the bureaucratic architecture of the European Union and the institutional geography that makes it legible. The Commission's directorates, the Council's rotating choreographies, the Parliament's life between cities, and the dense ecosystem of agencies and representations all anchor their work in and around Brussels. Buildings like the Berlaymont and Europa are not merely backdrops; they are instruments—sites where transparency and opacity, routine and urgency, are staged and managed. Alongside them operate an army of diplomats, civil servants, advocates, journalists, and interpreters whose everyday practices knit together a supranational polity.

While attentive to blueprints and treaties, the chapters also follow the grain of civic life. Cafés near rond-points where drafts of legislation are argued over; multilingual schools that model a European future; public squares that serve both protest and

pageantry—these spaces ground the abstractions of “integration” in ordinary rhythms. Policy-makers will find clear, accessible explanations of how decisions travel from proposal to rule; students of international relations will encounter a working anatomy of multilevel governance; and curious travelers will discover how to read the city as a living textbook of European politics.

Crises—financial, health, security, and geopolitical—run like fault lines through this narrative. Each tested the Union’s capacity and legitimacy; each, in different ways, deepened Brussels’s role as coordinator, mediator, and crisis manager. The chapters trace how emergency logics coexist with deliberative procedures, how bargaining norms evolve under pressure, and how moments of strain create opportunities for institutional learning—and sometimes for overreach.

This book invites multiple pathways. Read sequentially, it moves from local history to continental futures; dipped into selectively, it offers thematic windows on diplomacy, lawmaking, civic culture, and memory. Throughout, the argument is simple: to understand the rise of supranational power in Europe, one must understand the city that hosts and humanizes it. Brussels is more than where Europe meets; it is how Europe works.

## CHAPTER ONE: A City at the Crossroads: Geography and Trade Routes

Brussels does not announce itself with the grandeur of Paris or the ancient dignity of Rome. Instead, it sits nestled in a gentle valley, flanked by the forested hills of the Ardennes to the east and the flat expanse of Flanders to the west. The Senne River winds through its heart, a modest waterway that once carried barges laden with goods from the interior to the North Sea. This unassuming geography would prove crucial, for Brussels grew not from imperial ambition but from the quiet logic of commerce and connection. Its location at the crossroads of regions fostered a culture of negotiation and exchange that would echo through centuries. Even today, the city's skyline is shaped by this legacy, with modern glass towers rising where medieval merchants once counted their profits.

The name itself is a whisper of the past. Brussels derives from the Dutch "Broekzelle," meaning "marshy manor," a nod to the wetlands that dominated the area in the early Middle Ages. These marshes, fed by the Senne and its tributaries, made the site less than ideal for settlement. Yet they also provided natural defenses, forcing potential attackers to navigate treacherous terrain. The region's earliest inhabitants were likely Celts, followed by Romans who established roads and outposts to secure their empire's northern frontier. The Via Britannica, a Roman thoroughfare linking Cologne to Boulogne, passed nearby, underscoring the area's strategic importance. By the ninth century, however, the marshy settlement had evolved into a fortified town under the auspices of the Frankish rulers, a transition that would lay the groundwork for its future prominence.

The Counts of Flanders, who governed the region from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, recognized Brussels's potential early on. In 1229, they granted the town the right to hold markets and fairs, privileges that transformed it into a commercial hub. The Senne became a vital artery, transporting Flemish cloth, Brabantine grain, and luxury goods to and from the coastal ports. Brussels's position at the confluence of several trade routes made it a natural gathering point for merchants from across Europe. The Champagne fairs, which connected northern Europe with Italian banking centers, extended their influence into the Low Countries, with Brussels serving as a waypoint for goods and ideas. This early exposure to international commerce would instill a cosmopolitan spirit that persists to this day.

By the late Middle Ages, Brussels had become a critical node in the network of European trade. The Scheldt River, which connected the city to Antwerp and the sea, funneled commerce through its gates. Wool from England, wine from France, and

spices from the Levant passed through the hands of local merchants, who sold their wares in the grand halls of the Grand Place. The city's markets were not merely economic centers but social spaces where languages mingled and alliances formed. A traveler from the Hanseatic League might pause here to negotiate deals with Flemish traders, while a diplomat from the Holy Roman Empire could observe the rhythms of negotiation that would later define European politics. These interactions forged a culture of pragmatism and adaptability that would prove essential as the city evolved.

The geography of Brussels also influenced its physical development. The marshy soil required careful engineering, leading to the construction of wooden platforms and stone bridges that connected the city's core to its outskirts. The earliest settlement clustered around the Senne's banks, where the water provided power for mills and a means of transport. As the population grew, so too did the need for fortifications. The city's walls, expanded repeatedly from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, followed the natural contours of the land, incorporating hills and rivers into their design. This blend of nature and architecture would become a hallmark of Brussels's urban planning, with green spaces and waterways weaving through even the densest neighborhoods.

The Senne River, though central to Brussels's identity, was not without its challenges. Frequent flooding plagued the city, disrupting trade and damaging infrastructure. In the sixteenth century, authorities began diverting the river underground, a project that lasted well into the eighteenth century. This decision, while necessary for urban expansion, severed the city's visible link to its waterway. Yet the river's influence persisted beneath the surface, shaping the layout of tunnels and basements that crisscrossed the city. The legacy of this transformation is still visible today, in the form of the Sainte-Catherine neighborhood, where the wharves and warehouses of the river trade have been repurposed into cafes, museums, and offices.

Brussels's role as a crossroads extended beyond commerce. Its position between the French-speaking south and the Germanic north made it a linguistic and cultural buffer zone. The city's rulers, from the Counts of Flanders to the Habsburgs, often governed over diverse populations, necessitating a delicate balance of power. Laws and regulations had to accommodate different customs, currencies, and dialects, fostering an early form of multicultural governance. This administrative complexity would later resonate in the European Union's efforts to harmonize policies across member states, though the mechanisms of diplomacy and bureaucracy would evolve far beyond the simple market squares of the medieval era.

The city's growth was not without conflict. As trade routes expanded, so too did tensions between rival factions. The merchants of Brussels often clashed with the nobility over taxation and trade privileges, while guilds competed fiercely for control of specific crafts and markets. These struggles played out in the streets and councils of the city, creating a dynamic political landscape. The need to mediate disputes and

balance interests honed skills that would prove essential in the centuries to come, as Brussels became a venue for resolving conflicts not just within its walls but across the continent.

By the fifteenth century, Brussels had emerged as a political and economic power in the Low Countries. The Great Market, established in 1304, became a symbol of the city's prosperity, its vast square accommodating the comings and goings of merchants, diplomats, and citizens. The construction of the Town Hall in the sixteenth century, with its ornate Gothic facade, reflected the city's growing influence and the wealth of its trading class. Yet even as Brussels ascended, it remained vulnerable to the shifting tides of European politics. The rise of the Habsburg Empire would draw it into larger conflicts, while the Reformation and religious wars would test its diverse communities.

The geography of the surrounding region further shaped Brussels's trajectory. To the south lay the County of Hainaut, a fertile plain that supplied the city with agricultural goods. To the north, the coastal cities of Bruges and Ghent competed for maritime trade, their rivalry influencing Brussels's own commercial strategies. The Ardennes forests to the east provided timber, game, and a source of protection, while the flat Flemish lands to the west facilitated overland travel. This diversity of resources and landscapes made Brussels a natural hub, where merchants could source goods from multiple regions and sell them to a wide audience.

The city's markets were not static. As demand for luxury goods increased in the Renaissance, Brussels adapted to serve new clientele. The textile industry, which had long been a mainstay of the local economy, began to specialize in fine linens and tapestries that catered to international buyers. The guild system, though not yet dominant, started to organize craftsmen into collective bodies that could regulate quality and negotiate trade agreements. These early forms of economic cooperation would plant the seeds for the more formalized institutions that would later define the European Union.

The Senne's role in trade was complemented by the development of roads and pathways that crisscrossed the region. The Chaussée de Nivelles, a Roman road that connected Brussels to the south, was among the most important. It facilitated the movement of troops, pilgrims, and traders, linking the city to the wider Holy Roman Empire. Similarly, the route from Brussels to Calais became a key artery for English wool and Flemish cloth, fostering economic ties that transcended political boundaries. These connections would later be formalized into the networks of diplomacy and governance that underpin the EU.

Yet Brussels's growth was not solely driven by external trade. The surrounding countryside provided a steady stream of raw materials and labor, while the city's artisans refined these goods into marketable products. The region's iron ore deposits,

though modest, supported a local metalworking industry that produced tools, weapons, and decorative objects. The proximity of forests and rivers ensured a steady supply of timber and water power, enabling the growth of industries that would later diversify the city's economy. These internal resources gave Brussels a degree of self-sufficiency that allowed it to weather periods of external instability.

The city's strategic position also made it a target for conquest. During the Hundred Years' War, English forces occupied Brussels in 1383, disrupting trade and imposing heavy taxes. The French, too, would lay siege to the city in subsequent conflicts, eager to control the commercial routes that flowed through it. Each occupation left scars on the urban landscape, as invaders requisitioned buildings and redirected trade. Yet Brussels proved resilient, its merchant class adapting to new circumstances while preserving the structures that had made it prosperous. This adaptability would become a defining trait of the city's character.

As the medieval period waned, Brussels found itself at the center of larger political upheavals. The Burgundian court, which moved its seat to the city in the late fifteenth century, brought with it a new level of sophistication and international attention. The dukes of Burgundy, eager to project their power, invested heavily in the city's infrastructure and culture. New palaces, churches, and public works transformed Brussels into a capital worthy of a European dynasty. The city's markets and guildhalls, already bustling centers of commerce, now hosted the pomp and ceremony of court life, blending economic pragmatism with the trappings of sovereignty.

The intersection of trade and politics was not without friction. As Brussels grew in importance, tensions arose between the city's traditional freedoms and the demands of its rulers. The patrician class, which controlled the guilds and markets, often clashed with the nobility over taxation and jurisdiction. These conflicts played out in the streets and councils of the city, with each side seeking to assert its influence over the burgeoning urban center. The resolution of these disputes required a subtle blend of negotiation and force, skills that would later be refined in the diplomatic salons of the European Union.

The geography of Brussels also influenced its religious and cultural life. The city's position at the crossroads of regions made it a melting pot of beliefs and traditions. While Catholicism dominated the urban landscape, Protestant ideas seeped in through the markets and trade networks. The printing press, introduced in the fifteenth century, found fertile ground in a city accustomed to the exchange of ideas. Books and pamphlets flowed through the Senne, spreading revolutionary thoughts that would later fuel the Dutch Revolt and the Protestant Reformation. Brussels's role as a conduit for information mirrored its function as a commercial hub, facilitating the movement of goods and ideas across Europe.

The city's markets were not merely places of exchange but also venues for cultural

expression. The Grand Place, with its ornate guildhalls and baroque facades, reflected the wealth and taste of Brussels's merchant elite. Festivals and celebrations were woven into the calendar, with processions and tournaments marking the rhythms of civic life. These traditions fostered a sense of collective identity that transcended the individual interests of traders and craftsmen. The shared spaces of the market and the square became symbols of the city's unity, even as its inhabitants grappled with the complexities of a changing world.

By the sixteenth century, Brussels had become a cosmopolitan center, its streets filled with the accents of merchants from across Europe. The city's population swelled beyond its walls, necessitating expansions that would reshape its urban fabric. New districts arose to accommodate the influx of workers and traders, while the old core retained its medieval charm. The juxtaposition of old and new would become a recurring theme in Brussels's development, as the city repeatedly reinvented itself while preserving its historical essence.

The geography that had once fostered trade also shaped Brussels's resilience. When the Spanish sacked the city in 1576 during the Dutch Revolt, the damage was severe but not irreparable. The city's merchants, accustomed to navigating disruptions, rebuilt their enterprises and restored their markets. The experience of occupation and recovery ingrained a pragmatic ethos that would serve Brussels well in the centuries to come. This ethos—of adapting to change while maintaining core functions—echoes in the institutions that now define the European Union.

As the early modern period dawned, Brussels stood at the threshold of a new era. The guilds, having gained ascendancy over the patrician class, would soon dominate the city's political and economic life. Yet their rise was not inevitable. The choices made by rulers, merchants, and citizens in these formative centuries determined whether Brussels would remain a regional hub or ascend to greater prominence. Geography provided the stage, but human agency filled it with drama and purpose. The city's evolution from marshy settlement to bustling capital was not a foregone conclusion but a series of decisions shaped by opportunity and necessity.

The legacy of these early years is still visible today. The winding streets of the old town, the broad boulevards of the nineteenth century, and the sleek towers of the EU district all reflect the layered history of a city that has consistently reinvented itself. Brussels's story is one of adaptation, where each generation has found new ways to leverage its position at the crossroads of Europe. This adaptability, rooted in the pragmatic spirit of its earliest merchants, continues to define the city as a center of diplomacy and governance. The markets of the Grand Place may no longer bustle with the same intensity, but the act of negotiation—whether over cloth, treaties, or policy—remains at the heart of Brussels's identity.

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