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The Politics of Luxembourg

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Introduction

Luxembourg, often celebrated for its picturesque landscapes and vibrant multicultural population, stands as a unique entity within the European political landscape. As both a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, the Grand Duchy weaves together historic tradition with modern principles, creating a system of governance that is both stable and dynamic. Despite its modest size and population, Luxembourg boasts a robust political framework with significant influence at the continental level—demonstrating that even small states can play decisive roles in international affairs.

At the heart of Luxembourg's political system lies a deeply rooted constitution, first enacted in 1868. This document not only outlines the fundamental rights of citizens but also delineates the structure and operation of the state, establishing clear separation between executive, legislative, and judicial powers. The result is a constitutional order that seamlessly balances the enduring role of the Grand Duke as head of state with the practical authority of elected representatives and government ministers.

This book, "The Politics of Luxembourg: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Luxembourg," provides readers with an accessible yet comprehensive introduction to the country's political architecture. We begin by exploring the historical evolution that shaped contemporary institutions, examining how the interplay between monarchy, government, and parliament has been defined and redefined over time. The book then investigates the machinery of governance, including the composition and function of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Special attention is given to Luxembourg's thriving multi-party system, underscoring how coalition politics and proportional representation have become hallmarks of its democracy.

Critical to any study of Luxembourgish politics are its peculiarities and progressive features. The electoral system mandates not only universal suffrage but also compulsory voting, ensuring broad participation in the democratic process. At the local level, communes wield significant self-governing authority, while on the international stage, Luxembourg embraces European integration and active participation in institutions from the European Union to NATO.

Finally, the book considers contemporary challenges and debates facing the Grand Duchy's political system—ranging from pressures of population growth and housing, to questions around electoral rights for foreign-born residents and concerns about transparency and government accountability. As Luxembourg prepares for future transitions, including potential changes in monarchy and evolving relationships within

Europe and the world, it stands as a model of resilience and adaptability.

Whether you are a student, policymaker, or simply an interested observer, this guide aims to deepen your understanding of how Luxembourg is governed, the traditions that sustain its political life, and the dynamism that carries it forward. Through this journey, readers will gain not only insight into the workings of the state, but also an appreciation for Luxembourg's singular place in the tapestry of European democracies.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Long and Winding Road to Self-Governance

Luxembourg's journey to its current political system is a story woven through centuries of shifting allegiances, external pressures, and the gradual assertion of its own identity. It wasn't a sudden leap into democracy, but rather a slow and often interrupted evolution from a feudal entity within larger empires to a fully independent, constitutional monarchy. To understand the Grand Duchy's political landscape today, we must first delve into the depths of its past, tracing the steps that led to the establishment of its fundamental institutions.

For a significant part of its history, Luxembourg was less a distinct political entity and more a pawn in the power struggles of dominant European dynasties. Imagine being a small county, later a duchy, constantly being passed around like a valuable antique between the houses of Burgundy, Spain, Austria, and France. This constant flux meant that local governance was often dictated by distant rulers, with little room for the development of independent political structures. The very idea of a "Luxembourgish" political system was, for a long time, a foreign concept.

The modern state of Luxembourg has its roots in the tumultuous period following the Napoleonic Wars. The Congress of Vienna in 1815, in its grand rearrangement of the European map, elevated the Duchy of Luxembourg to a Grand Duchy. This was a significant step, at least in terms of title, but it came with a catch: the Grand Duchy was granted to William I of the Netherlands, who also happened to be the King of the Netherlands. This created a personal union, where one monarch ruled both territories, but in practice, William I treated Luxembourg very much like another province of his kingdom, rather than an independent state.

This arrangement wasn't particularly popular with the people of Luxembourg, who harbored a desire for greater autonomy. When the Belgian Revolution erupted in 1830, seeking independence from the Netherlands, Luxembourgers joined in the revolt. For a period, a large part of the Grand Duchy was effectively under Belgian control, with the exception of Luxembourg City, which remained loyal to the Dutch King and was garrisoned by Prussian troops.

The situation was eventually resolved by the Treaty of London in 1839, which is a pivotal moment in Luxembourgish history. This treaty formally recognized Luxembourg as an independent state. However, the personal union with the Netherlands persisted until 1890. The fortress of Luxembourg City also remained under Prussian control until 1867, a constant reminder of external influence.

Even after gaining formal independence, the path to a stable political system was not smooth. In the first two decades of its independence, Luxembourg saw no fewer than four different constitutions. The first constitution, granted by the King-Grand Duke in 1841, established an Assembly of States, but its powers were purely consultative under an absolute monarchy. The Grand Duke held executive power and was a co-holder of legislative power. This assembly had limited authority and its sessions were held in secret.

A more liberal constitution was introduced in 1848, influenced by the Belgian constitution of 1831, which brought the beginnings of the separation of powers. However, this was short-lived. In 1856, the King-Grand Duke, under pressure from the German Confederation, repealed the 1848 constitution and replaced it with a more authoritarian charter, demonstrating the continued struggle between monarchical power and burgeoning democratic aspirations.

The dissolution of the German Confederation in the aftermath of the Austro-Prussian War in 1866 paved the way for another significant development. The Treaty of London in 1867 reaffirmed Luxembourg's independence and imposed perpetual neutrality upon it. This period of political instability, marked by five different constitutional documents between 1815 and 1868, underscored the need for a more enduring framework.

This led to the adoption of the modern constitution on October 17, 1868. While technically an amendment of the original 1841 constitution, the 1868 document marked a radical change in Luxembourg's constitutional settlement. It sought to find a compromise between the liberal freedoms of 1848 and the more authoritarian provisions of the 1856 charter. This constitution, with numerous amendments over the years, remains the bedrock of Luxembourg's political system today.

The 1868 constitution re-christened the parliamentary assembly as the Chamber of Deputies and restored many of the rights it had lost in 1856, including the crucial power of annually voting on the budget and taxes. However, the King-Grand Duke still retained significant executive power and remained a co-holder of legislative power. This was a system where power was shared, though not equally, between the monarch and the elected representatives.

A major turning point in the evolution of Luxembourg's political system came in 1919 with the introduction of universal suffrage. This expanded the right to vote to all male and female citizens who had reached the age of 21, a significant step towards a more democratic state. Later, in 1972, the voting age was further reduced to 18. This broadening of the electorate fundamentally shifted the balance of power, giving greater weight to the will of the people as expressed through their elected representatives.

The end of the personal union with the Netherlands in 1890, upon the death of King William III, was another crucial moment. As the succession laws in the Netherlands and Luxembourg differed, the Dutch throne passed to Wilhelmina, while the Grand Duchy went to Duke Adolphe of Nassau. This marked the beginning of the Nassau-Weilburg dynasty as the national dynasty of Luxembourg, a lineage that continues to hold the grand ducal throne today. With its own distinct royal house, Luxembourg solidified its identity as a truly independent nation state.

The 20th century saw further evolution, with the political system adapting to the challenges of two world wars and the changing global landscape. Luxembourg's experience of being occupied in both World Wars led it to abandon its policy of perpetual neutrality, becoming a charter member of NATO in 1949. This marked a significant shift in its foreign policy and its role on the international stage.

Throughout this historical journey, the power of the parliamentary assembly steadily grew, while the role of the monarch gradually evolved from a powerful ruler to a more symbolic head of state. While the Grand Duke formally exercises executive power jointly with the government according to the constitution, in practice, the government takes the lead in decision-making and implementing laws.

The constitutional amendment in 2008, following Grand Duke Henri's decision not to sign a euthanasia law, further clarified the primacy of the elected parliament. This amendment reinforced the principle that the Grand Duke cannot refuse to enact legislation passed by the Chamber of Deputies, solidifying the democratic nature of the legislative process.

This historical narrative, from a pawn in dynastic games to a sovereign grand duchy with a robust parliamentary democracy, highlights the resilience and adaptability of Luxembourg's political system. It demonstrates a continuous process of negotiation and compromise between historical traditions and the demands of modern democratic governance. The journey has been long and at times challenging, but it has ultimately shaped the stable and effective political framework that exists in Luxembourg today.

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