

After the local elections: U-turn in Brussels' transport policy

By Reinhard Boest

It was already apparent on the evening of the regional elections in Brussels on June 9, and the results of the local elections in the 19 Brussels municipalities have confirmed it: The heavy losses suffered by the Francophone Greens (Ecolo) in particular are in large part a rejection of the "Good Move" mobility plan, which aims to make Brussels' traffic safer, the air cleaner and the quality of life for residents better by 2030 (Belgiuminfo has reported regularly, most recently <https://belgieninfo.net/good-move-bruessel-was-bleibt-davon-nach-der-wahl/>). The plan is primarily associated with the regional transport minister Elke Van den Brandt of the Dutch-speaking Greens (Groen), whose losses were nevertheless significantly milder than those of Ecolo.

The liberals from MR in particular placed the issue at the center of their election campaign and were apparently successful. The omnipresent MR party leader Georges-Louis Bouchez accused the Greens of sticking to their transport policy for ideological reasons. However, the Socialists (PS), who supported the project in the Brussels regional government (and in the municipalities of Brussels City and Ixelles, for example), also distanced themselves.

Even if the formation of new majorities in some municipalities is still in flux, there is no doubt that the Ecolo party will lose all three mayoral posts it has held since 2018: Ixelles, Watermael-Boitsfort and Forest.

Already on the evening of the election, new majorities were formed in important Brussels municipalities where, unlike before, the Greens are no longer represented. These include in particular Brussels City, Anderlecht and Ixelles (although the list of Ecolo mayor Christos Doulkeridis received the most votes there). In Saint-Gilles and Watermael-Boitsfort, and perhaps also in Uccle and Forest, they will remain in government, but only as junior partners (of PS or MR).

What impact will this have on transport policy in Brussels? There has already been a foretaste: although there is still no new regional government four months after the election, the probable future coalition partners put an important element of the plan on ice on October 4: the tightening of the limits for cars allowed to drive in the city (LEZ, Low Emission Zones). With their majority in parliament, they have postponed the deadline from the beginning of 2025 to the beginning of 2027 for the time being. Euro 5 diesel vehicles and Euro 2 petrol vehicles will therefore be given a grace period of (another) two years; this affects around 35,000 cars and 8,500 light commercial vehicles in Brussels, but also 635,000 cars and 155,000 commercial vehicles throughout Belgium. This decision is justified on social grounds: population groups with low incomes in particular would be affected as they would not be able to afford a new car. In return, the targeted reduction in CO₂ and NO_x emissions will not be achieved. Brussels will have even more trouble achieving the targets it has set itself for climate protection and air pollution control. But they are in good company: in Ghent and Antwerp, where LEZs are already in place, the next stage will be postponed by two years; and in Wallonia, it will take another two years before LEZs are introduced in the major cities.

The next element of "Good Move" under attack will be traffic-calmed zones. In 2022, there was sometimes violent resistance to their introduction in Anderlecht and Schaerbeek. The plans have since been put on hold in most other municipalities. The MR wants to bury this approach to traffic calming for good.

"The 'Good Move' method is outdated. Mobility must be approached differently, with concertation and pragmatism instead of ideology," the daily newspaper "Le Soir" quotes MR politician Gaëtan Van Goitsenhoven, who will soon be part of a coalition with PS mayor Fabrice Cumbs in

Anderlecht. In Ixelles, where the MR will be the traffic commissioner in future, even the reduced "Flagey/Ponds of Ixelles" zone is up for discussion. In the largest traffic-calmed zone, Brussels city center within the "Pentagon", MR and Les Engagés, as partners in the new municipal council majority, want to allow more through traffic again. The "pragmatic" approach they intend to take remains unclear.

Does the mainstream expressed in the election results mean a "back to the car"? This could then also affect the Brussels-wide introduction of a 30 km/h speed limit (since 2021) and the significant expansion of cycle paths. Even if one has the impression that 30 km/h is seen by many more as a recommendation, it is clear that cars are driving more slowly than before. This has also had a positive impact on the number and severity of road accidents.

Only just over half of Brussels households still have a car at all. Many apparently see the generally well-functioning local transport system as an alternative, supplemented by offers such as car sharing or the use of bicycles. The future regional government - and probably others - will not be spared the mammoth "Metro 3" project when it comes to expanding local transport. Like PS, MR and Les Engagés are in favor of completing the line to Bordet. However, it will be interesting to see how MR, which is eager to make savings, will deal with the financing of the almost unmanageable costs.

But first the new majorities must be found. At regional level, the Greens are not yet completely out of the game. In the Brussels parliament, Groen is the strongest group within the Dutch-speaking college, with which the French-speaking majority must find an agreement (see <https://belgieninfo.net/regierung-in-bruessel-noch-lange-nicht/>).

So there is still a lot in motion.

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