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A RER in Brussels? A sociological history of rivalries and political regulations (1989-2013)

Un RER à Bruxelles ? Socio-histoire des rivalités et des régulations politiques (1989-2013)

Een GEN in Brussel? Socio-historisch onderzoek naar de rivaliteiten en politieke reguleringen (1989-2013)

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Translator: Jane Corrigan



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A RER in Brussels? A sociological history of rivalries and political regulations (1989-2013)

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This article traces the history of the project for a Regional Express Railway (RER) from, towards, in and around Brussels by highlighting the major conflicts between the different stakeholders which have underlain the issue from the start. The RER is at the heart of rivalries regarding the uses, users and visions of the city to be favoured, as well as the concrete mobility policies to develop and the role of the Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Belges (SNCB) in this respect. The article also traces the different steps in the political regulation of the issue, covering the phases of progress and standstill which mark out the history of the RER. By shedding light on the history of these rivalries and antagonisms which have never lost their substance, this article provides a better view of the current situation, illustrating the power of misunderstandings.

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Introduction¹

1. The Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) is often presented as a city-region which is being asphyxiated by car traffic. Since the creation of BCR in 1989, this problem has been at the centre of political and societal debates. The mobility problem in Brussels is complex for several reasons. The Region is confronted with a policy promoting the 'supremacy of the car' [Hubert, 2008], which existed well before its creation and which greatly influenced the urban space since the end of the 1950s by accelerating urban sprawl. This urban sprawl and the attraction of the capital in terms of employment have resulted in a particularly high number of daily long-distance commuters, to the point of being referred to as a 'society of commuters' [Montulet, *et al.*, 2008]. The phenomenon of the commute – initially by train and then by car – was favoured by the public authorities and embodies 'a constituent element of the urbanisation of Belgium and Brussels in particular.' [Dessouroux, 2008, p. 4] The mobility problem in Brussels is also confronted with the fact that the Region, in the same way as Wallonia and Flanders, is competent in its territory regarding public transport, but other levels of authority also play significant roles in this respect. The federal level manages the Société nationale des chemins de fer belges (SNCB) and the municipal level manages certain roads and adopts a municipal mobility plan. The scattering of competence [Aussems, 2009] makes the management of mobility all the more complex since – in addition to the stacking of levels of authority – the scale of problems must be taken into account, which rarely corresponds to the institutional boundaries of the territories, as well as the complexity of a phenomenon which goes beyond the question of travel. Resolving the mobility issue in Brussels

involves going beyond the territorial boundaries of the Region, the institutional boundaries of regional competence and sectoral divisions.

2. In this context, the idea of creating a Regional Express Railway (RER) from, towards, in and around Brussels has gradually spread. In this article, we shall look at some of the major challenges with respect to the RER by highlighting the way in which they have been shaped by certain stakeholders. The socio-historical perspective allows an understanding of the emergence and depth of the social phenomena and the way in which they have been constructed and placed on the agenda as a 'public problem' [Noiriel, 2006; Damay *et al.*, 2011]. We shall thus show how, since the beginning of the project, the RER has been at the heart of many conflicts regarding use, visions of the city and concrete mobility policies to be implemented. These conflicts have a strong influence on the political regulation area surrounding RER regulation, which we shall examine afterwards. Negotiated forms of governance have been implemented in view of building this 'new' public transport network, nevertheless certain obstacles appear to be inextricable. Given the political deadlock and budget deficit, the RER project has even been overtaken by and in competition with other alternative railway network projects which have recently been brought into the public sphere.

1. The RER: complex rivalries

3. Other projects existed before the RER, such as the métropolitain project in the 1920s and 1930s [Van Meerteen, *et al.*, 2002, p. 32]. As of 1968, the draft project for the 1976 sector plan also included an outline of the RER as an addition to the underground [Tellier, 2012, p. 185].

¹ This article was written in the framework of a research project entitled 'Prospective Research for Brussels', financed by the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) between January 2011 and June 2013. The study focuses on the stakeholders of the RER issue in Brussels, though other perspectives are not rejected. The results discussed here are based on a documentary analysis (parliamentary debate reports, newspaper articles, association memoranda, consultancy firm reports, RER piloting committee reports, etc.) and on the realisation of semi-structured interviews (20) with key stakeholders in the area. We wish to thank the anonymous readers of this paper for their comments on the project, as well as Kevin Lebrun, Michel Hubert and Benjamin Wayens.

There were also local demands (or rather, concerns) for three-track lines in order to serve certain municipalities of Brussels better in the mid 1970s.² That being said, the main stakeholders involved agree that it was towards the end of the 1980s that the project became part of the public debate under the combined influence of two events. Firstly, in December 1988, Stratec (a independent consulting firm created in 1984) submitted its final report to SNCB, sponsor of a study seeking to improve the company's market share towards Brussels. The conclusions of the study were incontestable: the market share of SNCB was decreasing in a 37.5 km radius around Brussels while this ring constituted the greatest potential as a major pool of commuters. Following this, the authors asked SNCB to 'partially replace the current inter-urban offer by a suburban offer [...]; [...] along its urban route this type of service would also attract some intra-urban and suburban travel [...] and would thus make a positive contribution to the improvement of urban public transport in Brussels'.³ While the report does not mention the acronym 'RER', it outlines its objectives which match the commercial intentions of SNCB, which was losing momentum at the time. SNCB began working on this theme and, as it stated,⁴ a more precise plan was drawn up for a future suburban network like the Paris RER. The Star 21 plan, presented by SNCB in 1989, also announced the densification 'of a suburban network' ensuring 'frequent service for Brussels'.⁵ The public corporation backed down, however, mentioning technical and financial problems on several occasions. Secondly, however, the RER was also the focus of other discussions, in the first BCR electoral campaign in June 1989. Several parties referred to this network, with the subject of traffic congestion in the background. 'The

asphyxiation of Brussels' is a subject which has become more important in politics, presented by the media in a catastrophic perspective. Since the implementation of the Region, there has been a need for a mobility plan for Brussels (the future IRIS plan) which would place great emphasis on public transport, such as the train. Many stakeholders in Brussels point out the political will of the minister for Public Works and Communications, Jean-Louis Thys, and his cabinet regarding the RER. That being said, as regards the ecological opposition at the Brussels first regional executive, despite the discourse 'there are consensus – such as that regarding cars – which are difficult to break'.⁶ The role of the car in the city is one of the major elements which have influenced the rivalries since that time, but it is not the only one. We shall present three major debates which structure and mark out the existence and progress of the RER project.

1.1. Rivalries between uses

4. Who would use the RER? What types of use would be favoured? What would its effects be on mobility as well as on the residential strategies of households as well as the strategies of economic stakeholders? There have been heated debates regarding these questions since the beginning of the project. While Brussels policies take the lead in promoting the RER by taking certain initiatives in terms of negotiation or publicisation of the stakes, their position is far from being unanimous.

5. For certain politicians, the RER must of course respond to the phenomenon of commuting by car by causing a modal shift from the car to the train, but it must also solve the problem of internal mobility in

² HENROTIN, A., 'Le plan star 21 inquiète la population proche de la Ligne 161. Le spectre du RER hante Boitsfort.', *Le Soir*, 10 May 1991, p. 22.

³ STRATEC, *Etude de la desserte ferroviaire de Bruxelles et environ*, final report for SNCB, 5 December 1988, p. 31.

⁴ VANTROYEN, J-C., 'Le chemin de fer pour éviter l'asphyxie de la capitale', *Le Soir*, 29 May 1989.

⁵ DEPAS, G., 'Star 21 : répondre au 21^{ème} siècle (détails du projet de la SNCB)', *Le Soir*, 13 November 1989, p. 4.

⁶ BCR Council, *Compte rendu intégral*, plenary session of Thursday 13 July 1989, p. 44.

Brussels by serving users in Brussels. The Brussels executive criticises the intentions of SNCB which 'does not take internal mobility in Brussels into account'.⁷ In addition to the existing service, the Brussels executive suggests promoting two lines towards the west and the east of Brussels as a prefiguration of the RER, supporting the development of internal mobility by allowing better accessibility of out-of-the-way areas which do not fully benefit from the current railway network which passes mainly through the North-South junction. The promotion of internal mobility in Brussels does not necessarily please the other Regions, firstly because they would like to favour the quickest possible service to the centre of Brussels for their commuters, and secondly because they see it as a sort of hold-up of federal financing. The Flemish opinion, for example, was expressed in 1992, via the minister for transport: 'If we analyse the current situation, we have the impression that the Brussels-Capital Region wishes to resolve its problems through the commitment of others and through a drain on the budget at federal level, or at the level of the Flemish Region and Walloon Region.'⁸ It is clear that for the other Regions as well as for SNCB, which sees an interest in terms of market shares, commuters are the main potential users. Perhaps paradoxically, some politicians in Brussels agree that, fundamentally, the RER is not a matter for the inhabitants of Brussels. 'The Flemish and the Walloons who live within a 30-kilometre radius of Brussels need a Regional Express Railway. The inhabitants of Brussels will only use it occasionally. There is therefore no reason why the Brussels Region should be mainly responsible for the construction of a network which may result in the exodus of more of its inhabitants.'⁹ The objective is above all to avoid having to take on a large part of its potential financing.

6. Another element of the debate is mentioned in the above citation: what if, above all, the RER emptied Brussels of its inhabitants? According to some, the RER may increase the urban exodus of wealthy households by providing a quick and frequent means to reach the employment poles in Brussels, a quality of life which is supposedly more pleasant in the Walloon or Flemish 'countryside' and a more attractive real estate market. The urban sprawl debate is on the whole a classic one. The fear of seeing the inhabitants of Brussels flee the city thanks to this network has existed since the beginning of the project.¹⁰ The RER is seen as a worthwhile yet destabilising service, with the potential to prompt more people to leave. This argument is supported in the demographic context of Brussels (which has changed greatly since): between 1971 and 1991, BCR has lost 11 percent of its population while the outskirts have increased in population by 20 percent. The RER is therefore described as the worst thing for a Region which is also under-financed due to taxes based on place of residence. The Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines (ARAU) has continued to be particularly critical with respect to the impact of the RER on Brussels and 'urban habitability' [Schoonbrodt, 2007]. Studies modelling the influence of the RER on the location of households later confirmed the risk of exodus [Boon and Gayda, 2000]. Some Brussels politicians got their fingers burnt by what could be related to the transformation of the '[...] capital into an area of use which pushes the legitimate expectations of inhabitants and the quality of their living conditions into the background'.¹¹ In order to counter this exodus, the RER project must tackle the supremacy of the car, in particular through support measures. We shall return to this.

⁷ ALSTEENS, O., 'Le plan Star 21 de Mr Dehaene a oublié les Bruxellois', *Le Soir*, 21 April 1990, p. 10.

⁸ SAUWENS, J., Ministre communautaire des Transports, du Commerce extérieur et de la Réforme de l'Etat, *Le RER à toute vitesse*, proceedings of the round table of 5 June 1992, Brussels, p. 5.

⁹ TELLIER, D., 'Le SP appuie le plan Transport SNCB. Le RER n'est pas l'affaire des Bruxellois', *Le Soir*, 1 August 1997, p. 4.

¹⁰ Council of the Brussels-Capital Region, *Bulletin des interpellations et des questions orales et d'actualité*, 13 March 1992, p. 197.

¹¹ Charles Picqué, *Pour Bruxelles. Entre périls et espoirs*, Brussels, Editions Racine, 1999, p. 123.

1.2. Rivalries with respect to visions of the city

7. Behind these positions favouring the inhabitants of Brussels and commuters, throughout the historical sociology of the RER, different visions of the city or different references which guide the various positions have also appeared. Is Brussels a hyper-concentrated city, with offices centred round the main stations of the North-South junction and the European Quarter? Or is Brussels a city which must return to its inhabitants who have already paid a high price for railway development? These different images of the city are found in the concrete proposals which prefigure the future RER. If we caricature the debate only slightly, the Walloons and the Flemish wish to access the centre of Brussels as quickly as possible, via the North-South junction or the European Quarter. There should be many stations in their respective territory, yet there must only be a limited number in the Brussels territory, in order not to increase travel time with useless stops [Frenay, 2009]. It is also out of the question to have trains serve less important poles, such as the West Station. Brussels is therefore limited to its very centre and the European Quarter; it is a city of commuters with a few employment poles. In contrast, BCR attempts to maximise the number of stations in its territory and to favour the more harmonious use of an existing railway network for internal mobility in Brussels. It would thus free its underground network, which is also saturated in the central areas. That being said, the positions are more complex than they appear. For example, the 1995 Regional Development Plan, through its ABC policy, is aimed at positioning tertiary sector activities in 'the main public transport hubs' (North, South, Arts-Loi, Schuman, etc.) [Hubert, et al. 2008; de Keersmaecker, 2005]. A great many

concerns also exist in Brussels, among others, regarding the destructive potential of RER infrastructures, and in particular the creation of four-track lines, for the existing urban fabric. Certain municipalities and certain cooperatives (associations which promote causes such as alternative mobility or groups of local residents) therefore slow down the progress of the project¹² or question the opportunity to connect their territory to the west of Brussels, rather than the centre.¹³

8. Much more recently, the image of Brussels as a 'polycentric' city has emerged, above all in the political debates concerning the last development plan for Brussels – the Sustainable Regional Development Plan – whose draft was approved after a first reading by the Brussels government on 26 September 2013. This polycentric nature is based on the fact that the centre is not necessarily at the origin or the destination of the journeys made in the city and that it is therefore necessary to densify and favour urban mix around intermodal hubs. That being said, certain analysts criticise the purely rhetorical use of this term without any concrete measures being put into practice [Casabella and Frenay, 2009].

9. Other images of the city also compete in terms of the references used in negotiation or in public debates. The RER may thus contribute to making the city 'breathable' and to developing 'sustainable' mobility, as the 'means of transportation which is the most respectful of the environment'.¹⁴ The RER should favour the modal shift from the car to alternative means of transport, a transfer announced as a political objective in the IRIS 1 and IRIS 2 mobility plans for BCR. The environmental associations in the three Regions are generally in favour of this network¹⁵ with the implementation of support measures, the

¹² SCHOONE, C., 'Uccle-Stalle réaiguille les plans du RER', *Le Soir*, 10 May 2000 and <http://www.uccle.be/fr/services-communiaux/urbanisme/rer-1> (consulted on 23/12/2013).

¹³ 'SNCB has just presented a provisional outline for the operation of the RER. While this will improve access for commuters to Brussels, it will not favour travel within Brussels by train. This is why, in Uccle, line 124 (which serves the stations of Linkebeek, Calevoet and Stalle) will no longer go to the South Station but to the West Station in Molenbeek. Although the concern to lighten the North-South junction is understandable, it is unacceptable to Marc Cools, Uccle Deputy Burgomaster of Works and Mobility.' (<http://www.marccools.be/region.html>, consulted on 23/12/2013)

¹⁴ BOVY, L., 'RER : un projet de mobilité nécessaire', Presentation at the Economic and Social Council, 28 October 2010.

¹⁵ See for example: *Inter-environnement Wallonie, avis d'IEW sur le RER*, 1 September 2004.

decrease in pollution for local residents and, for the inhabitants of Brussels, the taking into account of internal mobility in Brussels. In addition to the image of Brussels as 'eco capital' [IRIS 2, p. 18], thanks to the resulting modal shift, the RER could also ensure better access to the economic poles and to companies. It is paradoxical that by reducing car traffic, the RER would allow the remaining vehicles to move more freely, which is an important argument for certain stakeholders, as expressed by the different social partners in the three Regions.¹⁶ The same is true for Brussels as 'economic capital'.

1.3. Rivalries regarding mobility policies

10. The RER also gives rise to socio-technical controversies regarding the concrete policies to implement, their level of feasibility and their potential effects. The least we can say is that with respect to these challenges, SNCB-Holding leads, to the extent that it is the owner of the railway infrastructure (via its subsidiary Infrabel), project manager for works connected with its network and railway traffic operator (via the operator SNCB). The monopolistic situation of the public corporation in railway regulation has often been criticised: it was blamed several times for blocking the project. The media pointed out that, according to SNCB, since the beginning of the project 'the existing infrastructure cannot be used due to the incompatibility of signals, power and traffic flow'.¹⁷ It admits that the RER is not its 'core business', which would be the case for regional transport companies. As a national company, it has less interest in suburban railway development and favours its IC/IR plan (between cities and regions) and international development. Other imperatives mentioned in the debate by SNCB which have an impact on policies are transport security, the

robustness of the network, profitability and service speed. There is suspicion regarding its actions: SNCB has accepted the RER because this project would allow it to increase its capacities in terms of infrastructures (the creation of four-track lines, the Schuman-Josaphat tunnel) in favour of the robustness of its network.¹⁸

11. But the debate regarding mobility policies is not limited to the infrastructures to be built and the operating schedule of the RER. Several studies indicate that the RER will not solve mobility problems if drastic support measures are not taken, on the one hand, aimed at making the train more attractive by penalising the use of the car in different ways (such as parking policy, lane reduction or the implementation of urban charging) and on the other hand, at gambling on mobility demands via a land-use planning policy favouring density and urban development around poles which benefit from better public transport service. The support measures are linked to urban exodus and urban sprawl. In addition to the first study mentioned above [Boon and Gayda, 2000] conducted from 1996 to 1998, other studies from 2002 and 2003 indicate the extent to which urban exodus will be facilitated if certain support measures are not taken.¹⁹ It is not surprising that after these studies, the increase in the public transport offer will not be enough to check urban exodus: the supremacy of the car must be dealt with via mechanisms such as urban charging and parking restrictions.²⁰ BCR will fight to impose these support measures on other stakeholders, finding them more necessary than the other Regions do. However, it is not enough for the other Regions to build car parks around future RER stations; BCR and its 19 municipalities must also adopt coherent measures in terms of roads, parking and priority to public transport, which they have still not done.

¹⁶ Joint statement by SERV, CESRBC and CESRW, *Le Réseau Express Régional*, 27 June 2006.

¹⁷ BOURTON, W., 'Trois lettres : RER comme SOS', *Le Soir*, 22 January 1992, p. 20

¹⁸ BCR Council document, *Bulletin des interpellations et questions orales et d'actualités*, Commission de l'infrastructure, chargée des travaux publics et des communications, 18 March 1998, *BIQ (1997-1998) N°19*, p. 8.

¹⁹ STRATEC, *Evaluation et optimisation des mesures d'accompagnement du RER desservant l'agglomération centre sur la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*, section 1 final report and section 2 final report, October 2002 and October 2003, for the federal office for mobility and transport.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92; p. 55.

2. The RER: attempts at political regulation

2.1. Agenda, coalitions and expertise (1989-1998)

12. These structural antagonisms have continued throughout the historical sociology of the RER. Several phases may be defined in the elaboration and implementation of this project. The first decade from 1989 to 1999 is characterised, on the one hand, by the will of political stakeholders in Brussels who did not cease to give the project visibility and rally other stakeholders and, on the other hand, by the importance of building up expertise in this area. The 'Task Force pour l'amélioration de la desserte ferroviaire de Bruxelles'²¹ was an initiative of the Brussels minister for public transport in 1991, gathering the different parties with the objective to start with 'the upgrading of line 26' and then to 'make an inventory of issues shared by SNCB and STIB in view of favouring the realisation of a RER network.'²² The strategy of Jean-Louis Thys' cabinet, like that of Brussels ministers who succeeded him in support of the RER, seems to have been to involve the other stakeholders, inside (and above all) outside the Region so that the RER would not appear to be a demand coming only from Brussels. In June 1992, the first round table on the RER was organised. It was called – with a twist of irony – 'Le RER à toute vitesse'²³ ('The RER at top speed'). During this conference, the other political stakeholders such as Flanders, were reticent (see above). However, the creation of this Task Force resulted in the creation of the 'Syndicat d'études pour le RER' in June 1993. This was once again an initiative of BCR.²⁴ The mission of this research committee was to propose a network, by giving priority to the existing

²¹ BCR Council document, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission de l'infrastructure, chargée des travaux publics et des communications. Réseau Express Régional (RER)*, Brussels, 8 May 1996, document A85/1~95-96, annexe 1 (Synthèse du RER project), p. 34.

²² BCR Council, full report, plenary session of Thursday 13 June 1991.

²³ 'Le RER à toute vitesse', proceedings of the round table of 5 June 1992, Brussels.

²⁴ REBUFFAT, J., 'La Région paie 35 millions pour une étude sur le futur RER', *Le Soir*, 3 April 1993, p. 30

infrastructure, programming future investments and specifying the rolling stock to acquire, the investment costs and operation costs. It requested the services of a French consultancy firm, SOFRETU, specialised in the design of public transport networks. Surrounded by other subcontracting firms, this research committee submitted a first report in 1995, often referred to as the 'Sofretu study'.²⁵

13. Still in the perspective of building favourable configurations of stakeholders, a second round table was organised on 12 March 1996, gathering 300 people.²⁶ According to some, this was when the two other Regions began to support the RER project:²⁷ 'A network project was thus presented [...] and was the object of a wide consensus.'²⁸ For others, such as the federal minister Michel Daerden, the approaches

diverged and illustrated the 'community'²⁹ character of the issue, which must not be presented as an 'irreversible gain'.³⁰ The SNCB ten-year plan',³¹ which was finally approved in July 1996,³² does not mention the realisation of the RER as a priority. The RER research committee submitted a second report in January 1998, its 'final report' presenting a RER project which constituted 'a network centred mainly round the junction'.³³ The project was criticised by certain politicians in Brussels, in particular because it abandoned line 28 and did not take the recommendations of the BCR Council adopted in May 1996 into consideration. Meanwhile, SNCB adopted its new transport plan which came into force in May 1998. While this plan greatly benefited long-distance commuters, it neglected 'the suburbanites, i.e. the connections at less

²⁵ COMITE DE PILOTAGE CONVENTION RER of 04/04/2003 (MB 01/03/2006), annual report 2006-2007.

²⁶ BCR Council Document, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission de l'infrastructure, chargée des travaux publics et des communications. Réseau Express Régional (RER)*, Brussels, 8 May 1996, document A85/1-95-96.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, presentation by minister Hervé HASQUIN, p. 4.

²⁸ BCR Council document, *Bulletin des interpellations et questions orales et d'actualités, Commission de l'infrastructure, chargée des travaux publics et des communications*, 18 March 1998, *BIQ (1997-1998) N°19*, p. 3

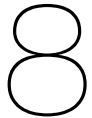
²⁹ Belgian House of Representatives, *Commission de l'infrastructure, des Communications et des Entreprises Publiques*, 20 March 1996, C105, p. 4.

³⁰ Minister Daerden, *ibid.*, p. 21

³¹ *Plan décennal 1996-2005 pour le transport de demain: STAR 21*, SNCB, 1996.

³² *Troisième avenant au premier contrat de gestion de la SNCB*. Published in the *Moniteur belge* on 29 October 1996.

³³ BCR Council document, *Bulletin des interpellations et questions orales et d'actualités, Commission de l'infrastructure, chargée des travaux publics et des communications*, 18 March 1998, *BIQ (1997-1998) N°19*



than 30 kilometres around Brussels. The new offer is fundamentally not in keeping with the idea of the RER [...].³⁴

14. For Brussels politicians, the final report by the research committee must be the object of a cooperation agreement between the three Regions and federal level. While BCR clearly made contacts in this direction,³⁵ the RER project entered a latent phase. It was more than one year later, in March 1999, that the Conférence Interministérielle des Communications et de l'Infrastructure (CICI) declared itself in favour of the realisation of the RER and the creation of a working group, called the 'high-level RER group', appointed to study (once again) the conditions of the realisation of the RER and to create a draft cooperation agreement between the federal authority and the three Regions.

2.2. Institutionalisation and the beginning of implementation (1999-2008)

15. The following decade was more of an important phase of decisions, which institutionalised the project despite several obstacles and also led to the implementation – at least partial – of the infrastructures required for its realisation. Following the June 1999 legislative elections, the governmental declaration mentioned the necessity to create the RER.³⁶ In 2000, a new interministerial conference started up the work of the 'high-level RER group' once again and gave it the task of creating a cooperation project and agreement.³⁷ At the end of this same year, the RER fund was created to cover part of the investments in infrastructures.³⁸ The federal level worked on the production of a RER

report and proposed a future RER agreement to be negotiated with the Regions. The opinion of the SNCB board of directors was required, however, and it was not until March 2001 that it expressed a favourable opinion concerning the RER project, included in the budget of the 2001-2012 ten-year investment plan. SNCB was reluctant, however, often declaring that it no longer had the funds to invest in this project, causing a 'trial of strength' with the political world, which denounced the 'freezing' of the project.³⁹ The political stakeholders in Brussels who were still very proactive regarding this issue, were also concerned about the lack of a cooperation agreement, which finally took shape in the agreement of 4 April 2003 aimed at implementing the programme for a RER from, towards, in and around Brussels, established by the federal state and the three Regions.⁴⁰

16. The contents of the RER project for Brussels may be summarised in three points: the realisation of a certain number of railway infrastructures (creation of four-track lines for several lines, development and creation of stations, etc.) and road infrastructures (development of bus connections); the development of methods of operation for this infrastructure (including the operating schedule and the purchase of rolling stock); and the implementation of 'support measures', defined in the 2003 agreement as 'any action whose objective is to favour the use of public transport in the RER area (the parking policy and the construction of car parks, the hierarchical organisation of roads in the city, the improvement of intermodality conditions, etc.). The agreement also created a certain number of ad hoc coordination bodies to ensure negotia-

³⁴ TELLIER, D., 'Le SP appuie le plan Transport SNCB. Le RER n'est pas l'affaire des Bruxellois', *Le Soir*, 1 August 1997, p. 4.

³⁵ BCR Council document, *Bulletin des interpellations et questions orales et d'actualités*, Commission de l'infrastructure, chargée des travaux publics et des communications, 18 March 1998, *BIQ (1997-1998) N°19*, p. 7.

³⁶ Belgian House of Representatives, *Annales*, plenary session of 14/07/1999, p. 48.

³⁷ COMITE DE PILOTAGE CONVENTION RER of 04/04/2003, Annual report 2006-2007, p. 6

³⁸ COMITE DE PILOTAGE CONVENTION RER of 04/04/2003, Annual report 2006-2007, p. 6

³⁹ See for example: Demonty, B., Dewez, A., 'Le patron de la SNCB affirme qu'il n'a pas de moyens pour entreprendre les travaux RER : bras de fer Vinck-Durant', *Le Soir*, 8 February 2003, p. 33; Demonty, B., 'La ministre des transports n'est toujours pas satisfaite. Un peu d'argent pour le RER', *Le Soir*, 15 February 2003, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Agreement of 4 April 2003 aimed implementing the Regional Express Railway programme from, towards, in and around Brussels. This agreement was the object of a law adopted on 17 June 2005 and published in the *Moniteur belge* on 1 March 2006.



Figure 1. A SNCB Siemens Desiro ML train, already in service as an IR train, seen here at the Antwerp Central Station. Source: photo Alfenaar via Flickr/Wikimedia, Creative Commons - certain rights reserved.



Figure 2. Interior (second class) of a SNCB Siemens Desiro ML train already in service. Note the density of the layout and the lack of tables. Source: photo Maurits90 via Wikimedia, Creative Commons - certain rights reserved.

tions between the parties. In addition to the Comité Exécutif des Ministres de la Mobilité (CEMM), made up of the four ministers with mobility within their remit, the agreement established the 'RER piloting committee', made up of the different administrations and transport companies, as well as 'the operational group', which was a more technical group associating only representatives of the four public transport companies.

17. The piloting committee is in charge of the general follow-up of the agreement and is a central group in the management of negotiations. The committee took up its functions in April 2006, and was in charge of the follow-up of a study provided for in article 13 of the agreement, centred on travel needs and functionality requirements regarding frequency, scope and stations, i.e. the 'operating schedule' of the RER. At the beginning of 2008, this study was entrusted to an association of consultancy firms and was the object of discussions within the piloting committee as it progressed. The study report from June 2009 presents

an intermediate scenario for the implementation of the RER in 2015, but it also proposes a scenario for 2020 and another for 2030. These scenarios have not undergone in-depth study from a technical point of view but have the political advantage of being more in keeping with the competing demands of the Regions. While the activity report of the consulting firms was approved in order to close the deal, the contents of the report have not been officially accepted by the piloting committee, the Regions, federal level or SNCB.

18. The RER project materialised as of 2004 with the beginning (from Schuman to Watermael, for example) of the first infrastructure works, which required the realisation of impact assessment studies and the obtaining – not without difficulty – of certificates and planning permission. The rolling stock was also the object of a contract in April 2008 with Siemens, for the purchase of 305 Desiro ML trains, 95 of which would be used for the RER. This material was therefore not specifically

dedicated to the RER, which gave critics reason to believe that the transport operator's strategy was to benefit from this acquisition intended for its 'traditional' network. Despite this progress, the RER project once again reached an institutional deadlock.

2.3. Obstacles and alternatives (2009 -)

19. Since 2009, many obstacles have appeared along the route of the RER. The approval of the operating schedule proposed by the 'article 13' study, was stopped by the regional elections, the implementation of new cabinets, and then by the biggest institutional crisis ever experienced in Belgium, with the lack of a federal government. In 2010, Infrabel also announced the delay in putting the RER into operation due to the legal saga related to the obtaining of permits at Linkebeek: instead of 2016, Infrabel spoke of 2019 or 2020 as the year in which the service would be operational.⁴¹ In 2012, the deadline was estimated to be 2022 for the same reasons. While it looked as though the RER had 'come out of hibernation' in May 2012, following a first meeting of mobility ministers under the aegis of the new Federal Mobility Secretary, there had been no formal approval of the operating schedule. The pilot-ing group had not been able to achieve this either due to political opposition regarding the choices made with respect to the favoured uses of the RER as well as a more 'technical' opposition by SNCB, which felt that the 2015 intermediate scenario was unfeasible, considering the current use (and not the situation in 2008) and the entire network (and not a model which it felt would not consider all of the subtleties of the network). Without apparently settling these conflicts, CEMM nevertheless set common objectives, recalling the necessity to put the RER into operation in 2018, based on the 2015 intermediate scenario. The politi-

cal stakeholders were aware of the coordination difficulties and sought other ways to come to an agreement, either via the creation of a 'metropolitan community' [Vanwynsberghe, 2013], which would hold the meeting between the three Regions related to mobility in particular – but not explicitly to the RER – or via a new 'subsidiary in which the three Regions and the federal state would be represented', created within SNCB to 'manage the operation' of the RER [government statement by Elio Di Rupo, December 2011, p. 27]. More recently, the discussions on the new SNCB 2013-2025 ten-year plan once again cast doubt on the imminent arrival of the RER and recalled the importance of the budgetary factor and the lack of determination of the public corporation regarding this project. The amounts of infrastructure investments were reduced, works were delayed indefinitely and others were not mentioned even when the CEMM had ratified them. On this occasion, SNCB also affirmed that some of the objectives of the RER had already been met by the IC/IR plan, distorting the project, which provided an additional service with respect to the existing one. There were many criticisms regarding this ten-year plan, such as those made by the Brussels government, but the SNCB CEOs stood up for themselves: in a context of budgetary scarcity, the priority must be the safeguarding of the railway. Furthermore, they said that the railway was not intended to be a 'taxi'.⁴²

20. In this strained context, potentially alternative projects also entered the public debate. Without going into detail here about the 'Brabantnet' tram network project⁴³ of the Flemish regional public transport company De Lijn, which also aims to ease congestion in Brussels, let us mention the proposals by Jannie Haek,⁴⁴ head of SNCB-Holding, which were probably inspired by the Réseau Express Bruxellois (REB) project by Brussels ecologists. This project was based on the existing infra-

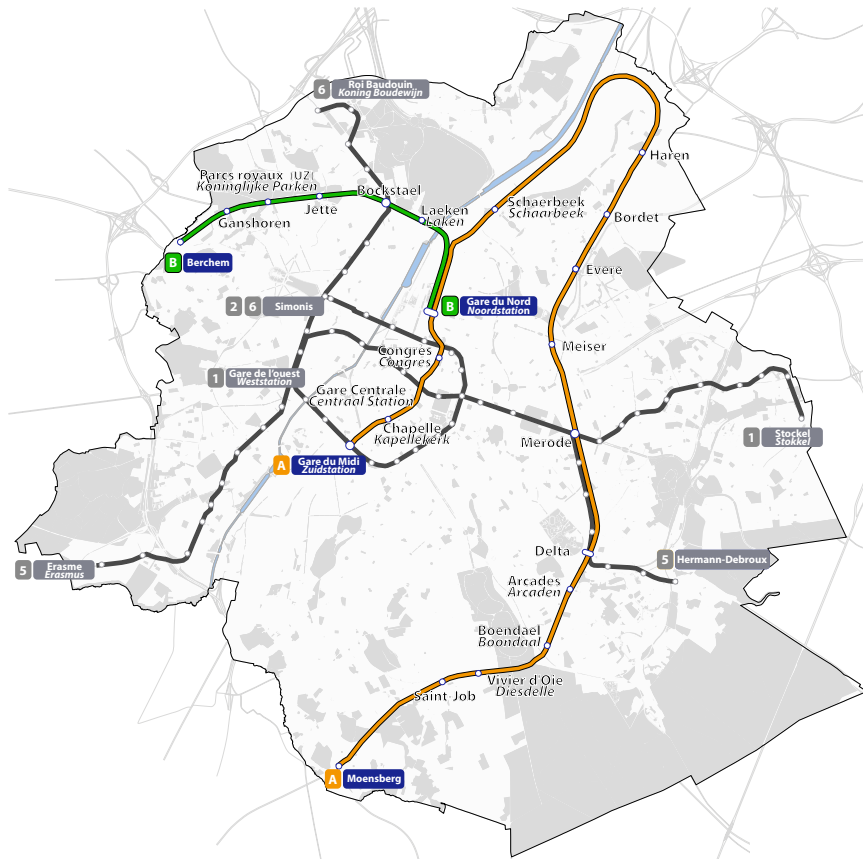
⁴¹ 'RER : Un retard de trois ans suite à l'arrêt du Conseil d'Etat?', *Le Soir*, 19 February 2010.

⁴² Cf. the debate on the SNCB *Plan d'Investissement Pluriannuel* before the *Commission Infrastructure* of the Brussels Parliament of 22 May 2013; Baele, M., 'Le train pour booster la mobilité dans Bruxelles? Impossible, dit la SNCB', *RTBF info*, 23 May 2013. Available online at: www.rtf.be/info/regions/detail_le-train-pour-booster-la-mobilite-dans-bruxelles-impossible-dit-la-sncb?id=8001244

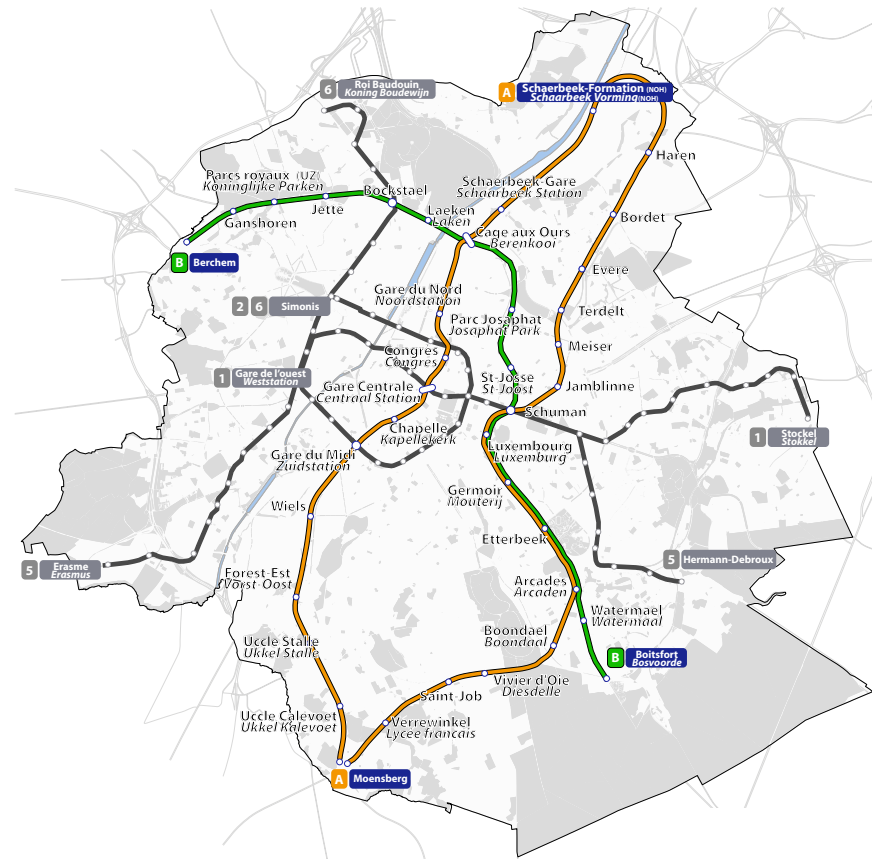
⁴³ See http://www.delijn.be/mobiliteitsvisie2020/pegasus_vlaamsbrabant/index.htm

⁴⁴ Renette, E., 'Une alternative ferroviaire au RER' and 'Une petite ceinture version rail', *Le Soir*, 19 April 2013; 'RER : la proposition de la SNCB déplaît', *La Libre*, 19 April 2013.

Réseau Express Bruxellois (REB) | Brussels Express Network (BEN) Phase 1 | Fase 1



Réseau Express Bruxellois (REB) | Brussels Express Network (BEN) Phase 2 | Fase 2



Figures 3 & 4. Réseau Express Bruxellois (REB) project by Brussels ecologists. Source: Ecolo-Groen, 2013.

structure (at first) and proposed two lines in Brussels (from Moensberg to the centre and from Berchem to the centre), stopping at existing stations, which were often underused according to Ecolo/Groen. By making use of lines 26, 25 and 50 mainly, the REB would provide a train service every fifteen minutes, connecting many municipalities of Brussels. The REB would require relatively limited investments and is presented as being able to provide a quick solution for the inhabitants of Brussels, complementing the RER, which is aimed more at commuters. This project is far from being inconsequential, in as much as it has given rise to many reactions such as those by the different municipalities of Brussels, which gave an opinion on a motion by the ecologists (see the maps of the two phases of the project).

21. In a similar yet more urbanistic perspective, a reflexive and artistic process lasting two years, initiated by the non-profit association Recyclart and Congress, with the Brussels Region chief architect and the Agence de développement territorial, led to the presentation of a 'Manifeste Jonction' on 12 December 2013, which returned to the idea of two loops (called 'butterfly' loops due to their shape) bypassing the North-South junction eastwards and westwards, favourable to the development of a RER within Brussels and of a polycentric city.⁴⁵ It also promoted renovation on the surface and under the junction and imagined an easier crossing of Brussels by international trains, all in a perspective of 'taking over' the entire problem by the Brussels regional authorities.

Figure 5. The two 'butterfly' loops bypassing the North-South junction eastwards and westwards. Source: Manifeste Jonction (www.jonction.be), 2013.

⁴⁵ During their presentation, the authors of the manifesto referred explicitly to the firm 51N4E, which first developed this idea in the framework of the study 'Bruxelles 2040', conducted in 2011 at the request of BCR, and which was the object of an exhibit at the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts in 2012.

Conclusion

22. The RER is a complex issue, marked by important social, political and economic challenges. It first appeared to be emblematic of the political antagonism in a country marked by dissociated federalism [Delpérée, 2011; Delwit and Pilet, 2004], based on the federated entities' opposed strategies of attractiveness. The uses which the RER is intended to favour and the visions of Brussels at stake are clearly at odds and do not appear to be overtaken by the project at this stage. Furthermore, to the extent that it involves – beyond sectoral transport policies which are already very complex in themselves – thinking about other related public actions and therefore developing desectoralisation strategies, the RER issue is becoming more complicated. Comparative reflections on the use of the railway and environmental concerns prompt the coordination of actions between transport and land-use planning [Gauthier, 2005], but political will seems to be lacking in order to adopt desectoralised and coherent strategies in the area.

23. Furthermore, the RER issue is also shaped by different dimensions whose logic and temporality have difficulty fitting together. The logic of expertise of consulting firms and the world of technicians and engineers in transport companies are not necessarily in keeping with the temporality of politicians and their logic of decision, often part of processes which also accelerate and slow down at times. The transport operator SNCB has its own strategies, which unquestionably favour what it considers to be its core business as a 'federal' company. Added to this are societal logics in terms of travel, residential locations and others, which are of course related to policies and transport infrastructures, but also have their own dynamics. Finally, this issue testifies to a compromise which is perhaps typically Belgian, as the questions related to works, heavy infrastructure and rolling stock have been resolved at least in part, before settling the more sensitive aspects of the actual transport service as well as related policies which must regulate its use. It is as logical as building a machine before knowing exactly what it will be used for. This is probably the power or at least 'the character of misunderstandings' [Offner, 2012]. Opposition and uncertainty still exist, precisely because they allow each stakeholder to hope that their own visions will triumph some day.

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