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Brussels as an international city

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Bruxelles, ville internationale

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Synopsis nr. 13

Brussels as an international city

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I. Observations

The five characteristics discussed below illustrate the importance of internationalisation in Brussels.

1. *International connectivity*

Brussels is a highly connected city, located at the heart of Europe (note that 19% of the EU's surface area plus Switzerland and Norway holds 60% of the population and represents 72% of the Europe's GDP), and the centre of the continent's densest motorway and high-speed train networks.

Brussels' rank among world cities is largely superior to what could be expected from the size of the city and the strength of the Belgian economy. The GaWC (Globalisation and World Cities, 2000) listed Brussels in seventh place among European cities, far behind the "global cities" of London and Paris, but holding its own with Milan, Frankfurt, Madrid and Amsterdam, and ahead of Zurich.

2. *International character, primarily linked to its functions as the capital of Europe*

This sound position is essentially tied to Brussels' hosting of European institutions, and secondarily to other international institutions, such as NATO. This international presence is growing. The international function itself produces value, but also generates many other activities such as lobbying, consultancy, the media, and a multiplicity of embassies, regional delegations, etc. It thus yields significant multiplier and induced effects, in business and tourism for example.

In terms of jobs, the international institutions in Brussels employ a large number of people: from 38,000 to 41,000 for the European institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council of Ministers, Committee of the Regions...), nearly 4,000 for NATO. Added to these figures are all the parallel activities (15,000-20,000 lobbyists, 1,400

journalists/press, 300 at Regional delegations; 5,322 diplomats, 2,500 other international agencies, over 2,000 international firms; plus 150 international law firms...).

All together, the presence of European and international institutions in Brussels and the induced and multiplier effects count for 13 to 14% of employment and of the Brussels GDP "adjusted" by adding in activities that are not counted in national statistics. These institutions occupy 30% of the office space (3.3 million m² out of 12 million m²) with a surface area of over 700,000 m². The impact on the housing market (rental and purchase) is also significant: 70% of the people employed by these sectors live in Brussels. Lastly, these activities generate a large daily flow of professional visitors from abroad.

3. *A population highly international, multilingual and multicultural*

Of the 1,048,491 Brussels residents counted in 2008, 295,043 (28.14%) were not Belgian nationals. When the number of Belgian citizens of foreign origin is added the figure rises to 50% of the population who have non-Belgian points of reference (Deboosere et al, 2008). Although members of the population are diversely affected by the city's international position as such, this high proportion of residents coming from a variety of horizons is the basis for the city's links with numerous spots on the globe. On the margin of the "official" internationalisation, encouraged by the authorities and major economic operators, these links also spawn the development of "globalisation from below" networks (for example Matonge (Central Africa), Rue de Brabant (Maghreb), Saint-Gilles (Poland), city centre (Asia),...). Certain international conflicts (Middle East, Congo) thus also deeply affect Brussels society.

4. *An emerging centre for art*

Brussels is an international spawning ground for the arts, primarily as the crossroads of the Germanic and Latin cultures. Brussels is also carving itself a role as an international focal point in various artistic realms such as contemporary dance and the opera. In some areas its international standing has surged (for example in visual arts) (Genard et al., 2009). The ArtBrussels fair is steadily becoming a major address for European contemporary art, and several major foreign galleries have opened offices in Brussels. An increasing number of top trend artists have also chosen the city, not only to take advantage of the affordable rent and type of surfaces available, but also because of its dynamism and cultural openness. Recording studios and production offices are also developing, particularly in the audio-visual field.

Brussels is also home to a network of art schools of international renown which attract a large number of top level foreign students, who then launch their career in Brussels. The fashion sector, for example, is flourishing.

All this makes diversity and pluralism the city's prime cultural feature. The contribution of each individual is both possible and necessary in so far as no culture can claim complete domination.

5. *A centre for scientific research and innovation*

With two full universities (ULB and VUB) and the Facultés Universitaires St. Louis (FUSL), campuses of other Belgian universities, along with five higher education institutes and several university hospitals, Brussels is the country's main centre for research and higher education. Over 13,000 people are employed in scientific research activities, 9,000 of which are researchers. Two thirds of these people are working at universities, which points to the R&D sector's poor showing in the private economy (Van Camp et al., 2009). Universities thus play an important (and increasingly vital) role in Brussels' international status: these institutes attract foreign researchers and students, and convey the city's reputation throughout the world, they also participate in research on the European presence in Brussels.

The impact of this international position has been documented sporadically (Mens & Ruimte (s.d., 1992 ; 1994) ; Iris Consulting (1998 ; 2001), IGEAT (2007)). But all researchers working on this topic have highlighted a considerable impact for the Brussels and Belgian economy (Vandermotten et al., 2009). More in-depth research is needed to determine exactly in which areas this internationalisation enters into play and exactly who profits from it, and also to have a more clear understanding of its affect on urban development. (Corijn et al, 2008).

II. Questions-issues

1. *Is supporting this internationalisation the right strategy for development?*

Brussels' metropolitan development is linked to its political functions as a capital city. These functions have become internationalised (capital of Europe) which intensifies the city's connectivity. Brussels is a small world city, which yields a specific form of development in the context of a globalisation that increasingly places metropolises in competition as hubs in this space of flows. The internationalisation trend is linked to external activity that is launched from Brussels. This type of development also tends to overly emphasise the policy services functions and under-evaluate other economic and cultural channels.

The development of company headquarters and the related R&D logistics (knowledge centres, production development) however lags behind (Vandermotten et al., 2009). Internationalisation is a fact and a megatrend. It is also a promising choice for certain types of economic activities and certain sections of the population. If this trend is to be integrated in a project for the city that also ensures sustainable development, the project must be balanced and its effects well managed. Sustaining this development would call for improved management of the projects and taking into account its effects and cultural needs (for example, regarding the use of English). To accompany this development, clearly more attention must be given to the socio-economic and cultural context, particularly the effects of exclusion and dualisation. This is all the more important because alongside the "upstairs" internationalisation of Brussels there is also a "downstairs" internationalisation. The two processes are relatively independent and reinforce the polarisation of Brussels.

2. *Is the image as capital of Europe the best vehicle for internationalisation ?*

Brussels' international functions are not well integrated in the image the residents have of their city, which is still seen in relation to its functions as the capital of Belgium and the notions specific to Belgian federalism (Communities, Regions). The objective weight of international activities and the non-Belgian population is not sufficiently integrated in this scenario to the extent that a love-hate relationship has developed towards the international facet of Brussels. This negative image is reinforced by association of the term "Brussels" with a "European bureaucracy divorced from its people". An important challenge thus seems the image linked to the notion of "capital of Europe", sustained by an approach to European unification that is too institutional, bureaucratic and economy-based and too weak when it comes to ideological, cultural and educational references. These areas are still the sole realm of the EU Member States themselves.

At this level it is important to note that a true "capital city" should be more than the mere location of the power echelons and administrative offices. It should also be a place where the global vision is created, produced and represented. The lack of an image system for the European project hardly provides guidelines to fashion that of Europe's capital. When such a vision is developed it must bear the two above-mentioned shortcomings in mind: the failure of the Brussels citizens to identify with the city's international functions, and the lack of a cultural and intellectual image for the vision of Europe's unification itself.

Making up for these deficits could form the groundwork for a true project for the city itself. Taking up this challenge would give Brussels a special stance among other world cities and confer a distinct touch on the city.

Some changes are needed to encourage this "mental map" where Brussels is a capital of Europe accepted as such by its residents:

- broader acceptance of the EU by the people of Brussels,
- a better and more positive image of the EU in Brussels,
- better interaction between Brussels people and Europeans in the urbanity of Brussels.

It is clear that such a change could not be conveyed nor guided by European civil servants, expatriates and the cosmopolitan population alone. Europe should also project an image as open to the populations and cultures of the Mediterranean, and beneficial to the integration of the least privileged residents.

These changes go hand in hand with a mental shift in the city's axis from a purely Belgian city to one that is international, intercultural, multilingual and cosmopolitan.

3. *Is this development model inclusive?*

Brussels' present development model produces exclusion. The structure of the economy and the jobs market mainly benefits a peripheral population of commuters and creates problems for the Brussels population and its socialisation institutions (school, culture, churches, media...). If the international dynamics moves further along existing models this will only increase the refusal and resistance of a growing portion of the population. Thus any dynamics in this direction must be accompanied by strong policies, needed on the one hand to include a maximum of Brussels residents in this dynamics, and on the other to prevent a maximum of adverse effects (in terms of mobility, job market, housing and use of languages). Any model of international development, if it aims to be sustainable and peacemaking, must take into account the heavy compensations needed to balance the development. These should not only enable a redistribution of purchasing power and re-balance standards of living in order to avoid inequalities, but also finance less productive development models in the proximity, social or non-commercial economies.

4. *What opportunities are available for collateral forms of development?*

The population of Brussels is highly international and distributed unequally throughout its territory. Residents and activities frequent various different city centres which can participate in internationalisation, according to each one's specificity. This means that Brussels can take advantage of several core areas according to the spaces of flow concerned. This kind of "downstairs globalisation" starting from specific city centres (such as Matonge and Rue du Brabant mentioned above) which makes use of the immigrants' cultural and ethnic networks is necessary for a well-balanced dynamics of internationalisation.

Furthermore, over 110,000 people have settled in Brussels because of its international function. They form a population group that is highly cosmopolitan, mixed, multilingual, yet relatively isolated and politically inactive. It would be advisable to

develop an explicit policy for cultural and political integration, in order to integrate them civically in a project for Brussels.

In such a process, the "European quarter" has a key role. A framework plan has been adopted to turn it into a neighbourhood that combines: a) the BCR's prime core for European and international administrative employment; b) a rapidly developing residential area; and c) a recreation and leisure area completely open to the public. The urban development of this quarter must also serve to create an image linked to European construction. The European Quarter must be seen as a European city centre. It can not remain a purely administrative district, but must attract other activities and functions that foster a heightened mix of functions. The most important element is to ensure that the Brussels population does not abandon this neighbourhood and that it does not become an isolated institutional zone. This is cannot be a matter solely for the residents in the surrounding areas, but one for the whole city. Perhaps the most emblematic "contract" to be concluded between the "Eurocrat residents" and the "Bruxellois" would be to turn the European Quarter into a prestigious city centre dedicated to the spirit of Europe. An urban programme of this sort should primarily target the dynamism of public space (squares, parvis, but especially parks).

Furthermore there is no truly integrated plan to transform Brussels into a genuine capital of Europe. The debate, launched every now and then - see the Prodi-Verhofstadt report, the OmbudsPlanMédiateur, the project « A vision for Brussels » (Berlage Institute) – always appears to be abandoned for projects that are more sectorial and fragmented.

5. *And what about international tourism?*

Leisure tourism and the MICE sector (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Events) are another important vehicle for the internationalisation of Brussels. Since 1995, as in most other European metropolises, the number of visitors has grown steadily, from 3.5 to 5.1 million overnight stays per year, close to 50% more. For a large part this process has been driven by the evolution in tourism in the strict sense of the term. While the Region registered hardly 1.2 million overnight stays for leisure tourism in 1995, it hosted over 2.4 million in 2007, almost double. At the same time business stays barely increased over this period, from 2.2 to 2.7 million. Contrary to general thinking, leisure tourism is a substantial source of visits to Brussels. In fact it is almost on equal par with business travel, at least in the number of overnight stays.

The slow growth of business stays in Brussels is the result of several factors combined, including the development of video-conferences, the multiplication of one-day business trips, all the more due to Brussels' excellent accessibility from all Europe's major cities, and lastly due to the fact that the Palais des Congrès has been closed for renovation since 2003.

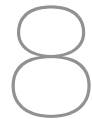
Despite the growth in the number of tourists, Brussels has not risen to the ranks of the most visited European cities. Quite logically it is far behind Paris and London, which each host over 30 million overnight stays per year. It is also clearly less popular than cities such as Barcelona (15 million overnight stays), Amsterdam (9 million), Vienna (10 million) or Munich (9.5 millions), and is ranked at the level of a city such as Stockholm (5.6 million). Furthermore, recent evolution in the number of overnight stays in Brussels has been much less spectacular than other European cities often

cited as examples, such as Barcelona (stays multiplied by 2.5 from 1990 to 2004), Bilbao (stays multiplied by 2.5 from 1992 to 2004), Valencia (multiplied by 2.2 from 1994 to 2004), Prague (multiplied by 2.4 from 1990 to 2004) or Tallin (multiplied by 3.7 from 1994 to 2004).

This said, tourism generates approximately 33,000 jobs in the Brussels-Capital region, 4.9% of total employment. It is thus a fairly important sector: it counts for over 1.5 the number of jobs in construction, two-thirds that of overall industrial employment and as many jobs as those in retail trade. Roughly half of tourism-related jobs are in the horeca sector: some 6,000 (18%) in lodging and about 10,000 (30%) in restaurants, cafes and discotheques. Over 8,500 tourism jobs (27%), including barely 2,800 jobs in the tourist agency/tour operators sector, are linked to transports – a sturdy one fifth of the total jobs. We can also count approx. 3,200 jobs (16%) linked to tourism among the 34,000 jobs in the retail sector. Lastly, 2,500 jobs (8%) can be imputed to the cultural, sports and recreation sector. More basically, the data of the 2001 socio-economic survey shows that jobs in the tourism sector include a high number of low-qualification professions, often held by people who live in the Region.

6. *What kind of integration for the new arrivals, visitors and "foreigners"?*

Because of its international function Brussels needs specific services and hospitality for new arrivals. although foreign immigration continues at a strong rate (Deboosere et al, 2008), there is no integrated policy for reception and integration. There is a need to coordinate approaches and improve efforts to help the new arrivals settle in to Brussels. Furthermore, the type of immigration in question must be considered, whether it is economic (job seekers) or "business" (linked to international functions).



III. Policy options

Although Brussels' international vocation seems to be generally acknowledged, it is nevertheless not integrated into the debate on sustainable development for the city. The visions and projects for development are too fragmentary to lend itself to a true project or to support the formation of a coalition for urban development.

1. *Tourism*

Several initiatives have been taken in Brussels over the past decade to enhance the city's tourist potential, more in the realm of communication and promotion than in works to revamp the infrastructures. Following the first *Assises du Tourisme*, organised in 1994-1995 at the initiative of Minister Dominique Harmel, the Brussels tourist information bureau (T.I.B.) was transformed into a genuine office to promote tourism. In a second phase, following the second *Assises du Tourisme*, organised in 2005 at the initiative of Minister Evelyne Huytebroeck, the BITC (formerly TIB) developed new lines for promotion, in particular highlighting Brussels' European dimension and its "trendy" character. The aim was to attract new publics, especially citizens of the new EU Member States and young adults. The websites "Brussels ToF People" operated by citizens of the EU's 27 Member States living in Brussels, and "Brussels-mania" which targets young adults wishing to come to Brussels, are strong examples of this new direction. Nevertheless this cannot belie the fact that other Community tourist bureaus are involved in marketing the city.

2. *The International Development Plan (IDP)*

In the absence of a third Regional Development Plan, in 2008 the Minister-President launched an International Development Plan (IDP). The status of this road map is not clear. It is not a plan in the usual sense of the term, rather a document laying out intentions and programmes, placing in coherence a series of projects that are not yet finalised and still liable to be amended. Furthermore neither is it a real international development plan. Ten zones are designated, some of which are already covered by a framework plan while others still lack established projects. Appreciation of the IDP varies. Even though it is useful to develop a plan to publicise Brussels internationally, three serious criticisms have been voiced: (a) the plan's lack of coherence and low quality, (b) failure to integrate the ten zones chosen with an integral vision of urban development (the choices seem to reinforce tendencies away from the city centre), and (c) too much leeway to the private sector and the inherent risk to leave international development in the sole hands of the real estate promoters.

3. *The Business Route 2018 for Metropolitan Brussels (BRM)*

This lack of an integral and integrating vision encourages initiatives by civil society and socio-economic stakeholders. For example, in late November 2008, the FEB, VOKA, UWE and BECI launched the Business Route 2018 for Metropolitan Brussels (BRM). This ambitious road map targets economic development of the metropolitan zone by taking advantage of the presence of numerous European and international institutions in Brussels. This should enhance the capacity to develop promising niches and the Region's overall attractiveness. Thus the business world has managed to transcend Community and Regional divides, opting for a cosmopolitan im-

age at a metropolitan scale. However, this plan does not deal with the implications of international development in terms of social exclusion and polarisation.

4. *A project for an international city*

The major shortcoming appear to be the lack of a overarching project for the city that takes the dynamics of globalisation and the city's internationalisation into account, and more particularly one that foresees better integration of Brussels' foreign and foreign origin residents. The international citizens, especially expats linked to the EU, could be more involved in the city project. For this to happen movements in two directions are needed: on the one hand European construction must assume more directly its responsibilities towards its capital, and on the other hand, integrating the "Eurocrats" calls for measures to enhance political integration (ex: voting rights at the Regional level) and civic integration (a proactive policy to promote and open up education and culture). This same strategy also applies to disadvantaged immigrants who should be able to have both realistic prospects for social and economic integration and a possibility to become involved civically in a multi-cultural and international city. All this means that the debate on possible implications for a further international development are even more relevant.

The elements for such a debate are therefore:

- Improved integration of the policy at the Regional level, and especially, development of a forward-looking perspective, offering a vision of the future that is capable of mobilising the actors concerned.
- Extending political rights at the Regional level (a necessary and sufficient condition): passive citizenship can be activated by creating institutional areas for inclusion in the debate on Brussels.
- The considerable problem posed by regulations at multiple levels in a context of a highly mobile population, in a context of local loyalties. This involves attaching political loyalties to a mental map that can provide meaning amidst the nomadism that is characteristic of Brussels. This is how the "capital of Europe" must grow and find its niche in a network of European cities.
- One initiative that can help develop this mental map is to develop a "Cosmopolitan City University" as a place to involve a diverse group of urban stakeholders in a project for the city.
- Developing a sound image and symbolic system for Brussels, capital of Europe, starting from a process of "*city imaging*" rather than "city marketing".
- The spaces of marginality and dissent must be cherished, along with the practices of participatory democracy. This is the only way to incorporate these spaces. A technocratic, managerial and consensual approach with no true public debate will remain divorced from the society it wishes to embrace.

To sum up, signs point towards the continued internationalisation of Brussels. This tendency is taking shape at various levels and is driven by a broad range of actors. It has deep-seated effects on the city's population, economy and culture. But the different roads to internationalisation are not yet integrated, and neither have its adverse effects received due consideration. Furthermore, the task remains to develop a true image of an international city.

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