



Antwerp high-speed station opens

Antwerp Central Station officially opened its new high-speed station on 6 December. The new station, constructed below the existing 19th-century terminal, is designed for high-speed Thalys trains running on the Paris to Amsterdam route. The new route takes trains through a new 3.8km long tunnel built under the city. The project means that international passengers are taken to Antwerp Central station, rather than having to change at the suburban station Antwerpen-Berchem. The direct link will save travelers some 15-25 minutes. The journey time from Paris to Antwerp is now down to 2hrs 7mins.

Belgian railways also launched their new timetable last week. But many commuters have complained that their journeys are now likely to be longer.

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Belgium holds onto AA+ rating

The credit ratings company Fitch Ratings said last week that it does not expect the political stalemate to put downwards pressure on Belgium's stable outlook or its AA+ rating. Fitch Ratings, which provides the world's credit markets with an independent assessment of creditworthiness, also said that it did not expect financial fallout from the proposed constitutional reforms. "A strong track record of achieving budget targets and the automatic reversion to 2007 expenditure ceilings mean that risks to the fiscal outlook from extensive legislative delays are limited," said Brian Coulton, managing director of Fitch's sovereign group, which provides credit ratings for countries.

The country went to the polls last June, but coalition talks have so far failed to produce a government. But Fitch noted that the machinery of government was continuing to operate in the short term, despite the lack of a new coalition.

Fitch does not expect any significant expenditure shocks to arise in the short term and predicts a general government deficit of 0.3% of GDP in 2007 and 0.4% in 2008, leading to a decline in the government debt/GDP ratio from 84.6% in 2007 to 81.8% in 2008.

The ratings firm accepted that Belgium might one day split in two but said that it was unlikely to happen over the medium-term. It added that the most likely scenario is that hard-fought negotiations will result in constitutional changes that further decentralise the Belgian state.

GOING NOWHERE

One in four drivers stuck in traffic

Derek Blyth

One-quarter of Belgian drivers gets stuck in at least one traffic jam on their commute to work, according to a recent report in the Flemish daily *Het Nieuwsblad*. The problem has now reached a critical level, with one employee in three looking for a different job to escape traffic delays. Drivers under 30 are the most frustrated road-users, with 40% saying that they want to change their jobs.

Many of those interviewed said that better public transport could

offer a solution to the problem of traffic congestion. A considerable number of drivers were willing to telework from home to avoid the daily grind. Heavy trucks were seen as a major cause of traffic jams, and many people said that lorries should be banned from the motorways during the rush hours or at least prevented from overtaking.

Road transport authorities are increasingly being called upon to find a solution to the daily misery. But experts are divided about what causes traffic to grind

to a halt. "There are two schools of thought in traffic jam studies," says Sven Maerivoet of the traffic study group Transport & Mobility Leuven. "One group argues that traffic jams happen spontaneously as a result of driving behaviour. The other group see the cause lying in the road network and traffic bottlenecks."

Last Wednesday traffic was brought to a standstill on the Brussels Ring when a Lithuanian truck loaded with pork hit a car on the Vilvoorde flyover. The accident, caused by a burst tyre, caused 500

litres of diesel fuel to spill across the southbound carriageway. Several cars skidded on the spillage, but no one was seriously injured.

Two days earlier the Flemish traffic centre recorded 200 kilometres of traffic jams across the region. The queues were longer than average because of heavy rain, which led to a series of minor accidents. But the situation was considerably worse in The Netherlands on the same day, when some 500 kilometres of traffic jams blocked a large part of the Dutch motorway system.

