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Wednesday, 23 October, 2019

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Four out of five people find the mobility situation in Belgium "deplorable," according to a poll carried out by *La Libre* newspaper and UCM, the organisation for the self-employed. According to respondents to the poll, the main causes of the problem are the fractured and fragmented political system, where there are three regional and one federal minister of mobility as well as three regional public transport systems; and the lack of public investment in roads and in alternative means of transport, including multi-modal (bike, train, tram for example).

On the question of investment, the paper quotes federal mobility minister François Bellot: "Belgium invests an average of 0.6% of its GDP, compared with an average of 1% among the 28 member states of the European Union."

The costs are enormous, both in terms of loss to the economy and the detrimental health effects of an endless increase in the use of private cars. In a study from 2013, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) put the cost of time wasted in traffic (and at bus-stops) at 1-2% of GDP. According to Professor Sven Maerivoet of the university of Leuven, congestion costs anywhere between 0.6 and 3 million euros a day in Belgium, which in 2015 translated into a loss of 200 million to one billion euros – a cost which can only have increased since then.

In its study of 2013, the OECD raised several points about Belgium, mentioning how government subsidy of road traffic (namely the fiscal advantage of the company car) led to increased congestion and pollution, the lack of a national infrastructure plan, the failure of subsidies for rail and public transport to deal with problems, and the lack of a plan to tackle congestion in public transport by, for instance, operating a peak and off-peak fares system.

That was six years ago. "Nothing has really changed, even if we feel here and there the stirrings of the beginnings of a solution," the paper concludes.

Some figures from the latest UCM poll:

- The average time lost in traffic by respondents was 17 minutes and 34 seconds a day, worth an estimated 235 million euros a year in lost productivity.

- The means of transport preferred by those polled was the car to the

tune of 86% of respondents. That figure is, however, nuanced by the fact that most of the respondents were self-employed, with more than half based in Brussels and Walloon Brabant. Other means didn't even come close: 17% on foot, 14% by bike, 13% by train and 10% by tram.

- 51% said they never used public transport, and a further 21% almost never. Only 17% use public transport daily or several days a week.
- Having said that, more than 62% were in favour of increasing the availability of public transport, especially multi-modal transport across regional boundaries. A problem which, commented Clarisse Ramakers of UCM, has a clear cause: "We all know that at the level of the concertation committee, which brings together representatives of the various governments, things don't function very well."

Alan Hope

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