

Polluted, bike-hostile Brussels to slam on the brakes

20 July 2019, by Matthieu Demeestere



From 2021, any car that escapes the gridlock in Brussels will still be limited to only 30 kilometres per hour - less than 19 mph

Brussels has made its choice: to reduce emissions and encourage greener, two-wheeled transport options, the road speed limit will have to come down.

From 2021, any car that escapes the gridlock on the streets of Europe's capital will still be limited to only 30 kilometres per hour—less than 19 mph.

The Belgian city is following in the footsteps of Berlin and Madrid, but road-users are not convinced that the measure will make any real difference.

Restrictions already apply to around 55 percent of the city, but the capital region's left-Green government is rolling the limit out beyond residential districts.

By January 1, 2021, cars, vans and trucks will face a 30 kph limit everywhere apart from key thoroughfares—grand avenues and the inner ring-road.

But even with this 18-month delay, the measure is regarded as ambitious by many experts and unwelcome by many road-users already mired in Brussels' notorious road chaos.

Benoit Godart, spokesman for road-safety agency Vias, says studies have shown that without physical speed-limiting infrastructure, drivers ignore limits.

"If it's just a question of a couple of signs announcing the start and end of a 30-kilometre zone, that's no use," he told AFP.

But if it's a question of putting in traffic-calming measures, that will come at a cost to both the capital region and the 19 communes that make up the city.

Doesn't feel safe

Conservative opposition councillors are opposed and, perhaps not surprisingly, so are taxi drivers.

"Traffic congestion makes it impossible to pass 30 and 40 kilometres an hour anyway," said Fethi Dhib, who has been on the road since 1987.

In this, Brussels has more in common with congestion champions London and Moscow than bike-riding cities in the Netherlands or Scandinavia. In the UK capital, the average speed is 10 kilometres per hour.

Belgian cyclist associations and environmental groups have welcomed the limit change, however. And Godart said his agency believes it will improve the safety of other road users.

"A pedestrian hit by a vehicle travelling 30 kph has around three times more chance of survival than one hit by a vehicle travelling 50," he said.

Bike riders such as Dudley Curtis, a 42-year-old Briton, hoped Belgian police enforce the new limit,

but also argued for better-protected cycle lanes.

"I think we also need separate cycling infrastructures in Brussels because often we're just mixed up all with the traffic and the cars, vans and the lorries are just cutting into us," he told AFP.

"It's quite terrible sometimes, the behaviour of the drivers. You've got some of them honking at you trying to tell you to get out of their way. Generally it doesn't feel safe."

Parthena Papadopoulou, an EU official from Greece and a pedestrian, agrees that the bikes should be better segregated—but not for the same reason.

It's the cyclists who scare her. "They have all the rights and we have none," she laments. "They just put their heads down and go."

And, as for the new speed limit, she sees a problem: "Little by little, they're trying to get rid of cars. I don't know how the auto plants are going to survive, or any of the folk who work in them."

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