VOICE Country Sheet

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Vulnerable road users in Belgium

Part I

Introduction

Despite recent improvements, Belgium still finds itself below the EU road casualty average. According to figures available in the CARE database[1], Belgium had one of the highest fatality rates within the EU-15 group in 2001, only ahead of Portugal and Greece[2]. Presently, the country ranks 12 within the EU-25 group. Within its borders, figures vary according to region. Wallonia has a weak record, with 173 fatalities per million inhabitants whereas Flanders performs better with 119 fatalities per million inhabitants[3]. The national average is 128 deaths per million inhabitants. More specifically, fatality rates among vulnerable road users are a cause for concern: in 2002, 108 cyclists and 132 pedestrians died on Belgian roads out of a total of approximately 1,350 road users[4]. It is difficult to say whether fatalities have decreased considerably in the past 4 years as up-to-date data is not available.

Different actors/levels of government

Belgium is a country with a complex federal structure and as a result cooperation and coordination of policies is not an easy task. This is due to the fact that the federal state, the language communities and the regions are all equal under the law but their spheres of influence vary[5]. To make matters even more complicated, it is the federal government that is responsible for passing road safety legislation and for taking legal initiatives to protect vulnerable road users, but it is the regional and local authorities that are responsible for managing and maintaining the roads and initiatives in the field of road safety[6].



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Regional road safety policies

Road safety concerns and priorities vary according to the different regions. Flanders and Brussels are predominantly urban. In Flanders, in particular, the bicycle plays a major role in terms of mobility and the use of public transport has been on the rise whereas in Wallonia, people are still very dependent on the car[7].

The Flemish region seems to favour enforcement measures such as the 70 km/h limit on national roads, more radar control and so on. Wallonia, on the other hand, tends to focus more on the acceptability of measures to drivers[8]. The regional policies also vary considerably in terms of radar speed control. For instance, the number of fixed radars in Flanders is considerably higher than in Wallonia – in 2003, there existed 260 radars in Flanders and only 15 in Wallonia[9]. It must be noted, however, that additional radars have been foreseen for the less equipped zones[10].

VOICE

VOICE : Vulnerable Road User Organisations in cooperation across Europe

VOICE is a network to ensure that usually neglected VOICEs are heard in the transport debate – those of vulnerable road users.

The VOICE coalition currently consists of:
AGE - the European Older People's Platform; ANEC - the European consumer voice in standardisation; EPHA Environment Network European Child Safety Alliance; European Disability Forum European Public Health Alliance; European Federation for Transport and Environment; Voetgangersbeweging - Flemish Pedestrian Association, BEUC; European Transport Safety Council

More information: www.etsc.be/Voice.php

Municipal road safety policies

The municipalities manage their own road networks in terms of infrastructure, safety, equipments and so on. There exists a great disparity amongst them. Certain municipalities place a lot of emphasis on enforcement, education, and so on whereas others do not prioritise road safety[11].

Civil society has played an important role in placing road safety on the political agenda. Vulnerable road user organisations have added a new impetus to road safety policies. However, the lack of unity amongst the different actors within the road safety system has slowed down the implementation of policies. Furthermore, the priorities and policies in terms of road safety also vary according to the region and to the municipality.

It is difficult to get the different actors to cooperate and work together as they each have different strategies and realms of activities – local and federal police; federal and regional ministries of mobility, infrastructure, interior, justice; road user associations, and so on. Closer cooperation, however, is essential if implementation and enforcement of road safety rules are to be effective in reducing casualties in the country.

30 km zones around schools

In order to address the issue of road safety around schools, the federal government passed a law on 26 April 2004 under which all levels of government (regions, provinces, towns and municipalities) are required to impose a speed limit of 30 km/h in all school surroundings throughout the country.[12] This new rule came into force on 1 September 2005.[13]

There already exist many 30 km zones. However, those areas in which the speed limit was previously higher than 30 km/h risk remaining unchanged due to a lack of proper enforcement and appropriate traffic calming measures such as road narrowing, speed bumps, and chicanes. In such cases, a speed limit sign might not be enough and drivers might still stick to 50 or 70 km/h. The fact that many school entrances are hidden from view or not properly indicated contributes to a lack of safety around schools.[14] There is a risk that the 30 km/h rule will not be respected unless local authorities take proper action.

It is important that the speed issue is addressed sooner than later. As it stands, two out of three parents take their children to school by car, even when they live in the neighbourhood. This is partly due to the fact that parents find the road dangerous and partly because they find it easier and faster to use the car. As a result, traffic increases thus making the school area unsafe.[15] The parents' perception of danger may well come from the fact that many road accidents involving children occur near schools.[16]



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Furthermore, parents tend to lose a lot of time by looking for parking space and end up double parking or parking in areas reserved for bicycles, pedestrians or pedestrian crossings, by default creating potentially dangerous situations for pedestrians and cyclists.[17] This situation can also be particularly difficult for wheelchair users who are unable to cross the road if a car is parked on the pavement, or blind or partially sighted persons who are not prepared for unexpected obstacles in their way and may injure themselves as a result.

The "Street Code"

Important changes under the Street Code[18] were incorporated into the Traffic Code in 2003.[19] The Street Code, which came into force on 1 January 2004, has been adopted due to pressure from organisations representing the interests of pedestrians, cyclists, and disabled persons. The main objectives of the Street Code are to: 1) change the mentality and behaviour of road users so as to improve safety in the streets; 2) ensure better protection of vulnerable road users; 3) take into account the place, rights and obligations of each different road user.


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A good example is the provision that allows cyclists to circulate in both directions in one-way streets with a speed limit no higher than 50 km/h. It essentially aims at preventing cyclists from taking unnecessary detours or dangerous routes.[20] Even though it came into force on 1 July 2004, many municipalities have been slow to implement this measure, particularly in the Brussels region and in Wallonia.

Many local authorities argue that the number of accidents will increase and that they will be held accountable for it. Evidence, however, indicates otherwise. The Belgian Road Safety Institute and cyclists' organisation GRACQ have launched a joint campaign[21] to raise awareness about the issue but a more concerted action is necessary in order to have this measure fully implemented.

Accident data

Statistical information, and accident data in particular, is another area which is sadly neglected in Belgium. Reliable and up-to-date data is not readily available for the country as a whole. The most recent figures on road casualties or fatalities involving vulnerable road users dates back to 2002.

Underreporting is another serious problem. Even though accidents seem to be decreasing generally over the past few years, it is difficult to ascertain the present situation as regards cyclists and pedestrians. A significant number of accidents are not reported.[22] Only 85% of police officers make use of the same reporting system – out of the 196 local police zones, 141 are linked to the same network.[23] This year, the Belgian Ministry of Mobility began to publish a bi-monthly accident data report known as "baromètre de la sécurité routière". However, it is not comprehensive enough in that it does not differentiate between the road users and it focuses mostly on motorway accidents.

Part II

What works best? Examples from Europe

Many of the problems Belgium is currently facing are not unique. Speed reduction measures, road policy coordination, user-friendlier urban infrastructure design and accident data collection are issues that countries in Europe and around the world need to take into account in order to improve the safety of the most vulnerable and ultimately all road users. The examples presented bellow illustrate initiatives taken by other countries that could serve as a tool kit of measures to be implemented in Belgium.

Measures to protect vulnerable road users at EU level

In 2001, the Commission proposed an ambitious target to halve the number of road fatalities by 2010 (White Paper on the European Policy for Transports, 2001). In order to pave the way towards achieving this target, the Commission subsequently published a European Road Safety Action Programme (COM (2003) 311 final). It stressed the need for better protection of vulnerable road users. In particular, it highlighted the relevance of education and awareness campaigns aimed at vulnerable road users and the importance of the tests conducted by EuroNCAP (European New Car Assessment Programme) regarding passive safety, which concerns protection against injury in the event of a crash.

Safer car fronts for pedestrians and cyclists are a priority to EU action. Mindful of the fact that every year some 8,000 pedestrians and cyclists are killed and a further 300,000 injured on European roads, the Parliament and Council adopted a Directive (2003/102/EC) which aims to reduce the severity of injuries to pedestrians by laying down tests and to introduce changes to the front of vehicles, concentrating essentially on the bonnet and bumper. These could help prevent up to 2,000 pedestrian fatalities a year. European, Japanese and Korean car manufacturers have already agreed to produce vehicles complying with these provisions and to introduce a range of other safety measures, which will reduce the risk of serious or fatal injuries to pedestrians. The second stage of this Directive is to be reviewed and all involved must ensure that the standards eventually adopted give the protection of vulnerable road users the highest priority.

Road Safety policy coordination

Like Belgium, Switzerland is a country with a federal system, different levels of government, various language communities and many different road safety actors. Yet, it has a considerably better road safety record.[24] In 2000, the federal government launched a new road safety policy based on the Scandinavian Vision Zero approach according to which road deaths and serious injuries should be reduced to zero, and human error taken into account. Key to the effective implementation of the proposed measures is the commitment from the federal government, the cantons (regions), the municipalities and other road safety actors to coordinate their activities and set priorities in order to achieve fixed and common goals. Quality checks and periodical reports are also foreseen.[25] Although no official results are available yet, Belgian authorities could seek to set up a similar system of road safety coordination that holds all actors accountable.



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In Norway, road safety policy is part of the national transport policy. Road safety work is implemented on 4 levels: national, regional, counties, and local. The Norwegian Public Works Administration, under the direction of the Ministry of Transport, cooperates with the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs, the Police and the National Society for Road Safety in the formulation of a national traffic safety action plan and each actor is allocated a different task. Local authorities are also requested to formulate their own traffic safety plans. This effective sharing of responsibility and monitoring system is reflected in Norway's road safety record, which is one of the best in Europe.[26]

The Swiss and Norwegian examples show that effective implementation of measures for improved road safety - including safer walking and cycling - requires an effort by all of the many professionals involved, together with commitment by policymakers.[27]

30 km/h zones around schools

In Europe, the legislation stipulating that speed in school surroundings should be restricted to 30km/h seems to be unique to the Belgian context. It is, in fact, an emergency measure meant to improve safety in areas where children are likely to walk, cycle and play as many schools are located on busy roads outside residential areas where the speed limits are often higher. It is therefore important that more residential and urban areas be turned into 30 km zones where children and adults alike can walk and cycle safely. This requires proper enforcement and traffic calming measures.

The number of 30 km zones in the city of Reykjavik in Iceland has been on the rise in the past 10 years. According to a study carried out by the Reykjavik's Department of Public Works,[28] serious accidents decreased by 60% in 30 km/h zones between 1990 and 2004 and the decrease was more pronounced than in areas where the 30km/h restriction had not been implemented. There was also a decrease in accidents involving pedestrians with approximately 17 per year.

In the Netherlands, motorists are discouraged from driving in residential areas[29] through the implementation of a 30km/h limit and speed reducing measures such as speed bumps, road narrowings and so on. Moreover, only cars coming from or going to a particular address in the area are normally allowed in. Cars with a different destination are encouraged to use other routes. On average, injuries decrease by 25% when a 50km/h residential area is redesigned as a 30km/h zone. In 2002, a third of severe crashes in the country involved motor vehicles and cyclists or pedestrians, but only 21% of these crashes occurred in residential streets which account for three quarters of the urban road length.[30]

In Belgium itself, many cities have already developed large 30 km zones independently from the new legislation focusing on school surroundings. Flanders has taken the lead, one of the reasons being the higher number of cyclists on the roads. There have also been noteworthy initiatives involving schools and parents in the elaboration of safe routes to schools combined with road safety education.[31] Furthermore, the Voetgangersbeweging, a pedestrian organisation in Flanders, with the support of the Flemish and federal government, has produced and distributed material ranging from posters and flyers to road furniture such as road signs to schools in order to increase their visibility and to alert drivers when they enter a 30 km zone. These are good examples of how alternative solutions can be found to improve the safety of children in the absence of appropriate traffic calming measures near their schools.



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Accident data

France is an excellent example of a country that has invested in providing reliable and up-to-date figures to highlight serious problems and later on improvements incurred as a result of its national road safety campaign. In 2002, President Jacques Chirac declared road safety as one of his top priorities. There was ample evidence at the time that drivers were not sufficiently respectful of the law. In the meantime, many measures have been implemented and have received much support from civil society organisations as well as media coverage. A major advantage in this regard is that indicators on speed and traffic accidents have been available in France for some time. Figures proving the success of the new measures could then be presented to the public without major delay.[32]

The UK has one of the best overall road safety records in the EU. Every year, the Department for Transport publishes a comprehensive "transport statistics bulletin" focusing on road casualties and accounting for a wide variety of road users, types of road, and types of accident severity.[33] These annual reports keep road safety actors as well as the public informed. The results are widely disseminated, which provides a boost to road safety campaigning and enforcement.

Belgian Campaigns and Organisations

In Belgium there are a number of organisations that promote the interests of vulnerable road users, some of which are listed here.

The **Voetgangersbeweging** (www.voetgangersbeweging.be) is a pedestrian organisation that has been very active in raising awareness about the new Zone 30 legislation by means of the Octopus campaign.

The **Belgian Road Safety Institute BIVV/IBSR** (www.bivv.be / www.ibsr.be) is supported by the Ministry of Transport and organises awareness campaigns, often in conjunction with other local organisations, and disseminates information related to road safety. The Institute also manages the website jesuispour.be/ ikbenvoor.be, which is a forum for citizens and organisations that advocate increased road safety.

Langzaam Verkeer has been divided into **Mobiel 21** (www.mobiel21.be) which is responsible for two well-known campaigns for primary schools: ***Fietspoolen*** (Bicycle Pool) (www.fietspoolen.be) and ***Milieu en vriendelijk naar school*** (Safe and environment friendly to school) (www.milieuvriendeliknaarschool.be); and **Vectris** (www.vectris.be) which is more research-driven.

Fietsersbond (www.fietsersbond.be) promotes cycling in Flanders and the Brussels region whereas **GRACQ** (www.gracq.org) concentrates on Brussels and Wallonia.

The **Belgian Disability Forum (BDF)** promotes the rights of disabled persons and acts as a bridge between Belgian associations and the European institutions.

By far the most important information sources for statistical crash analyses are data collected by the police or similar agencies at national level. Some of the weaknesses of this source of information for pedestrian and cyclist casualties are related to comprehensiveness and quality, and underreporting. In the case of Belgium, the local and federal police have a crucial role to play by improving and harmonising their reporting system.

Furthermore, statistical analysis based on standard crash data needs to be complemented by approaches such as observation of traffic conflict techniques, traffic behaviour, collection of travel data about walking and cycling, amongst others. There is also a particular need for data about injuries in traffic to people with reduced mobility, in view of the growing concern to meet their requirements.[34] The Belgian federal and regional authorities should encourage this type of research by providing more support to research institutes and road user organisations.

Part III

All actors contributing

The examples of what has worked in various locations illustrate mainly what local authorities can do to improve the protection of vulnerable road users. But national and European decision makers also have a role to play.

At a national level the government must ensure the frameworks they establish for more local action support and stimulate the spread of initiatives that have been successful. Additionally the legislative framework for transport policy in general needs to be strengthened. Establishing a legal framework which addresses those factors that raise road risk as a priority needs to be the focus of government action rather than an afterthought. This means the legislation that establishes traffic law and the related sanctions needs to be framed so as to target the factors that most increase road risk. In Belgium the areas that specifically need to be strengthened are appropriate traffic calming measures and strict sanctions applicable for exceeding urban speed limits, better road safety coordination, and more effective accident data gathering, particularly relating to vulnerable road users.

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