

Brussels, a sustainable capital of Europe?

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Prague, Frankfurt and Luxembourg seem to have competing claims, write Philippe Van Parijs and Jonathan Van Parijs

On the map, Brussels seems an odd choice as the capital of the EU. Its location – in the north-west of a Union that has been pushed east and south-east as it has expanded to 27 members – places it far from the geographical centre of today's re-united Europe. As climate change makes the ecological cost of travelling increasingly salient and as further enlargement to the East is being envisaged, is it not obvious that Brussels is becoming an inappropriate place for people from all over the EU to keep meeting?

Let us bluntly suppose, if only for the sake of the exercise, that the only concern that should affect the choice of a city as a capital is the minimization of travel. What are then the cities that qualify as the best options in the EU as it is now, and under an extreme enlargement scenario that includes the whole of the Balkans, Moldova and Turkey?

In a first variant of our exercise, let us assume that meetings typically consist of one diplomat from each member state travelling to the EU capital. To ensure that diplomats travelled the fewest kilometres possible from the capital of their home country, the best choice for the EU 27 capital would then be Prague. In our extreme enlargement scenario, Vienna would become the best choice.

This is, however, a very naïve view of the minimization of travel. It assigns the same importance to distance from Paris or London as to distance from Valetta or Nicosia. Surely, it makes more sense to give distance from each member state a weight that varies as a function of the size of their respective populations. Once this is done, Frankfurt turns out to be the best choice with the current membership of the EU, and Munich in the extreme enlargement scenario.

In practice, however, the people who are most likely to participate in European public affairs come disproportionately from large cities. It may therefore be argued that the travelling distance to be minimized should rather be the one that separates a prospective capital from the metropolitan areas of the EU, each weighted by the size of its population. Does then make a difference? Yes it does. The best choice then becomes Luxembourg in the current EU and Strasbourg in our extreme enlargement scenario.

This ranking is arguably a better reflection of the reality of a European capital. But if what matters is the minimization of travel, it should make more sense to focus more narrowly on those people whose activity is transnational, whether they work for international governmental organizations (say, the FAO in Rome or Europol in The Hague) or for international NGOs (say, the headquarters of Greenpeace or a pan-European industrial lobby). This suggests a final variant of our exercise, which weights distances by the number and importance of the offices of such organizations located in the various cities. The best choice then becomes Brussels in EU27, and it remains Brussels in the enlargement scenario. Why? Essentially because of the massive concentration of such offices in London and Paris, and above all in Brussels itself.

The criterion that underlies this fourth ranking, duly refined, may be the most relevant in the short term. But it also seems by far the most vulnerable to change. After all, secretariats of organisations are created or moved much more rapidly and easily than capitals are added or populations moved. Some further reflection suggests, however, that this assumption is wrong.

Firstly, there is *network power*. Countless transnational associations are located in Brussels, many of them not directly because they aim to lobby the European Commission or the European Parliament, but simply because of the presence in Brussels of so many other associations with which it is important for each of them to have frequent contact. Once settled in Brussels, few of them can escape the power of this magnet, especially as more and more are expected to join them.

This mechanism operates on the "peripheral" organizations, but what about the European institutions themselves? It is worth remembering that Brussels became the EU's capital not by decision, but by indecision. In 1958, its position in the alphabet gave Belgium the first presidency of the Council of Ministers and, therefore, the task of housing civil servants for the two newly created Communities (EEC and Euratom). The inability to make a unanimous official choice gradually led to making Brussels the de facto EU capital. If stalemate could not be overcome with six member states, is it reasonable to expect this to change with twenty-seven?

Not really, especially if one takes into account a further factor: the *sunk costs* which could not be recovered, in case of move, by both organizations and households. In half a century of growing presence in Brussels, the European institutions themselves, the permanent representations of the member states, countless lobbies, medias and associations and their tens of thousands of employees have gradually expanded and improved their investment in the European capital. For many of them, moving to another city would not only be a nuisance. It would be an economic disaster.

The conjunction of these considerations suggests that what seemed to be the most important yet the most vulnerable of our four rankings may well be the most stable. For purely contingent historical reasons, Brussels has become Europe's capital. Powerful mechanisms now combine to make this irreversible even in the event of a dramatic further enlargement to the east — just as irreversible as the (rather more) deliberate choice of Washington DC has proven to be despite the no less dramatic enlargement of the US to the west.

Irreversible under any conditions? Yes, provided the quibbles between Flemings and Walloons remain what they are, rather than become something that starts resembling a civil war.

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