



Brussels' position as capital of Europe is getting stronger but the city could do so much more to justify its status, writes Tim King

Brussels has become the capital of Europe by accident rather than design. The capital of Flanders and Belgium is now also the capital of the European Union, but there has never been an official decision to this effect: it has come about through a series of incremental steps.

Over the past nine months, we have witnessed another incremental change that has consolidated Brussels' position as capital of Europe. Herman Van Rompuy, who presides over meetings of the EU's national leaders, the European Council, wants them to meet every month. He has already increased the frequency of European Council meetings from four a year to six: in February, March, June, September, October and December. Until 2003, European Council meetings were hosted by the country holding the rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers, but now they are all held in Brussels, and the more frequently the European Council meets, the stronger is Brussels' claim to be capital of Europe.

Yet Brussels is not the European equivalent of Washington, DC. Whereas Washington's position is assured by a special provision to create the US federal capital laid down in article one of the US Constitution, the EU still has no constitution and successive treaties have studiously avoided anointing Brussels as the capital of Europe ahead of Strasbourg and Luxembourg.

Making Brussels into a separate, autonomous EU territory in the style of the District of Columbia will not happen, even if some wild dreamers think that it would be a way for Brussels to free itself from Belgium

and the associated political, linguistic and fiscal in-fighting between Flanders and Wallonia. They refuse to see that such in-fighting is what makes it impossible to separate a European capital from the surrounding state.

So Brussels will go on being part of Belgium. But that does not mean it cannot be a better European capital. Because the European Union has so many oddities, the oddity of Brussels as the 'unofficial', improvised capital is easy to get used to, and then easy to ignore. But that is to lose sight of some harmful consequences. A question that is not asked often enough – perhaps because it is politically incorrect, perhaps because it is considered futile – is this: if the European Union had sat down and designed its own capital, how would things have turned out differently?

Here are some points on which both the EU and Belgium are failing at present:

Architecture

With a few exceptions, the European Union's contribution to the architecture of Brussels is shockingly bad. European Commission offices are for the most part uninspiring. This is not the Commission's fault: it is only in recent years that the Commission has been able to own buildings rather than rent them.

The European Parliament's building in Brussels started out as a speculative venture, disguised as a conference centre. Without designated status as Europe's capital, the aesthetics were left in the hands of private-sector property speculators.

Beyond the architectural merit of the individual buildings, the spatial planning has been dreadful. In the Schuman area and in the area

around the Parliament, the construction of EU buildings was imposed to the detriment of the residents. It still seems the case that the distribution of EU staff in the city pays little attention to the interests of Brussels.

Who pays what?

Since Brussels does not have official status as the EU's capital, the question of fiscal transfers goes nowhere. It is not hard to find Belgians who believe that the EU institutions are a drain on the Brussels economy and that EU civil servants pay no tax. Where the presence of the EU requires Brussels to invest in infrastructure projects, who foots the bill, they ask. Meanwhile, EU civil servants mutter darkly about how much they contribute to the Brussels economy, for a poor return.

Electoral rights

To the question of whether a special fiscal regime is needed, can be added another layer of complication – voting rights. Non-Belgian residents from other EU states are allowed to vote in local district elections and (nowadays) the European Parliament elections, but denied a vote in Belgium's regional and federal elections. Note in passing that a similar problem exists for the District of Columbia, whose residents are not represented in the Senate and only partially in the House of Representatives. Note also that Belgium's linguistic divisions create another set of disputes about fiscal transfers and voting rights.

Policing and justice

Another simmering source of tension between Brussels and the EU institutions is policing. An unofficial EU capital has some special policing challenges, including: a concentration of wealthy foreigners near EU institutions who will be

a target for muggings and car-jackings; frequent demonstrations outside EU buildings (some of them violent); and regular visits from high-level politicians who are a security risk.

Although EU institutions have their own security services, to a large extent they must rely on the Brussels police, whose reform has been appallingly slow. (Another reform plan was delayed last week.) Where the EU institutions have to resort to Brussels courts, they rarely find a speedy response.

The list of issues begins to pile up. Ask international civil servants about their perception of Brussels as a host city to their institution and the responses tend to be very mixed. Much depends on what they are used to and what their expectations were. Some frustrations are shared with Brussels-born residents. Many responses are common to other foreigners in Brussels. The Belgian government's failure to provide a site for another European school often comes up.

The failures and faults are not all on one side, however. The EU has done itself (and Brussels) no favours by refusing to end the wasteful nonsense of the European Parliament having two seats in Strasbourg and Brussels.

While we're waiting, a more cheerful thought is what the cultural implications of being officially designated as an EU capital might be. Brussels is, in many respects, a flourishing cultural centre, particularly for music and the visual arts, less so for theatre, but a European capital could be so much more.

These questions will feature in a debate about Brussels' position as the capital of Europe that I will be chairing this Saturday (2 October) on the campus of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. It is just one part of a bigger discussion (1-3 October) about the future of Brussels, the Brussels Citizens University.