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Nieuw stadion en openbare besluitvorming: controverse rond de thuisbasis van Union Saint-Gilloise

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In order to see the figures in a better resolution, go to the article online and click on
“Original” below it.

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Introduction

- 1 The desire to build stadiums for football or other professional sports in or near urban areas is not new [Bale and Moen, 1995; Sorez, 2011; Delépine, 2014]. In the 21st century, at a time of “global sport” [Beissel and Andrews, 2022] and “transnational football business” [Giulianotti and Robertson, 2012; Dermit-Richard, 2013], these projects are promoted more and more by private developers [Delaney, Eckstein, 2003; Cournoyer-Gendron, Trudelle, Devisme, 2019: 6]. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it may involve providing a club or national team with a stadium which complies with the standards imposed by the private bodies which organise professional competitions,

such as Belgium's Pro League or the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Secondly, building a bigger stadium can be justified by actual or expected growth in demand due to actual or expected improved performance by the home team. Finally, it may involve improving the quality of the infrastructure, by proposing more comfortable seats which are usually sold at a higher price: covered seats, VIP seats, etc. Increased ticket sales help to boost the revenue of a club, allowing higher income for players, coaches, managers and shareholders, thus enhancing its market value. With this in mind, a stadium could have a multifunctional purpose, with its other uses (sports, commercial, events, etc.) generating additional revenue.

- 2 From a collective interest point of view, the public authorities could support the construction of a new stadium for two reasons: firstly, as an infrastructure for a very widespread leisure activity (attending football matches); secondly, as a lever for local growth [Cournoyer-Gendron, Trudelle and Devisme, 2019: 11] and a vector for city marketing [Le Noé, 2002: 32-35], in a context of regional competitiveness between cities [Bacqué, 1998; Brenner, 2009]. Consequently, in addition to issuing the necessary building permits, the public authorities may, for example, grant a free long lease on a plot of land belonging to them and/or cover all or part of the costs of building the new stadium and developing its surroundings [Bradburry, Coates and Humphreys, 2024]. Conversely, concerns related to the environment, mobility, tranquility and preserving the pre-existing uses of these locations may call into question the social utility of new stadiums [Lekakis, 2018; Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 3; Lucchese and Heidinger, 2024], which can lead to the “stadiumisation” of neighbourhoods, especially if they are residential [Rivière, 2010]. Sometimes described as “big and unnecessary projects forced upon citizens” [Binctin, 2014; Grisoni *et al*, 2018], new stadium projects are challenged both in terms of global ecological issues such as climate change (warming and flooding), the increasing scarcity of undeveloped land and the decline in biodiversity¹, and public decision-making processes which are opposed to making “participatory democracy a new paradigm of public action” [Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005; see also: Schiffino and Van Ingelgom, 2021; Blondiaux, 2022].
- 3 For the past 30 years, stadiums have been appearing in many European cities², sometimes at a quick pace, such as in France – Paris (Stade de France, 1998), Le Havre (2012), Lille (2012), Nice (2013), Bordeaux (2015) and Lyon (2016) – and in the UK – London (Arsenal, 2006; West Ham, 2012, Tottenham, 2017, Brentford, 2020), Manchester (City, 2003) and Liverpool (Everton, 2025). It is rare to see projects being abandoned due to opposition [Sawicki, 2012; Cournoyer-Gendron, Trudelle and Devisme, 2019]. In contrast, no new professional football stadiums have been built to date in Belgium, with the exception of the Ghelemco Arena in Ghent in 2013³. Although projects seem to be under way in La Louvière and Charleroi, the failure of new stadium projects due to local resistance has left its mark in people's minds⁴. Two projects from the beginning of this century are discussed in particular: the not yet abandoned project for a new stadium in Bruges and the one which was called off in Brussels to replace the current Roi Baudouin stadium at Heysel with a new “national stadium” and new home of RSC Anderlecht [Govaert, 2022].
- 4 In recent years, a new project was launched in Brussels, to the benefit of Royale Union Saint-Gilloise (RUSG). This is the subject of this article. Like the existing case studies in political science [Bacqué, 1998; Sawicki, 2012; Lekakis, 2018; Cournoyer-Gendron, Trudelle and Devisme, 2019; Govaert, 2022], this article aims to document the terms of

the controversy [Lascoumes, 2019] by considering them within the public decision-making process as it unfolded during the 2018-2024 municipal legislature. Our case study is rooted in public policy analysis [Moran, Rein and Goodin, 2008; de Maillard and Kübler, 2016; Jacob and Schiffino, 2021], and is based on a body of documentation including first-hand data (official public documents, points of view of stakeholders published on their websites or Facebook pages, etc.) and second-hand data (articles from traditional or community media). We were careful to cross-check their accuracy, in particular through informal interviews with privileged stakeholders/witnesses in strict confidence.

- 5 The article's narrative is part of a sequential approach [Jacquot, 2019]. It makes use of an inductive “process tracing” method [Bezès, Palier and Surel, 2018] referring to the conceptual framework of the public action cycle inspired by the pioneering work of Laswell (1956) and Jones (1970) [Harguindeguy, 2019; Knoepfel *et al.*, 2015: part. 3]. Any intervention by the public authorities is considered as a response to a public issue – in the sense that it takes place on the scale of a political community – which can be traced comprehensively according to a sequence of 6 phases [Jacob and Schiffino, 2021: fig. 3; Schiffino *et al.*, 2022: 38-40]:
 1. the emergence of the issue in civil society, including a specific definition of its terms;
 2. the issue is placed on the political agenda, often accompanied by a proposed solution;
 3. the choice of public action intended to respond to the issue, involving a prior investigation of its terms and alternative solutions;
 4. the effective implementation of public action;
 5. the evaluation of the public action implemented;
 6. the termination of public action.
- 6 Below we shall highlight the main sequences of the public decision-making process which took place until the end of 2024. In conclusion, we shall examine the reasons for the current failure of the new stadium project, reviewing some of the hypotheses put forward to explain the failure of the previous project in Brussels at Heysel [Govaert, 2022].

1. The emergence of a public issue: the unsuitability of the Marien stadium

- 7 Founded in 1897, Union Saint-Gilloise have played their home matches since 1919 not in Saint-Gilles, but rather in the neighbouring municipality of Forest in the south of Brussels, on the edge of Parc Duden, where the present-day Marien stadium has existed since 1926⁵. The plot of land is owned by the Donation Royale, a parastatal organisation which is responsible for managing the property bequeathed to the Belgian state by King Leopold II. Under the terms of a 30-year renewable long lease, the municipality of Saint-Gilles exercises ownership rights and signs contracts with RUSG for stadium occupancy⁶.
- 8 At the start of the 2021-22 season, after a 48-year absence, Union returned to Division 1⁷. The club owes its comeback to its purchase in 2018 by two English investors: Tony Bloom, a passive investor⁸ who was already chairman-investor of the Brighton club⁹ at the time, and his associate Alex Muzio, who became chairman of RUSG¹⁰. According to Philippe Bormans, the new CEO, “We want to establish ourselves as a strong team in

Division 1A over the long term. In order to achieve this, we need to double our budget, which means increasing revenues, and therefore ticketing income.”¹¹ The desire for the growth of the club goes hand in hand with the project for a new stadium, which considers the Marien stadium (see Figure 1) to be inadequate and unadaptable to the new ambitions of the club¹².

Figure 1. View of the current stadium: Stade Marien



Source: Google Earth, 02/06/2025. This image contains data from GoogleLandsat / Copernicus, Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO. Source images taken from 29/03/2021 to 24/06/2023

- 9 Several disadvantages of the current stadium are highlighted.¹³ Its 7 700-seat capacity for Union fans has become too small with respect to the demand: the number of annual season tickets has been capped¹⁴, and most matches have been sold out for several years. Due to its small size, there are only 50 VIP seats, which are the most lucrative. Only 750 of the 1 800 seats allocated to rival fans are available for sale, as the section of Chaussée de Bruxelles which can be physically isolated from Union fans – in accordance with the federal law of 21 December 1998 on the safety of football matches (known as the “football law”) – cannot accommodate more than 16 buses. The stadium does not comply with UEFA standards (article 18¹⁵), which require a minimum of 8 000 seats instead of the current 5 000. As a result, the club must rent another stadium for European home matches. At first, they rented Oud-Heverlee Louvain, 30 km from the Marien stadium, followed by the stadium of neighbouring rival RSC Anderlecht, 4 km away but on the other side of the canal, and finally the Roi Baudouin stadium at Heysel, 15 km away in the north of Brussels.
- 10 So why not expand the Marien stadium so that it meets UEFA standards? Given the existing legal constraints, the possible scenarios are considered less than optimal in terms of the club's business model¹⁶. The stadium is located in an “outdoor sports and recreation area” with a reduced surface area in the Regional Land Use Plan (PRAS) (see Figure 2). It could therefore not be extended significantly enough without encroaching

on the adjacent “park area” (see below). The park itself is also listed, as is the main stand of the stadium. The scope for intervention on the current stadium is therefore limited from a legal standpoint, unless the Brussels parliament amends the PRAS provisions, or the Brussels government amends the listed status of the site. Last but not least, the nuisance caused to the neighbourhood by the huge masses of people attending stadium matches [Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 3] – street closures, noise pollution and the uncivilised behaviour of fans – is all the more problematic as the Marien stadium is located directly opposite a residential area.

Figure 2. Map showing the protected area and the outdoor sports and recreation area for the Marien stadium



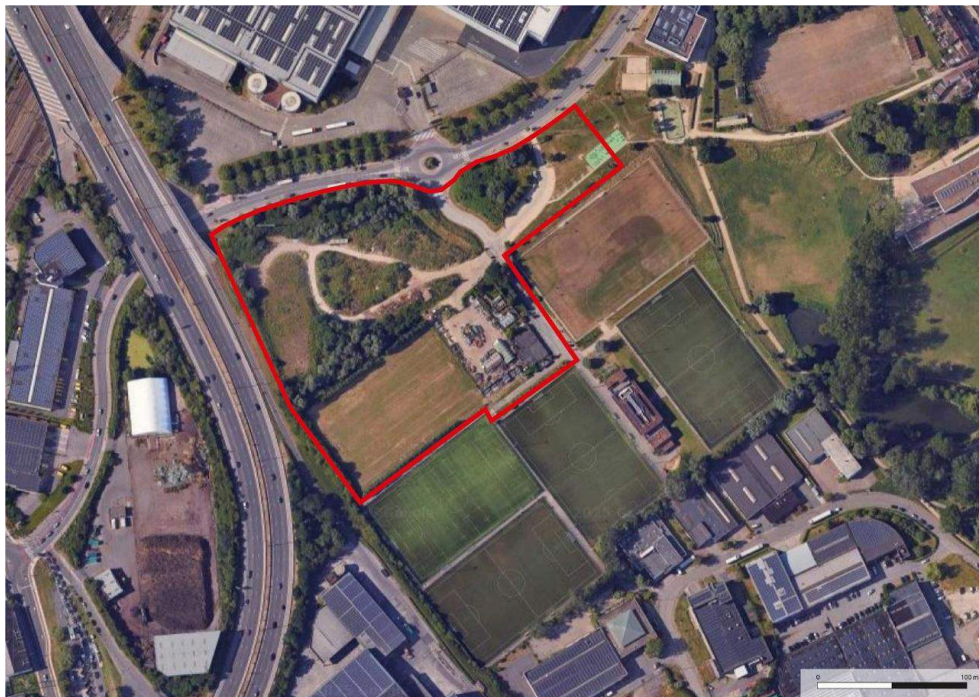
Source: CBR Government Decree initiating the classification procedure for the Joseph Marien Stadium street-front building. Annex 2. 26/03/2009. Map adapted and completed by the authors by adding colours to make the different zones more visible and a legend

2. New Forest stadium project on the agenda

- 11 Shortly after the municipal elections in October 2018, the club contacted the new municipal college of Forest – formed by a Socialist/Green Party majority headed by a mayor from the Green Party – about finding a site to build a new stadium using its own funds. They had reasons for choosing Forest. Union has been playing its home games in Forest for over a century, and it is also the municipality of residence of a quarter of the club's season ticket holders, with almost 40 % living in neighbouring municipalities (Saint-Gilles, 14,5 %; Ixelles, 12,50 %; Uccle, 12,25 %).¹⁷
- 12 At the beginning of 2019, the club found a 3,5-hectare plot belonging to the municipality of Forest approximately 2,5 kilometres from the Marien stadium, in the Bempt district near Ring O, along Boulevard de la Deuxième Armée britannique,

opposite the Audi factories still in operation (see Figure 3). The closest dwellings are at least 200 metres away from it. The upper half of the plot is undeveloped, apart from a path leading to the Bempt sports complex. The sports complex comprises five football pitches and two rugby pitches used by 2 000 players every weekend¹⁸. The lower half of the plot encompasses one of the football pitches and part of one of the rugby pitches. The central area of the lower half of the plot is used by the municipal green spaces department. The northeast part of the plot includes an outdoor fitness area, a public open space and petanque facilities. The eastern part of the Bempt park extends as far as Chaussée de Neerstalle, while the “Promenade Verte” – a path for pedestrians and cyclists which criss-crosses Brussels – winds its way between the pitches at the amateur sports complex. In the PRAS, most of the plot is located in an “outdoor sports and recreation area” (see Figure 4), and only strips along Boulevard de la Deuxième Armée britannique and Ring O are classified as “urban industrial areas” (ZIU). In the two areas in question, the PRAS stipulates that “public interest or public service facilities may be permitted to the extent that they are compatible with the main purpose of the area in question and the characteristics of the surrounding urban environment” (prescription 0.7).

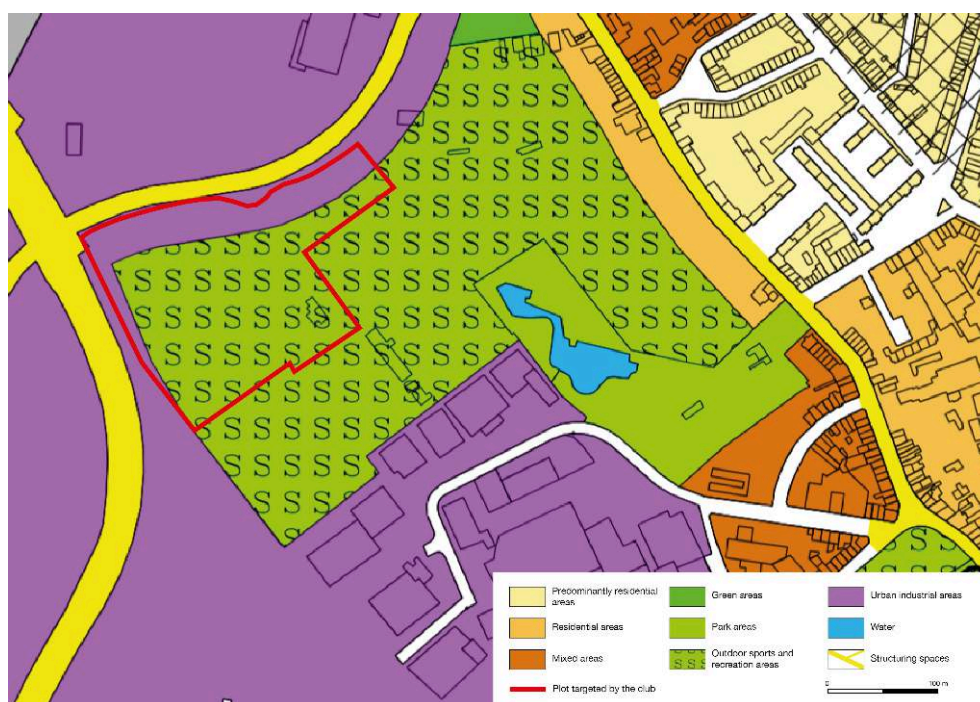
Figure 3. Location of the municipal plot targeted by the club for its new stadium at the Bempt site



Source: Google Maps, 12/05/2025. Source images from Airbus, Maxar Technologies (2025). Image adapted by the authors to delimit the plot in question

On the right of the targeted plot, outlined in red, the path which winds between the pitches at the Bempt sports complex is part of the “Promenade Verte”. The main road, which bends at the bottom left near the Bruxelles-Propreté facilities (see below), corresponds to a section of Ring O.

Figure 4. Location in the PRAS area of the municipal plot targeted by the club for the construction of its new stadium at the Bempt site



Source: PRAS, Map 3 - Land use (Plate 4/6). Adapted by the authors to delimit the parcel in question and add a legend. Available at: <http://urbanisme-bruxelles.hsp.be/sites/urbanisme-bruxelles.hsp.be/files/carte3-affectations4.pdf>

Please note that only the publication of PRAS maps in the Moniteur Belge is legally binding.

- 13 The club intends to build its new stadium on the Bempt site, with a budget of 60 to 80 million euros¹⁹. It would be compliant with UEFA standards and fully covered, and would include a significant number of VIP seats. Initially designed for a capacity of 20 000 and later reduced to 15 000 to 16 000, the new stadium is intended to be “extremely environmentally friendly”²⁰: wooden construction, solar panels, rainwater recovery system, etc. There is no plan for a car park, except for VIPs in accordance with UEFA standards (art. 25). At the end of 2022, the club made a purchase offer of 3,5 million euros, i.e. 100 euros per square metre²¹. This amount comes from an estimate provided by the regional administration Bruxelles Fiscalité, whose supervisory minister is the Flemish liberal Sven Gatz, “based on the selling price of other land for sports facilities in the Brussels region”.²²
- 14 As soon as the Forest executive became aware of the new stadium project, it raised a series of “stumbling blocks”²³ which would structure the negotiations between the municipality and the club and the terms of the public controversy.
- 15 Firstly, in terms of urbanism, doubts were raised as to the compatibility with PRAS regulations of certain planned profit-making activities: VIP seating as well as a luxury hotel which was removed from the project.
- 16 Secondly, the question was raised as to the relocation – as well as its financing – of the existing municipal facilities and community amenities which would have to make way for the new stadium.

- 17 Thirdly, the college wanted guarantees that the Bempt sports complex could continue to operate during RUSG matches. However, due to the safety regulations of the federal “football” law, this compatibility is not simple.
- 18 Fourthly, in terms of the environment, the “artificialisation of a crucial site in terms of water management, where there is run-off and a high water table”²⁴, is a source of concern. The plot is located in the Senne catchment basin²⁵, in an area which is often affected by flooding²⁶ and where heat islands are already present²⁷. The college also underlined the loss of green space and biodiversity, in an area with biological value officially classified as “C” (“significant”) on a decreasing scale from A to E²⁸.
- 19 Fifthly, there are many concerns related to mobility. The main entrance to the new stadium is planned to be on Boulevard de la Deuxième Armée britannique, which is already busy with commuters, workers from the Audi factories (now closed), and users of a nearby regional waste disposal site. The “Good Move” regional mobility plan for 2020-2030 plans to densify the through traffic in order to keep it out of the neighbourhoods²⁹. If car traffic is allowed on match days, the narrowness of the sidewalks would pose safety risks for the flow of fans arriving at the stadium, while their massive arrival by public transport would require a densification of the current service. For arrival by car, the club is counting on the availability of nearby parking spaces (Audi factories, CERIA campus, nearby supermarkets, etc.), with the possibility of providing shuttles to the stadium, but an agreement has not been signed. Finally, in order to ensure that rival fans are isolated from Union fans, as required by federal “football” law, the club wants their buses to pass through the grounds of a waste treatment centre managed by Bruxelles-Propreté, which has not given its consent.

3. Regional expertise to assess the relevance of the new Bempt stadium project

- 20 At the end of 2021, the club appealed to the Brussels Region³⁰, whose executive – as that of Forest – was made up of a Socialist/Green Party majority, supplemented by Défi (a French-language federalist party) and Open VLD (a Dutch-language liberal party). Given the size of the project, the Region is responsible for issuing the planning permission required to build the new stadium. In addition, since 2019, its urban planning agency, perspective.brussels, has been equipped with a sports unit whose mission is to “work with the competent public authorities in order to develop a coherent strategy in the area of sports infrastructure. It is also the contact point for the Brussels sports sector. The aim is to facilitate the realisation of infrastructure projects (...) by identifying and coordinating projects, networking the relevant public and private stakeholders, and providing administrative support.”³¹
- 21 Perspective.brussels was given a mandate by regional Minister-President Rudi Vervoort (PS) to “support RUSG in its search for a stadium location”³², requesting “a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats] analysis of the current site [the Marien stadium] and the two alternative sites identified [by the club]”³³, namely the Bempt site and the Bertelson stadium, which is located one kilometre from the Marien stadium and is now used only for athletics (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. View of the Bertelson stadium above the Forest-national concert venue



Source: Google Earth, 02/06/2025. This image contains data from GoogleLandsat / Copernicus, Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, IBCAO. Source images taken from 29/03/2021 to 24/06/2023

- 22 This appeal to expert knowledge [Damay, Denis and Duez, 2011] is a standard procedure prior to the selection of public action [Caby, Ouimet, 2021]. The aim is to (re-)frame the rest of the process and the terms of the controversy on a more objective basis, which is likely to facilitate a public decision whose legal legitimacy will be enhanced by rational arguments. However, the study by perspective.brussels from the beginning of 2022 is limited in scope in two ways. On the one hand, it was “limited to sites located in the PRAS ‘outdoor sports and recreation area’ in the territory of the municipalities of Saint-Gilles and Forest”, on the understanding that “the Bempt site is the only one to have been selected by the club”³⁴. On the other hand, only three analysis criteria were taken into account in the comparison of the three selected sites, namely “urban planning considerations regarding spatial integration into the setting; mobility and multimodal accessibility aspects; and biodiversity and human impacts (noise, waste management and safety)”³⁵.
- 23 An important part of the study consisted in investigating ways of sharing existing football stadiums, describing a series of examples of clubs which share their stadiums with another club (Rome and Bruges) or a national team (Amsterdam and Copenhagen), and then reviewing the existing possibilities in Brussels, including the Lotto Park in Anderlecht (22 500 seats) and the Roi Baudouin stadium at Heysel (50 000 seats). Various possibilities for sharing a new stadium at Bempt were also examined, with both sports (football, rugby, field hockey, etc.) and non-sports (concerts, etc.) activities.
- 24 In conclusion,
- “on the basis of this SWOT analysis limited to certain criteria and restricted to the three selected sites, [perspective.brussels considers that] *the Bempt site has the most potential. Nevertheless, there are a number of important points to consider (...), such as compliance with the PRAS, sharing infrastructures at supra-local and local levels, accessibility by public transport³⁶, parking and integration into the landscape of the Bempt site. An impact study should be carried out in addition to this initial analysis, and the scope of the search for alternative sites should be widened*”³⁷ (our emphasis).

25 On the basis of the study, the Minister-President stated that:

“While it is legitimate for Union to want a new stadium in the Brussels Region, the economic use of land should nevertheless prompt us to consider (...) the possible sharing of existing infrastructures, the diversity of uses and the creation of sports activities for the neighbourhood. The project must also be designed in accordance with PRAS requirements. A final direction has not been decided on. Discussions are under way with the municipal authorities and club officials. It would therefore be premature [for the Regional Executive] to move forward on this issue”.³⁸

4. An initial municipal decision rejecting the project for a new stadium at the Bempt site

26 The club returned to negotiate with the municipality of Forest without having obtained the political support of the Region or an expert opinion which was entirely in favour of its plan for a new stadium at the Bempt site, and endeavoured to deal with certain points of attention which had been raised regarding its project, by commissioning a legal study to demonstrate its compliance with the PRAS³⁹ and by conducting a mobility study⁴⁰. At the beginning of 2023, after organising a public information session regarding its project, the club presented it during a closed session of the Forest municipal council committee. In February, first the college⁴¹ and then the municipal council⁴² decided to reject the club's offer to purchase the municipal plot. The price was deemed insufficient, with the alderman for sports (PS) even describing it as “ridiculous”⁴³. It was still considered that the project did not meet certain conditions and failed to include: “[1°] viable compensation for loss of use of municipal structures; [2°] an impact study recommended by Perspectives.Brussels; [3°] pre-agreements concerning the use of nearby car parks, as well as access to and/or use of Bruxelles-Propreté infrastructures; [4°] legal guarantees that the project could be considered as a facility of collective interest or public service in the sense defined by the PRAS; [5°] the feasibility of sharing such an expensive infrastructure with such a huge spatial impact.”⁴⁴ However, the municipal council decided “to mandate the municipal college to continue discussions with the Region and the club in order to find possible solutions in the municipal and regional territory as recommended by the Perspectives.Brussels study, and as regards the Forest sites, the club would have to meet the conditions formulated by the municipality, so that the municipality and its residents could make a final decision with full knowledge of the facts”⁴⁵.

5. The Region's unsuccessful attempt to facilitate the municipality's approval of the new stadium project at the Bempt site

27 Called to the rescue a second time by the club, the Region played the role of facilitator through its secretary of state for urbanism, Pascal Smet, and then after his resignation in mid-2023, Ans Persoons, who belonged to the same party (Vooruit, the Flemish Socialist Party)⁴⁶. The aim was to reach a tripartite memorandum of understanding by 21 July 2023⁴⁷ on the Bempt scenario, thus disregarding the municipal request to look for other possible solutions at regional level, which was also recommended by perspective.brussels. However, in the absence of an agreement⁴⁸, “the three parties

decided at the end of July not to continue the dialogue on the basis of a memorandum of understanding, but rather in a more discreet manner,” stated Ans Persoons in October 2023. “(...) The cornerstone [of the case] concerns the purchase by RUSG of land which belongs to the municipality of Forest. The negotiations are quite difficult in this respect. This is why the Region has taken on the role of facilitator between the two parties. It is currently working with the municipality before presenting RUSG with a price proposal.”⁴⁹ At the same time, the club is implementing a number of commitments included in the draft memorandum of understanding⁵⁰. It commissioned a specialised consulting firm, Stratec, to conduct “mobility” and “environment” impact studies, and in collaboration with the “Bouwmeester Maître architecte” (BMA) for the Region, it launched an architectural competition to select a project for the “integration of the new RUSG stadium into the landscape and the urban setting”.⁵¹

- 28 For its part, as it was dissatisfied with the conclusions of perspective.brussels on the matter, the Forest municipal college urged the Region to further examine the possibility of adapting the Marien stadium. New regional expertise was mobilised for this purpose. The regional urbanism authority, urban.brussels, was asked to write a note, of which there were two versions. The first 5-page version was published in mid-2023⁵². It presented two scenarios. The first scenario, deemed “technically possible”⁵³, involved a 8 000-seat Marien stadium, which would meet UEFA standards but with a smaller capacity than at present. The second scenario involved a 12 000-seat stadium, which would be technically feasible only with a retaining wall extending into the park area established in the PRAS, which would be problematic from a legal standpoint. In addition, “the covering of the stands (other than [the existing one over] the west stand) is problematic in that it risks creating a wall which would be visible from the park, thus leading to a loss of the landscape qualities of the park”⁵⁴. In its second 11-page version published in April 2024⁵⁵, the note presented a detailed scenario 2’. Written by the BMA, it reflected the club's desire for a 15 000-seat, fully covered stadium, which is not required by UEFA standards. While stressing that “the impact of mobility should [also] be the object of a serious study and consideration,” the BMA concluded that “a stadium with a capacity of 15 000 is not tenable from an urbanistic and landscape point of view”⁵⁶. This second mobilisation of regional expertise contributed to disqualifying as objectively unfounded one of the main alternatives to the scenario desired by the club. Thus, according to Ans Persoons, “an extension of the Marien stadium in Forest is a no go [since] a study shows that it is impossible to accommodate 15 000 fans.”⁵⁷ The tripartite negotiations came to an end in May 2024 when the parties began their campaigns for the regional elections on 9 June and the municipal elections on 13 October, putting a temporary end to a story which would continue when new executives would be set up by the new majorities after the elections.⁵⁸

Conclusions

- 29 “After six essentially futile years, the case seems to be headed in the same direction as the national stadium,” reads an article in the press⁵⁹. In conclusion, it is therefore pertinent to wonder whether the stagnation of the new RUSG stadium project could be explained by “fault lines” between the main players of the project, similar to those resulting from the centre-periphery divide, which have been put forward to shed light

on the “saga” of the national stadium at Heysel [Govaert, 2022: 96-97]. These splits are historical explanations for social divisions and political confrontations which are consubstantial with modern western democracies [Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Seiler, 2011; Schiffino *et al.*, 2022: ch. 5], particularly in Belgium [de Coorebyter, 2008; de Coorebyter, Sinardet and De Munck, 2009]. In the broadest sense, the centre-periphery divide opposes two sides with diverging ideas of development within a given territory (supranational, national, regional, etc.). The “centre” side is embodied by those who – in the name of the “common interest” to be promoted in the area concerned – defend a unified, homogeneous vision of development at institutional, linguistic, religious, economic or urban level. On the other hand, the “periphery” side includes those who – in the name of protecting “local particularities” – resist these attempts at indiscriminate territorial development and centralisation of power.

- 30 In the case of the national stadium, more local interests had contributed to causing “reluctance among the public officials concerned regarding a form of urbanisation of areas on the outskirts (a stadium and its annexes built in a fairly residential [area])” [Govaert, 2022: 96]. Similarly, local residents and associations denounce the new stadium project at the Bempt site as “a new stage in the 'concretisation' and densification of the last green lung in Forest”.⁶⁰ In this case, however, local resistance to urban sprawl is also justified by the fight against increasingly artificial land use, seen as a supra-local issue⁶¹ which is also being addressed by regional associations such as Inter-Environnement Bruxelles⁶² and We Are Nature⁶³. Given the global ecological context, the construction of large-scale buildings on undeveloped land should be considered with caution, with due regard for their sustainability and convertibility⁶⁴, or even for the proportional restoration of soil permeability for built-up areas⁶⁵. Whether from the point of view of the centre or the periphery, prioritising the search for opportunities to share existing infrastructures or – failing that – new ones, is part of an approach to regional planning which aims to overcome contemporary environmental challenges.
- 31 Another facet of the centre-periphery divide expressed in the case of the national stadium was the “refusal of the federal authorities to get involved in a case considered to be of regional interest (or even [in the] opposition between the City of Brussels and the Brussels-Capital Region)” [Govaert, 2022: 96]. In our case, this fault line is reflected in the failure of the Region to act on the recommendation made by perspective.brussels to look for an alternative site with a better advantage/disadvantage ratio than Bempt, leaving the question of a new stadium for RUSG to be dealt with first on a decentralised, local and municipal scale. Yet Union has become a club with (at least) a regional dimension, as its fans come from Forest and beyond, and its youth and women's teams also benefit from facilities located in Anderlecht and Uccle. When the Region became involved, it did so with the sole aim of facilitating the realisation of the Bempt scenario, attempting to convince local authorities to lift their reservations regarding the project, but to no avail at the time of writing.
- 32 As in the case of the national stadium, this “conflicting cooperation” between region and municipality thus reflects a framework of public management marked by a certain degree of “institutional complexity, particularly in the field of sport” [Govaert, 2022: 96]. In Brussels, sport is a highly fragmented area of competence. The Region is only responsible for spurring municipal sports infrastructures. General sports policy, including top-level sport, is the responsibility of both the French and Flemish

Communities, while the French Community Commission (CoCoF) and its counterpart, the Vlaamse Gemeenschapcommissie (VGC), are responsible for developing amateur sport. Beliris – the federal body responsible for financing the role of Brussels as national capital – can co-finance the construction of sports infrastructures with the Region, as in the case of the project for a national field hockey stadium in Uccle, 700 metres away from the Bempt sports complex⁶⁶. “I am calling for sports-related competences to be grouped together at a single level of authority,” declared Bernard Clerfayt (Défi)⁶⁷, the regional minister responsible for municipal sports infrastructures. If the sporting competences of supra-local political institutions active in Brussels were concentrated at regional level, it could help reduce the institutional complexity associated with handling future sports infrastructure projects with a regional dimension, such as Union. In our case, however, the institutional complexities involved are also due to the club's decision to build its new stadium on land belonging to the municipality of Forest. As approval by the latter is essential for its use, this has reinforced the weight of local authorities – and therefore potentially the interests of the periphery – in the public decision-making process, alongside the Region, which is responsible for granting planning permission. For any public authority, whether associated with the centre or the periphery, “controlling land [means] controlling urban production” [Tillemans *et al.*, 2012].

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ABSTRACTS

Unlike many French and British cities over the last few decades, Brussels has never seen the construction of a professional football stadium. The recent failure to build a new “national stadium” at Heysel has left its mark in people's minds. In recent years, however, a new project was launched to the benefit of Union Saint-Gilloise, which was promoted to Division 1 in 2021 and became Belgian champion in 2025. The club, which has been based in Forest for over a century, has ambitions to build its new home on a plot of land owned by the municipality on the edge of the Brussels region. Following a sequential approach to public policy analysis, this article traces the phases of the public decision-making process during the 2018-2024 municipal term. It explains the terms of a controversy which has yet to be resolved in mid-2025, with the project still awaiting a favourable decision from the authorities. Its conclusion examines the extent to which certain hypotheses put forward to explain the failure of the national stadium project at Heysel can also explain the stagnation of the project for a new stadium at Bempt.

Au cours des dernières décennies, Bruxelles, à l'inverse de nombreuses villes françaises ou britanniques, n'a vu sortir de terre aucun stade de football professionnel. L'échec récent de l'implantation d'un nouveau « stade national » au Heysel a marqué les esprits. Depuis quelques années toutefois, un nouveau projet est apparu, cette fois au bénéfice de l'Union Saint-Gilloise remontée en division 1 en 2021, devenue championne de Belgique en 2025. Localisé depuis plus d'un siècle à Forest, le club souhaite ériger son nouvel écrin sur un terrain de la Commune situé à la lisière de la Région bruxelloise. En suivant une approche séquentielle d'analyse des politiques publiques, le présent article retrace les phases qui ont rythmé le processus de décision publique pendant la mandature communale 2018-2024. Il explicite les termes d'une controverse qui demeure non tranchée à la mi-2025, le projet étant toujours en attente d'une décision favorable de la part des autorités. Sa conclusion examine dans quelle mesure certaines hypothèses avancées pour expliquer l'échec du projet de stade national au Heysel peuvent expliquer aussi la stagnation du projet de nouveau stade au Bempt.

In tegenstelling tot vele Franse en Britse steden is er in Brussel de voorbije decennia geen nieuw professioneel voetbalstadion meer gebouwd. Dat het project rond de bouw van een nieuw “nationaal stadion” op de Heizel onlangs definitief van tafel geveegd werd, was een flinke opdoffer. Maar sinds een paar jaar ligt er nog een ander project op tafel, deze keer voor Royale Union Saint-Gilloise, dat in 2021 doorstootte naar eerste klasse en in 2025 Belgisch kampioen werd. De club speelt al meer dan honderd jaar in het stadion van Vorst maar wil nu graag een nieuwe thuisbasis bouwen op een stuk grond van de gemeente, dat nog net binnen het Brussels Gewest ligt. Dit artikel volgt een sequentiële benadering voor de analyse van het overheidsbeleid en beschrijft de fasen van het openbare besluitvormingsproces tijdens de gemeentelijke legislatuur 2018-2024. De auteurs lichten de omstandigheden toe van een controversie die half 2025 blijft voortduren, want het project wacht nog altijd op een positieve beslissing van de overheid. In het besluit onderzoeken ze in welke mate bepaalde hypothesen die aangehaald werden als verklaring waarom het project voor een nationaal voetbalstadion op de Heizel op niets uitgedraaid is, ook kunnen verklaren waarom het project voor een nieuw stadion op de Bemptsite momenteel in het slop zit.

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