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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- ¹ In the Brussels-Capital Region, there are 19 municipalities with 695 councillors [IBSA, 2022], who serve six-year terms. They vote on municipal regulations and orders, budgets and accounts, and appoint the municipal executive, which is known as the “college”. Councillors are typically organised according to political party, and the college is supported by one or more political groups which form a majority. The municipal councils meet at least ten times a year. While these meetings are public, citizens are not allowed to intervene spontaneously and must follow specific interpellation procedures outlined in the council's regulations. Committee meetings, which involve some members of all political groups, focus on discussing the technicalities of upcoming agenda items and may include internal or external experts.

Group meetings, which are held by each political group, are commonly organised before council meetings to define positions and assign roles for the next council meeting. Most often, majority groups meet together, whereas opposition groups meet separately.

- 2 As public distrust toward elected officials and representative democracy has grown, leading to the rise of participatory approaches to politics and policies [Ianiello *et al.*, 2019; Tan and Taeilhagh, 2020; Voorberg *et al.*, 2015], this article turns the spotlight back on elected (local) politicians. Specifically, we examine public deliberations among municipal councillors in Brussels from a social learning perspective. Public deliberation is defined as a “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” [Chambers, 2003, p. 309; Habermas, 1984]. In its Habermasian ideal-typical form, deliberation involves people with various understandings and interests openly expressing the “reasons” [Habermas, 1984] for their views on a public issue and their preferred solutions while also listening to those expressed by other participants [Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012]. Public deliberation is a process of mutual justification in which participants provide reasons for their positions, listen to others, and reconsider their preferences [Ercan *et al.*, 2019]. In other words, deliberation presupposes learning. Learning is a process involving the enduring acquisition or modification of cognitive constructs [Vandenbos, 2007] which can (or cannot) lead to alterations in behavioural intentions and actual conduct [Heikkila and Gerlak, 2013; Moyson and Scholten, 2018; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013]. In line with these conceptual clarifications, social learning in the context of municipal council deliberations refers to the cognitive and social dynamic leading municipal councillors to revise or strengthen their policy beliefs and preferences over time and make decisions accordingly.
- 3 Given that the purpose of municipal councils is to provide an opportunity for deliberations among municipal councillors, they should be the ultimate place for social learning. However, council deliberations differ substantially from the ideal of Habermasian “unconstrained discourse”. Fundamental differences in interests and values, or even in interpretations of situations, almost invariably make collective decision-making an adversarial process, with participants advocating for conflicting lines of action [Fairclough, 2015]. Additionally, in municipal councils, political groups and their members are most often suspected of playing static roles: opposition groups express another “vision of the world”, propose alternatives and counterbalance the college and the majority’s actions, whereas majority groups most often support the college and defend its actions. In other words, elected officials attend council meetings with the main objective of defending predefined positions [Dinsart, 2019]. Consequently, councillors may speak without necessarily listening to each other [de Beer de Laer, 2012], which prevents social learning.
- 4 Of course, decisions resulting from social learning in municipal councils are not necessarily better. After all, politics is simultaneously a matter of “puzzling” and “powering” [Heclo, 1974]. Nevertheless, deliberation and social learning in council meetings are desirable for at least three reasons. First, genuine deliberations prompting social learning can enable more equal consideration of all interests, making arguments relating to narrow self-interest more difficult to defend [Lindell and Ehrström, 2020, p. 3], and thus favouring political trust [Goovaerts and Marien, 2020].

Second, social learning is an indicator that deliberations do indeed facilitate the participation of councillors (and those they represent) who, otherwise, are excluded from the discussions behind closed doors before and after the meetings. Third, social learning may be considered as a key element for a well-functioning democracy where policy preferences – which democratic decisions are based upon – are informed, enlightened and authentic [Barabas, 2004, p. 687].

- 5 *What are the conditions of social learning within municipal councils?* To address this research question, a qualitative multimethod research design was implemented [Creswell, 2015], which should provide a “fuller” account, greater “trustworthiness”, and “more unbiased” analysis [Mik-Myere, 2020]. First, based on invitations sent to all 19 municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 general directors of municipal administrations (civil servants) and council presidents (elected officials) who agreed to participate in the research between May 2020 and October 2020 (see Table 1).¹ They were questioned about the dynamics, drivers and obstacles of social learning during committee and group meetings, as well as about the council itself. The data were analysed according to theme [Paillé and Mucchielli, 2016] using NVivo software (version 12). We used an inductive method by allowing research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent to the raw data [Thomas, 2006]. We decomposed the received data into themes and sub-themes, which were organised into categories of conditions.

Table . List of interviews (MCP = Council President; GD = General Director)

Municipality	Month	Interviewee(s)
Auderghem	October 2020	GD
Brussels City	October 2020	GD
Etterbeek	October 2020	GD
Ganshoren	October 2020	GD
Ixelles	October 2020	GD & CP
Jette	June 2020	GD
Koekelberg	May 2020	GD & 1 st Alderman
Saint-Gilles	October 2020	GD
Schaerbeek	October 2020	CP
Uccle	October 2020	GD
Watermael-Boitsfort	October 2020	GD & CP
Woluwe-Saint-Lambert	October 2020	GD & CP
Woluwe-Saint-Pierre	October 2020	GD

- 6 Second, these results were assessed based on four focus groups [Morgan, 1998] with the leaders of political groups in the councils of two of the municipalities of the region. Two focus groups were organised with six leaders from majority groups (two from Jette and four from Koekelberg) and two other focus groups were organised with 6 leaders of opposition groups (three from each municipality) ². An analytical approach combining deduction and induction was implemented. On the one hand, any quote related to one of the factors identified in our thematic analyses was coded under the same theme in NVivo. On the other hand, any factor of social learning that which not reported in the semi-structured interviews was analysed according to theme and added under a separate code³. Overall, this study is an analysis of research participants' subjective perceptions of social learning dynamics during council deliberations in Brussels municipalities.
- 7 This study provides both theoretical and practical added value. Beyond elections [e.g., Pitseys and Sägesser, 2018] and the operations that directly follow them [e.g., Nassaux, 2002], municipal councils in Brussels and more broadly, and especially their deliberations, have been under-investigated thus far [for exceptions, see Delwit, 2005; de Maesschalk, 2009; van Haute *et al.*, 2018]. The study of social learning processes in the municipal context is all the more innovative.
- 8 In the next sections of this article, we present the conditions for social learning in municipal councils of the Brussels-Capital Region. We rely on quotations from the focus groups, as the results of the thematic analysis based on the semi-structured interviews have already been used in another more theory-oriented publication [Alomar *et al.*, 2023].

1. Politics

1.a. A political game closer to rivalry and conflict than to collaboration

- 9 When conceived as a process of mutual justification, public deliberation is supposed to generate social learning among municipal councillors. In this case, municipal councillors offer reasons for their positions, listen to the views of others and reconsider their preferences in light of new information and arguments [Chambers, 2003; Ercan *et al.*, 2019], which leads to the exchange, acquisition and assimilation of new information about public issues and the policy solutions suggested by other councillors.
- 10 However, the semi-structured interviews conducted with the general directors and council presidents suggest that municipal politics in Brussels is generally understood by municipal councillors as a game closer to rivalry and conflict than to collaboration. After elections, the councillors of the majority agree on a political programme and tend to prioritise its implementation rather than collaboration with the opposition [Alomar *et al.*, 2023], but do not necessarily discredit all the ideas of the opposition.
- 11 The focus groups with the political group leaders confirm this interpretation: “*there is no collaboration between us (...). only sometimes for motions (...)*”.⁴ The majority councillors tend to use their political power to impose their agenda and projects: “*we are the majority, and this is democracy*”. The majority coalition does not feel the need to seek opposition support, especially in municipalities where the majority party is

predominant and stable. In such situations, opposition councillors feel *“forgotten (...) I don't remember being asked by the majority to participate in a motion”*. That said, the opposition does not try to share their good ideas with the majority, fearing that they would claim all credit for these projects, only to reinforce their public support in the upcoming election.

1.b. Group pressure

- 12 In municipal councils, most votes are nominal rather than anonymous. The interviewees suggest that group pressure is high, particularly among councillors from majority groups who support the college. As a result, their autonomy is constrained by the position of the group or the group leader [Alomar *et al.*, 2023]. While councillors theoretically have the freedom to express their opinions and to vote according to their political preferences, in practice, it is challenging to differ from their group's position. The dominance of the group can lead to frustration among councillors who may have dissenting suggestions: *“sometimes, I would like to send a message, but I'm told it's not the right time (...) I can understand, but there's still frustration (...) I wanted to propose something, and then at the last moment, I was told it wasn't possible.”*
- 13 Only in rare cases does the group leader explicitly allow a free vote, and councillors can vote according to their own preferences, which can contribute significantly to enhancing social learning. For example, in one of the municipalities, the majority groups decided that each of their councillors should vote individually – rather than following any group discipline – on a motion proposed by the opposition: not only was the motion adopted, but *“everyone was free to vote as they liked (...) despite being on a video conference”*, and it generated *“a good debate”*.
- 14 The influence of group pressure on deliberation is clear, according to the research participants, who report the absence of collaboration across groups: *“Individually, it is obviously difficult to collaborate with other municipal councillors beyond interpersonal relationships (...) there are always group dynamics.”* However, councillors from majority and opposition groups experience group pressure differently: opposition councillors exhibit more freedom in decision-making processes, whereas majority councillors are expected to support the college and the majority agreement, i.e. the catalogue of objectives and actions they agreed on. As a focus group participant stated: *“for a municipal councillor or group leader in the majority, there is a line to be respected, which is the majority agreement and the coalition which is in place. Our essential role is to ensure that this majority works.”* This political atmosphere does not generate many opportunities for social learning among councillors.

2. Individual characteristics of municipal councillors and social dynamics among them

2.a. All municipal councillors are not equal within the dynamics of social learning

- 15 There are various profiles of municipal councillors in Brussels. To our knowledge, there is no study which clarifies this diversity, which can influence social learning. First, the general directors and council presidents suggest that all councillors are not equally

motivated to engage in long-term discussions about complex issues, especially in committee meetings. The (gross) fee for committee or council meetings – usually between 75€ and 200€ – is not consistent with the amount of work and motivation needed for the preparation of these meetings. The capacity to dedicate substantial means to the preparation of council meetings also depends on the level of professionalisation. Some councillors are only dedicated to discussing municipal issues, while others are professional politicians who hold mandates at other levels of government. They may be equally dedicated to municipal issues, and social learning can be even greater if they receive input from their political party. Their engagement can also be reduced if they consider their municipal mandate only as a stepping stone for mandates at other levels of government. Finally, many municipal councillors engage in politics on a part-time basis in addition to their day job, and may regard politics as a form of volunteering. Limited availability makes it more challenging to foster a comprehensive social learning process.

- 16 Second, councillors differ in their propensity to engage in deliberation, as well as to search for consensus and compromises. In particular, confidence in public speaking, the ability to quickly read and understand numerous technical documents, or fluency in French or Dutch have been mentioned. In the same vein, some political and/or legal experience has been presented as an asset: *“I think those who have good political experience, whether at the local, regional, or national level, are much more at ease to speak in public and will intervene more rapidly and effectively”*. We suspect that these councillors can be timelier in engaging in social learning dynamics. This intuition is shared by some of the group leaders who participated in the focus groups: *“afterwards, when you are a municipal councillor, and given the wide range of municipal competences, you have to be able to adapt and learn about subjects which are not the basis of our competence. This requires a lot of learning power.”* At the same time, one interviewee emphasised that some legally trained councillors tend to focus on formal issues and procedures rather than on the content of discussions [Alomar *et al.*, 2023].
- 17 Finally, age was reported to influence the competitiveness of councillors, including towards members of their own political group, with a corollary effect on their willingness to participate in political discussions, especially in election times: *“When you are a young politician, there is really a very particular and unpleasant atmosphere, which is an atmosphere of competition (...) of individuality in the group and of a group in other groups (...)”*⁵.

2.b. Relationship building between municipal councillors

- 18 Relationship building among municipal councillors plays a decisive role in fostering informal meetings and discussions about municipal issues. This creates a sense of cordiality among councillors, facilitates interactions, and can lead to social learning, particularly in small municipalities [Alomar *et al.*, 2023]. Interpersonal relationships appear to be important in overcoming obstacles to social learning. Focus group participants emphasised that prior relationships among councillors enable them to meet informally and engage in discussions, fostering trust and confidence in working together: *“what would help me to work with others would be to know them (...) when you know someone, you have more confidence in working with them”*. Linguistic and cultural disparities between French and Dutch speakers were also highlighted as a significant

factor impeding social learning. Some councillors may not be bilingual, which hinders their ability to interact with and understand colleagues who speak the other language.

2.c. Lack of trust among municipal councillors

- 19 The interviewees reported that the way in which the councillors express their disagreement is essential in creating a positive environment for communication based on mutual understanding and respect. This opens the doors for social learning, as it enhances the receptiveness of the councillors to new information produced by the other parties during the council meetings or the preparatory meetings. In turn, it can lead to correcting minor errors, redrafting some parts of decision projects, or even more radically, changing the original decision projects [Alomar *et al.*, 2023]. The focus groups confirmed that cordiality may contribute to creating a favourable environment for social learning and collaboration: “(...)when I make an interpellation or a motion and the SP (Socialist Party) vote for abstention and not a direct no even if they do not really agree, and they make the effort to say why they do this (...) I respect that. I think it's nice.”
- 20 Beyond cordiality, trust was mentioned as a key driver of social learning by several interviewees and was recognised in all focus groups. This is not a surprise: while individuals learn from people they trust, trusted actors are also more likely to learn about others because the latter will talk to them more freely [Riche, 2019]. However, the councillors are convinced that the public sessions of the council are not the right place to build trust and compromise but rather a place for formal steps in rulemaking and other works of the assembly. The agreements should be discussed and pushed upstream: “there are not so many discussions at the municipal council (...) there are very strict rules regarding speaking times (...). The municipal council is not made to debate, but to approve the points, so the discussions must take place beforehand.”
- 21 That said, in general, the mayors, deputy mayors, and majority councillors avoid sharing information about their projects with the opposition to contain their criticism. Indeed, they assume that these criticisms will be made publicly in council sessions to hurt the majority, rather than in committees, to improve policy solutions. The same holds for the opposition councillors, who avoid sharing their “good ideas” with the majority councillors before the council sessions. They assume, for example, that these good ideas will be stolen and presented by the majority councillors as their own. In other words, there is a clear lack of trust: “when you table a motion, what does the majority do? They reprocess the entire text and will table an amendment which is exactly the same as ours except that they will change one word and therefore they will appropriate our motion. Then, they ask us to be constructive!”
- 22 Trust building may even be complicated further by some circumstances. Most often, the councillors do not know each other very well, especially in large cities. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic was not helpful in this respect: “it is the lack of human relationships and the coldness of the screen that sometimes prevents us from being more sensitive to emotions and feelings, evacuating frustration, expressing joy (...) I hope that the restrictions will be lifted to go have a coffee with colleagues, so that we can meet again.”
- 23 Rather surprisingly, the lack of trust among councillors is not necessarily limited to majority-opposition relationships. Our findings also suggest that a lack of trust may affect relations within opposition groups, which makes collaboration very complicated: “for me, the most important thing in the interpersonal relations among municipal councillors of

the opposition is trust (...). It is the words of honour: if we say that we will do something, we do it in the end. (...) sometimes it is unacceptable when we take the time to telephone and discuss a point with a colleague and we are told that, yes, they are going to vote it (...). And then at the municipal council they change their vote”.

3. Formal procedures, informal norms, and the role of council presidents

- 24 The semi-structured interviews and focus groups provide valuable insights into formal procedures and informal norms which can influence social learning among councillors. First, the distribution of tasks among councillors within each political group is most often based on their expertise and interests. This practice limits the range of perspectives discussed during committee meetings and reduces opportunities for councillors' beliefs to be challenged or reinforced in light of new information, i.e. for learning.
- 25 First, regarding the council itself, public access to councillor discussions has been identified as a crucial element influencing learning among councillors. Discussions which are not accessible to the general public (e.g. group meetings, preparatory meetings) and happen before council meetings are seen as more conducive to social learning. One participant described the council meetings as a “show” where councillors come with predetermined stances based on their political affiliations.
- 26 Second, the focus groups highlighted that councillors who challenge the college may be prevented from responding, which makes them unable to build upon the points made by the (deputy) mayor and can impede the learning process. Indeed, the opportunity for meaningful exchange and constructive dialogue is limited.
- 27 Third, voting procedures can also play a significant role in the learning process. For example, the collective voting system – in which the group leader acts as a spokesperson and votes on behalf of all group members – can hinder social learning. However, the interviews and focus group yielded divergent opinions regarding the impact of certain procedures. Specifically, the interviewees (i.e. general directors and council presidents) suggested that the legal delay of 7 full days before municipal meetings for councillors to receive the agenda and the documents is not an obstacle to preparing adequately for the deliberation. However, the participants in our focus groups (i.e. leaders of political groups) expressed a different viewpoint: *“the main issue is the time frame. You only have seven days, but not everyone is available due to work or other commitments. So, finding a suitable moment to meet as a group within such a limited period of time is often challenging.”* Another participant added that, *“to enhance our ability to collaborate effectively, it would be beneficial to have the interpellations provided earlier in the process”.*
- 28 Finally, social learning may be (or may not be) fostered by council presidents, who are not necessarily the mayors of the municipality [Deffet, 2020], according to the way they give opportunities to speak, encourage actual listening, organise the debate and, ultimately, facilitate the exchange of ideas. In the same vein, participants in the focus groups suggested that the mandate of council presidents could be even less political than it is: *“I agree with my colleague; this mandate should, in my opinion, be apolitical (...) we have a general director who does his job very well, who is unanimous on all sides (...) why not*

have a general director who would moderate the council meetings?” Nonpartisan presidents, who are skilled in facilitating discussions, could foster constructive and impartial interactions during council meetings. A neutral figure would shift the focus from suspicions of political biases and agendas toward promoting open dialogue and effective learning processes.

Conclusion: Summary of the results and solutions to make the most of council meetings

- 29 While citizen participation has drawn attention in recent years, representation remains the primary system used for politics and policies in liberal democracies. A multimethod design involving interviews with general directors and council presidents, as well as focus groups with the leaders of political groups, was implemented to examine the conditions of social learning in municipal councils in Brussels. Below, we summarise our findings and link them with existing studies as well as several avenues for future research. Finally, we speculate on several paths to overcome the obstacles to social learning dynamics in municipal council works.
- 30 First, municipal councillors are not equal in terms of their motivation, age, language skills, political and legal experience, and whether they are professional or part-time politicians. Specialised training organised by nonprofit organisations such as the association of the Cities and Municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region (Brulocalis) can contribute to mitigating differences in the propensity of councillors to participate in information exchange and acquisition during municipal deliberations. Nevertheless, previous studies on public deliberations highlighted the role of personal characteristics, e.g. shyness [Boossabong and Chamchong, 2019], on social learning dynamics. For example, in a Finnish deliberative experiment about immigration [Lindell *et al.*, 2017], opinion moderation seemed, on the one hand, to be more commonly adopted by left-wing and older participants, whereas opinion polarisation, on the other hand, was more commonly observed among female and older participants. In line with existing research on collaborative governance [Baird *et al.*, 2019], efforts to maximise the diversity of councillors could be reinforced, as diversity is expected to facilitate social learning. These efforts could include formal rules or the routines of political parties regarding how to build lists of candidates.
- 31 In line with Prosser *et al.* [2018], our findings also underline the importance of prior relationships among municipal councillors in facilitating deliberations built on trust, which ultimately promotes social learning. In the same vein, cordiality is an important factor of social learning in public deliberations and is recognised as such by our research participants. However, our results suggest that the three conditions pointed out by Wahl [2018] for cultivating trust among participants in public deliberations are not met in municipal councils. Initial distrust among councillors undermines the probability that any of them will make rhetorical appeals to others, whereas these appeals are critical for exchanging ideas, knowledge diffusion and changing one's beliefs. When discussion occurs, the parties which feel undercut, such as opposition councillors, may see forceful critique as the only effective mode to engage with the more powerful party. Despite the importance of such contestation in deliberations, it can damage the reciprocal trust necessary for mutual learning. Finally, deliberators often have predetermined beliefs about each other's views and interests. Distrustful

deliberators will probably not take the risk of sharing sensitive information with other participants.

- 32 Second, politics is a major barrier to social learning dynamics in municipal councils. Social learning is impeded by the absence of opportunities to exchange information and opinions between majority councillors and opposition councillors. The autonomy and decision-making processes of councillors are strongly driven by group pressure. While some free voting instances exist, the dominance of the group often limits the ability of individual councillors to express different opinions or to collaborate and exchange ideas across group lines, which impedes social learning dynamics. This issue is even stronger for majority councillors, whose primary roles are to respect the majority agreement and to support the college [de Beer de Laer, 2012].
- 33 There are several ways to improve social dynamics among municipal councillors. There should be more committees or working groups which bring together councillors from multiple political groups from the majority and opposition to work on specific issues. Social activities, such as field trips, could also be organised. To the best of our knowledge, except for some political groups, there are few municipalities in which social activities, especially intergroup activities, are organised for councillors. Of course, there are constraints related to the limited amount of time which councillors can dedicate to local politics. Furthermore, municipal councillors do meet on some occasions outside of council meetings, e.g. when they are invited by local actors to discuss an issue or to attend a reception or a dinner. However, while these activities are not necessarily sufficient to build actual relationships, the results of the study suggest that this could benefit social learning during and between council meetings. These efforts could be supported by Brulocalis.
- 34 Formal rules related to the organisation of the committee and council meetings could be adapted by the region and/or by the municipalities. New rules could encourage longer conversations between the college and the councillors, as well as more councillors from both majority groups and opposition groups to take the floor. Of course, these rules would only apply to certain issues which justify longer debates. Furthermore, the conditions of social learning differ in the context of deliberations among councillors and in the context of public deliberations: in the latter, the results of this research suggest that general public access makes idea exchanges more challenging, whereas in the former, private interests may take over. More opportunities to speak without an audience could be considered. Finally, receiving preparatory documents further in advance before council meetings could be prescribed for some issues which require more time for consideration, consultation and discussion for both majority and opposition councillors.
- 35 Beyond formal rules, debates could be redesigned to improve their spontaneity, at least in committee meetings if not in council meetings. For example, collective intelligence approaches are popular regarding citizen participation [Brulocalis, 2023], yet they remain underutilised in representative democracy despite their potential usefulness [Boucher *et al.*, 2023]. Collective intelligence techniques could make councillors more aware of biases in deliberations due to political values [see Kaebnick, 2021]. In order to enhance the diversity of opinions in debates, large political groups could prepare council agendas by combining inputs from both expert and non-expert members. Barabas [2004] suggested that experts tend to stick more to their positions than non-experts. Additionally, there is much room for improvement in information and

communication technologies. While the BOS software used by municipalities has admittedly improved document management, features to facilitate dialogue between councillors about these documents could be beneficial.

- 36 Council presidents can play a decisive role as deliberative facilitators. Previous studies on public deliberation have confirmed their importance in modelling social learning processes. They can foster internal inclusion and pluralism, encourage passive members to participate, and curtail dominant members when necessary, without interfering too much in the discussion [Lindell and Ehrström, 2020]. However, our findings showed that elected council presidents may not be able to play this role because they are members of the majority (if not mayors). The introduction of apolitical council presidents could be a promising avenue for future research and practice.
- 37 Finally, a significant stream of literature points to the key role of education in the development of deliberative abilities. New educational approaches, such as “deliberative pedagogy” [Manosevitch, 2019] or civic-focused serious games [Fisher, 2000], have been positively related to civic engagement and deliberative skills. This is important because our research shows that procedural mechanisms of deliberation alone are not capable of fostering learning: there is a need for civic competencies, including “reasoned argument” skills and openness to diverse perspectives [Morse *et al.*, 2005, p. 327].
- 38 In summary, the research presented in this article has confirmed that municipal councils are not places for effective deliberations. While social learning facilitates consensus formation and decision-making and could be a desirable product of council deliberations, this article has pinpointed political and social barriers as well as formal procedures and informal norms which complicate social learning, as well as potential solutions to overcome these barriers. In doing so, we have contributed to a better understanding of municipal politics and policy-making in Brussels.

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