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Quel stade pour l'Union Saint-Gilloise ? L'avis des supporters

Welk stadion voor Union Saint-Gilloise? De mening van de supporters

Olivier Paye, Thomas Ermans, Thomas Laloux, Youri Lou Vertongen, Loïc Cobut and Lou Kervarrec

Translator: Jane Corrigan



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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.

This article was published together with issue 202.

Introduction

- ¹ Like any large-scale infrastructure, the construction of a new professional football stadium fuels "controversies" [Lascombes, 2019] and "conflicts of use regarding public space" [Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 3; Bale, 1990; Sawicki, 2012; Lekakis, 2018; Scherer, Kafala and Davidson, 2022]. This was the case for the abandoned project for a national stadium to replace the current Roi Baudouin stadium at Heysel [Govaert, 2022]. The recent project in Brussels involving Royale Union Saint-Gilloise (RUSG) is no exception. After 48 years, the club returned to Division 1 in the 2021-22 season and finished in the top three, as it did in the following seasons, even winning the title at the end of the 2024-25 season. This resurrection was due to the purchase of the club in 2018 by English investors, Tony Bloom and Alex Muzio, the new chairman. In order for Union to grow, they need a bigger, more modern stadium than the Marien stadium, which is located in Forest in the south of Brussels, on the edge of Duden park in a residential neighbourhood¹. Due to the fact that it only has 5 000 seats – which is below the

8 000 seats required by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) – European matches have to be relocated, while the 7 700 seats allocated to Union spectators are now insufficient to meet demand. Deeming the current stadium insuitable, the club wanted to build a new stadium at its own expense in Forest, on a municipal plot of land at the Bempt site on the outskirts, as is often the case for new stadiums [Rannou, 2021: 106]. The project submitted encountered several obstacles, and in early 2023 the municipality refused the club's purchase offer, which was also deemed too low, instructing the municipal college to “continue discussions with the Region and the Club with a view to finding possible solutions within the municipal and regional territory”². The case has not resurfaced since then [Paye *et al.*, 2025].

- 2 This article is based on a survey conducted among Union fans to understand their positions in the debate. “Fans” refers to people who are characterised by a lasting collective identification with a team [De Waele and Husting, 2008; Niemann, Brand and Weber, 2024], to which they feel a partisan-like emotional attachment [Bromberger, 1995] expressed through acts of belonging or support [Hourcade, 2002: 76-78; Nuytens, 2004: 44-45; Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 2]. This “fandom” [Hourcade, 2002: 78-83] is likely to change over time, in form and intensity, from one fan to another, from one group of fans of a team to another and from fans of one club to another [Bromberger, 1995; Nuytens, 2004; Lestrelin, 2015; Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 1]. Union's type of fandom is characterised by constant support for its team and, above all, the absence of insulting remarks about the opposing team or their fans³.
- 3 A survey of Union fans makes all the more sense as they do not necessarily have the same expectations in terms of a stadium. There are a number of reasons why people may be reluctant about a new stadium, which could lead to the project being abandoned [Sorez, 2011]. Firstly, there is a tendency towards “topophilia” [Bale, 1989] with respect to the current stadium [Cournoyer-Gendron, Trudelle and Devisme, 2019]. The emotional ties are strong when it comes to a historic stadium [Molina-Luque, 2002: 71; Rannou, 2021: 100-105] such as Marien, nestled in the bucolic setting of a park which is listed, as is the art deco main stand⁴. Secondly, the new stadium is less accessible by transport [Rannou, 2021: 106], which has been pointed out as a risk for the Bempt project [Perspective.Brussels, 2022b: 11]. Thirdly, an expanded offer of more comfortable and more expensive seats could constitute a financial barrier [Scherer, Kafara and Davidson, 2022]. In fact, the project at Bempt includes complete coverage of the stands and a much higher number of seats and VIP seating⁵, which could lead to a lack of atmosphere [Rannou, 2021: 106-107] and a “gentrification of the stands” [Bouigue and Rondeau, 2018]. This is all the more true given that certain neighbourhoods of Forest⁶ [Debersaques, 2017; 2021a; 2021b] and Saint-Gilles⁷ – the first Unionist fan catchment areas – are undergoing rapid gentrification and that there is an influx of new, more “bobo” and “trendy” fans⁸ compared to ten years ago, when home attendance rarely exceeded 1 000 people per match⁹ and access to refreshment bars and toilets during the match was easy.
- 4 In contrast, a new stadium would have the support of fans seeking greater comfort at home matches. It would be all the more welcome given that the current stadium is no longer able to satisfy demand and does not meet “UEFA standards” [Sawicki, 2012: 208], with the Union's European matches taking place at the home of neighbouring rival RSC Anderlecht (22 000 seats), Roi Baudouin stadium (50 000 seats) north of Brussels or Oud-Heverlee Louvain (10 000 seats), 30 kilometres away. A new stadium could be a means of

improving the quality of the “fan experience”¹⁰ [Helleu, 2023] as well as enhancing fan identity: increased size recalibrating the scale of the club materially and symbolically, or more contemporary architecture adapted to societal standards in terms of sustainability, security and connectivity [Rannou, 2021: 106-107; Bucaille and Villard, 2025].

- 5 Therefore, based on the assumption that fans must be ambivalent about the idea of a new stadium for RUSG, we asked them to fill in an online questionnaire between 15 May and 5 July 2023. The first part (7 main questions) asked them to indicate the degree of importance they attributed to 10 practical improvements linked to a new stadium, as well as to 9 arguments “in favour of” and 9 arguments “against” the idea of a new stadium. They were then asked to rate how favourable they were to a new stadium as well as their preference for each of the 8 stadium scenarios most frequently mentioned in the public debate [Perspective.Brussels, 2022a] without ranking them, thus making it possible to give an equal rating to more than one scenario. Part 2 focused on the type of fandom of respondents (12 main questions), and part 3, on their socio-demographic profile and political leanings (9 main questions).
- 6 We sent each fan club an invitation to take part in the survey, which was also posted on fan group pages on Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as via our personal Twitter and Facebook accounts. Posters with a QR code for the questionnaire were also placed in cafés near Marien stadium. As the club did not agree with the wording of some of the questions, it preferred not to participate in the distribution of the questionnaire. We collected 645 completed questionnaires, including 26 in Dutch (4,5 %) and 19 in English (3 %). Some questions allowed the possibility of not answering, resulting in a total number of respondents (n) of less than 645.
- 7 Is this sample representative? It is impossible to know, as there are no data on the total population of RUSG fans. On a quantitative level, if we estimate its size at 16 000 people (equivalent to the highest number of tickets sold to Unionists in the 2022-23 season for a match against Bayer Leverkusen on 20 April 2023), the coverage rate of our sample would be 4 %. What about qualitative bias? 16 % of respondents (n: 637) are women, equivalent to the proportion of women among club season ticket holders¹¹, while 79 % of respondents reside in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR), as do 72 % of season ticket holders¹². For the other characteristics, no public data are available. The sample is likely to show the classic biases of online surveys [Bayart and Bonnel, 2010; Bosnjak *et al.*, 2013; Grewenig *et al.*, 2023]: under-representation of those aged 60 and over, who account for only 13 % of respondents (n: 645), and over-representation of higher education graduates, who make up 82 % of respondents (n: 636). However, the extent of both biases is less pronounced than in other online surveys of football fans, such as the one carried out in France during Euro 2016 (n: 954), which totalled 89 % higher education graduates and 5 % aged 60 and over [Charbonnier and Smith, 2017: 99-100].
- 8 Both the number of questionnaires collected and the diversity of respondent profiles proved sufficient for the survey to achieve its main goal [Swedberg, 2020; Ellis *et al.*, 2023]: to make an exploratory distinction, in a debate which is set to continue, between different groups of opinions according to the respective “grammars” [Genard, 1999; Trom, 2001; Duran, 2002] of responses to questions regarding the “project to build a new stadium for RUSG”, which only three respondents had not “heard of” when they took part in the survey.

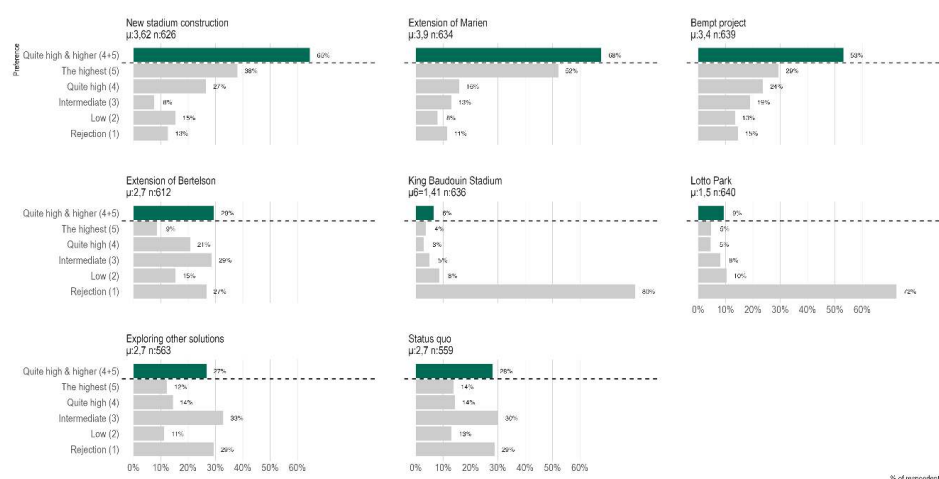
- 9 Following a description of the distribution of responses to the opinion questions regarding the controversy (section 1), we present a principal component analysis carried out first on arguments in favour of and against the construction of a new stadium (section 2), then on preferences in terms of stadium scenarios, on the basis of which we have classified respondents into distinct opinion groups (section 3). Bivariate analyses then allow us to examine whether belonging to one of the opinion groups is associated with certain characteristics of fandom (section 4). In the conclusion, we relate the results obtained to certain survey data concerning the socio-demographic characteristics and political leanings of fans.

1. The main lines of the fans' opinions regarding the controversy

1.1. A significant majority in favour of a new stadium, with two preferred scenarios: extension of the Marien stadium and the Bempt project

- 10 While a large majority are in favour of building a new stadium, the most popular scenario is the extension of the current stadium, with the project for a new stadium at Bempt in second place (Figure 1). The scenarios of maintaining the status quo, extending the Bertelson stadium located one kilometre from the Marien stadium, and exploring other possibilities for a new stadium score below average as a preference. Sharing scenarios at both Anderlecht and Heysel received less than 10 % as a preference.

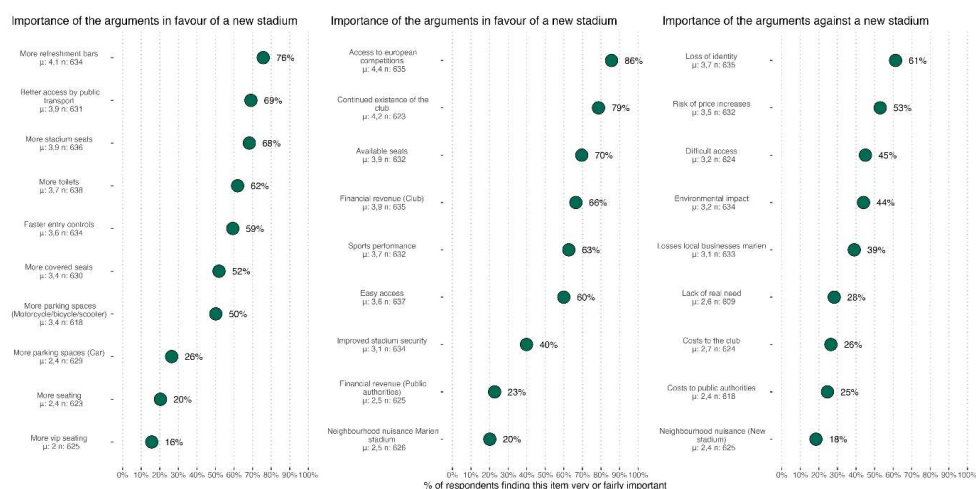
Figure 1. Degree of favourability towards the idea of a new stadium and degree of preference given to different stadium scenarios (on an ascending scale from 1 to 5)



1.2. A new, larger stadium with better public transport connections, to ensure the continued existence of the club and allow it to play European matches, at the risk of losing its identity and increasing ticket prices

- 11 Practical expectations regarding a new stadium (Figure 2) relate above all to more amenities (refreshment bars, toilets) and seats, as well as better access by public transport. Expectations are low for an expanded offer of more comfortable seating (VIP) and parking spaces around the stadium.
- 12 The most important arguments in favour of a new stadium concern the possibility of playing European matches in the new stadium, and its contribution to the club's continued existence at a high level, representing a source of additional revenue and improved sports performance (Figure 2). These arguments stem from the general attachment of fans to their club, from which they expect the best performance. More seats in the stadium and easier access by public transport are also deemed important. The elimination of nuisance for the area around the current stadium and the additional revenue that a new stadium could generate for the public authorities are below the median value.
- 13 Although of lesser importance than the first five arguments in favour of a new stadium, two arguments against one stand out (Figure 2): a loss of the club's identity due to “topophilia” with respect to the historic stadium, and the feared rise in ticket prices at the new stadium, associated with the (increased) risk of “gentrification” of the stands. These two arguments reflect the fear that a new stadium would undermine the sense of belonging which unites fans with the club. The majority of respondents consider the environmental impact to be of moderate importance at most. The two arguments of least importance against a new stadium are equivalent to the two arguments with the least support in favour of a new stadium: nuisance for the neighbourhood, in this case due to the new stadium (and no longer the current stadium), and the impact of the new stadium on public finances, in this case on expenditure (and no longer on revenue), i.e. concerns related to specific local interests and to the general interest.

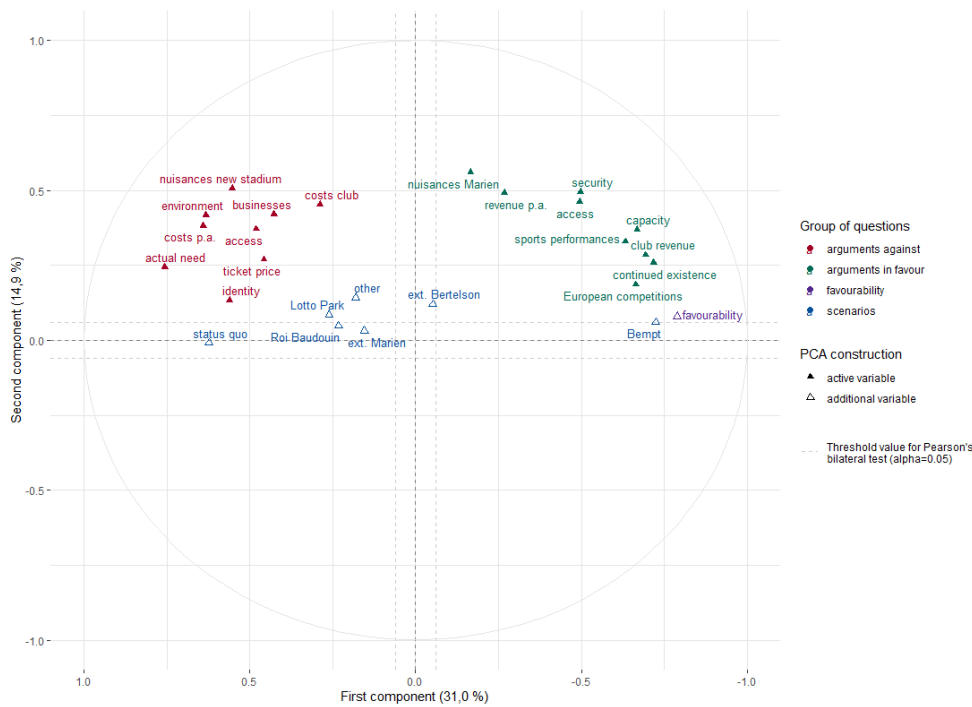
Figure 2. Degree of importance attached to the practical improvements which a new stadium could bring, and to the arguments in favour of and against a new stadium (on an ascending scale from 1 to 5)



2. The degree of favourability towards a new stadium: a structuring dimension of positions in terms of arguments and scenarios

- 14 In order to characterise the associations between the opinions presented in section 1, we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) [Escofier and Pagès, 2008] of the arguments in favour of and against the construction of a new stadium (Figure 3 and annexe). This brings out a first, highly structuring dimension of the arguments put forth in favour of the new stadium project, accounting for almost a third of the data, or more than double the second principal component¹³. This dimension, which can be read from left to right in Figure 3, can be interpreted as the degree of favourability towards the construction of a new stadium. It is correlated positively with the importance attached to the arguments in favour of a new stadium, in particular the continued existence of the club (+0,72), its revenue (+0,69) and the greater capacity of the stadium (+0,67). It is correlated negatively with the arguments against a new stadium, in particular the lack of a true need (-0,76), the cost to the public authorities (-0,64) and the environmental impact (-0,63).
- 15 Among the different stadium scenarios, the greatest polarisation is observed between the Bempt project and the status quo scenario. The importance attached to the arguments in favour of a new stadium is correlated with favourability towards a new stadium as well as towards the Bempt option, whereas all of the other stadium scenarios are correlated more with a high degree of importance attached to the arguments against a new stadium, with the exception of the Bertelson stadium extension, as the correlation is statistically insignificant at the 0,05 threshold (see annexe).

Figure 3. Circle of correlations between PCA-generated components and variables related to arguments and stadium scenarios derived from responses to the first part of the questionnaire

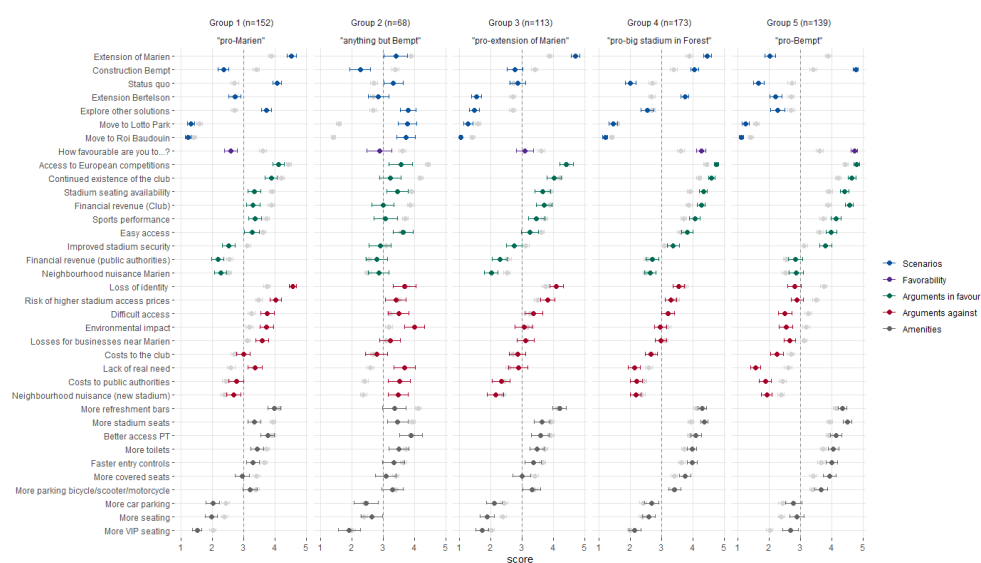


Additional methodological explanations concerning the graph are provided in the annexe.

3. A classification of respondents into five distinct opinion groups

- 16 We then carried out a classification analysis¹⁴ in order to group respondents together according to a certain degree of congruence in terms of stated preferences for stadium scenarios. We have distinguished five groups of opinions (Figure 4), whose positional and argumentative grammars we shall now present.

Figure 4. A classification of respondents into five distinct opinion groups



The groups are divided from left to right according to increasing degree of favourability towards the construction of a new stadium. The light grey dots indicate the average response of all respondents for each item.

3.1. Pro-Bempt (group 5; 21,5 % of respondents)

- 17 Group 5 is the most favourable to a new stadium, and the one which expresses the highest degree of preference for the Bempt scenario. We call it “pro-Bempt” because it prefers no other scenario. Compared to the average, it strongly and consistently overvalues every argument in favour of a new stadium and every expected practical improvement, and strongly and consistently undervalues every argument against a new stadium, even though the two arguments related to the fans' fear of an undermining of the sense of belonging to their club – namely the loss of identity and the risk of higher ticket prices – are considered to be of medium importance.

3.2. Pro-big stadium in Forest (group 4; 27 % of respondents)

- 18 Group 4 is slightly less favourable to a new stadium than the pro-Bempt group, and promotes the arguments and potential practical improvements in a pattern similar to that of the pro-Bempt group, while being, however, closer to the moderate preference of all respondents. While it also favours the Bempt option, it does so to a lesser extent than the pro-Bempt group, which distinguishes itself by also showing a preference for two other scenarios for a bigger stadium in Forest: the extension of the current stadium, which it prefers most, and the extension of the Bertelson stadium. This group is called “pro-big stadium in Forest” also because it rejects the scenarios of sharing the Lotto Park in Anderlecht and the Roi Baudouin stadium at Heysel, as well as the status quo option, which it prefers the least.

3.3. Pro-extension of Marien (group 3; 17,5 % of respondents)

- 19 Only moderately in favour of a new stadium, group 3 is the most enthusiastic about extending the Marien stadium, to the exclusion of the other options, with the Bempt option as well as the status quo representing a slightly below average preference. We therefore call it the “pro-extension of Marien” group. Its preference seems to be the opposite reflection of that of the previous group. Those in favour of extending the Marien stadium consistently undervalue every argument in favour of a new stadium, except for participation in European competitions, as well as every expected practical improvement, except for more refreshment bars. At the same time, they overvalue certain arguments against a new stadium, first and foremost those which reflect the fear that a new stadium would undermine the sense of belonging which unites fans with the club: a loss of the club's identity due to “topophilia” with respect to the existing stadium, and the dreaded rise in ticket prices, which may reflect a fear of an (increased) transformation in the profile of the fans who attend the matches.

3.4. Anything but Bempt (group 2; 9 % of respondents)

- 20 Like the previous group, group 2 is only moderately in favour of a new stadium. Its preferences also follow the general trend seen with the previous group, which it differs from by more strongly undervaluing the main arguments in favour of a new stadium, with the exception of improved stadium accessibility. Echoing this, the most valued practical improvement is better access by public transport, while most other potential practical improvements are undervalued. As regards the arguments against a new stadium, this group overvalues the lack of a true need, the cost to the public authorities of building a new stadium, and the nuisance the new stadium would cause to the neighbourhood. It is the only group to consider these last two arguments as a little more than of average importance. Other markers include environmental impact, which is the most important argument, while the scenarios of sharing the Lotto Park or the Roi Baudouin stadium, as well as the exploration of other solutions, are at the top of the group's preferences. As only the Bempt option fails to achieve a value of 3 among its preferences, we call this group “anything but Bempt”.

3.5. Pro-Marien (group 1; 23,5 % of respondents)

- 21 This group is the opposite of the pro-Bempt group in terms of favourability towards a new stadium. Its preferences are very similar to those of the previous group, and it also consistently overvalues every argument against a new stadium, in particular the risks of a loss of identity and higher ticket prices, as well as the lack of a true need, the environmental impact and the losses for businesses in the vicinity of the current stadium. Likewise, this group consistently undervalues every argument in favour of a new stadium, as well as every expected practical improvement, even though access to European competitions and the continued existence of the club are seen as fairly important arguments. On the other hand, having more seats is only a moderately important expectation. This group is the only one whose opinion is unfavourable to the idea of a new stadium as well as the Bempt option. Its two preferred solutions are the

extension of the Marien stadium, followed by the status quo, which is why this group is called the “pro-Marien” group.

4. Characterising the groups according to their fandom profile

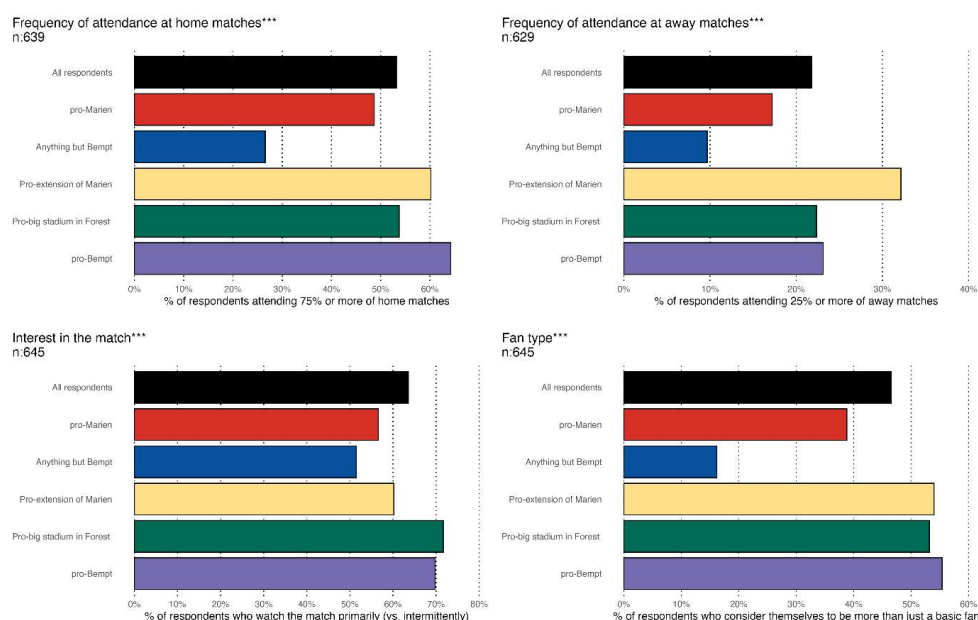
- 22 “Careers as fans” [Lestrelin, 2015] are typically distinguished [Hourcade, 2002: 76-78] diachronically, according to the length of “loyalty” to the club [Molina-Luque, 2002] and synchronically, according to the level of commitment to the club's current fandom practices [Giulianetti, 2002; Nuytens, 2004: part. 2, sect. 1; Heck *et al.*, 2024]. These variables refer to two opposing hypotheses. First of all, we can speculate that older, more active fans have developed a more pronounced topophilia towards the historic stadium and are therefore more likely to be pro-Marien and pro-extension of Marien. However, we can also assume that fans with this profile support the idea of a new stadium, better suited to sustaining high-level sports performance for their club. They would therefore be more likely to be pro-Bempt or pro-big stadium in Forest. In any case, we expect that the most long-standing and most active fans are less likely to be among the supporters of anything but Bempt, as they are scarcely in favour of sharing the Lotto Park – home of neighbouring rival RSC Anderlecht – or the oversized Roi Baudouin stadium, which is considered as not particularly conducive to a “warm atmosphere”. Furthermore, new fans who are drawn by the good sports performance might prefer a new stadium, which would be better suited to sustaining this performance. Conversely, they might also prefer to keep the club in its current stadium, especially if they consider their attendance at matches to be more of a means of “social bonding” [Nuytens, 2004: 137-138] than of active support for the team.
- 23 Two indicators are used to measure the number of years of support:
 - the year declared as the start of their support for the team;
 - where applicable, the year they became season ticket holders, which is a traditional marker of more regular support [Molina-Luque, 2002; Nuytens, 2004: 44-45]. This last indicator is also linked to the dimension of the intensity of support from a diachronic perspective.
- 24 The responses were expressed in years and were aggregated according to a four-period breakdown ranging from the greatest number of years of support, beginning prior to 2015 (year of the club's return to Division 2), to the fewest number of years of support, dating from the club's return to Division 1 at the end of the 2020-21 season.
- 25 To measure the intensity dimension, the following four indicators have been used:
 - declared frequency of attendance at home championship matches;
 - the declared frequency of attendance at away championship matches, which is considered to be a discriminating marker of particularly active support [Lestrelin, 2015: 63-64; 72];
 - declared affiliation with a more active type of fan than the “basic fan” [Nuytens, 2004: part. 2, sect. 1; Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 1]: a member of either an established fan club, or the “kop”, an informal group of fans who sing songs of support in the stands, or the “ultras”, a part of the “kop” responsible for various activities (using smoke bombs in particular) in and outside the stands;
 - declared interest while attending matches: is the main interest in the match itself, which characterises active support, or is it also or entirely in “drinking and meeting up with friends”?

- 26 We used bivariate analyses in order to uncover associations between these indicators of “length of support” and “intensity” of support and the five opinion groups. Three asterisks have been added to the titles of the graphs when significance tests confirm that the differences are significant (see annexe for methodological details).

4.1. Less active support from the two groups least favourable to the Bempt option

- 27 The four indicators selected show a consistently lower intensity of support for the two groups least favourable to the Bempt option (Figure 5). They distance themselves from the others, very clearly from those in favour of anything but Bempt, and in a much more moderate way for the pro-Marien group. The association of the other three groups with more active fandom varies according to the indicator, with the pro-extension of Marien group having proportionally the most fans who travel to see matches.

Figure 5. Profile of opinion groups in terms of intensity of support



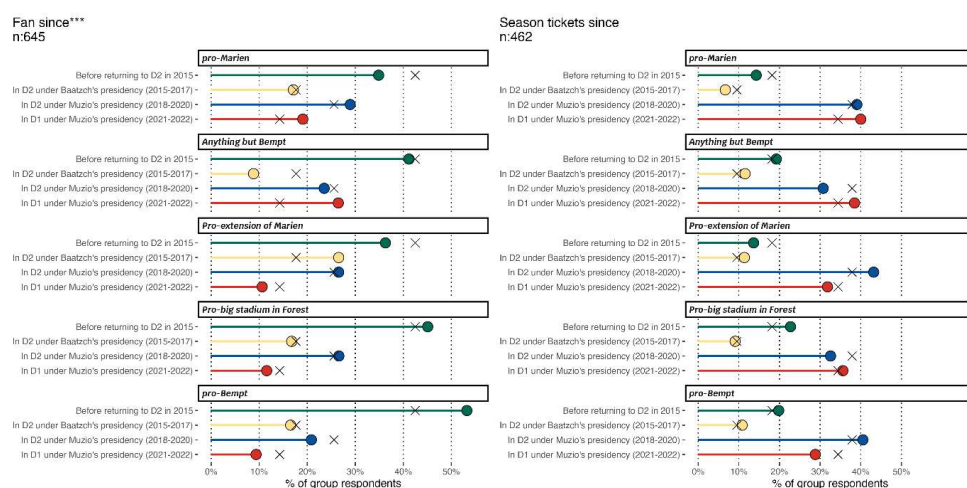
4.2. More long-standing fandom among the two groups most in favour of the Bempt option

- 28 The two indicators of long-standing fandom do not allow the groups to be differentiated to the same extent (Figure 6). However, a consideration of the year in which fans began supporting the team establishes the hypothesis that the two groups most in favour of the Bempt option are made up more of long-standing fans, and even more so among the pro-Bempt group than among those who are pro-big stadium in Forest; those whose support dates back to before 2015 therefore account for more than 50 % of the pro-Bempt group. The difference also applies if we aggregate the most long-standing fans and those who began supporting Union between 2015-16 and 2017-18,

with the stipulation that this difference does not apply to those who are pro-extension of Marien. Conversely, the two groups least in favour of the Bempt option – those who are pro-Marien and those who favour anything but Bempt – are characterised by a lower proportion of long-standing fans.

- 29 If we consider the year in which season tickets were first purchased by fans who were season ticket holders at the time of the survey, the differences between the groups are much less marked (Figure 6). Moreover, they do not reach the significance threshold when subjected to the chi-square test (see annexe). This could be explained by the fact that until the club's takeover in 2018, it was not necessary to have season tickets in order to ensure attendance at home games, as the stadium was never full¹⁵. It should be noted that the proportion of season ticket holders in the various groups – an indicator of the intensity of support – has no discriminating effect between the groups either, with the exception once again of the group of those who favour anything but Bempt, which has less than 40 % season ticket holders, compared with an average of 71,5 % among all respondents.

Figure 6. Profile of opinion groups in terms of duration of fandom



The crosses in the graphs indicate the average response of all respondents for each item.

Conclusion

- 30 As we hypothesised, when Union fans responded to the survey in mid-2023, they did not all share the same opinion with respect to the controversy: contrary to what is sometimes implied in the press¹⁶, not all of them wish for a new stadium, and even less so for a stadium at Bemtp.
- 31 The varying importance attributed by fans to the various arguments in favour of and against a new stadium in the debate is very closely linked to their (non-)favourability towards a new stadium, which therefore has a divisive impact. A higher-than-average importance attached to arguments in favour of a new stadium and a lower-than-average importance given to arguments against a new stadium is associated with favourability towards a new stadium, as well as with a strong preference for the Bemtp project. In contrast, a greater importance attached to arguments against a new stadium is associated with non-favourability towards a new stadium and a preference for an

alternative to the Bempt stadium scenario. Among the majority of fans expressing a preference for the Bempt project, some also show an equal preference for other solutions, in particular the extension of the current Marien stadium, which is the most popular solution.

- 32 Beyond their differing stances on stadium scenarios, there is a relative consensus among fans on the importance to be attached to certain arguments in the debate both in favour of a new stadium and against one, although to a lesser extent. Those in favour of a new stadium see an opportunity to play European matches at home in their own stadium and a means of ensuring the continued existence of the club at the highest level. These arguments reflect the general attachment of all fans to a club whose sports performance they want to see at its best. For those against a new stadium, the risks of a loss of club identity and higher ticket prices are linked to the fear that a new stadium would undermine the sense of belonging which unites fans with the club. Another widely shared argument relating to this relationship of proximity, this time understood in a material sense, is that the issue of better accessibility of a new stadium by public transport, or the fear of more difficult accessibility, is linked to the observation “that the current USG stadium is more centrally located in relation to the public transport network than [the proposed site at Bempt] for a new stadium” [Perspective.Brussels: 2022b: 4].
- 33 Two types of argument are widely considered to be of little importance, except for the small group in favour of anything but Bempt, whose preferences include sharing the Lotto Park in Anderlecht or the Roi Baudouin stadium at Heysel. These concern the impact of a new stadium on public finances in terms of both revenue and expenditure, and the impact of the existing or new stadium on the surrounding area in terms of nuisance. However, these concerns appear central to other stakeholders in the debate, the public authorities and local residents' committees [Paye *et al.*, 2025], who are also concerned about the environmental impact of a new stadium, an argument considered by a majority of fans as neither “very important” nor “fairly important”.
- 34 The ecological argument is only promoted by the supporters who are least in favour of the Bempt option and who, in the absence of an extension of the current stadium, prefer the status quo, namely those who are pro-Marien and those who are in favour of anything but Bempt, with the latter even prioritising this argument. These two groups are characterised by an over-representation of a more recent and/or, above all, less active fandom. Conversely, the most fervent supporters of a new stadium and the Bempt project – those who are pro-Bempt, favouring the Bempt scenario exclusively, and those who are in favour of a big stadium in Forest (at Bempt, Marien or Bertelson) – include a higher than average proportion of fans who are both long-standing and/or, above all, more active. But this is also the case for those who are pro-extension of Marien, whose only above average preference is for the expansion of the current stadium, and not for the project at Bempt.
- 35 Would the two groups least in favour of a new stadium and least inclined towards the Bempt option – which promote the ecological argument and are comprised of more recent fans and a less ardent fandom – start to include more of these new “bobo” fans who are said to be environmentalists, left-leaning and with a high level of (particularly cultural) capital¹⁷? The hypothesis requires a more targeted investigation, but certain survey data appear to support it, especially – and paradoxically – regarding the pro-Marien group who are the most attached to the current stadium to the point of

maintaining the status quo, which could lead to disinvestment by the club's English owners.

- 36 While higher education graduates make up 82,4 % of respondents (n: 636), they are over-represented among those who are pro-Marien (88,1 %) and those in favour of anything but Bempt (92,6 %). On a 7-position left-right scale, with 4 representing the centre, respondents rated themselves at an average of 3,06, which is equivalent to centre-left (n: 567). While there is only a slight difference for those in favour of anything but Bempt (3,00), the pro-Marien group is much further to the left (2,55). Finally, while 34,1 % of respondents eligible to vote in the 2019 legislative elections voted Écolo (n: 437) – with the proportion being almost identical for those in favour of anything but Bempt (36 %) – there were significantly more who did so from the pro-Marien group (51,6 %).
- 37 If we broaden the scope, we see that 63 % of respondents are on the left, and that 65,5 % voted on the left in 2019: radical (PTB: 14 %), socialist (PS or SP.A, now Vooruit: 13 %) or green (ÉCOLO or Groen: 38,5 %). Both the proportion of left-wing respondents and green voters clearly exceed the proportion of respondents (26 %) who consider the environmental impact to be “very important” in the debate on a new stadium. Would being a Union fan and having left-wing or environmentalist leanings be a source of cognitive dissonance? The survey we have conducted calls for further investigation into the relationship between a football fan's (active) identity as a fan and his or her other identities – in particular as a supporter and a member of a community – in terms of political attitudes and preferences.
- 38 More broadly, our study urges us to take fans seriously in the public debate [Busset, 2014; Busset and Gasparini, 2016; Lestrelin, 2016]. It encourages decision-makers to involve them in a participative manner in the decision-making processes which concern them. On the one hand, there are the club chairmen, with the “transnational football business” [Giulianotti and Robertson, 2012; Dermitt-Richard, 2013] pushing them to treat fans as mere passive customers according to the motto “Pay up! Sing! Don't protest!” [Hourcade, 2002: 85; Lestrelin, 2022: ch. 1]. On the other hand, there are the political leaders who strive to adhere to “participatory democracy, a new paradigm for public action” [Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005; Blondiaux, 2022], particularly for urban [Le Galès, 1995] and local governance [Michels and De Graaf, 2017]. This “deliberative turn in democracy” [Blondiaux and Manin, 2021] leads them to consult with all “parties concerned” [Schiffino and Van Ingelgom, 2021] before taking public decisions, which has hardly happened (yet?) in this case.

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APPENDIXES

Protocol explaining the quantitative analysis methods used

Section 2 of the article refers to the implementation of a principal component analysis (PCA). PCA is an inductive method which allows us to highlight the dimensions underlying the data collected in the survey questions. To do this, it extracts factors from the multivariate dataset (the variables in this case correspond to the answers to the questions in the first part of the questionnaire) called “principal components”, which correspond to new variables [Escofier and Pagès, 2008]. These new variables are built one after the other and are oriented in the direction of the greatest residual variance in the data. The first components thus concentrate more information than a single variable, and generally reveal the major oppositions present in the data. This is why these components are referred to as synthetic. They are also independent of each other.

In Figure 3, correlations between variables and components are used to interpret the latter. To facilitate reading, test values (Pearson correlation test, significance level equivalent to 0.05) are represented parallel to each axis with dotted lines. Variables within these lines are too close to zero to estimate that there is a non-zero correlation with the component being considered. Therefore, the importance attached to the Bertelson stadium extension scenario is too close to the value 0 on the horizontal axis, which corresponds to the first component to refute the hypothesis that there is no correlation with it. However, this hypothesis can be rejected for the vertical axis corresponding to the second component. These test values are provided to aid with interpretation: they indicate the consideration which can be given to the correlations

represented. It should be borne in mind, however, that not all significant correlations with variables necessarily provide information relevant to the interpretation of the dimensions. It is therefore rare for correlations of less than 0.20, in absolute terms, to be considered when interpreting a component.

The active variables are those used to extract the principal components. Complementary variables are added to the correlation circle to facilitate the interpretation of the principal components.

In section 3, the classification of the five opinion groups was established on the basis of responses related to stated scenario preferences, synthesised by the first four components obtained by a PCA applied to them. The classification itself followed the dynamic clustering method (K-Means method), based on centres corresponding to groups selected by hierarchical ascending classification (Ward's method).

In Section 4, due to the exploratory nature of our research, we have opted for bivariate analyses, given that the number of respondents is low in certain groups, such as group 2, which leads to insufficiently robust results for a multiple multinomial regression. As our independent variables are of a categorical nature, we performed chi-square tests, which are suitable for testing independence between qualitative variables and identifying any significant associations (see test results in Table A.1). Asterisks have been added to the graph titles where tests confirm that differences are significant.

Table A1. Results of statistical significance tests on correlations between fandom variables and opinion groups

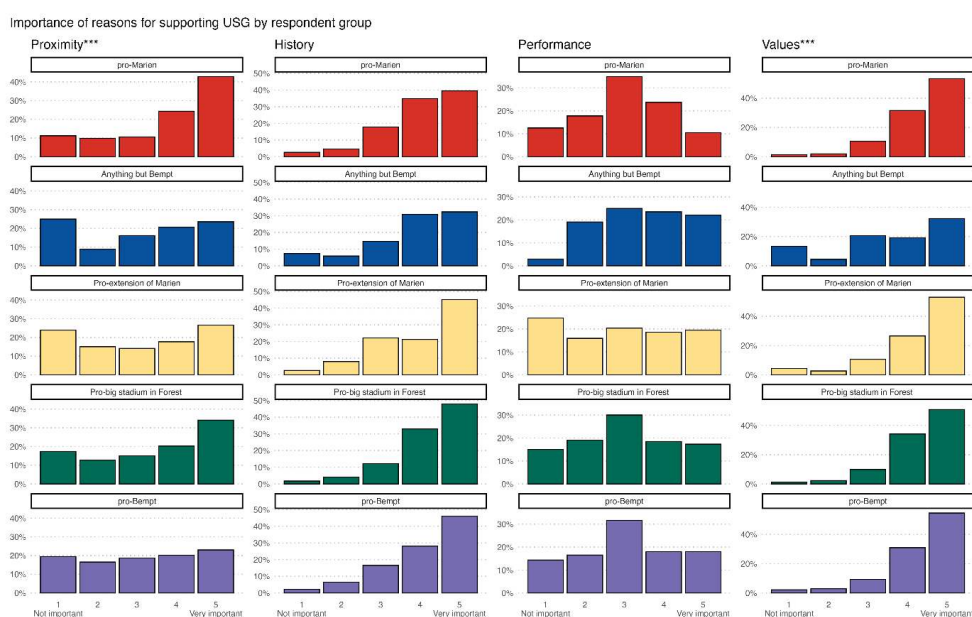
	Statistic	Value
Attendance at home matches	χ^2	28.415
	Ddl	4
	P	< .001
Attendance at away matches	χ^2	14.411
	Ddl	4
	P	= .006
Main interest during the match	χ^2	15.294
	ddl	4
	P	= .004
Self-identification with a type of active fandom	χ^2	38.807
	ddl	4
	P	< .001
Duration of fandom	χ^2	31.411

	ddl	12
	P	= .002
Length of time since becoming a season ticket holder	χ^2	9.633
	Ddl	12
	P	= .648

Finally, in order to test the robustness of the results obtained from our bivariate analyses, we carried out a multiple multinomial regression including all of the independent variables used in section 4, with the exception of the length of time since becoming a season ticket holder, as this reduced the number of cases too greatly and the chi-square test did not indicate a significant association between this variable and one of the five opinion groups. This multinomial regression largely confirmed the results of the bivariate analyses. Only the marginal effect of the duration of fandom disappears when the other variables linked to fandom practices are included.

We also carried out bivariate analyses of the distribution by group of the degree of importance attributed by respondents to four possible reasons for supporting a club, in this case Union (see Figure A2). As a result, the differences between the groups are not significant overall with respect to this variable. Only the geographical proximity of the current stadium and the club's values have a significant effect, and even then, in each case only allowing one group to be characterised. On the one hand, unsurprisingly, the pro-Marien group – but not those who are pro-extension of Marien – attach much greater importance to geographical proximity to the current stadium than to the other reasons for supporting Union. On the other hand, those in favour of anything but Bempt place less importance on the club's values. It is therefore surprising that the importance of the club's sports performance does not appear to be a significant source of differentiation between groups, including with respect to the group of those in favour of anything but Bempt, which comprises an over-representation of recent fans (see section 3).

Figure A2. Profile of opinion groups according to the importance of reasons for supporting Union



NOTES

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9. Average attendance figures for each season may be viewed on the Transfermarkt website at: <https://www.transfermarkt.fr/royale-union-saint-gilloise/besucherzahlenentwicklung/verein/3948>
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13. The second principal component (14,9% of the information, read from bottom to top in Figure 3) essentially expresses an opposition between people who tend to attach greater importance to all arguments, both in favour of and against a new stadium, and those who tend to attach lower importance to all arguments. It also contrasts those who attach a high level of importance to arguments related to nuisance around the stadium or safety with those who attach a low level of importance to these considerations. It also fails to distinguish between stated preferences for different scenarios, or the degree of favourability towards a new stadium project.
14. The classification of the five opinion groups was established on the basis of responses related to stated scenario preferences, synthesised by the first four components obtained by a PCA applied to them. The classification itself followed the dynamic clustering method (K-Means method), based on centres corresponding to groups selected by hierarchical ascending classification (Ward's method).
15. Average attendance figures for each season may be viewed on the Transfertmarkt website at: <https://www.transfermarkt.fr/royale-union-saint-gilloise/besucherzahlenentwicklung/verein/3948>
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ABSTRACTS

For several years now, a project for a new stadium at Bempt in Forest to the benefit of Union Saint-Gilloise has been a subject of debate, with no favourable decision having been taken by the public authorities by mid-2025. This article examines the results of an online survey carried out in mid-2023 among Unionist fans to find out about their views regarding this controversy. It reveals that the idea of a new stadium is a divisive one for fans. Although a large majority are in favour, the extension of the current stadium is the preferred option, with the Bempt project

coming in second place. The minority of fans who are content with the status quo and least in favour of a new stadium and the Bempt option are characterised by less active and more recent support. Despite their differing preferences, many fans agree on the importance to be given in the debate to a series of arguments both in favour of a new stadium – compliance with UEFA standards, increased capacity, contribution to the club's continued existence at a high level – and against a new stadium – risk of loss of identity and of higher ticket prices, with the issue of accessibility by public transport also pinpointed.

Depuis quelques années, un projet de nouveau stade au Bempt à Forest au bénéfice de l'Union Saint-Gilloise suscite un débat qu'aucune décision publique favorable n'a encore tranché à la mi-2025. Cet article décrypte les résultats d'une enquête en ligne menée à la mi-2023 auprès des supporters unionistes pour connaître leur avis sur cette controverse. Il révèle que l'idée d'un nouveau stade a une portée clivante en leur sein. Si une large majorité y est favorable, c'est toutefois l'extension du stade actuel qui bénéficie des faveurs les plus élevées, le projet au Bempt arrivant en deuxième lieu. Minoritaires, les supporters qui s'accommodent du statu quo et sont les moins favorables à un nouveau stade et à l'option du Bempt se caractérisent par un supportérisme moins actif et plus récent. Au-delà de leurs préférences différentes, de nombreux supporters s'accordent toutefois sur l'importance à donner dans le débat sur un nouveau stade à une série d'arguments aussi bien « pour » – conformité aux normes UEFA, capacité accrue, levier de pérennisation du club à un haut niveau – que « contre » – risques de perte d'identité et de hausse du prix des places, l'enjeu de l'accessibilité en transport en commun étant aussi épinglé.

Sinds een aantal jaar heeft het project rond de bouw van een nieuw voetbalstadion op de Bemptsite in Vorst voor Union Saint-Gilloise een debat op gang gebracht, maar half 2025 heeft de overheid nog altijd geen positieve beslissing genomen. Dit artikel bespreekt de resultaten van een online enquête die half 2023 ingevuld werd door de supporters van Union, met als doel hun mening over deze controverse te kennen. Uit de resultaten bleek dat het idee van een nieuw stadion sterk polariseert. Een ruime meerderheid van de supporters is voorstander, maar dan vooral via de uitbreiding van het huidige stadion. Het project op de Bemptsite komt dus pas op de tweede plaats. Een minderheid van de supporters behoudt liever de status quo en is het minst te vinden voor een nieuw stadion en voor de Bempt-optie. Kenmerkend voor deze groep is dat zij minder actieve en recentere supporters zijn. Maar ook al verschillen de voorkeuren, heel wat supporters zijn het erover eens dat er in het debat over een nieuw stadion belang gehecht moet worden aan een aantal argumenten zowel “voor” (voldoen aan de UEFA-normen, meer capaciteit en voortbestaan van de club op hoog niveau) als “tegen” (risico op identiteitsverlies en hogere ticketprijzen, maar ook de kwestie van de bereikbaarheid met het openbaar vervoer).

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AUTHORS

OLIVIER PAYE

Olivier Paye has a doctorate in political science from Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and is a professor at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, where he founded the Centre de recherche en science politique (CRéSPo), which he directed until 2010. His main fields of study are the analysis of public action and political participation. He is co-author of *Fondements de science politique* (De Boeck supérieur, 2nd ed., 2022).

olivier.paye[at]uclouvain.be

THOMAS ERMANS

Thomas Ermans has a degree in Geographical Sciences (ULB) and an additional master's degree in Statistical Data Analysis (UGent). He is an associate researcher at the Institut de recherches interdisciplinaires sur Bruxelles (IRIB) at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles and is employed by a public institution, with his work focusing on mobility. He has contributed as an expert to the accessibility component of the SWOT analysis for the new stadium project at Bempt.

Thomas_ermans[at]hotmail.com

THOMAS LALOUX

Thomas Laloux is a FRS-FNRS postdoctoral fellow at UCLouvain. His work focuses on the legislative process and European institutions, the attitudes of citizens towards globalisation and their perception of the legitimacy of different levels of government. He has published works in *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *European Union Politics*, *West European Politics*, *European Political Science*, *Politics and Governance*, and *Parliamentary Affairs*.

Thomas.g.laloux[at]uclouvain.be

YOURI LOU VERTONGEN

Youri Lou Vertongen has a doctorate in political and social sciences and is a visiting professor at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles. His thesis, carried out at the Centre de Recherche en Science Politique (CRéSPo), was published with the title *Papiers pour tous* (Academia, 2 vols., 2023-24). As a post-doctoral fellow at the Centre de Recherches et d'Interventions Sociologiques (CESIR), he is studying the politicisation of obstacles to restricted car use in Brussels.

youri.vertongen[at]uclouvain.be

LOÏC COBUT

Loïc Cobut has a doctorate in political and social sciences from UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles. His research has been conducted at the Institut d'études européennes and the Centre de recherche en science politique (CRéSPo), where he is a research associate. His research focuses on local energy governance. He is co-author of the article *Diverse scaling strategies of energy communities* published in *Earth System Governance* in January 2024.

loic.cobut[at]uclouvain.be

LOU KERVARREC

Lou Kervarrec is completing a master's degree in public policy analysis at the Institut d'Études Politiques (IEP) in Lyon, and is starting a doctorate in the Environnement Ville Société laboratory (UMR CNRS 5600) at École Nationale des Travaux Publics de l'État (ENTPE). Her thesis aims to document the use of knowledge co-production in the context of health/environment scandals,

based on a case study of PFAS pollution in the Gard département in France.
lou.kervarrec[at]entpe.fr