

# EV riders

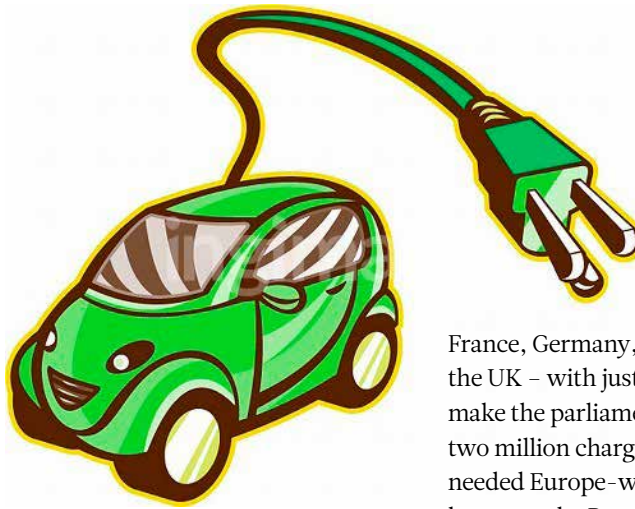
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*As the fight against climate change and congestion continues, Brussels is attempting to change drivers' habits*

**T**here are almost half a million cars in Brussels, but just 2% of them are electric, hybrid or powered by alternative fuels. That figure should grow over the next decade, as the regional government rolls out bans on polluting vehicles as well as taxation policies designed to force a switch from combustion engines to electric vehicles.

The electric vehicles (EVs) registered in the capital – which industry figures put at 1.7% of all vehicles – score 85 out of 100 on the Ecoscore system for exhaust emissions. This rating takes into account carbon dioxide – the main greenhouse gas – as well as nitrogen oxides and particulates, which are responsible for the capital's poor air quality. Along with the need to tackle climate change, these polluting emissions lie behind the push





for electric vehicles. But is it working? Figures from the European Association for Electromobility and its Belgian member, ASBE, show the shift towards electric cars is gaining momentum, with sales across Europe rocketing by 50% in 2017. Belgium is no exception to the trend: last year saw an almost one-third rise on the previous year's sales. And data from the Belgian carmakers association, Febiac, for the first five months of this year shows 185 new EV registrations in Brussels, among the 405 for Belgium as a whole.

However, the European Automobile Manufacturers Association (ACEA) paints a less optimistic picture, saying the rise is only in line with a growth in overall car sales. Moreover, it warned in July that the European Parliament's ambitious plans to force a shift to electric vehicles in the EU through stringent carbon dioxide emissions limits would not work, because there were so few charging points across Europe. In what the carmakers said was "a much-needed reality check for MEPs", ACEA published a study called Making the Transition to Zero Emission Mobility. Their report showed that EVs account for just 1.5% of total car sales in the EU, with hybrids making up another 2.9%.

The study also showed that three-quarters of all the 100,000 charging points in the EU today are concentrated in four countries –

## **1.5%** *of charging points in the EU are in Belgium*

France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK – with just 1,765 in Belgium. To make the parliament's plans realistic, two million charging units will be needed Europe-wide by 2025. In April last year, the Brussels-Capital region pledged to install 200 charging points, rising to 600 by 2030. The first phase of the works – around 2019/2020 – will see at least one charging point per square kilometre in the busiest parts of the city, with further expansion based on demand. Each terminal will have two charging points, compatible with all the most common EVs.

Electric vehicles currently pay the lowest rate under the annual circulation tax in all three Belgian regions; the rate in Brussels is €82.10. The region further offers tax breaks for companies that buy electric, hybrid or fuel-cell vehicles, applies a 120% deductibility rate and waives the tax worth up to €75 on office parking spaces if companies fit charging units.

Brussels finance minister Guy Vanhengel would like to take that further, basing both registration and annual taxes on the vehicle's Ecoscore. EVs would continue to pay the same low rate, but the difference would come in the hefty taxes on petrol and diesel cars, particularly the older, more polluting models. Vanhengel commissioned an expert report on the issue, which he presented to the finance committee in June. However, since any tax hike

would hit the poorest car owners most, it is controversial. Though the Greens back his plans, the Socialists were concerned about the impact on poorer Brussels residents. Vanhengel told the committee that before he made any firm proposals, there would need to be talks with the other two regions, since Brussels cannot fight air pollution and congestion with the capital's

## 'There is no silver bullet'

***Kathryn Sheridan, CEO and founder of Sustainability Consult, drives a BMW 225xe Active Tourer***

Initially I was looking at full electric vehicles, but as I drive rather than fly when I can, I felt it was too restrictive to have to stop and charge regularly.

The plug-in hybrid combines the petrol hybrid engine with some electric capacity. I can drive 30-40km on just the electric motor.

For driving short distances in Brussels, an electric or plug-in hybrid car is a great choice. But you need access to a charging point and that's more challenging. If you live in Brussels and don't have a garage or a private parking space, driving electric takes some commitment. If you can charge at work, then that's easy. As employers try to recruit and retain talent, offering an electric or plug-in hybrid vehicle and charging station at work is a big incentive.

I'd like to be able to charge whenever I park at the supermarket or station, for example, but that infrastructure isn't there yet. I'm hoping that by choosing a plug-in hybrid, I'm helping expand the network of charging points. It sends a message that the demand is there. From an environmental point of view, electric or hybrid vehicles are an improvement but they are not a 100% clean solution. Even the greenest full electric car has a carbon footprint from its production. It's certainly better to drive an electric than a diesel, but we have to be honest about the impact. There is no silver bullet.



KATHRYN SHERIDAN OF SUSTAINABILITY CONSULT

## 'I feel good about driving a clean car'

*James, an IT architect in Brussels, drives an Audi A3 e-tron plug-in petrol hybrid*

The experience of driving an EV is, in three words: proud, relaxing, thrilling. Proud because I feel good about driving a "clean" car, without puffs of diesel pollution coming out the back. Relaxing because it's so silent, and so easy with the almost single-pedal driving. Thrilling because the acceleration from stop or low speeds is instant, and it's fun every time you leave the traffic lights.

The benefits are on the running costs: I've only needed to go to the petrol station three times, and I've driven nearly 4,000km. The cost to "fill it up" with electricity is about €2 for about 50km pure EV range. I hardly ever use the mechanical brake; instead I use the regenerative motor braking to slow the car down, which also charges the battery, so there's hardly any wear on the brakes.

For me, the main challenge was charging, as I live in an apartment and I didn't have easy access to a charging station. I'm now able to use the plug in the garage, and plug it in every two days on average.

**4.4%**  
*of all cars bought  
in Belgium in 2017  
were electric or  
hybrid*



residents alone. He is unlikely to move on this before the regional elections in May 2019.

The need to tackle the problem nationally is also clear from the fact that two-thirds of vehicles on Brussels' roads come from the daily influx of commuters from Flanders and Wallonia. As a result, Brussels is now a low-emission zone, banning the most polluting cars in stages, starting with 1 January for the oldest Euro I diesel cars, through to 2025 when only the cleanest diesels will be allowed, and older petrol cars will also be outlawed. Matthias Dobbels, spokesperson for Brussels mobility and public works minister Pascal Smet, told The Bulletin that in December the regional government agreed in principle to ban diesel vehicles completely and later all combustion engines, "so there is a clear policy of pushing away from combustion engines and encouraging electric cars".

Nevertheless, the Brussels Capital region's mobility policy is focused on shifting people away from private car use and ownership to public transport, bikes and, when a vehicle is needed, taxis or one of five car-sharing schemes – Cambio, DriveNow, Ubeeqo, Zipcar and the all-electric Zen Car. And it is looking not just at electric cars but at buses, too. In June, the region handed over the running of its experimental electric line 33 to public transport operator Stib. • Sara Lewis

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