



Report no. 2018-R-22-SEN

## **Belgium in a European perspective**

Systematic comparison of road safety indicators



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- Schoeters, A., Daniels, S. & Wahl, J. (2019), La Belgique dans le contexte européen – Comparaison systématique des indicateurs de sécurité routière, Bruxelles, Belgique : Institut Vias – Centre Connaissance de Sécurité Routière

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# Summary

This report deals with the road safety performance of Belgium from a European perspective. As a framework, the so-called pyramid of road safety indicators is used. This model, which was developed during several international projects, structures the different dimensions of the road safety problem. The model indicates that the road safety performance of a country depends on the interventions and performances at different levels.

The comparative analysis in this report is situated on four levels:

- The final result, i.e. the road accidents and victims. The analysis in this report is limited to road fatalities because they are defined and recorded in a corresponding way in European countries, which is not the case for accidents and injuries.
- Intermediate performance: this relates to factors and phenomena that can cause accidents or aggravate their severity, such as the road users' behaviour, the quality of road infrastructure, the quality of the vehicle fleet and the functioning of the emergency medical services.
- Measures and interventions in terms of road safety.
- The underlying structures and culture.

## Road accidents and road victims

As far as road fatalities are concerned, Belgium positions itself among the less well-performing countries in Europe. Our country performs worse than the neighbouring countries, only South- and East-European countries perform worse. Belgium is in a middle position if the number of registered vehicles is also considered, but still performs worse than the neighbouring countries. The best performing countries in Europe are Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, but also the neighbouring countries, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have a relatively low number of road fatalities. There is therefore still a large margin for improvement.

Among the road fatalities in Belgium, there is a quite large proportion of cyclists and professional drivers (occupants of light lorries and lorries). Although bicycle use in Belgium is higher than in other countries, this only partly explains the differences; in the Netherlands bicycle use is even higher but there are fewer road fatalities per million inhabitants. In addition, it appears that Belgian motorways are less safe than in most other European countries. Even when considering the high density of the Belgian motorway network and the heavy traffic, Belgium scores very weak. Finally, Belgium also has a very high mortality rate during weekend nights.

Although road safety in Belgium has been increased since the beginning of the century, its relative position has not improved. Moreover, Spain and Estonia, among others, have overtaken our country. Over the past five years, Belgium has experienced a stronger road safety improvement than most European countries, but this is still insufficient to make up for the difference with the better performing countries. This evolution was not the same for all target groups: the number of road fatalities among cyclists, professional drivers, seniors and women decreased remarkably less over the past 10 years than in most European countries. On motorways, the decrease in the number of fatalities remained relatively limited too.

## Intermediate performance

The performance indicators analysed are mainly related to the road users' behaviour. It is possible to make a comparison based on observed behaviour only for some forms of risk behaviour; for the other behaviours the comparison is based on self-reported data. Concerning driving under the influence of alcohol and medicines that are dangerous to drive, Belgium scores less well than other European countries. Riding too fast outside built-up areas and not wearing a bicycle helmet is also reported more often than average in Europe. In terms of wearing a seatbelt, Belgium is now at the level of the better performing countries.

The Belgian road infrastructure is characterised by a relatively high density and traffic intensity. The quality of the roads is perceived as poor and the level of investment is very low. On the contrary, Belgium has a very modern fleet of vehicles: almost half of the vehicles are less than 6 years old. The medical emergency services also perform relatively well, with a large number of emergency services per 100,000 inhabitants.

## Measures and interventions

A large proportion of road safety legislation is decided at EU level. However, there are many differences in national legislation, the way and level of enforcement and penalties. The legislation is stricter in some countries than in Belgium: for example, there are several countries with a lower alcohol limit (general or specific for

young drivers). Although the speed limit in Flanders on roads outside built-up areas is among the lowest in Europe, it is high in Wallonia compared to other countries. Furthermore, there are countries that have stricter legislation in specific areas: for example, there are some countries with a helmet requirement for young cyclists, with a compulsory medical screening when renewing the driving licence or where the driving and rest periods also apply to drivers of light lorries.

The approach of traffic enforcement also differs widely within Europe: in Belgium, the subjective probability of being caught for speeding offences is relatively high, but for driving under the influence of alcohol, wearing a seatbelt and driving under the influence of drugs, the probability of being caught is estimated to be rather low in comparison with other European countries. Besides, Belgium belongs to the countries where there are rehabilitation courses for different groups of offenders and where an alcolock can be imposed. A plus point is the driving ability evaluation in Belgium which, unlike many other European countries, consists of a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account the different aspects of human functioning.

### **Underlying structures and culture**

Certain consumption patterns are more prevalent in Belgium than in other countries. For example, a relatively large part of the population regularly drinks alcohol and the use of some medicines that are dangerous to drive is high compared to other countries. The (self-reported) use of drugs is much lower.

Although Belgium performs average or even relatively well for most attitudes and components of the road safety culture, the situation is particularly poor with regard to the subjective norm of driving under the influence of alcohol and exceeding the speed limit. Compared to other countries, relatively few Belgians believe that their friends or acquaintances disapprove of these forms of behaviour.

### **Recommendations**

This report ends with some points of attention for the Belgian road safety policy. These relate to measures to influence the subjective norm, increasing the subjective probability of being caught, lowering the speed limits in Wallonia and encouraging the use of helmets by cyclists. Specific investments in road infrastructure that increase road safety are also recommended.



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