

PRESS RELEASE

April 2020

Report to the Flemish Parliament

Realization of missing links in Flemish road infrastructure

The Court of Audit examined the state of implementation of the 27 projects with which Flemish Government wanted to remove a number of missing links in the main road network by 2012. It found that due to delays and blockages only a limited number of projects have been completed and that implementation of the remaining projects is only feasible in the (very) long term and will cost a multiple of what has been estimated. The Court identified the main causes for this: a lack of clear priorities, unrealistic schedules and cost estimates, and management problems and errors.

Missing links in road infrastructure

In 1997 the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (SSPF) divided the road network into categories. It also laid out design principles for each category. In 2001, Flemish Government designed the Flanders Mobility Plan, including the intention to adapt the network of main roads and category I primary roads to the SSPF principles. This required a total of 25 road projects, gradually becoming unofficially called *missing links*. All projects had to start in 2010 at the latest and had to be completed in 2012. Later, Flemish Government added two more projects.

State of implementation

At the end of 2019, only nine projects had been completed, eight other projects were partially implemented and one project will not go ahead. The nine remaining projects had little or no implementation. In 2001, the total cost of 24 of the 27 projects was estimated at EUR 1.4 billion. At the end of 2019, the estimate for the 27 projects was already up to 11.1 billion euros. The Court of Audit expects the final costs to be even higher. Many projects experienced major delays or were sometimes blocked for years. The Court of Audit investigated the causes of this.

No priorities

One of the main causes of delays or blockages was the lack of clear and achievable priorities, regardless of the fact that various policy documents had underlined the necessity of these. In practice, Flemish government started numerous works at the same time, without prior cost-benefit analyzes that could ensure that projects with the greatest added social value were given priority. Starting several projects simultaneously caused budgetary problems, which were amplified by the pressure on the market to increase prices of studies and works. The implementation of many projects at the same time also made cost control difficult and caused personnel management problems for public authorities.

Unrealistic planning

Another cause of delays was the sometimes unrealistic planning, which took too little account of traffic aspects. For example, nearby intersections could not be tackled at the same time without the risk of traffic chaos. The planning also underestimated the lead time of spatial planning procedures and the time it took to find a broad consensus between all parties involved or create sufficient support for some works.

Lack of realistic cost estimates

The lack of realistic cost estimates also made project implementation more difficult. Government invariably underestimated costs, without adjusting its estimate over the years. Government often changed projects significantly over time, which resulted in higher costs, partly due to contract variation costs, and in the loss of costs already incurred, for example for studies.

Management problems

Flemish Government made little use of project management and insufficiently followed up on contractual obligations of the private partners. It did not take strong enough action against failing public procurement contractors. The commissioning boards themselves also made avoidable mistakes in spatial planning procedures, which led to annulments of decisions, loss of time and additional costs.

Alternative financing

In order to accelerate project implementation, Flemish Government relied on public-private partnerships (PPP) for a number of large projects, usually with a DBFM formula (Design, Build, Finance and Maintain). In practice, this delayed the preparation, on the one hand because the client first elaborated the design himself before starting the public contract, and on the other hand due to the legal complexity of the award procedure and the search for the best financing option. Moreover, due to the availability fees owed for many years, PPP projects place a heavy burden on future budgets.

Common interest

During the audit, the Court also made a number of findings that are not directly related to the slow project realization. For example, it noted that the government is increasingly attempting to invoke common interest to speed up procedures, but policy documents lack a general vision of what common interest in mobility entails: further developing road networks or switching to more sustainable passenger and logistics transport. Finally, there is no systematic and structured stream of information to the Flemish Parliament about the degree of realization and the costs of the missing links.

Response of the minister

On 21 and 27 February 2020, the Flemish ministers of Mobility and Public Works and of the Environment approved the recommendations made by the Court of Audit to optimize the functioning of the administration.

Information for the press

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on the *Realization of missing links in Flemish road infrastructure* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: [**www.courtofaudit.be**](http://www.courtofaudit.be).