

Before Brussels, I Built Belgium

A pre-arrival Hedegreen Research build note on Belgium Politics Data, Brussels, and building a checkable object before pretending to understand a place.

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HTTPS://HEDEGREENRESEARCH.COM/ARTICLES/BEFORE-BRUSSELS-I-BUILT-BELGIUM/

Not because I understand the country.

Because I do not.

I have technically been in Belgium before. For about ten minutes, when I was nine, because we took the wrong motorway on the way to France. That is not knowledge of a country. That is a family detour.

Now I am going to Brussels for real.

SINCE / UNTIL

HR leaves for Brussels for the first time

COPENHAGEN TO BRUSSELS - DEPARTURE 18:10 - BOARDING 17:35 - GATE CLOSES 17:55

19

DAYS

479

HOURS

28,767

MINUTES

1,726,030

SECONDS

In less than 24 hours I will be in Brussels for the EU Civic Tech Hackathon. I am excited about that, but I do not want the sentence to sound like a certificate. Brussels is not verification. Being selected is not the same as being right. Being in the room is not the same as understanding the room.

That distinction matters because Hedegreen Research keeps circling the same problem from different sides. Recognition is not proof. A visible output is not automatically knowledge. A system can look confident before it is correct. A person can sound prepared before he has actually met the place.

So the honest part has to come first.

I do not know Belgium yet.

I do not even know the Belgian parties properly yet. I do not know what all their names mean to people who live there. I do not know their histories, their local signals, their arguments, their old wounds, their jokes, or what a voter hears when one of those party names appears on a ballot. I will read more in the airport. I will probably still know too little when I land.

So my first goal is small.

Pommes frites. One local person. One real conversation about the place I am entering before I walk too far into the official room.

I want to hear what someone there has to say about it, not only what the programme, the data, or my own nervous preparation says.

That is exactly why I built a small Belgium politics-data preview before going.

Not because data can replace being there. It cannot.

Not because a municipal election layer can explain a country. It cannot.

Not because a correlation table knows what a journalist, organiser, voter, researcher, taxi driver, football fan, local official, or tired airport worker knows. It does not.

But because arriving with nothing except vibes felt wrong.

The Belgium tool is a first map. A rough one. A bounded one. It takes Belgian Chamber 2024 results and places them against a municipality layer with selected Statbel indicators. It lets me ask simple questions before I start making larger claims. Where do population size, density, and age structure appear to move with party vote shares? Which patterns are visible? Which ones are weak? Which ones should probably be ignored? Which ones should make me ask someone who actually knows the country?

That is the real use.

The tool is not there to tell me what Belgium is.

It is there to stop me from pretending I arrived without a first correction mechanism.

I made it public for the same reason. If a thing is only in my local folder, it can still become a private confidence trick. It can make me feel prepared without letting anyone else see the limits. A public preview is different. It can be opened. It can be wrong in public. It can be improved. Someone can point to a party label, a data boundary, a source choice, a municipality issue, and say: this is not how that should be read.

That is more useful than a polished claim.

It is also closer to the kind of civic tech I want to build. Not civic tech as a pitch deck about participation, but civic tech as small public instruments that admit their limits early enough for other people to enter the work.

The Belgium preview has limits. It is not a full political model. It is not a cultural reading. It does not know language, coalition history, campaign memory, local anger, local pride, federal structure, or what people were actually talking about in a cafe, a train, a newsroom, or a polling booth. It is a narrow public object built from data layers.

That narrowness is not a defect if it is named.

The mistake would be to let the interface make the claim larger than the evidence. The mistake would be to say: I have a Belgium politics app, therefore I understand Belgium. I do not. I have a preview. I have a few patterns. I have a small door into a place I am about to visit.

There is something almost too neat about the timing. I land in Brussels around the same evening Belgium play Iran in the World Cup. Before I understand the political parties properly, the country will already be happening around me in a louder language than a data table. People will be watching, moving, hoping, complaining, celebrating, or ignoring it completely, because real countries never reduce themselves to the symbol you arrive with.

Good.

That is the point.

The data is not the country.

The app is not the visit.

The hackathon is not verification.

But the work should arrive before I do, at least in some small checkable form.

So here we go, Belgium.

I do not understand you yet.

That is why I started by building something I can be corrected through.

RELATION MEMORY

NEARBY [Hedegreen Research Is Going to Brussels](#) · The earlier field note that frames Brussels as a test, not validation.

NEARBY [I Shipped 24 Doors Before the Hackathon](#) · Both pieces bring a concrete public instrument into the Brussels field context.

NEARBY [Recognition Is Not Verification](#) · Shares the boundary between visible output and verified knowledge.