

observant

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Tremendous lack of clarity about delayed completion of student complex
 “You can live in the building”
 the contractor says, yet 500 students
 are out on the streets



The Muse Einstein Campus Foto: Joey Roberts

The completion of the Muse Einstein Campus in Randwyck, where more than five hundred students were to have moved in as of 6 January, has been delayed for an undetermined period of time due to technical problems. While the construction company has given the go-ahead, other parties involved are digging their heels in. Lack of clarity, everywhere. Students are the victims; a few dozen are considering taking legal steps. In the meantime, UM fears there will be a rooms shortage.

The Muse Einstein complex with 506 studios – at the location of the former post office on the Duboisdomein – was supposed to have been completed back in September. Due to delays in construction, the expected opening date was pushed forward several times and ultimately to the beginning of January. However, on 21 December management company Nido Living sent an e-mail to intended inhabitants with the message that they could not move in for the time being, after all. The reason: inconvenience due

to water in the concrete slabs.

It meant that more than five hundred students - all studios were rented by then – had to find an alternative at the last minute. For those “who were in dire need,” such as international students who had to vacate their former accommodation and could not ‘just’ go home to their parents’ house, Nido is offering temporary accommodation in holiday park Dormio since this weekend, a Nido spokesperson said. “At the moment, 68 students are making use of that. Some others have terminated the contract free of charge, which was another option. We have also been in contact with the remaining students and everyone seems to have found a (temporary) solution.”

The temporary accommodation at the holiday park is available until 2 February. Nido does not have a solution ready as yet for students who end up on the streets after that. This while students have heard that the situation could last for months. “We don’t know where we stand either,” the spokesperson said.

“We are waiting on estimations from the contractor, the situation in the building is being investigated. We hope to hear this month when the students can move in.” As far as construction company Hurks is concerned, the homes are ready for habitation now. “The students can move in immediately tomorrow,” director Cees van der Meijs said by telephone. “Nido’s personnel is already working there. It is certainly not damp in the building. We have carried out several investigations and sent the results to the customer, ECM Development.”

ECM Development is, just like management company Nido, a subsidiary of the Dutch branch of the British investor Round Hill Capital. The latter was – a day before Nido sent the e-mail to inhabitants

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Angry people



“Do you know what is a real threat to democracy? The childcare benefits scandal, with all its internalised racism, caused by none other than our tax office. This is where so many people were cast aside. For the past few years, Wilders has shouted out a lot, acting like a verbal hooligan, but you must differentiate between what politicians say and what they do.” An interview with political philosopher Sjaak Koenis. P. 6-7

Cycling



The UM hopes that its employees will cycle more often. “We want to encourage sustainable transport and to achieve this, the conditions have to be attractive. Some organisations and businesses pay compensation per cycle kilometre.” P.5



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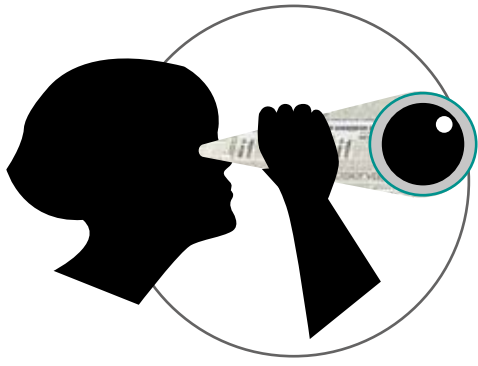
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Riki Janssen

editorial

Making money from cycling to work

Wearing a balaclava, a winter hat with ear flaps, thick gloves and waterproof overtrousers, I wasn't exactly the picture of elegance on the first Monday after the Christmas break. But my outfit did the job: I wasn't frozen to the bone when I arrived at the office after cycling fifteen kilometres through the first cold snap of 2024.

I almost always bike to work. I enjoy it (except in heavy rain or strong headwinds) and the health benefits are a nice bonus. Besides, I'm not much faster by car if you factor in traffic lights and congestion during the morning rush hour. In my bike bag, I always carry a set of office clothes and a towel to freshen up and change before work. Not that we have a proper shower at Lenculenstraat 14 – I have to make do with our toilet, which is so small that long-legged

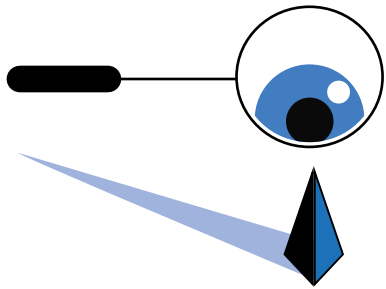
individuals are known to bump their knees against the bin. It's not ideal, but there's no other option. Our tiny kitchenette, which can barely accommodate two people, is an open kitchen that opens onto the corridor.

Why am I writing about my daily bike commute? Well, UM is once again reconsidering its staff travel policy to encourage employees to ditch the car and commute by public transport or bicycle. (An earlier version of the plan was rejected pre-pandemic.) Expecting some pushback, the *En Route* working group is looking to make the policy as attractive as possible. Think covered bicycle parking, a more generous bike purchase scheme and perhaps even showers in each university building. Personally, I'd like to propose proper lighting in the bike shelters; it's just about dark when

I retrieve my bike in the late afternoon.

The working group is also exploring ways to incentivise employees who cycle to work, writing that "Some organisations and companies provide travel reimbursement for bike commuters". According to a reliable source, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences offers bike commuters 21 cents per kilometre. Cyclists at KPN are even better off, getting 40 cents since this summer. At 30 kilometres per day, I could actually make money from cycling to work! We'll see what happens. If given the choice, I would prioritise bike shelter lighting and washing facilities.

Every week, the editor-in-chief writes about what has been happening at the Observant office



splinters

A funny incident, a striking piece of news, something interesting that happened elsewhere in the country: it is in this column. Contributions: Cleo Freriks, Dennis Vaendel, Simon Wirtz

Records shattered

Maastricht Biomedical Sciences student Sanne de Kleijn finished off last year well. During the Dutch Indoor Rowing Championships on 16 December – participants are not in boats outside but on rowing machines – she achieved a Dutch record for the 2,000 metres in the category Women's Advanced. In doing so, she shattered all records held by her association Saurus. De Kleijn not only beat the other 83 participants in her 'field', but with her time of 6 minutes and 56.7 seconds, she was no less than 2 seconds faster than the number 1 in the field of the Women's Elite – the highest category within the competition. "That is the field in which Olympians start, if they participate," says Saurus chairperson Rosanne van Ballegooijen.

Indoor rowing is a different kind of game than regular rowing, says Van Ballegooijen by e-mail. "It is purely about individual performance. In a boat on the water, you can have the wind in your favour or against you, a boat may be damaged or you can just be unlucky with the lane in which you start, and you have to cope with higher waves."

Scoring a holiday

They briefly turned the Dutch football world upside down at the end of December: amateur club Hercules from Utrecht beat the big Ajax from Amsterdam in the KNVB knockout competition. With many thanks to law student Tim Pieters, who scored two of the three Utrecht goals. He is not just a hero within his club now, his house mates have also put him on a pedestal. They wagered 15 euro at a betting agency that Hercules would win and Pieters would score. Due to the exceptionally small chance that this would actually happen, they won 11 thousand euro. "Yes, they can go on a very nice holiday with that," Pieters laughed at a NOS reporter. "But I think I might be allowed to tag along."

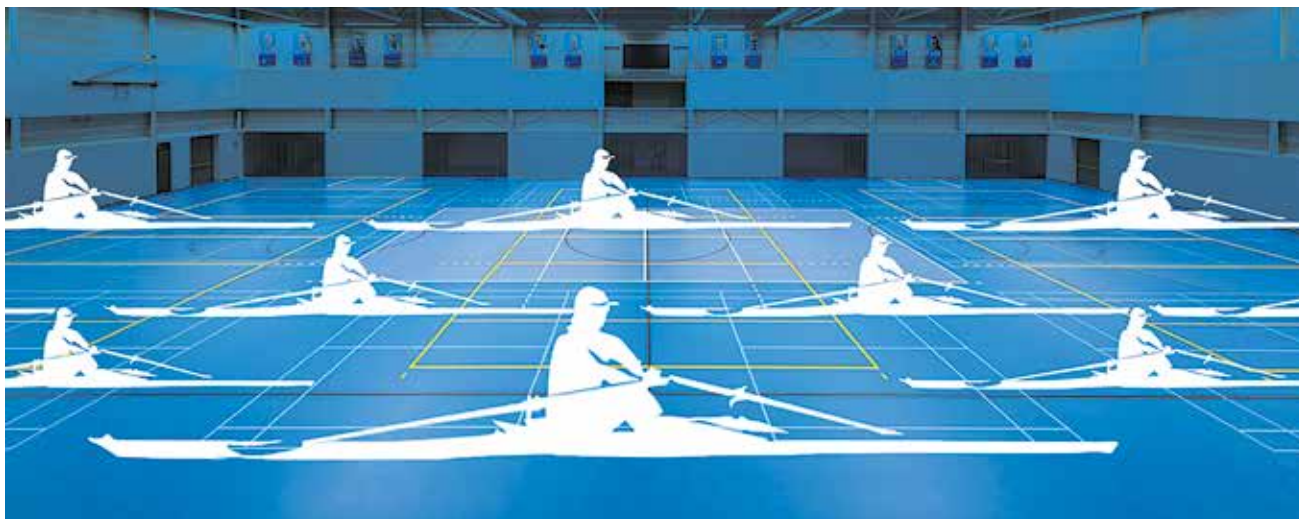
His housemates have even changed the banner they used to cheer him on, Utrecht university medium *DUB* reports. Before the game, it read 'Pieters, he waits a long time and usually misses', at the end 'usually' was crossed out and replaced with 'never'.



Mister Sjef and mister Nacho

"So handsome!", is an employee's reaction on Umployee, Maastricht University's intranet. This compliment is not for a colleague, but for 'mister Sjef', an interested-looking cat whose owner claims 'is very close to his employees'. The UM employee apparently finds the animal so cute that she shared a photograph in *Kattenliefhebbers UM* (UM cat lovers), a group with more than a hundred members. Other lovers of four-footed creatures – dogs – find one another on intranet too. An especially famous representative is 'mister Nacho', a Spanish water dog, of which the owner reports: "As soon as anything with cheese is eaten, we are compelled to hand over at least 10% of it to him". He lives up to his name.

Umployee went live in November 2022. Internal messages and news items all end up on the site. Those who want to create their own 'social group', have been able to do so (*voor de fun*, it is called) themselves, for a month now. And although there has been some humming and hawing about the digital platform – the setup is allegedly too inconvenient – on a social level, it is flourishing. There is a 'Haken/Crochet' group, where a user recently presented her personal Sinterklaas surprise gift: a cushion covered in colourful cats. Amateur photographers, gardeners, foodies, bookworms, and fresh-air lovers (*Blökske om Randwyck*) find each other there too. According to UM, the platform should be 'the digital start of your working day'. Even if it is just to see how Mister Sjef is doing today.



UM-President Letschert on expenses of MUMC top

“I don’t recognise that image of money-grabbers at all”

Just before Christmas, newspaper De Limburger published the expenses of the top of the Maastricht hospital on foreign trips and private chauffeurs: 254 thousand euro in eighteen months; this was described by various people as exorbitant. Maastricht University may merge with the hospital. How does UM president Rianne Letschert feel about this? “I think the attack on the MUMC top is too harsh.”

According to *De Limburger*, the three-person executive board of MUMC spent some 157 thousand euro on trips abroad, in particular to the United States. Furthermore, chair Helen Mertens and her fellow board members Geraline Leusink and Gabriël Zwart spent 97 thousand euro in eighteen months (2022 and the first half of 2023) on private chauffeurs who drove them to conferences and meetings. Their behaviour with regard to expenses caused a great deal of controversy. Board members of other Limburg care organisations expressed their disapproval of the expenses in *De Limburger* and called them “exorbitant”, “quite high” and “bizarre”. The trade unions in the health care sector spoke of a “completely wrong signal towards our bedside carers”.

Student chauffeur

The issue is all the more relevant in the light of the announced merger talks between UM and the university hospital. Looking at the foreign

travelling expenses of the Executive Board as published in the UM’s 2022 annual account, one can see that the total falls short of 1,300 euro.

The trips within the Netherlands amount to 45 thousand euro (including 11,758 euro for president Rianne Letschert’s leased car, as she lives with her family in Brabant). A total of 25 thousand euro was spent on official expenses (*representatiekosten*). This includes a partly compensation for the rental of Letschert’s studio in Maastricht. Rector Pamela Habibović also lives outside the province. “If her duties in Maastricht require that she spend the night here,” her expenses are paid, says the annual account. She also makes occasional use of a “student chauffeur for commuting”.

Spirit of the time

The question is whether UM president Letschert, who works closely together with Mertens, knew about the expenses claim behaviour at the hospital and what she thinks of it. “We talked about it with the MUMC board, after the publication. It is not for me to judge. If their actions fit within the rules [on declarations by healthcare executives, ed], but we as society still question the expenses, then we should talk about the content of that regulation, whether it is still in the spirit of the times. But the attack on people - and surely that is what has happened now at MUMC - I find too harsh. As if they are money-grabbers. I don’t

recognise that image at all. Moreover, in light of the conversations I have had with them, I have gained a more nuanced picture about the nature of the expenses.” Details about this she would not disclose, but she hopes they can be “widely shared” on a certain moment.

Last Monday, Mertens already said in the New Year’s address to MUMC employees that she had acted “within the prevailing rules and agreements”, but that she and her fellow board members understood the message. “In our travels and expenses, we will make careful choices and be transparent: is a trip really necessary and what mode of transport is chosen?” *De Limburger* cites.

The Hague

However, Letschert does not think there is necessarily a need to travel less; “I don’t think a ‘more austere’ expenses culture is necessarily better in that sense. You also gain a lot of knowledge during meetings abroad that you use for the development of your own organisation. That I don’t travel much is my choice.” Letschert, with internationalisation in her portfolio (including YUFE), stayed mostly in the Netherlands, mainly because of ‘anti-internationalisation plans’ in The Hague (more Dutch in undergraduate programmes) to which she wanted to give her “full attention” and make her voice heard.

Wendy Degens

Student rowing association looks after houseboat inhabitants

Saurus opens up its clubhouse to duped houseboat inhabitants

High water in an arm of the river Maas caused problems for houseboats, but student rowing association Saurus’s clubhouse did not suffer. On the contrary, the accommodation was used by the city for inhabitant and information meetings.

Last Wednesday evening, part of a dam on the north side of Maastricht was washed away by high water, as a result of which houseboats nearby were in danger. To prevent accidents, inhabitants were evacuated and offered accommodation with either family or in hotels. That was just in time. Late Wednesday night, early Thursday morning, an evacuated resident was called at her temporary accommodation: her houseboat had become detached and had smashed against the bridge. Saurus’s board also had to rush to its accommodation. The clubhouse, located on the Zuid-Willemsvaart, was immediately opened as a place of shelter. This was done “by order of the police. The day after, Thursday, was extremely busy. We were open all day,” chairwoman Rosanne van Ballegooijen states. Besides the fact that inhabitants could meet each other, there was also a meeting in which the Dutch Department of Waterways and Public Works, the mayor and emergency services were present to answer questions. “Emergency services reported on the situation at that time and the city brought along some *vlaai*.” There was a similar meeting on Friday. Today, Tuesday 9 January, residents can briefly return to their homes. A ferry boat will take them to their houseboats to collect any items,



The Saurus board and the ferry with houseboat residents Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

says Van Ballegooijen. Saurus will remain open for another while. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 16:00 to 18:00 hrs, inhabitants can pop in to ask the city representatives questions. There will be no rowing for the time being. Not due to the high water or the rapids,

because there has been none of the latter, but because of the cold. “That would be detrimental to the boats.”

Lotte van de Loo



ChatGPT: Between fear and unbridled optimism

“

Only fourteen months ago, I’m not sure I (and many of my colleagues) had even heard of large language models (LLMs). It’s difficult to believe that ChatGPT launched so recently, given how much time we have since spent worrying about, tinkering with, and consuming its handiwork. As a teacher, Board of Examiners member, admissions officer and writer in various outlets, it’s been interesting for me to look back at whether some of our initial fears and hopes have been borne out. Neither my pedagogical nor subject expertise lie in this area. But all of us involved in university work have been forced to think carefully about this development and to question what it means for our livelihoods - and our very identities - that the fourth industrial revolution has finally landed squarely on our doorsteps. When the capabilities of ChatGPT 3.5 (and later 4.0) came to light, responses broadly seemed to fall into two categories. Some viewed the model as little more than an elaborate parlour trick and dismissed the idea that it could ever convincingly mimic the kind of advanced composition we pride ourselves on as academics and seek to foster in our students. Others felt deeply uneasy, wondering if we’d reached what *The Spectator* magazine has called “the end of writing.” I have vacillated between these two extremes, but today find myself somewhere in the middle. It’s undeniable that LLMs have changed writing forever, and will continue to do so. True, the calculator didn’t herald the end of maths, but it was probably not the best news for anyone who’d hitherto prided themselves on their skills of mental arithmetic. Many parts of the research and writing process are probably now best described as human-machine hybrid endeavors, and this has far-reaching implications. On the other hand, we are not powerless in the face of these changes. Some can make our lives easier (let’s face it, some forms of research and writing amounted to little more than drudgery). Others can—and should—be regulated, much as we’ve worked to regulate other forms of modern technology. Both fear and unbridled optimism will only stop us from effectively engaging with this newest of challenges to our sector.

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Elsje Fourie, Assistant Professor of Globalisation & Development Studies

series societal impact

Breast reconstruction using the patient's own fat cells

In today's world, the societal impact of research findings seems more important than getting published in an academic journal like *Nature* or *The Lancet*. What impact has research conducted at UM had in recent years? This week: how a UM study paved the way for a new method of breast reconstruction after cancer.



Jamilla Wederfoort en Maud Rijkx Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

A mastectomy is a way to treat breast cancer by surgically removing a breast. Some patients undergoing this procedure choose to have the other breast removed as a precaution. And some patients who need a partial mastectomy decide, in consultation with their doctor, to play it safe and have the entire breast removed, explains researcher Maud Rijkx. "There are also women who decide to have a preventive mastectomy after discovering they are genetically at higher risk of breast cancer."

In the Netherlands, about one in seven women will develop breast cancer during their lifetime—almost twenty thousand each year, says Jamilla Wederfoort, who is training to be a plastic surgeon at MUMC+. Like Rijkx, she did her PhD research on breast reconstruction. Both are part of the UM BREAST trial team. "Of those twenty thousand women with breast cancer, an estimated seven thousand undergo total mastectomy."

Body tissues

For years, there were two main types of breast reconstruction: tissue-based recon-

struction using the patient's own body tissues, such as the DIEP flap procedure, or implant reconstruction. Many patients opt for DIEP flap surgery, which uses tissue taken from the abdomen. Wederfoort: "Many see it as a win-win—a flatter belly and a new breast. Patients who are not candidates for DIEP flap surgery because they're too thin, for example, can opt for a silicone implant. The advantage of implant reconstruction is that it's a shorter surgery with less scarring." However, both techniques have such serious drawbacks that some women opt for no reconstruction whatsoever. Wederfoort: "Implants are foreign objects in your body.

They may rupture or leak over time, resulting in additional surgery. DIEP flap surgery is taxing; it can take up to ten hours and there is a risk of serious complications. It also leaves a large scar on the abdomen."

Lipofilling

Enter a third option: lipofilling. This method of breast reconstruction was introduced in the Netherlands by the BREAST research team and tested in collaboration with other medical centres. Lipofilling also uses the patient's own body tissues by extracting fat cells from the abdomen, legs or back and injecting them into the breast. The technique has distinct advantages, says Rijkx. "It leaves minimal scarring, patients can go home the same day and recovery typically takes about two weeks."

But one question remains. Why does half of the injected fat disappear? "It partly dissolves, which is not unusual. We're currently trying to find out why some patients retain more fat tissue than others. Is it related to body weight, age, smoking?"

Plastic surgeons were already using lipofilling in cosmetic procedures, but its use in total breast reconstruction is relatively new. In a study, UM researchers compared 91 women undergoing lipofilling with 80 women undergoing implant reconstruction. The lipofilling group turned out to be more satisfied with their new breasts and felt better physically. The technique was also found to be safe. Ongoing UM research is focused on fine-tuning the method.

The new method hasn't gone unnoticed. The list of hospitals offering lipofilling as a breast reconstruction option continues to grow, says Rijkx. "Five more centres joined this year, bringing the total to thirteen. Plastic surgeons in all thirteen institutions have been trained in the technique."

Health insurance

As of this year, the method is covered by health insurance under certain conditions. Wederfoort: "Patients must not have undergone radiation therapy, which damages blood vessels and leaves scar tissue, hindering fat tissue growth. Smoking and excessive weight also disqualify patients from the surgery." Some patients find the method demanding, as they must wear a vacuum-based device on their chest for two weeks before and after the surgery to improve fat tissue survival.

It's unknown how many patients in the Netherlands have opted for breast reconstruction using lipofilling this year. Wederfoort: "To give you an idea, a third of the seven thousand women who undergo total mastectomy opt for breast reconstruction. Part of that group opts for lipofilling. So we're not talking about thousands of women yet, but that may only be a matter of time."

Beautiful dream scenario: car usage is reduced from almost 50 to only 5 per cent

Taking the bicycle more often

Stimulating the use of bicycles, maybe even rewarding it, in the hope that employees won't use their cars anymore. A working group is busy creating new mobility plans. Because yes, a survey shows that things could be more sustainable at Maastricht University.



Photo: Joey Roberts

It is not the first time that thought is being given to more sustainable commuting. In the autumn of 2018, former plans – popularly called ‘the UM parking policy’ – was sent back to the drawing board by the University Council and Lokaal Overleg (trade union representatives). They felt it was too sensitive an issue and feared commotion among employees. They would prefer a plan that would have the sympathy of the people they represented. Therefore, an elaborate opinion poll among staff members was set up. Next to that, three behavioural scientists were given the task to organise group discussions.

Parking place

And then came Covid. “Everything has changed. We now have hybrid working, partly at home, partly in the office. That is why the line of approach of the mobility policy is different,” says Cyriel Heuts, project leader of the new working group with the jolly French name *En Route*. “Before the Covid pandemic, the pressure on parking spaces, in particular in the city centre, was great. Having car users pay for a space, was one of the options at the time. What we now see is that people work from home one or two days, as a result of which parking spaces are no longer the main problem. It is true that on Tuesday and Thursday they are quite full, especially on Tongersestraat and on the Minderbroedersberg, but on other days, it is not so bad.” Parking facilities in the city centre are many

times more limited than in Randwyck: 433 versus 1,586 spaces.

1-minute survey

How are things looking for UM? That is the question that Heuts first wanted answered. “We can encourage the use of bicycles and public transport, but is it necessary? Are we not doing really well already?” Things could be much better, showed a 1-minute survey that was held among employees last year, carried out by Zuid-Limburg Bereikbaar. One quarter of the staff members filled it in. The car is the most frequently used mode of transport by UM employees (almost 50 per cent), followed by the bicycle (a quarter), and then public transport (almost 20 per cent). There were also questions about ‘obstacles’: why don’t we travel by train or bus? Longer travelling times is the first and foremost reason. Heuts gets that: “We should not be naive. People who live in a small village, thirty kilometres from Randwyck, spending an hour travelling by bus, add ten minutes to that waiting for a transfer; they will not give up going by car.”

Carers

Sustainability is the most important spearhead of the new mobility policy. “It is a core value for UM. Moreover, all large businesses are compelled to register the CO2 emissions of commuter traffic. Emissions from cars form a relatively large

“Everything has changed. We now have hybrid working, partly at home, partly in the office. That is why the line of approach of the mobility policy is different”

percentage of the total CO2 emissions of road transport.”

In the survey results that have been published on UMPLOYEE, there is a beautiful dream scenario. In it, car usage is reduced from almost 50 to only 5 per cent. The use of bicycles increases from one to two thirds (including speed pedelecs and e-bikes). “That is a ‘theoretical potential’.

But let me be clear: we are not going to take this line. It gave us insight, but it doesn’t take personal situations into consideration, for example, carers, parents with children who need to go to the crèche or school, employees who are not so mobile, people who are afraid to get on an e-bike, people who fear public transport.”

Compensation

If you are not careful, everyone has a reason to use their car and in a year’s time there will still be no plan. “Correct. We want to encourage sustainable transport and to achieve this, the conditions have to be attractive. You could reward the cyclist. Some organisations and businesses pay compensation per kilometre.” But it takes more than that, says Heuts. “Things like decent facilities such as safe and sheltered bicycle sheds and possibly also broader bicycle regulations (*fietsregeling*).”

Strict rules

If it is up to the working group, an end will also be put to the strict rules in the choice of transportation. In the city centre, you will have to choose: either a parking space if you travel 15 kilometres or more or purchasing a new bicycle every three years with a contribution from UM. “But, as appeared from the survey, employees want freedom of choice on a daily basis. We are looking into the best way to facilitate this.”

Actions

When will employees see something of the new policy? A report with calculated proposals will be sent to a ‘steering committee’ shortly, which includes the directors of Finance and HR. Some time later – working on the basis that the ideas for *En Route* are not shot down – the representative bodies will get to see them. “In anticipation of the new policy, we would like to start a number of actions in spring to bring attention to sustainable travel. We are still negotiating with Zuid-Limburg Bereikbaar on this matter.”

Cycling zone

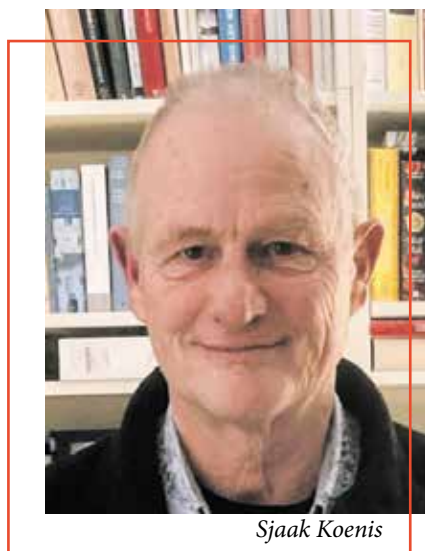
At the end of last year, the Maastricht city administration presented a new idea that is in line with more sustainable commuting: a cycling zone in the city centre. Mayor and aldermen want to encourage cycling, making the car ‘a guest’.

Interview with political philosopher Sjaak Koenis

"If PVV remains on the sidelines again, anger will only increase"

The populists do not form a threat for democracy in the Netherlands, Sjaak Koenis concludes in his book *De januskop van de democratie* ('The double-faced head of democracy'), which was published in 2016. How does the political philosopher view that now? After all, the PVV has now become the largest party and negotiations for a right-wing cabinet are in full swing.

Text: Maurice Timmermans **Photo:** archive Sjaak Koenis and Robin Utrecht/ANP



Sjaak Koenis

There is often something cosy about election night, says Sjaak Koenis, who sat himself down, together with his wife and son, in front of the television on 22 November. "But this time, after the results, that cosiness vanished in one fell swoop. What the heck, I thought, what is going on here?"

As a left-wing voter – Koenis voted strategically, for GroenLinks-PvdA candidate Frans Timmermans – the disappointment was tremendous. But as a scientist, the political philosopher referred to it as "an extraordinarily captivating development".

In the Netherlands, the right-wing voice has been prominently present for a long time, says Koenis. "Certainly since Fortuyn, but also back in the nineteen-seventies with the Wiegels-Van Agt cabinet. Still, that right-wing voice has always been muffled in the cabinets, where the political centre called the shots. This has now been broken through for the first time, with help from VVD."

As they no longer excluded PVV, says Koenis, many right-wing voters started to believe in it. "PVV could actually play a meaningful role in governing the country."

In his book *De januskop van de democratie* (2016), Koenis went over populism with a fine-tooth comb. Is the anger, which is so characteristic of populists, a threat to democracy? No, Koenis argued at the time. Resentment and anger are inherent to the democratic system, creating tensions between the elite and the populace, between equality and unequal-

ity, yet at the same time processes it.

When your book was published, PVV was doomed to the opposition, now Wilders' party has become the largest. Do you still feel that populism does not form a threat for democracy?

"Only this morning, I read all kinds of alarmist newspaper headlines about the demise of our democracy, but I don't believe that. Do you know what is a real threat to democracy? The childcare benefits scandal, with all its internalised racism, caused by none other than our tax office. This is where so many people were cast aside. For the past few years, Wilders has shouted out a lot, acting like a verbal hooligan, but you must differentiate between what politicians say and what they do."

Should he become Prime Minister, Wilders is now able to put words into action for the very first time. Are you holding your breath?

"No, because he won't be given the opportunity to put words into action. Wilders has already put all kinds of stuff on the back-burner, on his own accord and because mainly Omtzigt demanded this of him. It would be a whole different story if PVV had gained an absolute majority, as happened in Hungary or Poland. In the latter country, PiS was able to tackle the constitutional state and the broadcasting system,

but Wilders can't do that here. He has to take his coalition partners into consideration. I think it would be good for the Netherlands if a right-wing cabinet were formed."

Why?

"Democracy is a political system that makes anger visible and debatable. And that is healthy. Just like in families, you don't want feelings of resentment and anger to smoulder under the surface. If PVV were to end up on the sidelines again, that anger will only increase. In the nineteen-seventies, people were also angry, except that they focused on anything that exerted authority. Squatters at the time shouted that the constitution of the Netherlands was not *their* constitution. A completely different spirit of the times, but it was just as fierce. There is nothing wrong with that."

You once said that populism is nothing to be afraid of. Still, many Dutch people are now worried, especially those with a Muslim background.

"Still, Wilders has taken the Muslim hatred off the table. Most people are not angry about the fact that there are Muslims among us. It is just crap, latched onto after terrorist attacks. Wilders himself also knows that he won't get support for this in the Netherlands, on the contrary, this has actually put him in an isolated position."

He often emphasises that it is in the PVV's DNA.

"I wonder if that is true. Kind of strange that something so essential was put on the back-burner so quickly. Let us put our faith in the institutions that have been built up over the past centuries. Wilders would never be able to pass discriminating laws or a ban on mosques in Parliament."

NRC is not so sure. According to the newspaper, the lines of the democratic legal system have shifted. In the comment, the newspaper referred to the motion submitted by VVD in December. In it, the chairwoman of the party, Yesilgöz, appealed in the Senate to not discuss the Spreading Act (Spreidingswet), meant to regulate refugee emergency measures in municipalities. Constitutionally, this appeal is borderline, but according to NRC, it does show how Yesilgöz is already adapting to a new political climate, in which PVV sets the tone. "If PVV also participates in government, the political mood will change unmistak-

ably," says Koenis. "The Spreading Act will not be passed, because then it could appear that the refugee topic is not as big an issue as we thought. If all municipalities were to participate, emergency measures might be easy to arrange. However, parties to the right want to keep the outrage on the agenda. You can think all you want about that, but it doesn't mean that democracy will be destroyed. It all fits in with the rules of the game."

It would be a different matter, says Koenis, if a right-wing cabinet were to revoke the refugee treaty. "That would actually be damaging to at least the spirit of our constitution."

Do you expect that a possible right-wing coalition would revoke such a treaty.

"They may try. But what I am protesting against is the idea that we are, as it were, sliding in the direction of Orban. Hitler has also been dragged into it, because didn't he also come into power democratically? Yes, that is correct, but don't forget, besides the democratic rules of the game there is also a centuries-old political

tradition and that won't just disappear."

In 'De januskop van de democratie', you wrote that it would be disastrous if the populists were capable of mobilising the country for a Nexit. Now, it is in the election programme of the largest party.

"We would look just as foolish as the British do now, and as far as I am concerned, we would have taken the wrong exit. But even if the Netherlands were to leave the EU, that would still not mean the end of democracy."

It won't be easy for Wilders to deliver on his election promises. Do you expect that his voters will quickly abandon him again?

"I think so. The promises he made in the election programme – banning mosques, abolishing the freedom of education – he has already partly abandoned. I think that his voters will become disappointed if PVV alters its course further. Remember, too, that all politicians in the

Netherlands find themselves on a giant ship and can actually change very little. For a Nexit, for example, you would have to turn a lot of things upside down, change rules, calculate the consequences for the economy, to name but a few. I would not be afraid of that. Not as afraid as I was of as the childcare benefit scandal, where the system showed that it was rotten to the core, in the way in which we deal with relatively defenceless people. We need to be much more focussed on that."

Is the future for the populists?

"We have a remarkable paradox here. The classic populist role is really only possible from the sidelines. With the attitude: we are the people and the elite is crazy. But that can no longer be maintained by the populists if they shift to the centre. You immediately see that the tone changes. Then they have to participate, take responsibility, get their hands dirty. Shouting your mouth off from the sideline is over."



news

“Really great”: UM employee prize for Kevin Fuchs

He was allowed to give a twenty-minute speech, he joked, but during the presentation of the UM Award, Kevin Fuchs restricted himself to a thank you to his colleagues who nominated him: “I am honoured. Happy New Year!” Fuchs received the award – flowers, a certificate and a restaurant voucher – during Maastricht University’s New Year’s reception in Centre Ceramique on Monday.

Fuchs is field study co-ordinator of the bachelor’s of Global Studies, but according to his colleagues this official title does not do justice “to how essential his role is” within the bachelor’s programme. In their praising letter of nomination, they write that they are hoping the award “will show this exceptional colleague and lecturer that his potential is seen and valued”. And that exceptional colleague himself? In his very modest comment to *Observant*, he states that he himself would have nominated someone else. He finds the compliments from his colleagues “really great” and “it is nice to be appreciated,” but “I don’t do my work because I want to win an award. I have a passion for teaching and for the students. It is great to see them grow, it makes me feel proud”.

By the way, the UM Award is normally awarded to two people from UM. The second prize winner, however, chose to remain anonymous and not to accept the award, said vice president Nick Bos.

PD



Kevin Fuchs and his colleagues during Maastricht University’s New Year’s reception Photo: Joey Roberts

Students are considering taking legal action

Continuation of 1

– declared bankrupt by the courts in Amsterdam on 20 December as per their own request. “A strange coincidence,” comments Van der Meijs from construction company Hurks, to whom it is also a mystery. “We only have contact with ECM Development via the bankruptcy trustee, who is not saying anything about the situation either.” The Nido spokesperson denies that this is all about legal finagling. “The delayed completion is purely due to technical problems. The building has not yet reached a state of completion and has not yet been handed over to Nido according to the standards we set”

Legal action

In the meantime, many students are without

accommodation. According to Nido, arranging temporary shelter is “a gesture of goodwill”, since the situation would be a case of force majeure. The students, however, refer to the signed tenancy agreement. A few dozen are considering taking legal action, as appears from a WhatsApp group in which more than 260 duped students have come together. One of them, law student Beyza Akça, has hired a lawyer who sent a registered letter to Nido last Monday. It contains a demand for fulfilment of the tenancy agreement: staying in the holiday park is after all a temporary measure and without one’s own facilities.

Rooms shortage

In view of the influx of new students in Feb-

ruary, Maastricht University also fears a dire situation. “If the complex is not open at the beginning of February, that will put extra pressure on the market,” says Maurice Evers, head of Maastricht Housing. There will be a rooms shortage threat, while UM has no alternatives. “The Guesthouse is fully booked, and the university does not own any other buildings. We ourselves, as well as the city authorities, see no options for temporary shelter locations in Maastricht. A tent camp is practically impossible in the winter. We do want to take responsibility, but we are dependent on external parties”

In a meeting of the city council on Tuesday evening, Volt’s local fraction, having previously submitted written questions, called upon the

city council to ensure that those students who are victims “should in no circumstances run the risk of ending up on the streets”. In addition, Volt council member Mart den Heijer brought up the matter of a “questionable deal with a company with a questionable structure,” of which it is unclear what their plans are with the building. “What about permits? Can the building be sold on to a new company that does not want to house students?” This was not answered during the meeting: alderman Pas (housing and student city portfolio) was not present.

Dennis Vaendel

Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

09-1, 16.00 h Zeynep Karagöz
10-1, 13.00 h Robbert Erik Geertsema
10-1, 16.00 h Amée Fleur Wolters
11-1, 10.00 h Lisanne H.P. Houben
11-1, 13.00 h Patrick Naaktgeboren
Double Doctoral Degree
Maastricht University and
University of Antwerp
11-1, 16.00 h Mary Rose Postma
12-1, 10.00 h Felix Sebastián Gubler
12-1, 13.00 h Carsten W.K.P. Arnoldussen
12-1, 16.00 h Damon Willems
15-1, 10.00 h Claudette Edna Gillian Hall
15-1, 13.00 h Yiyong Gou
16-1, 10.00 h An Ning
16-1, 13.00 h Aniruddha Agarwal
16-1, 16.00 h Andra Sachinder Waagmeester
18-1, 13.00 h Hanan AlBurno

18-1, 16.00 h Miriam Jacomien Oost
19-1, 10.00 h Britt Derks
19-1, 13.00 h Jeroen Jan Roor
19-1, 16.30 h Dr. Benedikt Poster
INAUGURATIE
22-1, 16.00 h Kevin B.W. Groot Lipman
23-1, 16.00 h Rok Hrzic
24-1, 16.00 h Marijo Silva Vargas
25-1, 10.00 h Karolien Baldewijns
25-1, 13.00 h Kevin M.R. Nijssen
26-1, 15.30 h - 17.00 h DIES NATALIS
St. Janskerk Maastricht
29-1, 10.00 h Niels Andreas van der Baan
29-1, 13.00 h Shan Wang
29-1, 16.00 h Marvin T.L.J. Martens
30-1, 16.00 h Rebecca Farah
31-1, 16.00 h Mitch van Hensbergen



Maastricht University

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