Twitter Thread by Chris Kendall ■■



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I split my life between two of the richest regions in the world: the UK home counties, and the Brussels region. Three and a half days per week in each. This is a short thread about some similarities and differences, and what that tells me about priorities.

Disclaimer: most of the following is based purely on my subjective empirical observations living in both places and using public spaces. You would never know that both regions enjoy similar levels of wealth. One feels poor, the other feels rich, you can guess which is which.

Similarities: rich, northern European, densely populated, frequently shit weather. Home to high value added service industries and high tech industries. Both have been through painful austerity during the last decade. Differences: taxation levels; quality of life; infrastructure.

In and around Brussels small businesses thrive, high streets are full of family-run stores selling high quality goods to people who seem to have plenty of cash to spend. In UK high streets you'll rarely find a store that isn't a chain, and many lie empty.

Brussels is full of green spaces being used by locals, over the last ten to fifteen years they've been transformed with new bike paths, exercise tracks, water fountains. Roads and paths are carefully maintained. These spaces feel alive and precious.

Parks near my home in the UK feel shabby and run-down. Councils don't have money to spend on new infrastructure nor to maintain existing facilities. Potholed residential roads have not been touched for decades. Cars are parked everywhere. Spaces feel unkempt.

Around my UK home, there is ostentatious private wealth (McMansions, supercars) but also evident poverty (run down estates, food banks). Around me in Brussels there is wealth & also poverty but it's less in your face. Immigrant families picnic and play in the local parks.

Belgium has transformed in the 25 years that I've been here. It feels far more prosperous, much cleaner, much healthier than it did in the 90s. Meanwhile the UK feels that it has slipped back from a high point at the turn of the millennium and the days of Cool Britannia.

Here's my non-scientific gut sense for why this is: first, federalism. Belgium introduced reforms in the 90s giving more power to its regions & municipalities. The national government hardly impinges upon people's lives (it went without a government for 353 days in 2010-11!).

People are invested in their local and regional governments, they see their daily impact, decisions are made close to them. Vested interests that had dominated (and corrupted) Belgian public life prior to the 1990s have given way to richer, more responsible local politics.

By contrast, localism & regionalism in the UK - especially in southern England - is practically non-existent. Lip service is paid but it's meaningless. Local elections are proxies for national elections. Local government is starved of cash. Folk disengage. https://t.co/khSUy0wAQf

Second, finances. Belgian local governments have money to spend. Where citizens see that their environment is cared for, they take more care of it. They use it. People get out, they exercise, they cycle, they recycle, they live in their public spaces. But they pay through taxes.

Belgians used to be famous for dodging taxes and living luxuriously behind anonymous front doors. I feel that this has changed. In the UK by contrast I see gated mansions proliferating behind potholed streets and pavements. But the mansion owners pay less tax.

It's a trade off, sure. Belgian tax levels are notoriously high. But look at quality of life, and disposable income. Your average high taxed Belgian looks a lot richer than your average low taxed Brit. Politics is about choices; we've made some bad ones in the UK. /ends

A little addendum to my thread of yesterday - this article pretty much says it all. https://t.co/qzYYjtmazq