

Immigration and migrant integration policies in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract

About one in ten of the population living in Flanders has a foreign background, i.e. is either having a foreign nationality at birth or having at least one parent with a foreign nationality at birth. Recent immigration figures as well as population forecasts make us believe that this will even rise up. In order to help integrate this population, a number of policies have been decreed by the Flemish Government. To be mentioned are 1) the ‘Inburgeringsdecreet’ (integration decree), 2) the ‘Decreet op de Huizen van het Nederlands’ (decree on Dutch teaching courses), 3) the ‘Inwerkingsdecreet’ (decree on employment services for foreigners) and 4) the ‘Sociale wooncode’ (social housing code). Pivotal is the ‘Inburgeringsprogramma’ (an integration program) which ‘people integrating’ are either invited to follow or, as the case may be, are compelled to follow. It consists of two trajectories in which basically an orientation in the host society and in professional life is offered along with an elementary course on Dutch. At the end of the process, a ‘certificate of Inburgering’ is solemnly handed over, of which it is hoped it may provide some comfort to the migrant in his/her walks of life in the Flemish society.

1 Introduction

Today, nearly six percent of the population with residence in the Flemish Region has a foreign nationality. Compared to the other regions in Belgium, this is by far the lowest share. Nonetheless, immigration figures are rising up and a significant part of the resident Belgian population has foreign origins. In order to help integrate this population, be it of foreign nationality or of foreign origin, a number of policies have recently been decreed by the Flemish Government under the umbrella of an integration agenda. To monitor these programs, a number of new concepts and criteria have been defined. Our presentation aims to give an overview of these programs and to provide statistics on the set target groups.

2 Foreigners in the population

Figures from the federal statistics administration show that in Belgium 9.1% of the total population that is registered in the *National Population Register* (NPR) on 1st January 2008 has a foreign nationality (ADSEI, 2008). Broken by region, that gives almost one in three for the Brussels Capital Region (28.1%), one in ten for the Walloon Region (9.3%) and just slightly over one in twenty for the Flemish Region (5.8%). These are fairly stable proportions over time though in the last few years some drop in that share is observed in both the Brussels and Walloon Region, whereas in the Flemish Region figures tend to rise up.

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The nationality of course is but one part of the whole picture. Like many other countries in Western Europe, Belgium organised a post-war labour immigration – mainly from countries in southern Europe and northern Africa, or from Turkey -, and in due time made some provisions for their families to reunite and settle down. Changes in the legislation on the acquisition of citizenship, both in 1991 and 1999, made that a great many of that foreign population, either the migrants themselves or their children, could acquire the Belgian nationality. This makes it a lot more difficult to visualize the group issued from that post-war migration history in the general population. To do so, some concept of ‘foreign origin’ or ‘foreign background’ that looks beyond the nationality status, has to be framed. A number of interesting proposals in that respect have certainly been worked out, but none of these so far has gained official status in the national statistics (e.g., Desmarez *et al.*, 2004; Poulain and Perrin, 2008).

In an exercise performed by our own administration (SVR) based on NPR household data for January 1st, 2004, it was decided upon to classify within the ‘population with a foreign background’ those with a foreign citizenship (nationality) at birth irrespective of their current citizenship. To be added were those of the younger generation (under age 30) with a Belgian citizenship at birth that were however registered to live in a household with members of the older generation (presumably their own father and/or mother) of which the presumed mother - and if absent, the presumed father-, was having a foreign citizenship at birth. As such, one in ten in the Flemish Region was classified to belong to the ‘population with a foreign background’ (10.3%); that is double the share of the foreign population according to current citizenship (4.8%). For a large city like Antwerp, one in four was estimated to belong to that population with a foreign background (26%); for Ghent, one in six was noted (16%) (Corijn and Lodewijckx, 2009).

Poulain and Perrin (2008) applied a somewhat different algorithm based on the citizenship at birth, place of birth and the migration and naturalisation history, as could be derived from a combination of NPR-data and census-data. This certainly was a rather cumbersome exercise, which can be explained by a tradition in Belgium, like in France, to provide only statistics on citizenship in standard tables. A simpler exercise based only on information of current citizenship and past naturalisation, gives a rough estimate of the ‘population with a foreign background’ equal to 15% for Belgium on January 1st, 2006. Broken by region, this is 9% for the Flemish Region, 17% for the Walloon Region and already a staggering 47% for the Brussels Capital Region (N. Perrin, ADSEI, personal communication).

Whatever the case, it has become clear so far that Belgium and its regions have become not only multi-lingual societies but very much also multi-cultural societies. Current net migration figures that show a positive trend in each of the three regions, as well as the recent population forecasts (FPB, 2008) expecting future rises in (net) immigration figures, add to this general conclusion.

3 The integration agenda

Over the past legislatures a number of initiatives and decrees have been adopted by the Flemish Government with respect to the integration of the foreign population in society. To oversee all initiatives in this respect would certainly take us a long way; therefore let’s concentrate on the key policies that frame the integration agenda. In this respect, three general policy tools that are regulated by decrees stand out: 1) a general city policy promoting a better

quality of life in the inner cities, 2) a diversity policy aimed at a good understanding among different groups according to their national background, and 3) an integration policy aimed at a better participation of new foreigners in society.

3.1 A city policy

A Flemish City Fund, called ‘Vlaams Stedenfonds’, was set up by decree at the end of 2002 (Decreet van 13 december 2002). Basically, its task is to distribute funds to be used by cities to enhance 1° the quality of life in the inner cities (partly in order to stop depopulation), 2° to combat poverty and destitution, and 3° to promote good governance. On the basis of a set of social and economic criteria, it was agreed upon that thirteen Flemish cities can benefit from this special fund along with the ‘Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie’ (Flemish Community Commission), the latter being the representative of the Dutch-speaking community in the bilingual Brussels Capital Region. Particularly social programs of the largest Flemish cities, Antwerp and Ghent, are funded by this provision. It is to be added however that the local cities themselves are granted much freedom in the shaping of their programs.

3.2 A diversity policy

The diversity policy is primarily directed towards ‘ethnic-cultural minorities’, i.e. people with a foreign background and socially deprived (formerly labelled as “allochtonen”), asylum seekers and refugees that can benefit from international protection, or travellers (Decreet van 28 april 1998).⁴ The policy should create the circumstances in which the ethnic-cultural minorities 1° can fully participate as citizens in society, and 2° can be given the necessary assistance. Generally, the decree stands for an inclusive and coordinated policy promoting equal opportunities for the minority groups. In this, diversity is looked upon as an asset; however this may not blind the government for problems it may cause.

It operates through *Integration Centers* (at the provincial level) and *Integration Services* (at the local level), which are now coordinated by the ‘Vlaams Minderhedencentrum’ (Flemish Minorities centre)⁵. Next to that, a *Forum van etnisch-culturele minderheden* (Forum of ethnic-cultural minorities) has been recognized, that brings together all the stakeholders in the field.

A peculiarity is the provision of ‘*managers of diversity*’, a title that is granted to either public or private associations that help in the managing of diversity. In this way, programs promoting social cohesion at the local level can be subsidized, e.g. voluntary work aimed at helping schoolchildren with a foreign background with their schoolwork.

3.3 The integration policy

With the implementation in 2004 of the decree on “inburgering”, say the integration of *newcomers*, e.g., adult new immigrants to Flanders and Brussels within the last year, we come

⁴ This Decree will now be replaced by the new Decree of April 30th, 2009, in which the policy with respect to the ethnic-cultural minorities will become a general integration policy. The new decree however is not yet in effect, as it still waits for implementation orders. So long, the old decree of April 28th, 1998, stands.

⁵ This will become VLEMI, the ‘Vlaams Expertisecentrum Migratie en Integratie’ according to the new Decree of April 30th, 2009 on the policy with respect to the ethnic-cultural minorities (see further in text).

to the very heart of the integration policy (Decreet van 28 februari 2003).⁶ The decree indeed embodies the will of the Flemish Government that “newcomers” to our western society should be welcomed in the best of conditions and given the right, if not the plight, to integrate themselves; that is to understand the host society and be able to fully participate in daily social life according to one’s abilities and aspirations. As such, the integration decree builds on the ‘Minorities decree’ of 1998 (op.cit.), now giving more shape to the way new immigrants should be welcomed and guided in the host society.

Pivotal is the “*Inburgeringsprogramma*” (integration program) which ‘people integrating’ are either invited to follow or, as the case may be, are obliged to do so.⁷ Basically it consists of two trajectories. In the first trajectory, the adult migrant is offered 1) an orientation in society labelled as ‘civic integration’ (maatschappelijke oriëntatie, MO), 2) a basic course in colloquial Dutch (Nederlands als tweede taal, NT2) and 3) some orientation on the labour market (loopbaanoriëntatie, LO) with the help of official services. The second trajectory is situated within the regular services in sectors such as employment or education, which are also requested to adapt their general services to the people integrating in society.

For a subgroup of “newcomers” the ‘inburgerings’-program is compulsory, the non-compliance of which is liable to (administrative) fines. This pertains particularly to all newcomers between 18 and 65 years of age with a residence in the Flemish Region that do not have the citizenship of a member state of the EU or of the EEA plus Switzerland⁸. Also recognized asylum seekers and persons under subsidiary protection (refugees, asylum seekers with a stay longer than 4 months, victims to slave trade, etc.) belong to that target group, as well as Ministers of God’s Word (of recognized religions) of foreign origin.

Priority is given to 1) those with a conscription of ‘inburgering’ (compulsory program), 2) for ‘oudkomers’ (the group of migrants that came to Belgium in former days) who do not understand Dutch at all and are dependent on social welfare, 4) foreign parents of schoolchildren, and 4) foreign tenants or applicant-tenants of social dwellings. Moreover, a proof of willingness to learn Dutch or (the willingness) to follow/have followed an integration trajectory is mandatory for the right to apply for a social dwelling (Decreet van 15 juli 1997).

To organise this, eight *Onthaalbureau’s* (Reception offices) were created and/or recognized. Their task is to guide and follow-up the newcomer (or as the case may be, the ‘oldcomer’) through the integration process, i.e. the ‘inburgerings’ trajectories. We will find a provincial *Onthaalbureau* in each of the Flemish provinces as well as a local office in Ghent and in Antwerp, whereas for the Brussels Capital Region, a regional office was created under the supervision of the *Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie* (Flemish Community commission). At the start, a *contract of ‘inburgering’* is signed between the newcomer/oldcomer and the municipality; at the end a *certificate of ‘inburgering’* is granted testifying that such a trajectory was followed on a regularly basis.

⁶ Sometimes the target group is much broader defined as “*all persons with a legal and longstanding stay in Belgium though not born a Belgian or having at least one parent not having the Belgian citizenship.*” This, it is admitted, urges the government to define the target group in a more precise way (Beleidsnota Inburgering en Integratie 2009-2014, pp. 48-49).

⁷ ‘People integrating’ is our translation for “inburgeraar”, the new concept to designate the target group for ‘inburgering’ (according to a 2008-amendment to the ‘inburgering’ decree of 28 Februari 2003).

⁸ EEA = European Economic Area = EU + Iceland + Liechtenstein + Norway. Remark that EEA + Switzerland = EU + EFTA (European Free Trade Association, of which Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland are member).

It is to be understood that the whole program of the first trajectory can be finished within one year. The course on 'civic integration' (MO), giving an overview of basic rights & plights in Belgium and Flanders, and of all sorts of public services, customs and events, lasts for about 60 up to 90 hours and usually is spread over 3 months. The course on (colloquial) 'Dutch as a second language' (NT2) is differentiated according to the newcomer's/oldcomer's prior educational level, and may last between 90 and 240 hours. It can be followed at a 'Centrum voor basiseducatie' (CBE, centre for basic education), a 'Centrum voor volwassenenonderwijs' (CVO, centre for adult education) or at a language centre situated in one of the universities. The dispatching of this is regulated by a special decree (Decreet van 7 mei 2004). Finally, the professional orientation is preferentially organised together with professional organisations, such as the 'Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding' (VDAB, the Flemish office for employment-finding and vocational training) or the 'Brusselse Gewestelijke Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling' (BGDA, Brussels Regional Office for employment-finding). No fees are charged.

The second trajectory is organised within the regular services in the fields of education, employment (VDAB) or entrepreneurial activities (Syntra Vlaanderen). Here also, attention is paid to a practical knowledge of Dutch. Under given circumstances, persons of the target group may have direct access to the second trajectory (Decreet van 4 juni 2003).

Related initiatives among others are that 1) the courses on civic integration have been standardized, 2) a central database for follow-up has been set up (called *Kruispuntbank Inburgering*, KBI), and 3) a "Day of integration" is organised every year to celebrate the integration efforts made by the newcomers, an occasion also on which the certificate of 'inburgering' is delivered.

For the year 2008, the Flemish administration counted an influx of 29.541 adult 'newcomers' to Flanders together with 16.347 minors under age 18. Half of the total group possesses the citizenship of countries outside the 'EEA plus Switzerland'-area. Of the adult newcomers, 53% were 'family migrants' ("volgmigranten", either intending to start or to re-unite a family) and slightly over 9% were 'asylum seekers or refugees'. For a large group, the 'inburgerings'-program was considered merely a right within the law (43.5%); for one in five it was a compulsory program (18.1%). The top-5 of adult newcomers according to their nationality was formed of citizens from the Netherlands, Poland, Morocco, Turkey and Bulgaria. Finally, to give an idea about the workload, 13.973 contracts were signed that year giving the right or the plight to follow the 'inburgerings'program, either in the Flemish Region (#12.443) or in the Brussels Capital Region (#1.530) (Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur, Jaarbeeld 2008).

A survey conducted in 2006 among 561 attendants of the courses on 'civic integration' or 'labour market orientation' spread all over Flanders and Brussels showed that the mean onset time for the primary 'inburgerings'-trajectory is 9 months since the stay in Belgium whereas the mean trajectory time is another 8 months. Asylum seekers in general are keener on following the courses swiftly than family migrants. On top among the attendants were citizens from Morocco, Russia, Turkey, Iran and the DR Congo. The large majority of attendants report that they are very much satisfied with the courses. This holds in the first place for the course on civic integration, and then comes Dutch and labour market orientation. It is reported

however that one in four of the respondents dropped out.⁹ Risk groups for drop-out are female marriage migrants (particularly from Morocco), domestic servants (from India), Chechenian refugees, members of the Jewish orthodox community and illiterate persons (Geets *et al.*, 2007).

4. New policies

In the new ‘Policy Agreement 2009-2014’, the Flemish Government opts for an “innovative, lasting and warm society”. In this, “inburgering” of the ethnic-cultural minorities is perceived as a chance to realise a more cohesive and respectful society. It is basically an instrument to help the people integrating to participate in all realms of social life. In accordance with the so-called ‘Pact 2020’, a more inclusive society is strived for, which bans social deprivation and exclusion (De Vlaamse Regering 2009-2014).

The Policy Document of the responsible regional Minister is more specific (Beleidsnota Inburgering en Integratie 2009-2014). It is announced among other initiatives that 1) a ‘Staten-Generaal van Inburgering en Integratie’ [General Assembly on Inburgering & Integration] will be organized in 2010 to define the long-term perspective on the issues involved, 2) a basic course on “inburgering” will in due time be available on demand in the country of origin, either on-line or in the form of a hardware packet but always on a free basis and free of charge; 3) ‘marriage migration’ in the so-called ‘second and third generation’ will be discouraged with the intention to cut off a recognized vicious circle of social deprivation¹⁰, 4) the ‘certificate of inburgering’ will be upgraded in the sense that its recognition will be more valued in both the public and private arena; and 5) the debate with representatives of Islam will be continued and intensified, particularly with respect to the training of imams. Also, a centre of expertise on migration and integration, the ‘Vlaams Expertisecentrum voor Migratie en Integratie’ (VLEMI) – successor to the ‘Vlaams Minderhedencentrum’ -, will be installed to support the integration policy along with a new legal framework for social interpreters (Decreet van 30 april 2009).

Decreets

- Decreet van 15 juli 1997 houdende de Vlaamse Wooncode - B.S. 19/08/1997
- Decreet van 28 april 1998 inzake het Vlaamse beleid ten aanzien van etnisch-culturele minderheden - B.S. 19/06/1998
- Decreet van 13 december 2002 tot vaststelling van de regels inzake de werking en de verdeling van het Vlaams Stedenfonds - B.S. 29/01/2003
- Decreet van 28 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid – B.S. 8/05/2003

⁹ For a good understanding, it is to be noted that the decree on a compulsory ‘Inburgerings-’ program first took effect on January 1st, 2007, according to a special regulation of the government (Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering van 15/12/2006). Since, the drop out is much reduced.

¹⁰ It is of interest to note that this debate is an issue among members of the so-called “second generation (migrants)” themselves. The announcement of a video display annex debate of the film “Verliefd, verloofd, getrouwd – gewikt en gewogen” (In love, engaged & married – weighed up) by the ‘Steunpunt Allochtone Meisjes en Vrouwen’ (SAMV), organized in collaboration with an “inter-cultural centre” (‘De Centrale’, Ghent, on Thursday 26/11/2009), is just but one token of this.

- Decreet van 4 juni 2003 betreffende het inwerkingsbeleid – B.S. 20/06/2003
- Decreet van 7 mei 2004 betreffende de Huizen van het Nederlands – B.S. 19/11/2004
- Decreet van 30 april 2009 tot wijziging van het decreet van 28 april 1998 inzake het Vlaamse beleid ten aanzien van etnisch-culturele minderheden – B.S. 2/07/2009

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