

Three Key Concepts for a More Successful Migration Policy in Belgium

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In this policy brief, the author proposes 3 concepts to underpin the new Belgian migration policy, taking into account the new structure of the State. Belgium needs a robust mechanism for dialogue between federal and federated entities. The Regions and Communities have the essential competences for integration. Until our societies find the key to integration, migration policies will remain painful. Finally, our policies must respond to flows of migrants, not to stocks of migrants. These policies must support trajectories rather than groups. A government agreement based on dialogue, integration and flows is more likely to meet the challenges of migration than an agreement that reinforces the federal state's sovereign power over a stock of migrants.

The European Affairs programme of the Egmont Institute has just completed its “Promoting a dialogue on migration” cycle that it was running with the European Policy Centre, thanks to the support of the King Baudouin Foundation. The end of a cycle always raises the question of whether the issue has evolved. This contribution, acknowledging the need for and existence of a dialogue, paves the way to go one step further by targeting three concepts on which the dialogue should be pursued without delay.

First of all, let's go back to the hypothesis on which the cycle that has just ended was based. The aim was to “promote dialogue on the subject of migration”. The assumption behind this need for “dialogue” can be seen in the absence of dialogue, and in the existence of a need to talk to each other. Before solving the migration issue, a prerequisite was set: to dialogue. The cycle “promoted”

the idea of a dialogue. It meant that previously, the dialogue was absent. Which dialogue? Dialogue between the international, European and national levels. Dialogue between the Regions and the Federal Government. Dialogue between civil society and the authorities. Dialogue between left and right. The dialogue between law and reality. Dialogue between the anthropology of migration and migration policies. Dialogue between micro- and macro-economic approaches to migration. Dialogue between migrants and hosts, etc. Note how far we are from this, since the title of the cycle was not “Dialogue on migration” but “Promoting dialogue on migration”. The “Promoting” stage is therefore completed. However, there are still a few players to be mobilised in this dialogue. The formal evaluation of the cycle will help to identify them. This is not the purpose of this contribution.

MULTISTAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE EXISTS AT INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL

This success leads to the first key concept: dialogue must now be structured rather than promoted. The dialogue must continue, but in a structured way so that it itself becomes structuring. Belgium has no institutional mechanism for structuring the debate on migration.

For 5 years, the United Nations negotiated the two “Global Compacts”: for refugees on the one hand, and for safe, legal and orderly migration on the other. Barack Obama and Ban Ki-moon, both at the end of their term of office, led to the New York Declaration on 19 September 2016, which launched the preparatory work for the so-called “Marrakesh Pact” signed by 152 States on 19 December 2018. Its signature by Belgium led to the fall

of the Michel government. This shows how important the method of dialogue is. The Pact adopted pursues 23 objectives ranging from monitoring to the portability of social rights and the fight against racism and xenophobia. The Pact creates a capacity-building mechanism within the United Nations system under the responsibility of the IOM:

- A liaison centre where tailor-made solutions can be developed to meet the needs of member states,
- A seed fund to cover the initial financing of projects,
- A global knowledge Platform

The Pact explicitly states that it is to be implemented “at the national, regional and international levels, in cooperation and partnership with migrants, civil society, migrant and diaspora organisations, faith-based organisations, local authorities and communities, the private sector, trade unions, parliamentarians, national human rights institutions, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, academia, the media and other stakeholders”. The essence of the Global Compact is to set the international community on the path of dealing positively with the migration issue through “multi-stakeholder dialogue”.

At European level, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented a draft Pact on Migration and Asylum on 23 September 2020. After long and difficult negotiations, it was adopted by the European Parliament on 10 April 2024. The Council is now finalising its work. While the Global Compact is only politically binding, the 10 regulations set out in the European Compact will become law. The responsibility of each Member State for entries onto its territory is accompanied by a multi-faceted solidarity mechanism: relocation (minimum 30,000 per year), financial contribution, secondment of personnel, etc. A solidarity coordinator will be appointed to facilitate the trade-off between Member States as regards the responsibilities conferred on them by the Pact and the solidarity they must show each other in the event of an influx, crisis or imbalance in reception. The Pact provides for minimum financial contributions of €600 million. To give an order of magnitude, this corresponds to ¼ of the

ordinary budget of an agency like FEDASIL. Each Member State will have to put in place a national strategy to ensure its capacity to manage the asylum and migration system effectively. The Pact organises the initial harmonisation of asylum and reception procedures, as well as the filtering of people crossing a border illegally. The essence of the European Pact is to ensure a balanced burden between Member States in dealing with involuntary migration, and through dialogue.

DIALOGUE TO TURN PROBLEMS INTO SOLUTIONS

The time has probably come for Belgium to build an institutional dialogue between all the stakeholders. The essence of a National Pact resulting from this dialogue would be to - albeit partially - transform the migration issue into a solution rather than a problem, and to regenerate the democratic space and the rule of law, which have suffered from thousands of judicial condemnations. The difficulty of the democratic parties to position themselves on the issues of asylum and illegal immigration reinforces the formations at the extreme of the political spectrum, on the left as well as on the right, and in different ways in each region of the country. It's not easy to put a figure on the impact of the migration impasse in terms of electoral results, but the assumption of 7 to 8 seats (out of 150) can't be far off the mark.

The 6th state reform has placed Belgium's centre of gravity at the level of the Regions. The issue of migration has yet to be anchored in this new paradigm. However, to date, it is still the sovereign issues of access to the territory and asylum policy that structure the debate. Community and regional competences in education, integration, recognition of diplomas, employment, culture, etc. are not yet coordinated around the issue of migration. These areas of responsibility have not yet taken on board the massive increase in migration. They are still stuck in 20th century thinking on interculturality and diversity. However, as we saw during the mass arrival of refugees from Ukraine, the combined efforts of federal, regional, community, local and citizen forces have a far greater impact than federal intervention alone. Belgium has not experienced a crisis in the reception of Ukrainians.

This is because the citizens were mobilised, the Regions developed permanent housing and employment, and the Federal Government immediately exercised its operational powers such as social security, coordination, vehicle registration, etc. and less its sovereign powers, while the Communities focused on providing schooling for children, etc. Two players were not particularly mobilised and should be in the future: the social partners and, more generally, civil society organisations.

As can be seen from the dynamics at global level (the Global Compact) or European level (the Migration Pact), but also from the only consensual migration policy of the last 15 years in Belgium (the reception of Ukrainians), the concept of “multistakeholder dialogue” makes it possible to mobilise the resources of all stakeholders and to succeed where political results are generally painful. Belgium needs an official and robust multistakeholder dialogue tool.

MIGRATION IS A PROBLEM. INTEGRATION IS A SOLUTION

A second concept would benefit from feeding into the next majority agreements (following the elections on 9 June 2024). At least if the parties in power in the various majorities want to build a positive narrative around migration. Migration can be seen as a flow and should be studied as such. To manage flows, we can play on different parameters: territory (surface area), entry, flow and exit. However, political discussions on migration focus mainly on the territory, on inflows, on the strength of these flows (throughput), but rarely on outflows. When it is mentioned, leaving the country is almost exclusively discussed in terms of removal from the territory, whether voluntary or forced. Integration is always the blind spot in migration policies. The debate on the reception crisis, for example, rarely focuses on the people who might leave the reception centres. It focuses mainly on reception capacity and inflows, but little on outflows and on the integration of people authorised to stay in the country. Yet migration policies will only become acceptable to the host populations when integration policies are working well. Without integration capacity, host societies see

migration as essentially problematic. We therefore need to “enable” our societies to integrate. As long as we do not invest massively in the capacity to integrate migrants, migrants will remain foreigners, i.e. people who are passing through and should not stay.

Once again, the 6th State reform, by placing the centre of gravity of our institutions at regional level, provides fertile ground for the essential issue no longer to be the sovereign right of residence, but rather the socio-economic issue of integration. We will long remember the missed opportunity to make this turning point in 2015, when our homes were struck by the images of mainly Syrian migrants crossing the Mediterranean and Europe, and stopping off at Parc Maximilien. And in 2017, when the concept of “trans-migrants” appeared. At those times, Regional and Community political majorities were content to castigate the federal government (and in particular its Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration) when they could have contributed to solving the problem by developing, as they did in 2022 for the Ukrainians, real integration capacities (schooling, housing, work).

As we know, the four major integrators are

- the family (mother tongue and culture), which guarantees emotional security,
- housing that guarantees the security of the private sphere,
- education that provides the keys to understanding and participating,
- and work, which enables individuals to contribute to collective life through their activity and purchasing power.

THE PROBLEMS AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL. THE SOLUTIONS AT THE FEDERATED ENTITIES LEVEL

All these competences fall within the remit of the federated entities. They play a crucial role in the success of migration policies. The increased responsibility of the federated entities through their integrative competences will make it possible to shed light on the solutions. This increase in responsibility requires a great deal of attention. The federated entities have



budget deficits that do not encourage them to open up new fronts.

In this delicate context, we need to identify existing levers, and to distinguish between:

- policies which, although they do not specifically target migrants, already cover all migrant groups. For example, education is compulsory. The children of migrants are therefore subject to compulsory schooling, including children without residence permits.
- policies targeting migrants but which do not reach the population category concerned, such as welcoming newcomers, language learning, support for multiculturalism, etc.
- policies that target migrants but whose impact is not easy to quantify, and it is not clear whether they are more likely to support or slow down migratory trajectories: equivalence of diplomas, granting of work permits, examination of regularisation, asylum courts, etc.
- policies that exclude certain categories of migrants by regulation, such as policies on access to the profession and housing support policies,
- policies that have no specific focus on migrants and have no impact on them, even though the need exists and is only met by private provision.

These distinctions make it easier to measure what is already being done and the gap between what is desired and what exists. Beyond that, to validate the feasibility of policies for integrating migrants, we need to make visible the cost of not taking action : what is the budgetary impact of doing nothing or not enough?

Often, migration policies have been tightened on the basis of the “failure of integration policies”, with the success that we know of, both in terms of volumes and in terms of social cohesion and human dignity. Inviting the federated entities to contribute to migration policies via their integration capacities opens up considerable scope for debate.

TURN STOCKS INTO FLOWS

The third invitation is almost epistemological and concerns theory of knowledge. We have developed a strong expertise in terms of stocks: how many residents in Belgium without the Belgian nationality? We know everything in terms of stock variations: how has this figure changed over the last ten years? These data are essential, but they do not enable us to grasp the nature of the migratory movements to which we are responding, or to construct appropriate policies. Let’s take an example: we know that, from 2017 to 2022, 10,000 people arrived in a city but from 2018 to 2023, this number raises up to 11,000. Can we deduce from these figures that the effort should be increased by 10%? What if the 11,000 people actually conceal 2,000 departures and 3,000 arrivals rather than 1,000 additional arrivals with no departures? When we talk about migration, what counts are flows, not trends. Stocks can decrease simply because there are very few arrivals and no departures. Similarly, stocks can fall because massive arrivals are matched by huge departures. The same applies to education: if everyone fails, the student population increases while the age group decreases. If all studying migrants succeed, their proportion in the overall number of students will fall, while they may arrive in greater numbers. Data in terms of stocks and changes in stocks do not correspond to our needs for knowledge of migratory phenomena.

Getting into the habit of talking in terms of inflows and outflows makes it possible to take a diametrically opposed view of the reality in Brussels. The increase in poverty, for example, conceals the outflow from Brussels of a secure population and the inflow of a slightly greater number of fairly precarious people (including young people, whether migrants or not). Brussels’ success in securing a large number of new arrivals is drowned out by the failure to tackle poverty. This is all the more true for migrant income groups.

The corollary of flow-based knowledge is the organisation of trajectories. As soon as humans are on the move, it is this movement that needs to be supported rather than the passage from state A to state B. We need to 1/ think

about the journey from A to D and 2/ capitalise on each move to B and then to C, because the person may have left before D. Migration therefore becomes a question of social mobility. How can we build trajectories and support them so that each stage of social mobility is rich for the individual, useful for the community and stimulating for the next stage? In addition, inter-institutional dialogue must make these trajectories visible and ensure that the territories that benefit from migrants at time T+3 in the social mobility stages must contribute to the funding of stages T+1 and T+2.

BRUSSELS (AND CITIES) IS MORE IMPACTED

The Brussels Region is probably the most affected part of the country by migration. Not only in terms of stocks, but above all in terms of flows. It probably has more reason to develop a real capacity to analyse flows and support trajectories. But the question also arises in Walloon and Flemish cities, whether small like Verviers or large like Antwerp, because they are experiencing realities that cannot be captured by stocks. Flows have an impact on the number of lockets that municipalities have to organise in their population services. Flows impact the number of reception classes for newcomers in their schools, new applications for social incomes, price trends on the rental market, and so on.

Flows and trajectories, instead of stocks and segmented policies: this is the shift that our analytical capacities and our proposals for public action must make.

With these three concepts of structured dialogue, integration and trajectories, Belgium can begin to build a new migratory pact specific to its reality. Belgium's tradition has always been to minimise the role of the state and maximise the role of social actors and civil society. Migration policies have so far resisted this Belgian tradition by remaining concentrated in the bosom of the Ministry of the Interior. Mobilising these three concepts would make it possible to bring the migration issue back into the fold by reducing the role of the State and increasing the skills and capacities of social players and federated entities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BELGIUM

Establish a National Migration Dialogue Platform: This platform should include representatives from federal and regional governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector. It should aim to foster cooperation and ensure that all voices are heard in the policymaking process.

Implement Regular Consultations: These consultations should occur at various levels, ensuring that local, regional, and national issues are addressed cohesively.

Develop a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: This framework should assess the effectiveness of the dialogue and make adjustments as necessary to improve outcomes.

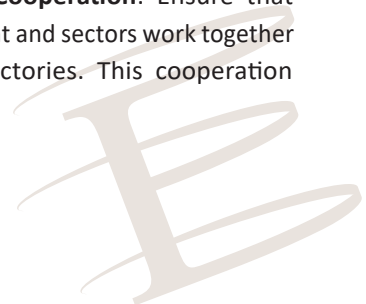
Invest in Integration Capacities: Belgium must invest significantly in the integration capacities of its federated entities. This includes ensuring that migrants have access to quality education, housing, and employment opportunities.

Develop Comprehensive Integration Strategies: Federated entities should be encouraged to develop strategies that address the unique needs of migrants and facilitate their successful integration into Belgian society.

Enhance Data Collection and Analysis: Develop systems to collect and analyze data on migratory flows. This will provide a clearer picture of migration patterns and help in designing targeted policies.

Support Mobility and Trajectories: Policies should support the mobility of migrants, ensuring that each stage of their journey is beneficial for both the individuals and the host communities. This involves facilitating access to education, training, and employment at each stage of their integration process.

Foster Inter-Institutional Cooperation: Ensure that different levels of government and sectors work together to support migrants' trajectories. This cooperation



is essential for creating a cohesive and supportive environment for migrants.

Align Federal and Regional Policies: Ensure that migration control and integration policies are aligned across federal and regional levels. This alignment will facilitate more effective and cohesive migration management.

Leverage Existing Policies: Identify and utilize existing policies that already cover migrant populations, even if they do not target them specifically. This includes compulsory education, healthcare, and housing policies.

Address Policy Gaps: Identify and address gaps in policies that target migrants but are not reaching the intended populations. This includes improving access to language learning, cultural integration programs, and support services.

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