

Country Report Belgium

by Zeynep Yanasmayan and Marie-Claire Foblets

The INTEC project:

*Integration and Naturalisation tests: the new way to
European Citizenship*

This report is part of a comparative study in nine Member States on the national policies concerning integration and naturalisation tests and their effects on integration.

Financed by the European Integration Fund

November 2010

Centre for Migration Law
Radboud University Nijmegen
Netherlands

Pros and Cons of Compulsory ‘Inburgering’: Mapping the Views of Newcomers in Flanders and in Brussels

I. Introduction*

The management of cultural diversity is a widely debated topic in Europe. Governments have attempted to address this issue in a variety of ways and with different policies. In recent years, mandatory integration courses and tests have come to the fore and enjoyed public visibility. They have also become highly interlinked with citizenship policy and have been transformed into requirements for the acquisition of nationality. While the use of these new instruments of integration has increased, little is known about their actual effects. Taking this lack in the literature as its starting point, the INTEC (Integration and Naturalisation Tests, the way to European Citizenship) project seeks to first provide an overview of the integration tests of nine European countries and then to compare their effects.

The case of Belgium is unique in that its absence of integration tests makes it an ‘outlier’ amongst the other countries under scrutiny. In order to understand this divergence, it is useful to provide elucidation about the federal system in Belgium. Belgium is composed of three regions (the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region), and three linguistic communities (the Flemish Community, the French-speaking Community and the German-speaking Community). Competences are intricately distributed between the different levels of governance. Within the current system, the federal government is in charge of legislating with respect to nationality.¹ On the other hand, the Communities are the sole responsible bodies for putting forward integration policies. This structure enables separation of the issues of nationality and integration and an option to be independent from each other. The Belgian Code of Nationality² in its present form does not require foreigners to provide proof of integration while naturalising. The Act of March 2000,³ by removing the condition of proof of ‘willingness to integrate’ and reducing the length of residence required to three years, has made Belgium a country with one of the most liberal legislations in Europe

* The authors are grateful to all their respondents for sharing their opinions. Special thanks to Ekaterina Dzhioeva for her invaluable assistance in conducting the interviews.

1 Art 8 and 9 of the Belgian Constitution.

2 28 Juin 1984, Loi relative à certains aspects de la condition des étrangers et instituant le Code de la Nationalité belge, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 10095.

3 1er Mars 2000, Loi modifiant certaines dispositions relatives à la nationalité belge, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 10829.

(De Hart & Van Oers 2006; Loobuyck & Jacobs 2006; Foblets 2006; Foblets & Loones 2006). Recent public debates have seen proposals to reverse this trend and re-introduce the integration condition and we briefly touch upon these recent developments in our concluding remarks.

With regard to the integration policy, the Flemish Region is the only governance level endowed with a mandatory measure. Newly arrived immigrants in Flanders are entitled to, and some are obliged, to follow an integration programme that comprises societal, vocational and linguistic courses. Nevertheless, the obligation is limited to attendance at these courses and there is no official examination to assess the end result. Moreover, as we have described above, attending or not attending the programme has no impact on the acquisition of nationality, or on any residence status for that matter. In brief, unlike other countries in the INTEC research, in Belgium the link between the nationality legislation and integration courses is entangled.

This situation led us to focus on the mandatory integration courses, endorsed as formal policy by the Flemish authorities since 2003, rather than the nationality legislation. The policy is officially entitled '*inburgering*' in Dutch and we refer to it with its original term for 'integration, does not entirely echo the meaning. *Inburgering* denotes the process of 'becoming a citizen', where one is familiarised with the functioning of a society.

The policy of *inburgering*, and hence the entirety of the integration programme, is also at the disposal of migrants who come to settle in Brussels. Even though the Flemish government cannot impose it outside the boundaries of Flanders, the offer is still available on a voluntary basis. We noted this differentiation in practice and reflected it in our research design by selecting two cases, namely Brussels and Antwerp.

The methodology of this report is identical to the other national reports within the framework of the INTEC research. It is based partly on the analysis of public debates and existing literature. However, empirical data gathered through face-to-face interviews constitutes the most important source of information. We conducted 34 interviews in total with stakeholders: four with pre-eminent NGOs⁴ that have throughout the years accumulated a deep knowledge of the field; five with social orientation course teachers, five with public officials who are in direct contact with migrants and twenty with migrants who have participated in or are currently participating in the courses.⁵

4 Coordination et Initiatives pour et avec les Réfugiés et Étrangers (CIRÉ), Foyer, La Voix des Femmes, Young Women's Christian Association –Women's Intercultural Centre (IVCA-YWCA).

5 In Brussels, we had three interviews with the social orientation course teachers, three with individual counsellors and eight with migrants who had participated in the classes. In Antwerp, we had two interviews with the social orientation course teachers, two with individual counsellors and twelve with migrants who had participated or were participating in the classes.

The INTEC coordinators designed the questionnaires for all four types of actors. However, due to Belgium's situation, with the coordinators' approval we revised the questionnaires to a certain extent, and particularly included questions about voluntary measures.

Migrants who wish to, or are obliged to, follow integration courses should apply to the reception centres for *inburgering* in their towns. Therefore, our main point of contact in order to reach our respondents were the reception centres in Brussels (hereafter referred to as Bon) and in Antwerp (hereafter referred to as Atlas). It should also be borne in mind that, except for two migrant respondents who were personal connections, all the interviews were arranged by them. Again, with the exception of these two interviews, they all took place in the reception centres. The interviews in Bon and Atlas took in total approximately one and a half months, starting at the end of April and ending at the beginning of June 2010. NGO interviews were also conducted during this period. The length of the interviews differed from informant to informant: between one and a half to two hours with NGO staff, between one to one and a half hours with individual counsellors, approximately two hours with social orientation teachers and approximately half an hour with migrants, with a few exceptions. This schedule required us to make at least three visits to the venues.

Generally speaking, our respondents were welcoming and happy to find a channel through which to make their voices heard. Even though we followed the guidelines provided in the questionnaires, we left space for personal opinions and experiences. In this sense the interviews could be said to have been semi-structured, particularly in the case of migrants. In our interviews with the migrants, we deliberately sought to ensure diversity in our sample. Therefore, it included people with different nationalities, coming from different educational backgrounds and having followed alternative paths in the integration trajectory. The latter means that whereas some of them only received the initial social orientation course and the first level language course, some others continued further studies and made use of the vocational training offered by the Flemish Employment Service (*De Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding* hereafter referred to as the VDAB) or the like. We obviously took into account the impact that this difference might play in participants' discourses. For instance, a migrant who had not completed the whole trajectory and who, thus, had not followed specialist courses in the VDAB would be more likely to evaluate the programme as less useful for finding a job. Therefore, their appraisals should be seen in this light. Other demographic details were catalogued as follows: 13 out of 20 migrants were female; they were between 26 and 49 years old with a majority in their mid-twenties and thirties. In terms of nationality distribution, we had a great variety: four Moroccans, three Turkish, one Vietnamese, two Tibetan, one Togolese, one South African, one Congolese, one Peruvian, one Jordanian, one Ukrainian, one Iraqi, one Polish, one Moldovan and one Ivorian.

In this report, by looking at two different cases, Bon and Atlas, we seek to examine two aspects of the *inburgering* policy. First, we attempt to shed light on the practices of implementation through the accounts of our respondents. The second objective is to portray the ‘perceived effects’ of the courses on the lives of migrants. An underlying investigation that we try to achieve by means of the comparative approach is to observe whether there is a difference between mandatory and voluntary measures. We remain reserved in our conclusions and prefer to employ the term ‘perceived effects’ as the outcomes of a qualitative research are very contingent on the choice of respondents. Not only did we not have control over this process, we also did not reach the migrants who did not attend the courses⁶. This is obviously pertinent for Brussels where participation is entirely voluntary, as well as for Flanders where some migrants simply pay the fine to avoid attending the classes. Due to this sampling strategy, as a rule, the qualitative research was not expected to produce generalizable results. Nonetheless, the data collected was more in-depth, intelligible and equally policy-relevant.

II. *Inburgering* Policy in Flanders: An Ambitious Political Project

The policy of *inburgering* was first set up by the Decree of 28 February 2003⁷ and amended twice, by the Decree of 14 July 2006⁸ and by the Decree of 1 February 2008.⁹ Whereas the former amendment was aimed at enlarging the target group of the policy, the latter was steered towards making it compatible with the changes regarding asylum applications that had been made to the Foreigners’ Law.^{10, 11}

The Decree defines *inburgering* as an interactive process that implies rights and duties both for the newcomers and for the Flemish government. The *inburgering* policy strives to create a society based on the values of

6 See recent research conducted by HIVA: <http://www.hiva.be/resources/pdf/publicaties/R1332.pdf>. Their sample also includes people who preferred not to attend the courses.

7 28 februari 2003, Decreet betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 24937.

8 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

9 1 februari 2008, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 28 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 108511.

10 15 Decembre 1980, Loi sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers, *Moniteur Belge*, p.63341.

11 Following the changes in the asylum application procedure the target group of the *inburgering* policy began to include asylum seekers who had submitted an application more than four months previously instead of asylum-seekers whose applications have been declared admissible.

shared citizenship and of active participation.¹² The concept of *inburgering* is innovative in that it accentuates the commonalities on basic grounds, such as knowledge of the Dutch language, while respecting diversity and different backgrounds. ‘The individuality and cultural identity of each citizen needs to be respected, within a set of prevailing norms and values that are to remain the cornerstones of the democratic society’ (Gsir *et al.* 2005: 10).

The implementation of *inburgering* calls for a policy of assistance to the newcomers during the first period of their stay. This is, thus, attained through the offer of citizenship trajectories (*inburgeringstrajecten*). The citizenship trajectories are composed of two complementary parts. The first route is the commonly known trajectory that is mandatory for certain groups of people. The second route is, on the contrary, not compulsory since it goes beyond the acquisition of basic knowledge of society and of the language and is, rather, a quest for improving professional skills. This second trajectory does not specifically target immigrants; it is available to everyone eligible for this route. It consists of one-to-one guidance in relation to the future professional itinerary of the newcomer and of specific training. This second route is only available upon completion of the first route and it seeks to help immigrants to fully participate in Belgian society, especially with regard to access to the labour market.¹³ The first part of the *inburgeringstrajecten* is, nevertheless, more in the foreground as it includes a wider range of people, due to its compulsory nature. It includes three different programmes: language courses (Dutch as a second language NT2), social orientation and vocational guidance. Moreover, an individual counselling system during the entire programme completes the scheme.¹⁴

The target group for the *inburgering* policy was initially designed through two criteria: 1) being recently registered in a Flemish or Brussels municipality for the first time; 2) reaching the age of majority.¹⁵ It was tailored only to newcomers who had arrived in Belgium for non-temporary purposes. With the 2006 amendments, the target group has widened significantly, particularly with the inclusion of the established immigrants of non-EU origin, including Belgian nationals born outside Belgium (known as ‘oudkomers’), within the scope of the Decree.¹⁶ Ultimately, the target group of the Decree of 2006 as a whole consists of adult foreigners staying in Bel-

12 Article 2§1 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

13 Article 4§2 of 28 februari 2003, Decreet betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 24937.

14 Article 8 and Article 13§1 of the 28 februari 2003, Decreet betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 24937.

15 Article 3§1 of 28 februari 2003, Decreet betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 24937.

16 Article 3§1 1 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

gium for non-temporary purposes and adult Belgian nationals who were born outside Belgium and who have at least one parent born outside Belgium. This obviously leads to a much more diversified list of persons, ranging from asylum-seekers who submitted their asylum applications more than four months previously, to Belgian nationals who are receiving social security assistance.

The target group is divided into three categories: compulsory participants, those who are granted priority and those who are not. Compulsory participants are foreigners who have been registered in Belgium for less than twelve months, religious ministers, asylum-seekers who submitted their asylum applications more than four months previously and 'oudkomers' who are dependent on social assistance (i.e. Centre public d'Assistance sociale CPAS or in Dutch het Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn OCMW¹⁷). This latter category depends on the organisation.¹⁸ The priority group is mainly composed of persons who will be included in the mandatory group eventually, such as resident immigrants with school-age children or immigrants who are renting or are on a waiting list to rent community housing in the Flemish Region. Priority is also given to family members of EU nationals (not Belgians) and minor migrants who have recently arrived.¹⁹

A number of immigrant categories are exempt from the obligation to follow an integration programme. Since the EU Directive (2004/38)²⁰ on free movement forbids any impediment being imposed on the residence of EU citizens and EEA nationals and their family members, they are exempt from this obligation. In addition, persons who suffer from a serious illness or a mental or physical disability, those over the age of 65 and those who can prove their integration through certain certificates or diplomas are also exempt.²¹ Lastly, labour migrants – with the exception of religious ministers – and their families who are assumed to have come for a limited period of time

17 Literally translated as Public Centre for Social Action, CPAS/OCMW is the institution that offers social assistance both financially and psychologically to the most disadvantaged groups in Belgium (i.e. persons who cannot receive an unemployment benefit). CPAS/OCMW operates in a decentralised way; each municipality has a CPAS/OCMW section where the demands are assessed case-by-case.

18 Article 12 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014, promulgates that the CPAS/OCMW sends out a list of compulsory migrants each month to the reception centres.

19 Article 3§ 4 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

20 The Directive 2004/38/EC on the right of citizens of the European Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the EU, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 158 of 30 April 2004.

21 Article 5 § 2 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

are categorised as exemptions. Two other groups are partly exempt and, therefore, do not have to follow the entire programme. Immigrants who have already fulfilled integration requirements in another EU Member State in order to obtain long-term resident status (in accordance with Article 5 of Directive 2003/109/EC²²) are only required to attend Dutch language classes.²³ Secondly, asylum-seekers who have submitted their application at least four months previously have to follow the civic orientation part of the trajectory.²⁴

In order to register for an integration programme, both newcomers and ‘oudkomers’ are expected to apply to the reception centre (onthaalbureau) of their province once they have registered in a Flemish municipality. In total, there are eight reception centres: one in each of the five provinces (Antwerp, Limburg, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant and West Flanders) and three in the major cities of Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels. There, newcomers sign a ‘contract of civic integration’ concerning their individual programme. After an initial assessment at the reception centres, migrants are directed to the responsible bodies for different aspects of the programme. Usually, the programme begins within three months of the newcomer’s application to the reception centre and overall the training should not last more than one year.²⁵

At the end of the courses, an attestation is granted to the migrants who have attended 80% of them. The obligation in Flanders limits itself to attendance; there is no official examination or test that assesses the skills learned on the trajectory. Even though the amended Decree offers the possibility of introducing such a test, the idea seems to have been put on hold after 2008. No emphasis has been put on it in recent documents. Instead a test that would exempt migrants who already possess the necessary knowledge is being designed by the University of Antwerp.²⁶ As for the sanctions, failure to comply can result in a fine of between 50 and 5000 euros.²⁷ A fine can also be imposed if the person refuses to cooperate with his or her integration programme or to sign an integration contract. Moreover, failure to complete the integration programme might give rise to the withdrawal of social benefits for people sent by the CPAS/OCMW.

22 The Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25 November 2003 concerning the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 16/44 of 23 January 2004.

23 Article 5 § 6 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

24 Article 5 § 7 of 1 februari 2008, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 28 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 108511.

25 Article 12 § 2 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

26 Information gathered from our interviews with the Flemish Ministry of Integration within the framework of a previous study: Foblets and Yanasmayan (2010).

27 Article 25 § 2 of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

III. *Inburgering in Practice*

An Inquiry into the Perceptions of the Stakeholders of Inburgering

Following the synopsis of the legal basis of the *inburgering* policy, in the following sections we explore the empirical realities concerning the practices and the perceived effects of the policy. These sections draw entirely on the analysis of the qualitative data. Conforming to the framework of the INTEC project, we acted in accordance with the guidelines of the questionnaires. This implied a certain order for the questions, particularly for the migrant interviews: we began with their main reasons for attending the courses, continued with their personal experiences of the courses also including the problems encountered and ended with their evaluations of the courses' utility. Therefore, our report to a certain extent follows the same structure but we also broach several other matters relating to the practices of *inburgering*. Our focus is, nonetheless, inclined towards the social orientation courses as they are, in our view, much more telling with regard to the understanding of 'integration' in the Flemish context since their purpose is to teach the very basics of Belgian/Flemish society to the newcomers. We complemented our presentation with the accounts of the policy executers where relevant.

The questionnaires give prominence to the knowledge of language and of the majority society and seek to see to what extent migrants judge this information to be important for their lives. Besides replying positively to the few direct questions on these topics, a large number of migrants themselves raised the importance of speaking Dutch. Below we describe the various expressions of this in a more detailed way for each of our cases. We were generally keen to leave enough room for individual articulations and refrained from suggesting answers. A second dimension that came up naturally were the positive repercussions of the courses for the newcomers not only in terms of the acquisition of knowledge but also as a social space. The courses ensured their gradual familiarisation with the social and cultural environment and as a process entrenched the feeling that they are not alone.

Analytically, we kept Brussels and Antwerp as separate cases even though they did not display strikingly different pictures. This was intended for facilitating our later discussion on the obligation. We devoted distinct sub-sections to making the differentiation clear unless the issue at hand was irrelevant for a case or no worthwhile difference was noticed in the courses.

Motivations: Readiness to Speak Dutch

Brussels

Since participation on the courses is voluntary in Brussels, we were more persistent in discovering the factors that influenced migrants' decision to attend them. Following our questionnaire, we paid particular attention to the significance of the acquisition of linguistic skills and knowledge of the majority society.

To start with the language, it would be safe to claim that there was a prevailing awareness that knowledge of the language was pivotal for genuine settlement in the country of residence. Several reasons were given to explain why speaking the language mattered. Two of them stand out as being of crucial importance to almost everyone. First of all, the newcomers were eager to learn Dutch with a view to becoming active in the labour market. Speaking Dutch in Brussels, which is a bilingual region, has become a valuable asset, even a necessity for employment, in recent years. However this should not be seen as a pragmatic involvement since this attitude also conveys an affirmation of their future life in Belgium. This links us to the second reason that was stated unequivocally: the ability to communicate with others. They recognised Belgium as a Dutch-speaking country and displayed a lively interest in understanding its inhabitants and in being understood. Not everyone explicitly mentioned integration as a goal in itself, however similar concerns were raised. For instance, one participant referred to a climate of exchange that was generated by speaking the language and regarded it as *'a way of showing respect to the country that welcomed him'*. Some also evaluated it to be personally rewarding and asserted that speaking the language increased their self-confidence or made them feel comfortable in the society.

Respondents also alluded to personal feelings when questioned about the importance of acquiring knowledge of the majority society. Independence was a theme that recurred in several interviews. They put forward the empowering role of knowing 'how to do things' in a society as a stimulus for attending the courses. They thus thought from the beginning that this knowledge would assist them to stand on their own feet or, as lucidly formulated by a respondent, would give them the assets to be their own guide in life. This desire for independence and self-sufficiency usually went hand in hand with an acknowledgement of long-term settlement in Belgium. Although we discuss the content of the courses in the next section, it is worth mentioning here that familiarisation with the laws of Belgium was an influential factor in their judgement. They were interested in discovering the boundaries of the public sphere and the rules to which they were subject. Equally important was learning about their rights.

Looking at the Decree that establishes the legal basis for the *inburgering* policy²⁸ allows us to see that the migrants' intentions are well in line with the legislator's expectations. The Decree in its amended form in 2006 emphasises promoting the autonomy of the newcomers. A shift in discourse from making migrants familiar with their new environment to promoting their autonomy is noticeable in the amendments made in 2006.²⁹ The new emphasis is reinforced by the new teaching method that has replaced the lecture system with a seminar-like system where participants are encouraged to seek information themselves and participate with their own presentations. Our expert interviews also support this perspective on the part of the public officials.³⁰

Antwerp

In Antwerp, our emphasis was less on their private motivations since the assumption was that they had to follow the courses regardless of their interest. To our surprise, half of our respondents did not mention the obligation amongst their reasons for participating in the integration programme. Instead they focused on the necessity of speaking Dutch in daily life in Antwerp and expressed their willingness to learn it. A French-speaking respondent compared the lack of Dutch knowledge to being blindfolded. This elegant metaphor manifests the weight of learning Dutch in the unilingual region of Flanders. Amongst the other half who mentioned 'being obliged' as a reason for attending the classes, many were happy to have done it and valued highly the information they received. There were, nevertheless, a few people who appeared dissatisfied with the courses and mentioned that they would not have gone to the classes had they not been obliged to do so. We expand on this discontentment in the part where we discuss the perceived effects of the courses in Antwerp.

28 Decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

29 Please compare Article 2§1 of 28 februari 2003, Decreet betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 24937, with that of 14 juli 2006, Decreet tot wijziging van het decreet van 8 februari 2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, *Moniteur Belge*, p. 5999014.

30 Data obtained through interviews with teachers and personal counsellors in the reception centres.

Participation rate³¹*Brussels*

In a number of cases, the motive behind applying to Bon's services has been an interest in learning Dutch. Migrants come to Bon because they hear about its reputation and also the funding it provides for language courses through their social circles. Social orientation courses have, thus, been a bonus that has assisted them much more than they expected. At this initial stage, a limitation with regard to implementation which relates to the channels of information can be identified. Bon has to rely on informal channels, such as social networks or personal campaigning by ex-participants during their official campaign period. Word of mouth is reportedly the most effective way of 'recruiting' participants. Bon's annual report for 2009³² indicates that 40% of the participants hear about the courses from friends and family and approximately 20% are referred from the Houses of Dutch (Huizen van het Nederlands).³³ Lastly, specific campaigns account for 15% of the intake (Annual report 2009: 10). The problem with informal channels despite their efficacy and persuasiveness is the absence of control over the content that is being transmitted. Nevertheless, because of its unique situation Brussels is unlikely to distribute information through more institutionalised channels, the exception being the Molenbeek municipality, which hands out Bon's brochure to newly registered persons. This notwithstanding, the system is well-established and has enjoyed increased numbers of participants, particularly after 2007 when the government decided to expand its staff. The number of signed contracts has augmented from 622 in 2006 to 1297 in 2007, 1540 in 2008 and 1608 in 2009.³⁴

31 For an analysis of the participation rates in all the reception centres, see a recent research conducted by HIVA about the efficiency & effectiveness of the *inburgering* policy <http://www.hiva.be/resources/pdf/publicaties/R1331.pdf>.

32 Downloadable from http://www.bonvzw.be/files/Docs/Nieuws/bon_annual%20report%202009.pdf (retrieved 25 June 2010).

33 The Houses of Dutch are in charge of evaluating the level of Dutch knowledge of the participants and then assigning them to the education centres. Various institutions offer language classes, such as centres for basic education, for adult education and the university language centres.

34 Data accumulated through Bon's annual reports for the given years. Reports downloadable from <http://www.bonvzw.be/en/b074763f-8523-4224-b1f0-eaf9ce78df6d>.

Antwerp

In Antwerp, the recruitment process is more straightforward by virtue of its compulsory nature.³⁵ In the last years' figures there has been no major fluctuation in the intake: 7647 in 2006, 7280 in 2007, 6044 in 2008 and 7569 in 2009.³⁶ Among those who presented themselves in 2009, 4407 signed a contract and 2584 attestations were granted.³⁷ This reveals that the completion rate of the trajectory has increased in recent years as an evaluation study conducted in 2007 indicated that 41.7 % of those who sign a contract successfully complete it (Lambert *et al.* 2007: 21). There has also been an increase in the number of contracts signed over the years: 2285 in 2006, 3798 in 2007 and 4201 in 2009.³⁸

The full trajectory of integration is composed of three different areas of training (language, social orientation and vocational) as well as personal guidance throughout the whole process. The training is designed in a linear fashion: migrants start with the six-week social orientation courses and then continue with the language and vocational training respectively. Even though our focus is the social orientation courses, we touch briefly on the others as well.

Social orientation courses

Social orientation courses are conducted in a number of languages and migrants can choose to attend the course available in the language in which s/he can communicate comfortably. The list is impressive: French, Dutch, Arabic, English, Russian, Spanish, Persian, Turkish, Polish, Tibetan, etc. The groups are also divided by level of education if there is sufficient number of participants. Accordingly, three different groups can be formed: persons who are illiterate or have completed few years of schooling, persons who are university graduates and, finally, a mixed group in between. Occasionally, the results of the covert test employed by the Houses of Dutch as a means of assessing applicants' aptitude for learning are taken into account in this classification. Offering courses adapted to migrants' education level is an essential aspect for improvement of the efficacy of the policy. We have elsewhere³⁹ drawn attention to the need for a tailored approach that would allow the highly educated to be exposed to a more sophisticated programme and the less well educated to follow courses for a longer period of time. The teachers we interviewed confirmed the validity of this suggestion. They reported that they applied different teaching methods according to the education level of

35 Also because the municipalities have a structural mission on informing all newcomers, and because the Flemish reception offices receive data (cevi-lists) through the administration in order to contact newcomers directly with a letter.

36 Data from the Atlas annual report of 2009 given by an Atlas official.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 See Foblets and Yanasmayan (2010).

the participants. They gave the highly educated groups more autonomy by asking them to research a theme and present it in the class. In situations where the small number of participants did not permit separate classes, teachers tried to bridge the gap by assigning different homework. The highly educated category could also benefit from customised timing for classes – i.e. 60 or 40 hours of evening classes and Saturday classes. These practices all accentuate the significance of an interactive approach that aims to enhance the satisfaction of participants.

The content of the courses is determined based on a report of a commission of experts that has been created by the Flemish government.⁴⁰ The Commission was charged with suggesting a list of values and principles deemed to be the constituent pillars of Belgian/Flemish society (Foblets and Yanasmayan 2010: 289). The government then published a course book and related materials. It also prepared a teachers' guide in order to ensure that similar issues were addressed in the courses.⁴¹ This new teaching method, 'climo', (cooperative learning in a multicultural environment) consists of asking the students the subjects they are interested in from the start and engaging them to participate. In Brussels, a week before the classes begin a meeting is organised by each teacher in order to collate the expectations of the students. In Antwerp, this is usually done during the first course where the students are provided with a suggested list of subjects. A number of themes recur in every session, namely legal residence issues, rights of foreigners, social housing and work-related questions. Additionally, some subjects are covered regardless of the demand for them, such as basic information about Belgium's history, geography and political system. The teachers are of the opinion that the new method, by increasing the flexibility of the thought material, has improved responsiveness towards the needs of the migrants.⁴²

Brussels

When we juxtapose this with the concerns highlighted by the participants, an analogous picture emerges. The content of the courses is deemed to be very useful at different stages in their lives but particularly in the beginning. The

40 It is important to mention that even before the process with the commission and climo, a common book was prepared by the reception centres who recognise the necessity of working together with professional material.

41 As pointed out by a teacher, some themes within the teachers' guide are not appropriate for Brussels as they apply uniquely in Flanders.

42 This is all the more important for Brussels where participation on the courses is voluntary. In addition to the classes both Bon and Atlas organise excursions to different places depending on the wishes of the participants. However, the greater number of such excursions is presented as a strategy on the part of Bon to attract a larger group of migrants.

courses provide them with a starting point by not only teaching a little bit about everything in Belgium but also by showing them ways to improve their knowledge. Evidently, they all valorise this knowledge according to their personal experience in life. Therefore, while some stress the importance of learning about rights vis-à-vis the landlords or the social security system that they were not aware of, others are simply happy to have acquired the tools to keep abreast of current events. Themes that pertain to subsistence such as housing, employment opportunities and health system have spontaneously featured in each interview. Transport also stands out as a helpful topic, particularly for migrants from African countries. A majority of the respondents also mentioned being pleased to learn about Belgian culture, Belgian history and its federal system. It can easily be claimed that they are satisfied with the curriculum as a whole. Only when asked specifically did a handful of people utter their wish to hear more about certain topics, such as asylum and regularisation procedures. An exception to this promising picture was a respondent who judged the content of the courses as insufficient for her professional ambitions. It is worth expanding on her personal situation as it bears a general message. She came to Belgium six years ago as an asylum-seeker. After spending almost three years without a legal residence she received regular status, which allowed her to attend the courses in Bon. She was about to complete her 2.1. level Dutch course when we interviewed her but she was experiencing a lot of difficulty attending them since she had also had a baby in the meantime. Her family was dependent on a modest monthly CPAS/OCMW salary. The situation, which made it imperative for her to find a job immediately, discouraged her from following the VDAB courses. She wanted to specialise in care for the elderly but the training for it was too long, given her situation. Even though she appreciated what she had learned, especially about the different employment agencies she thought that the information would only be practical when she found a job. This example clearly illustrates that migrants with precarious economic (and legal) situations tend to attach only an instrumental value to the courses. This leads them to overestimate the outcomes of the courses and to a certain extent be disappointed. With a view to overcome such problems perhaps a more perspicuous communication strategy can be developed. It should be made clear to all stakeholders that the courses are meant to be a first step. The concrete outcomes are highly contingent on the situation within the labour market, as well as the social policies with regard to housing, discrimination and education. This would alleviate the burden on the shoulders of the *inburgering* policy by decreasing the expectation that it would offer a blanket solution to all the problems relating to integration.

Antwerp

It is difficult to offer a holistic picture of the situation in Antwerp as we encountered differing views. For instance, this singular case in Brussels was shared by a few more respondents, who expressed that the courses were of a general nature and that they were not helpful in terms of receiving concrete outcomes, such as finding employment. On the other hand, a large number of respondents were highly interested in the topics discussed in the classes. The coverage was deemed to be sufficient for different purposes. Most respondents emphasised the knowledge they had acquired about practical issues like filling in tax forms or insurance policies. Themes touching upon basic life realities were highly cited, such as transportation, the health system, public offices, etc. Again, many expressed appreciation of the documents⁴³ they had received during the courses and how useful they had been in daily life. Whereas some would have preferred the courses to be more detailed, others were of the opinion that the programme could have been completed within a shorter period. One respondent drew attention to the importance of the teaching skills of the teachers in rendering the course much more entertaining than set out in the book. Another respondent articulated his wish to have more excursions with a view to ensuring 'on-the-site' learning. Some also disapproved of the new method claiming that it was not easy for everyone to look things up on the Internet. A common complaint related to the speed of the procedure. A number of respondents reported having to wait approximately six months after their arrival before being placed on a course, a period during which they lost valuable time and motivation. In comparison to Brussels, it can be said that our respondents in Antwerp remained more critical of the integration programme. We examine below if this had any impact on the perceived effects of the courses.

Dutch as a Second Language and Vocational Guidance

Dutch language courses are administered through the Houses of Dutch, which assign migrants to education centres dispersed around the city. Within the framework of the integration programme, they have to complete at least one module whose duration can vary between 120 to 240 hours, depending on the education level of the applicant. In Brussels, there seems to be a shortage of schools offering 240-hour courses, which are high in demand because of the large amount of people at that particular education level. This complicates the placement of migrants onto these courses and might in future cause

43 During the social orientation courses, a pack of documents including important addresses and phone numbers is distributed to the participants.

delays, given the popularity of the courses. In Antwerp, delays for an adequate placement are already a major problem.

At the end of the language module the programme continues with a vocational course. In the mandatory form of the trajectory in Flanders this is given by the VDAB. The course, called 'Kiezen', -which means to choose in Dutch- teaches the participants about their options in the labour market and, accordingly, which training to follow. The attestation of integration is granted at the end of this course. Afterwards interested participants continue to the second trajectory and attend different occupational training courses that usually last between three months to one year. If the migrant already has a profession that s/he can perform in Belgium s/he can also follow customised language courses, like administrative Dutch, at the VDAB. In Brussels, there is a possibility to choose from different actors offering similar or more specialised services. A meeting is organised with the migrant, his/her individual counsellor, the VDAB and Actiris – the Brussels regional public employment service – at the end of the language module. If the migrant has had no previous knowledge of the Dutch language, his/her level is limited to the first module of 1.1. Yet the minimum level for starting the VDAB courses is 1.2. This situation creates irregularity from the point of view of consecutiveness of the trajectory. The reception centres do not finance further language modules but there are other possibilities for funding at the disposal of underprivileged persons.⁴⁴

Challenges faced by the participants

Brussels

Clearly, the integration programme requires a considerable amount of self-involvement from the migrants and is a difficult road particularly for those with little education. Drop-outs are mainly from this group for whom the trajectory lasts significantly longer. Since we had only one respondent who dropped out, it would not be correct to speculate in general terms. However his case still highlights the importance of a tailored approach. He was placed in a class that did not have a level distinction, which led him to quit after a few weeks. When he was called for a new opening he had already started working and thus could no longer attend the courses. Another example that hints at a need for a more flexible and tailored approach is the situation of the respondent who had difficulty attending the classes because of her baby. Notwithstanding this, our respondents were all determined to improve their Dutch knowledge mostly with the motivation detailed in the section above.

44 The VDAB for instance finances the language courses for the migrants who have the intention of undertaking the training it offers.

Despite the hardship they faced in learning it, they perceived it as an indispensable item. In order not to lag behind the majority society, they agreed it is a fair price to pay. They were very proud when they see that they speak better Dutch than some people who have been in Belgium for several years.

Another hurdle that they face solely in Brussels with regard to language acquisition is that they rarely practice Dutch in their daily life. This is due to the fact that a majority of the population of Brussels is French-speaking despite its official bilingual status. Having noticed the discouraging role the situation plays, Bon seeks to create alternative solutions, like conversation tables.

Antwerp

In Antwerp, the main challenge faced is the delay in the assignment to the appropriate classes. For instance, one respondent, after waiting months to be placed on a language course, had to drop out and wait for the next semester, as the course was not at beginners' level. The problem of waiting seems to be the case more for the language training than for social orientation. A large number of migrants reported difficulty learning Dutch. They particularly had a problem with pronunciation and conversation. Except for one respondent they were satisfied with the quality of the language courses. Another respondent was not pleased with the method of teaching in the language class. She found it frustrating that the teacher expected students to speak Dutch from the very first course. According to her, this exerted too much pressure on the students and did not leave space for them to figure out their learning skills. It must be also mentioned that this respondent had a personal issue with the language teacher, which might have contributed to her negative image.

The teachers and individual counsellors' impressions more or less coincided with the migrants. They indicated that the difficulties encountered were related to the education level, irrespective of cultural and sexual identity. A more alarming account given by the teachers pertained to their inability to reach certain groups of people who could benefit greatly from the courses. We elaborate on this while discussing the obligation.

Personal Guidance

The courses and training in the integration programme are complemented by a system of personal guidance (*begeleiding*) throughout the trajectory. This service is formally envisaged to last for a year but can take up to two to three years for illiterate people whose trajectory progress is slower. During this period, an individual counsellor is allocated to each participant. The individ-

ual counsellors' tasks are various: they ensure that the participant in question is appropriately placed on a course, they assist him/her in his/her endeavours to find suitable training, they organise meetings with different actors. In addition to these supervisory duties vis-à-vis the integration programme, they also provide personal 'coaching' to the migrants. Migrants are encouraged to ask their individual counsellors for help with any sort of problems they encounter. A good case in point is a respondent who mentioned calling her individual counsellor with a view to getting help for her emotional troubles and was referred to a psychologist.

Brussels

In our interviews with the individual counsellors in Brussels, we observed their diligent relationships with the participants. Migrants feel free to utilise their help for a number of issues. Individual counsellors function as a bridge that provides the contact with specialised agencies in problematic areas. For instance, a majority of the concerns focus on a professional career. Migrants are eager to know how to find work and where to look for it. They are then directed towards more specialised services for job hunting. It is the same for legal aid vis-à-vis their residence situations. Nevertheless, they personally deal with the issue of the recognition of diplomas. They also take it upon themselves to deal with daily problems that may arise with regard to housing, social security or schooling for those with children. It is part and parcel of their job to make phone calls to the institutions in charge or even to go in person if necessary. Housing in the Brussels region is particularly identified as troublesome, not least due to the exploitative behaviour of landlords.

Antwerp

In Antwerp, the tasks of individual counsellors are comparable to the ones in Brussels with one major difference. In Antwerp, they are also in charge of registering migrants, preparing their contracts and matching them with appropriate courses, whereas in Brussels a separate intake team is responsible for these administrative tasks. Our understanding is that this leaves relatively less time for individual counselling particularly given the larger number of migrants in Antwerp, due to the programme's mandatory nature. Whereas an individual counsellor deals with approximately 110-120 migrants in Antwerp, this number is about 80 in Brussels.

Financial Aspect of the Integration Programme

As opposed to some other European countries within the framework of the INTEC project, in Belgium the courses are free of charge. Even though the Decree offers the possibility to alter this practice in the future, to our knowledge it has not been executed so far. With a view to predicting what would change if the courses were to be charged, we asked our respondents whether they would be willing to pay. Considering that they were all unemployed when they began the courses, they expressed that they would have been rather reluctant. Therefore, charging fees for the courses may put, especially Bon, in a delicate situation by reducing the participation by migrants. Notwithstanding this, the intention of the policy-makers has never been to ask for a fee from underprivileged persons; if it is ever introduced it will be based on the income of the participants. The opinions of public officials are divergent on the topic, however they are all keen to preserve the good intentions of the courses. Some defend the current implementation believing that the offer of free and well-organised courses carries a welcoming message. A teacher in favour of free courses suggested that it would not be fair to ask the participants to pay insofar as there was no guarantee of finding a job after completing the classes. On the other hand, the argument in favour of introducing fees mainly attached to it a symbolic value as a means of handing over some responsibility to the migrants.

Possibility of a Test?

Since the principal objective of the INTEC project is to assess the effects of the citizenship tests in nine European countries, we also kept the matter in our questionnaire and asked our respondents how they would have reacted if there were a test. As we have explained in our introduction, integration policy and nationality legislation are competences that lie in different layers of governance in Belgium.⁴⁵ Therefore, even if the attestation of *inburgering* were to be granted as a result of a test rather than of attendance, it would not have any impact on nationality acquisition. This evidently leaves intact the possibility for the Flemish government to introduce a test. The idea of having a test as an end result was previously on the agenda; however it seems to have been put aside for the moment. Instead the efforts are focused on preparing a test that would give to the authorities the means to see whether or not a particular person does truly need the social orientation courses. Different actors we interviewed hold different views vis-à-vis the practice of a test. We try to sketch these below.

45 For further information on this discordance see Foblets and Yanasmayan (2010).

Several migrants interviewed in Brussels and Antwerp were sceptical about the possible benefit a test would bring to the system. The information received was perceived to be practical rather than theoretical and thus needed to be internalised and 'performed' in daily life. Therefore, one could easily repeat the topics of study in a test but never use this knowledge later. The capacity that migrants should be endowed with in the end is rather to put into practice what they have learned. Some were categorically opposed to the practice of a test, judging it to be offensive for grown-ups. They mentioned having to deal already with a variety of problems in life and they were of the opinion that a test would only be an additional source of stress. On the other hand, there were few respondents, particularly in Brussels, who argued that a test would help them consolidate their knowledge. One respondent said she would have preferred having a test not for them to evaluate her but for her to assess the quality of the courses. Those who were in favour of the introduction of a test suggested having a differentiated system, which would not penalise illiterates and older people. Whereas the young and educated people could be expected to pass a test, the older and/or less educated should not be forced to take it. The respondents in Antwerp were more committed to the idea of a test that would enable migrants to be exempted from the courses. In particular, respondents who had been living in Belgium for several years and who had to attend the courses later on in their stay preferred to have an examination as they were of the opinion that they already possessed the necessary knowledge. This remark also contains a hidden criticism with respect to the obligation to attend the courses in Flanders. Another alternative that was proposed was to link success in the test to more 'substantial' outcomes, such as the acquisition of nationality. However, as we have mentioned previously, in the current political climate in Belgium this is not likely for the time being.

The views of public officials were more or less separated along the same lines. Following the logic introduced above, a teacher argued that the *inburgering* test should be extended to each part of the country and should be used as the basis for an eventual citizenship test. In contrast with all the other public officials we interviewed she subscribed to a more control-oriented mentality with regard to migration. She contended that migrants should 'deserve' to stay in the country of residence and the test would provide the only way to have 'good' foreigners. This approach differed sharply from the other respondents who considered the test to be coercive. They were worried that compelling migrants to take a test could endanger the bonds they had developed over time. Hence, presence in the class and collaboration with classmates were deemed to be more essential. They stressed that it would be unfair to expect the migrants to acquire a profound knowledge after a six-week course amidst all the other worries they had vis-à-vis their lives. They also emphasised the incompatibility of a uniform test with the individualised approach that they maintained during the courses. Accordingly, the expecta-

tions a teacher developed vis-à-vis one migrant differed widely from another one and thus could not be tested in the same manner.

Reception Centres as Social Spaces

The last aspect that we explore is the impression that the participants maintain regarding their time in the reception centres. Since observing individual perceptions is an unfamiliar approach in policy studies, this particular aspect of implementation often goes unnoticed. However, after having gathered the testimonies of migrants we are convinced that personal relationships between migrants and public officials constitute an important part of the implementation. Particularly in the case of the *inburgering* policy, the contact with the individual counsellors and teachers constitutes in most instances the migrants' first long-term interaction with the majority society.

Our respondents in both Brussels and Antwerp held a very high opinion of this first encounter. They all reported that they had been treated in a very friendly and kind manner. However this seemed to have been taken to another level in Brussels.⁴⁶ The positive relationships they maintain have nourished their feeling of belonging: many mention that they feel at home in Bon. The allegiance to Bon remains very strong for migrants who attended the courses years before. Nearly all our respondents were working for Bon voluntarily either by helping with translations or by attending their campaign day/week.

Both Bon and Atlas indeed truly reflect the dual meaning of the French word *accueil*: they not only receive migrants they also welcome them. This feeling also seems to be reinforced, thanks to the representation of diversity within structure. Especially for newcomers who do not speak any of the national languages of Belgium, it is the only place where they can socialise and communicate with others.

The teachers' accounts confirm this positive influence the reception centres have on the migrants. An additional interaction they point to is between traditionally conflicting groups within the same social orientation course, such as Russians and Chechens both following classes taught in Russian. Therefore, migrants not only learn how to engage with Belgian society but also with a multicultural society.

⁴⁶ We prefer not to link this merely to the voluntary nature of the courses as it might simply be due to the lower number of people involved, which makes the atmosphere cosier.

IV. What Are the Effects? A Critical Appraisal by the Target Group

The aim of the *inburgering* policy, as stated by the Decree, is to achieve a cohesive society based on the values of shared citizenship and active participation. The integration programme thus appears as a means to this end, which would, on the one hand, promote foreigners' autonomy and on the other contribute to their recognition as fully-fledged members by the majority society.⁴⁷

Brussels

Returning to the point mentioned in the motivations section, we can claim that the message of autonomy was clearly conveyed to the participants. They almost unanimously gave accounts of their newly acquired capacity to act on their own due to the information they had received. One respondent referred to the courses as an eye-opener that enlightened her about her life choices. Moreover, they reported that they had a better understanding of Belgian society and their own rights after the classes. They also showed interest in the current political crisis in Belgium and stated that they would have been unable to comprehend the political sensitivities had not they known about Belgium's history.

Since *inburgering* as a term implies 'feeling acquainted or feeling at home', we also inquired about substantive dimensions of citizenship, such as belonging. We addressed two specific questions to the participants and came across a variety of answers. The first was whether they felt a member of the society, which is one of the purported aims of the *inburgering* policy. All our respondents in Brussels demonstrated a certain sense of affiliation. Even though the list cannot be considered exhaustive, we have attempted to display the different elements that appeared to foster feelings of membership. One element touches upon the idea of engaging with the community. Participating in cultural events, volunteering in Bon or other civil society organisations and thus being in touch with different strata of the society seemed to generate feelings of belonging. At times, this idea is entangled with the previously described phenomenon of autonomy. Hence, some of the responses were along the lines of 'Yes, I feel very good as I can stand on my own feet' or 'I feel I have to say something if it is not the way it should be'. One respondent regarded participation on the courses as a contribution to Belgian society and expressed being proud of having contributed. On the other hand, two out of nine respondents in Brussels explicitly mentioned their discontent with the racism within society. One Moroccan respondent, pointing to the problem of stereotyping, felt the burden of being constantly perceived as someone in-

47 Cf. Supra note 10.

volved in terrorist or criminal activities. The other remark related to another widely known stereotype about migrants 'stealing the jobs' of the majority society. They both identified these personally experienced behaviours as racist and an impediment to their successful integration.

This last comment makes the connection with the second question we addressed to our respondents, namely whether the courses made them feel more integrated into the majority society. A common point that emerged from all the interviews conducted is the necessity to consider the courses as the first step of a long journey. If the policy-makers wish to obtain a more accurate and realistic picture of the effects of these courses, this should be borne in mind. Otherwise, the policy is deemed to fail, due to unfeasible expectations that it cannot deliver. The courses do provide the basics for daily life in Belgium and offer the migrants the tools to successfully cope with it. They also give them a very elementary level of Dutch that can be improved upon by willingness on the part of the migrants. And, lastly, the VDAB courses or their alternatives in Brussels give them valuable hints about their options in the Belgian labour market. Nonetheless, all these need to be supported by surrounding structures that are of vital importance for the lives of the newcomers and that altogether compose the public sphere, such as housing, the health system, employment, education and the like. These structures are precisely the spaces where the interaction that would lead to integration takes place. The courses can thus smooth access to them but cannot guarantee them. On the other hand, improved levels of integration are also contingent on the migrants' own agency in pursuing further what they have learned in the courses. Therefore, the purpose of the courses should be clearly codified as encouraging migrants to make this further step rather than assuming the journey towards integration will be accomplished at the end.

The concept of the courses as a first step was widely accepted by the migrants. One respondent's allegory perfectly exemplifies this:

'I see Bon as customs; you have to change your jacket at the entry in order to melt into the society. Some people do not go further than the courses, it is up to each and every one of us to enrich what we have gained.'

Some hinted at the need to access other wider structures referred to above but mainly the labour market. They indicated that they would feel more integrated once they were employed, as this would give them the opportunity to interact with different levels of society. Even though the courses had not had a direct impact on their employment status, they had been introduced to different agencies, which had facilitated the process for job hunting. Volunteering in civil society organisations was perceived as an alternative way of reaching and of being active in these structures and thus increasing integration.

A rather unanticipated outcome is how much these courses have been influential in their self-development as social beings. A number of them have acquired or enhanced their hobbies through their encounters in Bon and some of them have actually turned them into their professions. They have been put in contact with other voluntary groups and encouraged to pursue social activities. The activities in which they are now involved are as diverse as poetry, film-making, music and voluntary translation. This reveals that alongside the concrete material information they have received in these courses, equally important are the deeper and positive psychological consequences.

Antwerp

An observation at first glance is the number of people who report being dissatisfied with the courses. Although our methodology, which is qualitative in nature, does not allow us to establish causal relationships in order to explain this difference with Brussels, our belief is that it cannot be solely attributed to sampling strategies. Even a simplistic account of human psychology would reveal that one tends to like something more when the activity is chosen out of free will. Hence it was not surprising to hear statements like *'I would not have gone if I wasn't obliged'* in Antwerp.

Notwithstanding this, they uniformly stated that their understanding of Belgian society increased after the courses. Learning about the laws and their rights had endowed them with the capacity to become more intensively involved in the society. One respondent declared that it was the way she perceived Belgians that had changed. Now that she could speak Dutch she felt that she had increased levels of friendly exchanges. She thus concluded that the problem had stemmed from her previous lack of linguistic skills rather than a cultural clash. This is precisely the kind of thinking the *inburgering* policy aims to achieve. An interesting discourse we encountered only in Antwerp was the concern they had with regard to their classmates, particularly the migrants who had been living in Belgium for several years. Some referred to them as an obstacle during the courses. Since they were not interested and eager to learn, they ended up compromising the positive effects for everyone. A parallel discourse was about the importance of the courses for this specific group who were perceived to *'stay in their neighbourhood and have no contact with Belgians'*. In order to see the extent the discourse reaches it is useful to directly quote an example:

'Actually these courses have nothing to do with Belgium, it is rather aimed to mobilise the uneducated. There is nothing substantial, I only learn things that I cannot learn from my fiancée. I feel as much part of Belgian society as I used to feel before. I see it more as an eye-opener for the uneducated'.

BELGIUM

This creates a very paradoxical situation in the sense that it is either 'motivated newcomers' or 'uneducated' established immigrants who belong to the courses but not both at the same time. This reveals that merging these two groups with different problems was perhaps not initially thought through. We return to this point below.

Faced with the question of whether they felt a member of the society after the course, an overwhelming majority of our respondents replied positively. They affirmed feeling more at ease in the society after becoming acquainted with Belgians. One respondent who had grown up in the Netherlands – who thus spoke the language prior to the classes – mentioned that he had been more reserved before and that the courses had helped him to open up. Another respondent stated that the courses helped him to better understand not only Belgian society but also a variety of people coming from different cultural backgrounds. For some, the positive affiliation was conditional on external factors, such as receiving a legal status or obtaining a job. Some respondents' articulation of belonging took their own established communities in Belgium as a reference point, and not necessarily in a positive way. A Turkish migrant reported feeling closer to Belgian society than to the Turkish community members who had been there for several years. A similar account was given by a Moroccan migrant. This might also have been due to the fact that the persons from these established communities who attended the courses were the ones who had been in a way 'penalised' because of their failure to find employment. Yet for some others, their national culture's habitual traits remained very strong and seemed to constitute a reason for alienation from Belgian society, at least initially. One respondent, for instance, categorically refused to be identified as Belgian:

'I cannot be a member of Belgium as I will always remain Turkish/ a part of Turkey. I am a Turkish who spends a period of her life in Belgium. I am not, I cannot be.'

Comparatively speaking, we received more affirmative answers to our question about integration in Antwerp than in Brussels. Almost all of our respondents confirmed having improved levels of integration. While one referred to the better language skills acquired, the other referred to the capacity to act on his own without having to ask for help for every single thing in his life. A similar account was given by a respondent who said that she no longer felt like a foreigner as she had been equipped with the necessary information. Another respondent was simply happy to see all the efforts aimed at her better integration and reported feeling more integrated out of gratitude. A few respondents also reported that they felt less discriminated against after having completed the courses. This is an important statement in the sense that migrants begin to understand why Belgians 'do things the way they do it' rather than simply labelling these attitudes as racist. However, one respondent complained that the societal rules were too strict and that there was no room

for negotiation. He considered this to be an assimilationist inclination, which prevented him from making efforts towards integration. This proves that it is not easy to break essentialist approaches to culture; therefore time and the support of social policies are much needed.

Before talking about the policy implications of our research we would like to draw attention to a recent report published by HIVA that specifically focused on the impact of following *inburgering* trajectory in Flanders (Pauwels and Lamberts 2010). Different from our research, this study made use of a methodology akin to a semi-experimental design. The data is gathered from interviews with respondents who shared a similar profile on sex, age, country of birth and educational level but who differed in their position vis-à-vis the courses. The respondents included persons who started and completed the courses, persons who started the courses but did not complete them and finally persons who chose not to attend the courses at all.

The main rationale behind citing this study is to see to what extent the accounts of the migrants are compatible with our findings. The report indeed confirms that the migrants who started the courses held a high opinion of them and considered them as an added value. Those who did not participate in the trajectory also managed to gather the information taught in the courses, but they had learnt it more slowly and in a more fragmented way. An important difference between both groups however remains in the access to correct judicial information such as labour contract rights, house renting rights, etc. which are apparently much harder to gather through informal networks.

Another striking element that resulted from this study is that half of the respondents had a limited mastery of the Dutch language regardless of their attendance in language courses. One of the conclusions of this report in this regard is that the language courses could still be improved and differentiated between slow and fast learners (Pauwels and Lamberts 2010).

V. Policy Implications

The public officials we spoke to were optimistic yet modest about the effects of the courses. They shared the view that the courses provide the foundation upon which the migrants can build a future. Familiarity with the basic notions of the society helps them to find their own way and come to grips with their lives. The positive feelings they developed from their interactions in the reception centres stimulate integration. Bon and Atlas thus function as a catalyst. The public officials also underlined the psychological impact of meeting new people from different backgrounds, or of simply going out of the house with a particular purpose in mind. Confirmation of the psychological and socialising role of the courses reveal that examining solely the end result of the courses is not sufficient, the process is as important. This also reinforces

our argument about the reception centres as social spaces and also why a test would not then be an appropriate mechanism. In terms of concrete outcomes, they acknowledged that the development is idiosyncratic and that substantial changes require longer periods of time, even generations. Yet they believed that there had been an overall increase in knowledge of the society and awareness of professional opportunities.

When it comes to integration, they embraced this compartmentalised approach, which recognises that it is dependent on improvement in other social spaces. Schools and workplaces are most often identified as the major vehicles through which a migrant can socialise with the majority society. Therefore the policy of *inburgering* alone cannot be held responsible for the successful integration of migrants, it needs to be supported by social policies that take into account the diversity of the population in Belgium. The strategic plan for ethno-cultural minorities in 1998,⁴⁸ which established this principle, is a major move in this direction in Flanders. Even though the initiatives towards achieving a more inclusive policy are sustained, *inburgering* policy dominates the public debate. This emphasis has in recent years contributed to the false expectations mentioned above. The problem is not so much at the level of the stakeholders who are actively involved in the implementation of the policy but at the level of general public discourse. We can single out two miscalculated moves on the part of the Flemish government that have contributed to this image. First, the introduction of the policy as an innovation from the start gave the impression that the *inburgering* policy would find an answer to all the enduring problems. Moreover, it did not entirely reflect the truth as the reception of the newcomers had been on the agenda ever since the adoption of the minorities' policy. Reception centres that were operating on a voluntary basis in different parts of Flanders and Brussels were reconstituted and gathered together under one heading after the official foundation of the *inburgering* policy. This step did not only fail to recognise the existing programmes of integration, such as COMPAS or TRACE, but also the existing demand for such programmes. The failure to recognise the previous demand for these voluntary schemes led to a misrepresentation of migrants as unwilling to make an effort to follow integration trajectories on their own. Hence they needed to be obliged to do so. We will return to this point when discussing the mandatory nature of the courses. The second mistake, in our view, was to lump together the category of the established residents, the so-called 'oudkomers', with the newcomers whose motivations and problems differ widely. This situation rendered the courses at best less efficient and at worst counter-productive. Even though the lack of language knowledge can perhaps be identified as a common setback, the root causes should be disentangled. The reasons for low levels of successful participation

48 Decreet van 28 april 1998 inzake het Vlaamse beleid ten aanzien van etnisch-culturele minderheden, *Moniteur Belge*, 19 juni 1998.

in the labour market or command of the Dutch language in the successive generations of immigrant groups can be explained by a combination of factors ranging from the deficiencies of the education system, to the low human capital of the parents, from the absence of adequate reception measures at the time to a lack of interest towards the country of residence. Therefore, the problems stretched over time cannot be improved with a unitary measure and trying to deal with them under the same heading puts the reputation of the policy in danger. Forcing established residents who are dependent on CPAS/OCMW to follow the courses is also highly discouraging for the newcomers. A number of migrants in Antwerp reported losing interest in the courses because of the attitude they displayed during the courses, like chatting with each other and their low levels of motivation. Below we quote a very telling example:

'I didn't feel comfortable being in one class with long staying immigrants. They had their personal questions that were not interesting for me, I wanted to get more general information. What's more old-comers have their prejudices towards Belgians that they shared during the course. It made me slow in making friends among Belgians.'

Looking at it from the perspective of established residents, it is difficult to tell whether they actually learn anything new or they simply fulfil their duty by listening to things they already know or are not interested in knowing. Unfortunately there were very few people in our sample who had been living in Belgium for many years, which made it academically unsound to draw conclusions. However it would be safe to say that within our group the discourses of the newcomers did not match with those of the established residents. Whereas the newcomers were surprised to see that a large number of the established residents did not have a good knowledge of Belgian society, the few established residents we interviewed were of the opinion that the courses were useless for them. In either case, these two groups are not mutually beneficial to each other and their interests do not revolve around the same issues. An alternative solution, if they remain within the target group, would be the introduction of an exemption test for those who do not need it and subsequently placing them in different classes from the newcomers.

Obligation

This last remark opens the discussion for the main area of investigation of this research, which has so far been implicitly touched upon. The central premise of this report is to examine in depth two reception centres of *inburgering*, Atlas and Bon, with a view to seeing to what extent the obligation to attend the courses had an impact on the results achieved. We first present

the views of the migrants we gathered and then the pros and cons of the obligation.

In Brussels we asked the respondents whether they would have felt differently if they had been obliged to attend the classes. A considerable number shared the view that as long as the information received was valuable they did not mind having to attend the courses. Another opinion along these lines revolves around the responsibility of the migrant. Two out of nine respondents asserted that it was the duty of the migrant to become accustomed to the country of residence and attending the courses was only a fair trade-off for the opportunities obtained in Belgium. One respondent smoothed this view by suggesting that there should be explanatory mechanisms that would enable migrants to understand that it was in their interest to attend. While acknowledging a migrant's necessity to 'make changes' in a foreign country, another respondent claimed that learning a language had to be out of free will. She argued that the key to learning was taking pleasure in it and imposing the courses endangered this pleasure. Therefore, according to her, migrants were conscious enough to make the right choices for themselves and could take the necessary steps for their integration without being forced to do so. Lastly, one respondent abstained from commenting and limited herself to stating that she did not know if she would have experienced it the same way if she had been obliged to attend. We can discern in the Brussels' case that migrants were grateful for the availability of the free courses that had introduced them to life in Belgium. It seems that the voluntary nature of the programme has strengthened its bona fide character.

In Antwerp, our questions were slightly different, ranging from their first reactions when they found out they had to attend the courses to their evaluation of the courses as a mandatory measure. To our surprise, a large number of the migrants were aware of their obligation to attend integration courses. They even presented themselves to the reception centre before they received the official call-up paper from the municipality. Because of this prior knowledge they were not surprised by the obligation. Most of them were happy about the offer whereas a few of them mentioned that they were suspicious about the use of it in the beginning. The most unfavourable reaction was from a respondent who mentioned that she did not in principle appreciate anything mandatory. She also reported being a little offended as she had the impression of being treated as uncivilised. Even though she had lost her feelings of resentment, she had not really changed her mind about the utility of the courses. Only two of our respondents mentioned that they would not have gone to the courses had they not been obliged to attend. While one of them had been living in Belgium for five years, the other was a newcomer. The former respondent justified her disinterest by her previous years of residence in Belgium and contended that the courses did not really contribute to her knowledge. The latter was the woman mentioned previously who took offence to the obligation. She thus believed that the courses did

not teach anything she could not have learnt on her own. On the other hand, the remaining respondents were glad to have completed the courses and were not disturbed by the obligation. Suffice it so say here that their arguments did not differ from the respondents in Brussels.

The mandatory nature of the integration programme in Flanders has been topical from the moment of its introduction. At the political level, while liberal and conservative parties supported the obligation, socialist politicians argued that an obligation could only be fair when sufficient tuition was available and waiting lists for classes had been eliminated (Loobuyck & Jacobs 2006: 112). On the other hand, several scholars (Timmerman, Geets & Van der Heyden, 2006: 306; Loobuyck & Jacobs 2006: 112) claimed that the debate was misplaced and that the focus should be on the emancipatory aspect of the obligation, especially for women living in closed minority communities. Based on the qualitative research we conducted with migrants and policy executers, we have attempted to contribute to this debate.

The main advantage of the obligation is clearly the opportunity to reach a wider group. Since the 'marketing' of the courses is carried out through formal public channels, a better level of awareness can be achieved. A corollary to this argument is the goal of emancipation. The obligation brings to light marginalised – or forced to be marginalised – persons such, as spouses who arrive in Belgium through family reunion. The obligation to attend the *inburgering* classes would not only equip them with the necessary tools to attain a certain autonomy but it would also simply give them an opportunity to be away from the authoritarian rule of the family and the community in which they live. Nevertheless, what usually goes unnoticed is that this emancipatory aspect can be best accomplished to the extent that it can be entrusted to a teacher coming from within the community. The recognition and reputation of the teacher within the community reduces the perception of the courses as a threat to the retention of the culture of origin. Another option would be to implant a more severe sanction mechanism that could cause serious deprivation for the migrants. However, in such a scenario the means would no longer justify the ends; putting migrants into economically vulnerable situations with a view to emancipating them is not practicable. In our opinion, this is precisely the weakness of the obligation. It is a slippery slope in the sense that it can easily lean towards more coercive measures. It depends much more on public officials' good will and how well they communicate it. A very welcoming measure in its essence can be misrepresented with a wrong communication strategy. The accounts of the migrants presented above indeed indicate that the message is sometimes less clearly conveyed to the migrants who were obliged to follow the courses.

VI. Concluding Remarks

As a conclusion, we would like to reiterate a few observations that appear crucial in order to better grasp and to a certain extent improve the policy of *inburgering*.

The first point to be made is the conceptualisation of the courses as a first step towards a successful process of integration. Integration is not an ultimate outcome that is mathematically achieved through accurate calculations, but rather a continuous engagement, revitalised and developed daily. Social orientation courses assist migrants to make the right start on this journey by offering them the toolkit to survive and encouraging them to further this initial move. Perceiving the courses, as a start-up does not undermine the effects of the policy but instead enhances its chances of succeeding by setting up adequate priorities.

A second item that flows from this concern is the necessity to dissociate the *inburgering* policy from the other societal problems that relate to integration, such as unemployment or low education levels. These difficulties faced by the second generation cannot be sufficiently dealt with by the *inburgering* policy and they need to be supported with social policies. Therefore, the *inburgering* policy should not be expected to offer a blanket solution either to all the challenges or to everyone. As we have seen, lumping together the groups of newcomers with the second generation does not generate a fruitful synergy. Unfortunately our data did not provide sufficient information to make a strong claim about whether or not the content of the courses was indeed useful for the second generation. However, it definitely led us to suggest that if the second generation were to be kept in the target group, a distinct class should be assigned to them and perhaps even with slightly different curricula.

Thirdly, concerning the obligation, our contention is that it should be carefully managed so that it continues serving its purpose of reaching a larger number of migrants rather than deterring would-be migrants. Even though there are no striking differences on the perceived effects of the courses in the two cases, the message of 'welcome' is more unambiguously conveyed in the voluntary form of *inburgering*. A clear and coherent communication strategy should be endorsed in order to ensure all three concerns mentioned here. It could also be envisaged to develop exemption mechanisms such as the test mentioned before that pave the way for customised grounds.

Despite the encouraging picture we paint, it remains to be seen what the current political developments in Belgium will engender. One recent event, for instance, is the proposed measures of integration abroad stated by the last policy report of the Ministry of Integration. It talks about an enriched cooperation with the Belgian Consulates with a view to offering *inburgering* courses in the country of origin (Beleidsnota 2009-2014: 33). The Flemish

government has already commissioned a team of researchers from the King Baudouin Foundation and HIVA- KU Leuven⁴⁹ to design this integration abroad measure. For the moment, it is envisaged as a voluntary and free offer that could initially concentrate on certain countries and groups of migrants, such as those who come through family reunification channels (Beleidsnota 2009-2014: 33). Nevertheless, Belgium has recently come out of federal elections and on the Flemish side, the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (the NV-A literally translated as the New-Flemish Alliance), a Flemish nationalist party, won the majority of the votes. This party has a tougher stance on issues relating to migration and suggested in its political programme prior to the elections making the family reunification visa dependent on the fulfilment of such measures in the country of origin, even though it is legally not possible to realise that for the moment. Yet another issue recently discussed relates to the nationality legislation. In early April 2010, a draft bill was adopted that aims to increase the length of residence to five years and to re-introduce an integration condition which would consist of proof of 'willingness to integrate' and linguistic competence in one of the national languages of the Kingdom. These changes are not likely to be fully adopted in the coming months as Belgium is still awaiting the formation of a government. Nevertheless, the question remains of whether any link can be established between *inburgering* and the fulfilment of the integration condition. Such a scenario would require the French-speaking side to design a similar integration programme. Even though there are attempts in that direction, unless we are mistaken, they are not intended as mandatory measures.⁵⁰ It is difficult to forecast which way the wind will blow; nonetheless it is worthwhile to at least mention the possibilities.

Bibliography

- Cuyper P. de, *Inburgering in Vlaanderen, de efficiëntie en effectiviteit van het beleid geëvalueerd (deel 2)*, HIVA, KU Leuven 2010.
- Foblets, M.C., Les changements de la loi sur la nationalité Belge, in: B. Khader, M. Martiniello, A. Rea, C. Timmerman (eds.), *Penser l'immigration et l'intégration autrement*, Brussels: Bruylant 2006.
- Foblets, M.C. & S. Loones, Belgium, in: R. Bauböck *et al.* (eds.), *Acquisition and Loss of Nationality, Volume II: Country Analyses*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2006.

49 Data obtained from colleagues in KU Leuven, Fernando Pauwels, Johan Wetz and Peter de Cuyper.

50 Data obtained through interviews with CIRE and La Voix des Femmes.

- Foblets, M-C., & Z. Yanasmayan, Language and integration requirements in Belgium: Discordances between the Flemish policy of 'inburgering' and the federal legislators' view(s) on integration of newcomers and migrants", in E. Ersbøll, D. Kostakopoulou & R. van Oers (eds.) *A Re-definition of Belonging? Language and Integration Tests in Europe*, Leiden: Brill 2010.
- Gsir, S., M. Martiniello, K. Meireman & J. Wets, Belgium, in: J. Niessen, Y. Schibel & C. Thompson (eds), *Current Immigration Debates in Europe: A Publication of the European Migration Dialogue*, 2005, downloadable from http://www.migpolgroup.com/multiattachments/2959/DocumentName/EMD_Belgium_2005.pdf.
- Hart, B. de & R. van Oers, European Trends in Nationality Law, in: R. Bauböck et al. (eds), *Acquisition and Loss of Nationality, Volume I: Comparative Analysis; Policies and Trends in 15 European Countries*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2006.
- Loobuyck, P. & D. Jacobs, The Flemish immigration society: Political challenges on different levels, in: L. d'Haenens, M. Hooghe, D. Vanheule & H. Gezduci (eds), *New Citizens, New Policies? Developments in Diversity Policy in Canada and Flanders*, Ghent: Academia Press 2006.
- Lambert, M., P. De Cuyper, J. Geets, L. Struyven, C. Timmerman, S. van den Eede & J. Wets, *Het Vlaamse Inburgeringsbeleid geëvalueerd*, 2007, downloadable from http://binnenland.vlaanderen.be/inburgering/onderzoek/pdf/Het%20Vlaamse%20Inburgeringsbeleid%20geëvalueerd_synthese.pdf.
- Pauwels, F., Lamberts, M., *De impact van inburgering in Vlaanderen (deel 3)*, Leuven: HIVA 2010.
- Timmerman, C., J. Geets & K. Van Der Heyden, Les Nouveaux Arrivants en Flandre, in: B. Khader, M. Martiniello, A. Rea & C. Timmerman (eds), *Penser l'immigration et l'intégration autrement*, Brussels: Bruylant 2006.