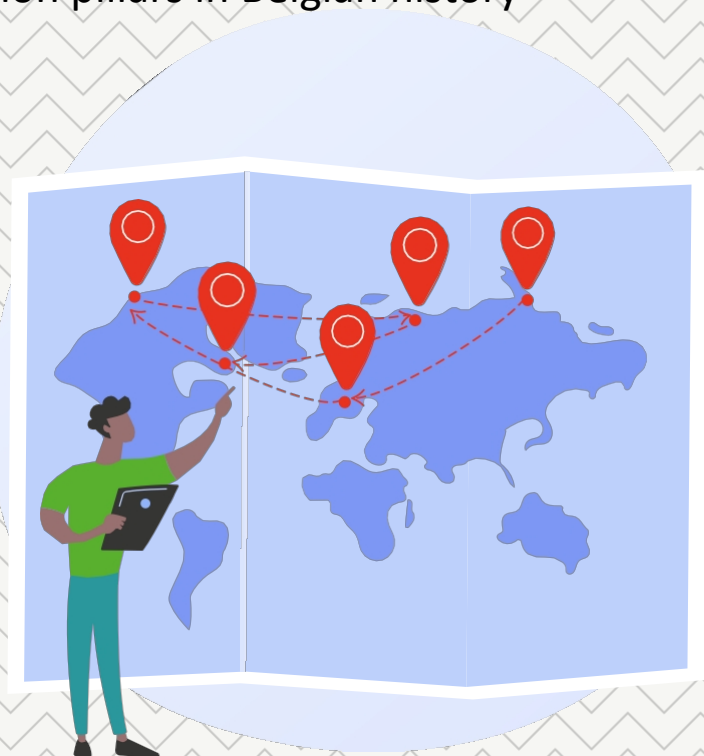




# as a constant

## Migration pillars in Belgian history



Although super-diversity in our country is a recent phenomenon, migration is of all times and is an actual part of our social diversity. Since its emergence as a species, humans have predominantly led a wandering existence. Travelling is in man's blood. People don't just move around. People migrate in the hope of finding a better life elsewhere.

Migration is a constant throughout Belgium's history. Because today we know Belgium mainly as a country of immigration, we often forget that until just after World War I more Belgians left our country than foreigners migrated to Belgium. Throughout history, hundreds of thousands of Belgians migrated abroad to try their luck. Sometimes in faraway countries, but mostly much closer to home.

Belgium has experienced large internal migration throughout its history. In addition, our country attracts new residents (**immigration**), but residents also decide to leave for other countries (**emigration**).

Why people migrate is often an interaction between the reasons for departure from the country of origin (**push factors**) and the attractiveness of the destination country (**pull factors**). These factors may relate to the economic, political, socio-cultural context ... In addition, social networks and individual characteristics of migrants are also important. Depending on a person's profile, one country attracts more or less than another.

# The term 'migration'

In this publication, we use several terms related to migration. A major challenge with this terminology is the fact that there are no internationally legally binding definitions for many terms. Depending on the time, place, political and economic context, these terms are defined or interpreted differently by different actors. We rely mainly on the definitions of the [International Organisation for Migration \(IOM\)](#).

## MIGRATION

Migration is a complex issue. We define this umbrella term as movement by a person (or group of persons) moving away from their usual place of residence to another place within their state or across international borders. Migration can be **temporary or permanent** in nature. Thus, we see that migrants sometimes decide to return to their country of origin (return migration) or commute between two or more countries, usually as a function of work (circular migration). Whereas in the context of the 'guest workers' of the golden years after WWII there was still a single movement from country A to country B, those migration trajectories that many migrants take in recent decades are much **more complex**. They often move between several countries (transmigration). Migration is **independent of the person's legal status**: some people move across borders without the required documents (irregular migration). Others do enter our country with the prescribed papers. In addition, migration can be both **forced and voluntary**, and the reasons for movement are diverse. Increasingly, you also hear the term **chain migration** (chain migration or follower migration): the phenomenon

of migration resulting in new migrations, mostly caused by family reunifications and marriage migration.

## EMIGRATION

From the perspective of the departure country, the movement from the country of origin (country of nationality or habitual residence) to another country so that the destination country becomes the new country of habitual residence.

## IMMIGRATION

From the perspective of the arrival country, the movement to a country other than the country of nationality or habitual residence so that the destination country becomes the new country of habitual residence.

## LABOUR MIGRATION

This is the movement of persons from their home country to another state for reasons of employment. Within the EU, the right of free movement and residence of EU residents has applied since 2004 (Directive 2004/38/EC). The European institutions therefore do not categorise EU citizens as labour migrants.

## FAMILY REUNIFICATION

The right of foreigners to reside in a country where their family members are legally located or of which they are nationals, so that the family can be preserved as a unit.

## FLIGHTING

According to the Geneva Convention, 1951: a person who, because of a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social

group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and who does not or does not want to receive protection in his country of origin because of this fear or a person who does not have nationality and is outside the country of his former residence as a result of persecution and does not or cannot return there.

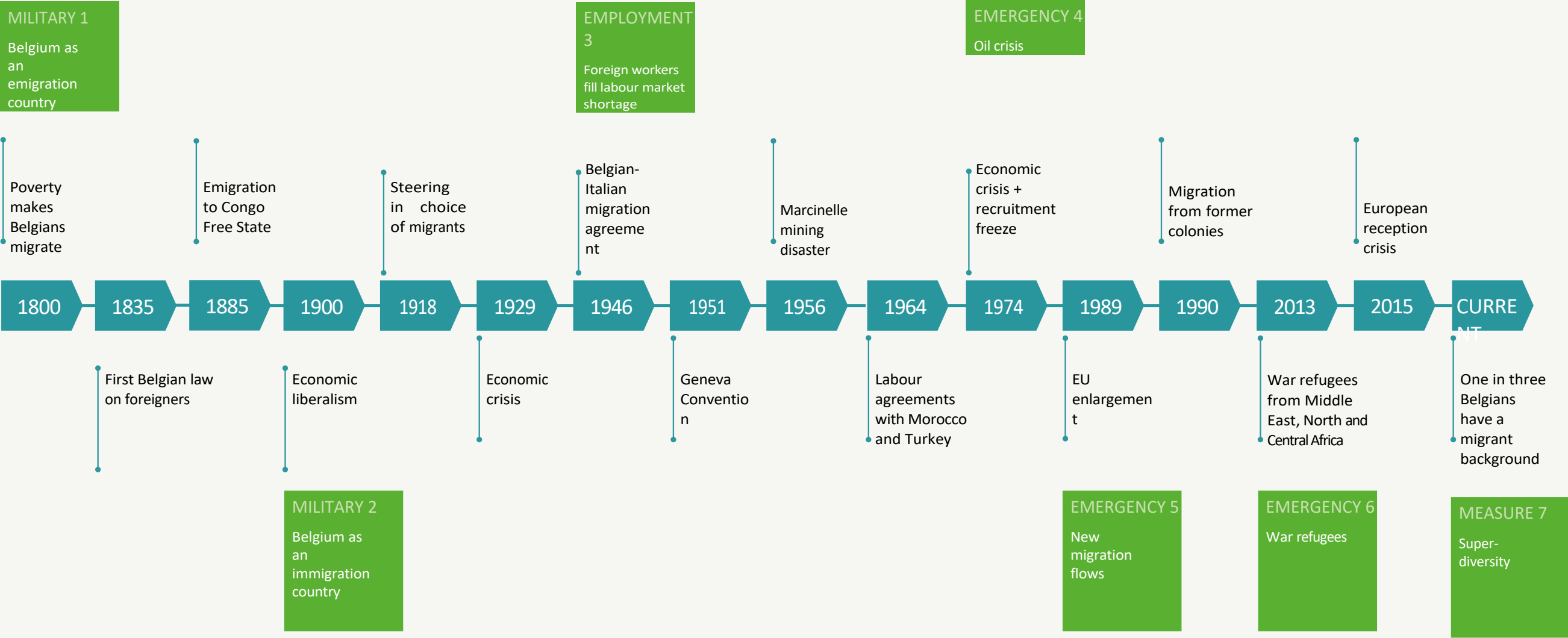
## OUTSIDER

A person who does not have the nationality of the country of destination or arrival. In the case of Belgium: residents with a non-Belgian nationality.

## PERSON OF FOREIGN ORIGIN

A person lawfully and long-term resident in Belgium who did not hold Belgian nationality at birth or at least one of whose parents did not hold Belgian nationality at birth (Statbel).

# Timeline



## Milestone 1: Belgium as an emigration country

### Poverty makes Belgians migrate (at home and abroad)

The 19th century was a century of much mobility and migration. During this period, more Belgians left abroad than persons of foreign origin settled in Belgium. The reasons cannot be explained solely by individual motives, but are strongly related to the political, social and economic context of Belgium. Indeed, the industrial revolution brought very high levels of poverty in rural Flanders. Belgians emigrated mainly to France, North America and Latin America. There was also a group of internal migrants, who migrated mainly from Flanders to Wallonia and from the countryside to cities such as Antwerp and Ghent.

The largest group of emigrants left for France. At the end of the 19th century, some 500 000 Belgians resided in France. France was attractive mainly because of its economy. For instance, there were many jobs thanks to the construction of the Paris-Rouen railway line and the northern French textile industry. Together with the Italians, Belgians were the first guest workers.

The internal movement of Flemings to Wallonia also had economic motives. Parts of Flanders, unlike Wallonia, had not responded to industrialisation and growing international competition in agricultural production. Moreover, fewer and fewer local miners in Wallonia were willing to continue mining work and began to limit their numbers of children. Flemish farmers therefore sought their livelihoods in prosperous Wallonia in the late 19th century.

It is estimated that at least 250 000 Belgian migrants are trying to find better living conditions further from home. North and Latin America were popular destinations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cheap land and work opportunities in the growing industrial sector, were the motivation for many Belgian technicians and specialised workers. In addition, Belgians, like other Europeans, were attracted by the exotic and adventurous that this region seemed to exude. On Red Star Line steamships, between 1873 and 1935, more than two million passengers made the crossing from Antwerp to North America.

#### Want to know more?

- Goddeeris, I. & Hermans, R. (2011) Flemish migrants in Wallonia 1850-2000.
- The Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp presents stories of people who travelled to North America on the shipping company's ships.



#### 1835

In the 19th century, Belgium was primarily an emigration country. Nevertheless, foreign migration movements to the big cities (Brussels, Antwerp, Liège) increased as the 19th century progressed. This also translated into policy. In 1835, the first Belgian Aliens Act was a fact: it was open and welcoming, but already made a striking distinction between Belgians and non-Belgians. However, this distinction did not match the social reality of the 19th century. The word "nationality" only gained real meaning among the broad population after World War I. The law also led to the registration of foreigners in separate aliens registers.

These immigrants were not only highly skilled men. Increasingly, low-educated men and women also decided to come to Belgium. Whereas these migrants initially came from neighbouring countries, in the last years of the 19th century they also came from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Russia ...

The migratory movements of the 19th century are still visible today in the great diversity of today's family trees.

## Milestone 1: Belgium as an emigration country

### Emigration to Congo Free State

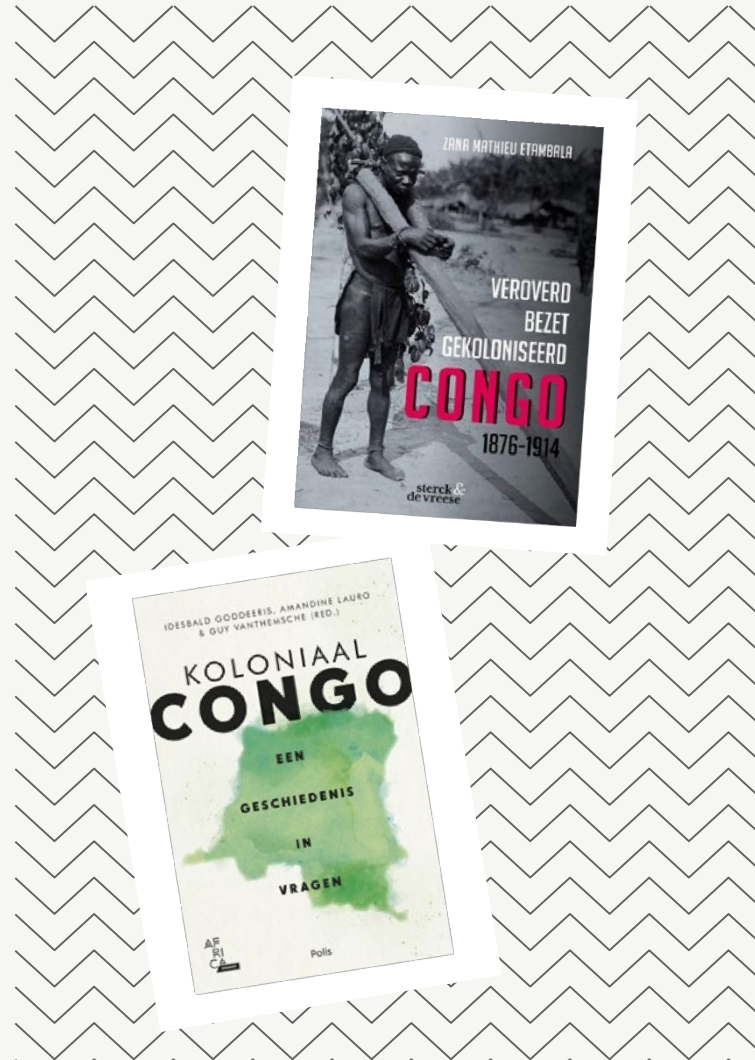
1885

Congo Free State was established in 1885. At the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), the territory around the Congo River was assigned to Leopold II. It would remain his private property until 1908. Soon criticism of abuses in Congo Free State arose. Under international pressure, King Leopold II set up a commission of enquiry. This confirmed many of the accusations. King Leopold II was forced to cede his private property to the Belgian state, which established Belgian Congo in 1908. During the colonial period, many Belgians emigrated to Congo. Besides colonial officials, soldiers, missionaries and businessmen also left for Congo. Some sought adventure, for others it was a way to get promoted. The missionaries often came from modest Flemish families. As part of their religious mission, they usually stayed in the colony for long periods of time.

#### Want to know more about colonialism in Congo?

- Etambala, Z. M. (2019) Conquered. Occupied. Colonised. Congo 1876-1914.
- Goddeeris, I., Lauro, A. & Vanthemsche, G. (2020) Colonial Congo. A history in questions.

After World War I, Ruanda-Urundi (present-day Rwanda and Burundi) was transferred from the German coloniser as a mandate territory to the Belgian coloniser. In 1960, Congo became independent. Burundi and Rwanda followed two years later.



#### Belgians fled Congo after independence

Shortly after Congo's independence, in 1960, mutiny had broken out among the Congolese soldiers. Autochthonous Belgians, colonials, left Congo headlong because they no longer felt safe there. On 9 July, Sabena launched an 'airlift' to take the Belgian refugees to their country of origin. A total of 34 484 Europeans would be taken home in three weeks, the vast majority of whom were Belgian.

Source: Naegels, T. (2021) New Belgium: A history of migration 1944-1978.



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## Milestone 2: Belgium as a country of immigration

### Labour market needs

#### 1900

Even before World War I, Belgium was an attractive immigration country. Its central location between England, France and the German Empire played a role, partly as a function of easy communication. Belgium was also seen by many Central and Eastern Europeans as a transit country to reach the United States. In addition, economic, socio-cultural factors and French as a lingua franca in Europe were also important motives for migrating to Belgium.

#### 1918

After World War I, the expansion of the Limburg coal mines, the Walloon steel industry and large-scale agriculture meant Belgium was in even greater need of labour. With the introduction of the eight-hour working day and competition with northern France for Flemish workers, employers were forced to recruit outside the Belgian labour market. During the interwar period, Belgium also sought workers outside our neighbouring countries: mainly Italians and Eastern Europeans (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Hungary) came to work in the Belgian mines. The labour shortages of Belgian industry meant that refugees could also blend in with the migrant workers who came to Belgium in droves.

Besides economic prosperity, the high quality of our technical education **a t t r a c t e d** many foreigners. Eastern

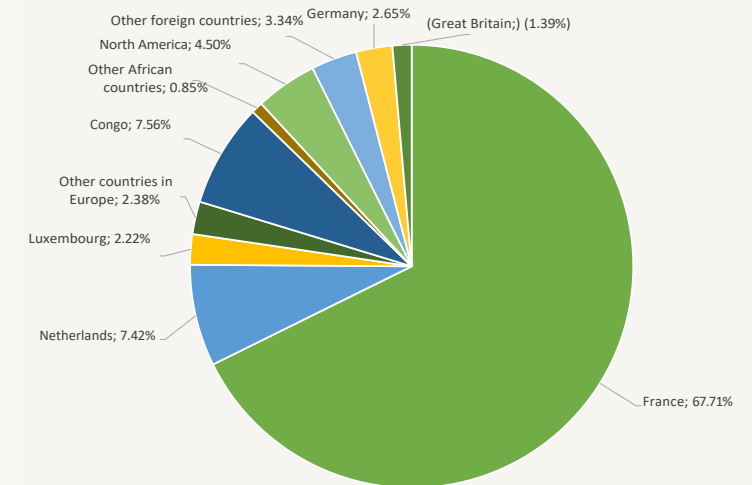
Europeans came to Belgium to study (e.g. engineering studies). Until the 1960s, predominantly European migrants settled in Belgium.

There was also emigration during the interwar period. Thus, Belgians emigrated primarily to neighbouring countries (80%). France remained the main destination country. Congo, as a Belgian colony, was the most important emigration country outside Europe (7%), followed by North America.

#### 1929

As a result of the 1929 stock market crash, Belgium also fell into an economic depression. In an economically very turbulent period, the Royal Decree of 31 March 1936 on the employment of foreign workers came into being. To protect the native population from competition from their foreign colleagues, the state wanted to curb the economic activity of migrants if it did not match the needs of the Belgian labour market. From now on, foreigners who wanted to work in Belgium could only do so with a work permit of certain duration.

The economic crisis of the 1930s resulted in a drop in the number of immigrants, but this was short-lived.



Destination countries of Belgian emigrants (1921-1939) Source:  
NIS



#### Jewish migration in Belgium

Jews are already some 2000 years present throughout Europe. Their numbers in Belgium's major cities increased rapidly from 1880 onwards

due to their flight from poverty and persecution from Central and Eastern Europe. Belgium was attractive because of its relatively high level of prosperity and religious freedom. A large influx of Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria started from the 1930s. In 1942, more than 25,000 Jews were deported from Belgium to Auschwitz, of whom less than 5% returned. Afterwards, the group grew steadily again, partly due to Hungary and later from Morocco.

Milestone 3 →

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## Milestone 3: Foreign workers fill the shortfall in the Belgian labour market

### Belgian-Italian migration agreement

1946

During the reconstruction of the country after World War II, coal was the main source of energy. The Belgian government wanted to increase coal production. German prisoners of war were the first foreign workers to keep the Belgian economy from failing. Under US pressure, Belgium had to release these forced labourers and the mines had to look for new workers. The Italians once again proved to be the suitable workforce for this sector. The choice of Italians was mainly a political one. The Belgian state was looking for low-skilled workers who did not question the organisation of their jobs and had little or no experience of social struggles. Italian countrymen were suitable for this purpose. On the other hand, Italy wanted to alleviate the poverty and unemployment of its population through emigration. Belgium, in exchange for Italian miners, would sell two to three million tonnes of coal to Italy every year.

Thus, the Belgian-Italian agreement on the migration of Italian workers came into being in 1946. One of the agreements in a series of labour agreements with Mediterranean countries. The workers were recruited for one economic sector: mines. Between 1946-1949, the Belgian government attracted as many as 100,000 workers to work in the mines: 77,000 Italians and 23,000 Eastern European displaced persons. These displaced persons or *displaced persons* were trapped in German refugee camps after World War II. They did not want to return to their homes, which had come under communist control of the Soviet Union

come. After World War II, Belgium was one of the first countries to resettle persons trapped in German refugee camps on the condition that they kept coal.



'Children of migration': several generations of Italians were active in the mining industry.



#### Geneva Convention (1951)

In 1951, the United Nations adopted the 'Convention relating to the Status of Refugees'.

The Refugee Convention stipulates that

refugees and asylum seekers should not be sent back to a country where they are in danger. This binding convention also defines who qualifies as a refugee ([see glossary](#)). This definition is still the basis on which someone can be recognised as a refugee. However, the Convention does not prescribe how or by which country refugees should be received.

The suppression of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet troops in 1956 created a huge refugee movement and was immediately the first test for the new treaty. As many as 200 000 Hungarians fled and could count on enormous solidarity in Western Europe. Belgium would also take in 7,000 Hungarian refugees.

1956

Migrant mine workers worked in harsh and dangerous conditions. The mines were often in a dilapidated state, which was accompanied by ongoing mining disasters leading to accidents and deaths.

Consequently, the Marcinelle tragedy took place on 8 August 1956. The mining disaster resulted in 262 fatalities, of which 136 were Italians. The Italian emigration service subsequently demanded stricter safety measures. The Belgian state and the mining companies circumvented this demand by concluding labour agreements with Greece, Spain, Morocco and Turkey. Italy subsequently decided not to send any more workers to Belgium. Despite the end of official recruitment of Italian workers, families and other Italians continued to come to Belgium.

[Want to know more?](#)

Naegels, T. (2021) New Belgium: A history of migration 1944- 1978.

Milestone 3 (bis) →

## Milestone 3: Foreign labour force fills the shortfall in the Belgian labour market

### Labour agreements with Morocco and Turkey

1964

The growth of the Belgian economy in the 1960s was so explosive (*golden sixties*) that the active population could not fill all available jobs. For the first time, Belgium also intensively recruited migrant workers from outside Europe. In 1964, Belgium concluded bilateral agreements with Morocco and Turkey.



'Children of migration': why did people from Morocco and Turkey come to Belgium?

Outside official recruitment, many migrants also came to Belgium as tourists during this period, without the required documents. In 1964, the government announced that 'tourists' who found work in the Belgian labour market would be systematically regularised. It was also notable that Belgium encouraged family reunification. This was to ensure that the 'guest worker' was less likely to change jobs or countries. There were also demographic reasons: Wallonia wanted to counter population decline through targeted immigration.



'Children of migration': how did family members feel about moving to Belgium?

Mainly under pressure from the economy, the then government wanted to present Belgium as an attractive immigration country. Illustrative of this period is the brochure 'Vivre et travailler en Belgique'.

Want to know more?

- [Myria \(2014\) 'Belgium - Morocco, 50 years of migration'](#).
- [Myria \(2013\) 'Demographic study on the population of Turkish origin in Belgium'](#).



Why was it that Belgium went in search of guest workers and that we did not have agreements with the Belgian colonies like our neighbouring countries?

Most colonising countries saw an increase in migrants from their (former) colonies after World War II. Compared to countries like France, Great Britain or the Netherlands, only a very limited number of migrants from the former colonies came to Belgium in the period before and after independence.

According to Dr Bonaventure Kagné, a sociologist at the University of Liège, there are two possible hypotheses.

#### 1. High demand for labour for labour-intensive industries in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi

Work in Congo was hard and the colonial authorities needed all the forces. In addition, Belgian companies in Congo also faced a labour shortage. Congolese, for example, did work on cargo ships bound for Antwerp, but were required to sign a contract whereby they would not leave the boat.

#### 2. Preserving 'racial homogeneity'

The Belgian government wanted to preserve 'racial homogeneity' to maintain the power differential and colonial order. This hypothesis starts from racial superiority thinking, which would be compromised if there was racial mixing. This second hypothesis could be downplayed: the Belgian government wanted to avoid Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian workers coming into contact with Belgian, colony-critical communists and thus rebelling against the colonial system. Italians, on the other hand, had little experience of social struggle.

Source

[Rabau, R. \(2014\) 'Why were there no Congolese migrant workers in Belgium between 1945 and 1960?'. Kifkif.](#)



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## Milestone 4: Oil crisis

### Economic crisis and immigration freeze

1974

Unemployment began to rise sharply in Belgium in the early 1970s. The decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard in 1971 and the rise in oil prices from October 1973 triggered an economic crisis.



'Children of migration': people lose their jobs because of oil crisis

Belgium wanted to adopt a more restrictive migration policy. After West Germany and France, the Belgian government also decided in 1974 to implement a recruitment freeze, the so-called migration freeze, . Any new migration coming from countries outside the then European Economic Community (EEC) was stopped immediately. In fact, only individual migration of unskilled workers from outside the EEC was banned.

Nothing changed in all other migration channels. EEC nationals were allowed to move freely within the EEC, family reunification was allowed and refugees could still get residence permits. Students were given temporary residence permits and were covered by a special status. Moreover, the recruitment freeze had the effect that many guest workers decided to settle permanently in Belgium. Previously, they could go to their country of origin regularly and for longer periods

return. The recruitment freeze made many fear that this would no longer be possible and that they could even lose all their accumulated rights.



'Children of migration': returning hit for the back burner most guest workers.

This recruitment freeze aimed to avoid an increase in new workers, as unemployment was already high in Belgium. Yet migration continued to increase.



'Children of migration': the recruitment freeze had the opposite effect, which was visible on the streets.

Indeed, when recruiting guest workers in the 1960s, Belgium had not sufficiently taken into account the strong networks and kinship structures of the North African and Turkish populations.

Guest workers, for instance, gave signals of prosperity in the West during short visits to their homeland. Since family reunification was allowed, many family members also effectively migrated.



'Children of migration': family reunification and marriage migration became the main 'legal' ways to come to Belgium.

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## Milestone 5: New migration flows

### Globalisation of migration and Black Sunday



1989

The **fall of the Berlin Wall** in 1989 and later the Soviet Union drastically changed the structure of the world. The end of the Cold War and the bipolar world caused increased mobility and migration intensity on a global scale. From the 1990s onwards, new migratory movements to Belgium emerged. It was no longer just about family formation and reunification of former guest workers. Globalisation and growing international trade also caused economic migration.

Moreover, in the 1990s a lot of war refugees found their way to Europe and Belgium: the post-Yugoslav wars (1991-2001), the first Gulf War (1990-1991), wars in the Great Lakes Region in Central Africa (Congo, Rwanda), wars in the former Soviet Union (Nagorno-Karabakh, the first Chechen War) ....

All these developments, together with accelerated international communication and mobility, have led to a marked increase in migration rates. There was a notable peak in immigration from 1998 onwards.

The increasing diversity in society caused unrest among part of the Belgian population. From the 1980s, this manifested itself politically in the steep rise of the far-right Vlaams Blok party.



'Children of migration': increasing migration causes frustration.

1991

In 1991, the Vlaams Blok won the elections at the expense of the traditional governing parties. This day is referred to in Belgian history as '**Black Sunday**'.

Milestone 5 (bis) ➔

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## Milestone 5: New migration flows

### Migration from former colonies in the 1990s

While most colonising countries saw an increase in migrants from their (former) colonies after World War II, migration from Belgium's former colonies, both before and after independence, was rather low.

During the colonial period, you had a small community of Congolese in Belgium who, among other things, were temporarily transferred as servants. In the pre-independence period (1949- 1959), about a hundred or so Congolese migrated to Belgium every year.

Some factors that could explain this difference from other colonising countries:

- Belgium had never given citizenship to the inhabitants of the former colonies. Not even after the Second World War.
- No Congolese fought in Europe (though in Africa and Asia) during World War II.
- There was no recruitment policy of workers from the colony (see milestone three).
- After Congo's independence in 1960, more Congolese came to study in Belgium. Again, this is a small number compared to countries like France and Britain.

#### 1990

Only from 1990 onwards did we see a sharp increase in Congolese migration to Belgium and we can speak of **post-colonial migration**. This was linked to a large increase in Congolese refugees who fled the country because of political instability, dictatorship, President Mobutu, and social misery and sought asylum in Belgium.

Another country from the former colonial territory is Rwanda, where migration to Belgium was also mainly concentrated in the 1990s. During that period, civil war and genocide caused a sharp increase in refugees.

#### Want to know more?

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- [King Baudouin Foundation \(2017\) Citizens with African roots: a portrait of Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian Belgians](#)

Milestone 6 →

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## Milestone 6: War refugees

### European reception crisis



#### 2013

From 2013, we saw more and more migrants crossing the Mediterranean to get to Europe. These were refugees from war zones in the Middle East, North and Central Africa. Major causes were the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the coup that followed in 2013, the uprising in Libya and the second Libyan civil war, the Malian civil war, the civil war in South Sudan and, from 2011, the Syrian civil war. In 2014, the threat of Islamic State (IS) was added.

The crackdown on movements that triggered the Arab Spring and, above all, the ongoing conflicts in countries such as Iraq

Afghanistan and Syria created major new migratory movements towards Europe.

#### 2015

In 2015, the term European migration crisis or refugee crisis was used to describe the increased migration of refugees to Europe. The term 'crisis' was mainly used from April 2015 after it became known that several hundred boat refugees drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in just a week. The refugees who reached Europe applied for protection, causing government institutions in several countries

became overburdened. They are still seeking solutions to the challenges posed by this large refugee movement.

[Want to know more?](#)

['The migration issue: how is the EU dealing with the influx of asylum seekers and migrants?'](#)

Milestone 7 →

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## Milestone 7: Current super-diversity

### People with a migration background make up an increasing share of the population

Countries like Belgium or the Netherlands evolved over a good half century from relatively homogeneous societies, with a small number of people of other nationalities, to societies in which people with a migration background make up an increasing share of the population.

To describe this changing reality, we use the concept of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). This concept describes not only changing migration patterns, but also their impact on society.

Superdiversity refers to quantitative and qualitative changes.

The quantitative dimension has to do with the very large increase in the number of nationalities. Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have seen the broad diversity of people with a migrant background gradually become the majority of residents in more and more cities and municipalities (*majority-minority cities*). In recent decades, Brussels, for example, grew to become one of the most diverse cities in the world: more than seven in ten Brussels residents have a migrant background. After Brussels, Antwerp, Genk, Zaventem and Vilvoorde, other cities and towns in Flanders will undergo a similar evolution over the next decade.

Superdiversity is not only about refugees or new migration, but it is also about the demographic reality after half a century of migration. Persons of Belgian origin are ageing. The

natural accretion of persons of foreign origin is greater because the population group with foreign origin has more young parents. The younger generations are thus much more diverse than the older ones. Even without new migration, Flanders is becoming more super-diverse.

The qualitative dimension refers to the growing diversity within diversity. Whereas in the last century migration movements came only from a limited number of countries (Italy, Poland, Spain, Greece, Morocco and Turkey), now people come from all over the world. Besides many different nationalities and origins, we also see differences in migration motives, residence statuses, languages, religions, education, socio-economic positions ... This creates more diversity within and between communities. Increased mobility, technology and communication tools help maintain links with country(ies) of origin and country of residence, or with diaspora communities elsewhere in Europe or the world. Globalisation makes it easy to combine multiple cultures and lifeworlds. We have multiple, dynamic identities. Who we are depends on the context, place, time and other factors in which we find ourselves at any given moment.



'Children of migration': striving for shared citizenship and shared goals.

#### Learn more.

- Geldof, D. (2019) Superdiversity. How migration is changing our society.
- Maly, I.; Blommaert, J. & Ben Yakoub, J. (2014) Superdiversity and democracy.
- Vertovec, S. (2007) Superdiversity and its implications.
- [Movie on superdiversity](#) by Jan Blommaert



**Crosspoint thinking or intersectionality** Having an eye for diversity in diversity means transcending stereotypical us-versus-them thinking. It approaches and recognises the other as an individual, and not just as a member of a particular group or community, let alone as a representative of a group. Everyone has their own identity, consisting of different 'intersections' of traits. These identities are multifaceted, dynamic and context-specific. Recognising multiple identities is crucial here. [More info.](#)



'Children of migration': the multiple identities.

Milestone 7 (bis) ➔



# Milestone 7: Current super-diversity

## People from migrant backgrounds make up an increasing proportion of the population

Evolution of diversity in the Flemish Region from 1990-2021 by countries of origin. Source: Integration and Integration Agency

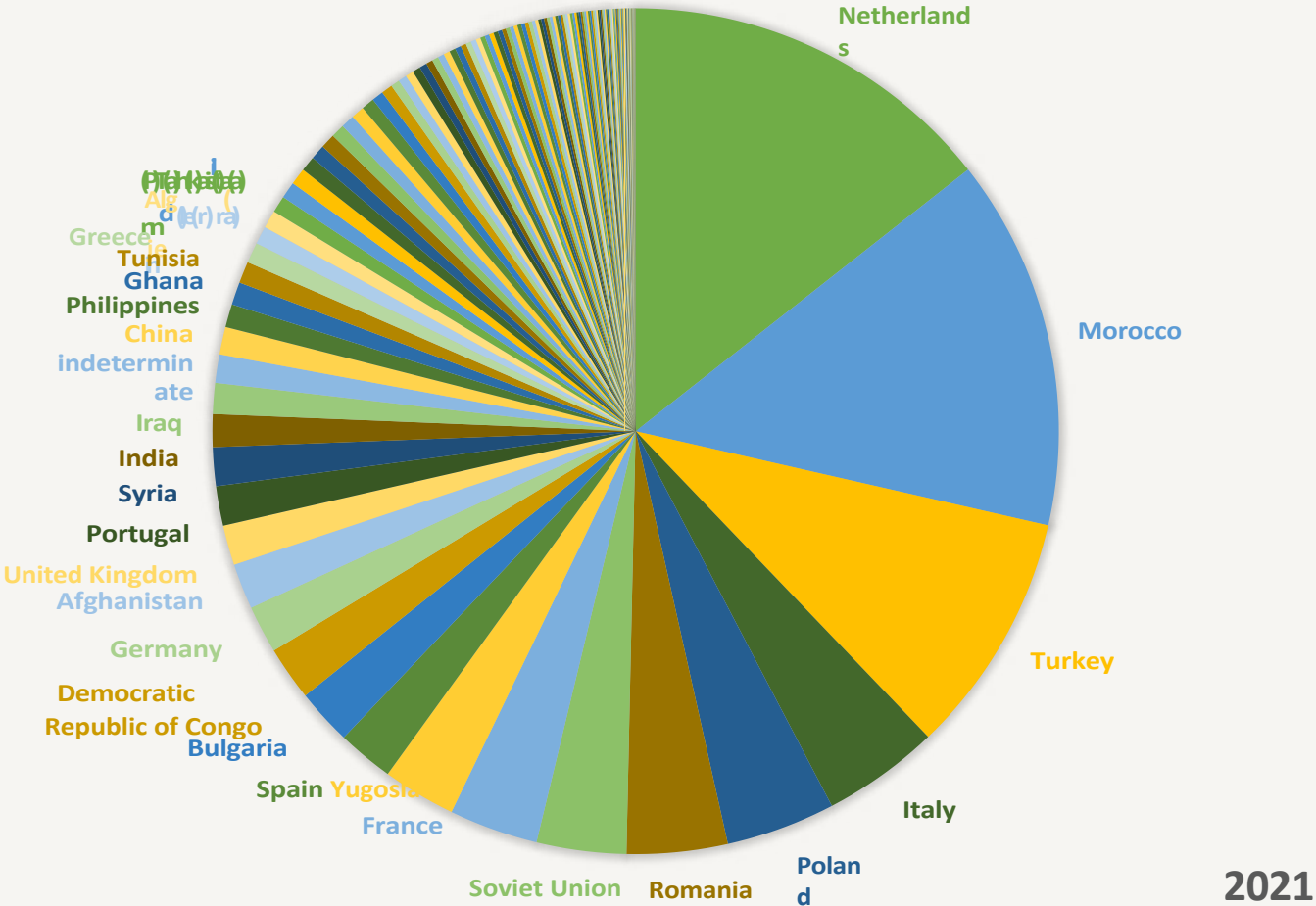
Figures from your city or municipality?  
Go to [the Municipal and City Monitor](#).

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# More info

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## Museums

- The Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp is made up of stories of people who travelled to North America on the shipping company's ships.
- Migration Museum Migration in Molenbeek. The museum not only tells the history of migration in Brussels. It also pays tribute to the many migrants who have made Brussels the city it is.

# Colophon

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