

National Report

Polish immigrants in Belgium



Brussels, December 2011

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Presentation of the communities of EU citizens selected in each partner country: characteristics of the communities (historical approach, number of people, reasons of immigration, etc.), different problems encountered (in employment, education, etc.), ...

HISTORY

Poland has a long history of immigration in Belgium. Since 1830 there is a significant number of Polish migrants in the Kingdom. From there, several waves of immigration (with political or economic reasons) can be underlined. A peak was observed in the 1920, as many Polish people came to work in mines. With the agreement of Polish authorities, Belgian companies hired more than 5.500 Polish workers in mines or other industries.

This movement changed in nature during and after the Second World War as the newcomers were mainly refugees flying war-zones or the new regime in Poland. The Cold War made migration more sporadic and irregular but not impossible (and usually with no coming back possibilities). In the 1970s, the Polish government decided to loosen short-term visa conditions, which created a small rush to the West through tourist visas. Asylum seeker status was only used to obtain long-term or permanent stay.¹

Since the fall of the Berlin wall and the opening of the iron curtain, going West was easier hence a new important wave of migration, which was concentrated on Brussels (and on Flanders to a lesser extend). And the progressive removal of all legal and administrative barriers (in the view of the European integration) only made it easier and stronger. In 1991, Polish people were allowed to stay for 3 months as a tourist in Belgium. However, they were not allowed to work during that period of time. Of course, Polish people coming to Belgium were less motivated by tourism than work, even if there were hardly any legal settings for

¹ Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, *Flux migratoires en provenance des nouveaux Etats membres de l'Union Européenne vers la Belgique. Tendances et perspectives*, Bruxelles, 24 février 2006.

them to work legally. Indeed, after the fall of Communism in Poland, they could not get the status of asylum seekers anymore which could have allowed them to work.² Consequently, illegal work became common among the growing Polish community of which members often stayed much longer than permitted. The illegality of this migration is one factor which created a gap between the new and the old waves of immigration.

Furthermore, these formal settings of stay is one factor that made the Polish migration temporary as the migrants were usually working for a few months with a “tourist visa” (*i.e.* a stamp on the passport with the date of arrival), went back home and sent someone from his/her family or a friend to have his/her job for a few months, or at least enough time to have a new “tourist visa” and so on.

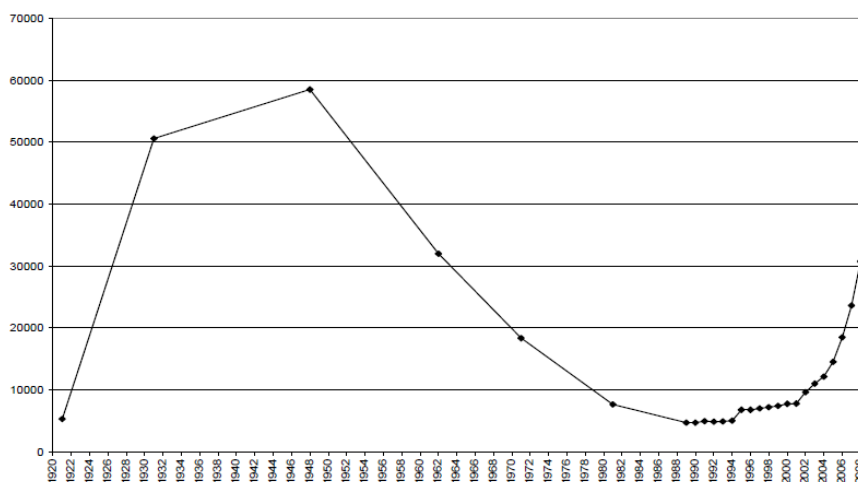
Since 2004 and the adhesion of Poland to the EU, illegal stay was not a problem anymore. But illegal work still was problematic as the opening of the Belgian labour market did not happen until May 2009 (although Belgium decided to gradually open its labour market to the new member States for specific sectors where there was an urging need for labour forces). Nowadays, Polish people are granted the same rights as every other European person.

IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMUNITY

The importance of the community varied greatly over time (see figure below).

² KUZMA Elżbieta, « La communauté transnationale polonaise », in *Migrants de l'Est*, Agenda interculturel, n.280, Bruxelles, février 2010.

Figure 4.12. Le nombre de Polonais en Belgique, 1920-2008



Source : Recensements et registres de population - DG SIE

Number of Polish people in Belgium : 1920-2008 ³

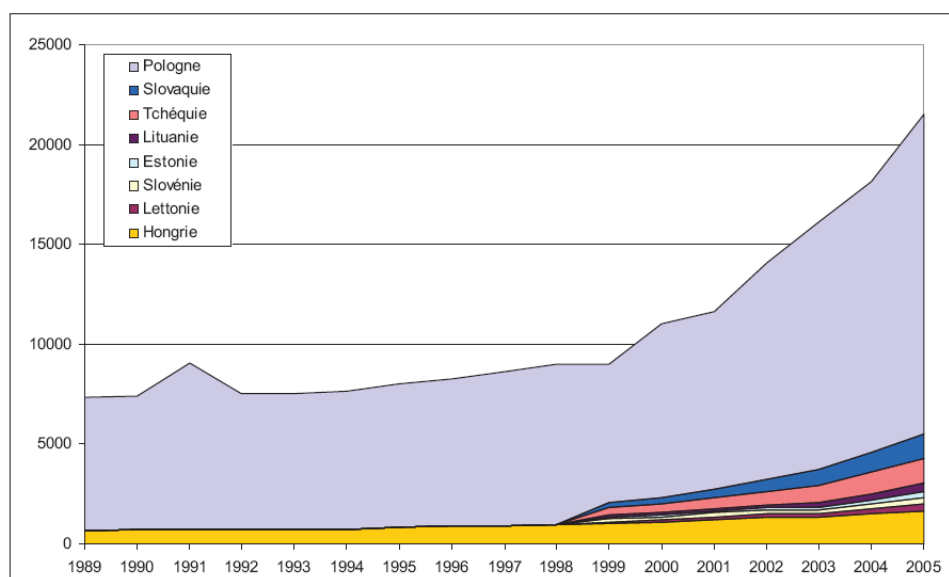
Since the beginning of the years 2000, the number of Polish people in Belgium rose steadily. In 2006, there were 18,000 Poles, in 2008 they were 30,768 and 43,085 in 2010⁴ (these numbers only take the legal immigration into account. The real number of Poles on the Belgian territory is estimated around 100,000 up to 120,000 individuals). This rapid increase is however to be seen in the light of a slow movement of regularization. It is indeed very possible that a large amount of this numerical expansion is the result of the legalization of former illegal migrant's status... even though the Polish community is not characterized by a strong will to regularize its presence in Belgium. Actually, it is even possible that the migration wave slows down – but this is hard to verify.

³ Groupe d'étude de Démographie Appliquée (UCL) & Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, *Migrations et populations issues de l'immigration en Belgique*, Rapport statistique et démographique 2009.

⁴ Direction générale Institutions et Population du SPF Intérieur – Population, Statistiques, Population par nationalité, sexe, groupe et classe d'âges au 1er janvier 2006, 2008 et 2010.

Nowadays, Polish arrival is the third most important in the amount of foreign newcomers (10%, after the French 13% and the Dutch 12% but before the Moroccans 8% - stats 2007).⁵ From the new member States, Poland is also a very important country in terms of migration

Graphique 3: Evolution population nouveaux Etats membres



Bron: INS/ECODATA, SPF Economie, PME, Classes moyennes et Energie

Evolution of the population from new member States⁶

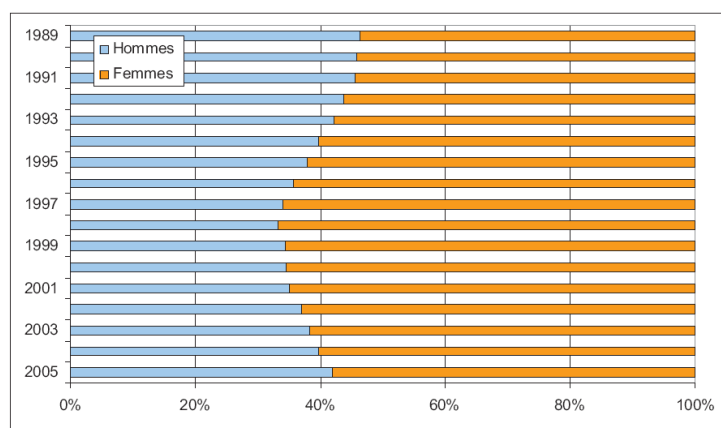
Another important characteristic of the community is the proportion of women. For a long time, there were many more female Poles coming to Belgium, some of them through marriage. This is not especially particular to the Polish migration but the feminization of migration is still quite striking. A cause of this predominance of women in migration is also to be found in economic situation in Poland where women are the biggest unemployed group,

⁵ Groupe d'étude de Démographie Appliquée (UCL) & Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, *Migrations et populations issues de l'immigration en Belgique*, Rapport statistique et démographique 2009.

⁶ Groupe d'étude de Démographie Appliquée (UCL) & Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, *Migrations et populations issues de l'immigration en Belgique*, Rapport statistique et démographique 2009.

especially in the countryside. In Brussels however, they can find job easily, even more than men, and cleaning jobs are often more stable than in the building sector.⁷

Graphique 5. Distribution hommes-femmes des flux migratoires en provenance de Pologne.



Source : INS

Proportion of men-women from Polish migration⁸

Nevertheless, this proportion seems to even up slowly in time – at least when we look at official migration data.

The Polish community is far from being homogeneous, partly because of its history. There are two very distinctive groups: the old and the newest waves of immigration.⁹ They have very different characteristics, needs and level of integration, hence of participation. While newcomers need to learn some cultural basis on the Belgian community, find accommodation and find a job to earn money rapidly (*i.e.* basic needs), the older group, which is much more integrated due to its age, seems to focus its need on cultural maintenance. The temporality of

⁷ KUZMA Elżbieta, « La communauté transnationale polonaise », in *Migrants de l'Est*, Agenda interculturel, n.280, Bruxelles, février 2010.

⁸ Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, *Flux migratoires en provenance des nouveaux Etats membres de l'Union Européenne vers la Belgique. Tendances et perspectives*, Bruxelles, 24 février 2006.

⁹ We will not discuss here the specific case of functionaries working for the EU institutions, diplomats,...

migration is not the only dividing factor among the community. The migration wave from the 1920s was composed of peasant workers seeking for jobs in mines; the Cold War era however saw a bigger flow of highly educated people among political refugees. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, economic migrants with legal or illegal status compose the main cohort of the migration.¹⁰

This divide has territorial resonance. Wallonia had been a welcoming land for economic migrants thanks to its coalfields, mainly in the 1930s. The new migration wave however is focusing since the 1990s on Brussels and on Flanders to a lesser extent. This means that most Polish people in Wallonia originate from older immigration waves, with slightly different socio-economic features, and the great majority of them is very well integrated or became Belgian. These factors can explain why this community has relatively weak associative network in Wallonia, as its need faded over time¹¹ (see following sections).

The subject of this analysis is the newest wave of migration (mainly economic workers coming from 1990 and onwards).

REASONS FOR MIGRATION AND MIGRATION PATTERNS

An important unemployment rate in Poland and prospects of higher incomes: these are the main motivations to migrate to Western Europe. In other words, the main motivation is economic. Polish people come in Belgium to work and to get a better quality of life for them and/or their family. Highly educated Poles usually don't choose Belgium as a destination but go to countries perceived as more dynamic like the UK (although Brussels can attract

¹⁰ LAMBRECHT Seppe, *Integration Patterns in urban contexts: the case of Polish immigration to Brussels*, working paper presented at the First International Conference of Young Urban Researchers (FICYUrb), June 11 - 12, 2007.

¹¹ LAMBERT Pierre-Yves, *La participation politique des allochtones en Belgique - Historique et situation bruxelloise*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia-Bruylant (coll. Sybidi Papers), juin 1999.

migrants through the symbolic of EU institutions). The Polish immigration in Belgium is generally specialized in some working fields: in the construction sector, the domestic sector, health care, seasonal work in agriculture,... They benefit from a good professional reputation which can ensure them a small advantage in comparison to other foreign workers (especially on the illegal labour market). A substantial part of their income is usually sent back to their family in Poland.¹²

Since the opening of the Belgian labour market it became much easier to work legally but regularization of Polish activities seems to take time. However, it seems that more and more Polish workers start to put the advantages of the Belgian social security system in the balance. Insurance, pension, unemployment benefits,... it becomes interesting to work on the legal market, although many Poles still acknowledge to work a few hours illegally to be able to keep sending money to their relatives.

A second important factor of Polish migration is that it has long been perceived as being temporary. Although this is slowly changing, most migrants wish to go back to their native country one day (even though few actually do). The temporariness of migration is due to several factors. One comes from the formal regulation entries which created a socially prescribed expectation of duration. These immigrants worked abroad in shifts of a few months after which they get replaced by a member of the family or a friend. This repeatedly and short stays abroad lead to the formation of a quasi-community in the host country, which allows them to combine a job in Belgium with a family life in Poland.¹³ This situation is evolving since the adhesion of Poland to the EU in 2004 and even more since the complete opening of the Belgian labour market in 2009.

¹² Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, *Flux migratoires en provenance des nouveaux Etats membres de l'Union Européenne vers la Belgique. Tendances et perspectives*, Bruxelles, 24 février 2006.

¹³ LAMBRECHT Seppe, *Integration Patterns in urban contexts: the case of Polish immigration to Brussels*, working paper presented at the First International Conference of Young Urban Researchers (FICYUrb), June 11 - 12, 2007.

This can nevertheless explain the weakness of the regularization movement as many people often go back to Poland. The development of transport infrastructure made Poland relatively close to Belgium. But for some – before the 2004-2009 shift period – it didn't look close enough, especially for those with a work permit (who didn't have to go back every three to four months) so they wanted to bring some pieces to Belgium. Consequently, they developed an important network of commercial activities to create a “little Poland” in Belgium through the opening of Polish shops selling regional products or proposing specific services.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

As work permits or “visas” are no longer needed, Polish people do not encounter many problems linked with illegality anymore. However, in a transnational point of view, Polish emigration has strong consequences on demographic structures in Poland. Since 2004, more than 1,000,000 left the country (at least temporarily)! Besides the economic consequences on the Polish economy, migration has an impact on families as many migrants leave their relatives behind, while being in contact with other cultures can create a gap when migrants come back home (this can be the case for some women coming from very peripheral regions who may have enjoyed more liberties than in their village where life may be based on traditional structures). Family divisions can become problematic and reunion either in Poland or in Belgium is never an easy choice. If they decide to go back to Poland, they must have enough money (social pressure): migrant should come back richer than he/she left (some don't dare to go back).

In conclusion, geopolitics events and the progressive enlargement of the European Union played a determining role in migration patterns which is now mainly economic. The Polish adhesion in 2004 and the opening of the Belgian labour market in 2009 represent shifting moments in migrants' status. But these formal changes still need to be translated in attitudes and we are now in an important period for the Polish community which can come out of illegality and play a more important part in its country of residence.

Presentation of their organization: how are these communities organized? Which are the existing type of associations (formal and non formal)? What is the role of the associations? How many associations? ...

For many years, Polish people illegally stayed in Belgium and started developing networks to allow them to live a “normal” life. This network of services managed to care about most of the Polish migrants' needs, except of education and health care services. With their own informal labour market, shops, hairdressers,... daily life became rather comfortable, especially in comparison to other undocumented migrants.

This network also helped newcomers to travel to Belgium, and granted them access to the informal labour market. The presence of “contact persons” such as relatives, friends, Polish priests, doctors,... helps the newly arrived migrant to feel safe in the new country. This network is largely spread from Belgium to Poland in order to facilitate transfers of goods, people and financial flux. Language knowledge is here an important resource.

This network was slowly consolidated over time. In the 1980s, the combination of solidarity among migrants and temporariness of migration leads to arrangement to guarantee a job to new migrants every three months (following the schedule of the visa expiration). This solidarity was mainly for relatives and friends. Polish workers were able to secure particular sectors of employment so that members of their community can have privileged access to new job opening, while restricting that of outsiders. Family ties are very important in this migration process and in the creation of a real « migration industry ». This migration industry is structured like an informal network, comprising travel agents, fixers and brokers. These persons maintain links between Poland and Belgium and act as an intermediary between the employer and the employee, mostly to negotiate about the wages because they usually understand both languages, Polish and French/Dutch.¹⁴

¹⁴ LAMBRECHT Seppe, *Integration Patterns in urban contexts: the case of Polish immigration to Brussels*, working paper presented at the First International Conference of Young Urban Researchers (FICYUrb), June 11 - 12, 2007.

Thanks to this network, the migrant can feel “at home” and can live between Polish relatives or friends, without having the need to integrate in the Belgian society as he/she can read Polish newspapers, eat Polish food,... this feeling is reinforced by the fact that migration is often seen as temporary. Integration seems therefore (even though this is slowly evolving) far from being a top priority to most Poles in Belgium. This organisation created a real “transnational community”, allowing migrants to live in illegality but still nourishing deep contacts with Poland. In this community, family, friends and religious organisations are very central.

This can explain why most Polish people in Belgium originate from the same region in Poland: Podlasie (North-East Poland). This peripheral region is built on two main institutions: family and the Church, explaining their importance to the Polish community in Belgium. For example, a few years after the fall of the Berlin wall, the Church was the only “bridge” between Belgian and Polish institutions, being then a real “lighthouse” for migrants, helping them to build their own personal network, to find a house, a job or providing administrative help, translation,... With the development and the organisation of the community, the Church started losing its relative importance to migrants and is now slowly getting back to its first function (religion).¹⁵ But there are still three important Polish Catholic organizations in Brussels.

¹⁵ KUZMA Elżbieta, « La communauté transnationale polonaise », in *Migrants de l'Est*, Agenda interculturel, n.280, Bruxelles, février 2010.

The town of Siemiatycze, called by locals 'Mała Belgia' (Little Belgium), is a good example of group migration and eligible for the examination of long-term consequences of circular migration. Migration from this town to Belgium already started in the 1980s, when the local public transport enterprise (PKS) organized a regular bus service to Brussels. Before the accession of Poland to the European Union in May 2004, about 3.000 individuals of the town of around 15.000 inhabitants lived and worked in Brussels, commuting back and forth by using daily bus services (public and private) or by own car. Due to the fact that restrictions on access to the Belgian labour market remained in force for citizens from 8 eastern EU MS until 1 May 2009, the migrants developed an informal and partly illegal circuit, including their own goods, transport and employment services. In the beginning, mostly single family members left for Brussels and often found illegal work mainly in the construction sector and in private cleaning services. On the one hand the city of Siemiatycze considerably benefited from the migration movement via remittances, often invested in real estates and in recent years also in local businesses. On the other hand the social costs of this unregulated migration movement became quickly apparent, mainly resulting from the disconnections of family bonds.

VANHEULE Dirk, MORTELMANS Annika, MAES Marleen, FOBLET Marie-Claire, *Temporary and circular migration in Belgium: Empirical evidence, policy practice and future options*, European Migration Network- Belgian National Contact Point, January 2011.

Several Polish schools were also established in Brussels and Antwerp, financed by the Polish authorities. One of the biggest Polish schools in Belgium, the "Joachim Lelewel-School" in Brussels has about 900 pupils.¹⁶ These schools care for the continuity of the Polish language and culture and create a strong link between migrants.

This network of services and organizations are not evenly spread throughout the Belgian territory. In Wallonia, there are a few cultural associations, resulting from the oldest migration waves but their aim is more the preservation of cultural identities than migrants' needs. In Brussels and Flanders, where the biggest flow of the new migration concentrated, this network is very much alive but with regional differences though. Polish people also seem to

¹⁶ VANHEULE Dirk, MORTELMANS Annika, MAES Marleen, FOBLET Marie-Claire, *Temporary and circular migration in Belgium: Empirical evidence, policy practice and future options*, European Migration Network- Belgian National Contact Point, January 2011.

be a little less organized in Flanders than in Brussels. Even in Antwerp (the Flemish city where the concentration of Polish people is probably the most important) there are a few Polish shops, a school, a church... but the services provided are quite limited and actions not coordinated. In Brussels, there is a lack of coordination too, but the network of services is much more consistent.

Important organisations of the Polish community in Belgium:

- Conseil de la Communauté polonaise de Belgique
- Polish expat network
- Comité des écoles polonaises de Belgique
- Missions catholiques polonaises
- Institut polonais (culture)

An important vector of information for the community is the Polish media in Belgium. There are a few newspapers, internet forum, radio,... which are read by a big number of migrants. These media provide information on the Belgian society or on administrative matters, glossaries on important words in French/Dutch, articles on Poland, community's activities in Belgium but also, and even more importantly, classified ads on housing, job opportunities, Polish products, bus rides to Poland, ...

Main Polish media in Belgium:

- Gazetka (the most important newspaper : 20.000 copies – 10/year, free.):
<http://gazetka.be/>
- Nowinki: <http://nowinki.be>
- PoloniaNet: <http://www.polonianet.be>
- EmStacja : <http://www.emstacja.eu/>
- Plus: <http://www.polskiplus.be/>
- Radio Roza: <http://ww1.radioroza.eu/>
- BelgiaNet: <http://www.belgia.net/>

Relations of these communities with nationals and other communities: issues of racism and discrimination, ...

The Polish community benefits from quite a good image among the Belgian society, although some stereotypes and misunderstandings can still be very vivid in both mindsets. Their long history of illegality heavily limited the possible contacts with the Belgian society as a whole. At that time, contacts mainly remained superficial with their employers, landlords or random people met in pubs,... But these few contacts forged the vision Polish people may have on Belgian community and vice versa. A poor knowledge of the national languages is also a big constraint as it may limit conversations to very basic or work-related matters. This means that Polish people mainly know the Belgian community from what they see, not from what they hear or understand.¹⁷

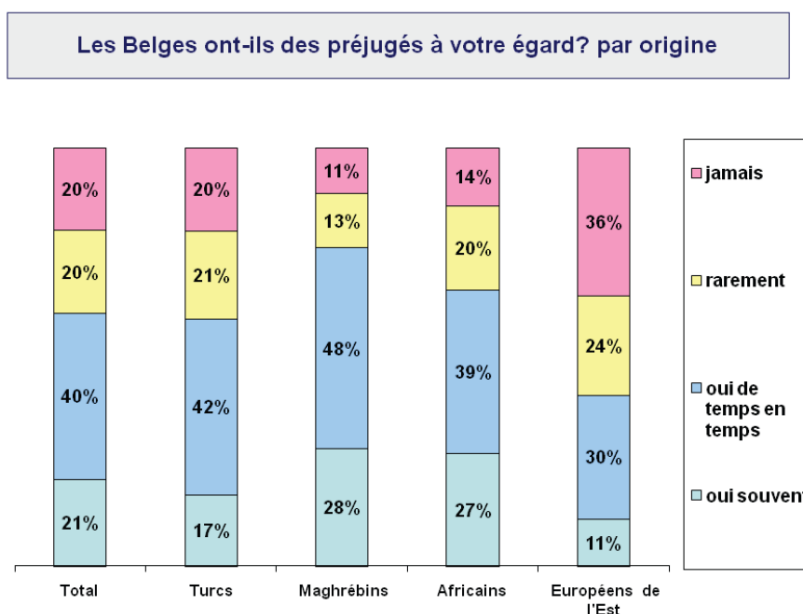
Although the end of their illegal situation changed the context of these relationships, the importance of the community and its services can still act as a limitative factor to contacts with Belgians. Some Polish people may still perceive Belgian community as not very welcoming, for example because they only get contacts with Belgian people through their work, where role playing or symbolic powers may be at stake, thus giving some twisted image of the other's community. Moreover, stereotypes can be very long lasting in mindsets and the opportunities in contacts given by their newly acquired legal status may take time to percolate into the community.

Concerning Belgian attitudes towards the Polish community, it seems that Polish people living in Flanders say more often that they feel discriminated than those living in Brussels, possibly because Flanders insists much more on a good knowledge of Dutch. However, where the majority mainly has Polish friends, socialization with Flemish people seems to occur more rapidly than in Brussels. In both Regions, a change can often be observed when Polish people have children (contact with other parents in school,...). These contacts can work on mutual

¹⁷ LEMAN Johan, *Sans Documents. Les immigrés de l'ombre. Latinos-Américains, Polonais et Nigériens clandestins à Bruxelles*, De Boek – Université, 1995.

perceptions: those having many contacts with Belgian people are more likely to have fewer stereotypes on their country of residence.

All in all, and in comparison with other foreign communities, Polish people do not have major problem of discrimination or stereotypes, although misunderstandings exist, partly because of language problems.

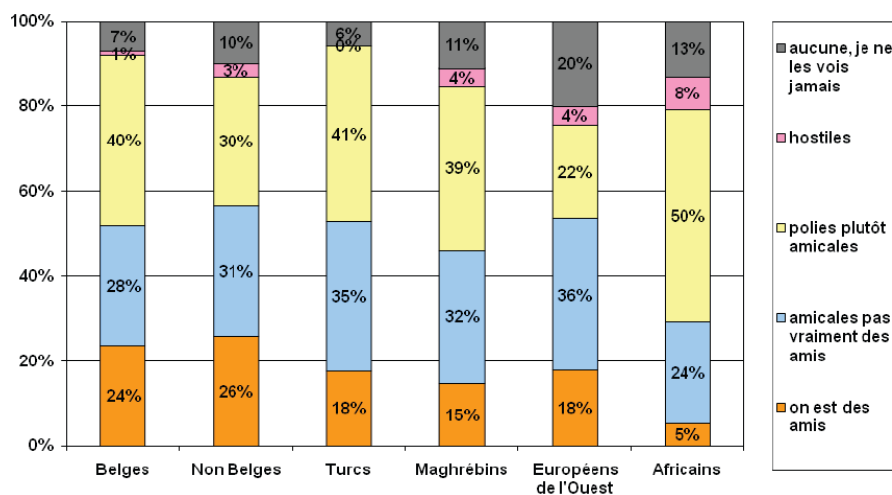


Do Belgian have stereotypes on your community? Never/hardly ever/sometimes/quite often¹⁸

Concerning their relationship with other foreign communities, Polish people seem to be less positive than Belgian. Hence attitudes are not particularly friendly, but these relationships generally remain “polite” and hardly ever aggressive or tense.

¹⁸ “East European: people from Central and Easter Europe, mainly Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania,...”, From: Independant Research Bureau, *Quelle perception les minorités ethniques ont-elles de la Belgique ? Présentation des résultats d’une enquête auprès de populations d’origines différentes en Belgique*, Etude pour le Centre pour l’égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, novembre 2009.

**Nature des relations avec ménages avoisinants:
par origine: Européens de l'Est**



Nature of the relationships with neighbours from other communities: none, I don't see them/hostile/polite/friendly but not real friends/we are good friends¹⁹

¹⁹ Source : Independent Research Bureau, *Quelle perception les minorités ethniques ont-elles de la Belgique ? Présentation des résultats d'une enquête auprès de populations d'origines différentes en Belgique*, Etude pour le Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme, novembre 2009.

Participation of non national EU citizens in the local and EU elections: data+ qualitative analysis (reasons for low or high rate of participation)

FORMAL PARTICIPATION: ELECTIONS TURNOUT

For both European and local elections in Belgium the turnout is low.

At Local elections in 2006, the turnout was as follow²⁰:

	Potential voters	Actual voters	% of potential
Brussels	8 712 (4352men/4360 women)	436 (162 men/274 women)	5%
Flanders	5 400 (869men/3035 women)	342 (80 men/262women)	6.3%
Wallonia	2245 (2 365men/ 1 376 women)	222 (75 men/ 147women)	9.9 %
Belgium	16 357 (7 586men/ 8 771 women)	1 000 (317 men/ 683women)	6.1%

These numbers are quite incomplete as we don't know the proportion of Polish people from the newest waves of migration and those from the older waves (different integration capital, which can for example explain why actual voters are proportionally more numerous in Wallonia). In addition, the potential voters' data only take into account Polish people who are registered at local level, hence hiding a huge part of the community who still isn't regularized. What is interesting to note however is that women seems to be more active relatively to men, especially in Flanders.

²⁰ Source : Direction générale Institutions et Population du SPF Intérieur - Registre National, statistiques officielles des électeurs, au 1/08/2006. Données par commune, sexe et nationalité, du nombre d'électeurs inscrits et potentiels.[<http://www.contact.rn.fgov.be/fr/statelec/elec.php>]

At the last European elections of 7th June 2009, 1.357 Polish people registered to vote (out of 28 367 potential voters).²¹ This means than less than 5% of potential voters did participate in these elections. We do not have more specific data but it remains that only a dramatically small proportion of Polish people do actually vote.

During these elections, a young Polish man, Bartosz Lech ran as a candidate for the European Green party. It seems that he was the first Polish citizen to stand as a candidate in European elections in a country other than Poland.²² He collected 13.955 votes²³, which is a very decent score, although not sufficient to be elected.

Beside this formal participation, Polish people are not very active in Belgian civil society either. Only a minority of Polish people (14% in Flanders) is active in Belgian associations. And in that case, they are mainly active in trade unions (some unions even targeted Polish workers through a couple of initiatives). This can be an indication that economic motivations are still very important.

REASONS FOR LOW PARTICIPATION

The unemployment rate is very low among the Polish community and most Polish people seem quite satisfied with their economic situation. This strong economic activity, linked with the motivation of migration, can partly explain the low level of participation: Polish people usually work a lot and consequently have little time to think about politics.

The creation of a Polish transnational community in Belgium clearly makes integration more difficult. Poles working in Belgium may not have many incentives to learn French or Dutch as

²¹ Direction des Election du SPF Intérieur – Statistiques officielles extraites du Registre national le 11 avril 2009, Nombre de citoyens européens inscrits en qualité d'électeurs au 1er avril : statistiques par nationalité. [http://elections.fgov.be/index.php?id=1182&no_cache=1&print=1]

²² Ydt Gazeta Wyborcza Polak kandyduje do Europarlamentu z Belgii, 23/03/2009, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,6411313,Polak_kandyduje_do_Europarlamentu_z_Belgii.html]

²³ Source : [<http://barteklech.wordpress.com/>]

most of them work with other Polish workers or only need to have a basic knowledge of one of the national languages to be able to do their jobs. When they don't work, they can spend most of their time with their family or Polish friends, they can get Polish TV, etc. But without an appropriate knowledge of French or Dutch, integration – hence participation – seems very difficult as Belgian society can be a complete mystery for some migrants, even if they have been living in the Kingdom for many years.²⁴

Furthermore, many Polish people are not even aware of their right to vote in Belgium or fear that they would lose their right to vote in Poland if they do so. Language is again to blame here. But the fact that citizens prefer to vote for national lists is also important.

Migration is seen as temporary and as a tool to earn money. Integration – hence participation – is not a priority. However, for most migrant, this temporary stay becomes much longer than expected, if not definitive. Some Poles managed to get a good professional situation, got most of their family in Belgium, with children educated in Belgian schools,... it becomes harder to go back to Poland. This feeling is reinforced by the persistence of a high rate of unemployment and low incomes in Poland (especially in the countryside or in peripheral regions such as Podlasie). Although the economic situation is getting better in Poland, Belgium and its living conditions still seem to weight more in the balance.

In other words, the creation of a transnational community, with strong and constant links with Poland and a temporary migration, gives rise to a transnational ethnic community whose culture and commitments are neither wholly oriented toward the new country nor toward the old, this is opposed to permanent settlement and the exclusive adoption of the citizenship of a destination country.²⁵

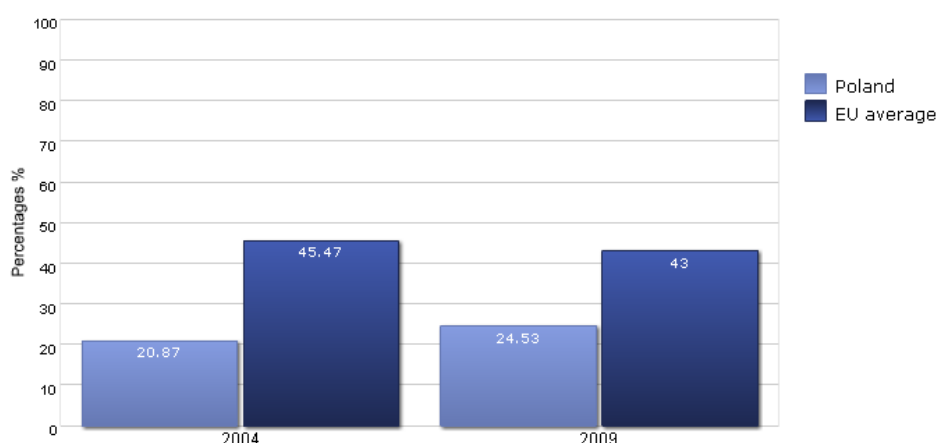
²⁴ KUZMA Elżbieta, « La communauté transnationale polonaise », in *Migrants de l'Est*, Agenda interculturel, n.280, Bruxelles, février 2010.

²⁵ LAMBRECHT Seppe, *Integration Patterns in urban contexts: the case of Polish immigration to Brussels*, working paper presented at the First International Conference of Young Urban Researchers (FICYUrb), June 11 - 12, 2007.

The idea of a stay in Belgium being a little more than temporary, coupled with the opening of the labour market (allowing them to work legally) are key factors to a greater integration and participation in the Belgian society.

DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLAND

Other factors for low participation can be found in the tradition of democracy and civil society in Poland. In comparison with other member States, turnout at European elections is quite low in Poland, hence this is not a surprise that Polish migrants in Belgium don't seem to feel an urging need to vote.



Election year	National turnout (%)	European turnout (%)
2004	20.87	45.47
2009	24.53	43

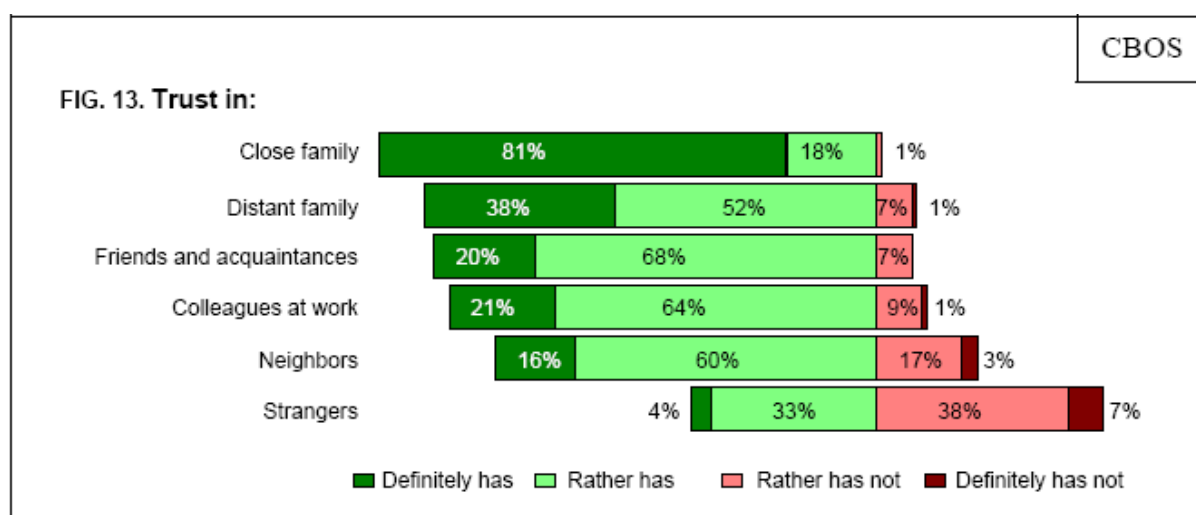
Turnout in Poland – European elections²⁶

Concerning the civil society dynamics, Poland is near the bottom of European ranking of membership in non-political organizations and associations (only 5.5% of adults worked in

²⁶ Source : European Parliament – Turnout per country, 2009, Poland,
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00082fcd21/2009-results.html?tab=20#result_turnout]

non-political organization or association in the last 12 months, while EU average is 13.6%). Current membership in trade unions is also low (14%).²⁷ Modern Polish civil society is actually very new: over 90% of the Polish NGOs have been established after 1989.²⁸ It seems that Poland suffered from a lack of democratic traditions, due to historical conditions²⁹ In other words; Polish people are not used to participate much (yet).

Another important factor is trust, which is an important prerequisite for the creation of civil society and for participation. Here again, Poland scores quite low. If these data are the same for Polish migrants in Belgium, this can explain the strength and the importance of the community, and the low level in participation.



Trust levels among Polish people³⁰

²⁷ EKIERT Grzegorz, KUBIK Jan, WENZEL Michał, *Civil society in Poland – Case study*, paper prepared for international conference “The Logic of Civil Society in New Democracies: East Asia and East Europe”, Taipei, June 5-7 2009.

²⁸ ANNA GAŚSIOR-NIEMIEC et PIOTR GLIŃSKI *Europeanization of civil society in Poland* Rev. soc. polit., god. 14, br. 1, str 29-47, Zagreb 2007.

²⁹ ROSZKOWSKA, Joanna, *Creation of civil society in Poland in comparison with European experiences*, YouREC Conference Paper November 2004.

³⁰ EKIERT Grzegorz, KUBIK Jan, WENZEL Michał, *Civil society in Poland – Case study*, paper prepared for international conference “The Logic of Civil Society in New Democracies: East Asia and East Europe”, Taipei, June 5-7 2009.

Presentation of the **results of the focus groups and lunch debates**

FINDINGS OF THE FIRST FOCUS GROUP

- Definition of participation

Participation is all about sharing common things, elections but also diversity and the way to live together, neighbourhood activities... Participating makes you feel good in a given territory.

Participation is also about creating a relationship with Belgian society and Polish people will only be able to do so if Belgian society is ready to welcome them as they are.

- The Polish community is not homogeneous.

It is the result of several immigration waves and is composed of very different “little worlds” which do not necessarily cross each other. An important question we should agree on is “Who do we want to involve in this participatory process?”. Following the answer, we won’t mobilize the same resources or organize the same activities, which have to be adapted to the specificities of the target group – linked to the fact that the Polish community is far from being a united body and that its various subgroups have to be approached in a differentiated way. Moreover, the little worlds composing the Polish community do not often mix, which can result in a lack of social diversity in the associative networks.

- However, a well-organized Polish network can allow the community to live “cut off” from the Belgian society in a certain way.

There is a widespread idea that Polish people don’t want to participate, but this is far from being entirely true. A weak political participation can be explained by a variety of factors,

such as a strong and well-organized Polish network, allowing the community to live “cut off” from the Belgian society – what is sometimes described as communitarianism. If one must not jump too fast to a conclusion on that matter, it is true however that it can be hard to get out of the community as the latter gives so many practical advantages to its members. Although it tends to weaken, this informal network is still very present in the society.

- **The language barrier is identified as one of the most important obstacles to integration and to participation.**

Language barrier is also identified as an important obstacle to integration and to participation. Learning the language(s) of the host country is indeed needed if someone wants to get involved in participatory activities and to enjoy “full citizenship”. Very few Polish people however have enough time to attend language courses (courses spreading over a couple of years, not suitable for work schedules...) and many are embarrassed to speak (not fluently) another language. Moreover, many women work as cleaning ladies in private houses, hence being alone most of the time (for some of them). This situation can create a lack of social contact which subsequently doesn't help learning languages. Some participants explain furthermore that a significant part of the Polish community is not used to attending school, so taking languages courses might represent an additional effort that not all of them are ready to make. From these observations, the usefulness of translating information on political life but also on mindsets and cultural background was underlined.

- **The reasons of migration (mainly economic) are to be taken into account as participation may not be a priority to Polish people. However, the recent opening of the labour market may leave more space to “freedom and rights” preoccupations.**

Reasons of migration are a determining factor we must also take into account. Many Polish people indeed chose to migrate for economic reasons and – very important detail – often illegally. Therefore, Polish migrants didn't come to Belgium to participate but to find a work and earn some money. Active citizenship was not a priority. Most of them did not even think

of staying in Belgium and considered their presence to be temporary. This can explain the discretion of the Polish community and its weak involvement in Belgian society as it did not want to be seen either. The recent opening of the Belgian labour market (May 2009) changed their conditions from an illegal to a legal one and the transition towards “freedom and rights” cannot be integrated in mindsets at once. The very idea of staying in Belgium for an indefinite period of time is however slowly gaining strength. For example, cars are less and less registered in Poland, which can show that returning to Poland is not as frequent as it used to be. Another example is the increasing number of ads in Polish newspapers proposing to sell flats and houses in Poland

Consequently, the need to participate is not often expressed... or even thought. This need would hence have to be « created » through informing people of foreign origin on the advantages of participation. Maybe does political integration only come after economic integration?

- **Many people don't know how to intervene in local political life – even less in European politics. Information on participation seems to be insufficient.**

Most foreigners arriving in Belgium are not even aware of their fundamental rights. It is therefore important to make them understand they have social rights and that the associative network can support them if needed. For example, the “Inburgering” process in Flanders was underlined as an important tool to enter the Belgian society.

Concerning political participation as such, people should understand it can change their future. Integrating foreigners is important for social cohesion and inclusion. One problem is that people don't know how to intervene in local political life – even less in European politics. Who could imagine becoming a municipal councilor one day? Political field looks too much disconnected from their everyday concerns. It is therefore important to explain to people of foreign origin what is the very purpose of participation, which are the advantages of it and how it can affect their daily life – because local politics can have a significant political clout (to say nothing of European politics).

But even if a Polish person were to stand as candidate for local elections, she/he would have to have enough time, a suitable social capital and a broad personal network, in order to ensure the position. It already happened that someone wished to run as candidate but then abandoned the idea because he/she did not feel able of assuming the role of representative.

- **Polish people often are suspicious of politics and government (to be considered in regard of Polish history). Misperceptions**

Besides, Polish people often are suspicious of politics and government (to be considered in regard of Polish history). Misperceptions, stereotypes and mistrust are still very alive in both Polish and Belgian mindsets. Many Polish people perceive Belgian community as not very welcoming and Belgian politics hardly ever ask them to participate at all. Some people think there will be no political participation from people of foreign origin as long as politicians don't have interests in activating them.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE FIRST FOCUS GROUP

- **Spread information (from both formal and informal channels) on the importance of participation.**

The lack of information is huge: many foreigners don't even know they can vote in local (and European – for EU citizens) elections! To reach Polish people, it is a good way to provide them information through shops, churches, journals, representatives, local politics... but also explain why it is so important to participate by showing the impact it can have on their life. The message would be something like “vote and feel good at home (in your host country)”. Ideally, information should come from both formal and informal channels.

- **Mobilize Polish associations, organizations concerned with the promotion of integration of migrants,... around participatory matters.**

Finally, cultural events (for example, official events related to “high culture” organized by the Polish embassy) are a way for Poland to reconstruct its image against long-lasting stereotypes. According to some estimates, every Belgian has had an interpersonal contact with a Polish person and it would be a pity if this cultural awareness was to be limited to some “intellectuals”. Therefore, some participants proposed to share Polish culture at local level through fun activities, culinary events...

- **Raise awareness among civil servants and public authorities’ representatives about problems encountered by people of foreign origin willing to participate.**

It is to be said that the political opportunity structure may not always be very open to associative initiatives or to the activation of the citizenship of persons of foreign origin. Civil education can play an interesting role in the promotion of participation but often stays informal due to a lack of resources.

Related to this, some associations already asked for subsidies to Flemish authorities. In Brussels, there are lots of sociological differences between municipalities and each one of them has specific tools to help NGOs and associations. The Polish community may be very well organized in Brussels but this is not the case everywhere in Belgium. Hence a formal information campaign can be a way to reach everybody (and can also be more neutral).

- **Empower women and « contact » persons, by linking social life with the political one for instance.**

Women are the backbone of Polish society and are very active – for example (which can be fortuitous but still interesting to be underlined): most Polish participants attending this focus group are women. Women can be a source of mobilization and participation, especially if we link participation with subjects that directly concern them such as health care, education, social security, family support... Women are also those in charge of children (and/or the

elderly). This is a “constraint” one has to take into account. It can be useful to create meeting places where children would be taken care of, while women would discuss local politics, community life... or attend specific language courses. Through these activities, woman could promote participation around them. But these efforts should of course not be restricted to the Polish community. Women from other communities should be invited to share their experiences, to debate and to learn from each other. Because a lack of diversity and contact between communities have been underlined. For example, parents of different origins (e.g. Polish, Moroccan, Brazilians) but with children attending the same school do not really communicate with each other. These meetings could begin with very small things like cooking classes. Step by step it could bring political matters in the discussion and link social life with the political one – the latter looking much closer then to their daily concerns.

Trust is an important factor. An idea could be to create a referent, an exemplary citizen, a contact person who would know both cultures.

Concerning language courses, the offer is adequate but when you work 10 hours a day, you don't always feel like attending lessons! That's why some proposed to integrate language courses in professional trainings or work. This opportunity already exists but is underused.

FINDINGS OF THE SECOND FOCUS GROUP

The results of the first focus group were discussed, keeping the different regional situations in mind.

In Flanders and Wallonia, situations can indeed vary from the one in Brussels, because of their history among other things. Wallonia had been a welcoming land for economic migrants thanks to its coalfields. The new migration wave however is focusing since the 2000s on Brussels and on Flanders to a lesser extent. This means that most Polish people in Wallonia originate from older immigration waves, with slightly different socio-economic features, and

the great majority of them is very well integrated or became Belgian. These factors can explain why this community has relatively weak associative network in Wallonia, as its need faded over time.

In Flanders, the Polish immigration mainly began in the early 2000s, as in Brussels even if some differences between the two regional situations should be underlined.

The Flemish integration politics is very concerned with language learning as a sufficient level of Dutch can often be a condition to access certain services. Polish people also seem to be a little less organized in Flanders than in Brussels. Even in Antwerp (the Flemish city where the concentration of Polish people is probably the most important) there are a few Polish shops, a school, a church... but the services provided are quite limited and actions not coordinated. In Brussels, there is a lack of coordination too, but the network of services is much more consistent.

It seems that Polish people living in Flanders say more often that they feel discriminated than those living in Brussels. However, where the majority mainly has Polish friends, socialization with Flemish people seems to occur more rapidly than in Brussels. In both Region, a change can often be observed when Polish people have children (contact with other parents in school,...). These contacts can work on mutual perceptions: those having many contacts with Belgian people are more likely to have fewer stereotypes on their country of residence. Concerning their relationship with other foreign communities, Polish people seem to be less positive than Belgian.

Only a minority of Polish people (14% in Flanders) is active in Belgian associations. And in that case, they are mainly active in trade unions (some unions even targeted some initiative on Polish workers). This can be an indication that economic motivations are still very important.

The unemployment rate is very low among the Polish community and most Polish people seem quite satisfied with their economic situation. This strong economic activity, linked with the motivation of migration, can partly explain the low level of participation: Polish people usually work a lot and have consequently little time to think about politics.

In order to improve Polish participation in social and political life in Belgium, participants insisted on the importance of taking into account the diversity of the Polish community : socio-economic, cultural differences are often great (education, gender, age, origin,...). This sociological diversity will then ask different mobilization means as these people encounter specific problems, don't always share similar values and can be sensitive to varying issues. Nevertheless, common mobilization means could be work and/or religion.

IDENTIFICATION OF COMPETENCES THROUGH CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Before starting the role playing exercises, the general characteristics a contact person may need were identified as follow:

- To be fluent in one of the national languages (and in Brussels, even have a passive knowledge of either French or Dutch seems necessary)
- To have a strong and relevant contact network within the Belgian society
- To possess an extended contact network within the Polish community.

We went further in the definition of these characteristics through two different examples.

In the first example, a case of representative democracy, participants had to imagine a person of foreign origin (and Polish in particular) who would like to be elected at local level in order to represent his/her community in political life, but also to raise issues that are facing people of foreign origin in general.

In the second example, a case of participatory democracy, the approach was different as the imaginary person wishes to mobilize political representatives around a problem that directly concerns his/her community (for example, the Polish community). The aim is to make political representatives move towards the resolution of this specific problem. The issue we

chose was the request of a social interpretation service in local offices for social support (CPAS).

CASE A: to be elected – representative democracy

In genera, every person wishing to be elected at local level should be familiar with Belgian politics (different power levels, attribution, competences and responsibilities following the level, history, recent political development...). It seems that many Polish people living in Belgium don't know much about the functioning of the electoral system. Hence, in addition of a good knowledge of Belgian institution, a person wishing to be elected should also be able to transmit this knowledge to his/her community. For example, being able to explain the main differences between Flemish and French-speaking political parties, issues and powers that are in the hands of the local level, the value of participating at such a proximate power level,...

In another way, to be elected also means that one should represent a consequent constituent group. Hence giving the impression to be able to raise awareness on specific issues touching the community seems important, as well as being very engaged on social matters while showing an open mind to particular problems and needs.

Besides, to gain a broader electoral base, it seems interesting to be capable of touching other foreign community, in the idea of representing all people of foreign origin. This demands an open mind and great cooperative abilities. Finally, as Belgian politics can be slow patience can also be an interesting characteristic.

CASE B: Mobilize a community around a specific issue – participatory democracy

In order to mobilize a community around an issue, many competences were similar of those identified in case A, such as ability to convince, to show an open mind, to be familiar with Belgian institutions,... On this last point, the capacities were more specific: to be aware of

organizations and procedures that are involved in the problem-solving process, to have a good knowledge of the law (*i.e.* to be able to get more information about the law or to use an appropriate expertise), to be able to identify the relevant actors in the issue. A good Belgian contact network is also far from being superfluous in this case.

As in case A, an issue should be brought by a consistent group. It is therefore important to know well the situation of the community (for example, the Polish situation since 2000), to be able to bring together the different cultural groups (which includes understanding the complexity and the internal diversity of the community) and to be able to capture the needs and experiences of the group at its level (proximity).

Finally, participants insisted on the need of sharing abilities, competences and knowledge: contact persons should take time to inform their community and should become “role models” for new participatory practices.

Presentation of **good practices** from representative associations (from any origin) to empower the people they represent and encourage them to take part in the democratic life of the host country and/or of the EU

The municipality of Saint-Gilles is the one with probably the highest concentration of inhabitants from other member States (30%). Therefore, the local authorities decided to set up a commission of dialogue on European Union (Commission du dialogue sur l'Europe). In 2004, following the European enlargement and the adhesion of Poland, this commission organized debates on the Polish presence in Saint-Gilles and on the importance of Poland for the EU. In 2006, Polish people could vote for the first time at local elections as EU citizens. Consequently local authorities intensified their actions for participation of EU citizens, hands in hands with the Brussels-Europe liaison Office. Raise-awareness campaigns were set up to support participation in local elections for EU citizens, trying to reduce administrative burdens or formal obstacles and informing people on their political rights (e.g. some were not aware of their right to vote in Belgium, others were afraid to lose their right to vote in their country of origin,...). All this was explained in leaflets which were distributed to every registered EU citizen, translated in his/her national language. Although these actions aimed every EU citizen in Saint-Gilles, a special attention was given to the Polish residents. For instance, the local authorities organized "Polish Days" (les Journées polonaises de Saint-Gilles) which aimed at improving the image of Poland in Belgium and to make people discover Polish culture, music, food, artists, poetry,... but also to empower this very "shy" community to have a greater say in local social and political life. More than 300 people participated in the activities. Following the success of this event, a new edition of the Polish days was organized in 2011.

With the Polish presidency of the EU, the municipality of Etterbeek also organized cultural events linked with the Polish presence in its ground (Polish community is the second most important in Etterbeek). One of the main events was a meeting to raise-awareness among EU citizens about participation in local elections, their main issues, goals and ways to participate.

Identification of the **needs** and of what has to be improved: **recommendations**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS IDENTIFIED

- Spread information (from both formal and informal channels) on the importance of participation. Use Polish media in Belgium to spread information
- Facilitate and promote language learning but also keep translating the most important documents on social and political life.
- Mobilize Polish associations, organizations concerned with the promotion of integration of migrants,... around participatory matters.
- Raise awareness among civil servants and public authorities' representatives about problems encountered by people of foreign origin willing to participate. Also try to tighten their relationships with the Polish community.
- Empower women and « contact » persons, by linking social life with the political one for instance, and encourage them to try giving a greater visibility and a bigger say to their community.

List of partners associations

PEOPLE MET DURING THE PROJECT

- Elzbieta Kuzma – researcher ULB-GERME
- Sławomir Czarlewski, Polish Ambassador in Belgium
- Isabelle du Bois d'Aische
- Dagmara Jasinska, European Commission
- Christine Kulakowski, director Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle
- Jean Spinette – president CPAS Saint-Gilles
- Maciej Hilarowicz, chief redactor Emstacja / Plus
- Agatha de Latour – journalist Emstacja / Plus
- Dominika Piatkowska – journalist Emstacja / « Plus »
- Jowita Sokolowska - ADMB HR Services
- Marysia Turbiasz, BON (Brussels Onthaalbureau)
- Joseph Ptaszynski - Conseil de la Communauté Polonaise de Belgique
- Jan Bielecki - Conseil de la Communauté Polonaise de Belgique
- Leokadia Komaiszko – journalist, writer
- Katarzyna Jurowczyk - Antwerp Business Center
- Jacques PENEZ - Commission Consultative des Affaires Européennes de la Commune d'Etterbeek (CCAÉ)
- Bruno MARIANI - Commune d'Etterbeek – CCAÉ
- Véronique LHOIR - Commune d'Etterbeek – CCAÉ
- Alain Willaert, Conseil bruxellois de coordination sociopolitique
- Elzbieta Michalak, student
- Justyna Jarzabska, student
- Tchuda José Antonie – ID
- Kris Vancluysen – researcher UHasselt
- Sofie Hennau – researcher UHasselt
- ...

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