

# in search of public support for migration

jan denys

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political parties  
english translation

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ecolo	french speaking green party
groen!	dutch speaking green party
ps	french speaking social democrats
vooruit	dutch speaking social democrats
ptb	french speaking communist party
pvda	dutch speaking communist party
mr	french speaking liberal party
open vld	dutch speaking liberal party
n-va	dutch speaking nationalist party
vb	dutch speaking radical nationalist party
les engages	french speaking (former) christian democrats
cd&v	dutch speaking christian democrats
défi	french speaking nationalist party

# 01

## introduction

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## why this study?

Why is Randstad Research devoting a survey on support for migration in Belgium? Firstly, because it is one of the most important social developments. Developments that also carry over into the labour market. And of course, also because in these times of historical scarcity, attracting talent from abroad is more than ever a key strategic concern regarding staffing. Some figures are in order here.

On 1 January 2021, 11.52 million people (100%) officially resided in Belgium, including 1.45 million foreigners (13%) and 10.07 million Belgians. Of the latter, 2.32 million were of foreign origin (20%). Belgians with Belgian background make up 67% of the population. (Myria, 2022)

The proportion of foreigners in Belgium rose from 9% to 13% between 1995 and 2021. The proportion of Belgians with a foreign first registered nationality rose from 4% to 10% over the same period.

Over the past seventy years, Belgium has experienced structurally rising immigration (albeit, of course, with cyclical fluctuations in between) and, since 1989, a continuously positive migration balance. Since 2001, annual immigration has exceeded 100,000, and since 2007, it has even mostly exceeded 150,000, peaking at 175,000 in 2019. Even in the infamous Covid year, the figure was still 144,000. Overall, Covid had a limited effect on migration. But emigration has also risen sharply. Since 2012, it has also exceeded 100,000, peaking at 120,000 in 2019. After peaking at 79,000 on net migration in 2010, it has since hovered around 50,000. (Statbel, 2022)

Migration has been a hot topic for several decades, both in terms of new influxes and the group of migrants who are (trying to) integrate here. The social debate is strongly influenced by various ideologies. An underlying problem is undoubtedly that migration is lumped together too much. However, it is likely that the different forms of migration (regular, asylum, illegal) are not assessed in the same way. These are totally different realities anyway. The main contribution of this study is that it very clearly distinguishes between these different forms of migration. The study maps the public opinions on migration. Given the strong ideological slant of the debate and the high degree to which migration is a politicised issue, there will be a strong focus on the electorates of different political parties. How do these electorates view different aspects of migration? But more classic socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, etc.) have not been left out. Of course, the differences between respondents of Belgian (Flemish, Walloon) origin and those of other origins, including Moroccan and Turkish, are also highlighted. However, it remains difficult to get a fully representative picture of the latter group's opinions.

We start the study with some general hypotheses on migration. After that, we take a closer look at regular migration (work, family reunification, students). We then cover asylum, and end with illegal migration. In the final chapter, we summarise the main insights and also formulate some policy concerns.

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# 02

## methodology

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The survey was administered online during the period from May to June 2022. To allow for sufficient subdivisions (e.g. regarding the different electorates), we opted for an extra-large pool of some 3,000 respondents. The study population is comprised of the group of citizens aged 18 and above. The oldest respondent was 94 years old. We were able to call on the knowledge and expertise of Professor Emeritus Mark Elchardus (VUB) to draw up the survey and interpret some of the figures. Randstad Research is solely responsible for the content of the report.

The composition of the pool of respondents sought to be representative in terms of gender, education, age, place of residence, and ethnic background. We could not completely avoid the well-known problem regarding underrepresentation of people from non-western migration backgrounds. The problem is that this cannot be corrected with weighting. Young people are clearly overrepresented within this cohort. The cohort of people over the age of 60 is virtually absent. Obviously, this must be taken into account in the interpretation.

table 1

breakdown of respondents  
(proportions)

n = 3,005

gender	men	49	ideology	non-religious, not interested	32
	women	51		atheist, liberal	14
age	18-30 years	18	christian	47	
	31-40 years	19	muslim	4	
	41-50 years	18	other	3	
	51-60 years	15	language	french	46
	over 60	30		dutch	54
level of education	little or no formal education	18	west flanders	10	
	secondary education	41	east flanders	13	
	higher education	40	antwerp	16	
	other	1	limburg	8	
background	belgian, flemish, walloon	82	flemish brabant	10	
	european	12	brussels	11	
	moroccan	3	namur	4	
	turkish	1	henegouwen	12	
	other	2	luxemburg	3	
socioeconom- ic position	employed	54	walloon brabant	4	
	job-seeker/ unemployed	4	liège	10	
	sick/disabled	6	les engagés	2.6	
	student	5	cd&v	5.2	
	housewife/ househusband	4	défi	2.1	
	retired	27	ecolo	6.1	
			groen	4.5	
electorate			mr	8	
			n-va	12	
			open vld	5.2	
			ptb	7.1	
			ps	7.4	
			pvda	4.5	
			vlaams belang	10.8	
			vooruit	6.7	
			other/blank	17.6	



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# 03

## the impact of and vision for migration

This chapter discusses migration in a general sense, and does not distinguish between the different forms migration can take. First, we examine how the population assesses the overall impact of migration using five statements.

- What impact does migration have on the government budget?
- What impact does migration have on the economy?
- What impact does migration have on education?
- What are the personal experiences of migration (impact on neighbourhoods and individuals, feeling of comfort, feeling of safety, etc.)?
- Overall assessment

Then we will explore the connection between how migration is viewed and how people view their own and society's future. We then confront respondents with two extreme positions on migration: open and closed borders, respectively.

### 3.1 impact on government budget

To explore how the population assesses the costs and benefits of legal migration, the following question was asked, "If one looks at what they contribute in terms of social contributions and taxes and what they cost in terms of social security, pensions, health insurance, and unemployment... then...", with three response options: "Do migrants contribute more than they cost?", "Do they contribute as much as they cost?", and "Do they cost more than they contribute?".

Only 12% of the population believes that migrants contribute more than they cost, 28% think there is a balance between the two, and a whopping 60% feel that migrants cost more than they contribute. The estimate of a negative impact is five times higher than the positive one. Men are slightly less negative than women in this regard (14% and 10%). The same is true for young people and more so for students. Those under 30 are positive in 16% of cases, and among students, it is as high as 24%, but among people over 50, it is still 9%. People with little or no formal education are also more negative than those with a higher education (resp. 10% and 15%). The same goes for Dutch-speakers versus French-speakers (9% and 15%). In line with expectations, people who find it difficult or impossible to make ends meet and expect no improvement in this (hereafter referred to as the vulnerable) also score more negatively (8%) than those who can live richly or comfortably and expect no loss of income (hereafter referred to as the privileged) (16%). The difference between the two cohorts is even clearer if we consider the responses to "cost more than they contribute" (resp. 71% and 49%).

On average, we note larger differences regarding ethnic background. Someone from a Belgian, Flemish, or Walloon background is positive in only 9% of cases in this respect. This proportion rises to 19% for someone from a European background. It is 31% among people of Moroccan/Turkish background. We reiterate that, given the quasi absence of older people among the respondents, the results from this cohort are probably less representative than for other cohorts. Among other people from non-European backgrounds, the proportion with a less negative assessment

is also relatively high (29%). Characteristics associated with a more negative estimate of the budgetary costs and benefits of migration are: Dutch-speaking, native (people defining their origin as Belgian, Flemish, or Walloon), people with little or no formal education, socioeconomically vulnerable, somewhat older and male. Characteristics associated with a positive assessment are: French-speaking, migrant, higher education, socioeconomically privileged, relatively young, and female.

We also see clear differences by political affiliation. The electorates of the different Belgian political parties have very different views on this. Most striking is the alignment of the green factions. Where the negative assessment clearly carries more weight in all other political formations, this is not the case with Ecolo. There, both keep each other in balance (resp. 29% cost more and 30% contribute more). The proportions in Groen are still somewhat balanced as well (resp. 22% and 32%). But for all other political parties and factions, the proportion of negatives is at least 2 to at most 28 times higher than the proportion of positives.

table 2

“migrants contribute more than they cost” versus “migrants cost more than they contribute” (proportions)

	contribute more	cost more
ecolo	29	30
pvda	23	51
groen	22	32
ps	19	51
les engagés	19	42
défi	16	58
ptb	15	56
cd&v	12	50
vooruit	11	56
mr	8	63
open vld	8	53
n-va	3	82
vlaams belang	3	85

### what does science say?

The impact of migration can, of course, be viewed in different ways, depending on the benefits and costs involved. One of the least controversial ways to do so adheres to easily measurable costs. That method was utilised by the National Bank of Belgium in a study published in 2020 covering the year 2016. (Baeyens, 2020)

That study only looks at the costs and benefits of legal migration. The costs and benefits of asylum and illegal migration are not taken into consideration. Specifically, it takes into account what the government spends on pensions, unemployment benefits, and child benefits through compulsory health insurance and on welfare. Taxes paid and social contributions are taken into account on the benefits side. Due to the methodology used by the National Bank, the estimation of costs and benefits can only be carried out for first-generation migrants. First-generation legal migrants were found to cost about 3.6 billion more than the average population in the year under review. If we take this study as a starting point, we could say that 60% of respondents were correctly informed and 40% were not.

## 3.2 migration and economy

There was a clear negative answer to the question on the impact of migration on the government budget. Does this also apply regarding impact on the economy? This is indeed the case. Only 18% believe that “this country is doing better economically as a result of migration”; 82% of respondents see no positive economic impact. Given the statement, this does not necessarily mean that they view the impact of migration on the economy negatively, but rather that they believe migration does not improve the economic situation.

Men are more positive than women in this regard (resp. 21% and 15%). The same is true for young people and students (resp. 24% and 35%). However, this is still 13% for those over the age of 50. In terms of level of education, we also notice a difference between the

people with little or no formal education and those with a higher education (13% versus 22%). There is little difference between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers in this case (19% versus 16%). Ethnic background, on the other hand, does make for big differences. Among people with a Belgian background, the proportion of positives is 14%. Among respondents from European backgrounds, this is 22%, while it is 29% for those with Moroccan/Turkish backgrounds, and other non-European backgrounds rated as high as 46%. Predictably, social security has a major impact on how people assess the contribution of migration to the economy. Among the vulnerable, only 9% believe things are improving economically as a result of migration. Among the privileged, this is 27%. A more positive assessment is seen among men, young people, those with a higher education, migrants, and the privileged. A

<sup>1</sup> So, the cost of education is not considered either. However, comparable foreign studies generally do take this into account.

<sup>2</sup> The method used assumes that costs and benefits can be taken into account over a lifetime. This is possible for first-generation migrants, but not for second-generation migrants. Their average age in the study is 28, most of the costs (pensions, health insurance) are incurred by somewhat older people.

more negative assessment was found among women, somewhat older people, people with little or no formal education, natives, and the vulnerable.

In addition to ethnic background, political affiliation is once again the variable that shows the biggest differences. Once more, it is the green factions that are comprised of the most people who view the impact of migration on the economy positively. The figure is 40% for Groen and 33% for Ecolo, followed by the parties with Christian roots (CD&V 34% and Les Engagés 28%). Among the left-wing parties, we see notable differences between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking parties. Among PS and PTB electorates, 12% and 11%, respectively, see a positive impact; among PVDA and Vooruit electorates, this is 23% and 26% respectively. Even among the liberal factions, Dutch-speakers are more positive than French-speakers (Open Vld 23%, MR 13%). Remarkably, NV-A's electorate (13%) scores very close to that of PS and PTB in this variable.

### 3.3 migration and education

We also observe the negative tenor regarding the effects of migration when it comes to education. 64% of respondents believe that migration has caused the quality of education to decline. Men are more negative in this regard than women (67% versus 61%). In terms of age, the differences run high, from 49% among people under 30 (and even as low as

table 3

#### migration degraded the quality of education (proportions)

	agree
défi	82
vlaams belang	80
n-va	79
mr	75
ptb	66
cd&v	61
ps	60
les engagés	60
open vld	54
pvda	52
vooruit	51
ecolo	50
groen	36

41% among students) to 73% among people over 50. The negative trend does not continue beyond the age of 60, though. In terms of level of education, the differences are less pronounced, with 70% of people with little or no formal education and 60% those with a higher education seeing a negative impact.

Regarding ethnicity, we find the same well-known differences. In two out of three cases, respondents from Belgian backgrounds felt that the quality of education has declined as a result of migration, for other Europeans, this drops to 56%, and goes even further for respondents from Moroccan/Turkish backgrounds at 33%. French-speakers (67%) are also more negative in this regard than Dutch-speakers (62%). Vulnerable people also view this more negatively (69%) than privileged people (57%). People with the following characteristics are more likely to perceive a negative impact of migration on the quality of education: men, older people, people with little or no formal education, natives, French-speakers, and the vulnerable. A less negative opinion is found among women, young people, migrants, those with a higher education, Dutch-speakers, and the privileged.

Again, the differences between and sometimes within political factions are stark. We notice the most negative evaluation of the impact of migration on education among DéFI (82%), followed by Vlaams Belang (80%) and N-VA (79%). MR is close at 75%. The difference with sister faction Open Vld is large (54%). The left-wing and (historically) more Christian-inspired parties are overall slightly less negative where

it is notable that, in addition to the liberal MR party, the left-wing French-speaking parties are also more negative than the Dutch-speaking ones (PS 60% versus Vooruit 51%; PTB 66% versus PVDA 52%). Once again, it is the Groen parties whose electorates see the least negative impact on education. In fact, Groen is the only party where a minority of the electorate views the impact of migration on education negatively (36%); however, this is just not the case with Ecolo (50%).

### 3.4 the personal experiences and effects of migration

There is no doubt that personal involvement and experiences play a role that cannot be underestimated in forming an opinion on (the effects of) migration. Therefore, it is interesting to gauge personal experiences of migration. This was done by asking respondents a series of yes or no questions. Six of these questions related to possible positive effects of migration (see table 4) and four to possible negative effects (see table 5).

table 4

personally experienced the positive effects of migration  
(proportions)

"as a result of migration..."	total	dutch-speakers	french-speakers
"i know a greater variety of people"	47	41	53
"i find life more fascinating"	29	30	29
"i have access to more services"	17	13	21
"my neighbourhood has improved"	17	14	20
"it's been easier to find a job"	15	14	16
"i earn more"	11	9	13

table 5

personally experienced the negative effects of migration  
(proportions)

"as a result of migration..."	total	dutch-speakers	french-speakers
"i feel less safe"	58	58	58
"i feel less at home in this country"	53	51	55
"my work has become less pleasant"	40	35	46
"i feel lonelier"	25	22	28

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The first thing to note is that twice as many people see negative effects as those who recognise positive effects. The average percentage answering 'yes' to the negative effects is 44, while the average for the positive effects is 23. More than half of those surveyed feel that their safety decreased as a result of migration and they feel less at home in this country.

The differences between men and women are relatively small and not clear-cut. Men feel slightly less at home and also find work less enjoyable as a result of migration but report finding work easier and earning more than women. In terms of age, the trend is clear. An advancing age is associated with more negative and less positive opinions. Vulnerable people are also almost always more negative or less positive than privileged people. The same applies to respondents with a Belgian background compared to the other ethnic backgrounds.

There are usually no major differences between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers. Among the differences that are present, we find that more French-speakers see both positive and negative impacts. Compared to Dutch-speakers, more French-speakers know more different people, have more services at their disposal, and see progress in their neighbourhood as a result of migration. But there are also more French-speakers than Dutch-speakers who believe that working has become less pleasant and they feel more lonely as a result of migration.

We also notice the differences on personal experiences among different electorates.



table 6

“feels less at home” and “feels less safe” due to migration (proportions in agreement)

	feels less at home	feels less safe
vlaams belang	84	89
ptb	62	61
mr	61	66
n-va	61	74
défi	53	66
ps	47	57
cd&v	45	51
ecolo	43	41
les engagés	39	45
pvda	39	42
open vld	37	42
vooruit	31	39
groen	29	34

Whereas the differences between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers are globally limited or even non-existent in the case of safety, this is not so among different political factions of the same stripe. Each time, the difference regarding feeling less at home is very pronounced between the electorates of PS and Vooruit (47% versus 31%), PTB and PVDA (62% and 39%), MR and Open Vld (61% and 37%), and between Ecolo and Groen (43% versus 29%). The explanation is that migration is more politicised in Flanders. As a result, Dutch-speaking voters with more negative and less positive experiences are more concentrated in two parties that do not have a French-speaking equivalent (61% of N-VA voters feel less at home as a result of migration while this is 84% of Vlaams Belang voters). This also makes it clear that the absence of a party like Vlaams Belang in French-speaking Belgium does not mean that the concerns that party responds to are not present there.

Language aside, it is the Groen political faction that takes the least negative/most positive stance on migration in a general sense. Vlaams Belang is fairly definitive as the most negative/least positive. The extent to which this translates to the various forms of migration should become clear further in this report.

### 3.5 a more negative overall opinion on migration

Connecting the different pieces of the puzzle—impact of migration on the government budget, economy, education and personal experiences—it is possible to estimate how many people have a positive or negative opinion of migration. 11% believe that migration brings more benefits than costs to the community and 28% believe that costs and benefits are balanced. 18% believe migration has been positive for the economy. Close to 25% experience personal advantages from migration. In short, we can expect approximately 20-30% of respondents to rate migration rather positively overall.

This also appears to be the case. When asked “How do you rate the migration that Belgium has experienced over the last 50 years?”, 27% replied that it has been beneficial or very beneficial. Only 5% viewed this as being very advantageous.

On the other hand, we see that 60% of people judge that migration costs more than it brings in to the community, 82% do not see current migration as a means of economic progress, 64% believe that migration has made our education worse, and almost one in two experience personal disadvantages due to migration. In short, one would expect the 60% to have overall negative views on migration. However, this is not the case. Only 39% hold this view (16% consider the impact “very detrimental”, 23% “detrimental”). A very

large cohort (35%) keeps a low profile, being of the opinion that it is “neither beneficial nor detrimental”. This is probably because a number of people who have had adverse experiences still choose the neutral middle ground because they feel that by judging the effects of migration, one is also judging migrants. These may be people who have a negative opinion about the effects of migration, but do not want to make a judgment that could be interpreted as negative for migrants. Nevertheless, the cohort expressing negative views is larger than the cohort expressing positive views (resp. 39% and 27%), a ratio of one and a half to one.

The overall opinion on migration is, however, noticeably more positive in Belgium than in the Netherlands. A 2019 survey shows that 49% of the Dutch consider the impact of migration “very to fairly” negative. As in Belgium, 35% see neither positive nor negative effects, but only 11% consider the effects “very to moderately positive”, while in Belgium, 27% consider them to be “beneficial or very beneficial”. (Verhue, et al., 2020)

The extent to which residents of Belgium have overall positive or negative views on migration obviously differs between different population cohorts. Men are slightly more positive, as are young people, those with a higher education, and the privileged. The overall assessment of the impact of migration is slightly more positive among French-speakers than among Dutch-speakers. 29% of the former and 24% of the latter see mainly advantages; 36% of the former and 41% of the latter see mainly disadvantages.

In terms of ethnic background, the differences are, as expected, bigger. One in four respondents with a Belgian background is positive. Among respondents with a background from another European country, the figure is 33%. The highest scores are for those with a Moroccan/Turkish background (46%) and those with a background from another country outside Europe (44%).

The biggest differences are also noticeable between the electorates of different political parties when it comes to the overall opinion on migration. The overall opinion on migration is highly politicised.

table 7

“migration of the past fifty years has been (very) beneficial to the country” and “migration has been very detrimental to the country” (proportions in agreement)

	(very) advantageous	(very) detrimental
groen	49	17
ecolo	48	20
les engagés	45	23
cd&v	43	20
open vld	33	27
ps	32	28
pvda	32	29
vooruit	32	25
ptb	28	40
mr	23	43
défi	18	38
n-va	13	57
vlaams belang	7	71

We find a clear positive opinion among the green political faction and CD&V and Les Engagés. A strongly divided electorate is present in Open Vld, Vooruit, PS, and PVDA, where positives and negatives roughly balance each other, albeit with a slight prevalence for the positives each time. In all these parties, there is a large cohort of about 40% that is undecided in each case. For PTB, as the only left-wing party, the negatives clearly carry more weight.

In their overall assessment of migration, respondents are milder than in their evaluation of personal experiences (feeling less at home, feeling less safe). 53% feel less at home and 58% feel less safe but 'only' 39% feel that migration has been detrimental over the past fifty years. Particularly notable among the CD&V electorate is that they experience major personal disadvantages in many cases (45% and 51%), but only 20% considers migration to be detrimental as a whole.

Depending on the specific effect of migration surveyed, population groups differ in their relatively more positive or negative attitudes. However, a more positive assessment of the effects of migration is consistently found among young people, the socioeconomically privileged, and migrants.

### 3.6 perceptions of migration and perceptions of one's own and society's future

Clearly, migration and its effects are a profound event for many. Therefore, it can be expected that, on the one hand, the view of migration and, on the other, the view of the country's future and one's personal future, are closely related. To ascertain the extent to which this is the case, two statements were presented. The first on the future of society, the second on personal futures. On the one hand: "In the near future, I expect our country..." with the response options (1) will improve, (2) will neither improve nor decline, (3) will decline. On the other hand: "Personally, in the near future, I expect to..." with the response options being (1) become more prosperous, (2) become neither more nor less prosperous than I am currently, (3) become less prosperous.

For some time now, it has been observed in several countries that a large part of the population feels that their country is in decline, that what is of value is being lost. That belief in social decline is referred to as declinism. In 2012, residents of Belgium aged 25 to 35 were found to be particularly declinist. (Elchardus, 2015) Such declinism was also observed in the Netherlands, among others. We also noted it in this study. 48% of those surveyed expect

the country to decline, 41% expect neither progress nor decline, and only 11% expect progress. In people's minds, this is no longer the continent of progress but, at best, that of stagnation and, most fear, decline. This feeling is even stronger among Dutch-speakers than among French-speakers. Of the former, 54% expect decline, of the latter 44%; of the former, 10% see progress in the future, of the latter, the proportion is slightly larger at 13%. Past research found that belief in social decline was accompanied by optimism regarding personal futures. This is especially true for younger people. In the 2012 survey in Belgium, we see that almost eight in ten young adults expect to do better than their parents in many areas. Thus, despite the great social decline they believe they see, they are remarkably optimistic about their personal future. The Dutch Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, which came to a similar conclusion, put it succinctly with "I'm doing well, we're doing poorly". (Schnabel, 2018)

That appears to be the case to a much lesser extent today. It is as if the fear of personal decline has now caught up with the belief in social decline: we are doing poorly and so am I. Of those surveyed, 42% expect to become less prosperous in the future, 46% expect no change, and only 13% think they will be more prosperous in the future than they are today. This is in stark contrast to what was observed in young adults just a decade ago. Of course, young people are more optimistic about becoming more prosperous. The future is still ahead of them. Of those aged between 18 and 30, 32% still count on being more prosperous in the future than today. That proportion

steadily decreases with age to reach 3% in people over the age of 60. That is typical to the way life is organised here. What is more striking and almost certainly contributes to a general sense of decline is that starting around the age of 40, more than 45% fear losing wealth in the future. That proportion then rises further to 52% among those over the age of 60. From that age, a majority fears losing at least part of what was built up over the course of their lifetime.

table 8

relationship between social and personal future expectations (proportions)

	personally, I expect to...		
	improve	neither improve or decline	decline
become more prosperous	5	5	2
become neither more or less prosperous	5	27	13
become less prosperous	1	8	33

Only 5% of the population has a resolutely “optimistic” view of the future, while 33% has a resolutely “pessimistic” view of the future. 27% believe it is stagnating. 18% see progress, either socially, or personally, or for both. 57% see decline, either personally, or socially, or for both. In short, the future appears as dark grey to black.

The purpose here is not to identify which social groups fear more or less social decline and personal decline. However, it can be observed that migrants and their descendants are much more optimistic than natives (those people who claim to have Belgian, Walloon, or Flemish origins). Among natives, for instance, only 9% expect social progress, but among EU migrants, it is 17%, and among migrants of Moroccan/Turkish origin and those from outside the EU, it is 32%. Much the same occurs with regard to expectations of increased personal wealth. 12% of natives, 14% EU migrants, 27% non-EU migrants, and 36% Moroccan/Turkish migrants expect this. The expectation of becoming less prosperous is the mirror image. 44% of natives fear this, while it is only 16% of people of Moroccan/Turkish origin<sup>3</sup>.

The statement that concerns us here concerns the relationship between these future expectations and the view of the pros and cons of migration. That connection is probably mutual. People with negative experiences and/or negative perceptions of the effects of migration may fear social decline and personal decline as a result. People who fear personal and/or social decline for various reasons may also seek an explanation for this in the (perceived) effects of migration. This study does not allow us to ascertain which of these two possible influences is the stronger and whether they both indeed occur. What can be explored, however, is whether there is a link between how people judge the costs and benefits of migration on the one hand, the belief in social decline and personal decline on the other, and how strong that link is.

<sup>3</sup> The difference between people of Belgian, Walloon, and Flemish origin, compared to those of Moroccan or Turkish origin, in terms of personal future expectations, is partly explained by the age difference. On average, the latter are younger than the former.

table 9

social and personal outlook and attitude towards the statement “As a result of migration, this country is doing better economically” (proportions)

	country's future					
	country progresses		country remains the same		country declines	
personal future	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree
become more prosperous	52	19	31	22	27	51
same	48	16	27	27	26	47
become less prosperous	41	38	29	32	17	56

The relationship between perception of the future and assessment of the economic impact of migration is particularly strong. Of those who expect social and personal progress, 52% believe that migration is good for the economy and 19% reject that statement. Among those who fear social and personal decline (a cohort much larger than the former), we see an almost perfect mirror image: 17% believe migration makes the country do better economically, while 56% reject that statement. In general, it is mainly the belief in social decline that is associated with a negative assessment of the economic impact of migration.



table 10

social and personal outlook and attitude towards the statement “If one looks at what they contribute in terms of social contributions and taxes and what they cost in terms of social security, pensions, health insurance, and unemployment... then...”, with three response options: “Do migrants contribute more than they cost?”, “Do they contribute as much as they cost?”, and “Do they cost more than they contribute?” (proportions)

	country's future					
	country progresses		country remains the same		country declines	
personal future	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	agree	disagree
become more prosperous	29	34	19	44	13	68
same	24	34	10	50	12	67
become less prosperous	23	49	7	64	8	75

We see a similar pattern in the assessment of the costs and benefits of migration for the government budget. Of the entire population, 12% believe that migrants contribute more than they cost and 60% believe that they cost more than they contribute. In the cohort that sees social and personal progress, the proportion who believe there are benefits from migration is more than double at 29%, and the proportion who see costs is almost half as small at 34%. Among those who expect both social and personal decline, only 8% see benefits, and an overwhelming 75% see costs. Again, the impact of expectations regarding society is strongest.

It is clear that the link between valuing migration and viewing the future, especially the collective future but also the personal future, is particularly close. How one sees the future of society and one’s personal future is closely related to how one assesses the effects of migration. This underlines once again, and by now superfluously, how closely the experience of migration is linked to people’s life perspective, how much it colours their image of the social and personal future.

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## 3.7 open and closed borders

Respondents' overall views on the impact of migration are more negative than positive, with obviously differences depending on socio-demographic background and political affiliation. Another way of looking at the issue is to present respondents with two rather extreme views. How do people feel about closed and open borders? To avoid polarisation, these views were presented through a series of different statements. We detect the proportion in favour of closed borders from the supposition that "Belgium no longer allows migration at all, including regular migrants". The proportion that are pro-closed borders are those who totally or simply agree with this. We calculate the proportion of supporters of open borders based on the supposition that, "For me, illegal migration does not exist; we open our borders and whoever wants to come to Belgium is welcome". In this regard, too, the categories completely agree and agree are combined. In fact, we applied this approach throughout this report. Given the rather negative tenor on opinions about and experiences with migration and the overall evaluation that is also, albeit less pronounced, negative, we might expect that more respondents would support closed borders than open ones. However, this does not appear to be the case.

table 11

for or against closed and open borders by socio-demographic characteristics (proportions)

	closed borders		open borders		extreme position*
	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	
total	15	50	16	54	31
gender					
men	17	49	14	58	31
women	13	50	17	50	30
age					
under 30	16	49	22	39	38
31-40 years	16	45	22	43	38
41-50 years	17	46	17	43	34
51-60 years	18	46	11	65	29
over 60	11	57	10	64	21
level of education					
people with little or no formal education	21	34	11	54	32
secondary education	15	46	16	54	31
higher education	12	60	18	53	30
language					
dutch	12	53	12	60	24
french	18	46	20	46	38
background					
belgian, flemish, walloon	15	50	14	57	29
moroccan/turkish	19	40	33	30	37

\*the extreme position is the sum of the 'yes' proportion on closed and open borders

The main finding is that both views are followed by a rather small, though by no means negligible, minority, and in each case, about half explicitly distance themselves from them. 15% of respondents favour closed borders and 16% open borders. This means that 69% do not identify with these extreme views. Not insignificantly, in both cases, a sizeable cohort appears not to have an opinion either way (36% with closed borders and 31% with open borders). This shows that despite the sometimes polemical tone in which the global migration debate is conducted by proponents and opponents, polarisation is on the whole not too bad. The fact that a fairly significant cohort is not speaking out can perhaps be interpreted in that sense.

Men and women differ little in terms of [closed borders](#) (16% versus 13%). There is also virtually no difference in terms of age. The pro-closed borders proportion hardly increases with age. On the contrary, there is even a slight decrease (12%) among those over 60. There is a difference in terms of level of education. People with little or no formal education (21%) are more in favour than those with a higher education (12%) and significantly more are undecided (44% versus 28%). French-speakers are also more in favour (18% versus 12% for Dutch-speakers).

In terms of ethnicity, we find that, somewhat surprisingly, people of Moroccan/Turkish origin are slightly more pro-closed borders (19%). That vulnerable people are more pro-closed borders won't surprise anyone but even in this cohort, it is at most 20%. Among the privileged, this is 13%.

We will return to the now fairly predictable political differences on this issue later in this report.

In terms of the proportion of [pro-open borders](#), we also notice little difference between men and women (15 and 17%). We do notice a difference in terms of age. The proportion of pro-open borders decreases with age (from 22% among those under 30 to 10% among those over 50). In terms of level of education, there is also a predictable if limited difference (11% among the people with little or no formal education versus 17% among those with a higher education). French-speakers are not only more pro-closed borders but also more in favour of open borders (20% versus 12% among Dutch-speakers). Public opinion is thus more polarised in the French-speaking part of the country than in the Dutch-speaking part. 38% identify with an extreme view compared to only 24% among Dutch-speakers. Regarding ethnicity, we see more supporters of open borders among respondents with Moroccan/Turkish background (33% versus 14% for Belgian background). Privileged people (17%) are more pro-open borders than vulnerable people (11%).

The statement regarding open borders was also presented to a sample of the Dutch population in 2019, of whom 11% were in favour of open borders, so almost the same proportion as among Dutch-speakers in Belgium. (Clingendael Institute, to be added) How do different electorates view open and closed borders? These are very different views that are radically mutually exclusive. For both items, we post the proportion that are explicitly for or against. The undecided are not included. Overall, 35% are undecided on a migration freeze and 30% on open borders.

table 12

for or against closed and open borders by political party  
(proportions)

	closed borders		open borders		extreme position*
	agree	disagree	agree	disagree	
total	15	50	16	54	31
vlaams belang	30	29	8	74	38
défi	25	49	17	57	42
ptb	21	48	28	48	49
ps	19	40	18	42	37
ecolo	17	58	30	35	47
n-va	17	51	7	75	24
groen	13	55	29	27	42
les engagés	12	56	31	39	43
mr	11	58	8	66	19
pvda	10	56	24	48	34
open vld	9	69	10	59	19
cd&v	9	60	15	51	24
vooruit	0	69	11	51	11

\*the extreme position is the sum of the 'yes' proportion on closed and open borders

In only one electorate of a political party is the proportion in favour of an extreme position on migration zero, namely Vooruit, regarding closed borders. Together with Open Vld, Vooruit is also the party with the highest proportion of explicit opponents of closed borders (69%). All other parties have voters who have diametrically opposed views on this issue. Even in Vlaams Belang, there are a limited proportion of voters in favour of open borders (8%). What is interesting with this party is the division of the electorate on closed borders. With 30% in favour, Vlaams Belang achieves the highest score of all parties, albeit not a majority. That's a somewhat surprising figure for the party that is the only one with closed borders (for a ten-year period) in its manifesto. It gets even more interesting when it turns out that an equal proportion of the electorate is against closed borders.

A relatively high proportion of voters with extreme views on open borders within a party does not automatically mean a relatively low proportion on closed borders and vice versa. The most pronounced example in this regard is PTB. The party scores substantially above the overall average for both open and closed borders (21% for closed and 28% for open borders). Just under half of this party's electorate has extreme views on migration. Thus, the electorate of this party is heavily divided on the issue. Ecolo comes close with 47% sharing an extreme vision where the proportion in favour of open borders does carry a bit more weight, proportionately, than in PTB (30% in favour of open borders,

17% in favour of closed borders). Les Engagés (43%) and DéFI (42%) also achieve an extreme proportion of more than 40%. Only one Dutch-language party (Groen) also achieves a high extreme score (42%) that leans more than average towards open borders. At 13%, the cohort within Groen in favour of closed borders is a lot smaller than the cohort in favour of open borders (29%), but it is not marginal.

That left-wingers advocate open borders more than right-wingers is broadly true but still needs to be nuanced. Overall, leftists are indeed more pro-open borders. Among right-wing parties, each electorate always has a proportion that is also pro-open borders but this proportion is always below the average of 15%. As mentioned earlier, among the Vlaams Belang electorate, we still note that 8% of supporters favour open borders. Among several progressive or left-wing parties (PTB, Groen, Ecolo, and Les Engagés), the pro-open borders proportion is even relatively high (around 30%). The oft-heard claim that no one is in favour of open borders is clearly false. In the population as a whole, it is 16% and in the electorates of some parties, almost one in three. Among the PS electorate, this proportion is smaller than among other left-wing electorates (19%), albeit still above average. Among the Vooruit electorate, it is only 11%, well below the overall average. The leftist electorate is divided on open borders, not only between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties but also between the far left and the moderate left.

The contrast between left and right becomes even more diffuse when we look at the proponents of closed borders. Stijn Bruers’s assertion that mainly right-wingers are in favour of closed borders (Bruers, 2021) is not supported by the results of this study. Among right-wing parties, only Vlaams Belang scores well above the overall average with 30% in favour of closed borders (about the same proportion (29%) in that party explicitly disagree with closed borders, by the way). The pro-closed borders proportion among N-VA is 17%, just above the overall average. This is the same proportion as for Ecolo and is below that of PTB (21%) and PS (19%), two left-wing parties. MR (11%) and Open Vld (9%) score well below the overall average in this regard. Bruers’s assertion does not hold up under any circumstances. Only one left-wing party – Vooruit – scored well below the overall average at 0%. Furthermore, it is the (historically) Christian and liberal parties that score below average, not the left. All this shows that thinking about migration and all that goes with it cannot be captured in simple diagrams, let alone simple left-right divisions.

Lastly, the differences between N-VA and Vlaams Belang are interesting. In terms of views on open borders, the electorates score about the same with 75% against. But there is a big difference on closed borders. The pro-closed borders proportion among Vlaams Belang is almost double that of N-VA (resp. 30% and 17%). The proportion of opponents of closed borders, on the other hand, is sharply higher with N-VA (51% versus 29%). In terms of closed borders, the N-VA electorate is closer to that of the liberal parties. Perhaps closed borders are seen as economically detrimental by some of those electorates.

table 13

summary table (proportions)

	agree
migration is detrimental to the government budget	60
migration makes things better economically	18
migration has reduced the quality of education	64
experiences personal advantages from migration	23
experiences personal disadvantages of migration	44
for the past 50 years, migration has been overall beneficial for the country	27
for the past 50 years, migration has been overall detrimental for the country	39
pro-open borders	16
pro-closed borders	15

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# 04

## regular migration



The previous chapter covered migration in a general sense. No distinction was made between the different forms of migration. In this chapter, we talk explicitly about regular migration, also sometimes described as legal migration, and explained in the survey as follows: “The next set of statements deals with regular migration (i.e. not refugees or illegal migrants). Regular migrants are people from abroad who have valid documents to come to our country to work or study, for example.”

First, respondents were presented with two main motives for allowing migration. After that, we take a closer look at the three major forms of regular migration: work, family reunification, and students.

## 4.1 why regular or legal migration?

Respondents were presented with two main motives for allowing migration. Migration would be necessary to counteract population decline, and migration is necessary because otherwise, we will not be able to pay pensions in a few decades.

Both statements have little support. With the oft-repeated claim that migration is a solution to population decline, only 15% agree and 50% disagree. This is not very surprising because, to date, Belgium has not seen a population decline based on natural balance. This was exceptionally the case in 2020, due to the Covid virus, but in 2021, for example, there were 5,623 more births than deaths. Even for the coming decades, there is still a

positive natural balance—albeit a small one. This balance only starts to become negative as from 2042. However, it is true that the external migration balance is quite a bit higher than the natural balance. This will not change in the coming decades. (Federal Planning Agency, 2021) The statement does hold true for the EU as a whole. Without migration, Europe’s population would have shrunk by half a million by 2019 (4.2 million births and 4.7 million deaths). (European Commission, 2021) There is also little support for the claim that migrants are needed to pay for pensions. Only 27% agree with this. 29% disagree. A very large cohort (44%) does not wish to or cannot comment on this. The low support for this statement is probably related to the fact that the statement can only hold true if large cohorts of migrants effectively enter and stay in the employed workforce. This, however, as we know, is not the case. We will come back to this later on in the conclusion of this report. Both statements are slightly more supported by men than women. In terms of age, we see remarkably little difference, including in retirement. Those with a higher education, the privileged, and respondents with a non-Belgian ethnicity are more pro-regular migration. The same applies to French-speakers, albeit only for the population decline statement.

Traditionally, the greatest differences are those between the different electorates. Among no fewer than four Dutch-speaking political parties, migration as a solution to population decline achieves a proportion of less than 10% (N-VA, PVDA, Vlaams Belang, and Vooruit). Groen and Open Vld score double (20% and 19%), which is still a small minority. Among French-speaking parties, three score above 20% (Les Engagés, MR, and Ecolo). With migration to pay for pensions, the differences between them are greater.

With Vlaams Belang, it is only 13%; with Groen, it is as high as 42%. There are also relatively many respondents among the electorates of Les Engagés (40%) and Open Vld (40%) who believe that migration can help keep pensions affordable.

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## 4.2 regular migration as an entry channel to work

A major reason for entering the country legally is work. Officially, there has been a ban on migration since 1974. To shore up the then disrupted labour market (high inflow of young people and women, low outflow of pensioners; high job destruction resulting in sharply rising unemployment), foreign labour was barred. From the outset, however, exceptions were

foreseen. Family reunification, for example, remained possible. Almost 50 years later, this ban is still in place, in principle, but has been partially eroded in actual fact. First, there is the reality of the European Union within which workers can move freely, including to work. And along the way, the ban has been further relaxed to contribute profiles that are difficult or impossible to find in the local labour market. Since the publication of the McKinsey pamphlet 'The War for Talent' (1997), bringing in global talent (mostly those with a higher education) has been seen as a key variable to compete, both for companies and for sectors and countries. Global players like LinkedIn but also Google have greatly reduced the barriers to identifying and approaching talent around the world, and conversely, it has also made it easier for this talent to apply globally. (Randstad Research, 2021).

Work is an important motive to migrate but only applies to a minority of migrants. In 2020, work was the motive for 35% of migrations in Belgium. The importance of this motive varies greatly depending on the region from which the migrant comes. Among European migrants, work achieves a 51% proportion, by far the most important motive among migrants. (Myria, 2022) Among third-country migrants, it is only 11%. Among these migrants, familial reasons (family reunification) are by far the most important motive. We will return to this motif later in this chapter.

Respondents were presented with the following statement: “We admit some migrants selectively when there are shortages in the labour market.” This statement is backed by a large majority: 60% of respondents see labour market shortages as a justification for legal migration. Only 12% are against.

This is a similar percentage to the cohort in favour of closed borders (15%). Those in favour of migration for this reason are five times more numerous than those against. There is little doubt that work as a motive to migrate meets with strong popular approval.

table 14

“we admit some migrants selectively when there are shortages in the labour market” (proportions)

		agree	disagree
total		60	12
gender	men	62	12
	women	58	12
age	under 30	58	9
	31-40 years	55	13
	41-50 years	53	15
	51-60 years	61	13
	over 60	67	10
level of education	little or no formal education	50	17
	secondary education	57	12
	higher education	68	11
language	dutch	62	11
	french	58	13
background	belgian, flemish, walloon	61	12
	moroccan/turkish	54	12

Of course, this does not mean that there are no differences between different population cohorts. Men (62%) are slightly more positive than women (58%). In terms of age, there are few differences. Most support is found among those over the age of 60 (67%). Those with a higher education (65%)—which is even 73% for those with a master's degree—are also significantly more pro-regular migration than people with little or no formal education (51%). People with little or no formal education tend to be more critical of migration because migrants are seen as additional competition for the jobs they hold, a motive that should decrease in importance given the current historical scarcity of labour. There are also fears of a negative impact on wages. But that does not alter the fact that a narrow majority, even among the people with little or no formal education, are in favour and only one in five are explicitly against. The difference between privileged (65%) and vulnerable (47%) is also large. The position by ethnicity is also interesting. There is similar support for legal labour migration from respondents from Belgian, European, and non-European backgrounds (around 60%). Among migrants from Moroccan/Turkish backgrounds, support is still high but slightly lower (54%), perhaps because they fear competition from new migrant workers. Among this cohort, there are also more undecided (35%) and only 11% explicit opponents. There is no doubt that work-based migration has great support.

This kind of migration also has the support of a majority in all electorates, albeit very narrowly in some cases. That left-wing electorates are, on average, slightly less enthusiastic about labour migration is broadly true but should also be nuanced. The PS (54%) and PVDA (51%) meet the rule. But both PTB (64%) and Vooruit (64%) electorates are above the overall average. The green factions also score exceptionally around the average (Ecolo 60%, Groen 62%). Remarkably, PS and PVDA's score is close to Vlaams Belang (51%). Even the most migration-critical party and the only one with a migration ban in its manifesto has an electorate with a narrow majority (51%) in favour of work-based migration. However, the difference with N-VA in this regard is once again stark. In that electorate, no less than 69% favour regular labour migration, well above average. The biggest support comes (not surprisingly) from liberal quarters (MR 71%, Open Vld 75%), but also from historically Christian quarters (CD&V 76%, Les Engagés 76%).

table 15

“we admit some migrants selectively when there are shortages in the labour market” (proportions)

	agree	disagree
total	60	12
open vld	76	7
les engagés	76	9
cd&v	76	8
mr	71	9
n-va	69	11
défi	64	20
vooruit	64	8
ptb	63	11
groen	62	11
ecolo	60	13
ps	54	12
pvda	51	14
vlaams belang	51	19

## selection and acceptance of regular migrant workers

According to the National Bank study (referred to above), migrants with little to no education are one of the reasons why the cost of regular migration weighs so heavily on the government budget. Therefore, the study polled support for making tougher demands in that regard through the statement, “Migrants coming to our country legally should be selected for characteristics that increase the likelihood of them finding work more easily”.

Those in favour (48%) are three times more numerous than those against (18%). Just over a third of those surveyed did not appear to have an opinion either way. Men favour it more than women. Support also increases with age, albeit only after the age of 40. In terms of level of education, there is no difference. Support is also equally high among Dutch-speakers and French-speakers.

Support for the measure outweighs opposition in all party electorates. It is at least twice as big in nine of the thirteen electorates. The exceptions are a number of parties whose electorate is divided on such a measure, which face a split in their electorate on that issue. That goes for CD&V with 39% for and 23% against, PVDA with 38% for and 24% against, Groen with 34% for and 28% against, and especially Ecolo with 31% for and 29% against.

The National Bank study also found that those with little to no education often led to welfare dependency, which increased the cost of regular migration. Therefore, the following statement was also presented: “Migrants from outside the European Union can only claim social security after contributing for five years.”

49% of the population agree, 21% disagree. Men are more supportive of such a measure than women. Support also increases with age. The people with little or no formal education and the vulnerable are also more inclined to support this statement. The statement finds much more support among Dutch-speakers than French-speakers, 55% versus 42%.

In all party electorates, support for the measure is higher than the opposition to it, except for Groen, where 33% are in favour and 42% against. Support is at least twice as high as opposition in five party electorates (DéFI, MR, N-VA, PS, and Vlaams Belang). Particularly strong supporters can be found in the electorate of N-VA (68% for, 10% against) and Vlaams Belang (74% for, 8% against).

table 16

“migrants from outside the European Union can only claim social security after contributing for five years” (proportions)

	agree	disagree
total	49	21
vlaams belang	73	8
n-va	68	10
mr	55	21
ptb	50	16
cd&v	46	27
défi	46	23
ps	45	16
pvda	45	27
vooruit	45	28
open vld	41	26
les engagés	39	28
groen	33	42
ecolo	30	33

## what conditions should be imposed on regular migration?

A series of statements were used to examine whether support for regular labour migration increases when certain additional conditions are imposed.

table 17

### measures that regular labour migration should comply with (proportions)

	agree	disagree
we admit some migrants when there are labour market shortages, but on the condition that they will return to their country of origin after an agreed period of time	33	31
we admit some migrants when there are labour market shortages, but they are only allowed to stay if they have jobs	42	26
we admit some migrants selectively when there are shortages in the labour market, but not if they are Muslim	16	53

We note that adding conditions does not increase overall support for regular labour migration, which 60% of the population favours. On the contrary. This is not surprising since the opponents in this case include those who are opposed to regular labour migration in and of itself, plus those who are opposed to the additional condition or do not consider it important or unnecessary. The condition should be one that greatly increases support for regular labour migration. This is not the case for any of the conditions formulated here.

There is very strong resistance to selecting regular migrants based on faith (in this case Islam). 53% speak out against it, with only 16% in favour. In Vlaams Belang, this rises to 30%. The proportion of opponents is still higher within that party though (37%).

On the statement of whether regular migration should always be temporary (like circular migration), the population is divided, with almost as many in favour as against and a large cohort of undecided.

There is more support for returning regular migrants if they can no longer find work: 42% are for such a measure and 26% are against. This again underlines how much the people of Belgium link the acceptability of regular migration to work. But even this measure would not increase overall support for regular labour migration; quite the contrary. This measure does get an absolute majority behind it in three electorates, N-VA (53%), Vlaams Belang (59%), and DéFI (61%), despite a relatively large undecided cohort.

### 4.3 students as regular migrants

Besides working, studying is a second motive for legal migration. It accounted for 11% of migrations in 2020. Migration from the EU is 8%, while migration from third countries is 15%. Therefore, the following statement was presented “[We need more foreign students to come and study here](#)”. Given students are future workers and given the high support for work-based migration, one might expect high support for this motive as well. But the results do not show that. The population appears to be strongly divided, with 31% responding positively and 25% negatively. The largest cohort does not appear to have an opinion about this either way. Apparently, the link

to work here is less clear than could have been expected. Possibly, it is assumed that students will return to their home countries in large numbers or migrate to another country, making the Belgian investment less worthwhile.

There is slightly more support for this statement among men (34%), people under the age of 30 (36%), privileged people (38%), those with a master's degree (40%), and Dutch-speakers (36% versus 26% for French-speakers).

In the next statement, the link to work is already more explicit. “[If a student has studied here, we must try to get them to stay here in our workforce.](#)” As expected, support for this statement is higher than for the previous one: 38% agree, 20% disagree, with a particularly large proportion once again undecided (42%). A very big difference remains with the 60% support for migration based on labour market shortages. In short, there is more support for attracting foreign students than resistance, but there is not a lot of enthusiasm.



## 4.4 family reunification

Family reunification is traditionally a very important channel of regular migration and, after the migration freeze for many years, is actually the only channel (besides asylum) to migrate to Belgium. In 2020, the proportion of migrants for family reasons was 35%. Among migrants coming from outside the EU, the figure is as high as 45% (to be compared with the 11% who migrate for work-related reasons).

The National Bank study cited earlier already showed a link between the negative cost-benefit balance of migration and family reunification. Family reunification obviously does not have to preclude work but the flow is proving difficult or impossible in many cases.

Therefore, some statements were also made about family reunification. “Are regular migrants allowed to bring their family or future spouse to Belgium?” 16% answered radically no. This figure tracks almost perfectly with the proportion who are pro-closed borders (15%). 12% answered yes and attached no conditions to it. The vast majority, 72%, support the possibility of family reunification—albeit subject to conditions.

Men reject the right to family reunification slightly more than women (18% versus 15%). Regarding age, we notice an upward trend in preference for rejection (from 8% among students and 13% among those under the age of 30 to 22% among 51- to 60-year-olds). Over the age of 60, the proportion drops back to 13%. The other differences are in line with expectations. People with little or no formal education (22%) are more dismissive than those with a higher education (12%), vulnerable more than privileged (24 versus 12%). The rejection rate climbs as high as 30% among jobseekers/unemployed. Respondents of Belgian background (17%) are also more dismissive than those of other origins.

The difference with those of Moroccan/Turkish background is clear (9%). Respondents from European or other backgrounds scored around 10%. The difference between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers is limited. There are slightly more French-speakers opposed to family reunification (17% versus 15% for Dutch-speakers) but also more in favour of family reunification without conditions (15 versus 10%). Again, we notice slightly more polarisation among French-speakers than among Dutch-speakers.

table 18

family reunification possible subject to conditions, without conditions, and no family reunification according to electorate (proportions)

	yes subject to conditions	yes without conditions	no
total	72	12	16
cd&v	86	7	7
mr	81	8	11
open vld	81	12	7
voornut	79	15	6
n-va	79	3	18
les engagés	72	20	8
ptb	72	13	15
groen	69	22	9
ps	68	14	18
défi	68	13	19
pvda	64	27	9
ecolo	59	26	15
vlaams belang	58	2	40

The differences between the various political electorates are wide, as already noted several times in this report. In terms of total rejection of family reunification, Vlaams Belang stands out with 40%. This does mean that there is still a majority even in that party in favour of family reunification (albeit almost exclusively subject to conditions). However, the other parties differ little on total rejection. The highest scores are found among DéFI (19%) and N-VA and PS (both 18%). Among political factions, Dutch-speakers consistently reject family reunification to a lesser extent than French-speakers (PS versus Vooruit 18% versus 6%; PTB versus PVDA 15% versus 9%; Ecolo versus Groen 15% versus 9%; MR versus Open Vld 11% versus 7%). The Christian-inspired parties (Les Engagés and CD&V) score very low at 8% and 7%.

We also notice quite a difference when we distinguish between family reunification that is subject to conditions and without them. The highest scores for family reunification without conditions are found among PVDA (27%), Ecolo (26%), Groen (22%), and Les Engagés (20%). These are also the parties that are—logically—more inclined towards open borders than average, albeit the proportion of opponents is still higher even in these parties than the proportion in favour. The only

party sending a divisive signal in this is PTB. A high proportion of pro-open borders but tending towards the overall average on family reunification without conditions (13%). At the other end of the spectrum, we find Vlaams Belang and N-VA, where support for family reunification without conditions is virtually zero (2% and 3%), and CD&V and MR where such support remains below 10% (7% and 8% respectively).

The parties with the highest proportion of supporters for family reunification subject to conditions are CD&V (86%) and the liberal political faction (81%).

## what conditions?

The vast majority of Belgian residents (72%) believe that family reunification should be subject to conditions. Some conditions were explicitly presented to respondents.

table 19

what conditions must apply to family reunification? (proportions)

	agree	disagree	agree dutch-speakers	agree french-speakers
the migrant must be able to support themselves (and those coming for family reunification)	95	5	97	94
those coming must first pass an integration exam	79	21	83	74
those coming must know the language of the country	76	23	80	72
the migrant (who wants to bring family here) must have worked here for at least four years	57	43	57	57
those coming must meet certain educational degree requirements	31	69	29	33

We see majorities to almost everyone wanting to impose fairly strict conditions. People don't want to set degree requirements, but are in favour of these family members passing an integration exam (79%) and having knowledge of the language (76%) as conditions to be met before the migrant's arrival. These conditions are not imposed in the current scheme.

The condition that the migrant wanting to bring family here must have been working for at least four years is supported by a majority, but it is smaller than for some of the other conditions. The latter therefore get a majority in all party electorates. The condition of having worked for four years gets a majority in

nine of the thirteen distinct party-electorates. The exceptions are Vooruit (48%), Open Vld (45%), Ecolo (40%), and Groen (33%). So those electorates are very divided on such a measure.

In summary, it seems clear that there is support for making the conditions for family reunification stricter.

## 4.5 decision: which regular migration policy

What is striking about the responses on regular migration is the large number of respondents choosing the middle ground. This may indicate that they are in doubt or have not yet formed an opinion. It is also clear that a number of respondents chose the middle ground because they did not feel sufficiently informed to form an opinion. For example, we can see that the vast majority of people did form an opinion on the statement of whether regular migration can solve labour market shortages. Only 28% choose the middle ground in that case. They apparently consider themselves less informed to judge whether migration is necessary to keep pensions affordable and whether foreign students should be attracted. For those statements, no less than 44% choose the neutral middle ground each time.

On average, over a third (36%) of respondents chose that position when asked about regular migration. Therefore, in the reporting, we have also always given the proportion of those in favour and against, the percentage of people who agree with the statement presented and the percentage who disagree.

Where there is a majority in favour or in agreement, while a good third do not express an opinion, it obviously means a very solid majority. The relatively large undecided proportion does mean that debate and communication on regular migration can still have a relatively large impact.

Based on the answers given, we can identify which policies on regular migration would receive majority support: the kind of policies that would emerge if the policies were voted on by referendum.

There is a clear majority in favour of a regular migration policy to address labour market shortages. The link to work seems crucial in this regard. Regular migration to keep pensions affordable or address demographic imbalances has much less support.

Regular migration policies need not necessarily be temporary or circular. There is no explicit majority concerning sending back regular migrants if they do not find work. But the proponents of such a measure are far more numerous than the opponents: 42% versus 26%.

A policy in line with popular preferences would select migrants for characteristics that increase the likelihood of them finding work easily. Selecting on faith is explicitly rejected by a large majority. There is also a clear preference for policies that give migrants conditional and phased access to social rights. 49% of the population favours giving migrants access to social rights only after they have contributed for four years. 21% oppose such a measure.

An overwhelming majority is in favour of the right to family reunification, but wants it linked to stricter conditions. Migrants wishing to bring family members or a future partner to Belgium must be able to support themselves and have already worked in Belgium for at least four years. Those immigrating for family reasons must pass an integration exam beforehand and know the country's language.

# 05

## asylum

## 5.1 introduction

Like 145 other countries, Belgium is committed, through the 1951 Refugee Convention (and the 1967 Additional Protocol<sup>4</sup>), to providing protection to people who qualify for it on treaty grounds and who cannot invoke the protection of their own government.

According to the Refugee Convention, a person is eligible for protection—i.e. can be considered a refugee—if they, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.

Not all countries that adopted the convention and the protocol build similar regulations there to deal with asylum seekers. In the United States, Canada, and Australia, for example, asylum is not a right. In European regulations, on the other hand, asylum is a right, with the effect that a judge can rule on it in a way that neither government nor parliament have any recourse against it.

The European Union has supplemented and expanded the Refugee Convention in various ways, including how the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was incorporated into European regulations. The ban on torture contained therein was expanded through European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence into comprehensive regulations on asylum, making it more difficult to effectively deport rejected asylum seekers. Among other things, those regulations have very much relaxed the condition that the asylum seeker is in personal danger. Individual application of the convention was replaced by a more group-based approach.

Whether one belongs to a particular group is enough to qualify for protection, regardless of whether one is personally at risk. The protection offered by the Refugee Convention was also supplemented by the EU with so-called subsidiary protection: “The protection given to a third-country national or a stateless person who does not qualify as a refugee but in respect of whom substantial grounds have been shown for believing that the person concerned, if returned to their country of origin, or in the case of a stateless person to their country of former habitual residence, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm”.<sup>5</sup> The actual regulations have largely been established through case law of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. (Bossuyt, 2022)

<sup>4</sup> The Refugee Convention itself only covered refugees from before 1951 and who came from Europe. The protocol removed those geographical and temporal restrictions. Some countries did ratify the convention, but not the protocol.

<sup>5</sup> Risk of serious harm includes the existence of the death penalty in the country of origin.

Although refugees and the right to asylum have been in the spotlight for a number of years, it is far from certain that the media have given citizens an accurate picture of what exactly that right is and the foundations on which it stands. Confusion between ‘asylum seekers’, ‘refugees’, ‘migrants’, and ‘illegal migrants’ is rife in news coverage. The survey explained asylum as follows: “The following statements deal with asylum. Asylum seekers are people who have fled their country because they feel threatened and are asking to be allowed to settle in Belgium.”

## 5.2 support for asylum law

Three different statements were presented to measure support for asylum law. One refers to the general idea of asylum and protection and another refers directly to asylum seekers already present in the country. It is likely that support for asylum is greater in the latter case—with the connotation of confronting the asylum seekers already present—than in the former. The first case examines a principle, while the second is a more concrete case of people seeking protection in Belgium. Lastly, the third statement gauges how many refugees can be received from inside or outside Europe, ranging from an unlimited number to none at all.

The first statement reads: “Our country cannot be responsible for protecting people from other countries, even if they are forced to flee persecution or acts of war.” 28% agree (completely), 37% disagree (completely). Based on this statement, we can conclude

that 37% of the population support the right to asylum, 28% reject it, and many (35%) are undecided or take a neutral stance. That ratio (37% for asylum, 28% against it) indicates a rather fragile support. People in the Netherlands were presented with the same statement in 2019. There, 27% agreed (completely) with the statement. (Clingendael, o.c.) So, in this area, there is no difference between the attitudes of residents of the Netherlands and Belgium.

Men support the statement—i.e. reject the right to asylum—more than women (31% versus 25%). In terms of age, we notice a slight increase in agreement with the statement, albeit with a slight change in those over 60. Among students, 18% reject the right to asylum as formulated in the statement; among those under 30, it is 24%; among those between 51 and 60, it rises to 32% before falling back to 28% over 60. In terms of level of education, the differences are pronounced (39% among people with little or no formal education, 22% among those with a higher education). More or less the same ratio is seen among the vulnerable versus the privileged (36% versus 25%). Surprisingly, however, the attitude of people of Moroccan/Turkish origin differs little from that of natives (with 26% for and 33% against). Support for asylum, as measured by this statement, appears to be greater among Dutch-speakers than among French-speakers. 25% of Dutch-speakers versus 32% of French-speakers believe that Belgium cannot be responsible for protection in the context of asylum.



table 20

“our country cannot be responsible for protecting people from other countries, even if they are forced to flee persecution or acts of war” (proportions)

	agree	disagree
total	28	37
vlaams belang	47	17
ptb	37	34
ps	36	26
mr	31	36
n-va	30	35
défi	30	42
les engagés	26	46
ecolo	22	47
pvda	21	48
open vld	19	51
cd&v	19	45
groen	13	61
vooruit	9	59

Those who reject the right to asylum based on this statement do not constitute a majority in any electorate. The Vlaams Belang electorate does come close with 47% agreeing with the statement presented. After Vlaams Belang, the PS and PTB have the highest proportion; both of these are left-wing parties. Only in those three parties are the opponents of asylum more numerous than the supporters. It shows again that the broader migration narrative in general and certainly that of asylum in particular clearly transcends the left-right divide. Within the liberal, green, social-democratic, and far-left political factions, the Dutch-speaking parties are clearly more pro-asylum than the French-speaking ones in each case (for Groen, 13% reject the right to asylum, for Ecolo 22%; Open Vld 19% and MR 31%; PVDA 21% and PTB 37%; Vooruit 9% and PS 36%). Note that, based on this statement, the electorate of N-VA (30%) is more pro-asylum than that of the PS and PTB and at the same level as MR. The green political faction is overall the most pro-asylum. As an individual party electorate, these are the voters of Vooruit.

A second statement refers to asylum seekers already present in Belgium: “Anyone who applies for and is entitled to asylum in Belgium should be able to stay here and receive protection.” Evoking the image of asylum seekers that are already present does indeed increase support for asylum. A majority, 51%, agree or completely agree with that statement. 17% disagree (completely). Approached in this way, support for asylum is much more solid. Just a narrow majority (51%) are explicitly in favour, but only 17% are explicitly against. Those in favour are three times more numerous than those against.

Men, when the statement is asked this way, are slightly more pro than women (resp. 53 and 49%). Regarding age, we again notice declining support with increasing age, albeit with a slight change in those over 60. From 65% among students and 52% among those under 30, to 45% among 51- to 60-year-olds before rising again to 57% among those over 60. Again, the differences in terms of level of education are significant, with 42% of the people with little or no formal education and 57% of those with a higher education being in favour of asylum when referring to asylum seekers already present in Belgium. Among those with master's degrees, it is as high as 64%. Logically, then, the differences are large between the vulnerable (40%) and the privileged (58%). Unlike the previous statement, there is practically no difference between Dutch and French-speakers now (52% and 53%). The differences are significant in terms of ethnic origin. Respondents of Belgian origin agree with the statement presented in 50% of cases, while people of Moroccan/Turkish origin agree in 65% of cases.

In ten of the thirteen distinct electorates, there is an explicit majority in agreement with the ruling. In two of the three exceptions (DéFI and N-VA), those in favour achieve 49%, a multiple of the members of those electorates who disagree. In fact, the only exception is the Vlaams Belang electorate of which only 29% believe that asylum seekers already present in Belgium who are entitled to it should also be given protection and 36% who disagree. The Dutch-speaking parties within the green, liberal, social-democratic, and far-left political factions are again more pro than their French-speaking sister factions (Groen 71% versus Ecolo 62%; Vooruit 64% versus PS 56%; Open Vld 60% versus MR 54%; and PVDA 57% versus PTB 52%).

Lastly, a third statement gauges Belgium's refugee accommodation capacity. Partly in response to the Ukraine crisis, we created two separate questions, one for European and one for non-European refugees: "How many refugees from outside Europe do you think Belgium can accept per year?" and "How many refugees from inside Europe do you think Belgium can accept per year?"

For informational purposes, approximately 26,000 people presented applications for international protection to the Immigration Department in 2021. (Commissioner for Refugees and Stateless People, 2022)

table 21

### how many refugees from outside and inside Europe do you think Belgium can accept per year? (proportions)

	outside Europe	inside Europe
no cap	23	26
+10,000	7	9
5-10,000	6	17
1-5,000	15	17
500-1,000	11	9
-500	8	8
no refugees	21	14

Public opinion is sharply divided over refugee accommodation capacity. For a meaningful minority (approximately a quarter), there should be no cap in this regard. But for a similarly significant, albeit slightly smaller, minority, Belgium should not take in refugees at all, thus reneging on international obligations. Indeed, these figures show a slightly greater tolerance for European refugees. There are slightly more respondents who do not want a cap on European refugees (resp. 26% and 23%). In particular, there are fewer respondents who say they do not want to accept refugees (resp. 14% for refugees from Europe, 21% for refugees from outside Europe). That 14% is almost in line with the proportion advocating closed borders (15%). One can imagine a cohort that does not want asylum seekers but might want other migrants (e.g. for economic reasons) but this cohort amounts to 6% at most (15% pro-closed borders versus 21% pro-no asylum seekers). Conversely, one can also imagine that there is a cohort that does not want a cap on asylum seekers but is still not in favour of open borders. But even this cohort amounts to 7% at most (16% pro-open borders versus 23% no cap for non-European asylum seekers).

The differences between the cohorts are not always as expected. Women reject a cap more than men, but then the proportion who do not want to accept refugees is the same. In terms of age, the figures are a little more difficult to interpret. The proportion that does not want a cap rises—contrary to expectations—until age 50 before declining somewhat again. But the same rise is also seen among those who do not want to accept refugees. However, the trend starts moving up again after the age of 60. Thus, as age increases, there is a form of polarisation.

In terms of level of education, the trend is quite clear. People with little or no formal education are much less in favour of no cap and adhere to the statement that Belgium should not accept refugees more than those with a higher education (resp. 19 and 28% in terms of no cap and 31% and 12% in terms of no refugees (from outside Europe) at all). We can largely extend this trend to the vulnerable versus the privileged. The difference in this is particularly noticeable among those who do not want to accept refugees (resp. 34% among the vulnerable and 13% for the privileged concerning non-European refugees). In terms of no cap, then, the differences are rather limited (resp. 21 and 24%).

We observe the same with ethnicity. Regarding no cap for non-European refugees, the difference between Belgian and Moroccan/Turkish backgrounds is rather limited (21% for Belgian backgrounds, 25% for Moroccan/Turkish backgrounds). The difference is especially noticeable among those who do not want to accept refugees, with a proportion of barely 4% among those of Turkish/Moroccan background. French-speakers are more in favour of no cap for non-European refugees (28% versus 19% for Dutch-speakers) and less in favour of no refugees (17% versus 24%).

table 22

“our country should not have a cap on accepting refugees versus our country should not accept refugees (non-European and European refugees) at all” (proportions)

	non-european refugees		european refugees	
	no cap	none	no cap	none
total	23	21	26	14
les engagés	38	9	36	4
groen	36	3	36	3
ecolo	35	10	35	7
ptb	29	17	31	11
pvda	28	10	30	5
cd&v	27	10	29	9
vooruit	26	11	31	7
ps	25	16	29	11
mr	20	13	25	8
défi	19	22	23	14
open vld	19	11	22	6
n-va	9	27	15	12
vlaams belang	5	53	8	39

Meanwhile, it is no longer surprising that the opinions of different political electorates differ widely. It is notable, however, that besides Vlaams Belang, which almost always demonstrates a distinct profile, this is now also true for N-VA. N-VA's scores are often reasonably close to the overall average, but this is not the case here. Which, incidentally, does not prevent the two parties from scoring very differently even on this theme. The proportion of Vlaams Belang voters who do not want to accept non-European refugees is 53% (European 39%). With N-VA, it is 27% (European 12%), well above the overall average, but only half the score of Vlaams Belang.

Once again, the green political faction is overall the most pro-asylum. It is also the only faction that makes virtually no distinction between non-European and European refugees. With all other parties, including those that promote international solidarity as a value, this is the case, albeit rarely expressed. The party that most strongly distinguishes between non-European and European refugees is N-VA. 27% of the electorate believes that Belgium should not accept non-European refugees. This proportion drops to 12% for European refugees. Although French-speakers are overall more pro-asylum—according to this survey method—this is not true for the green, blue, and red political factions separately. There, the electorates of the Dutch-speaking parties show themselves to be greater, albeit not very strong, supporters of the right to asylum.

Looking at the electorates' stance on access to asylum, on the one hand, and pro-open and closed borders on the other, it is striking that the differences are mostly limited, as is also evident for the overall population. 15% favour closed borders, 21% do not want asylum seekers—a difference of 6 percentage points. By far the biggest difference we notice is with Vlaams Belang, where 30% are in favour of closed borders and 53% want to keep out all asylum seekers. Another curious result is found among the green political faction. For both Ecolo and Groen, the proportion that does not want asylum seekers is lower than the proportion in favour of a total migration freeze. With Groen, 13% are in favour of a migration freeze and 3% for no asylum, while this is 17% and 10% in Ecolo.

Taking the results of the three statements into account, the correct conclusion seems to be that there is support for asylum, but it is fragile. A clear majority wants asylum granted to those asylum seekers already present in Belgium who are entitled to it. If you formulate the right to asylum and the duty to protect in more general terms, then it appears that it's not a close majority, but rather just 37% that explicitly support it. When it comes to whether or not to set a cap on the acceptance of (non-European) refugees—which is contrary to the Refugee Convention—only 23% oppose such a cap; 21% even expressly state that they do not want to accept refugees.

## international comparison

Are residents in this country more or less critical/negative of asylum seekers compared to abroad? A study by Ipsos on the occasion of World Refugee Day provides some data to answer this. The study shows that 31% of residents in Belgium think the borders should be closed to asylum seekers. That proportion is a lot higher than in this study, perhaps as a result of different phrasing used in the various surveys. But it is the comparison with other countries that is interesting in this regard. What did they discover? Belgium does not differ from the Netherlands, France, Germany, Britain, or Switzerland. The US (34%) and Australia (29%) are also close. In Europe, Poland (17%) and Spain (22%) score a lot lower and Sweden (40%) a lot higher. (Ipsos, 2022)

### 5.3 support for asylum is threatened

An often-heard criticism of asylum law is that it is abused to facilitate or even promote illegal migration, and that rejected asylum seekers, who should return to their countries, do not do so, disappearing into illegality in most cases.

A number of statements were presented to ascertain how widely shared these criticisms are by the population.

55% agree (completely) with the statement “I get the impression that the right to asylum is being abused to enter Europe and then stay illegally in one of the member states” while 12% disagree (completely). For every person who disagrees with the statement, there are almost five who agree with it.

The differences between population cohorts are as expected. Men are slightly more in agreement in this than women (58% versus 53%). Increasing age is also associated with more support (from 28% among students and 36% among those under the age of 30 to 67% among people over 50). The differences on level of education are slightly more limited, with scores ranging from 61% among people with little or no formal education to 51% among those with a higher education (46% among those with a master's degree). The differences between vulnerable and privileged people are similar (49% and 62%). In terms of ethnic background, then, the differences are large with 59% for those with a Belgian background and 23% for those with a Moroccan/Turkish background. Dutch-speakers are also slightly more supportive of this statement than French-speakers (58% versus 53%).

Political electorates are once again divided. Support is rather limited among just two electorates, Ecolo and Groen, with 29% each. In these electorates, the cohort rejecting the statement is at least as large (Ecolo 32%, Groen 30%). In the electorates of Vlaams Belang, N-VA, and MR, one finds the largest proportions who believe that asylum is misused to promote illegal migration, 77%, 75, and 70%, respectively.

To examine the extent to which failed return policies undermine support for asylum, the following statement was presented: “We can no longer grant asylum because people whose asylum is rejected and who are deported remain in our country anyway.” 43% agree (completely), 17% completely disagree.

This is a radical statement, as it states “we cannot grant asylum anymore”. However, 43% of respondents agree with such a radical statement, 2.5 times more than those who disagree. This means that not only is there a large cohort of opinion that there is abuse but also that it needs to be dealt with forcefully. The differences between populations are the same as these above. The view is shared more by men, people with little or no formal education, and the vulnerable, and increases markedly with increasing age. Again, the difference in terms of ethnicity is also very large. Remarkably few people of Moroccan and Turkish origin agree with this statement. The differences between the electorates are also the same as those on the previous statement.

table 23

“the right to asylum is abused” and “no more asylum due to abuse” (proportions in agreement)

	asylum is abused	no more asylum due to abuse
total	55	43
vlaams belang	77	65
n-va	75	54
mr	70	54
défi	62	53
ptb	59	48
open vld	51	41
ps	49	46
pvda	49	32
vooruit	48	31
les engagés	47	32
cd&v	45	36
ecolo	29	27
groen	29	24

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## 5.4 modalities of the asylum policy

Respondents were presented with a number of statements to ascertain their preferred type of asylum policy. Table 24 lists them according to the support they receive. Quite a few statements achieve an explicit majority of more than 50%. Others gained the support of more than 40% of those surveyed, which – given the undecided proportion – means that there are many more supporters than opponents.

People's major concern appears to be that too many asylum seekers reach Belgium and that only a small number of rejected asylum seekers return voluntarily or can be deported. 61% speak in favour of accepting them in the region, while only 8% do not see that as a solution to slowing the flow of asylum seekers into Belgium. Similar concern is expressed by the support for the statement to adjust the pushback principle. Under the current rules, people who present themselves at the border or are on the territory of a member state and are seeking asylum are required to be considered.

A large majority (57%) would prefer to change that rule and immediately send people back to countries where they are not at risk. Only 12% speak out against it. That statement actually amounts to classifying more countries as 'safe' or returning these people to countries that only grant refugee status to a small number of inhabitants. A survey does not allow for the technical elaboration of measures. It is clear that a large majority of Belgium's residents want a selection mechanism that allows asylum seekers with very low chances of asylum to be stopped at the border and sent back immediately or quickly.



table 24

characteristics of the desired asylum policy (proportions)

	agree	disagree	agree dutch-speakers	agree french-speakers
measures supported by over 50% of the population				
in order to accept fewer refugees in Belgium, proper accommodation and protection must be provided in the regions where these people come from	61	8	68	54
if the country of origin does not want to take back their deported asylum seekers, that country must be heavily sanctioned	61	8	65	56
asylum seekers who reach Europe or our country from countries where they are not at risk must be moved back across the border immediately	57	12	60	54
refugees granted asylum should be allowed to stay in Belgium only temporarily, until it is again safe for them to return to their country	55	12	60	50
asylum seekers who have not been granted asylum must remain in detention centres until they are deported from the country	50	18	58	41
measures supported by 40-49% of the population				
we must spend (much) less money on the acceptance, housing, and care of asylum seekers than we are currently spending	42	21	47	36
asylum applications from people outside Europe should also be processed outside Europe	41	18	38	44
measures supported by less than 40% of the population				
we must grant asylum to people from Europe, such as Ukrainians, but not to people from outside Europe	20	45	20	20

Another way to achieve the same goal is to propose that the asylum applications for people from outside Europe must also be processed outside Europe. 41% are in favour of this, with only 18% speaking out against it.

The other major concern is that people who are deported rarely actually leave the country. No less than 61% support heavily sanctioning countries that do not take back their deported asylum seekers. Only 8% are against it. The same concern is expressed by the statement to keep people whose asylum applications have been rejected in detention centres until they are deported. 50% of respondents are in favour of that measure, while 18% are against it.

Furthermore, there is a clear majority, 55% against 12%, to make refugee status and subsidiary protection temporary until it is safe enough for the people concerned to return to their countries.

Lastly, a large section of the population (41%) believes that less money should be spent on the acceptance, housing, and care of asylum seekers than is currently the case. 21% believe that such spending should increase, while 38% believe it should remain at current levels. The differences between different population cohorts largely follow the familiar pattern. Men tend to be more pro-stricter measures than women. The same applies to the people with little or no formal education and the vulnerable. Large differences are also seen between respondents of Belgian origin and the others.

As always, the differences between the electorates vary greatly. Ecolo and Groen are clearly the parties least overall pro-stricter measures, but even in those parties, half the electorate is pro-more acceptance in their own region to reduce the number of refugees in Belgium. Furthermore, the other proposed stricter measures have more supporters in those parties than opponents. On temporary asylum, for example, 37% and 30% (Ecolo and Groen, respectively) are in favour and 24% opposed each time. As for imposing sanctions on countries that do not want to take back rejected asylum seekers, 38% (Ecolo) and 36% (Groen) are in favour and 18% and 16% respectively are against.

The majority of supporters of strict measures can be found in the electorates of Vlaams Belang and N-VA. The difference between the two electorates is almost non-existent in this regard. We often saw large differences earlier in this report. For example, Vlaams Belang voters are more in favour of abolishing the right to asylum (especially for non-European refugees). It is also interesting that PTB's electorate is tougher than PS's in each case. This applies to temporary asylum, acceptance in one's own region, processing asylum outside of Europe, sanctioning countries of origin for not taking rejected asylum seekers back, and deporting refugees coming from countries where they are not at risk.

There are also a number of measures that more people reject than support. Radical is the rejection of the statement to limit asylum, as originally in the Refugee Convention, to Europeans only. Just 20% support this statement, while an overwhelming 45% reject it.

In general, support for tightening asylum policy is greater among Dutch-speakers than among French-speakers. The only exception to this is that more French-speakers are won over to the idea of handling asylum applications from non-Europeans outside Europe. However, the differences are mostly insignificant as some measures have a solid majority behind them in both parts of the country and other measures are rejected by a clear majority in both parts of the country. There are two exceptions to this. Placing asylum seekers whose applications were rejected in detention centres is preferred by 58% of Dutch-speakers and 41% of French-speakers. Furthermore, 47% of Dutch-speakers believe that less money should be spent on the acceptance, housing, and care of asylum seekers, compared to 36% of French-speakers.

## 5.5 the support for asylum

A somewhat detailed survey shows that support for asylum is a variable, not a yes/no issue. Support for asylum, or the lack thereof, can range from a radical rejection of the right, over to a lack of support for the principle of protection as formulated in the Refugee Convention, to suspecting the right is being abused and seizing on that abuse as a reason to reject the right, to proposing restrictions on said right. Table 25 visualises this variation and also shows how it occurs in the different electorates.

## support for asylum, by language group and party electorate (proportions)

	dutch speakers		french speakers		green parties		christian democrats		left-wing parties			right-wing parties			nationalist parties	
	total	dutch speakers	french speakers	groen	ecolo	cd&v	les engagés	vooruit	pvda	ptb	ps	open vld	mr	défi	n-va	viaams belang
we no longer admit asylum seekers, including from within Europe	14	15	13	3	10	4	7	7	5	11	11	6	8+	14	12	39
we no longer admit asylum seekers from outside Europe	21	23	17	3	7	10	9	11	10	17	16	11	13	22	27	53
our country cannot be responsible for protecting people from other countries, even if they have to flee persecution and acts of war	28	25	32	13	22	19	26	9	21	37	6	19	31	30	30	47
we can no longer grant asylum because people whose asylum is rejected and who are deported remain in our country anyway	43	44	42	24	27	36	32	31	32	48	46	41	54	53	54	65
i get the impression that the right to asylum is being abused to enter Europe and then stay illegally in one of the member states	55	58	53	30	29	45	47	48	49	59	50	51	70	62	75	75
we no longer admit refugees or put a cap on the number (for refugees from outside Europe)	77	81	72	6	65	73	62	74	72	71	75	81	80	81	91	95

In terms of the total population, 14% no longer want asylum seekers to enter the country, including those from within Europe. 21% no longer want to accept asylum seekers from outside Europe. 28% believe our country cannot be responsible for granting asylum. 43% believe we can no longer grant asylum because rejected asylum seekers do not return to their countries in sufficient numbers. 55% have the impression that the right to asylum is abused for illegal migration. 77% either want to stop admitting asylum seekers or put a cap on the number of asylum applications that can be made. We see the same trend of declining support for asylum in all electorates depending on when abuses are also probed or the idea of a cap is introduced, with the understanding that support is much higher in some electoral cohorts than others.

Overall, the right to asylum has slightly more support among French-speakers than Dutch-speakers, except for the general principle: more French-speakers than Dutch-speakers believe that our country cannot be responsible for granting asylum.

In terms of parties, the most support for asylum is among Groen, Ecolo, Vooruit, and the parties Christian-based CD&V and Les Engagés. The support for asylum is fragile among the electorates of MR, PS, DéFI, and N-VA. The Vlaams Belang electorate is very critical of asylum.

## 5.6 which asylum policy is preferred by the majority of the population?

It is clear that a broad majority does not want to limit the right to asylum to Europeans alone. A majority wants a stronger focus on acceptance in the region, explicitly aimed at reducing the number of asylum applications in Belgium. The so-called Turkey Deal is a policy that fits into that framework. It is clear that people want more such effective agreements with countries in the regions from which asylum seekers come.

A large majority would also prefer to see a temporary right to asylum, with people returning to their country as soon as it is safe. Clearly, many interpret the right to asylum as a right to protection, not as a migration channel. Protection, they say, should be provided for as long as it is needed. This implies a demand for the development of a return policy once the country of origin or parts of it are sufficiently safe. The preferred temporary nature of the asylum is clear. How a return policy can be effectively shaped is obviously an entirely different question, which will have to take into account, among other things, the length of the stay in Belgium and the degree of integration into this society.

It is clear that the preference for a number of measures is driven by the belief that once an asylum seeker is inside the European Union, it is still difficult to get them out, regardless of the action taken on the asylum application. Therefore, a majority favours processing asylum applications from non-Europeans outside of Europe. This refers to Denmark and Britain's current attempts to do so, the policies that have been or are being pursued by the United States and Australia, as well as the European Commission's proposal to implement an initial selection of asylum seekers extraterritorially. In the latter case, part of the territory of the member states would be considered extraterritorial so that asylum seekers could be sent back from there, after an initial selection, without it being considered as pushback. It is clear that there is strong support among the Belgian population for processing asylum applications outside the territory of member states.

The same concern that inspires the preference for extraterritorial treatment of asylum requests is also evident in the support for the proposition to place those asylum seekers who were refused asylum in a detention centre until their deportation, as well as the overwhelming support for 'heavily sanctioning' countries of origin that do not want to take back their rejected asylum seekers. A degree of desperation is evident from the strong support for those statements. After all, the detention centres do not have the capacity to do this. The same goes for the statement that asylum seekers coming from a safe country should be sent back to the country they came from immediately. This also reflects a desire to curb

the practice of applying for asylum in order to be admitted to the procedure once one has arrived on the territory of a European member state. In a lot of cases, this is done by people who have no or very little chance of being granted asylum. However, this offers asylum seekers the opportunity to disappear into illegality. Refusal of asylum in a large number of cases does not involve returning that person to their country of origin. The desire to put an end to this is clear and is reflected in the high level of agreement with the statements presented. However, immediate return to a safe country, as one of the rulings puts it, is not possible without a thorough amendment of European regulations and case law. It is clear that a majority of the population wants such an amendment. If national governments fail to do so, it is reasonably likely that public dissatisfaction will increase, and support for the right to asylum will erode.

Plus, four in ten respondents want fewer resources to be spent on the acceptance, housing, and care of asylum seekers. This raises a difficult issue as a sound asylum and migration policy is not feasible in today's world without investing heavily in it. The debate on this, however, would have been helped by a reliable estimate of the costs of asylum and illegal migration, of the cost of processing asylum applications, of dealing with disputes over those applications, the cost of housing and care, of medical care and other costs of asylum seekers and illegal migrants, such as the cost of security forces and of safety directly related to illegal migration and so-called transmigration. In light of a solid estimate of those costs, the financial sense

and nonsense of alternatives could also be discussed. For example, with such a budget, what can be done for accommodation in the region for which there is strong support among the inhabitants of this country?

It is clear that the vulnerability of the support base for asylum is mainly related to the use and abuse of asylum as a channel of illegal immigration, on the one hand, and the failure of return policies, on the other. And there are also questions about the actual quasi-indefinite duration of refugee status or statutorily protected status.

# 06

## illegal migration



## 6.1 open borders?

The concept of 'illegal migration' is itself controversial. Some people favour open borders; these people believe that migration cannot be illegal. This report showed above that the proportion in agreement with this is 16%. Clearly a minority, but far from a negligible number. The statement that no one is in favour of open borders is clearly false. In the previous chapter, we made it clear that the fragile support for the right to asylum is strongly linked to the observation that rejecting the demand for protection causes many people involved to disappear into illegality. Asylum is then seen less and less as a means of protection, and more as a gateway to illegality with all of its negative effects.

## 6.2 what can be done with the illegals already present?

In general, the attitude of the population in Belgium towards illegal migration is characterised, on the one hand, by a preference for tough and decisive measures to combat illegal migration and, on the other hand, by a preference for a somewhat milder approach to illegal migrants already present in the country, provided they work. It is an attitude that inevitably leads to contradictions in a number of cases.

In what follows, we first address the statement of what to do with the illegal immigrants already present, then we address how illegal immigration should be dealt with according to the residents of Belgium.

There are clear majorities for criminalising illegal presence in the country (56% for versus 15% against) and for never regularising people who entered the country illegally (52% for versus 18% against). There is almost a majority (49% for versus 18% against) to house illegal immigrants in detention centres until they are deported. Those in favour of the latter measures may be somewhat fewer in number because people realise that this is impossible given the number of illegal immigrants (150,000 to 200,000 according to current estimates). Nevertheless, 49% of respondents chose that option.

table 26

statements concerning the approach to people already present illegally in the country (proportions)

	agree	disagree
it should be punishable to stay illegally in Belgium	56	15
people who entered the country illegally or are staying there illegally after being told to leave the country should never be regularised and never be granted a residence permit	52	18
people who are in the country illegally should stay in a detention centre until they are deported	49	18
illegal migrants are also entitled to housing and livelihood support	23	40
those who entered illegally but find work and can hold that job for at least a year should be granted a permanent residence permit	37	24
people who entered Belgium illegally but work here have the same right to social benefits as Belgians	35	31

In terms of support for these measures, we see differences by gender, age, language group, and socioeconomic situation. Table 27 illustrates this for criminalising illegal residence and for resisting regularisation of people who entered the country illegally and do not comply with deportation.

table 27

“illegal migration is punishable” and “no regularisation (asylum) should be granted after migrating illegally, according to socio-demographic characteristics” (proportions in agreement)

		punishable	no regularisation
total		56	52
gender	men	61	58
	women	50	46
age	under 30	40	31
	31-40 years	46	41
	41-50 years	54	52
	51-60 years	64	65
	over 60	68	66
level of education	little or no formal education	59	53
	secondary education	57	50
	higher education	52	38
language	dutch	63	55
	french	47	49
background	belgian, flemish, walloon	59	48
	moroccan/turkish	21	17
	european	49	40
	non-european	26	23

Women, young people, those with a higher education, French-speakers, and the privileged generally take a less strict attitude towards illegal migrants. The differences between ethnic origins are also large. Natives are a lot stricter than citizens of Moroccan/Turkish background and those of non-European background.

As always, the differences between the electorates vary greatly. There is a majority on criminalising illegal residence among six parties: PTB (50%), CD&V (54%), Open Vld (57%), MR (66%), N-VA (78%), and Vlaams Belang (85%). There isn't a majority among the other parties, but supporters outnumber opponents by far: Les Engagés (44% for, 24% against), DéFI (46% for, 21% against), PS (46% for, 14% against), PVDA (42% for, 28% against), Vooruit (48% for, 17% against). Supporters and opponents are somewhat more balanced in just two parties: Groen (38% for, 29% against) and Ecolo (30% for, 31% against).

The green parties once again clearly face a split in their ranks when it comes to this measure. That is not the case in this regard for parties like N-VA and Vlaams Belang, where supporters form an overwhelming majority. What is striking about the latter parties is that few of their voters take a neutral, undecided, or wavering stance on these and similar measures. 18% of the N-VA electorate and 12% of the Vlaams Belang electorate does so for criminalisation, compared to 40% in the PS, 39% in Ecolo, and 35% in CD&V and Vooruit. There is a high degree of unanimity within the electorates of N-VA and Vlaams Belang on tackling illegal migration. A lot of the other parties' electorates are divided to strongly divided on how illegal migration is best handled.

The attitude of the electorates regarding the regularisation of illegals who were once deported but did not leave the territory is very similar to that regarding criminalisation. Among those speaking out explicitly, majorities are found among Open Vld (50%), DéFI (52%), PTB (54%), MR (67%), N-VA (77%), and Vlaams Belang (77%). Opponents of regularisation far outnumber supporters among some of the other parties: CD&V (44% versus 16%), PS (44% versus 15%), Vooruit (44% versus 20%). Supporters and opponents are somewhat more balanced in two parties: Les Engagés (41% versus 32%) and PVDA (39% versus 27%). There are more people in favour of regularisation than against it in the green party electorates. 41% of Groen voters reject the statement that people who entered the country illegally and were deported but failed to comply should never be regularised; 20% support that statement. Among Ecolo voters, 34% reject it and 32% support it. So we see a big split on this measure with this party, much like PVDA and Les Engagés. Again, there are a few undecided for this measure among N-VA (16%) and Vlaams Belang (17%), but also among PTB voters (19%) in this case.

When asked whether illegal migrants are entitled to housing and livelihood support, almost twice as many people answered in the negative (40%) as in the affirmative (23%). There are no major differences in this regard in terms of social background, with the partial exception of age. People under 40 are more in favour of it (30%) than those over 40 (18%). The differences between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers are slight: of the former, 21% are in favour of such a measure, of the latter 25%.

We again see the now familiar differences by political affiliation here. There are more supporters than opponents in three electorates: Groen (47% for, 11% against), Les Engagés (38% for, 24% against), and Ecolo (36% for, 25% against). Interestingly, the electorates of most left-wing parties are sharply divided on this statement. This is true for Vooruit (29% for, 29% against), PVDA (30% for, 31% against), and PS (30% for, 26% against). More opponents than supporters can be found in the electorates of CD&V (23% for, 28% against), PTB (27% for, 39% against), DéFI (22% for, 42% against), and Open Vld (17% for, 40% against). A majority of the electorates of MR (50%), N-VA (62%), and Vlaams Belang (62%) explicitly oppose the statement.

### 6.3 what can be done with the illegals who work here?

Attitudes towards illegal immigrants change quite radically when they are working. The statement “People who entered Belgium illegally but work here have the same right to social benefits as Belgians” is accepted by more people than rejected, 35% versus 31%. The difference is not very big. The population is clearly divided on this, which in itself is remarkable given the strong rejection of illegal migration. Working makes up for a lot in the eyes of many. This is in line with people’s positive views on bringing in regular migrants to counter labour market shortages.

The statement gets majority support from the electorates of Ecolo (51%) and Les Engagés (52%). In both cases, 18% are against.

There are more supporters of this measure than opponents in six other electorates. This is true for Groen (49% for, 14% against), PS (44% for, 22% against), PTB (45% for, 28% against), PVDA (39% for, 29% against), Vooruit (37% for, 24% against), CD&V (34% for, 24% against), and MR (37% for, 33% against).

There are just as many supporters as opponents among Open Vld voters: 33%. There are more opponents than supporters among DéFI and N-VA. For DéFI, it is 35% versus 40%, and for N-VA, it is 26% versus 44%.

Only among Vlaams Belang is there a clear majority – 53% versus 21% – who believe that people who entered the country illegally but are working cannot have the same social benefits as Belgians.

The fact that attitudes towards illegal immigrants change significantly when they are working is also demonstrated by the extent to which respondents agree with the following statement: “Those who entered illegally but find work and can hold that job for at least a year should be granted a permanent residence permit.” Of those living in Belgium, 37% agree, 25% disagree, and a large cohort (39%) remains undecided. Women are more inclined to support the statement than men. The traditional correlation appears again in terms of age and level of education. As age increases, there is less support for the statement, albeit with a slight change in those over 60.

Those people with a higher education are also more in favour. The difference between language cohorts is significant. Of the Dutch-speakers, 31% support the statement, while this is 45% of the French-speakers. Furthermore, there is more support among the privileged and those with a higher education

(40% and 41%) than among the vulnerable and people with little or no formal education (30% and 31%). There is also, as often shown here, a difference in terms of ethnic background: 35% of people with a Belgian background and 42% of people with a Moroccan or Turkish background support the statement.

table 28

“those who entered the country illegally but find work and can hold that job for at least a year should be regularised” (proportions)

		agree	disagree
total		37	25
gender	men	34	28
	women	40	21
age	under 30	46	14
	31-40 years	38	23
	41-50 years	33	30
	51-60 years	31	32
	over 60	37	25
level of education	little or no formal education	31	28
	secondary education	36	25
	higher education	41	22
language	dutch	31	29
	french	45	20
background	belgian, flemish, walloon	35	26
	moroccan/turkish	42	22
	europaean origin	47	16
	non-europaean origin	42	24

By comparing the answers to this statement with those to the statement “People who entered the country illegally or are staying there illegally after being told to leave the country should never be regularised and never be granted a residence permit” (see table 29), we can determine the impact of work fairly precisely. For the overall cohort, support for regularisation rises from 18% to 37%, more than doubling. The same is true for a majority of the distinct sub-cohorts.

The increase in support through work manifests itself fairly evenly across all sub-cohorts. In terms of gender, age, and level of education, there is little difference in the increase in support for regularisation through work. The increase in support is greater among French-speakers than among Dutch-speakers, and among those over the age of 60 than among younger age cohorts, and much smaller among people of Moroccan and Turkish origin than among natives.

table 29

attitude towards regularisation, with and without the condition of sustainable employment, according to socio-demographic characteristics (proportions)

		agree regularisation illegals	agree with regularisation subject to employment	+percentage points
total		18	37	19
gender	men	15	34	19
	women	20	40	20
age	under 30	28	46	18
	31-40 years	23	38	15
	41-50 years	17	33	16
	51-60 years	11	31	20
	over 60	12	37	25
level of education	little or no formal education	12	31	19
	secondary education	16	36	20
	higher education	22	41	19
language	dutch	15	31	16
	french	20	44	24
achtergrond	belgian, flemish, walloon	16	35	19
	moroccan/turkish	32	36	4

Among the electorates, we see largely the same mutual differences as for the previous statement. Of course, in this, we again notice the systematically higher support in every electorate for regularising illegals once the condition of sustained employment is added. This is illustrated in table 30.

table 30

### attitude towards regularisation, with and without the condition of sustainable employment, according to electorates (proportions)

	agree with regularisation of illegals*	agree with regularisation of (working) illegals	+ percentage points
total	18	37	19
groen	41	54	13
ecolo	34	57	23
les engagés	32	57	25
pvda	27	37	10
ptb	27	48	21
défi	21	38	17
vooruit	20	31	11
cd&v	16	34	18
ps	15	43	28
mr	13	47	34
open vld	11	36	25
n-va	7	23	16
vlaams belang	6	24	18

\*figure is the converted proportion who do not agree with 'no regularisation for people staying in the country illegally'

Regularisation support for illegal immigrants doubles overall if the condition of having worked for at least one year is added. This increase in percentage points is highest among the liberal factions and among PS and Les Engagés, and lowest among Vooruit and PVDA.



## 6.4 how can we tackle illegal migration?

Five measures that regularly appear in the public debate were examined to find out to what extent they are supported by the population. See table 31.

table 31

### support for measures to reduce illegal migration, by language cohort (proportions)

	agree	disagree	agree NL	agree FR
illegal migrants who do not apply for asylum or whose asylum application is rejected must be sent back to their country of origin	65	8	73	57
we need to invest more in guarding Europe's outer borders so that fewer people can enter irregularly	67	10	70	63
countries must be required to take back illegal migrants and asylum seekers from their countries who have exhausted all legal remedies, even if those countries do not want to do so	62	11	72	52
we must somehow reintroduce internal border controls in the EU to better control illegal migration	56	18	56	56
those entering Europe illegally can no longer apply for asylum and must be sent back immediately	46	24	49	41

For four of these measures, there is a majority explicitly in favour of them and only a small proportion—8-18%—against them. This involves a policy in which illegal immigrants who do not apply for asylum or asylum seekers whose asylum is rejected are effectively returned to their countries and that countries are obliged to take back their illegal immigrants and asylum seekers who have exhausted all legal remedies, even if those countries do not want to do so. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority wants more investment in guarding Europe's outer borders, with the aim of stopping illegal migration. There is even an explicit majority in favour of 'somehow' reintroducing controls at Europe's internal borders to curb illegal migration. While this amounts to a revision of the Schengen Agreement, only 18% of respondents speak out against that measure. It is a signal that the current course of events is generating frustration among a large section of the population.

As for the four newly mentioned measures, support is significantly higher among Dutch-speakers than among French-speakers in three of the four cases. The exception is the reintroduction of internal border controls. There is equal, explicit support for this in both language cohorts. The Dutch-speakers are possibly a bit more reserved here because Flanders is an export region.

Furthermore, support for the four measures is always higher among older age cohorts than younger ones, and generally higher among men than women, and those with little to no education/people with a secondary education

than among those with a higher education. The biggest differences are seen between the age cohorts, with the youngest cohorts (18 to 30 years and 31 to 40 years) showing less support. For example, 51% of those under the age of 30 are explicitly in favour of investing more in guarding the European Union's outer borders, and support rises to 78% among those aged 60 and over.

The fifth measure—automatically denying asylum to anyone entering Europe illegally—is the only one for which there is no explicit majority. There is explicit support from 46% of the population and opposition from 24%. Explicit support for the measure is greater among Dutch-speakers (49%) than among French-speakers (41%). There is more support among men (52%) than women (40%). In terms of age, support ranges from 25% among those under the age of 30 to 55% among those over the age of 60. People with little or no formal education explicitly support the measure in 52% of cases, while it is 38% for those with a higher education. We note a very large difference regarding ethnic background. Natives support the statement in 48% of cases, it is still 40% among respondents of European background, and only 17% among people of Moroccan/Turkish origin.

We discuss the five measures among electorates successively.

As for an effective return policy, there is an explicit majority in all electorates except that of Ecolo, with 37% in favour and 24% against. 50% of the Groen electorate are in favour and 18% are against. Explicit support for such a policy is particularly high in the electorates of Open Vld (77%), MR (78%), Vlaams Belang (85%), and N-VA (86%).

For investing more in guarding Europe's outer borders, there is also an explicit majority in all electorates, except those of Ecolo and Groen. In the former, 49% are for and 21% are against; in the latter, 42% are for and 26% are against. Explicit support here is again particularly high in the electorates of MR (79%), N-VA (85%), and Vlaams Belang (87% for, 1% against). Clearly, the issue of illegal migration disturbs the electorates of N-VA and Vlaams Belang particularly strongly. While we often see 25-30% undecided, for example, on the statement of better surveillance of Europe's outer borders, there are only 12% undecided in the electorates of Vlaams Belang and N-VA.

Requiring countries to take back asylum seekers and illegal immigrants who have exhausted all legal remedies, if necessary against opposition from those countries, has an explicit majority in all electorates except those of Les Engagés (49% for, 17% against), PS (49% for, 13% against), and Ecolo (36% for, 22% against). In this case, Groen does have a majority (53% for, 15% against). Support is high among MR (69%), Open Vld (71%), and especially N-VA (81%) and Vlaams Belang (83%).

There is somewhat more division on the reintroduction of controls at Europe's internal borders. For that measure, there is no explicit majority in the electorates of Les Engagés (49% versus 19%), CD&V (46% versus 25%), Ecolo (36% versus 34%), Groen (29% versus 36%), Open Vld (41% versus 30%), PVDA (44% versus 30%), and Vooruit (47% versus 24%). Explicit majorities do exist in DéFI (65% versus 12%), MR (67% versus 16%), N-VA (69% versus 11%), PTB (66% versus 17%), PS (58% versus 13%), and Vlaams Belang (78% versus 4%). Supporters outnumber opponents in all electorates except Groen. The measure would cause a great deal of division in the electorates of Ecolo, Open Vld, and the PVDA.

The latter measure (no asylum for those entering illegally) has an explicit majority in the electorates of MR (52% versus 20%), N-VA (65% versus 13%), and Vlaams Belang (75% versus 6%). There are more supporters than opponents of the measure in the electorates of CD&V (42% versus 26%), DéFI (46% versus 25%), Open Vld (39% versus 28%), PTB (47% versus 35%), PS (39% versus 21%), and PVDA (40% versus 34%). The electorates of Les Engagés (33% for versus 32% against) and Vooruit (33% for versus 36% against) are almost equally divided. A majority against can be found in the electorates of Ecolo (28% for versus 39% against), and Groen (23% for versus 49% against).

## 6.5 which illegal migration policy is preferred by the majority of the population?

There are a large number of measures that still get a sometimes very large majority of the population behind them, despite the high number of undecided or neutral positions. In those cases, proponents outnumber opponents by up to five times. A policy that wants to match the wishes of the population can find inspiration in these measures.

This clearly applies to investing more heavily in guarding Europe's outer borders to prevent people from entering Europe illegally and, to a slightly lesser extent, reintroducing controls at Europe's internal borders to limit the movement of illegal immigrants.

The same goes for pursuing an effective deportation policy and policies aimed at 'requiring' third countries to take their people back.

Furthermore, majorities want to criminalise illegal residence and never regularise people who entered the country illegally or ignored a deportation order.

There is no majority for a number of measures, but those in favour are far more numerous than those against. Supporters are almost three times more numerous for letting people who are in the country illegally stay in detention centres until deportation (49% for versus 18%

against) and for the very strict measure that those who enter Europe illegally can no longer apply for asylum (46% for versus 24% against). This would imply that the asylum application is always made extraterritorially or at the border, and that admissibility is decided before a person is admitted to one of the European Union member states.

Supporters and opponents are more balanced for some of the other measures; specifically, supporters are less than twice as numerous as opponents. This is true of the statement that people who entered Europe illegally, but found work and kept it for at least a year, can be regularised (37% for versus 24% against). This also applies to the statement that people who entered Belgium illegally but work here have the same right to social benefits as Belgians (35% for versus 31% against).

Lastly, there are almost twice as many opponents than supporters of giving illegal migrants support for housing and livelihood as well.

Looking at the measures for which there is a clear majority, it appears that the majority of the population is in favour of policies that are stricter than those currently in place.



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# 07

## the breakdown

## migration in general

The overall opinion on migration is rather negative. 60% believe migrants cost more than they contribute. Only 12% disagree. Only 18% of respondents believe that Belgium is now doing better economically because of migration. And 64% believe that migration has caused the quality of education to decline.

Respondents' personal experiences are also rather negative: 58% feel less safe as a result of migration and 53% feel less at home. On average, the proportion for negative experiences are double those for positive experiences.

Not surprisingly, only 27% believe that migration has been beneficial for the country over the past 50 years. 39% explicitly disagree, which is a lower figure than those who report negative personal experiences regarding migration. Nevertheless, even overall, the negative vote outweighs the positive.

The rather negative evaluation on migration does not imply polarisation. Both completely closed (15%) and completely open borders (16%) do not have substantial support. In both cases, about half are also clearly against. The fact that polarisation does not prevail in this regard is also evident in the undecided proportion on many statements on migration. Although the latter may also have to do with the sensitivity of the theme. At least it means that talking, debating, and consulting on the issue makes sense.

A key finding is that there is a strong correlation between the overall opinion on migration and the view of the country's future and the view of one's personal future. Traditionally, the view of the country's future is more pessimistic than that of one's personal future ("the country is doing poorly, but I am doing well"). However, this appears to be much less in this study. Those who are pessimistic about the country are also largely pessimistic about themselves. So there is a more global pessimism right now that is affecting both society and the individual. We then also see a strong correlation with views on migration. Those with a more pessimistic worldview (both socially and personally) also view migration more negatively.

Obviously, there are differences depending on socio-demographic characteristics. In terms of gender, the differences are rather limited, and in many cases women appear to view migration somewhat less strictly. The correlation is also clear with age. Young people are almost always less negative towards migration, and within the youth cohort, there is another difference with students. With increasing age, the proportion of negatives increases, albeit sometimes reversing after the age of 60.

In terms of level of education, the trend is quite clear. The people with little or no formal education are almost always more critical of migration than those with a secondary education, and the latter, in turn, are more critical than those with a higher education. Even among those with a higher education, there is usually a difference between those with a bachelor's degree and those with a

master's degree.

Dutch-speakers are on average slightly more negative than French-speakers. Interestingly, the latter are more pro-closed and open borders, indicating greater polarisation.

However, we notice the biggest differences in two other variables. First, there is ethnic background. Respondents of Belgian origin are more critical than those of European origin, Turkish/Moroccan origin, or another country outside Europe. Some caution is needed here because the absence of respondents over the age of 60 means we do not have a fully representative picture of the Moroccan/Turkish community.

We encounter these global differences systematically across different forms of migration. We will not revisit it in this breakdown unless there are clear deviations from the overall trend.

Lastly, there is political preference. There are big differences between the various electorates for almost every statement. The answers are thus (sometimes strongly) influenced by various ideologies. Overall, the green political faction (Groen and Ecolo) is the least negative or strict/most positive on migration. Electorates are also sometimes very sharply divided within the same party with an equal amount of supporters and opponents. For example, 30% of the Ecolo electorate thinks migrants cost more than they contribute, 29% think they contribute more than they cost. The electorate of Vlaams Belang is, not surprisingly, the most negative/strictest on migration. Yet even that electorate

contains surprises. For example, a well-known election proposal by Vlaams Belang is a ten-year migration freeze. This is shared by only 30% of the Vlaams Belang electorate and even rejected by 29%. Interestingly, within political factions, Dutch-speaking parties tend to be less negative. This is due to the absence of highly migration-critical parties in the French-speaking part of the country. The more migration-critical voters are more spread out among the other parties. The N-VA electorate is as negative as that of Vlaams Belang on some aspects but differs greatly on others. Thus, while the disapproval for open borders is as high as that of Vlaams Belang, there are far fewer supporters of closed borders. N-VA's electorate often comes close to MR and sometimes to that of PTB and PS.

## regular migration

The perception on general migration is rather negative. The question now is whether we can extend this to different forms of migration. We successively distinguish between forms of regular migration (work, family reunification, study), asylum, and illegal migration.



## work

It is abundantly clear that work-based migration has a lot more positive support. If migrants are working, contributing to society, and relying less on social security or welfare, a lot of the resentment or unrest disappears. Migration for the purposes of shoring up labour market shortages gets approval from 60% of respondents. Only 12% do not support this, which is about the same percentage that advocate closed borders (15%). Those in favour are five times more numerous than those against.

Interestingly, the differences between the sub-cohorts differ in some cases from the pattern outlined earlier. While women have a less negative perception on migration overall, it is now men who are slightly more inclined towards work-based migration. Nor do we find traditional differences in terms of age. The difference between people with little or no formal education and those with a higher education remains. Among those with a higher education, 68% are pro, while this is only 50% among the people with little or no formal education, but even among the latter, the proponents are still three times more numerous than the opponents.

Where the green political faction is usually the least negative or most pro-migration, the same is not true for work-based migration. The greatest support for this type of migration can be found among the liberal (Open Vld and MR) and Christian parties (CD&V and Les Engagés), where approximately three in four are pro, narrowly followed by the N-VA electorate (69%). The difference with Vlaams

Belang is significant at this point. But even in this migration-critical party and the only one with a migration ban in its manifesto, just over half are pro-migration for work-related reasons (51%). In this respect, Vlaams Belang differs little from PS and PVDA where 54 and 51% are pro, respectively. Compared with liberal and Christian political factions and the N-VA, left-wing electorates are on average slightly less enthusiastic about labour migration.

Given the positive public perception in this regard, the question can be asked as to whether the current regulation on work-based migration is in need of expansion or relaxation. That is definitely worth a substantive discussion but is still very uncertain. The positive popular approval may just be a effect of the previously restrictive legislation. But there are certainly arguments for driving up the proportion of work-based migration within the global migration flow. We will come back to this further in this breakdown.

## family reunification

Besides migration for work-related reasons, the principle of family reunification also has solid support. Only 16% reject this. This figure matches those who want to close the borders to migrants. Family reunification does need to be linked to (sometimes fairly strict) conditions (72%) for by far the largest cohort. Solid majorities favour compulsory civic integration and better language skills. Migrants must also have worked for at least four years before bringing other family members over.

## students

Given the rather positive perception of work-based migration, one might expect that education-based migration would also have similar support. However, that doesn't appear to be the case. The proportion in favour (31%) is slightly higher than those against (25%). Apparently, the link to work in this regard is not made unequivocally.

## asylum

Compared to work-based migration, asylum has less approval. Exactly how large the support base is depends on the statement. The most positive score is achieved for the statement "Anyone who applies for and is entitled to asylum in Belgium should be able to stay here and receive protection". Half of the respondents (fully) agree, while only 17% disagree. These results are not very different (9 percentage points) from those for work-based migration (60% agree, 12% disagree).

This indicates a still fairly solid support base. The picture changes, negatively, when asked about accommodation capacity for asylum seekers. Where 51% believe that everyone entitled to asylum should be able to stay and receive protection in Belgium, the proportion who believe there can be no cap on recognised asylum seekers is still only 23%, which is more than half. This statement also shows that 21% do not want to recognise asylum seekers at all, a proportion slightly above the proportion of those who want a total ban on migration (15%). This statement was split into European and non-European asylum seekers. Indeed, there appears to be a difference in opinion,

not among those who do not want a cap (those proportion hardly differ), but among those who do not want asylum seekers at all. It is 14% for European asylum seekers, and 21% for non-European asylum seekers. Admittedly a clear, albeit not a huge difference. 'Europe first' seems to play only a limited role.

The global right to asylum is endorsed by all but one electorate of the political parties. The only exception is the Vlaams Belang electorate of which only 29% believe that asylum seekers already present in Belgium who are entitled to it should also be given protection and 36% who disagree. The difference with N-VA is again large, with 49% in favour and 23% against. Overall, the green political faction is the most pro-asylum (Groen 71%, Ecolo 62%). As with the greens, we also notice that the Dutch-speaking parties are more pro-asylum among the liberal, social-democratic, and far-left factions (Vooruit 64% versus PS 56%, Open Vld 60% versus MR 54%, and PVDA 57% versus PTB 52%).

In terms of accommodation capacity for asylum seekers, the green political faction is also the most pro-asylum. It is also the only faction that makes no distinction between non-European and European refugees. As mentioned earlier, the difference is rather limited overall anyway. Only two parties deviated moderately from the average. 53% of Vlaams Belang believe asylum cannot be granted to non-Europeans. This drops to 39% for Europeans. For N-VA, the figures are 27% and 12%, respectively. So in both cases, a drop of about 15 percentage points, sharply above the average drop of 7 percentage points.

Although public opinion towards asylum is more negative/stronger than towards work-based migration, several results suggest that the basic principle of asylum – “providing protection to people persecuted in their own country for a variety of non-legitimate reasons” – is not fundamentally in question. It is more about other issues. For example, 55% believe that the asylum procedure is being used improperly by ineligible people. Only 12% disagree with this. Similarly, 55% believe the temporary nature of asylum should be increased. Again, only 12% disagree with this. The protection applies until the situation in the home country is okay again. 61% believe that countries that do not want to take back asylum seekers must be sanctioned. And 43% believe that asylum should be abolished because it fails to deport asylum seekers whose applications were denied. It is not so much asylum as a basic right and moral principle that is at issue, but its concrete use and the observation that asylum is effectively a conduit for illegality.

### illegal migration

Part of the less positive perception around asylum lies in the fact that it is often the gateway to illegality. Not surprisingly, the perception of illegal migration is negative. Open borders, a situation in which illegal migration does not exist, is endorsed by only 16% of respondents. The overall mood is fairly clear. For 56%, staying in the country illegally should be punishable. Only 15% disagree with that. For 52%, someone who entered the country illegally can never be regularised;

only 18% disagree with this. For 49%, illegal immigrants should be detained in a detention centre before being deported.

Women, young people, those with a higher education, and French-speakers generally take a less strict attitude towards illegal migrants. The differences between the electorates vary greatly yet again. On criminalising illegal residence, there is a majority among six parties: PTB (50%), CD&V (54%), Open Vld (57%), MR (66%), N-VA (78%), and Vlaams Belang (85%). Notice the disparate ideological spectrum! There isn't a majority among the other parties, but supporters outnumber opponents by far: Les Engagés (44% for versus 24% against), DéFI (46% for versus 21% against), PS (46% for versus 14% against), PVDA (42% for versus 28% against), and Vooruit (48% for versus 17% against). Supporters and opponents are somewhat more balanced in just two parties: Groen (38% for versus 29% against) and Ecolo (30% for versus 31% against).

The attitude of the electorates regarding the regularisation of illegals who were once deported is very similar to that regarding criminalisation.

A very striking finding is that having a job also has a positive effect on public opinion in the case of illegal migration. 37% believe that any illegal migrants who have worked for a year should be granted a residence permit. Only 25% are against this. A large cohort remains undecided. By comparing the results with another regularisation statement, we can precisely determine the net effect of work. Overall, support for regularisation rises from 18% to 37%, more than doubling. The increase in support through work manifests itself fairly evenly across all sub-cohorts. In terms of gender, age, and level of education, there is little difference in the increase in support because of work. The differences increase slightly more with language and ethnicity.

What policies do people want to reduce illegal migration? For four of the presented measures, there is a majority explicitly in favour of them and only a small proportion – 8-18% – against them. This involves a policy in which illegal immigrants who do not apply for asylum or asylum seekers whose asylum is rejected are effectively returned to their countries (65% pro) and that countries are obliged to take back their illegal immigrants and asylum seekers who have exhausted all legal remedies (62% pro), even if those countries do not want to do so. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority wants more investment in guarding Europe's outer borders (67%), with the aim of stopping illegal migration. There is even an explicit majority in favour of 'somehow' reintroducing controls at Europe's internal borders to curb illegal migration (56%). While this amounts to a revision of Schengen, only 18% of respondents speak out against that measure. It is a clear signal that the current course of events is generating frustration among a large section of the population.

As for the four newly mentioned measures, support is significantly higher among Dutch-speakers than among French-speakers in three of the four cases. The exception is the reintroduction of internal border controls. There is equal, explicit support for this in both language cohorts. The Dutch-speakers are possibly a bit more reserved here because Flanders is an export region.

## conclusion

The rather negative evaluation of migration in general is strongly linked to the negative view on asylum and illegal migration. Part of the negative view on asylum can be explained by its strong interconnection with illegal migration. Asylum seekers whose applications are rejected do not leave the country in many cases and end up in illegality. Another sore point about asylum for a majority of respondents is its improper use. Defenders of this improper use point out that there is little choice for those affected as no other channels are available. According to them, the pressure on asylum would decrease if other channels were opened. Although this isn't a guarantee. Thus, those who first take a chance through the new channels and are rejected may well still use the asylum procedure.

There is no real evidence that the basic principle of asylum is fundamentally in question among a majority of the population. Only one in five wants a total ban on asylum. But this support is fragile. However, respondents do distinguish between different forms of migration. Migration in the context of work, for example, has strong support. Only a limited cohort that wants a total migration ban, some 15%, is against that type.

Views on migration differ and are diverse, even within the electorates of political parties. Extreme views are in the minority. The polarisation does not prevail as yet. However, a fairly clear majority is in favour of a tougher approach to illegal migration, family reunification, and asylum as well. A possible additional avenue for future policy could be to reach an agreement with certain countries, whereby a contingent from that country could apply for migration. However, it falls to Belgium to select the migrants to be admitted from this group. Most obviously, this choice is made primarily on the basis of labour market integration opportunities. In return, said country must commit to countering illegal migration from the country and readmit deported nationals.

Apart from this track, it is clear that an additional weakness of asylum is the low flow through to work. The inflow is not only very slow; in the end, even after many years, there's never more than 50% working. (Lens, 2022) With this knowledge in mind, it remains strange that activists continue to positively name refugee flows as a possible solution to labour market bottlenecks. Indeed, this study

shows popular support for the latter. But the population knows all too well that this is not true for a large group of asylum seekers. So this kind of pleading, however well intentioned, may achieve the opposite result. For policy, there is little choice but to step up or refine efforts to direct recognised asylum seekers to work. The same analysis can be made for migration based on family reunification. This form of migration also scores poorly on labour market integration. Over time, at most, half of this group will find jobs here. Consideration should also be given to how to strengthen the link to work for this channel. Because this study absolutely demonstrated that work solves a lot of migration problems.

Unlike what usually happens in Randstad Research studies, electorates of political parties were an important variable here. Generally, this was also the variable with the greatest variation regarding attitudes towards migration. This study provides an opportunity for the various political parties to further refine and make their programmes on migration more explicit. The study certainly showed that most parties do have some issues in this regard.



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