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# **Europeanisation in migrant integration policies and practices based on the study trip to Belgium and Poland**

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#### **Abstract**

This essay is a reflection on the education policy convergence processes in the European Union, known as Europeanisation, informed by the academic literature and a study trip to Belgium and Poland in 2024, organised by the University of Melbourne and supported by the Erasmus+ program. The processes of Europeanisation are uneven and ambiguous across European countries and are influenced by several factors, such as national path dependence. Though national policies are informed and financially supported by the EU, on the ground they are perceived and look quite different. Though Flemish education policies and educators mostly adapt to the EU, Polish policy actors seem to leverage EU resources while scaling down EU policies. In other words, Europeanisation as a policy convergence process has its own tensions and pressures and understanding of those can help education policy-makers at all levels to take meaningful and balanced decisions.

Keywords: Belgium, education policy, Europeanisation, migrant integration, Poland

### Introduction

Migration and migrant integration policies involve different levels of governance, from local and regional to national and the European Union (EU) levels. While EU has the authority "to establish the conditions for entry and legal residence in a Member State, including for family-reunification purposes, applicable to nationals of non-EU countries" (Marti & Sandu, 2024, p.1), migrant integration is the competence of Member States, and the approaches to integration consequently differ from country to country (Scholten & Penninx, 2016). In the EU, integration of newly arrived immigrants or refugees is seen as a holistic process, where education is a key element, or a critical integrator, which is both a marker and a means by which further integration can be achieved (Morrice & Salem, 2023). However, despite the process of Europeanisation and "growing interdependence and future coordination of EU policies" (Klatt & Milana, 2020). Member States develop their own concepts and policies of migrant education, in tune with their internal political and social agendas, values and perception of social justice (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Comparison of two EU countries, such as Belgium and Poland, which are different in population diversity, demographics of the migrants and historical and cultural background, assists in understanding the Europeanization process. The different forms of communication with the different administrative levels of policy-makers, educators and students within the field trip to Europe, helped to clarify the interplay between the EU, the national, the local and the individual levels in the European space of education.

This essay reflects my thoughts, concerns and discoveries, which I made during the trip to Belgium and Poland, compressed into two weeks and 3000 words. The observations and conversations during the visits to EU decision-making institutions in Brussels, national education Ministries, universities and schools, add understanding of the mechanisms and factors of the Europeanisation process in education, and migrant education in particular, to consider in policy-making decisions. The logical structure of the essay is shaped by the itinerary and relevance of the observations.

# The European Union institutions and policy actors

The governance structure of the EU, the functions and competences of the main three institutions can be described in brief the following way: the European Parliament is presented as the voice of EU citizens, the European Commission as the voice of EU, and the Council of the EU is the body for national governments' collaboration. A valuable insight on European policy-making issues was received from an EU representative during the visit to the EU Parliament, who stressed the role of political leverage used by parties and countries to achieve consensus. Still, there is no consensus between the Member states on migration yet. Education is a supporting competence of the EU, so it cannot be harmonised, and the education systems as well as migrant education curricula are the exclusive competence of the Member States.

The European Commission provided another opportunity to listen to ,and talk with, the education specialists directly involved in development of education policy documents. The presenter at the Commission focused on the European Education Area (EEA) and EU priorities in higher education: digitalisation, sustainability, equality and inclusion. EEA is a framework to improve learning mobility within Europe, and to allow more people to benefit from the Erasmus+ programme and other cross-border learning mobility schemes. Inclusion is one of the EUs priorities. On the one hand, inclusive education is seen as the means to tackle school segregation and eliminate exclusion of the disadvantaged (such as migrant and refugee children), and improve equality in education across the EU. On the other hand, it is a tool to secure the workforce of the future: due to low birth rates, everybody matters, so everybody should be skilled. Also, from the EU perspective, "inclusion" as a concept in education would close the disparities between the Member states.

Lifelong learning is another area prioritised by the EU Commission and a strategy, benefitting both natives and migrants (Eurostat, 2023).

A presentation on the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 was a demonstration of some digital instruments developed in the EU. Digitalisation is another feature of the EEA which facilitates "the capacity of transnational organizations to distribute the data they produce on a (potentially) global scale" (Decuypere, 2016, p.852). In other words, digitalisation is a means of policy convergence utilised by the European Commission.

Like the European Parliament presenter, the presenters at the Commission lamented that the role of the EU is limited in education: the EU can make top-down suggestions for policies, but there is no direct instrument of influence. The EU's ideas are mainly

socialised by sharing best practices through working groups and Erasmus+ programmes.

It is clear that though, the EU appears to be a solid and coherent unit, often referred to as collective Brussels, the process of taking decisions at the EU level is very complex and takes a lot of effort, flexibility and political wisdom. Some mechanisms of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) associated with Europeanisation were mentioned by the EU representatives: common statistics and data, capacity-building and benchmarking (Klatt & Milana, 2020).

Scholars argue that in the EU the "idea of national models of integration has been strong not just in policy but also in academic discourse" (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p.98). Moreover, the interplay between the national and local policies depends on various factors such as the decentralised education system or the election cycle.

# **Europeanisation and education in Belgium**

## **Belgium in brief**

Belgium is a multicultural country in Western Europe. The administrative division of three communities is based on languages: Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia and Brussels. The linguistic communities are responsible for education and for migrant integration (European Commission, 2024b). School is mandatory for all children aged 6–18. Distinctively, Belgium is home to the EU institutions. In the next paragraph, I will focus on Flanders, the region I visited during the study trip.

# **Sub-national level (Flanders Ministry of Education and Training)**

The meeting agenda at the Flanders Ministry of Education and Training included the hosts' introduction into the Flemish education system and the first impressions of the Flemish tests from the developers of the high-stake examination system in Flanders. The distinctive features of the Flemish education system are:

- freedom of education and school choice;
- school autonomy;
- freedom to start a school (subject to some regulation) including home education;
- free compulsory pre-primary, primary and secondary education (including refugee children and immigrants);
- a direct access to free higher education (with some exception).

Migration diversity, linguistic integration and challenging class management are identified as the main issues. The Dutch language is referred to as both the key element of the Flemish identity, and an issue: a difficulty for migrant children and one of the causes of teacher shortages.

#### **School level**

According to the research by a team of academics from Ghent University, a majority of Flemish teachers support the existing monolingual policies, and insufficient facility

with Dutch is seen as a deficit which has to be tackled to achieve academic success (Pulinx et al., 2017). The researchers suggest that top-down efforts to change the education and language policy would be "contested and reconstructed at school and classroom level" (Pulinx et al., 2017, p. 554). The decentralised character of the Flemish education system can also hinder top-down reforms (Emery et al., 2023).

The European School of Brussels (*Argenteuil*) is an example of a school which, while located in Belgium, follows the European school curriculum and the EU agenda is embedded into its internal policies and practices. The school's main features are:

- Small classes with the high teacher-student ratio
- International teachers
- The focus on languages (at least three, as well as Latin and Ancient Greek)
- The positive learning environment and the openness and confidence of the primary school student
- Language and cultural diversity is embraced and celebrated.

The successful integration is provided by a team of highly qualified educators. The education system is built on the primary importance of the mother tongue, the concept of the dominant language and multilingualism (Schola Europaea, 2019).

Steiner school *Leuven de Zonnewijzer* is another example of diversity of the Flemish education system. My knowledge of the Steiner system is mainly based on the comprehensive presentation on the philosophy, main principles and educational approaches of Steiner Waldorf Education, made by Margareta Van Raemdonck, the President of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE). Some distinctive approaches are

- the holistic approach to student development (the OECD model)
- the focus of the curriculum on the Arts, Music and experiential classes
- diversity in teaching
- meaningful and age-appropriate usage of machines.

Interestingly, trauma was identified by the presenter as a factor in the academic performance and wellbeing of the children, who had fled from the war in Ukraine. The academic literature proves that war-traumatized children often experience practical challenges with problem-solving and engagement (Urbanski et al., 2023). Thus, the Steiner school educators acknowledge integration issues in educating migrant and refugee children and have developed a teaching strategy aligned with EU values and priorities.

However, both the Steiner school and European School of Brussels are elite schools similar to some Australian selective ones. In my opinion, elite schools do not support the EU's fight on school segregation or exclusion, and fostering interactions between migrant and native children (European Commission, 2020). In Australia, school segregation, education disparities and social exclusion are identified as the main issues, too, because "elite schools provide skewed access to elite knowledge and future social positions for the children of the dominant socio-cultural and economic class fractions, in ways that counteract meritocracy and educational efficiency" (Beach, 2019, p.804).

De Stroom Leuven middle school, on the contrary, provides an example of how the EU agenda is implemented in public schools. De Stroom Leuven is a new addition to the Flemish education system (2017). Learning in this middle, or low secondary, school is based on some innovative forms: a specific combination of individual and group activities (Flex), and a format of integrated learning (Lab). These learning formats require more active student agency and self-management skills. According to the school teachers, the model of self-paced individualised learning combined with some group activities is effective both for students with low self-efficacy and for self-confident high-performing students. While the teachers do not directly refer to the EU documents, they identify integration issues and apply specific techniques on the ground to help disadvantaged students or students with migrant background.

A visit to Go! Campus *Redingenhof* college, also reveals the benefits and drawbacks of the Flemish vocational education system. After the introductory briefing and a school tour, I was lucky to talk with a refugee student who shared his positive opinion on the dual learning model which combines school studies (mandatory until 18–19) with development of job-ready skills. He saw the program as a direct and smooth way to employment. However, probably that student is more of an exception, because the educators lamented that they face the issues of low student engagement, ill-discipline and negative perception of vocational education. The same issues were voiced during the visit to CVO *Lethas* Brussels, a public college for adults. CVO *Lethas* is supported by the EU's concepts of inclusion, integration and lifelong learning: developing and applying the educational potential of migrants all across life (European Commission, 2020). The presenter underscored that the main purpose of the variety of courses offered by the centre and substantially subsidised by different levels of governance, besides upskilling and reskilling, is to help the students integrate and find a job.

Unfortunately, despite the extensive range of policies to support lifelong learning, performance of Flemish adult education is not satisfactory (OECD, 2022). Lack of motivation, time and suitable courses are the main factors hindering learning (OECD, 2022).

## **University level**

The presentations at KU Leuven, a renowned Flemish university (founded in 1495) help in understanding how EU education policies are reflected in the Flemish higher education system. While the European Commission recommends "valuing and mobilising learners' individual linguistic backgrounds as key skills in teaching curricula" (European Commission, 2020, p.10), Dutch remains the only language of instruction in Flanders.

The speakers agreed that a monolingual policy in education, such as the requirement to have a correspondent program in Dutch accompanying each program in English, hinders attraction of the best academics and students to Flemish academia (Vandenbussche, 2020). The dominance of Dutch as the language of higher education has been indisputable since the introduction of the Bologna reform in Flanders in 2003. However, under European legislation, universities with a foreign accreditation are allowed to offer programmes in English, which 1) promotes an unhealthy competition between Dutch and foreign universities, and 2) feeds the tensions between the intention to keep Flemish education as a common good (protecting the Dutch language) and the potential financial benefits (voiding the language requirement)

(Vandenbussche, 2020). In other words, higher education policy-makers are concerned with the national identity issues challenged by the deeper integration processes, both at the national and international levels. Similar concerns were expressed at *Vrije Universiteit* Brussels (The Multidisciplinary Institute for Teacher Education MILO). The representative identified several gaps in teacher education in Flanders, related to specifics of multicultural/multilinguistic communities, mentioned the debate on religious symbols in schools, and lamented the fierce school competition and school segregation, as well as the monolingual education policies. The tensions between defence of the national identity and the multicultural community, might indicate some resistance to the EU policies in the operations on the ground (Radaelli, 2023).

Summing up, in Flanders, Europeanisation in education is manifested through acknowledgment and embracing of the EU agenda, and socialisation of EU narratives and concepts at all levels of the education system. However, there are some tensions between traditional values and the processes related to integration of migrants and refugees in education.

# **Europeanisation and education in Poland**

#### **Poland in brief**

Poland is a big Eastern European country, and is mostly monolingual. The Polish education system is characterised by centralised governance, including funding of public schools, and decentralisation at the school level (European Commission, 2024a). Compulsory primary education is free (in public schools). The mostly monocultural Poland has been affected by the influx of the Ukrainians since 2022.

#### **Sub-national level**

The briefing at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Department of International Cooperation) was focused on the recent changes and developments in higher education and scientific policy in Poland, and the role of the new Ministry which was re-established by the newly elected Tusk government. The speakers highlighted some priorities of the policy: support of high-quality research and internalisation of higher education and participation in the Bologna process; and the introduction of the Polish Graduate tracking system (ELA).

The presenters detailed that the research priorities are aligned with the EU agenda and funding schemes. Unfortunately, Poland has to rely on the EU because of "a very significant deficit of funds in the area of science and higher education" (Brent, 2024). Funding seems the key issue in the Polish education system at all levels.

The presenter at *Collegium Civitas* (Private University specialising in social sciences), revealed that the education policy-makers are concerned with funding applications rather than systemic improvement; political decisions prevail over evidence-based policies; the resistance to change is high at all levels. Unfortunately, the practice of fast solutions prevails in the education system.

The recently introduced no homework policy, in his opinion, is a good example of a dumb, not evidence-based decision. Also, both parents and teachers are focused on

attainment and preparation for the high-stake examination as the way to secure a place at the best university.

The insights from the *Collegium Civitas* professor were later proved by the visit to *Ośrodku Doskonalenia Nauczycieli* (Teacher Training Centre in Poznan). After an overview of the teacher professional development system, three projects (on extracurricular activities, on remote teaching and school digitalisation) were presented. What we heard supports the suggestion that Polish educators are looking for quick solutions and mastering the budget. For example, the new digital equipment within *Cyfrowa Szkoła Wielkopolska* 2030 project has been funded by the EU. This was an answer to a question as to the practical value of the equipment for teaching: "some of VR cameras are only suitable for gaming and the others could be used, but, unfortunately, the material is in English and based on American curriculum, so needs adaptation for our classes".

Refugee integration is seen as something related to the local authorities and Poznan Migrant Info Point. Migrant students are considered a challenge for the educational system and teachers, in particular because "they do not want to integrate". However, no specific training or funding is provided, besides language courses. Likewise, the briefing at the School of Education (2016) was mostly focused on the forms and methods rather than the purpose of education or goals and factors of education policies. The speakers sounded quite disconnected from the EU migrant education agenda.

The brief on the pedagogical supervision activities at the Region of *Wielkopolska* Educational Authority was very informative. The Superintendent talked about the domains of control (children safety, children rights and principals' performance) and basic directions such as citizenship education, wellbeing, digital skills and teacher professional and lifelong learning). The presentation was also about the new challenges faced by the Polish education system recently due to the influx of the Ukrainian students and the need for development of a Polish as a Foreign Language program for students from other backgrounds.

The talk with the Superintendent after the briefing clarified some more: while there is a lot of concern received from the teachers about integration of the refugee students, there is no specific regional program of refugee education. By law, all school-age children in Poland, including refugee children, are "subject to compulsory education, which covers one year of kindergarten and eight years of primary school" (Herbst & Sitek, 2023, p.577). However, refugee and immigrant children have not been considered a "separate group of pupils in Polish legislation" (Potoniec, 2021, p.7). Therefore, there is no specific framework, initiative or policy to monitor, control and adjust the process of integration of those children into the Polish education system (Herbst & Sitek, 2023; EU Commission, 2016; Potoniec, 2021).

At the same time, the presentation from the Central Examination Board demonstrated that Polish education policy-makers strive for centralisation and national unification in the Polish school education system. For instance, the unified centralised external examination system is seen not only as a big logistical event, but also as an important quality assurance mechanism. The unified and synchronised exam tasks across the country ensure consistency and reliability of the results, important both for the vocational school system and for potential employers.

The centralised education systems are generally seen as the vehicles for a nation-wide education reform (for example, in Singapore). However, education reforms also need vision and commitment from the key decision makers.

#### **School level**

The International School in Warsaw delivers a dual teaching Polish–Canadian program at primary level and, as an elite private school, on the one hand is concerned with the academic results of all students, while on the other hand it provides a positive and safe learning environment. However, a visit to *High School Number 3* confirmed another insight about the Polish education system from the Collegium Civitas: the academic performance and resilience are considered the two main virtues of students. As the principal proudly explained: "We demand high results and support them in distress". The principal did not hide that the main purpose of learning and teaching was to secure a place at the best university, and underscored cooperation with some of the best universities. More than 90% of the students pass the "extended level" of English in Matura exam and take Cambridge English exams (FCE and higher). However, the principal explained that most of the students have private English teachers. Though psychological wellbeing due to intensive studies and pressure was mentioned, it was seen as natural collateral damage. While the school is public, in the selective education system of Poland it is considered elite and the best.

At the other end of the Polish public education spectrum are integrative schools inspired by the concept of inclusive education understood as the presence, the participation and achievement of children with special needs in mainstream education (Świtała, 2020). *Szkoła Podstawowa Integracyjna* is one of them.

The process of enrolment of special children in Polish public schools is formal and standardised. The school is well-equipped and staffed: the team of specialists includes a speech therapist, five psycho therapists, and a physio therapist. Every teacher has got a second Degree as a special needs educator.

However, some issues were revealed during the visit, such as insufficient school funding, inadequate salaries and ineffectiveness of teaching for some students with special learning needs. Also, often parents of children on the autism spectrum do not apply for the certificate, and the school does not receive additional funding at all. The issue of inequitable subsidy distribution has been identified in the academic literature (Świtała, 2020).

Unfortunately, there may be another problem which the teachers preferred not to talk about. Disabled children in integrative class "are often rejected by the class and 'closed' in their own world" (Świtała, 2020, p.47). Though the teachers admit that some migrant children are enrolled, they are concerned with their special-needs-students' issues.

The vocational college we visited, *Technikum Ogrodnicze*, specialises in programmes related to IT, such as web designer or programming. Unlike the vocational school in Belgium, *Technicum* does not have any partnerships with businesses or the community. There is no specific integration policy in place, and the insufficient level of Polish of migrant students is seen as the only issue to hinder performance.

## **University level**

The presentation at the University of Adam Mickiewicz (School of Education), a public comprehensive university, located in the beautiful historic buildings in Poznan, included an overview of the Polish education system and the teacher training pathways. Surprisingly, the impact of the influx of the Ukrainian students was not even mentioned, though, as of April 2024, the number of Ukrainian children enrolled in schools in *Wielkopolskie* voivodeship stood at 19 231 (Statista, 2024).

Though a briefing at *Collegium Civitas* (Private University specialising in social sciences) provided some meaningful insights into some issues of the Polish education system, there were no reference to the EU education policies, concepts or documents.

To sum up, while the education policy-makers seem to utilise the benefits of a Member State, the teachers and educators in Poland mostly do not demonstrate awareness of the EU agenda, narratives or goals. I think, poor English might reduce sense of belonging of teachers to the EU education space. The process of Europeanisation understood as convergence of the education policies is not evident in the Polish education space.

## **Conclusion**

There are some pronounced tensions and pressures within the national education systems of Belgium and Poland related to the process of Europeanisation. The integration policies inspired by the EU agenda and supported by the recommendations and funds, we observed, look different on the ground. Flemish education policies and educators mostly adapt to the EU. However, the Polish policy actors seem to leverage EU resources while scaling down the EU policies.

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