

Turkish diaspora policy and its effects in Europe

Belgium country-report

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12 September 2022

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1. Introduction

The Turkish presence is both quantitatively and qualitatively significant in the Belgian migration debate. It amounts to nearly 155.000 individuals but represent 12% of naturalized Belgians¹. It can be traced back to the early sixties during the period of massive guestworkers recruitment in North West Europe. Turkish workers and their families were attracted in Belgium after the signing of the bilateral Belgian-Turkish labour-force agreement of 1964. Since then, Belgium has become the home to several generation of Turkish descent citizens.

This report seeks to offer an easily accessible overview of the political, social, cultural and economic developments which impacted the Turkish presence in recent years. A specific attention is paid to Turkish transnational policy and the way it is responded to among Belgian Turks. In Belgium as in many other European countries, the impact of Turkish transnational politics was plain to see. This has triggered a number of public debates and concerns about the *in betweenness* of Belgian Turks. To put in the words of a landmark report (Kaya and al 2007), are Belgian Turks a bridge or a breach between Turkey and the European Union ?

This research exercise needs to underline a first paradox. In public and media discourse, Belgian Turks are generally perceived as a cohesive and homogenous community allegedly having low-levels of intergroup contacts. This commonsense representation is however at odds with the picture sketched out in the following pages. Dwelling on a review of the literature dedicated to Belgian Turks, this report proposes a more complex picture which seeks to do justice to the internal diversity and heterogeneity that characterize Belgian Turks.

The report is essentially based on a review of the social science literature published during the last two decades. It is complemented by a review of Belgian migration data (Section 2 and 3) and by a qualitative analysis dwelling upon media and parliamentary data (Section 4 and 5). The objective was to identify the sequences during which Turkish diaspora politics were discussed in Belgian public life². Previous research works of the author on the institutionalization of Islam in Belgium are also mobilised here.

¹ https://www.myria.be/files/Migration2016-2-Migrations_en_Belgique_donnees_statistiques.pdf

² For that purpose, we have used the electronic archive of the Second Chamber of Parliament and of the press database GoPress.

2. Background of the population of Turkish origin in Belgium

2.1. Immigration, transnationalism and diasporas

Immigration towards North West Europe from Turkey to Europe is a well-established and well researched phenomenon. Between Turkey and major immigration receiving countries such as Germany, France and the Benelux, there is a migration corridor that has been active for more than a century. This has generated a complex web of long-distance connections and networks. Transnationalism and diaspora are two notions developed and discussed within academia to refer to these phenomena (Bauböck & Faist, 2010). These distinct concepts are however sometimes used in confused, unclear or inadequate ways.

Although both diasporas and transnational collectives are social formations giving rise to shared identification, the sense of groupness associated to both should be clarified (Lacroix, 2018b). Generally, there is a difference to be made in terms of historical depth and geographical spread. While diasporic identities are seen as forged by long histories and, for some, by traumatic memories of dispersion, transnationalism is associated with more recent time-frames where individuals and collectives are simultaneously active in two or more different places. As Lacroix (2018b) suggests, transnationalism is about constructing and sustaining identities and social, economic, cultural and political practices across borders. He goes on arguing that the geographical outlook of diasporas is characterized by multipolar ties between an imagined homeland and a variety of places of settlement. Transnationalism is more evidently associated to the duality of the countries of origin and destination. Transnational actors tend to develop multiscalar ties where translocal connections between places of departures and arrivals are central.

In recent years, the notion of diaspora has been strongly pushed forward through the rhetoric of sending State representatives. It has become commonsense to talk about a Turkish, Moroccan or Indian diaspora. While this is part of a broader global movement towards reshaping and renaming the nature of the relationships between international migrants and their home countries, it tends to conflate different notions leading to a form of conceptual confusion. How should we do justice to these complex understandings and nuances in practical and operational terms. While some are tempted to dismiss the use of diaspora for recent emigrant communities, others, in the footsteps of Robin Cohen (1997), are adopting and justifying the use of a modern view of diasporas that goes beyond the classical model of the forcibly dispersed diaspora.

With international institutions ranging from the World Bank to the OECD joining officials from emigration countries in the diaspora debate, the restrictive definition of diaspora already belongs to the past. No one can miss the increasing centrality the concept has acquired globally in policy-discussions dealing with migration and international development. This institutional push is of course no compelling reason for academics to abandon their quest for conceptual clarity. But there are also good reasons to keep using both notions of diasporas and transnationalism. Both are social formations evolving with their time. Recent scholarship tends to show this empirically so that no one can dismiss the case of transnational communities increasingly characterized by processes of diaspora-formation.

2.2. Migration history

Data published by Turkish authorities indicate that 6,5 Million Turkish nationals live outside their country which nearly equates the size of Indians abroad, the largest group of international migrants worldwide. Europe has a central place in the emigration dynamics from Turkey as more than 80% of Turks have settled in Europe. Within Europe, Germany, France, the UK and the Benelux countries are among the countries with the largest communities.

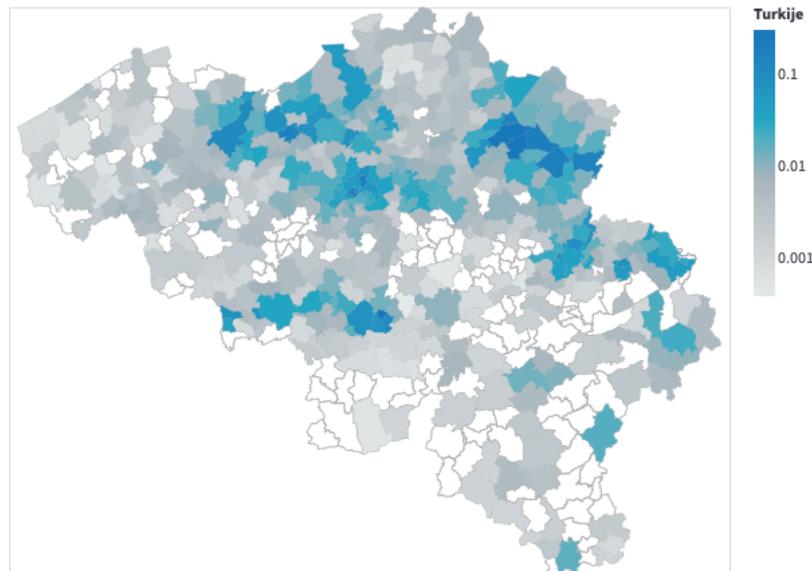
To a very large extent, the Turkish presence in Belgium takes its roots in the labour migration of the sixties. On the 16th of July 1964, Belgium and Turkey signed an agreement facilitating the settlement of Turkish workers in Belgium. This agreement marks the beginning of long-lasting movement of immigration and transnational circulation between the two countries.

While the Turkish diaspora in Belgium remains predominantly associated with the social representation of the classical economic labour migrant, the reality is one of an increasing complexity and internal differentiation. This is illustrated by the higher level of professional diversity and the emergence of a category of highly-skilled professionals and entrepreneurs grown and trained in Belgium.

Geographically, Belgian Turks are strongly represented in the capital city of Brussels and more specifically in the North of the city. The municipalities of Saint-Josse and Schaerbeek are known to host a sizeable Turkish presence and are sometime portrayed as the Little Anatolia. The old mining provinces of Limburg and Hainaut are two other areas where the Turkish

community remains highly concentrated. In recent years, the province of East Flanders and the city of Ghent have also witnessed a significant increase of their Turkish population.

Geographical distribution of the Turkish population in Belgium, 2021

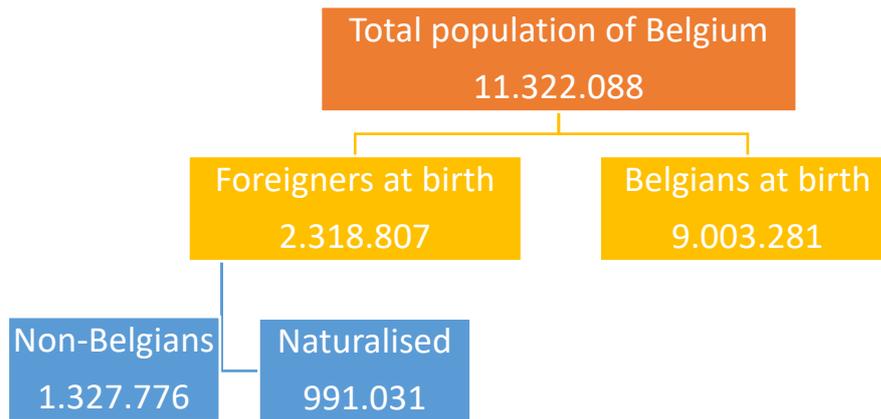


Source: npdata.nl, 2021

2.3. Demographic outlook

Estimating the size of the Turkish diaspora is methodologically uneasy as it relies on different and sometime contradictory data sources and identification methods. Even though they overlap to a certain extent, diasporas are distinct and potentially broader entities than migrant populations as many migrants have acquired citizenship of their country of residence and mixed with local populations over the years. This lies at the basis of the statistical discrepancies observed in social and political discourses. With several decades of emigration towards Belgium and other European destinations, the Turkish diaspora is much larger than what European statistical offices capture through nationality data.

In the following, we try to partially fill the gap by looking at nationality at birth and naturalization figures. This offers a more realistic view. As indicated in Table 1, Turkish nationals established in Belgium represent only barely a fourth of the Turkish origin population in the country. And this is not yet a complete picture because the third and fourth generation born Belgian to parents themselves born Belgians with a Turkish descent remain off the screen.



According to Myria, the Belgian Federal Agency for migration, the Turkish population in Belgium does not exceed 36.167 persons. However, when counting non-Belgian and naturalized Turks together they make up a larger group of 155.488 individuals, the second largest group of non-European citizens in Belgium after Moroccans

Table 1: Turks and Belgian Turks compared to the total population of foreigners and naturalized Belgians, 2018

	Turks	Total	%
Non-Belgian	36.167	1.327.776	2,7%
Naturalised	119.321	991.031	12%
Non-Belgian at birth	155.488	2.318.807	6,7%

Source: Myria, 2018, <https://www.myria.be/files/FR2018-2.pdf>

When looking at the top 10 foreign-born nationalities in Belgium, it is clear that Belgium remains predominantly marked by intra-European migration. Seven out of the ten top nationalities are European ones. One can also observe that three groups of non-EU migrants stand out by their size in the Belgian immigration landscape, namely Moroccans, Turks and Congolese (Table 2).

Table 2: Top ten nationalities of non-Belgians at birth

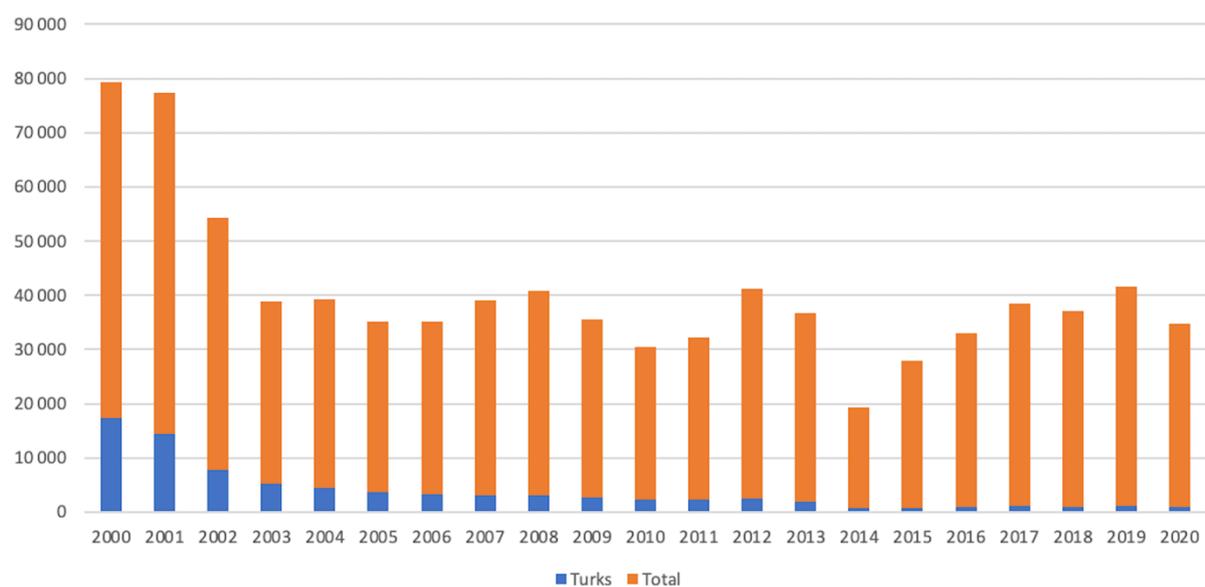
Morocco	311.772	13%
Italy	273.350	12%
France	213.619	9%
The Netherlands	186.069	8%

Turkey	155.488	7%
Poland	95.801	4%
Romania	92.746	4%
Spain	77.317	3%
Congo	60.257	3%
Germany	55.227	2%
Others	797.161	34%
Total	2.318.807	100%

Source: Myria, 2018, <https://www.myria.be/files/FR2018-2.pdf>

Not surprisingly, the naturalisation rate of this group has been particularly high in the past. In 2000, Turks represented 27,8% of all naturalization. In 2010, it fell to 8% and even more sharply to 2,6% in 2020.

Table 3 Number of naturalization of foreigners in Belgium and the share of Turks in it (2000-2021)



Source: Own elaboration from Statbel, 2021

2.4. Belgian Turks and the Muslim community

The Turkish population is generally considered as the second largest component of the Muslim population in Belgium. It's however extremely difficult to assess the exact size of the Muslim population in Belgium. For historical reasons, Belgium has been extremely reluctant to collect census data about religious affiliation. These can only be estimated indirectly.

For years, the media and public opinion leaders have been using the figure of 6 to 7 hundred thousand Muslims in Belgium. This figure was reached by an indirect measurement based on the religious break-up in the country of origin. Considering that many people may have turned into cultural Muslims or ex-Muslims, the method based of estimation based on nationality of origin is not very reliable. As many surveys have shown, there is a percentage of Muslims in the West who took distance with their religion. This is the reason why this is not anymore considered a wise way of estimating Muslims.

More recently, several attempts have been made by researchers to close this knowledge gap. In 2010, the US-based Pew Research Institute released a number of demographic projection about Muslims in Europe. For Belgium, the estimate used is based on the religious composition of the origin country. According to the kind of migration scenario likely to occur, this research expects the Muslim presence to climb at a maximum of 18,2%.

Table 3 – Growth Scenarios of the Muslim presence in Europe

	Growth Scenario	Abs	%
2010		650.000	6%
2016		870.000	7,6%
2050	Zero immigration	1.250.000	11,1%
	Medium migration	2.050.000	15,1%
	High migration	2.580.000	18,2%

Other experts such as Jan Hertogen have tried to build a specific indicator dwelling upon the three variable: national origin, religious composition of the country of origin and a proxy measurement of religiosity. On the basis of that methodology, Hertogen advanced the figure of 781.887 Muslims in Belgium.

Table 4: Percentage of Muslims per Regions

	2011	2013	2015	2017
Belgium	6,3%	6,5%	7,0%	7,6%
Flemish Region	4,5%	4,7%	5,1%	5,7%
Brussels Region	22,4%	22,6%	23,6%	24,6%
Walloon Region	4,4%	4,5%	4,9%	5,3%

3. Legal and socio-economic context in Belgium

3.1. Migration and citizenship laws

The Belgian migration history has been shaped by different waves of arrival. The first half of the 20th century was marked by emigration and immigration movements between neighbouring countries (from and to the Netherlands, France, Germany). In that period, Belgium also hosted both Jewish migrants fleeing persecution in central and Eastern Europe and other Mediterranean nationalities. Migration to Belgium will turn into a more quantitatively significant reality after the second world war. It's during the period stretching from 1946 to 1974 that Belgium massively recruited in the Mediterranean region. Italians, Spanish, Portuguese, Greeks, Moroccans, Turks, Algerians and former Yugoslavs, composed the bulk of the nationalities represented in this phase. From 1974, Belgium has tightened its admission policy but witnessed nevertheless a diversification of migrants in terms of origins and modes of entry. While there is a globalization of the geographies of the new arrivals, the restriction of the rules of admission increased the profiles of family migrants, asylum applicants and refugees. As in most other European countries, undocumented migration has turned into a permanent political issue since the nineties.

The Belgian migration policy is essentially based on a piece of legislation adopted in 1980 and modified on a very regular basis. This law remains to date the cornerstone of the Belgian immigration approach. It is of paramount importance to note that Belgium turned into a federal State in 1993 as the institutional architecture of the State has some peculiarities which are heavily impacting the migration debate. One of them is the absence of a hierarchy of norms between the federal level and the substate units (called Communities and Regions). Each competence devoluted to a substate unit becomes an exclusive responsibility. The key principle in the system is the autonomy of each level of power. As a matter of consequence, there is no compelling argument for the federal subunits to cooperate and coordinate their action either between them or between them and the federal level.

In the field of migration, the access to the territory and to the right of settlement, as well as nationality acquisition, falls within the federal jurisdiction. The other Federal subunits of the Belgian State are competent in other areas impacting integration such as education, employment, housing, etc. To take but one example of the uneasy of coordination between levels of power, nationality acquisition requests the delivery of a “proof of social integration” (Article 12bis of the law of 4th December 2021), but the content of the integration trajectory is

exclusively decided by the Regions. This means that in the bilingual Region of Brussels, there are two parallel integration approaches coexisting side by side.

As a pillar of the second phase of the Belgian migration history, the majority of Turkish families have benefited from a secure and permanent access to the right of establishment (either as a result of the long-term residence permits obtained by foreign workers before 1974 or through family reunification or yet through nationality acquisition). As seen above (Section 2.3), they have also had a broad avenue to citizenship. This is shown by the high naturalization rates records associated to the openness of the Belgian nationality law. Between 2000 and 2012³, Belgium introduced a reform which had broadly opened the access to nationality to foreigners. The idea was to switch from a paradigm where nationality is the endpoint of a successful integration into a system where the threshold to obtain nationality is lowered so as to offer an additional tool for improving integration.

In parallel to the classical guestworker immigration system of the sixties and seventies, there are also more recent immigration from Turkey. As shown in the following table, immigration to Belgium from Turkey for family reasons remains relatively important. Although declining, Turkish family migration has remained in the Belgian top twelve between 2010 and 2018. This is obviously correlated to the high level of intra-group marriages which is estimated to reach 90% (Torrekens and Adam, 2015: 38).

Table 5 : Top 12 main nationalities in terms of family reunion between 2010-2018

2010		2018		Growth 2010-18
Morocco	6 499	Romania	3 228	+ 1,3%
Romania	2 443	Morocco	2 882	-0,4%
Netherlands	2 268	Netherlands	2454	+1,1%
France	2 189	France	2 151	-
Turkey	2 092	India	1 487	+2%
Poland	1 896	Italy	1 320	+1,4 %
Bulgaria	1 479	Bulgaria	1 273	-0,9%
Spain	1 469	Spain	1 208	-0,8%
Italy	964	Afghanistan	874	+4,5%
Germany	814	Poland	858	-0,5%

³ Several reforms (1984, 1991, 1994 and 2000) have eased the access to Belgian nationality so as to make it one of the most liberal in Europe. In 2012, a restrictive reform without altering the openness to those born in Belgium.

USA	763	USA	789	-
India	762	Turkey	785	-0,4%
Total EU	15 894	Total EU	15 542	-
Total non-EU	24 268	Total non-EU	19 627	-0,8%
Total	40 162	Total	35 169	-0,9%

Source Myria, 2020⁴

As a final observation, one should note that Turkey came second in terms of refugee status recognition in 2019 and is the third country in number of foreign students in Belgium.

Table 6: Top ten countries according to the number of successful refugee applicants in 2019

Country of origin	Positive decision on the status of refugee	Positive decision on subsidiary protection	Withdrawal of status	Negative decisions	Total number of final decisions
Syria	1 348	293	5	850	2 496
Turkey	658	2	6	284	950
Eritrea	379	0	3	115	497
Iraq	368	123	84	1 211	1 786
Afghanistan	343	331	51	1 417	2 142
Burundi	333	0	3	51	387
Iran	294	0	7	100	401
Undetermined	278	6	8	332	624
Guinea	204	4	2	537	747
Palestine	172	1	0	610	783
Total	5 776	983	249	10 476	17444

3.2. Socio-economic integration of Belgian Turks

The Turkish community is generally perceived as an economically dynamic group. Several elements indicate a clear trend towards intergenerational social mobility. Because of highly selective immigration policy of the past, Turks used to be predominantly a population of blue-collar workers. This is not any longer the case. The younger generations have seized education and socio-economic opportunities. The most striking indicator is probably the level of home ownership. 79,7% of Belgian of them are owner of their housings, which is distinctly above the national average (71,3%). Another indicator is revealed by the comparative survey between Turks and Moroccans published by Torrekens and Adam (2015: 46) which estimates that the number of self-employed reaches 9,4% among Turks for 6,6% among Moroccans.

⁴ https://www.myria.be/files/2020_Droit_de_vivre_en_famille_Chiffres.pdf

Belgium is known to underperform in terms of migrant access to employment (MIPEX 2020). This is also observable in the Turkish population where both the level of the economically active population (65%) is low while the level of unemployment is high (23,9%) (Torrekens and Adam 2015: 46). Turks also face however numerous forms of discrimination and disadvantages on the labour-market (Unia, 2019⁵).

3.3. Educational backgrounds

A European study comparing third country nationals at the European level (Di Bartolomeo, Kalantaryan, Bonfanti 2015) suggests that there is a better labour-market integration among Turks in Belgium than among Moroccans. However, the index proposed by these authors also shows that the converse is true as far as educational attainments are concerned⁶. As shown in table X, the education index is higher in the case of Moroccan migrants (0,17), indicating that they better integrate in terms of education than Turks (0.03).

Table 7: Level of Labour-Market and Education Integration among Moroccans and Turks

Destination	Origin	Labour-Market		Education	
		Index	Gap Index ⁷	Index	Gap Index
Belgium	Turkey	0,26	0,18	0,03	0,02
Belgium	Morocco	0,14	0,06	0,17	0,16

While 40% of Moroccans have a higher education degree, the figure is only 13,5% among Turks (Torrekens and Adam 2015: 39). The latter are more heavily affected by school drop outs in primary, but more significantly in secondary education⁸. They tend to favour education trajectories involving a vocational and technical training.

⁵ The full report is available online: https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/Monitoring_FR_-_WEB-AS.pdf (Retrieved on April 28th 2022)

⁶ The education integration index was calculated on the basis of several indicators (highest educational attainment, school enrolment rate at ages 15-25 and at ages 25-35, percentage of international students at ages 20-24).

⁷ Gap indexes were obtained by computing the ratio between migrant and native values.

⁸ https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/1210_UNIA_Barometer_2017_-_FR_AS.pdf

3.4. Laws regulating the separation of Church and State

Belgium has developed an original approach to the management of religions in public life. In order to understand the logic that governs these relations, it is important to refer to the fundamental rules that have been in place since Belgium was created in 1830, namely the articles 19, 20, 21 and 181 of the Constitution. These provisions establish the principle of freedom of worship (art. 19), the prohibition of compelling others from practicing a religion, and the principle of the separation of the State and religions, understood as non-interference in the internal organization of the latter (art. 21). Although the word secularism or *laïcité* is absent from the Belgium Constitution, Belgium is with no possible doubt a secular State based on neutrality vis-à-vis religious matters. Article 181, however, provides that the salaries and pensions of the clergy of recognized religions⁹ are to be paid by the State. The legal translation of these constitutional rules is governed by a law of great importance: the law of 4 March 1870.

Consequently, the principle of secularism in Belgium is subtle because it does not mean a radical separation between State and Church. This relationship is complex and subtle but not without ambiguities. Insofar as the law of March 4, 1870, concerning the financing of religious buildings and personnel, provides for a system of formal recognition of religions, Belgium can be seen as close to a system of established religion. The law of 1870 allows the to grant public recognition and funding to those religions that request them. To date, six religions have received this official recognition label (Catholic Orthodox, Protestant Churches, the Church of England, Judaism and Islam).

The Belgian tradition puts the legal logic of secularism to a severe test. The concept of "recognition of religions" mention in the 1870 legislation is in a way problematic insofar as it creates an obvious discrimination with respect to non-recognized religions and beliefs. In response, it is often argued that the system only provides for a recognition and funding of the representative interlocutors. It is not so much the religions that are recognised as such by the State but their administrative representatives. This remains however a difference of treatment by the State with regard to the diversity of the cults and beliefs represented in society.

⁹ The same holds true for the delegates of recognized organizations that offer non-religious moral assistance.

		Estimated Share of Muslims	Legal competence
Federal State Level		6,5%	Institutional recognition Payment of salaries and retirement benefits of religious leaders
Communities (3)	Flemish Community		Appointment, supervision, and payment of salaries of islamic teachers Training of imams and religious leaders Education (headscarf)
	Brussels Walloon Fed°		
	German-speaking Comm		
Regions (3)	Flanders	4,7%	Conditions for the funding of religious building
	Brussels	22,6%	
	Walloon	4,5%	
Provinces (10)	West Flanders	1,8%	Funding of religious buildings
	East Flanders	4,5%	
	Antwerp	6,9%	
	Limburg	5,9%	
	Flemish Brabant	3,3%	
	Hainaut	5,2%	
	Namur	1,7%	
	Luxembourg	1,5%	
	Walloon Brabant	2,3%	
Liège	6,3%		
Municipalities (589)	308 in Flemish Region		Authorisation for construction of mosques (urban planning permits), Islamic cemeteries, urban planning, education, police,
	19 in Brussels Region		
	262 (incl 9 german-speaking) in Walloon Region		

4. The dynamics of Turkish associational life in Belgium

Turkish associational life in Belgium is extremely rich and dynamic. It is composed of a wide and dense network representing Belgian Turks from all walks of life. According to Manço, Turkish associations have developed in three phases. The first corresponds to the early phases of settlement during the sixties and seventies. It was essentially concerned with fulfilling the extra-professional needs of migrant workers in terms of social, cultural and religious life. Teaching the second generation the language of the home country and providing them with a religious education was also among the priorities of that time. For that matter, Turkish civil servants from the embassies and consulates played an active role in offering answers to the needs which emerged during this initial phase. It allowed them at the same time to exert a certain degree of control over their emigrant population and over their remittances to the country.

A second phase begins at the end of the seventies and during the eighties. The arrival of a generation of students, intellectuals and artists will diversify the landscape of the community. New groups (such as Kurds and Eastern Christians) and new themes (such as the defense of human rights in the homeland) will emerge. Many Turkish association will also seek to take on board the issue of intercultural coexistence and the promotion of integration in the city and neighbourhoods. Finally, the third phase will see the development of community-based media (radio, newspaper and later on websites).

Concerning Muslim associations (including those associated to mosques), their number is constantly increasing (Husson, 2015). Besides those devoted to fighting islamophobia (such as the *Collectif contre l'islamophobie en Belgique – CCIB* founded in 2014), other associations and federations of all sizes developed, making up a very dynamic Muslim civil society (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). The following overview is not intended to account for all of them, but just to give some relevant examples of this dynamism. These associations are organized along ethnic lines, mainly Turkish and Moroccan ones. As recalled above, the most influential Turkish Islamic movement is a Belgian spin-off of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (*Belçika Türk İslam Diyanet Vakfı*), known as *Diyanet* (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). The second Turkish Islamic group is the religious political movement *Millî Görüş* (lit. “denominational vision”) represented by the Islamic Federation of Belgium (*Belçika İslam Federasyonu*) (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). Concerning Moroccan religious associations and mosques in Belgium, they are not organised along ideological lines as strongly as its Turkish

counterpart, but they have banded together into unions by province such as: the Antwerp union (Unie der Moskeeen en Islamitische Verenigingen van Antwerpen, *UMIVA*) for the Dutch-speaking region and the Brussels-Brabant union (Union des Mosquées de Bruxelles-Brabant wallon, *UMBB*) for the Frenchspeaking region of the country (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). In 2002 these regional unions came together to form the Federation of Mosque Unions or FUM (French abbreviation). Some other associations established around shared interests across ethnic belonging and in line with religious affiliation, such as the *Rassemblement des Musulmans de Belgique*, aimed at promoting dialogue with other religions and previously directed by the actual president of EMB; the Islamic Relief Belgium, linked to the international humanitarian NGO; the *Association Belge des Professionnels Musulmans*, developing contacts among Muslim professionals; the platform Empowering Belgian Muslims (EmBem), promoting cooperation and empowerment within Muslim communities; the Forum Of European Muslim Youth And Student Organisations; the European Muslim Network (EMN), aimed at fostering communication and analysis on issues related to Muslims in Europe; the association Merhaba, aimed at promoting LGTB rights.

In terms of generations' involvement in this associative dynamism, Djelloul and Maréchal (2014: 94) report that first generation men have a most relevant role with regard to the management of mosques, while young people's intervention is required for specific aims, such as collecting public fund – as also Allievi shows (Allievi, 2009). Among the results of this situation is these youths' investment in founding new associations, whose varied socio-cultural goals determine actions such as: “organizing talks, setting up or following school or extracurricular activities, investment in humanitarian activities or cultural events centered on awareness of Islam, etc.” (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 94). According to Djelloul and Maréchal, despite the fact that these activities are quite often put in place as much by young women as men, mixed associations would remain proportionally rare (2014b: 94). Indeed, some other analyses report that more and more women are engaging in the associative sector (Ben Mohammed, 2006). Besides teaching and other cultural activities, we find associative actions aimed at converting experiences of discrimination in means through which developing support systems useful for other women, in terms of financial assistance, collective campaigns, visibilization of life experiences etc. (Mescoli, 2016).

5. The political climate between Belgium and migrant communities: public debates on migration, Islam and foreign state involvement.

5.1. Introduction

As already mentioned, Turks represent the second largest component of the Muslim community in Belgium. As Muslims, they have been directly confronted to the unescapable debate on the place of Muslims in European public spaces. In Belgium, this has gone hand in hand with a series of events involving tensions between Turkey and Belgium or Turkey and the European Union. The migration crisis with the European Union in 2015 was widely discussed in Belgium and contributed to deteriorate the climate between Brussels and Ankara. In addition to that, the general perception in Belgium was that police bilateral cooperation was inefficient and needed substantial improvement. Confronted domestically with the radicalization of home-grown Muslim youngsters, the Belgian government expected increased police cooperation in order to prevent Belgian terrorist fighters to join Syria. Other events have also downgraded the Belgian-Turkish bilateral dialogue. The position of Belgian politicians of Turkish origin on the Armenian genocide is a case in point as will be illustrated further. In the following, we seek to analyse these developments.

5.2. Voting behaviour in Belgian elections

Belgium offers a quite favourable context for the involvement of minorities in politics. The openness of its nationality law has allowed access to full citizenship to large segments of the immigrant minority population. This was a gradual development which started in the nineties in the big cities like Brussels, Antwerp, Mechelen, Charleroi, Liège, etc. Considering the high level of residential concentration of the Turkish population, their participation and representation has been naturally stronger in those areas (See above).

An exit poll survey in the municipality of Schaerbeek in the Brussels Region, also known for hosting a sizeable Turkish community, shows that the vote of the Turks is leaning to the centre-left. In this case, the role of local circumstances was important as Turks voted massively for a Mayor heading a coalition composed of centre and moderate right parties.

Table 8 : Party preferences according to ethnic origin in municipal election in Schaerbeek in 2006 (%)

Electoral preference	<i>Nationality at birth of mother</i>				
	Belgian of Belgian origin (N=327)	Belgian of EU origin N=72	Belgian of Moroccan origin (N=73)	Belgian of Turkish origin (N=61)	Other Belgian of non-EU origin (N=48)
Social-Democrats	11,6	15,3%	38,4%	36,1%	29,2%
Greens	25,1	30,6%	5,5%	3,3%	14,6%
Centre (Former Christian-Democrats)	8,0	15,3%	17,8%	9,8%	14,6%
Local list of the Mayor	46,2	34,7%	35,6%	47,5%	31,2%
Other	9,2	4,2%	2,7%	3,3%	10,4%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Source: Rea, Jacobs, Teney and Delwit, 2010

More recent survey data confirms the centre left tendency among Turks in cities such as Liège and Antwerp (Gaasendam 2020). In both cities, the Socialist, the Greens and the Radical Left are strongly over-represented when compared to natives. In Liège, 66,4 % of the Belgian-Turks express a preference for the Social-Democrats whereas compared to 30% among native Belgian voters. In Antwerp, the Social-Democrats also rank first among Belgian Turks with 39,9% while the party is favoured by 11,6% by natives.

Table 9 : Party preferences among Belgian-Turks in Antwerp and Liège

	Antwerp			Liège		
	N	%	% pop	N	%	% pop
Social-democrats	165	39,9	11,6	237	66,4	30,0
Radical Left	93	22,6	4,5	34	9,4	8,1
Greens	68	16,5	9,9	28	7,9	9,1
Christian-democrats	39	9,5	16,1	24	6,9	13,1

Liberal	11	2,7	10,2	28	7,9	25,2
Flemish nationalists	34	8,3	39,4	-	-	-
Flemish radical right	3	0,6	7	-	-	-
Others	-	-	1,4	5	1,5	14,5
Total	413	100	100	357	100	100

Source: Gaasendam, 2020

To date, Belgium counts one Minister of Turkish origin in the Flemish Government (Zuhal Demir), one president of a political party (Meryem Almaci – Flemish Greens) and one mayor in the municipality of Saint-Josse in Brussels (Emir Kir, independent). In the Federal Parliament, two MPs of Turkish origin can be identified in the second chamber (Ozlem Özen, Social-Democrat and Emir Kir, independent). In the regional Parliaments, there are 5/89 in the Brussels Parliament (Hasan Koyuncu, Social-Democrats, Ibrahim Dönmez, Social-Democrats, Sekvet Temiz, Social-Democrat, Sadik Koksak Regionalist Francophone Party, Emin Özkara, Independent), 1/124 in the Flemish Parliament and 0/75 in the Walloon Parliament.

5.3. Voting behaviour in Turkish elections

After the presidential and general election in Turkey on June, 24th 2018, Belgium discovered the Turkish electoral results with quite some surprise. While the tone of the Belgian and European media had been quite severe against Turkish authorities since after the 2015 migration crisis, commentators and experts found out that this critical stance was absolutely not shared by Belgian Turks. The election showed that Belgium was one of the countries in the world where the diaspora expressed the highest support for the power in place in Ankara. The official results presented in Table 10 show firstly a high-level turnout (53,58%) and a very high level of support for the islamo-conservative AKP (63,4%). The Presidential election provides an even more startling picture as the ruling President Recep Tayyip Erdogan won in Belgium with more than twenty percentage point than in the rest of Turkey (73,6% versus 52,59%)¹⁰.

Table 10: Turkish general election results in Belgium, 2018

	Consulate of Antwerp	Consulate of Brussels	Total	%

¹⁰ Placed on an ideological scale, these results of course are at odds with those presented in previous section.

AKP	28 261	20 148	48 409	63,4%
MHP	4 078	3 203	7 281	9,5%
HÜDA PAR	105	28	133	0,17%
VATAN PARTISI	90	87	177	0,23%
HDP	3 173	4 038	7 211	9,4%
CHP	3 554	4 391	7 945	10,4%
SAADET	379	345	724	0,94%
İYİ PARTİ	1 134	1 371	2 505	3,2%
CUMHUR İTTİFAKI	321	454	775	1,01%
MİLLET İTTİFAKI	25	44	69	0,09%
Total valid votes	41 120	34 109	75 229	98,5%
Invalid votes	518	577	1 095	1,5%
Total Nb of actual voters	41 638	34 686	76 324	100%
Total Nb of registered voters & turnout			142 436	53,58%

Source: Supreme Election Council of Turkey, <https://sonuc.vsk.gov.tr/sorgu>¹¹

5.4. Prevailing issues

During the last decade, the question of Islam and Muslims remained at the centre-stage in Belgian and European politics. The post-09/11 agenda with its security framing of the issue remained but took on new accents. After the beginning of the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, the debate moved to home-grown terrorism and radicalization. With more than 500 people having joined Syria and Irak, Belgium was directly concerned by this phenomenon. This became even more sensitive after the country was hit by a terrorist attack in Brussels on 22nd March 2016. The anti-terrorist and the anti-radicalisation became a dominant frame of reference.

Although, most Belgian foreign fighters in Syria were of Moroccan origin or converts (Van Ostaeyen and Van Vlieden 2018), this is not to say that Turks were not concerned by the debate. Van Ostaeyen¹² reports that the figures of Belgian Turkish citizen involved as Foreign

¹¹ Retrieved 15th December 2021

¹² https://europeandemocracy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Belgian_fighters-DRAFT8-webversion.pdf

Fighters are indeed more modest with only 10 out of 505 individuals identified. The author also reports the case of a Turk with Dutch citizenship and established in Brussels who was a member of a group affiliated to Jabhat Al Noursra and suspected of planning an attack against European institutions in Brussels.

After the March, 22nd 2016 attacks at Brussels airport and in the metro near the European Commission, the Belgian Federal Parliament created a commission of enquiry. The lower level of involvement was also highlighted by the Commission. In its 1000 pages report, the Commission notes that in different migrant communities, perceived subjective discrimination is higher among Moroccans and Turks: *“This would explain, according to one of the experts interviewed, why the Turkish community, which provides a lot of support but lives more in a closed dynamic, is less subject to these feelings than the Moroccan community, which is more in the process of seeking lasting integration”*¹³

The Commission made several recommendations to address the root causes of radicalisation and terrorism. Among other, it paid particular attention to grant a bigger role to the Executive of Muslims in Belgium (EMB) in the management of the Great Mosque of Brussels. The Commission invited the government to take back control over the building, owned by The Belgian State, in order to move away the control exercised by Saudi Arabia through the Muslim World League (MWL) over the Belgian Muslim institution.

The context of terrorism and radicalisation brought back the question of the training of imams and religious leaders. The Great Mosque of Brussels was also seen as a potential actor for this policy. The Commission wished that the Great Mosque would become the host to an Institute for the study of Islam (or Islamic cultures) under the control of the EMB.

Following these recommendations, the EMB decided to create two new institutions in 2019: the Association for the Management of the Great Mosque of Brussels and the Research and Training Academy for Islamic Studies (AFOR). The original plan was that the Great Mosque would become the seats for the EMB, for the AFOR, for a worship space and a museum dedicated to Islam in Belgium. After the federal election of 2019 and the formation of a new government, the relationship between the EMB and the new Minister of Justice deteriorated

¹³ See <https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1752/54K1752009.pdf>, page 151 (retrieved on 15th December 2021).

and that is now throwing into question the implementation of the whole plan devised by the former government. In order to make sense of the polemic, it is necessary to analyse the history of the EMB where Turkish representatives are central actors alongside Moroccans.

5.5. Relations between Turks and the other Muslim communities

The EMB was officially recognized by the Belgian Government in 1999. Being recognized for a religion means receiving public funding for the salaries and pension of clerics and teachers in public schools, for radio and television broadcasting, for religious buildings, etc. Since 1999, the EMB has struggled to obtain a recognition of Islam on a par with the other recognized religions. The quest for equal institutional recognition remains indeed an open question as several sources of public funding for Muslims have not yet been released. For instance, there is not yet an Islamic programme on public radio and television as theoretically foreseen. The problem is of a bureaucratic and budgetary nature and necessitate long and arduous negotiations with the federal administration.

Since 2020, the situation within the EMB is under high tension. In some ways, the institution has been in permanent crisis since its creation in 1999. But the last few years have brought new problems. The Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, himself recently fuelled the concern by saying in the House of Representatives: *"Let's be clear: if the Muslim Executive is working with public money, there can be no doubt about the way these means are used. This kind of shenanigans, we deserve better than that in our country"*. In reaction, the EMB announced its intention to stop applying for the €500,000 operating subsidy it received from the federal government. All this, to fight against government interference in the affairs of the Muslim faith.

5.6. Perception of Turkey's diaspora policy

5.6.a Belgian reactions to Turkey's diaspora policy

The implication of Turkey's diaspora policy for Belgium constitutes a rather sensitive issue. Reactions to the influence of Turkey may take on very different forms in public life ranging from open hostility to pragmatism and passivity. These positions are influenced by regional circumstances. While in the Walloon region, the question remains a low-key issue, it is much more central in Brussels and Flemish cities which host sizeable Turkish minorities.

Members of the largest party in the Belgian Federal Parliament, the Flemish nationalist N-VA, are among the most vocal opponents to the Turkish influence in Belgium. This goes hand in hand with a highly critical position on the Turkish candidacy to the European Union. In the run up towards the referendum of 2017, the Flemish MP Jans Lantmeeters (N-VA) proposed a ban on electoral campaigning of Turkish politicians within the diaspora. This came after a series of electoral meetings being held in the Province of Limburg by, among others, the AKP Turkish MP Metin Külünk. Zuhail Demir, a Minister of the Flemish government of Kurdish origin, pleads forcefully in the same vein. After a demonstration by Turkish nationalists in the Province of Limbourg, she commented in the media and on her social networks: *“Democrat in Flanders, Fascist in Turkey. And our parties (i.e.: Belgian parties) look on openhandedly as they count votes. Supporting hatred under the banner of tolerance. This is going to cost us a lot. We do not want this”*

In the same time, as denounced by Minister Demir, the Turkish minority in Belgium is also a political force whose electoral leverage is taken seriously by Belgian political parties. For that reason, it is often the case that political parties holding power locally tend to downplay the issue and speak about it in diplomatic language. Pragmatism and passivity then become a political strategy for keeping good relationship with local communities. Sometimes, this is associated with the perspective of keeping good economic and commercial relations with Turkey. This is well illustrated by Pascal Smet, the Brussels Secretary of State for International Relations and Foreign Trade, when he declared during a trade mission to Turkey in October 2021,: *“Turkey is not only a large market, but we also have strong ties because of the large Turkish diaspora in Brussels”*

The ambivalence of Belgian politicians in relations to Turkey’s diaspora policy is contrasted by the plain language used by Security Departments such as the *Sûreté de l’Etat*, the Belgian Federal intelligence service. In its 2019 annual report, Turkish influence is treated in a chapter after Salafism and before the Muslim Brotherhood under the heading Turkish Islamism. According to the *Sûreté de l’Etat*: *“A striking consequence of developments in Turkey is the increasing blurring of ideological boundaries between the Turkish State - represented by the *Diyanet* - and Turkish religious brotherhoods and movements such as the *Milli Görüş*.”*

5.6.b. The operational structure of Turkey’s influence on its Belgian diaspora

The conservative ideological influence of the Turkish State on its Belgian diaspora hinges on a number of field actors. In the Belgian Capital, Brussels, Turkey is represented by an Embassy and a General Consulate serving Turkish citizens living in the Region of Brussels Capital, Walloon and the Province of Flemish Brabant. Those living in Flanders are connected to the General Consulate of Antwerp. Both Consulates have been operating since the mid-sixties. This network of diplomatic institutions is complemented by a large network of mosques and cultural centres owned and controlled by the Belgian branch of the Turkish religious administration Diyanet. These institutions offer the operational structure of Turkey's influence on their diaspora.

In 2020, Turkey provoked wary reactions in Belgium when it decided to increase the staffing of Diyanet by sending 40 new imams. For many observers, the personnel of both the Diyanet and the diplomatic missions serves as a surveillance network. The imam and the board of a Diyanet mosque in Beringen came under close scrutiny after Belgian authorities discovered that threats and pressures were exercised against fellow Turkish citizens. The Flemish government ultimately decided to withdraw funding and official recognition to that mosque.

In an op-ed published by the mainstream newspaper *Le Soir*, the Islamologist Michaël Privot argues that: “ *Until the AKP government took final control in 2010, the Diyanet essentially disseminated an apolitical, if not totally depoliticised, Islam that was not supposed to pose any risk to the government in Ankara, regardless of its ideological orientation and degree of secularism. This has not been the case in recent years. If the core of the Diyanet imams' discourse, in Turkey as in Belgium, remains focused on the dissemination of conservative moral values and a tailor-made ethno-nationalism, a notable inflection of the discourses could be observed since the Gezi Park uprising in 2013. They have increasingly aligned themselves with Erdogan's rhetoric, naming and warning against enemies from within: Kurdish opposition movements (not just the Terrorists), but also other radical leftist movements, as well as F. Gülen's Hizmet, of course. Since the coup, a real witch-hunt has been launched against this organisation (...)*”¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://www.lesoir.be/89232/article/2017-04-08/espionnage-de-la-diyamet-quand-les-musulmans-de-belgique-seront-ils-enfin>, (Retrieved on September 1st 2022)

The intolerant and often violent climate that developed since 2016 was observable during visits of President Erdogan to the Belgian Capital. In March 2020, violent confrontations between Kurdish and pro-Erdogan demonstrators took place while the President was addressing the Turkish diaspora during a rally within the precinct of the Turkish Embassy. Ironically, the demonstrations that took place in front of the buildings of the European Commission which is located a few hundred meters away from both the Turkish Embassy and the Little Anatolia neighbourhood in the municipality of Saint Josse-Ten-Noode.

5.6.c. The 2015 migration crisis

The last decade has been rich in episodes of tensions between Turkey and Belgium. This has with no doubt impacted the identity and self-understanding of Turkish diasporic communities. The consequences of the Arab spring in terms of migration tensions was one of the first episodes of these tensions. While the government of Turkey was seen as playing instrumentally the game of the migration pressure, it was also perceived as mobilizing Turkish diasporas against European interests.

In Parliament, the Belgian government came on a regular basis under fierce attack of the opposition on the European-Union/Turkey relations. In March 2017, Charles Michel, Prime Minister¹⁵, was put under pressure by the parliamentary opposition on the Turkey-EU migration deal: *“I have never left any ambiguity any ambiguity about the relations between the EU and Turkey. Cooperation with Ankara is relevant from a geopolitical point of view, but I have never hidden the fact that a vision exclusively focused on the problem of migration seemed too one-sided to me. We need to also need to address other such as the development of the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and freedom of the press. We are not naive, and we are perfectly aware of the instrumentalization of the circumstances by the Turkish government. But it is clear that to note that the agreement concluded with Turkey on migration is bearing fruit in a very concrete way. To make things clear, I do not accept President Erdogan's declarations, and even more so the latest the latest ones. In our strategy towards Turkey, I advocate strong cohesion of the European Union.”*

¹⁵ Parliamentary Documents, 23rd March 2017
<https://www.lachambre.be/doc/PCRI/pdf/54/ip162.pdf#search=%22P1932%22> (Retrieved on 15th December 2021)

5.6.d. Perceived harmful influence of Turkey on Belgian domestic politics

Following the coup d'état attempt of July 2016 in Turkey, the wave of shock propagated directly to Belgium. In December 2016, the Flemish nationalists mobilised in Parliament against the negative impact of a letter sent by the Turkish government to encourage the surveillance of anti-Turkish activities. The leader of the largest party in Parliament (NVA), Peter De Roover challenges the government: *“I am probably not the only one here to have been questioned by the Turkish diaspora about the increasing pressure exerted by Ankara, which is aggravating the relations between Belgians of Turkish origin on our own territory and imports conflicts from Turkey. This week, an appeal was launched from mosques linked to the Diyanet to spy on citizens. These facts are totally incompatible with our principles. The minister has instructed the Executive of Muslims to integrate Islam into our ground rules. This is also the reason for the conflict between the Diyanet and the Executive. The minister's way is, the preferred route in the long run. I would therefore like to ask the Minister to instruct State Security to deal with this matter as a matter of priority”*

These pressures exerted by Turkish officials and their allies have been an ongoing feature of the Turkish diaspora policies in recent years. The latest development in that front was the cancellation of the Chair Fetullah Gülen in the largest Belgian university, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. This has led to the feeling of an increasing tendency to nationalist and religious extremism among Turkish Belgian citizens. The summer of 2016 was particularly full of tensions. After the attempted coup of 2016, several instances of intra-community violence were reported. Associations close to the movement of Fetullah Gülen have been the target of violent incidents especially in Flanders¹⁶.

5.6.e. The uneasy position of Belgian Turkish politicians

Due to tensed relations between Turkey and the European Union, Belgium has witnessed a series of conflicting events involving Belgian politicians of Turkish origin. In the following, we only concentrate on the period after 2010. This is not to say that the period before did not record episodes of transnational tensions. Since, the early days of Turkish migration to Belgium, there has been cases of tensions and conflicts (Infocon, 2011). These were generally connected to the issue of Kurdistan. But the point is that the intensity of the challenge climaxed during the

¹⁶ https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/fr/2016/07/18/des_sympathisantsdupredicateurguelenmenacesenbelgique-1-2717069/ (Retrieved on December, 15th 2021)

last decade putting Belgian politicians of Turkish origin at the frontline. There is no comparable record of political sanctions and exclusions from Belgian political parties having affected any other migrant origin community.

In the city of Verviers, in the East of the country, the tension about Kurdistan led to a polemic of a new kind in the Belgian political landscape in the form of an open conflict between two members of the local government belonging to the same party. During the electoral campaign of 2012, the socialist aldermen of Turkish origin, Hasan Aydin, clashed publicly with his colleague of Tunisian origin Malik Benachour. The first reproached the latter to welcome and host the participants to a demonstration rally in favour of Kurdish autonomy. The conflict was reported in the local media and appeared as a quite unusual type of conflict in Belgian local politics.

The same year, another leading figure of Belgian Turkish politics, Selahetin Koçak, attracted public and media attention. After having come under attack by the Jewish community due to an interview perceived as antisemitic, he was forced to resign from his position as aldermen of the city of Genk.

In 2015 in Brussels, a young Belgian lady of Turkish origin has been at the centre of intense media coverage. Right after she was elected in 2009 in the Brussels Parliament, she attracted wide media coverage as the first MP with a headscarf. In 2015, she was excluded from her party, the Christian-Democratic Party (cdH) on the basis of non-compliance to the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

The same holds true for Emir Kir, a leading figure of Belgian Turkish origin, Member of the federal parliament and mayor of the municipality of Saint-Josse in the Brussels-Capital Region. After refusing to attend the one minute of silence for the Armenian genocide victims, Emir Kir came under fierce attack from his colleagues. In 2020, he was excluded from the Social-Democratic Party (PS). He was accused of having hosted in 2019 delegation of Turkish MPs including two members of the Turkish MHP.

In October 2018, the Flemish Christian Democrats excluded Mrs Safiye Calinalti from their list for the local election because of her past connections with the Grey Wolves. In Herstal, near the city of Liège, the local councilor for the Greens, Yunus Sahinbay, was excluded from the

party after a picture of him doing the Rabia sign under the banner of the Grey Wolves was circulated on the social media.

6. Conclusion

This report has tried to trace the trajectory of Turkish origin communities in Belgium since the early sixties. More than fifty years after the first settlement of Turkish migrant workers in the country, the social, economic and political situation of Belgian Turks has tremendously changed. A new generation of Turkish elites has appeared in public life and is playing leading roles in politics from the national to the Belgian federal level. In parallel, the last decade also witnessed serious difficulties and tensions associated with Turkish transnational politics.

The report showed how the Turkish vote in the homeland and in the host-country has evolved quite at odds with one another. While the progressive orientation is obvious in the votes casted in Belgian election, a more conservative orientation is clearly observable in relation to Turkey. To be fair, one should say that the Turkish community in Belgium has been confronted during the last decade to a sequence of conflicting events putting Turkish transnational political connections strongly under attack.

Turks represent the second largest segment of the Muslim population in Belgium. As such, they have been associated to the difficult debates about the place of Islam in public life as well the discussion about youth radicalization and terrorism. In Belgium, they have also played an important role in the setting up and management of the Executive of Muslims of Belgium, the official body representing Muslims before the Belgian State. Here again, the transnational influence of the AKP dominated government in Ankara was perceived as playing against the development of a local Islam free for external interferences.

Since the migration crisis in 2015, the pressure exercised by the regime in Ankara on its diaspora has led to several episodes of tensions with Belgian decision-makers, as we have sought to recall in this report. The role of diplomatic missions and religious institutions in delivering an offensive ideological mix of religious conservatism and ethno-nationalism has in a way isolated the Turkish diaspora from the mainstream Belgian society. This is plain to see in the maximal pressure undergone by Turkish origin candidates in politics. The latter have paid a high price to these transnational tensions. No other immigrant community has indeed been confronted to a comparable level of exclusion from Belgian political parties.

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