

The **FORUM**
 Discussing International Affairs and Economics



MIGRATION

Character and Scope

Economic Potential

Regional Perspectives

Interviews, Essays, Editorials

Scott Blinder

Joseph Chamie

Gloria Moreno
 Fontes Chammarin

Justin Gest

Graeme Hugo

Maria Koinva

Khalid Koser

Mark Krikorian

Marco Martiniello

Tamlyn Monson

Yaw Nyarko

Tobias Pfutze

David Phillips

Rafael Reuveny

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Dr. Phillip Martin is Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California and is chair of the University of California's Comparative Immigration and Integration Program, and editor of the monthly Migration News and the quarterly Rural Migration News. He was the only academic appointed to the Commission on Agricultural Workers to assess the effects of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, received UCD's Distinguished Public Service award in 1994 and was a member of the Binational Study of Migration between 1995 and 1997.

Dr. Marco Martiniello is Research Director at the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FRS-FNRS). He teaches Sociology and Politics at the University of Liège. He is the director of the Center for Ethnic and Migration Studies (CEDEM) in the same university. He is also member of the executive board of the European Research Network IMISCOE (International Migration and Social Cohesion in Europe) and President of the Research Committee n°31 Sociology of Migration (International Sociological Association). He is the author, editor or co-editor of numerous articles, book chapters, reports and books on migration, ethnicity, racism, multiculturalism and citizenship in the European Union and in Belgium with a transatlantic comparative perspective. They include *La nouvelle Europe migratoire. Pour une politique proactive de l'immigration* (Labor, 2001), *Citizenship in European Cities* (Ashgate, 2004), *Migration between States and Markets* (Ashgate 2004), *The Transnational Political Participation of Immigrants. A Transatlantic Perspective* (Routledge 2009), *Selected Studies in International Migration and Immigrant Incorporation* (co-edited with Jan Rath, Amsterdam University Press, 2010)



Tamlyn Monson is a researcher within the Forced Migration Studies Programme, examining issues of non-state authority and territorial control in areas affected by xenophobic attacks. She has an interdisciplinary background, and has worked on several projects focused on the causes, consequences, and responses to xenophobic attacks in South Africa. In 2009, she was seconded to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to lead its investigation into issues of rule of law, justice and impunity arising from the 2008 attacks.

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Immigrant Integration: Discourses and Policies in Belgium and in the EU

Dr. Marco Martiniello

Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research
University of Liege

BELGIUM

International Affairs Forum: What do you view as significant issues for integrating immigrants into Belgian society?

Dr. Marco Martiniello: Belgium is a unique country in the European Union, and we are now in the middle of discussion about the mere existence of the Belgian state in the future. We had an election on the 13th of June, and still no government has been formed. The problem is that on the Flemish side, the Nationalist and conservative party (NVA) won the elections whereas, in the south, the Socialist Party (PS), which is progressivist and committed to the existence of the Belgian state, won the election. This political situation means that it's very different for immigrants to arrive in the Walloon side, in the south of the country, compared to the Flemish side in the north of the country, or in Brussels. Integrating in Brussels is not the same thing as integrating in Wallonia or integrating in

Flanders. Therefore, the topic needs to be discussed for each of these areas.

In Flanders, there is a clear vision of immigrants' requirements. Immigrants are expected to learn the Dutch language as quickly as possible and expected to endorse Flemish values defined by the Flemish government. Therefore an integration course has been designed for newcomers and immigrants, which they are obliged to pass. If they fail, they will not get access to certain advantages. For example, if they don't speak Dutch, they will have problems if they apply for public housing. There is a kind of assimilationist vision of integration even though there is a discourse about diversity. But diversity is meant as something superficial like ethnic restaurants. The main thought in Flanders is not to question the fundamentals of their society.

In Wallonia, the system is more like the French model, where everybody

is a citizen, and there is no difference between individuals according to ethnic origin, religion, or other factors, at least in political discourse. Basically, everybody is expected to be an equal member of society. This view is also an assimilationist view of society, but progressively there has been an opening towards more of an intercultural society. Compared to Flanders, there is no real clear vision about what should be done with newcomers. There is an idea that integration is not really a Walloon problem; that previous waves of immigrants were successfully integrated and therefore, the problems of immigration today are not very important in Wallonia. So, no homogenous course on the integration of immigrants exists.

Then there is Brussels. To a certain extent, Brussels is analogous to a city like New York. Brussels is a cosmopolitan city and the percentage of foreign-born in Brussels, or immigrant origin second or third generation, is close to 50% of the population. It is different since there is no assimilationist perspective. There is a view that whatever one does, Brussels will be a multicultural, multi-religious, multiracial society. But there is a level of complexity in Brussels because it represents a crossroads between the Flemish view and the Walloon view, and both regions have a say in what is being done there.

But beyond those differences that deal with public discourse and public policies, the problems are very similar for immigrants

throughout the country. It's about finding a decent job, finding decent housing, finding decent schools for their children, finding decent health care. While the problems are the same, the policy solutions are expressed in a completely different way in the three parts of the country.

How does those areas differ in how they approach integrating children?

Dr. Martiniello: For children and young adults, there are three problems: lack of education, unemployment, and discrimination. Lack of education is the result of education policy, especially in Brussels where a kind of soft apartheid regime has developed in education. There are good schools, mostly for white middle class and upper class students. Then you have bad schools that progressively welcome second-generation children, especially non-Europeans. Therefore, it's not rare to have Belgium born kids who cannot properly speak one of the national languages after attending primary school. This becomes a further problem because it creates an obstacle for accessing education later on, which severely impacts their ability to get an education or diploma required for the labor market. This problem can eventually lead to poor employment or unemployment.

This is reinforced by ethnic and racial discrimination, which has been demonstrated by several studies in

Belgium. So there is a convergence of poor performance in education and discrimination. This is also an obstacle for the integration of those immigrant students into the labor market that actually have diplomas, education, and skills. The situation is very worrisome throughout the country but it's more prevalent in Brussels because that's where the concentration of second generation immigrant children and young adults is greatest.

With the recent world economic downturn, have you noticed any effect on anti-immigration sentiment?

Dr. Martiniello: The anti-immigration sentiments were there before the world crisis. The situation in Belgium is very different from the situation in a country like Spain or Ireland. In each of those countries, there was this idea that immigrants were taking over jobs

of competition with the local workers in the labor market is perhaps less crucial than in countries like Spain, Ireland, or even the UK, where there the global crisis has had a direct effect on the growth of anti-immigration attitudes.

Overall, there is a little less anti-immigration sentiment in Belgium than those countries but it is still quite high and quite stable. One element that may have played a part in that is the focus on Muslim immigrants in Belgium following 9/11.

Multiculturalism has become a heated topic in the EU with some claiming that increased immigrant inflows will saturate cities to such a degree that integration efforts, and multiculturalism, are ineffective. Your response? Can multiculturalism programs be effective in the EU?

The challenge [the EU] is facing is how to find the necessary cohesion and unity, with a respect for diversity

from the local population. This has not really been the case in Belgium where migrants, especially new ones, are highly represented in the semi-legal labor market, doing jobs that nobody wants to do even during the world crisis. Therefore, the idea

Dr. Martiniello: I think that they have to be because in Europe, we are a multicultural society. There is no way we can imagine a homogenous Europe. We have entered what I call a process of diversification of European diversity. This is a group of 27

nations with national minorities, religious minorities, and immigrant minorities. We are very diverse society.

The challenge we are facing is how to find the necessary cohesion and unity, with a respect for diversity. We have to go beyond the multiculturalist agendas of the 90s, but we should not return to an assimilationist agenda at the European level because it won't work. So, we are trying to find a European approach to multicultural societies and it's very difficult because there are different traditions. We are struggling to define our own understanding of how a multicultural society should work while at the same time respecting diversity.

Very few people in Europe would advocate an extreme multiculturalist perspective, leading even to separation between groups. But I think that the challenge is really that, and we are struggling to deal with it in an appropriate manner. There is the idea that immigrants should become like us. It's an easy idea, so it seduces many people, even many policy makers. The problem is, how do we define who 'we' are?' If you ask that in Belgium or in Hungary or in Greece, it's very difficult to get a common understanding of what 'we' is. Because of that, I think we may have more problems than the US regarding this.

What about asylum policies and procedures? What are your thoughts on those right now?

Dr. Martiniello: We have moved towards a common asylum policy in the European Union which is quite restrictive and has developed at the same time as a kind of security approach to human mobility. There is a fear of invasion in European public opinion and a tendency to say, 'maybe we should limit the number of refugees we recognize.' In some countries they even want to have some quotas of refugees, which are contrary to the logic of human rights, but again it is really difficult to combine different objectives.

In many cases, there is also a starting presupposition that asylum seekers are fake or bogus refugees. Sometimes this is true, probably because it's quite difficult for someone to enter legally the European Union for economic reasons. However, some "real" refugees are reluctant to apply for asylum because they anticipate a rejection of their application.

Today, we do not have a very clear immigration policy even though we have the blue card and some programs like it. There are still differences between traditional immigration countries like the US, Canada, Australia and the European Union, which is still in the process of getting out of the zero-immigration idea, this idea that immigration is an anomaly

and that asylum seekers are not something normal. Again, like multiculturalism, we are struggling and tend to be a bit too severe when treating requests for asylum. It should be asked, how committed are Europeans to human rights? We do not have a global, coherent, immigration policy comprising economic migration, asylum policy, and family reunification. What we really need is a global, overarching approach to all different forms of migration because nowadays there still are imbalances between the different branches of immigration policy and that creates problems.

That said, there are also positive developments about asylum policy. For a long time, one of the countries carrying the burden of all asylum seekers was Germany. This was perhaps a way for Germany to make a type of amends for the war, and the refugee law was very open there. The idea that different partners in the European Union should share in this burden has been accepted now. That's a positive development. There is no reason why Germany should take care of the majority of asylum seekers that were trying to get into Europe. We are all partners in the European Union and should share the burden.

You've performed research on political participation with immigrant groups...

Dr. Martiniello: Yes, that's a very interesting

issue. Again, there is a wide diversity as far as political participation and the presentation of immigrants, and immigrant origin population in Europe. Perhaps one of the most important cases is in Brussels where there are top politicians with an immigrant background. Sometimes there is even an overrepresentation of immigrant politicians, compared to non-immigrant politicians in some districts of Brussels.

Political participation in Europe is a difficult and complex subject. There are three general groups of countries to examine. First, there are countries like Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and France, where it is an old issue and there is a kind of awareness that the issue of political participation and representation of immigrants and minorities is related in one way or another to the quality of the democratic system. Then there are countries in which the issue is slowly emerging, like Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Finally, there is a group of countries in which, talking about the political participation of immigrants, doesn't make sense. For example, Bulgarians do not see themselves as a country of immigration.

It's also interesting to note that the election of Barack Obama has been important for political participation in Europe. There are now African-origin politicians who claim to be the Paris Obama or the Brussels Obama or the Berlin Obama. It has created a kind of new energy, especially in African communities throughout Europe. This

again shows how interdependent we are. It could be said it's difficult to compare the experience of President Obama in the US to what's going on in Europe. But still, it is used by African immigrants as a model and they think, 'if it has happened in the US, maybe it will eventually happen in Europe, too.' Increasingly, there is discourse with clear references to Obama. The day he was elected, there were huge parties in immigrant communities throughout the European Union. He's very popular here and throughout the European Union in immigrant communities.

Looking to the future, what would you like to see in Belgium's immigration policy?

Dr. Martiniello: I would like to see a country in which immigrants are given a chance, an opportunity to fit in. I would like to see a country in which discrimination on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, would decrease. I am not naïve, I know that it's impossible to totally get rid of discrimination, but it still harms too many peoples' lives and opportunities here. I would also like a clear view, but I am not sure it will be possible at the Belgian level. And at the European level that you know, we are a country, a continent of immigration.

I am not advocating an idealistic, romanticized view about immigration. But we were, we are, and we will be a country and a continent of immigration. Therefore

we need a clear policy of immigration. We need clear policies of integration. We need to be more active about the fear of discrimination. But that doesn't mean that we should accept any form of cultural assertion in the public space in Europe. There is a democratic order in Europe that everybody has to respect, immigrants and non-immigrants.

We have to consider all the people who live in Europe as partners, as co-citizens. Therefore, they need to have rights, duties, and obligations. I think we'll get there because we've made much progress. There are many positive signs for migration and race relations in Europe. But I think that we are going to struggle with migration for many more years because it's a difficult world with tensions that are expressed in ethnic terms, in religious terms, opposing immigrants to non-immigrants. We have to move to a multicultural democracy, based on equality of rights and duties for everybody. We should give more choice to people to contribute to development of Europe and certainly includes immigrants.