

SESSION 3. 15h.

Speech ~~Ellen Vermoesen~~ IOM 26/10

Thomas Poens.
replacing Ms Vermoesen

Integration of Migrants in Belgium: the subsidiarity principle put to practice

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to excuse the Belgian Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken. As he is not only State secretary but also a mayor, he would have liked to be here. Unfortunately, in the end, his agenda did not allow him to be here.

Before I start to tell you about integration of migrants in Belgium, I would like to thank the ambassador, Mr. de Crombrughe, the president of IOM, Mr Swing and the organisation for the invitation. It's a great honor to be here as the topic of integration is of great political relevance. The number of refugees the world is facing today, challenges many governments and this can only be managed successfully if countries cooperate and learn from each other. Conferences like this are of great importance to exchange best practices.

While reading the white paper, I was happy to realize that Belgium already applies the three recommendations for national authorities outlined by the IOM and the JMD to no small extent. Belgium recognizes the importance of the local and regional levels of government in the integration of newcomers, enjoys good mechanisms of dialogue between all levels of government and supports decentralization according to the principle of subsidiarity. This is due to the general political culture in Belgium, which is in fact quite unique in a European perspective. The 589 municipalities of Belgium enjoy a political and fiscal independence on a scale unmatched by any of its neighbors. The regional authorities enjoy wide-ranging competences and a growing fiscal independence. Finally, Belgium possesses a longstanding tradition in close cooperation between the government and the non-governmental organizations that render public services and are funded by public means.

The Federal government of Belgium is competent for matters regulating the access to the Belgian territory, including the asylum procedure and the hosting of asylum seekers during their procedure. These competences are managed together with the regions and communities. As the competence for regulating the Labor Market have been fully regionalised, the Federal administration needs prior consent of the regional administration before visa for labor-migration can be issued. The Federal authorities retain only the competence of refusing those visa for reasons of public order.

When it comes to the very important task of integrating the people that settle in Belgium, this competence is awarded to the regional governments. The Flemish government is competent for integration in Flanders, while the government of the Francophone community regulates matters in Wallonia. Within the bilingual Brussels Region, both authorities may offer parallel services. The Flemish government has invested massively in integration. A broad educational network is now fully functioning. In class-rooms all over Flanders newcomers are given Dutch language courses and so called 'integration courses', in which the basic rules of our society are communicated, but also very practical information such as how to gain access to health services, professional courses, social security, education, culture and leisure activities. Those courses are obligatory for all non-European newcomers that take up domicile in the Flemish region, and are accessible to all newcomers settling in the Brussels region. The courses are offered free of charge. To limit the impact on the professional lives of the newcomers, the courses are also provided after working hours. After successful completion, participants are issued a certificate which is highly valued on the labor market. The Flemish government provides only the legal basis, the funding and the content of the integration course. The practical implementation of this regional framework is provided by the local and provincial entities, that have set up their own 'Reception desks'. Every province has its own reception desk, while big cities like Ghent and Antwerp have developed their own municipal ones. The Flemish model of integration policy has received positive acclaim, both by the recipients themselves as by international institutions such as the OECD. Inspired by this success, the government of the Francophone community in Belgium is currently

investigating to start a similar model of integration courses for Wallonia and Brussels.

Let us now look at the vital role of the municipalities in the integration of newcomers, a double role in fact. Firstly, the municipal authorities assist other levels of government in their policy. In close cooperation with the Federal government, the municipal administrations serve as the local partners of the Federal Immigration Office. When a new person takes up residence in a commune, he or she must always declare this to the municipal authorities, so a connection between the newcomer and the officers of the municipality is directly created. In some limited cases, people may file an application for a resident permit directly in the office of their municipal administration. In addition, these administrations play an important role in informing the newcomers and assisting them throughout any procedure they might undertake, including the process of obtaining the Belgian nationality. To that end, many municipalities have established a separate office for newcomers with staff especially trained in migration law and administrative practice, so as to inform the newcomer as accurate as possible about his rights and obligations. To ensure the local staff remains up to date on these matters, the national authorities organize training sessions whenever modifications are made to the legal framework or to the administrative practice.

Secondly, the local authorities develop their own integration policy in addition to the regional one. As such, the municipal administrations play a vital role in both the cultural and the socio-economic integration of all newcomers. They invest heavily in cultural and intercultural organizations, aimed at strengthening the social bonds between residents and newcomers. Furthermore, Belgian communes possess wide-ranging independence in shaping their own welfare policy. Every commune directs its own 'Public Center for General Welfare'. Those centers ensure basic financial aid and social housing for all inhabitants, including the newcomers. Social assistants help newcomers in finding adequate housing, provide additional language courses whenever necessary and make them acquainted with the wide range of cultural, sportive and social accommodations and activities the municipality organises. Moreover, the 'Public Centers for General Welfare' offer subsidised

traineeships to guide newcomers towards full participation on the Belgian labor market.

Before concluding, let me say something on how Belgium is coping with the great challenge posed by the ongoing asylum crisis. The number of asylum seekers became five times higher in a few months' time. For 2015 we have 2 in total 22000 request for asylum, compared to about 17000 for the whole of 2014. As said before, both the asylum procedure and the reception of asylum seekers during their procedure are Federal competences. Fedasil, the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, is taking care of this. However, close cooperation exists between the federal administration, non-governmental organizations and the municipal authorities. In May, a new model of reception was proposed to maximize the efficiency and rationalization of the existing capacity. Reception in collective federal or partner-based facilities is the norm. People with vulnerable profiles that have specific needs, require a more specific infrastructure and assistance. These will be provided in individual structures, mostly operated by specialized NGO's. The municipalities play also a role in another type of individual reception, by organizing the above mentioned local reception initiatives, of which more than 7.000 places have been organized at the moment. A call for more places has been recently enthusiastically answered by 242 municipalities, for a total of 1756 places. Moreover, we can count on the support of many volunteers that help out on a regular basis in the reception centers all over Belgium. Thanks to their enthusiasm and to the support of the municipalities, asylum seekers receive the extra attention they need. For example, dozens of volunteers assist children of asylum seekers with their homework, or provide workshops to help people develop their skills. As Miss Candaele explained/will explain the federal centers work closely together with the neighborhoods and the municipal authorities to organize activities and festivities to bring asylum seekers and the community together. Thanks to this successful cooperation between all levels of government, the NGO's, and the vast number of individual volunteers, Belgium has succeeded in providing shelter and a qualitative reception of everybody who has applied for asylum in our country. The same care is also awarded to asylum seekers that voluntarily wish to cancel their asylum procedure and return to their countries of origin. To organize the assistance in voluntary return, there is close cooperation between Fedasil, IOM and the

municipalities. The municipalities are important partners in the information and administrative process of helping people who want to return to their home country in a safe and dignified way.

As the Belgian example shows, success can be achieved if all actors of government cooperate and share responsibility. As a mayor, the State secretary can testify that the role of municipalities is vital to any successful integration policy. The professionalism and dedication of those locale instances make a difference for the integration of newcomers. I hope this conference, and this white paper, will spread this message and contribute to a successful integration.

Thank you for your attention. If there are any questions later on, I will be happy to reply.

