

**MIGRATION,
EQUALITY
& RACISM**



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MIGRATION, EQUALITY & RACISM

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Unity in Diversity: The Brussels Identity Glues Everyone Together

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Shared identities carry a great importance with regard to social cohesion: they offer us the feeling that we belong to a bigger whole, such as a group or culture. Decades of research have shown that such a feeling of connectedness to a bigger whole is key to our psychological well-being. This is true for people with and without a migration background. Yet research has especially emphasized its significance for people with a migration background, i.e. both first – and second – generation migrants. They have the possibility to construct their identity based on a feeling of connectedness to both the dominant group/culture of the country they inhabit and the ethnic culture of their country of origin. For a long time, migration and integration policies have held the view that maintaining both cultures is incompatible for identity construction. We now know that perceiving identities as unlayered is a serious misconception. Although differences do occur in the degree of connectedness to the ethnic or dominant culture, they do not rule each other out.

Interestingly, recent data show that young people living in Brussels, both those with and without a migration background, above all feel very connected to Brussels. The connection they feel with Brussels is deeper than their connections with Belgium, Flanders, Wallonia or any other country. We believe this has everything to do with the demographic composition of Brussels. After Dubai, Brussels is the second most superdiverse city in the world. From an ethnographical point of view, this means that there is no clear dominant ethnic group. In Brussels everyone is a ‘minority’, everyone is ‘the other.’ No majority or dominant group can force an identity on another, and therefore, a shared ‘umbrella identity’ is at everyone’s disposal. Everyone, regardless of one’s ethnic roots, can identify with Brussels.

The capital of Belgium, centered between Flanders and Wallonia, is home to a very young population of ‘Zinnekes.’ This is the nickname given to citizens who are

distinguished by a diversity of ethnic, cultural, social, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Historically, the term ‘Zinneke’ was given to street dogs that were thrown in the river Zenne, which is the only Belgian river that crosses all three regions of Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia. ‘Zinneke’ was used to label people in a somewhat pejorative sense by calling them a bastard with no clear, pure or plain origin. Zinnekes are opposed to ‘Ketjes’, the label of people whose ancestors were all born in Brussels. In the current modern context, the connotation of this label has adapted to the reality of a new superdiverse Brussels. In this new context, ‘Zinneke’ is no longer an insult, but rather a label that is worn with pride. A good example for this is the biennial Zinneke Parade that celebrates the diversity of Brusselians. Nowadays, Zinneke is a genuine Brussels symbol that stands for a Brussels identity marked by diversity and inclusion. This Brussels identity is carried with a certain pride by an extremely broad group of individuals, due to its non-exclusive connotation. It is precisely this inclusiveness that is an important factor in the construction of a collective identity, giving you a sense of belonging to a larger entity or group.

In two recent surveys¹ it became clear that Brussels indeed offers an identity with which many people can identify themselves. For Brusselians, the different layers available to be identified with are Belgium, Brussels, Flanders, Wallonia, and/or their country or countries of origin. Brusselians were asked how they identified themselves with the following question: ‘Indicate how attached you are to the following cities, villages, regions, and countries’. Young Brusselians with a migration background identify themselves in the first place with Brussels and feel only a subordinate attachment to Belgium, while their country of origin comes in third place. Among older Brusselians, a similar ranking holds for people with and without a migration background. However, in contrast to the young Brussels population with a migration background, the older generation’s identification with Belgium ranked above their identification with Brussels, while their country of origin again takes third place. It is remarkable, however, that Brusselians, both young and old, both with and without a migration background, only weakly identify with Wallonia and/or Flanders.

The tendency of young people with a migration background to identify primarily with Brussels illustrates that this city grants a sense of belonging that neither Belgium nor their country of origin seems to offer. How can this be explained? A lot of people with a migration background have a connection to their country of origin in the sense that they cling to some parts of the culture (such as listening to music, watching TV channels, eating typical food, ...) and maybe, every once in a while, make a return trip to reunite

with friends and/or family. While this connection is still apparent, it can be difficult for them to construct an identity based only on this connection. Often, citizens of their country of origin perceive them as different and, in turn, they may feel different. In addition, only a small part of their lives takes place in their country of origin, while they work, study, live etc in Brussels. Therefore, as a shared living environment for different groups, Brussels is much more tangible. But then why won't they identify with Belgium as a whole, Flanders or Wallonia?

This is where it becomes interesting. We argue that in Brussels people with a migration background are for once not made to feel they are in a minority. In Flanders, Wallonia or Belgium as a whole, they are often perceived and depicted as a minority group. When you are perceived and stigmatized on this ground, a common reaction is to identify more profoundly with the ethnic group of origin. It can even go as far as actively opposing any other form of identification. After all, why would you identify with a group that stigmatizes you?

In Brussels a distinction between 'us' versus 'them' is less likely to be made. Most Brusselians are Zinnekes and belong neither to the minority nor to the majority. Imposing a predisposed identity is impossible in Brussels, due to its myriad of cultures. Rather, Brussels is an open canvas that can be coloured and understood by everyone in a different way. Besides, in contrast to the Belgian, Flemish and Walloon identities, the Brussels identity cannot fall back on a (perhaps imaginary) common past. Brusselians from different cultures and ethnic groups do not really share a common history. The Brussels identity is rather based on a common present and future in a shared living environment that is characterized by diversity. Exactly within this diversity lies unity regarding identity formation. In Brussels the shared identity of the Zinnekes has been and is still created today in an organic, bottom-up way in which every citizen interprets and gives meaning to a shared identity.

What can we learn from the Brussels example? That inclusive identities are never predisposed or predefined. If Belgium, Wallonia and Flanders want to be inclusive and would like to have a shared identity, they could learn from the example of the Zinnekes in Brussels. Do not forget that the Zenne is the only river in Belgium that flows across the borders of Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia.

1 The Youth Research Platform's JOP-Scholenmonitor gathered data in 2018 among 1279 pupils from the 2nd and 3rd grade of all Dutch-speaking schools in Brussels. The BRUXODUS-survey, financed by INNOVIRIS, gathered data from 1900 18- to 75-year-olds ((former) Brusselians with and without a migration background) in 2019.