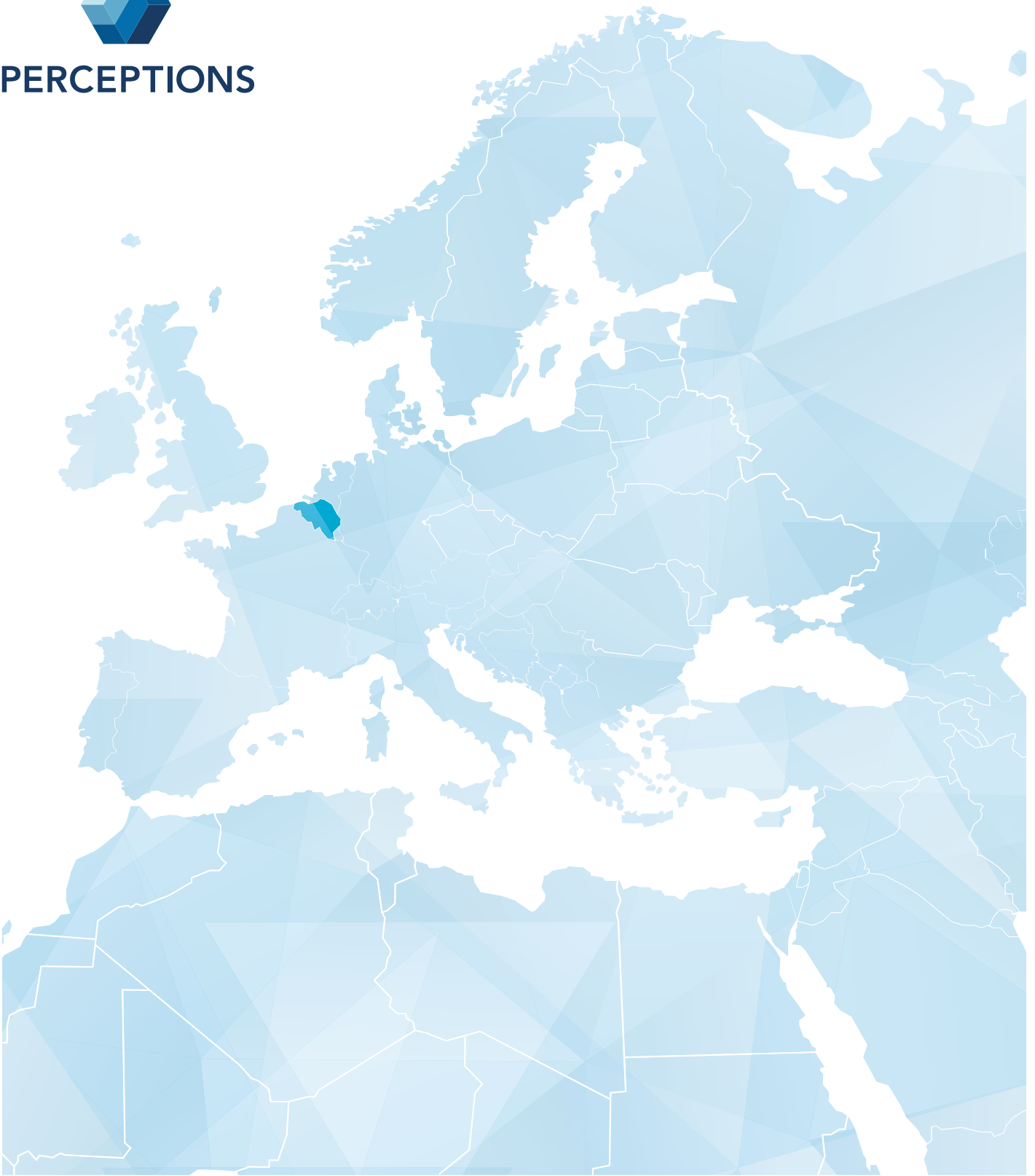




PERCEPTIONS



Belgium

PERCEPTIONS
Country Report

PERCEPTIONS RESEARCH:

Literature, studies, projects, stakeholders, solutions, tools and practices

DISCLAIMER:

Disclaimer: This report is based on desk-research conducted between 2019 and 2022 and covers major development between the period of 2015-2019. For more updated information on the country profile, please check the additional institutional links at the end of the document.



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a) Geographical map

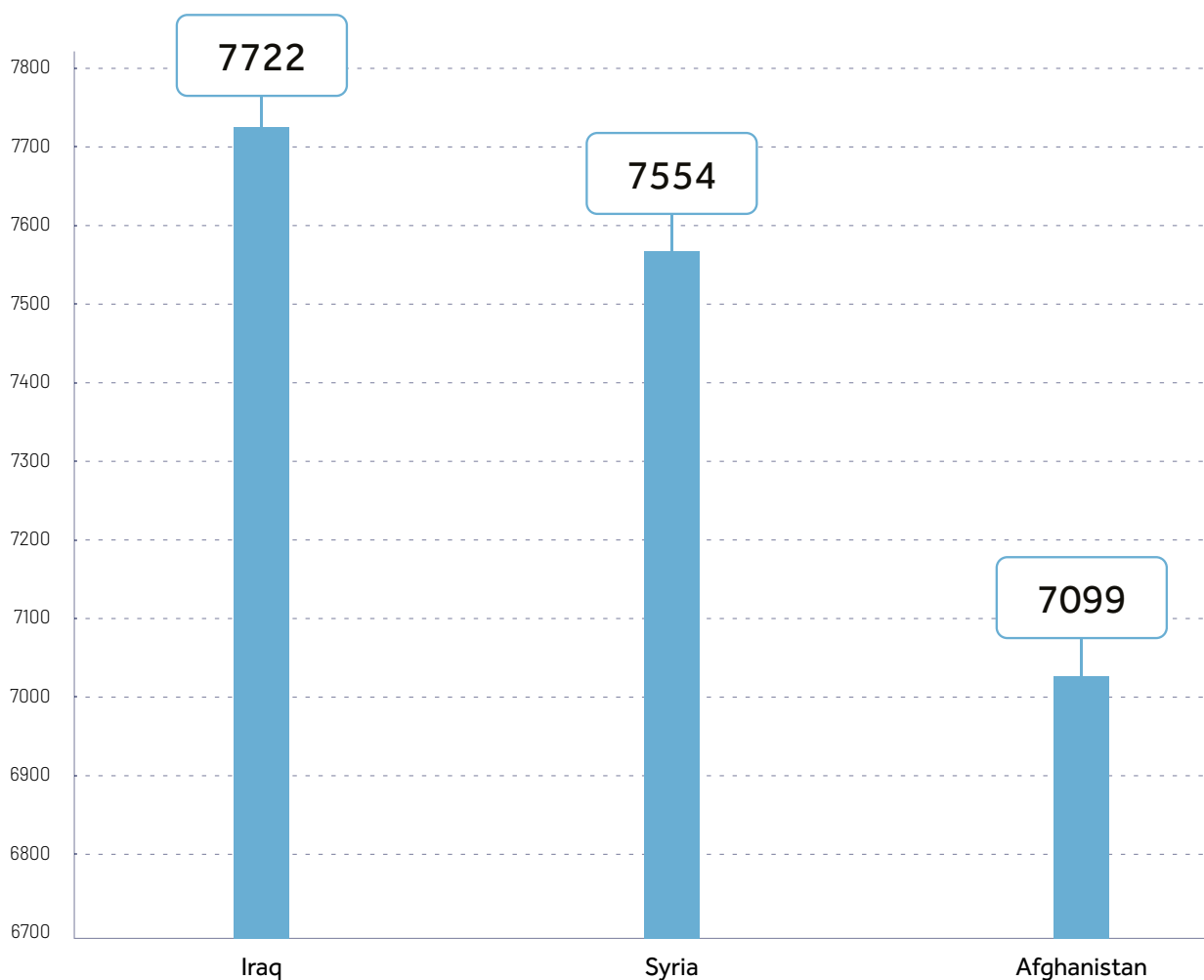


b) Short summary

Belgium is a federal state with a complex institutional structure in which policy responsibilities and decision-making powers are divided between governments at the federal level. Issues related to immigration and international protection are a federal responsibility, while integration is mainly a competence of the different communities. However, the federal state remains responsible for the entry to the territory and the right to reside in Belgium, as well as for issuing work permits for migrants with a temporary residence permit for reasons other than 'employment'. In 2015, Belgium saw a significant increase in the number of asylum applications (35,476 applications compared to 17,213 in 2015). These asylum applications mainly came from Iraqis (7,772), Syrians (7,554) and Afghans (7,099). More generally, like other European countries, Belgium has seen a surge of the extreme right as well as increases in xenophobia, islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment.

c) Facts & figures

Number of asylum applications per nationality in 2015



c) Full document

Institutional setting

Belgium is a federal state with a complex institutional structure in which policy responsibilities and decision-making powers are divided between governments at the federal level, the level of the three (territorial) regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital Region) and the level of the three (language) communities (Flemish community, French-speaking community and German-speaking community). Issues related to immigration and international protection are a federal responsibility, while integration is mainly a competence of the different communities. Economic migration used to be a shared responsibility between the federal state and the different regions but has been largely transferred to the regions and communities in 2014 as part of the sixth and most recent state reform (EMN Belgium, 2019). However, the federal state remains responsible for the entry to the territory and the right to reside in Belgium, as well as for issuing work permits for migrants with a temporary residence permit for reasons other than 'employment', e.g. in the case of asylum seekers (EMN Belgium, 2019). Issues related to border security are a federal responsibility and border controls are carried out by the federal police in cooperation with the border control department of the Immigration Office (ECRE, 2018). Belgium is part of the Schengen territory, and most people seeking international protection arrive in the country after so-called 'secondary movements' from another European country to which they arrived first (EMN Belgium, 2019). In this case, they are not subject to border controls when entering Belgium.

Short migration overview

In recent history, Belgium has been predominantly an immigration country or a 'country of destination'. Immigrants have come, and continue to come, mainly from neighbouring and other EU countries (Myria, 2019; Lafleur et al., 2019). However, significant groups of immigrants from outside the EU started arriving especially in the wake of World War II, when the state began to actively recruit workers from abroad to fill low-paid labour-market demands in the heavy industry and coal mine

sector (Lafleur et al., 2019; Geldof, 2016). At first, these so-called 'guest workers' mainly came from southern European countries. Later, in the 1960s, Belgium also began recruiting workers from outside the EU, mainly targeting Morocco and Turkey. While this labour migration was initially considered to be temporary, many ended up permanently settling in the country and became Belgian citizens. The economic recession of the 1970s resulted in an official 'migration stop', putting an end to the practice of 'guest workers'; however, immigration continued, mainly through family reunification and political asylum (Lafleur et al., 2019; Geldof, 2016). At the same time, Belgium's colonial policy of exploitation and segregation in what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (since the 1880s) and Rwanda and Burundi (after World War I) – which implicated forced displacement, abuses, and deaths of millions of people – did not involve active recruitment of its citizens, and their presence in Belgium remained rather limited until the 1980s and later (Lafleur, 2019; Demart, 2013). In the period 1980s–2000s, Belgium saw a rise in asylum seekers as a result of geopolitical conflicts and human rights violations in various regions and after the enlargement of the EU, immigration from Eastern European furthermore increased significantly (Geldof, 2016). Today, many people in Belgium, and especially in its larger cities, have 'roots in migration' with many different countries of origin. In Brussels, for instance, around two-thirds of the population has a migration background, while in the country's second-largest city (Antwerp) this is the case for almost half of its inhabitants (Geldof, 2016). At the same time, Belgium also stands out as a country in which migrants and people with a migration background face significant barriers in crucial life domains such as education and employment and are highly overrepresented in the un(der)employed statistics and have a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than the native population (OECD, 2010;

Key development since 2015

More generally, and similar to many other European countries, Belgium has seen & Piton, 2016). In 2015,

Belgium saw a significant increase in the number of asylum applications (35,476 applications compared to 17,213 in 2015). These asylum applications mainly came from Iraqis (7,772), Syrians (7,554) and Afghans (7,099) (CGVS, 2016). While Belgium saw the highest number of applications since the year 2000, asylum seekers still only represented a small part of immigrants entering the country each year (Burggraeve & Piton, 2016). In the years after 2015, asylum applications decreased again to 18,710 in 2016, slightly increasing to 19,688 in 2017, 22,565 in 2018 and 27,505 in 2019 (CGVS, 2019). This decrease was mainly as a result of more restrictive rules and legislation (e.g. the limitation of asylum registrations per day, dissuasion campaigns, etc.) (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2019). Of all decisions made in a given year, the percentage of applicants that received a positive decision (i.e. granting of refugee status or subsidiary protection) went from around 50 per cent between 2015 and 2018 (with a slight increase to 57.7% in 2016) to a mere 36.9 per cent in 2019 (CGVS, 2019). In recent years, the term 'transmigrant' – or 'transit migrant' – has also become part of the vocabulary politicians and the media use when talking about issues of migration and border control (de Massol de Rebetz, 2018). While this term has no legal meaning, 'transmigrants' mainly concern refugees from conflict areas in Africa and the Middle-East who want to go to the United Kingdom (for a variety of reasons) and do not apply for asylum in Belgium (EMN, 2019; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2019). Since the authorities claim no responsibility for refugees who do not apply for asylum in Belgium, they have no access to reception facilities and mostly end up living on the street in very precarious circumstances. It has been mainly NGOs and networks of local citizens that step in to provide these groups with food, clothing, health checks and legal advice (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2019). A surge of the extreme right as well as increases in xenophobia, islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment (Lafleur et al., 2019). The relatively high number - compared to other countries - of radicalised Belgian Muslims that left Belgium to fight in international conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and more recently the fear for their return, as well as the terrorist attacks of March 2016, also led to an increased focus on national security and have made the fight against radicalisation and terrorism a political priority (EMN, 2019).

For more information, see:

IOM Belgium:

<https://belgium.iom.int/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Belgium:

<https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en>

Ministry of Home Affairs Belgium:

<https://www.ibz.be/en>



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