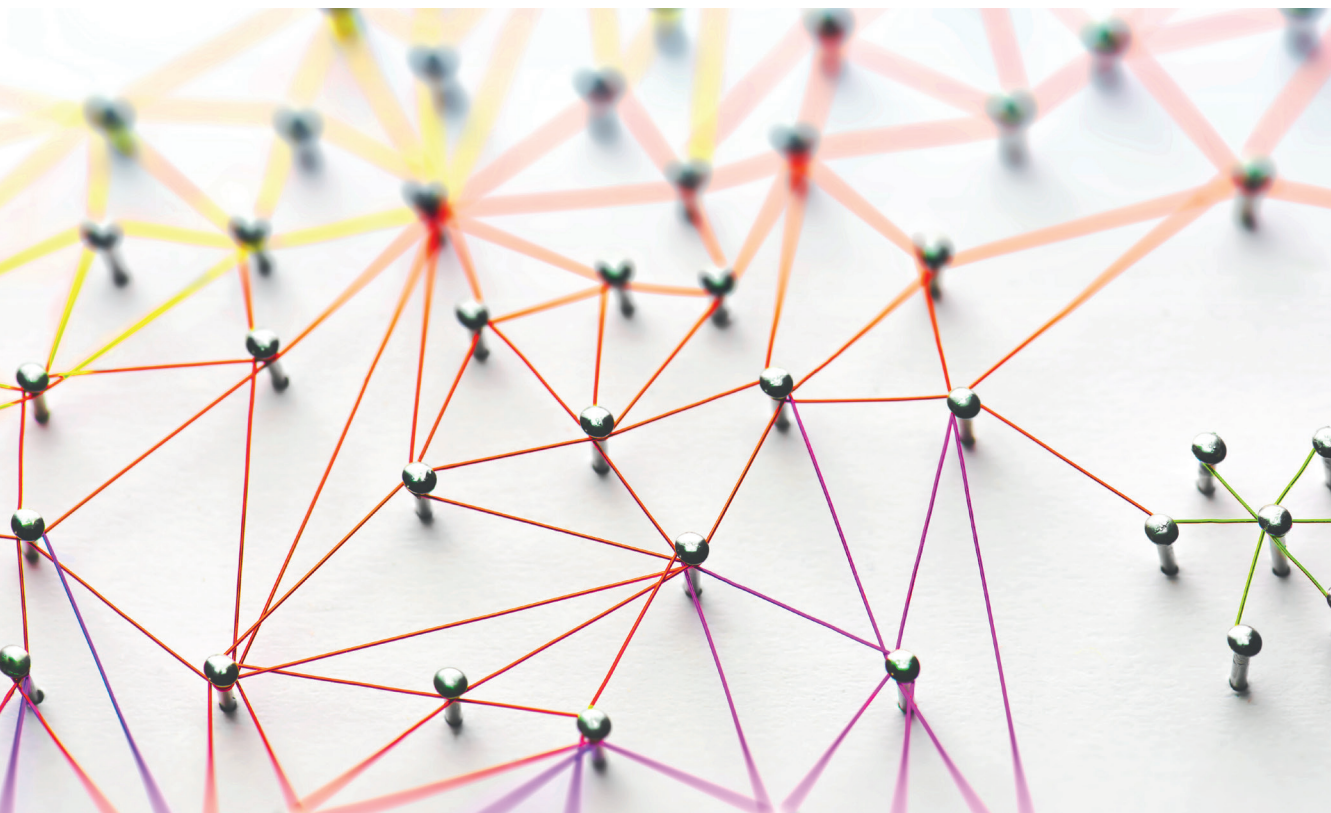




Asylum and Migration Overview

Belgium 2024

Published July 2025

The Belgian National Contact Point to the European Migration Network (EMN Belgium) is a multi-institutional entity composed of experts from the Immigration Office, the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), Myria – the Federal Migration Centre and Fedasil – the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. It is coordinated by the Federal Public Service Interior.

Editorial staff

Ruth Beeckmans, Océane Crabbé, Jan De Schutter, Bram Devos, Alexandra Lainé, Cléo Petrisse, Bieke Vens

Responsible publisher

Philippe Rosseel

EMN Belgium

Federal Public Service Interior
1 Rue de Louvain / Leuvenseweg 1
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

www.emnbelgium.be

LinkedIn: European Migration Network (EMN) Belgium



The European Migration Network (EMN) is a Europe-wide network providing information on migration and asylum. The EMN consists of National Contact Points (NCPs) in the EMN Member (EU Member States except Denmark) and Observer Countries (Norway, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Montenegro, Armenia, Serbia), the European Commission and the EMN Service Provider (ICF).

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

General acronyms

AMIF	EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EUROPOL	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Acronyms specific to the Belgian context¹

In text	English	Dutch	French
Agii	Agency for Integration and Civic Integration	Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering (AgII)	/
BOSA	FPS Policy and Support	FOD Beleid en Ondersteuning	SPF Stratégie et Appui
CALL	Council for Alien Law Litigation	Raad voor Vreemdelingenbetwistingen (RvV)	Conseil du Contentieux des Étrangers (CCE)
CGRS	Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons	Commissariaat-Generaal voor de Vluchtelingen en de Staatlozen (CGVS)	Commissariat Général aux Réfugiés et aux Apatrides (CGRA)
COCOF	French Community Commission	Franse Gemeenschap-commissie	Commission communautaire française
COCOM	Common Community Commission	Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie (GGC)	Commission communautaire commune
Fedasil	Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers	Federaal Agentschap voor de Opvang van Asielzoekers	Agence fédérale pour l'Accueil des Demandeurs d'Asile
FPS	Federal Public Service	Federale Overheidsdienst (FOD)	Service public fédéral (SPF)
Myria	Federal Migration Centre	Federaal Migratiecentrum	Centre fédéral Migration
NSSO	National Social Security Office	Rijksdienst voor Sociale Zekerheid (RSZ)	Office National de Sécurité Sociale (ONSS)
PCSW	Public Centre for Social Welfare	Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn (OCMW)	Centre Public d'Action sociale (CPAS)
SIIS	Social Information and Investigation Service	Sociale Inlichtingen- en Opsporingsdienst (SIOD)	Service d'Information et de Recherche Sociale (SIRS)

¹ Only the most used acronyms are listed.

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The Cabinet of the former Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, the Immigration Office, the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGVS/CGRA), the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), Myria – the Federal Migration Centre, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Belgium and Luxembourg, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Federal Public Service Interior, the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, the Federal Public Service Justice, the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue, the Social Intelligence and Investigation Service, the Federal Public Service Social Security, the Federal Police, the National Crisis Centre, Enabel – the Belgian agency for international cooperation, Unia – the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities, the Inter-departmental Coordination Unit for Action against Trafficking in and Smuggling of Human Beings, the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region, the Brussels-Capital Region, the German-speaking Community, the French Community, the Flemish Community, the Public Employment Services (VDAB, Forem, Actiris), the Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMW/CPAS), the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), the Union of Cities and Municipalities of Wallonia (UVCW), the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (AgII), International House Leuven, the Belgian Red Cross, CIRÉ, Medimmigrant, Nansen, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, Caritas International Belgium, the Hannah Arendt Institute, and the King Baudouin Foundation, DEI (Defense for Children International) ECPAT Belgium and the non-profit organisation Samilia.

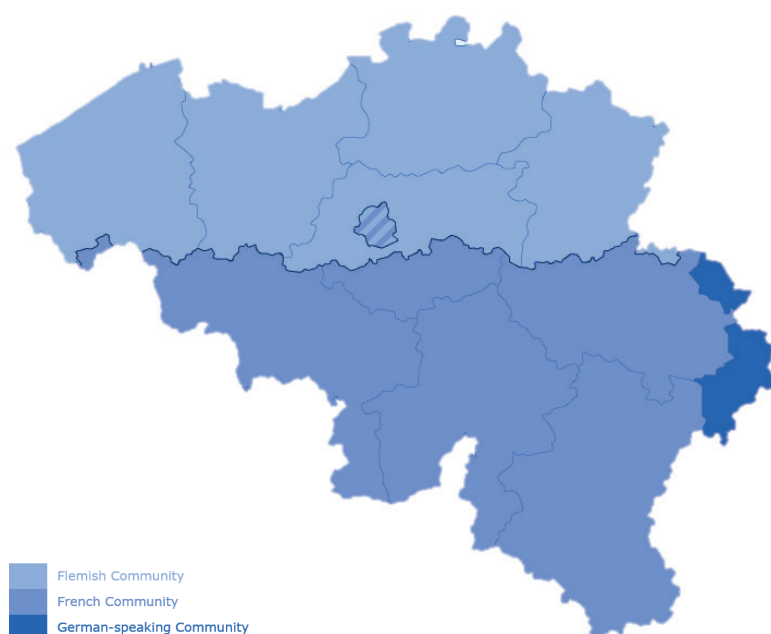
We would like to thank them for their valuable contribution.

OVERVIEW OF THE MIGRATION AND ASYLUM INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE IN BELGIUM

Belgium is a federal state, composed of Communities and Regions, each with their own set of competences:

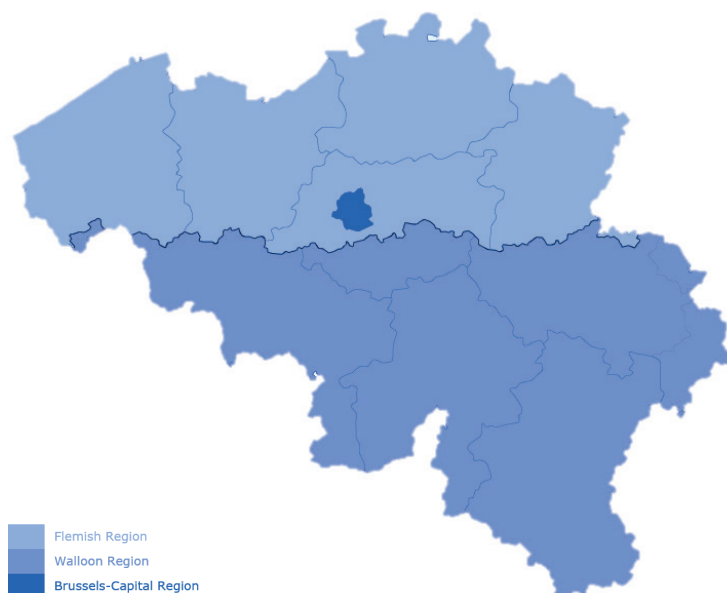
- **The federal government** has competences typically connected with matters of public interest: public finances, armed forces, judicial system, social security, foreign affairs, as well as substantial parts of public health and home affairs. Matters related to migration and asylum include access to and removal from the territory, border security, residence on the territory, international protection, reception, citizenship, etc.
- **The Communities** have competences typically connected with matters pertaining to the people: culture, education, the use of languages, social welfare, scientific research. There are three language-based Communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community, and the German-Speaking Community (**Map 1**). Matters related to migration include integration, access to education, language learning, etc.
- **The Regions** have competences typically connected with matters pertaining to the territory: economy, employment, agriculture, housing, energy, the environment, foreign trade, etc. There are three territory-based Regions (from north to south): the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region, and the Walloon Region (**Map 2**). Matters related to migration include access to the labour market, access to housing, etc.

Map 1: Communities



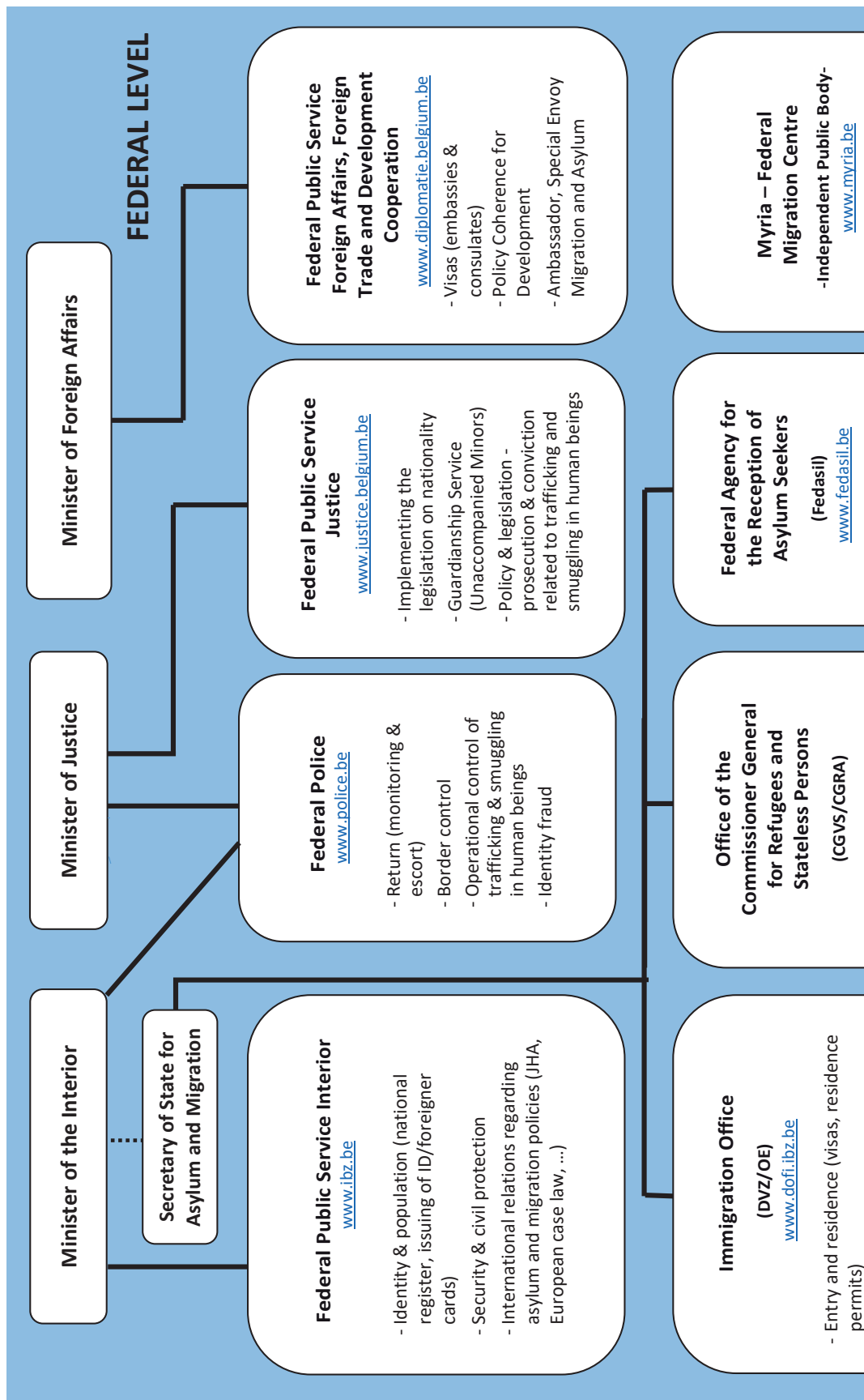
Source: Belgian federal government

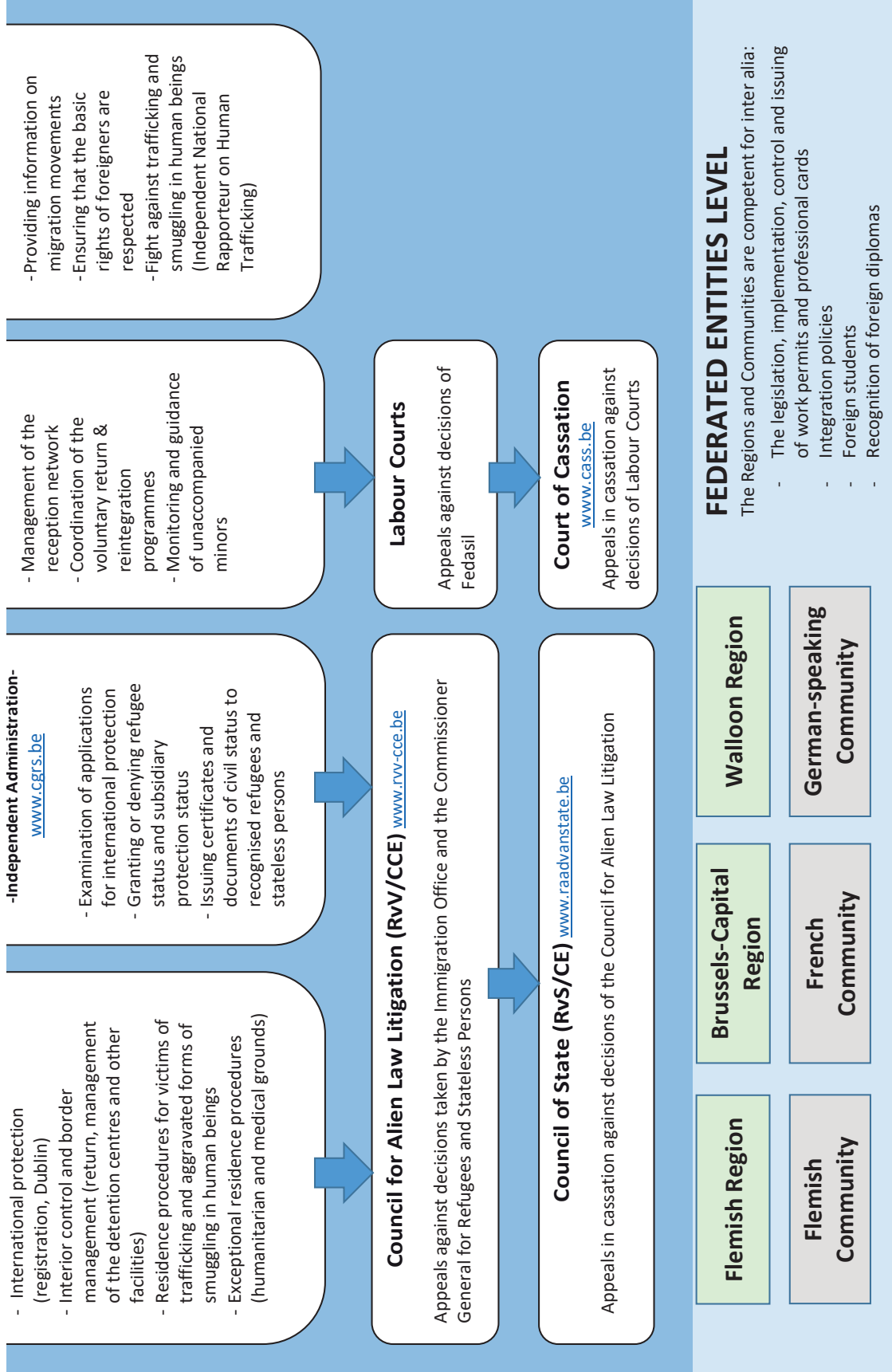
Map 2: Regions



Source: Belgian federal government

BELGIUM: institutional framework for immigration and asylum policies*





*Please note that this institutional chart provides an indicative overview of the asylum and migration system in Belgium. As such, it does not represent its complete structure.

Last update: June 2024



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Overarching asylum and migration developments

On 9 June 2024, Belgium held **federal and regional elections**. In January 2025, a new federal government appointed Anneleen Van Bossuyt as Minister of Asylum and Migration, replacing Nicole de Moor. De Moor's proposed Migration Code was not approved before the elections, and its future remains uncertain. On 1 May 2024, a **Chain Monitoring unit** was established to improve continuity, objectivity, and professionalism in migration oversight.



Legal migration

In 2024, all competent authorities have amended their cooperation agreement to include changes that **affect migrant workers in all regions**. The federal and regional authorities have also **transposed the EU Blue Card Directive** into Belgian legislation. Additionally, **all four federated entities adopted new legislation** regarding labour migration pursuing similar objectives, namely to streamline processes, reduce the administrative burden and ensure greater legal certainty for employers and responsible administrations, to combat abuse and introduce additional safeguards for foreign employees, and to address labour shortages and preserve or develop the economic attractiveness and competitiveness of the regions. A new law was adopted introducing a **number of important changes to family reunification** in Belgium. Labour mobility schemes were expanded through skills partnerships and entrepreneurial mobility, addressing labour market needs while fostering international cooperation.



International protection and reception

In 2024, 39 615 individuals **applied for international protection** in Belgium, an increase (by 11.6%) from the previous year. Despite an increase in the number of decisions taken in 2024 and extra staffing, the **workload** of the CGRS continued to increase. As part of its efforts to address the backlog and to increase efficiency, the CGRS completed the testing phase for the 'Tabula Rasa' project, and started implementing new practices based on its results. In parallel, the **saturation of the reception network** persisted throughout 2024, with a total of 2 809 persons still registered on a waiting list for reception at the end of the year. Fedasil took several measures to **increase reception capacity**. By the end of 2024, the total reception capacity reached the record capacity of 36 205 places, reflecting an increase of 562 places since the beginning of the year. Fedasil continued efforts to **facilitate access to the labour market and to accelerate the outflow** from the reception network of individuals accommodated in the reception centres, notably through the implementation of the new contribution system – a scheme whereby individuals with an income contribute to the cost of their reception in proportion to their earnings. It also maintained support for applicants outside the reception network. Despite these efforts, the shortage of reception places continued to have significant **legal and humanitarian**

consequences, with non-accommodated applicants for international protection often relying on humanitarian organisations to meet their basic needs.



Temporary protection and other measures in response to persons fleeing the war in Ukraine

By the end of 2024, 92 257 persons fleeing the war in Ukraine had received a **temporary protection status** in Belgium, with the number of new certificates issued remaining stable at around 1 000 monthly over the year. Most measures implemented in 2022 remained in place in 2024. With regards to **access to accommodation**, the Flemish Region continued its shift in strategy to facilitate a transition from public accommodation centres to the regular housing market. Additional measures were also taken to continue support beneficiaries' **access to education** and to **medical care** across the country.



Minors

In 2024, the Guardianship Service received **4 068 initial reports of unaccompanied minors**. In 2024, more than 14 000 young people under the age of 21 were residing in the reception network. Due to the decrease in the influx of unaccompanied minors and a low occupation rate for this type of reception place, the reception capacity for this group was reduced and redirected to accommodate another target group. Measures were also taken by the Guardianship Service to eliminate the backlog in the **appointment of guardians** by the end of 2024.



Integration and inclusion of migrants

The **Walloon Government adopted a thorough revision of its integration strategy**, aimed to increase the accessibility of the civic integration programme, establish greater equity between participants, professionalise integration services and guarantee the sustainability of their financing. The revision of the integration strategy also introduced new measures related to the labour market integration of third-country nationals through vocational training, including a **pilot project to facilitate access to the theoretical driving exam** for non-French speakers. The Flemish government advanced its policy on the recognition of skills by **facilitating the recognition of acquired experience**. It also **expanded its 'warm welcome' policy** by establishing new info-points in various provinces and launching an app to help newcomers navigate their way through their municipality. In the Brussels-Capital Region, the **bilingual civic integration programme** entered into force, introducing formal collaborations between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking entities in Brussels. The Brussels-Capital Region also **codified for the first time all existing legislation related to equality and non-discrimination**, an initiative that was welcomed in principle but met with important criticism in practice.



Citizenship and statelessness

In 2024, a law was adopted amending the Belgian Nationality Code to introduce **exemptions to meet certain language requirements for persons who are illiterate** and are applying for Belgian citizenship. The same law also introduced changes concerning the **loss of citizenship for minors**. A significant development took place concerning stateless persons in Belgium, with the adoption of a **new law that introduces a new administrative procedure to grant residence permits on the basis of statelessness**.



Borders, visa and Schengen

In 2024, Belgium made significant legal advancements in immigration and border management. A Royal Decree was issued to prepare for the **Entry/Exit System (EES)**, outlining national rules for authority access and reporting procedures in anticipation of the European EES implementation. The European Travel Information and Authorization System created the Belgian **ETIAS National Unit**, establishing the legal framework for the ETIAS under EU regulation. The Royal Decree on the Schengen Information System (SIS) further clarified the national access list and **procedures for SIS alerts**. These developments aligned with the European regulations aiming to enhance border security and migration management. Additionally, another law was adopted to expand **Frontex's competencies within national territory**, allowing Frontex members to be deployed at border controls and act as escorts during the forced return of foreigners. The FPS Foreign Affairs continued the **digitisation of visa procedures**, with diplomatic posts in Türkiye, Cameroon, Tunisia, and Lebanon. This digitisation process will be further expanded in 2025 to include all other Belgian diplomatic posts.



Irregular migration

In 2024, Belgium continued to serve as a transit country for migrants attempting to reach the United Kingdom, making this a priority for Belgian authorities. The **Belgian police intensified efforts to prevent irregular and dangerous sea crossings** involving small boats. In 2024, a total of 94 investigations into migrant smuggling by land or sea were launched, including 27 cases specifically related to small boats. These interceptions – whether involving vehicles on land or small boats at sea – often served as the starting point for broader investigations, sometimes leading to **coordinated actions at the international level**. Also in 2024, the Immigration Office and Enabel, the Belgian agency for international cooperation, completed their **awareness campaign in Guinea on the risks of dangerous migration**, which had been launched in November 2023.



Trafficking in human beings

In 2024, Belgium adopted two laws to strengthen the prevention and combatting of human trafficking. The first, effective since February, allows municipalities to conduct integrity checks in economic sectors suspected of links to organised crime, enabling refusal or withdrawal of operating permits for implicated establishments. The second, effective from December, sets a **regulatory framework for employing sex workers**, requiring employers to obtain prior authorisation under strict conditions, with non-compliance possibly leading to prosecution for pimping or trafficking. Special attention was given to combating the **sexual exploitation of children**, encouraging a police pilot project and integrating the issue into training for frontline professionals and youth education. Awareness-raising activities targeted diplomatic staff, the hospitality sector, and the general public to increase understanding of human trafficking. Belgium maintained cooperation within the EU and Benelux, exploring collaborations to leverage **new technologies** in the fight against trafficking, while actively participating in coordinated operations targeting trafficking networks. It also supported a project in Ukraine, where labour exploitation and trafficking risks are heightened among displaced persons at home and abroad.



Informing and guiding irregularly staying migrants towards long-term solutions

In 2024, Belgium reinforced its commitment to supporting irregularly staying migrants through new legislation, enhanced personalised support, and broader outreach. The Immigration Office strengthened the **Individual Case Management (ICAM) coaching**, providing customized individual guidance and steering persons in irregular stay toward sustainable solutions, including legal stay or voluntary return. Belgium also co-led the **Reaching Undocumented Migrants (RUM) Project** with France, supported by Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, and Switzerland. Implemented in collaboration with ICMPD's Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF), Fedasil, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), and the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI), the project focused on developing evidence-based outreach tools to better engage undocumented migrants in both Belgium and France. Additionally, **Fedasil's Info Point in Brussels** was expanded, providing support to over 11 000 people within one year. This model is now guiding the development of similar services in other Belgian cities.



Return and readmission

In 2024, Belgium implemented significant legal and operational reforms to enhance the management of both voluntary and forced return procedures. Fedasil expanded and strengthened its cooperation with national and EU stakeholders to promote voluntary return. It reinforced its engagement with the **European Reintegration Programme (EURP)** and co-chaired ICMPD's Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) alongside Sweden. Fedasil also continued to co-chair the RRF Technical Working Group on Reintegration & Development, fostering closer collaboration between migration and development actors to enhance support for returnees. In addition, it carried out several evaluation and observation missions to assess reintegration practices on the ground. With support from Fedasil and its partners, **3 371 voluntary returns** were facilitated in 2024. In the area of forced return, **new legislation was introduced in 2024 to make return procedures more effective**. It expands the group of authorised escorts, establishes a legal obligation for irregular migrants to cooperate with return procedures, formally recognises the ICAM programme as an alternative to detention and explicitly prohibits the detention of families with minor children. In total, the Immigration Office carried out **3 270 forced returns** in 2024, including 1 883 border returns and 90 transfers of convicted individuals to serve their sentences in their countries of origin.



Migration and development

In 2024, Belgium strengthened the link between migration and development through initiatives focused on **resilience, reintegration, diaspora engagement, and legal mobility**. Key actors including the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) of the Federal Public Service (FPS) Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Enabel, IOM Belgium and Luxembourg, and Fedasil, advanced projects supporting displaced populations, improving remittance systems, and enhancing the reintegration of returnees.



OVERARCHING ASYLUM AND MIGRATION DEVELOPMENTS

Federal and regional elections

On 9 June 2024, **Belgium held elections to renew the federal government and the four regional governments**: the Government of the German-speaking Community (formed 1 July 2024), the Walloon Government (formed 15 July 2024), the Flemish Government (formed 30 September 2024) and the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region. At the time of publication, the Brussels-Capital Region has yet to form a new government.

The federal government remained in caretaker mode until the end of 2024, meaning that it managed daily operations but could not actively pursue new policy initiatives or major reforms. Following the formation of a new federal government in January 2025, it was decided to appoint **Anneleen Van Bossuyt as the Minister of Asylum and Migration**, replacing Nicole de Moor in her position of Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration.

Reform of the asylum and migration legislative framework

In Belgium, the primary legislation governing migration and asylum is outlined in the Law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, settlement, and removal of foreign nationals (hereafter: Immigration Act).² Under the initiative of former Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Nicole de Moor, efforts have been made to replace existing legislation with a 'Code for controlled migration' (*Wetboek gecontroleerde migratie / Code de la migration contrôlée*), known as the '**Migration Code**'. This code aimed to replace both the Immigration Act and the Law of 12 January 2007 on the reception of applicants for international protection and certain categories of foreign nationals (hereafter: Reception Act).³

The Migration Code, presented by de Moor in January 2024, prior to the federal elections, was developed under the leadership of a dedicated committee. The development process included a comprehensive survey of 92 stakeholders and hearings with 34 speakers. Contributions were made by experts from academia, the judiciary, socio-economic organisations, and NGOs. However, the Code proposed by de Moor was not approved before the elections. The future of the text remains uncertain under the new government.

² *Loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers / Wet van 15 december 1980 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen*, <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/1980/12/15/1980121550/justel>, last accessed on 2 June 2024.

³ *Loi du 12 janvier 2007 sur l'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et de certaines autres catégories d'étrangers / Wet van 12 januari 2007 betreffende de opvang van asielzoekers en van bepaalde andere categorieën van vreemdelingen*, http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=fr&la=F&cn=2007011252&table_name=loi, last accessed on 2 June 2024.

Chain monitoring

Since March 2018, statistical data has been systematically collected from the asylum authorities, including the number of asylum applications, staffing levels, output of the asylum authorities, reception capacity, and occupancy rates within the reception network. Using this data, estimates were generated to estimate the evolution of workload at asylum services and the necessary reception capacity.

Until May 2024, the collection and simulation of this data were managed by the cabinet staff of the former Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration. However, to ensure continuity, enhance objectivity and quality of chain monitoring and simulations, and further professionalise the process, on 1 May 2024, **a Chain Monitoring unit was established within the FPS Home Affairs**. This new unit comprises the four organisations that are part of the asylum and migration chain: the Immigration Office, the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), the Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL), and the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum-Seekers (Fedasil). The creation of this unit aims to guarantee continuity, improve the objectivity and quality of chain monitoring, and enable more accurate estimates of the workload evolution at asylum services and the required reception capacity.

Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU

From 1 January to 30 June 2024, Belgium held for the 13th time the Presidency of the Council of the EU. In the area of asylum and migration, the Belgian Presidency aimed to **address all remaining legislative files** associated with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Belgian Presidency also took further discussions on return and reintegration, the future of the EU visa policy, legal migration, and the development of integrated border management.

Moreover, the Belgian Presidency strived to **strengthen the EU's actions in the external dimension of migration and asylum**. This entails preventing irregular departures to the Union, combatting migrant smuggling, enhancing border protection, improving the effectiveness of return, readmission and reintegration, developing legal migration opportunities, and helping to address the root causes of migration.

The Belgian Presidency launched discussions on **evidence-based policymaking, coordination, practical cooperation, and operational convergence** that remain key issues in migration and asylum management.

Activities organised under the framework of the Belgian Presidency are further detailed in the corresponding chapters of this report.⁴

⁴ These are highlighted in a yellow box and a magnifying icon "Focus on the Presidency".

Focus on the Presidency: EMN Belgium's Presidency Conference



On 25 and 26 June 2024, EMN Belgium, in collaboration with the CGRS, Fedasil, the Immigration Office, and Myria, organised a **high-level conference on “Operationalising the Pact on Migration and Asylum”**. The conference brought together 400 representatives and highlighted the opportunities and challenges associated with the Pact as well as the need and potential for partnerships in effectively implementing it. Key takeaways from the conference include:

- The high-level speakers provided insights into the extensive political negotiations and compromises that shaped the Pact and emphasised the strong political will to address the Pact's shortcomings through **collaboration with various stakeholders**.
- The European Commission presented the **Common Implementation Plan**, which provides a structured approach for EU Member States to adopt their National Implementation Plans by 12 December 2024, to **implement new legislation effectively by mid-2026**.
- Speakers emphasised the necessity for **shared responsibilities and the sustained evolution of solidarity mechanisms** amid challenging conditions, stressing the crucial role of political, legal, and financial support to ensure effective implementation.
- In the context of the **new border system**, the importance of **checks and balances** to ensure robust decision-making, evidence-based policy formulation, compliance with data protection regulations, and upholding human rights was emphasised.
- Comprehensive **contingency plans**, supported by essential resources, were highlighted as crucial for **effective preparedness for evolving migratory situations**, mitigating crisis risks, and enabling a prompt, efficient, and coordinated response during migration crises.
- **Key challenges related to fundamental rights** included detention practices, alternatives to detention, capacity-building to identify and address vulnerabilities, and ensuring access to remedies, appeals processes, and legal counsel despite resource constraints.



LEGAL MIGRATION

Since the sixth reform of the Belgian state in 2014, the competences related to the employment of foreign workers have been transferred to the federated entities: the [Flemish Region](#), the [Brussels-Capital Region](#), the [Walloon Region](#), and the [German-speaking Community](#). However, the regulations relating to access to employment based on the residence status of the persons concerned, as well as the rules relating to access to the territory, residence, establishment and removal of foreigners, remain the federal competence of the [Immigration Office](#). In 2024, all competent authorities have amended their cooperation agreement to include changes that affect migrant workers in all regions [\(1.1\)](#). The federal and regional authorities have also transposed the EU Blue Card Directive into Belgian legislation [\(1.2\)](#). Additionally, all four federated entities adopted new legislation regarding labour migration pursuing similar objectives [\(1.3\)](#). The main changes introduced by the new legislation can be broken down by category, namely highly-qualified workers and intra-corporate transferees [\(1.4\)](#), low- and medium-skilled workers [\(1.5\)](#), seasonal workers [\(1.6\)](#), other categories of migrant workers, including self-employed [\(1.7\)](#), and students [\(1.8\)](#). Third-country nationals authorised to stay and work in Belgium for more than 90 days have the right to benefit from family reunification [\(1.9\)](#). Finally, Belgium also implements initiatives to promote labour mobility, in the form of skills partnerships and mobility schemes [\(1.10\)](#).

1.1 Legislative changes affecting migrant workers in all regions

The federal government and the federated entities operate under a cooperation agreement for the coordination of policies for granting work permits and residence permits, as well as standards relating to the employment of foreign workers. In April 2024, [a new cooperation agreement entered into force](#) and introduces changes for various categories of migrant workers⁵:

⁵ Accord de coopération du 22 mars 2024 modifiant l'accord de coopération du 6 décembre 2018 entre l'Etat fédéral, la Région wallonne, la Région flamande, la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale et la Communauté germanophone portant exécution à l'accord de coopération du 2 février 2018 entre l'Etat fédéral, la Région wallonne, la Région flamande, la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale et la Communauté germanophone portant sur la coordination des politiques d'octroi d'autorisations de travail et d'octroi du permis de séjour, ainsi que les normes relatives à l'emploi et au séjour des travailleurs étrangers / Samenwerkingskoord van 22 maart 2024 tot wijziging van het Samenwerkingsakkoord van 6 december 2018 tussen de Federale Staat, het Waals Gewest, het Vlaamse Gewest, het Brussels-Hoofdstedelijk Gewest en de Duitstalige Gemeenschap houdende uitvoering van het samenwerkingsakkoord van 2 februari 2018 tussen de Federale Staat, het Waals Gewest, het Vlaamse Gewest, het Brussels-Hoofdstedelijk Gewest en de Duitstalige Gemeenschap met betrekking tot de coördinatie tussen het beleid inzake de toelatingen tot arbeid en het beleid inzake de verblijfsvergunningen en inzake de normen betreffende de tewerkstelling en het verblijf van buitenlandse arbeidskrachten, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-03-26&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-03-26&s_edition=&numac_search=2024002652&caller=&2024002652=&view_numac=2024002652fx2024002652n, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

- EU Blue Card holders, seasonal workers, Intra-corporate transferees (ICT), researchers, trainees and European volunteers⁶ can now **start working immediately upon arrival in Belgium**, provided they have completed visa formalities in the country of origin. Previously, they had to complete their administrative registration at the municipality first and obtain the 'annex 49' to be able to start working.
- The cooperation agreement also foresees **faster processing times** (90 days as opposed to 4 months, or 60 days in case of researchers). The deadline now includes the notification of the decision to the applicant, but the sanction previously applied for exceeding this time limit was removed. In the past, these categories of migrant workers received a positive single permit decision if the deadline to take a decision had passed. By removing the sanction, this is no longer the case and migrant workers will still need to await the final decision, even if the deadline has passed.
- **ICT and seasonal worker permits are excluded from the 90-days grace period** upon termination of the single permit. Most labour migrants are allowed to stay on the Belgian territory for 90 days upon termination of their work authorisation, particularly when the contract was terminated prematurely. This allows them to search for a new employer and potentially submit a new single permit application or gives time to make the necessary arrangements to leave. ICT permits and seasonal workers are now excluded from this arrangement and therefore need to leave the territory immediately upon termination.

On 1 May 2024, **the gross guaranteed average monthly minimum income (GMMI), applicable for all migrant workers in Belgium, was increased to € 2 070,48**. The GMMI applies as a general condition for obtaining a single or work permit if no specific wage condition applies, except for au pairs, trainees or volunteers. Before, this amount was € 1 994,18.

⁶ In practice, this policy is applied for all categories of migrant workers, including those with statuses that are not based on EU Directives.

Additionally, **the minimum salary thresholds for certain categories of migrant workers have been updated**. The table below (**Table 1**) shows the new minimum wages for any new or existing single or work permit.

Table 1: Minimum gross annual salary (in €) per category of migrant worker as per 1 January 2025

	Flemish Region ²	Walloon Region ³	Brussels-Capital Region ⁴ (monthly)	German-speaking Community ⁵
Highly-skilled workers	€ 48 912 or € 39 129,60 (for persons under 30, nurses and teachers)	€ 51 613 (or € 41 290 for persons under 30)	€ 3 704,44 (78%)	€ 51 180 during the first 4 years and € 85 388 in case of permanent employment
Executives	€ 78 259	€ 86 110	€ 6 647,20 (140%)	€ 85 388
European Blue Card	€ 63 586	€ 66 738 (or € 53 390 for persons with less than 3 years of experience)	€ 4 748 (100%)	€ 63 586
Professional athletes	€ 101 019 or € 50 509,50 (for trainers who do not have a professional athlete employment agreement)	€ 51 613 (or € 43 056 for trainers who do not have a professional athlete employment agreement)	€ 6 873,15	€ 88 320
Artists	€ 42 313	€ 43 056	€ 3 086,20 (65%)	€ 42 694
Intra-corporate transferees	€ 78 259 for ICT executives € 48 912 for ICT specialists € 48 912 for ICT trainees	€ 66 738 for ICT executives € 53 390 for ICT specialists € 33 370 for ICT trainees	€ 5 460,20 (115%) for ICT executives € 4 510,60 (95%) for ICT specialists € 2 611,40 (55%) for ICT trainees	€ 66 816 for ICT executives € 53 453 for ICT specialists € 33 409 for ICT trainees

The **Brussels-Capital Region** has drastically changed the calculation methods of applicable salary thresholds for single permits. Contrary to other regions, the salary thresholds in Brussels are now calculated monthly instead of yearly. Moreover, benefits in kind such as meal vouchers or group insurance premiums are no longer taken into account. To compensate, salary thresholds were slightly reduced. The average gross monthly salary in the Brussels Capital Region is the starting point of the calculations. For each single permit category, a percentage of the average monthly salary (currently € 4 748) is stipulated. The above changes are not applicable for professional athletes, where the threshold remains 8 times the salary as foreseen in the general labour legislations.

In the **Flemish Region**, teachers are included in the reduced salary thresholds for highly skilled employees. The reduced threshold was already applicable for young graduates (under 30 years old) and nurses. Additionally, the salary thresholds for other categories, including for EU Blue Card, have been revised.

The **Walloon Region** introduced lower salary thresholds for employees who are under 30 years of age or have less than 3 years of experience in EU Blue Card schemes. The salary threshold for professional athletes has also been revised, as well as the threshold for au pairs that is now indexed annually. Additionally, the Walloon Region now allows pro-rating of the salary thresholds according to the full-time equivalent worked by the employee. However, the salary can never be lower than the GMMI.

1.2 EU Blue Card holders

The federal and regional authorities have transposed the **EU Blue Card Directive 2021/1883** into Belgian legislation. Since April 2024, the EU Blue Card (**see definition**)² is **valid for at least 24 months** (as opposed to a minimum of 1 year in the past), or, if a shorter contract, for the duration of the contract plus 3 months. The minimum duration of an employment contract for an EU Blue Card has in all regions been reduced from 1 year to 6 months.

EU Blue Card

The residence permit bearing the term EU Blue Card entitling its holder to reside and work in the territory of an EU Member State under the terms of Directive 2021/1883 (Recast Blue Card Directive).

Moreover, information and communication technology managers or specialists can be exempted from the **requirement to have a diploma of higher education**, provided they can prove at least 3 years of relevant experience in the seven years preceding the application. The **German-speaking community** also allows 5 years of relevant experience to replace a diploma in other sectors.

Additionally, the **process to change employers** while on an EU Blue Card has been simplified. A change of employer is possible upon simple notification, provided that the new employer respects the conditions of the EU Blue Card, such as the salary threshold. In the past, this was only possible after 2 years.

During the first 12 months of employment, the new employment contract should be submitted to the competent labour authority, who can object within 30 days of the notification. The **Flemish Region** clarifies that this **notification** should be submitted within 15 days. The **Brussels-Capital Region** on the other hand only allows the transfer to take place after the objection period has passed. Before the permit expires, the new employer should still timely request a renewal.

EU Blue Card holders will only **lose their Blue Card due to unemployment** if they have been unemployed for at least 6 cumulative months (or 3 months if less than 2 years on an EU Blue Card). Exceptions are possible in case of fraud or misconduct by the employer. Similar to other regions, the **Walloon Region** now allows Blue Card holders to apply for a work authorisation of unlimited duration after 12 months of employment. Previously, this was 4 years.

The **conditions for intra-EU mobility** have also been made easier. EU Blue Card holders in another EU member state can request an EU Blue Card in Belgium after 12 months, where this was 18 months in the past. The application can be submitted in Belgium within 1 month of arrival. In the past, the application needed to be submitted from the previous EU Member State.

² All definitions provided throughout the report are taken from the European Migration Network's Asylum and Migration Glossary, version 10.0, last updated in December 2023. The Glossary is available online at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary_en.

Finally, both the **Flemish** and the **Walloon Region** now allow EU Blue Card holders to **conduct teaching activities** without an additional work authorisation.

1.3 Legislative changes at regional level

In 2024, new legislation regarding labour migration entered into force in all three regions (Walloon Region ⁸, Flemish Region ⁹ and Brussels-Capital Region ¹⁰) as well as the German-speaking Community ¹¹. These reforms pursued three main objectives, common across all regions: to streamline processes, reduce the administrative burden and ensure greater legal certainty for employers and responsible administrations, to combat abuse and introduce additional safeguards for foreign employees, and to address labour shortages and preserve or develop the economic attractiveness and competitiveness of the regions.

1.3.1 Procedural changes to single permit applications

Even though economic migration is regionalised, since 2021 requests for single permits **(see definition)** are introduced via the single online platform 'Working in Belgium'. Afterwards, they are transferred to the competent authorities: the regional authority gives the permission to work, while the Immigration Office gives the permission to enter the territory. In 2024, all three regions introduced important changes to the **processing of applications for single permits**.

Single permit

A residence permit issued by the authorities of an EU Member State after a single application procedure allowing a third-country national to reside legally in its territory for the purpose of work.

⁸ Arrêté du Gouvernement wallon du 6 juin 2024 relatif à l'admission au travail des travailleurs étrangers, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=24-08-12&numac=2024007847, last accessed 28 May 2025.

⁹ Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering van 8 maart 2024 tot wijziging van het besluit van de Vlaamse Regering van 7 december 2018 houdende uitvoering van de wet van 30 april 1999 betreffende de tewerkstelling van buitenlandse werknemers, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=nl&caller=summary&pub_date=2024-03-28&numac=2024002983%0D%0A, last accessed 28 May 2025.

¹⁰ Ordonnance du 1^{er} février 2024 relative à la migration économique / Ordonnantie van 1 februari 2024 betreffende economische migratie, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-06-19&dt=Ordonnance&pdd=2024-01-01&pdf=2024-06-19&htit=migration&choix1=et&choix-2=et&fr=f&nl=n&du=d&trier=promulgation&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-03-19&s_editie=&numac_search=2024001045&caller=list&2024001045=0&view_numac=2024001045fx2024005124fx2024005124n, last accessed 28 May 2025.

¹¹ Arrêté du Gouvernement germanophone du 14 décembre 2023 modifiant l'arrêté royal du 9 juin 1999 portant exécution la loi du 30 avril 1999 relative à l'occupation des travailleurs étrangers, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=24-03-20&numac=2024201295, last accessed 28 May 2025.

In the **Brussels-Capital Region**:

- Authorities will perform **additional checks on fraud, compliance with legal obligations and government finances** when treating single permit applications from companies that have been established less than 12 months earlier. Companies that have not yet started their economic or social activities but would like to hire a third-country national, need to prove that filling the vacancy is required to be able to start. These additional checks will also be performed in case of previous violations or an unclear description of the employment conditions.
- Applications need to include a **detailed list of documents**, per employment category. The authorities can, during the examination of a single permit application, consult any available data or conduct an on-site investigation at the employer's premises. The application will be declared inadmissible if it is not accompanied by all required documents (previously, the authorities sent a request for additional information in the case of incomplete applications).
- The obligation for employers to submit **annual compliance notifications** has been removed. Instead, authorities can now consult available data on their own initiative and check whether it corresponds with the terms of the work authorisation. The authorities can also conduct an on-site investigation. If the investigation shows that the conditions of the work authorisation are no longer met, or if the applicant has deliberately misled the authorities at the time of the application, the work authorisation can be revoked.
- **Stricter renewal deadlines** were introduced. Previously, the application for a renewal of a single permit needed to be submitted 2 months prior to the expiry date. However, in practice, it was possible to submit the renewal application after this deadline, up until the expiry date of the permit.

In the **Walloon Region**:

- **Additional refusal and revocation grounds** for single permits have been introduced. Not only can single permit applications be refused if the employer has been criminally or administratively sanctioned because of violations of economic, labour, immigration or scientific research regulations, but also if the employee's work authorisation was rejected or revoked in the same category in the year prior to the application (with no new elements) or if the foreseen salary is less favourable than for other employees who have the same function in the same company.

- A **decision on the renewal of a single permit application** needs to be taken within 30 days upon notification that the application is complete. If the administration fails to do so within the legal deadline, the work authorisation is considered to be granted. In case the previous authorisation expires during the examination period of the renewal application, a provisional work authorisation is granted, provided that the application is admissible and was submitted within the legal deadlines.
- The Walloon authorities have the possibility to **collectively exempt a certain category of employees from the labour market test** in case of a natural, health, military, industrial or social crisis. While a single permit application will still be required, more flexible conditions will apply.

In the **Flemish Region**:

- Employers now have the **legal obligation to notify the authorities within 15 calendar days** of any meaningful changes of the employment conditions, including termination of the employment agreement. Employers already had this obligation in the past, but the legislation now clarifies this obligation and establishes a deadline. On their end, the authorities will confirm within 15 calendar days whether the changes are acceptable under the existing permit, or a new permit needs to be requested.
- New **refusal and revocation grounds for single permits** have been introduced, notably in cases of incorrect or fraudulent information in the application, bankruptcy or unfavourable credit scores, low staff capacity, and infractions on social, tax or enterprise regulations, or not respecting the terms and conditions of the work authorisation.
- **Ministers of worship** now need to add proof to their application that they are not directly or indirectly remunerated by a foreign authority.

1.3.2 Increased flexibility and protection for foreign workers

The revised regional legislations introduce greater flexibility for foreign workers in order to diminish their dependence – and thereby potential cases of abuse – from their employer (**see also Box 1**).

In the **Brussels-Capital Region**, work authorisations of unlimited duration are **no longer tied to a single employer**. The migrant worker can now obtain a work authorisation of unlimited duration after 30 months of employment with a labour authorisation from the Brussels-Capital Region only in the 10 years of legal and uninterrupted stay in Belgium prior to the application. The previous duration of 4 years is still applicable for those who have not worked the entire 30-month period on a Brussels labour authorisation.

Similarly, in the **Walloon Region**, certain employees with a single permit are **now allowed to work for a different, additional, employer**, provided that the duration of this work is shorter than the main occupation. This allows third-country national workers with a single permit to have an extra income, without having to apply for an additional permit. Previously, this was never possible as a single permit holder was tied to a single employer. Additionally, employees who are eligible for a work authorisation of unlimited duration are now informed automatically when the employer applies for a single permit renewal application of limited duration. If the employee agrees, the authorities issue a single permit of unlimited duration instead of a single permit renewal of limited duration. Additionally, employment contracts for single permit purposes now need to contain mandatory paragraphs, confirming the commitment from the employer to cover travel expenses to Belgium and to pay for medical and pharmaceutical costs, including hospitalisation, until the (local) employee can benefit from health insurance. Lastly, the legislation now explicitly mentions that foreign workers need to receive a copy of every decision or communication that was sent to the employer. An automatic communication system is expected to be operational by 2027.

In the **Flemish Region**, single permit holders are now allowed to **work cumulatively for different employers**, provided that the activity for which the single permit was granted remains the main occupation and the employee works at least 0.8 FTE in the primary occupation. Foreign workers can now also benefit from increased flexibility when applying for a work authorisation of unlimited duration. To be eligible in Flanders for a single permit of unlimited duration, employees must have worked for 4 years with a single permit in the 5 years preceding the application. The new law now states that periods of incapacity for work due to illness, professional disease, occupational accidents or temporary unemployment (force majeure, bad weather, collective closure, strike or lock-out) count for the 4-year threshold.

Box 1: Sex work officially recognised as a profession

In 2022, Belgium reformed its sexual criminal law, decriminalizing certain forms of pimping and officially recognizing sex work as a legitimate profession. As of December 2024, sex workers can operate as self-employed individuals or employees, with full access to labour and social security protections. Specific safeguards are in place, including:

- Only adults (excluding students and flexible workers) can engage in sex work employment contracts;
- Consent is paramount – sex workers cannot be forced into acts and may refuse clients or acts without penalty;
- Workers may terminate their contracts without notice or compensation;

- Employers must take measures to ensure worker wellbeing (e.g., appointing a confidant).

To hire sex workers, employers must be recognised by authorities under strict conditions, such as being legally established in Belgium, having clean criminal records, and committing to respecting workers' rights. Operational requirements include:

- No outsourcing of employer responsibilities;
- Presence of a reference person during work hours;
- Alarm buttons in workrooms;
- Guaranteed access for health and professional support organisations.

Labour inspections are now permitted, though some regulatory details still await further legislation.

1.4 Highly qualified workers, including intra-corporate transferees

The revised legislation include developments to **allow work experience instead of a diploma** to prove the qualifications required for a position for highly qualified workers and intra-corporate transferees (**see definition**):

- The **Walloon Region** now allows **highly qualified workers** to demonstrate 3 years of relevant experience in the 7 years preceding the application to prove their required skill set instead of a diploma;
- Both the **Flemish** and the **Walloon Region** allow the same for **ICT managers or specialists** in information and communication technology ¹². Managers need to demonstrate their managerial position, while specialists need to demonstrate specialised knowledge. In the Flemish Region, relevant work experience of at least 3 years in the 7 years preceding the application is required, while there is no specific experience requirement in the Walloon Region.

Intra-corporate transferee

A third-country national subject to a temporary secondment from an undertaking established outside the territory of an EU Member State and to which the third-country national is bound by a work contract to an entity belonging to the undertaking or to the same group of undertakings which is established inside this territory.

¹² Partially implementing Directive 2014/66/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals in the framework of an intra-corporate transfer, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2014/66/oj/eng>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

Additionally, both the **Flemish** and the **Walloon Region** allow **highly qualified workers** to **conduct teaching activities** without an additional work authorisation. In the Walloon Region, this exemption is only in place after an initial period of 12 months on the work authorisation.

1.5 Low- and medium- skilled workers

Low- and medium- skilled occupations often face labour shortages on the local labour market. To identify and address this issue, each region publishes lists of shortage occupations, for which can be assumed that no suitable candidate can be found on the labour market. The procedure to obtain a work permit for these occupations is simplified, and employers are exempted from having to conduct a labour market test (**see definition**) before being able to recruit third-country nationals. Shortage occupation lists are compiled by regional public employment services (VDAB for the Flemish Region, Actiris for the Brussels-Capital Region, and Le Forem for the Walloon Region).

Labour market test

Mechanism that aims to ensure that migrant workers are only admitted after employers have unsuccessfully searched for national workers, EU citizens (in EU Member States this also means EEA workers) or legally residing third-country nationals with access to the labour market according to national legislation.

In 2024, the **Brussels-Capital Region** introduced a **shortage occupation list** for low- and medium-skilled jobs. Low-skilled professions that do not occur on the shortage occupation list can only qualify for a single permit application after a labour market test (so-called 'other' category). Employers need to use Actiris' recruitment services or publish a vacancy with the help of Actiris for at least 5 weeks in the year prior to the single permit application. Employers need to inform the authorities of the number of received applications and the reasons why these candidates were not accepted. Actiris will provide a substantial advice within 5 working days concerning the possibility to find a suitable employee on the labour market that would be able to satisfactorily and within a fair timeframe take up the position, possibly by undergoing appropriate vocational training. The advice is binding for the authorities in deciding on the work authorisation application.

In the **Walloon Region**, the new legislation provides a clear framework for the **labour market test single permit** (so-called 'other' category). This category already existed in theory, but applications were automatically denied in the past. Under the new regulations, the burden of proof lies with the employers who can submit any evidence to prove that there are no suitable candidates on the labour market. Authorities will take into account the specific nature of the function, the recruitment procedures and the employment location. Alternatively, a larger role can be attributed to Le Forem, who can accept an application if: (i) the employer has published a vacancy for at least 5 consecutive weeks in a period of one year prior to the application through Le Forem and no suitable candidates have ap-

plied; (ii) the employer has asked Le Forem to actively manage the vacancy and no suitable candidates have applied; or (iii) candidates have applied, but the employer and Le Forem reach the conclusion that none of them could satisfactorily fill the position. Additionally, in September 2024 the Walloon Region **updated their list** of professions that are eligible for a shortage occupation single permit application. The new list contains 73 professions (5 more than in 2023) and is valid from 1 October 2024 until 30 September 2025.¹³

In the **Flemish Region**, the **single permit process for medium- and low-skilled workers** has been reformed:

- The **eligibility criteria** for a single permit for low- or medium-skilled workers have been changed, for instance by specifying that low- and medium-skilled workers need to work at least 0.8 FTE to qualify for a single permit.
- Employers can now only recruit internationally for those professions that are identified by the VDAB in their annually published **list of bottleneck professions**. This list differs from the list of shortage occupations adopted by the Labour Minister, for which no labour market test is required.
- Authorities will verify more closely if there is a **match** between the vacancy and the profile of the applicant. Single permit applications for low- and medium-skilled functions now need to contain a detailed job and task description, as well as a resume with a full overview of any followed courses, professional experience and side activities.
- The revision of the shortage occupation list for single permit applications in the category 'medium-skilled shortage occupations') has been made **more flexible**. Previously, the list was revised after 2 years. Now, the list will be revised after maximum 2 years, to better adapt to the dynamics of the labour market.

¹³ Walloon Region, 'Liste des métiers en pénurie', <https://emploi.wallonie.be/home/travailleurs-etrangeurs/permis-de-travail/liste-des-metiers-en-penurie.html>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

1.6 Seasonal workers

Since 1 November 2024, citizens of the European Economic Area (EEA) who are performing seasonal work (**see definition**) in Belgium can benefit from a **simplified residence procedure**.¹⁴ The Belgian municipality can immediately upon arrival issue a residence document 'Annex 3septies', allowing the EEA seasonal worker to reside on the Belgian territory for the duration of the work. The residence document is valid until the end of the seasonal work. However, EEA seasonal workers are not registered in the civil registers and there are no residence checks.

Seasonal worker

A third-country national who retains their principal place of residence in a third country and stays legally and temporarily in the territory of an EU Member State to carry out an activity dependent on the passing of the seasons, under one or more fixed-term work contracts concluded directly between that third-country national and the employer established in that EU Member State.

The **German-speaking Community** and the **Walloon Region** have **reduced the maximum processing times** for all seasonal worker permits from 90 days to 60 days upon the notification that the application is complete, provided that the foreign national has worked at least once as a seasonal worker in Belgium during the past 5 years and respected all conditions. A decision on the renewal of the application is taken within 30 days upon notification that the application is complete.

The **Flemish Region** has **simplified the process to switch employers** for seasonal workers to a simple notification within 15 calendar days. For initial permit applications, employers need to have published a vacancy for at least 3 weeks in the period of 1 month preceding the application. Additionally, the Flemish legislation now explicitly provides that the employer needs to pay compensation to the seasonal worker if the work authorisation is revoked due to bankruptcy or infractions on social, tax, employment or immigration regulations. The compensation is at least equal to the salary the seasonal worker would receive and should cover all responsibilities of the employer if the work authorisation would not have been revoked.

¹⁴ Arrêté royal du 20 octobre 2024 modifiant l'arrêté royal du 8 octobre 1981 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers, en ce qui concerne l'engagement de prise en charge dans le cadre du court séjour, le citoyen de l'Union dans le cadre d'un travail saisonnier ou d'études, et la correction d'annexes / Koninklijk besluit van 20 oktober 2024 tot wijziging van het koninklijk besluit van 8 oktober 1981 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen, wat betreft de verbintenis tot tenlasteneming bij kort verblijf, de Unieburger in seizoenarbeid of studie en de correctie van bijlagen, https://etaamb.openjustice.be/fr/arrete-royal-du-20-octobre-2024_n2024009728.html, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

1.7 Other categories of remunerated workers

In the **Brussels-Capital Region**, a work permit is required for all foreign nationals working in a fully **remote position** for a company located in Brussels, regardless of the location of the employee. This was already the case for third-country nationals performing remote employment activities in Belgium, regardless of the location of the employer.

Additionally, **self-employed workers** can no longer be appointed as directors of existing companies without obtaining an authorisation (in the form of a 'professional card') first. Similar to the arrangement for remote workers, this also applies if the individuals are not (yet) in Belgium. The authorities also introduced new, transparent criteria to grant, extend, refuse or revoke professional cards. Every professional card application should demonstrate the importance of the intended self-employed activities for the economy or development of the Brussels-Capital Region. The revised legislation also introduces a list of mandatory documents for a professional card application, including a detailed business plan and projected revenues. Regarding renewals of professional cards, the authorities have introduced new criteria to assess the viability and economic contribution of the activities. Lastly, additional refusal and revocation grounds for professional cards have been introduced, including instances of criminal or administrative violations, lack of sufficient financial means for the applicant, or the presence of social or tax debts.

Changes were also introduced with regard to **short-term work authorisations** (less than 90 days). In the **Walloon Region**, employers can now request a short-term work authorisation to perform professional activities in Belgium for maximum 90 days in a period of 180 days. In the past, these short-term work authorisations were only approved for one consecutive period of maximum 90 days. If the employee would not use these full 90 days but needed to come back later, a new work authorisation was required. The revised legislation introduces the possibility for these 90 days to be spread in time, without exceeding a maximum period of 180 days. Additionally, new work permit exemptions are put in place for short-term work, including for seconded employees to test prototypes, certain artists, sales or marketing activities, exploring business opportunities, and researchers.

Short-term work permit exemptions have also been expanded in the **Flemish Region**. Foreign workers coming to Belgium for maximum 90 days to negotiate business agreements, sales or marketing activities, explore business opportunities, attend or conduct training courses, translate and interpret, or tourism personnel, no longer need a work authorisation. Residence permits or visa may still be required.

Finally, the **Walloon authorities** have extended the labour authorisation scheme for ministers of worship to **delegates of non-confessional philosophical organisations that are recognised by the federal authorities**. Additionally, they now allow **teachers** to still obtain a renewal of their single permit if their employment is interrupted by summer holidays. Both school and academic holidays are now considered to be consecutive employment. Moreover, a new work authorisation was introduced for teachers that will teach foreign languages or culture in the Walloon Region in the context of a cooperation agreement with a foreign state or institution. Lastly, **seconded employees** are now eligible for a single permit based on an international agreement. Previously, this option only existed for local employees.

1.8 Students

The **minimum available financial means** for third-country students have been indexed. For the academic year 2024-2025, students need to prove a monthly available amount of € 803 net to be able to obtain a student visa in Belgium. This was € 789 for the academic year 2023-2024.

The authorities have announced that they accept bank guarantees as **proof of these sufficient financial means**. Before July 2024, students could only prove sufficient financial means through a scholarship or loan from the education institution or Belgian authority, a guarantor residing legally in Belgium, or a blocked bank account, managed by the education institution, with a minimum available amount of € 9 636 (12 x € 803). Since July 2024, authorities also accept a bank guarantee, holding an available amount of € 9 636. The guarantee needs to have been obtained from a financial institution that specialises in blocked bank accounts for students. In practice, only bank guarantees from the institution 'Studely' are accepted.

1.9 Family reunification

In March 2024, a new law was adopted introducing a number of important changes to family reunification in Belgium.¹⁵

First, in order to avoid so-called 'cascade' family reunification – by which family members who have obtained residence based on family reunification are then joined by *their* family members, and so forth – the current legislative framework in Belgium foresees that the foreigner who is being joined and who has obtained

¹⁵ Law of 10 March 2024 amending the Immigration Act on the right to family reunification (Loi du 10 mars 2024 modifiant la loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers en matière de droit au regroupement familial / Wet van 10 maart 2024 tot wijziging van de wet van 15 december 1980 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen inzake het recht op gezinshereniging), https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=fr&sum_date=2024-08-22&lg_txt=f&caller=sum&s_editie=1&2024005947=2&numac_search=2024005947&view_numac, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

residence on the basis of family reunification as a spouse or partner, can only be joined by a new spouse or partner after a regular stay of at least two years.

The new law of March 2024 **extends this cascade restriction** to the third-party spouse or partner of:

- A third-country national with limited or unlimited residence rights;
- A person with international protection or residence due to statelessness;
- A beneficiary of temporary protection;
- Static or mobile Belgian citizens;
- EU citizens, or;
- “other family members” of EU citizens.

The impact of cascading is limited, as the family member who has obtained a right of residence in Belgium in the capacity of spouse or partner must continue to meet the conditions for family reunification during the first five years. If the relative divorces or starts a relationship with another partner (whom he then wants to bring over with family reunification), those conditions are no longer met and the Immigration Office can terminate the residence rights. Only if the family member can retain his right of residence on the basis of an exception during the first two years of his residence (e.g. in the case of domestic violence), can a cascade restriction be effective.

Secondly, the new law strengthens **the conditions for family reunification for parents of minor Belgian children** by specifying that the parent must be “actually taking care” of the child (**see also Box 2**)¹⁶. According to the Explanatory Memorandum, “actual care” means providing essential day-to-day care and material support for a child living in Belgium. This must go beyond minimal involvement and includes using financial resources to actively support the child, replacing the earlier requirement of financial dependency. When the parent does not have the actual care of the child, the Immigration Office will examine a possible relationship of dependency between the minor Belgian and the parent.

¹⁶ References in Box 2:

⁽¹⁾ Constitutional Court, ruling nr 131/2024, 21 November 2024.

Box 2: Constitutional Court rules on proof of identity for parents of a minor Belgian child

According to Article 40ter of the Immigration Act, the parent applying for family reunification with a minor Belgian child can only prove their identity with a valid identity document.

On 21 November 2024, the Constitutional Court ruled that this provision violates Articles 10, 11, 22 and 22bis of the Constitution, insofar as it does not allow an alternative proof of identity for parents of a minor Belgian child.

⁽¹⁾ According to the Court, **the impossibility of proving identity by other means has disproportionate consequences with regard to the right to respect for private and family life.** In this sense, the absence of alternatives to provide proof of identity does not respect the higher interest of the Belgian minor child that opens the right to family reunification.

Similar conditions now apply to EU students and their spouses or partners, who must exercise **parental authority over their child** to open a right to family reunification. EU students must also prove that they have **sufficient means of subsistence and health insurance** for their family members, to avoid burdening Belgium's social welfare system. Until now, EU students did not have to prove their financial means in advance, although the Immigration Office could terminate the residence rights if it was subsequently found that the family constituted an unreasonable burden for social assistance. In practice, a simple declaration of honour is sufficient, however the Immigration Office can terminate the residence rights of both the student and/or their family members if they no longer meet those requirements.

Thirdly, the law clarifies the conditions for **family reunification with Belgian citizens having used their freedom of movement**. Classic family members and 'other relatives' of a Belgian who actually resided in another EU Member State on the basis of Article 21 TFEU and subsequently return to Belgium, are subject to the same rules on family reunification as those applicable to family members of an EU citizen. The new legislation now clarifies that this more flexible family reunification scheme is only possible if family life was established or maintained while the Belgian and their family member lived together in another EU country, if the family member joins or accompanies the Belgian to Belgium, and if their family life continued until entering Belgium or submitting the reunification application. If one or more of these conditions are not met, the family member falls under the rules on family reunification with a 'static' Belgian.

Finally, the new law introduces a **new basis for termination of residence rights of "other family members" of an EU citizen** who are dependents or part of the EU citizen's family in the country of origin. The Immigration Office can now terminate the residence rights of this group within the first five years if they are no longer dependents or part of the EU citizen's family. Furthermore,

the Immigration Office can terminate the residence rights of “other family members” with serious health problems during the first five years of residence if (i) the EU citizen no longer bears the personal care of the family member, (ii) the family member no longer has serious health problems, or (iii) the family member no longer needs the EU citizen’s personal care.

1.10 Labour mobility

In 2024, Belgium continued to develop legal pathways through labour mobility and temporary migration. These initiatives aim to respond to labour market needs while ensuring skills development and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Enabel, the Belgian agency for international cooperation, continued to operate its THAMM project, which stands for ‘Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa’, which runs until March 2025. The project is a mobility initiative between Morocco, Tunisia and Belgium based on the concept of ‘Global Skills Partnership’. It aims to promote mutually beneficial labour mobility through legal pathways. The project focused on identifying common labour market needs, aligning curricula, matching international talents with employers, and providing pre- and post-arrival support for migrants. In total, 148 Moroccan and Tunisian talents were recruited in shortage occupations by Belgian, Moroccan and Tunisian companies. Among these talents, 30 Moroccan and Tunisian talents were recruited by Belgian companies. Fedasil assists Enabel in the THAMM project by setting up pre-departure cultural and practical orientation training (BELCO). Both agencies collaborate closely through a framework agreement for shared expertise and implementation since 2018, thereby facilitating in the context of THAMM crucial pre- and –post mobility support, improving the preparation and integration of professionals from Morocco and Tunisia, and strengthening institutional cooperation with THAMM’s Global Skills Partnership model.

Building on the THAMM experience, a new initiative was launched to address a critical sectoral labour shortage. In October 2024, Enabel launched an additional **Global Skills Partnership, this time in the care sector (‘GSP-Care’)**.¹⁷ Funded by the EU’s Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) with support from ICMPD, this project seeks to address labour shortages in Belgium’s and Morocco’s care sectors. This initiative tests a Global Skills Partnership between Belgium and Morocco, aiming to provide secure employment opportunities for Moroccan care professionals and help both countries meet their care workforce needs.

¹⁷ Enabel, ‘The Global Skills Partnership serving talents in the care sector’, <https://open.enabel.be/en/MAR/2800/p/the-global-skills-partnership-serving-talents-in-the-care-sector-la-gsp-au-service-des-talents-dans-le-secteur-des-soins.html>, last accessed on 26 May 2025.

Short-term mobility schemes continued to play a key role in promoting entrepreneurial collaboration between Belgium and its partner countries. In this framework, Enabel further advanced its Projects for Entrepreneurial Mobility (PEM), supporting initiatives that foster cross-border business partnerships and entrepreneurial exchange. In 2024, **PEM projects made notable progress in fostering partnerships through short-term mobility schemes:**

- The 'PEM WECCO' project in Senegal established over 30 business partnerships between Senegalese and Belgian small and medium-sized enterprises in sectors such as sustainable construction, health, water, and education.¹⁸ More than 50 Senegalese entrepreneurs have benefited from short-term mobility schemes. PEM WECCO entered its final year of implementation, which provided an opportunity to assess the outcomes of entrepreneurial mobility on economic partnership as well as the governance of migration between Senegal and Belgium.
- The 'PEM N'Zassa' project in Côte d'Ivoire facilitated short-term mobility for 35 Ivorian business operators, connecting them with European counterparts to share experiences and enhance their business ventures in sectors such as the agrifood industry, green economy, the digital sector or Cultural and Creative Industries.¹⁹ This project can be seen as a demonstration of the value of sector-based mobility schemes as well as the potential for private investments through international partnerships and short-term mobility (e.g. around € 2 million generated through financial partnerships for cocoa cooperatives).

The PEM projects were implemented in cooperation with a wide range of national actors in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as Belgian actors (FPS Interior, Fedasil, Flanders Investment and Trade, the Wallonia Export and Investment Agency, Hub.Brussels, and AFFORD Europe). Through these initiatives, Enabel continued to apply the Global Skills Partnership approach, exploring new pathways for regular labour mobility. The aim was to connect entrepreneurs visiting Belgium on business visas, promoting short-term mobility strategies that foster business partnerships and strengthen cross-border economic networks.

¹⁸ Migration Partnership Facility, 'Pilot project for business mobility between Belgium and Senegal (PEM-WECCO)', <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/27-pilot-project-for-business-mobility-between-belgium-and-senegal-pem-wecco>, last accessed on 26 May 2025.

¹⁹ Enabel, 'Human mobility – Project for Entrepreneurial Mobility between Ivory Coast and Belgium', <https://open.enabel.be/en/CIV/2516/p/human-mobility-project-for-entrepreneurial-mobility-between-ivory-coast-and-belgium.html>, last accessed on 2 June 2023.

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ²⁰



- Inform on Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection
- Ad Hoc Query on personal and family links residence permit
- Ad Hoc Query on recognition of documents in unregulated professions
- Ad Hoc Query on including time of absence from the territory and no valid residence permit into long-term residence
- Ad Hoc Query on recognition of third-country qualifications for the profession of doctor with basic medical training
- Ad Hoc Query on systematic post-decision monitoring of valid residence permits
- Ad Hoc Query on access to the labour market for third-country nationals during their single permit issuance waiting period
- Ad Hoc Query on intra-EU mobility for international students
- Ad Hoc Query on family reunification for third-country national migrants
- Ad Hoc Query on posted workers
- Ad Hoc Query on labour market tests
- Ad Hoc Query on fees paid by third-country nationals for granting residence permits
- Ad Hoc Query on employment and recruitment agencies
- Ad Hoc Query on pre-requisites to residence permits
- Ad Hoc Query on visas and the right to work
- Ad Hoc Query on family reunification and the use of “public order”
- Ad Hoc Query on forged documents for the acquisition of a digital nomad residence permit
- Ad Hoc Query on language proficiency requirements for family reunification and pre-entry language tests

²⁰ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION AND RECEPTION

In Belgium, the process of applying for international protection (2.1) involves three key governmental instances, each with different responsibilities and intervening at different stages of the process:

- The **Immigration Office**, which manages access to, removal from, and residence and settlement on the Belgian territory, is responsible for the registration of applications for international protection. It also decides on the application of the Dublin Regulation.
- Applications for international protection, subsequent applications and applications for international protection for which Belgium is responsible under the Dublin Regulation, are transferred to the **Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS)** for examination. The CGRS is an independent federal administration exclusively responsible for the first-instance procedure in terms of examining and granting, refusing or withdrawing refugee and/or subsidiary protection.
- Appeals against a decision made by the Immigration Office and the CGRS are handled by the **Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL)**, an administrative court.

In Belgium, applicants for international protection are entitled to material reception conditions during the entire period of their asylum procedure (2.2). Reception is organised in open reception facilities, managed by the **Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil)** or one of its reception partners.²¹ Specific measures are in place to identify and support vulnerable individuals both during the asylum procedure and while they are in reception (2.3).

2.1 International protection

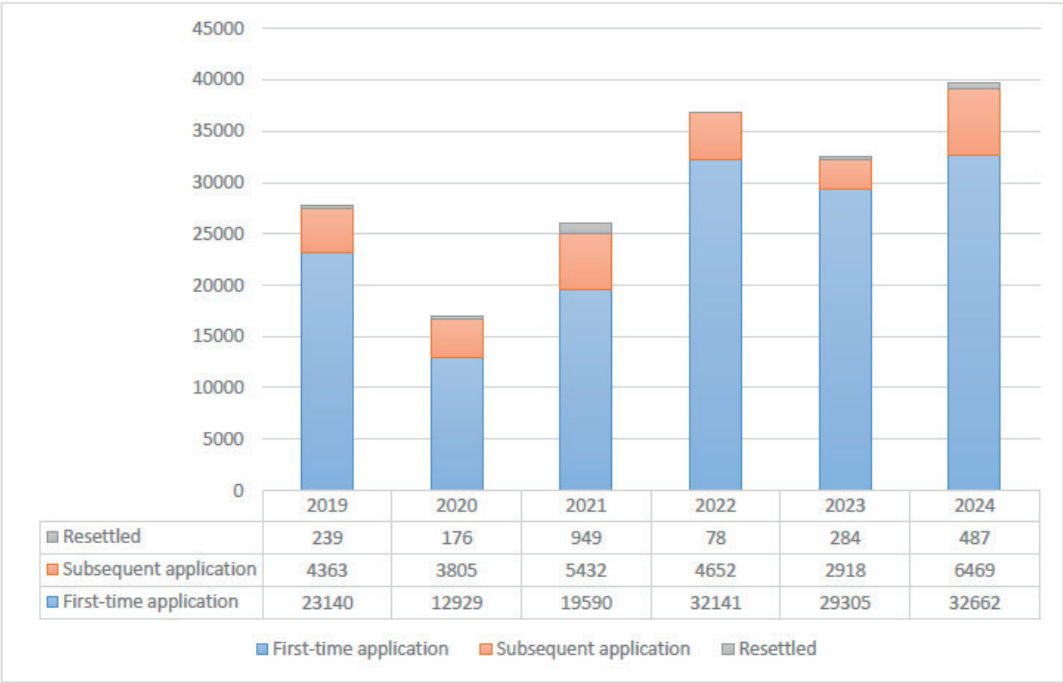
Belgian asylum authorities are under increasing pressure due to the steadily rising number of applicants for international protection (2.1.1). Political developments in certain parts of the world led to some changes in the issuance of decisions for the regions concerned (2.1.2). Despite an overall increase in the number of decisions taken in 2024 compared to previous years, the workload of the CGRS continued to increase due to the high influx. Consequently, the CGRS was unable to reduce the existing backlog of applications, which increased the pressure on the reception system. In response, the CGRS continued to explore new working methods to manage their work more efficiently (2.1.3). Furthermore, Belgium welcomed 487 refugees through its resettlement programme in 2024, as well as applicants for international protection who arrived via relocation (2.1.4).

²¹ Fedasil manages the reception network but also entrusts the organisation of some reception places to third parties (e.g. the Belgian Red Cross or the Flemish Red Cross).

1.1.1 Key statistics on international protection ²²

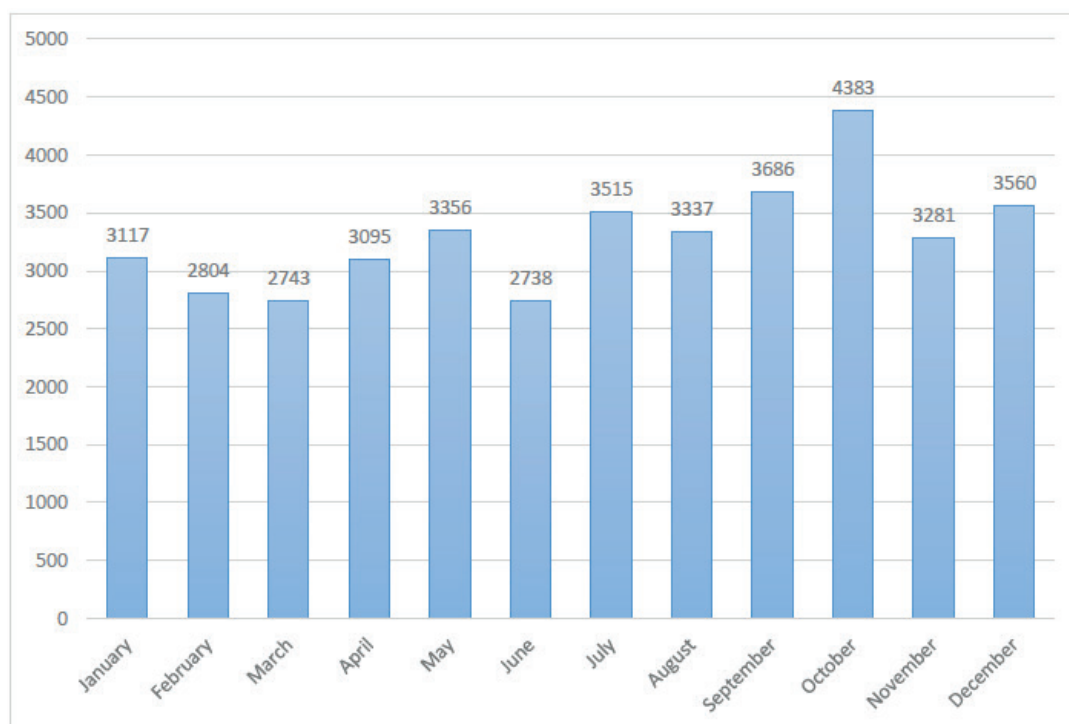
The number of applications for international protection rose to 39 615 individuals in 2024, marking a 11.6% increase from 2023 (when 35 507 applications were lodged) and a 7.2% rise from 2022 (see Graph 1). Throughout 2024, the monthly number of applicants consistently exceeded 3 000, with a notable peak in October reaching 4 383 individuals (see Graph 2).

Graph 1: Applications for international protection between 2019 and 2024



²² All statistics on international protection are derived from the CGRS. More statistics are available on their website at: <https://www.cgrs.be/en/figures>.

Graph 2: Total number of applications for international protection lodged in 2024 (first and subsequent), by month



Other key figures on applications for international protection in 2024 include:

- The proportion of **subsequent applications** remained stable compared to the previous year at 16.3% in 2024 versus 16.7% in 2023. However, in absolute numbers there was a 9% increase in subsequent applications from the previous year (**see definition**).

- The number of **inadmissibility decisions** (primarily related to subsequent applications or applications lodged by individuals who already obtained international protection in another EU Member State) decreased for the second consecutive year (**see also Box 3**).²³ However, their proportion remains significant, accounting for 14.4% of all decisions in 2024 (compared to 15.8% in 2023).

Subsequent application for international protection

A further application for international protection made after a final decision has been taken on a previous application, including cases where the applicant has explicitly withdrawn their application and cases where the determining authority has rejected an application following its implicit withdrawal in accordance with Art. 28 (1) of Directive 2013/32/EU (Recast Asylum Procedures directive)

²³ Reference in Box 3:

(1) Council of State, n° 261.887, 27 December 2024.

- The main **countries of origin** of applicants were the Palestinian territories, Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Türkiye.
- 2 345 applicants declared themselves **unaccompanied minors** at the time of their application for international protection, a decrease of 9.6% compared to 2023. Following examination by the Guardianship Service, 1 522 individuals were provisionally recognised as actual minors. The vast majority applicants who declare themselves unaccompanied minors were boys (86.1%), mainly originating from Eritrea (21.9%), Syria (18%) and Afghanistan (16.9%).

Box 3: Applicants with an international protection status in another EU Member State

In 2024, 4 825 asylum applications in Belgium, were submitted by individuals who already obtained an international protection status in another EU Member state, predominantly Greece. This amounts to 12.2% of total cases, which places **an additional strain on the asylum and reception services**. Since these applicants are not subject to the Dublin regulation, they are entitled to access reception services upon registering their application. The CGRS must assess the admissibility of each application, which includes a personal interview and a well-substantiated decision. Each case requires a thorough individual assessment, taking into account objective information on the situation of beneficiaries of international protection in the other EU Member States, because the international protection already granted still needs to be timely and/or effective. As a result, nearly half of these applications resulted in a protection status being granted in 2024 (final decisions after the appeal phase). Therefore, applications from individuals who have already received international protection in another EU Member State significantly impact the organisational and administrative capacities of Belgian asylum services.

In November 2024, in an attempt to ease pressure on the saturated reception network ([see 2.2](#)), the then Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration announced that **applicants for international protection (single men) who have already received protection in another EU Member State could no longer access the reception network**. However, this measure was suspended by the Council of State at the end of December 2024. The Council of State considered that this was a regulatory act which should have been submitted to the opinion of the Council's legislative section.⁽¹⁾

In 2024, **the CGRS made decisions regarding 34 052 individuals**. Of these, 26 474 cases (32 839 persons) resulted in a final decision, while the remaining 997 cases (1 213 persons) involved an admissibility decision. This marks a 14% increase compared to the previous year. The CGRS attributed the increase to both the recruitment of 59 new protection officers ²⁴ and the implementation of special measures aimed at enhancing efficiency (**see sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3**). Of those who received a final decision, **47.2% were granted an international protection status**, a notable increase from the 43.5% recorded in 2023. This rise was largely due to the substantial number of Palestinian cases processed in 2024 (**see Box 4**). ²⁵

Box 4: Applicants from the Palestinian territories

In 2024, Belgium experienced a notable increase in the number of asylum applicants from the Palestinian territories, rising from 3 249 in 2023 to 5 692 in 2024. According to Eurostat statistics⁽¹⁾, the majority of Palestinians applying for international protection in Belgium have already received international protection in another EU country, primarily Greece (**see Box 3**). The Palestinian territories became the leading country of origin in 2024, accounting for 14,4% of the total number of applications.

The CGRS attributes the relative **rise in the number of international protection statuses granted in 2024** to the influx of Palestinian applications. Following the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October 2023, the CGRS revised its policies for applicants from Gaza, acknowledging a clear need for international protection, although each case still required individual assessment.⁽²⁾ With approximately 90% of all Palestinian applicants in Belgium originating from Gaza, this led to a substantial number of protection statuses being granted.

In total, 15 620 persons were granted refugee status and 601 individuals received subsidiary protection status (**see Graph 3**). The highest number of refugee statuses were granted to nationals from the following countries: Palestinian territories (3 281), Syria (2 774), Eritrea (2 155) and Afghanistan (1 944).

²⁴ This is the official term for case workers at the CGRS, who are responsible for interviewing applicants for international protection and writing decisions.⁴

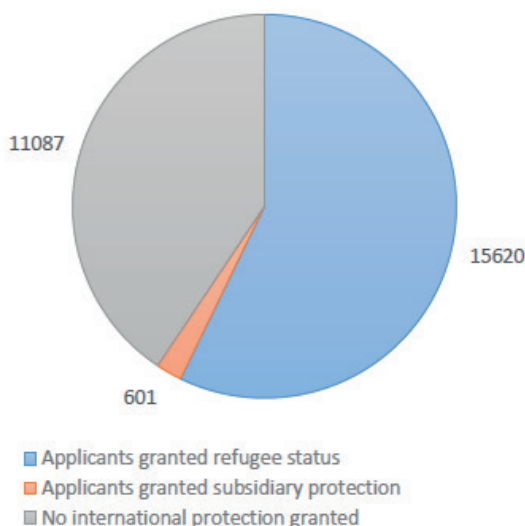
²⁵ References in Box 4:

(1) It should be noted that the number of Palestinian applicants reported by Eurostat is an underreporting, since they are often not uniformly encoded in the data. For example, they are often listed under categories such as "nationality unknown", "undetermined" or "stateless". However, when these categories are included, the same trends can be identified.

(2) For more information on the CGRS policy on Palestinian applications, visit <https://www.cgrs.be/en/news/cgrs-resumes-processing-all-palestinian-cases>.

The highest number of subsidiary protection statuses were granted to nationals from Yemen, Syria and Sudan.

Graph 3: Applicants with final decisions taken in 2024



Despite an increase in the number of decisions taken in 2024 compared to previous years, **the workload of the CGRS, defined as the number of applications pending a decision, did not decrease**. By the end of 2024, it amounted to 26 619 cases, involving 32 007 individuals.²⁶ This is more than three times the number of cases considered a 'normal workload' based on the current inflow of applications and staff capacity. Despite improved productivity, the high influx of applications meant that, on average, more applications were received than decisions made each month in 2024. The CGRS also emphasises the need for additional staff to address the backlog; however since the elections in July 2024, due to a government in caretaking capacity, no new staff could be hired.

The **Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL)**, as the subsequent stage in the asylum procedure, faced a considerably higher influx as well, with 23 159 appeals filed in 2024. Following an effort to expand capacity to process asylum appeals (see section 2.1.3), the CALL recorded an increase of 18.4% in its output, with 19 579 judgments pronounced in 2024, compared to 16 539 in 2023. Despite this significant increase, the workload of the CALL accumulated to 17 509 cases pending at the end of 2024.

²⁶ Detailed statistics, including a breakdown of data according to language docket (French or Dutch) and nature of the appeal (annulment litigation or full jurisdiction appeal), can be found in the CALL activity report for 2024, available in French and in Dutch at <https://www.rvv-cce.be/fr/cce/rapports-annuels>.

In 2024, **the CALL followed a large majority of CGRS decisions**, rejecting 76.2% of appeals filed in international protection litigation (full jurisdiction).²⁷

In 14.4% of cases, the appeal resulted in an annulment of the CGRS decision. In 9.4% of cases, the CALL amended the decision and granted refugee status (8.8%) or subsidiary protection (0.7%). These numbers have remained consistent relative to 2023. In the French language role of the CALL, 32.6% of appealed CGRS decisions were annulled or amended, compared to 16.9% in the Dutch language role.²⁸

2.1.2 Developments related to certain countries

Moldova was added to the list of safe countries of origin on 12 May 2024 (**see definition**). At present, the following countries are considered safe countries of origin: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The list is updated annually but can be renewed faster if the situation in a country changes. Applications from individuals with the nationality of countries considered safe can be the subject of an accelerated procedure (**see section 2.1.3**).

Following the outbreak of the internal conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023, the CGRS temporarily suspended treatment of **Sudanese applications**. In February 2024, the CGRS resumed processing of Sudanese cases from the Darfur, Kordofan, Blue Nile and Khartoum regions. Cases from other Sudanese regions remained suspended.

A temporary suspension of **Russian applications** came into effect in 2022 following the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The CGRS resumed processing of Russian cases in February 2024.

The CGRS temporarily suspended the notification of decisions regarding subsidiary protection status for **Lebanese applications** on 2 October 2024, in the context of the escalation of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict.

Safe country of origin

A country where, on the basis of the legal situation, the application of the law within a democratic system and the general political circumstances, it can be shown that there is generally and consistently no persecution as defined in Art. 9 of the Directive 2011/95/EU (Recast Qualification Directive), no torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and no threat by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict.

²⁷ The CALL issues rulings in two types of proceedings. If an appeal is directed against a decision of the CGRS, the court issues a ruling in 'full jurisdiction'. Rejection decisions of the Immigration Office regarding visas, family reunification, regularisation, and removal measures are handled in the 'annulment proceedings'.

²⁸ In Belgium, federal administrations are divided into two "language roles", French and Dutch. In the processing of cases and issuance of decisions, the CALL uses the language determined at the moment that the application for international protection was made (Article 36/69 of the Immigration Act).

The CGRS temporarily suspended processing of cases of **Syrian applicants** on 9 December 2024, following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Only interviews and decisions for persons with protection status in another EU Member State have been continued. All other decisions have been suspended.

2.1.3 Procedural developments within international protection administrations

In September 2023, the CGRS launched the **Tabula Rasa pilot project** to explore and test new working methods. During the experimental phase, which concluded in February 2024, three teams of volunteers implemented various innovative approaches. Following a positive evaluation of the pilot project in June 2024, a call was launched for staff to voluntarily join teams that would incorporate the best practices and lessons learned from the pilot. These teams will implement the Tabula Rasa working methods in 2025 under the name '**Prisma**'.

Box 5: New role for the CGRS on statelessness

Following the adoption of a new residence procedure for stateless persons (**see Chapter 6**), the CGRS became responsible for the issuance of non-binding opinions on the residence applications of persons on the grounds of statelessness. To facilitate this new role, the CGRS established a specialised unit focused on statelessness within its administration.

As of 1 February 2024, a **fast-track procedure** is in place for applications from countries on the list of safe countries of origin and for countries that meet specific criteria. For applicants coming from countries designated as safe countries of origin, there is a 15-working-day processing deadline from the date the application is transferred from the Immigration Office to the CGRS. For all other countries that meet the fast-track procedure criteria, a standard 50-working-day deadline applies. In addition to the safe countries of origin, this procedure is already in place for applicants originating from Georgia and DR Congo. Since its introduction in 2024, 760 cases were processed within the fast-track procedure.

In 2024, the **CALL increased its capacity to process asylum appeals**. Judges and legal professionals who previously worked solely on migration appeals, underwent a specially developed training programme, enabling them to handle asylum appeals as well. This measure not only increases the CALL's capacity for asylum cases but also enhances flexibility by broadening the scope of their competencies in asylum matters.

In 2024, the CGRS provided its staff with additional training and resources, namely:

- **Recruitment of 59 additional protection officers and 10 administrative staff members.** New protection officers follow a 6-month integration and training path including on-the-job training in the START department, which was established for this purpose in 2023.
- In November and December 2024, the BOSA administration (FPS for Policy and Support), through its Crisis Reserve, deployed **19 administrative staff members** to the CGRS to help reduce workload.
- The CGRS made a considerable effort to broaden the expertise of its staff, by making the EUAA modules **“Interviewing vulnerable persons”** and **“Interviewing children”** available and compulsory for all protection officers and supervisors.
- The CGRS organised training based on the EUAA module **“Conflict Management”** for the administrative staff in contact with the public.
- To support the well-being of its staff, the CGRS organised two pilot sessions for a training on **“Vicarious stress”**. In 2025, this training will be offered to all staff members who interact with applicants for international protection.
- The Country of Origin Information research unit (Cedoca) conducted **six fact-finding missions** to Türkiye, Burundi and Rwanda (combined mission), El Salvador, Armenia, Morocco and Cameroon.
- The CGRS continued to develop the **‘Electronic file’**, a project that aims to convert all paper files into a fully digital case management system. In 2024, the CGRS hired additional personnel for the developing team.

4. International protection through resettlement and relocation

The Belgian resettlement programme (**see definition**) is jointly managed by the CGRS, which is responsible for the selection of resettled refugees, and Fedasil, which manages the different phases after selection. This programme had been on hold due to insufficient reception capacity, but resumed at the end of 2023 and continued in 2024.

In 2024, **a total of 487 individuals were resettled to Belgium**. Resettlement missions were organised for Congolese refugees in Rwanda as well as for refugees evacuated from Libya through the Emergency Transit Mechanism in Rwanda. Additionally, Syrian refugees from Lebanon and Türkiye, along with refugees of various nationalities from Tunisia were resettled. A limited number of refugees were resettled through unallocated quotas from Niger, Türkiye and Pakistan. A resettlement mission to Egypt was organised, mainly for Sudanese refugees, who are expected to be resettled in 2025.

In 2024, **18 applicants for international protection arrived via relocation** from Cyprus.

Resettlement or relocation?

In the EU context, resettlement refers to the transfer, on a request from the UNHCR and based on their need for international protection, of a third country national or stateless person, from a third country to an EU Member State, where they are permitted to reside with one of the following statuses:

(i) refugee status within the meaning of Art. 2(d) of Directive 2011/95/EU (Recast Qualification Directive)

(ii) a status which offers the same rights and benefits under national and EU law as refugee status. In the EU context, relocation refers to the transfer of persons having a status defined by the Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol or subsidiary protection within the meaning of Directive 2011/95/EU (Recast Qualification Directive) from the EU Member State which granted them international protection to another EU Member State where they will be granted similar protection, and of persons having applied for international protection from the EU Member State which is responsible for examining their application to another EU Member State where their applications for international protection will be examined.

Following the federal election on 9 June 2024, the caretaker government decided to **suspend efforts related to resettlement and relocation** until a new government was formed.

In 2024, the reception of resettled refugees was organised through different channels. The reception centre in Alveringem, specifically dedicated to resettlement, which opened in 2023, continued to serve that purpose, along with two other reception centres for regular applicants for international protection. To enhance reception capacity and facilitate the integration of resettled refugees into Belgian society, **Fedasil operates 'Community sponsorship' programmes** in collaboration with partner organisations.²⁹ Through a matching procedure, some refugees selected for resettlement in Belgium are sponsored by a community and are not included in the reception network. In 2024, a total of 15 partnerships were concluded with local NGOs and Public Centres for Social Welfare to organise the reception of resettled refugees after the introduction of an innovative financial model in 2023 that enables various actors in the field of asylum and migration to become a partner organisation of the community sponsorship programme. In 2024, 15 refugees were welcomed through the national Community Sponsorship programme.

²⁹ A Community Sponsorship' is a hosting group, consisting of volunteer citizens, together with a dedicated partner organisation, which supports resettled persons by organising reception and accompanying them in the Belgian society for a year. For more information, visit: <https://www.fedasil.be/en/resettlement/community-sponsorship>.

Additionally, **Belgium participated in two pilot projects in 2024 to promote complementary pathways**. Firstly, IOM's Displaced Talent for Europe (DT4E), a labour mobility pathway for refugees based in Jordan and Lebanon focusing on specific sectors such as construction, engineering and healthcare. Over 160 employers were actively engaged, resulting in approximately 60 vacancies, and around 70 interviews. As a result, 20 matches were made with six individuals arriving in December 2024. A new iteration of the project (DT4E 2.0) started in October 2024. Secondly, Belgium participated in the pilot project EU Passworld, an educational legal pathway designed for individuals in need of international protection, who are currently living in host countries outside of Europe. The initial project partners were Caritas Belgium, KU Leuven and Fedasil, with support from UNHCR and the CGRS, which gives advice on international protection. In total, 7 students arrived in Belgium in the period of 2024 from Egypt, Uganda and Burundi.

Finally, Belgium has established a **humanitarian corridor** implemented by Sant'Egidio in collaboration with the CGRS, the Immigration Office and Fedasil, through which it committed to bring 250 individuals to Belgium over a two-year period (2022-2024). Initially set to conclude in March 2024, the project was extended to the end of 2025 to fulfil the quota. In 2024, a total of 97 people arrived in Belgium via the humanitarian corridor: 24 Afghans from Pakistan, 4 Palestinians from Lebanon and 69 Syrians from Lebanon.

Additionally, Belgium participated in the **medical evacuation** of vulnerable individuals from Gaza, selected by the World Health Organization. This effort involved 9 minors accompanied by their family members, totaling 34 people.

2.2 Reception of applicants for international protection

In the summer of 2021, Belgium's reception network began to saturate, prompting the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) to prioritise minors, families and other vulnerable groups in the allocation of reception places. Despite various measures to mitigate pressure on the reception network, Fedasil had to switch to 'crisis mode' in September 2021. The saturation of the reception network persisted throughout 2022, 2023 and 2024, and is still ongoing.

In 2024, the legislative framework governing reception conditions underwent significant amendments **(2.2.1)**. At the operational level, Fedasil implemented further measures to increase reception capacity **(2.2.2)**, accelerate the outflow from the reception network **(2.2.3)**, and improve conditions for applicants seeking international protection within the reception network **(2.2.4)**. Despite these efforts, the shortage of reception places continued in 2024 and had important legal and humanitarian consequences **(2.2.5)**.

In 2024, 26 303 individuals entered the reception network (IN) ³⁰, while 26 181 individuals left (OUT), resulting in an IN/OUT balance of +122 individuals. ³¹

Graph 4: Inflow ³² and theoretical inflow (of persons) to and outflow (of persons) from the reception network in 2024



2.2.1 Reform of the legislation on reception conditions

On 14 March 2024, the Belgian government adopted a new law revising the Reception Act, which constitutes the benchmark for the reception of applicants for international protection and certain other categories of foreigners in Belgium. The main changes made include:

³⁰ The total number of 'INs' does not include the 10 196 applicants (single men) who, due to a lack of reception capacity, were not accommodated in 2024. A number of them have registered on a waiting list, to be admitted at a later date to the reception network.

³¹ All statistics on reception are derived from Fedasil. More statistics are available on their website: <https://www.fedasil.be/en/news/reception-asylum-seekers/reception-network-under-pressure-0>.

³² The theoretical inflow is the inflow if the reception network had sufficient capacity to accommodate them all.

- **Decoupling the right to material aid from the order to leave the territory:** based on previous legislation, the right to material assistance ended when the term of the order to leave the territory expired. In practice, the Immigration Office issues this order, but it could be delayed due to various reasons, including administrative backlog or the initiation of new procedures, such as requests for regularisation. This resulted in the situation where persons who are no longer in an asylum procedure were still residing in the reception network. The new law links the end of the right to material aid to a final refusal in the international protection procedure: after receiving a final negative decision, the rejected applicant now has 30 days to leave the reception network.
- **Explicitly assigning the search for buildings to create additional reception places as a competence of Fedasil.** This amendment creates a legal basis for Fedasil to obtain information on existing building vacancies, giving it more agency to identify suitable properties to accommodate applicants for international protection. It also grants Fedasil the authority to obtain contact details of landlords whose buildings could serve as reception facilities.

In addition, on 25 March 2024, the Reception Act was further amended to address the data processing requirements in the framework of the CAAMI4Fedasil project.³³ This project aims to **simplify the administrative procedure to access healthcare** and therefore alleviate the administrative burden on Fedasil, which had led to a backlog of unpaid invoices. Fedasil is collaborating with the Agency for Health and Disability Insurance (*Caisse Auxiliaire d'Assurance Maladie-Invalidité / Hulpkas voor Ziekte- en Invaliditeitsverzekering (CAAMI/HZIV)*) to simplify the administration and invoicing for medical care through digitalisation. A Royal Decree was adopted to detail the specific financing and payment modalities of the new collaboration.³⁴ In July 2024, the pilot phase of this project was launched.

³³ For more information on the project, visit : <https://www.fedasil.be/fr/acces-aux-soins-de-sante-des-demandeurs-dasile>.

³⁴ Arrêté royal du 19 juin 2024 relatif au contrôle et au paiement des frais médicaux et pharmaceutiques dans le cadre de l'article 26bis de la loi du 12 janvier 2007 sur l'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et de certaines autres catégories d'étrangers / Koninklijk besluit van 19 juni 2024 betreffende controle en betaling van medische en farmaceutische kosten in het kader van artikel 26bis van de wet van 12 januari 2007 betreffende de opvang van asielzoekers en van bepaalde categorieën van vreemdelingen, <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/arrete/2024/06/19/2024006439/justel>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

2.2.2 Measures to increase reception capacity

In 2023, 3 796 new reception places were created, while 2 622 temporary reception places were closed, resulting in a **net increase in 1 174 places** (not including the shelter capacity created by the 'Brussels deal' – [see 2.2.3](#)). At the end of 2024, the total reception capacity was 36 205 places, reflecting an increase of 562 places since the beginning of the year and a record capacity. The occupancy rate remained consistently high throughout the year, averaging around 94%. ³⁵

Box 6: New Director General of Fedasil

On 1 July 2024, Pieter Spinnewijn took office as the new Director General of Fedasil, taking over from Fanny François, who acted as Director General ad interim following the resignation of Michael Kegels in September 2022. A new management plan was being developed in 2024, to be announced in 2025.

Fedasil implemented **several measures throughout 2024 to expand the reception network's capacity to ensure accommodation** for all individuals entitled to a reception place:

- **Six new reception centres were opened** ³⁶ and additional capacity was created in or near existing centres.
- **The Flemish youth sector provided places in youth tourism facilities as a temporary emergency solution for autonomous families.** Each site had an existing reception centre designated to coordinate reception and support.
- **A network of emergency places was created to accommodate families with a certain degree of autonomy:** around 800 reception places in several locations in the Brussels-Capital Region.
- Under the Impulse Fund, **Fedasil introduced new financial incentives for municipalities** to encourage the creation of new capacity in local reception initiatives, or to reactivate long suspended places.

At the request of Fedasil, the Council of Ministers approved a **new framework agreement for a public tender to facilitate the development of private operators for the reception of applicants for international protection**. A key innovation in this tender process was the possibility for private operators to distinguish between infrastructure provision and support provision (in oth-

³⁵ The reception network can never reach 100% occupancy due to factors such as family compositions, isolation sites, renovation works, etc. Fedasil considers the network saturated once it hits 94% capacity.

³⁶ One is directly managed by Fedasil: Gent Muink. Five others are managed by Fedasil's reception partners: Ypres (Red Cross-Flanders), Zutendaal (Red Cross-Flanders), Schaerbeek (Red Cross-Wallonia), Ixelles (Red Cross-Wallonia) and Forest (Samusocial). Fedasil's temporary centres in Bredene and Theux closed and re-opened their doors in 2024.

er words, to offer one or the other, or both). This strategy aims to attract new partners and broaden market participation, with the objective of establishing a flexible system that can quickly respond to sudden increases in the demand for reception places. The Council of Ministers authorised up to 3 500 places, with contracts expected to be awarded in 2025.

Finally, since 2022, **Fedasil has benefited from the temporary support of the EUAA** through an operational plan aimed at increasing the capacity and quality of reception. In 2024, the continuation and expansion of EUAA's activities included an increase in the number of experts, the deployment of interpreters and the support in delivering training.

2.2.3 Measures to accelerate labour market integration and out-flow from the reception network

Throughout 2024, Fedasil continued to use its 'meal voucher scheme', introduced in 2020 due to the need for isolation capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its objective is to reduce the occupancy rate in reception centres by encouraging certain categories of residents to free up their place in exchange for meal vouchers. One measure within this meal voucher system allows residents who have obtained a residence permit for more than three months to receive meal vouchers for a transitional period of two months instead of staying in a local reception initiative. In August 2024, this measure was amended to **double the period for receiving meal vouchers to four months**.

In Belgium, applicants for international protection can access the labour market four months after having submitted their application. In order to be able to work, applicants must possess a certificate of registration (the so-called 'orange card') issued by the municipality where the reception centre is located. Since 1 July 2024, **adult applicants staying in a reception centre and earning income from work will be required to contribute** to the cost of their reception. This contribution system (called 'Cumul') follows an amendment to the Reception Act and the adoption of a Royal Decree on 16 April 2024.³⁷ The contribution is adjusted based on the income received, and the system uses a differentiated rate to calculate the contribution, with lower contributions for self-reported earnings compared to verified earnings. Applicants for international protection who are self-reliant financially and who do not wish to contribute to their reception have to reside outside of the reception centres.

In 2024, Fedasil implemented various projects to boost the labour market integration of applicants for international protection:

- Over the past two years, Fedasil funded a **mentoring-to-work project** for highly-skilled applicants for international protection, in collaboration with various actors.³⁸ The project aimed to assess whether mentoring could provide valuable opportunities for applicants.
- Over the past two years, Fedasil funded a **project to combat the exploitation of applicants for international protection in the labour market**, in collaboration with the NGO Fairwork Belgium.³⁹ This partnership resulted in the creation of a manual against exploitation and training, which was presented across the entire reception network, including reception centres and individual accommodation places (Local Reception Initiatives).
- In 2024, Fedasil collaborated for the first time with the expertise centre Travi⁴⁰, to provide information and support to staff working in the reception network as well as applicants for international protection on **temporary work**. Temporary work through *interim agencies* accounts for more than 50% of employment for applicants for international protection.
- In 2024, Fedasil began a new collaboration with the Federal Public Service Finance, specifically the Tax Services. This partnership allows reception centres to work with local tax authorities to **assist applicants for international protection in filling out their taxes**.

³⁷ Arrêté royal du 16 avril 2024 relatif à l'octroi de l'aide matérielle aux demandeurs de protection internationale bénéficiant de revenus professionnels et autres catégories de revenus / Koninklijk besluit van 16 april 2024 betreffende de toekenning van materiële hulp aan de verzoekers om internationale bescherming met beroepsinkomsten en andere categorieën van inkomsten, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-06-19&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-06-19&s_editie=&numac_search=2024006083&caller=&2024006083=&view_numac=2024006083f, last accessed on 3 March 2025.

³⁸ Collaborators of this project were the Research Institute for Work and Society of the University of Leuven (HIVA), the Federation of Global and Democratic Organisation (Federatie van Mondiale & Democratische Organisaties (FDMO)), the think tank Beyond the Horizon and the Centre for Intercultural Action of the Province of Namur (Centre d'action interculturelle de la province de Namur (CAI Namur)).

³⁹ Fairwork Belgium is a non-profit organisation defending the employment rights of migrants in Belgium. For more information, visit their website: www.fairworkbelgium.be.

⁴⁰ Travi acts as the central point of information for the training of (candidates-)temporary workers. For more information, visit their website: www.travi.be.

2.2.4 Measures to improve reception conditions

In 2024, several measures were taken to improve reception conditions (**see also Box 7**).⁴¹ At the beginning of 2024, Fedasil partnered with the University of Applied Sciences Thomas Moore, on an AMIF-funded **project to improve intercultural mediation in Fedasil's reception centres**. The project – scheduled to conclude at the end of 2025 – aims to ⁽¹⁾ define the tasks and responsibilities of intercultural mediators, ⁽²⁾ establish a vision for cultural mediation, and ⁽³⁾ develop a short training programme for intercultural mediators. Currently, the role of intercultural mediator is not included in Fedasil's general HR-framework.

Under the guidance of Odisee University College's Family Sciences Knowledge Centre and supported by AMIF-funds, **Fedasil has been enhancing child-friendly reception centres** for several years. After the first phase (2020-2022) of the project 'Being a Child in a Reception Centre', which resulted in the book 'Being a child in a reception centre' (*Kind zijn in een asielcentrum*) along with training sessions, a second phase (2023-2025) was launched. Researchers from the Odisee University College developed an analysis tool for reception centres to assess their child-friendliness. Additionally, a dozen reception centres ran an intensive 10-day programme to improve the living conditions and development opportunities for children in reception.

In November 2024, Fedasil signed a new expertise agreement with the Rainbow Refugee Committee association. This collaboration aims to **provide individual support for LGBTQIA+ international protection applicants**, raise awareness among reception centre staff about the need for specific support for this group, and report on issues related to discrimination, harassment, and other difficulties faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in reception centers.

In November 2024, Fedasil signed a new expertise agreement with the GAMS (Group for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilation), replacing the previous agreement that partially covered the year 2024. The objectives remain unchanged: providing training for reception centre staff, conducting collective awareness sessions for residents, and **offering individual support to persons affected by female genital mutilation**.

⁴¹ Fedasil defines three phases for reception:

Phase 1: Arrival – screening and allocation to a reception facility

Phase 2: Stay – Accommodation in collective reception centres or, exceptionally, in small-scale or individual housing for applicants for international protection who have a high probability of being granted protection or who have specific individual needs.

Phase 3: Exit – A positive outcome leads to a transition to autonomous housing; a negative outcome results in the initiation of the return trajectory, including referral to open return places within Fedasil's reception network.

Box 7: Rethinking the arrival phase of applicants for international protection

At the current arrival centre for applicants for international protection, commonly known as 'Petit Château / Klein Kasteeltje', Fedasil carries out an initial social and medical examination of the applicants, and checks whether they are entitled to reception. If it is the case, the applicants are accommodated for a short period of time in a 'first phase' place (in the arrival centre or in another first phase centre), until a suitable reception centre can be found. In 2024, Fedasil, the Immigration Office, and the Guardianship Service, with the support of the EUAA, presented a concept note rethinking the arrival phase and the arrival centre to the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration. A central innovation put forward is the physical collaboration of the three agencies in one single location, which aims to promote a more efficient reception in the arrival phase.

2.2.5 Legal and humanitarian consequences of the lack of reception capacity

Despite efforts to reduce pressure on the reception network and free up places, Fedasil was unable to accommodate all applicants, leading to significant legal and humanitarian consequences. Since 2023, single male applicants cannot be accommodated immediately and must first register on a waiting list, unless they present an exceptional (medical) vulnerability (**see Box 8**). In 2024, an **exemption was also made for young men aged 18-19 due to their vulnerability**, allowing them immediate access to reception. At the end of 2024, the waiting list counted 2 809 individuals.

Box 8: Implementation of a waiting list

Since June 2024, Fedasil has faced litigation for allegedly implementing discriminatory practices based on sex by creating a waiting list for non-vulnerable single men. Several summary rulings and judgments have ordered Fedasil to pay 1 950 EUR in compensation for moral harm, which Fedasil has appealed. The Liège Labour Court has ruled against Fedasil in ten judgments, finding that it engaged in sex-based discrimination by limiting material assistance due to the saturation of the reception network, on the grounds that the person affected was a non-vulnerable single man.

Efforts were also made to harmonise waiting times across the board. Individuals can register on the waiting list in three ways: through referral by the humanitarian sector, via a QR code, or through a court decision after taking legal action against Fedasil due to lack of accommodation. Previously, there were disparities in waiting times based on the method of registration due to operational challenges. These issues were addressed in 2024 and changes were made to guarantee fairness; by the end of the year the waiting time was reduced to four months, compared to 10 months in 2023.

This crisis situation has already led to more than 10 000 condemnations of the federal government and/or Fedasil since 2022 for failing to provide accommodation as mandated by the Reception Act. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) issued 2 248 interim measures against the Belgian State, urging compliance with domestic court decisions. Since December 2023 and throughout 2024, **Fedasil faced a new wave of litigation, resulting in over 180 judgments ordering it to pay damages for moral and/or material harm due to the lack of reception.** Civil society organisations continue to claim that Fedasil, by failing to provide accommodation to applicants even after a court ruling, undermines the effectiveness of Belgian tribunal decisions requiring the state to offer accommodation. Regarding these appeals in individual cases, around twenty rulings have been issued by various Labour Courts (Liège, Namur, and Mons divisions). In December 2024, Fedasil lodged its first appeal in cassation against a judgment from the Mons Labour Court.

In January 2024, the Brussels Court of Appeal issued a decision **authorising a group of NGOs** (composed of CIRÉ, *Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen*, *Ligue des droits humains*, OBF, *Médecins du Monde*, NANSSEN, *Association du Droit des Etrangers*, SAAMO, and BelRefugees) **to seize 2.9 million euros from Fedasil's accounts.** These NGOs had taken collective legal action against Fedasil for failing to provide accommodation for applicants for international protection and to pay fines imposed by previous judgements. Fedasil appealed this decision but in June 2024, the Brussels Court of Appeal confirmed the asset seizure as an ultimate means to ensure the resumption of Fedasil's services.

The time spent by applicants for international protection without accommodation impacts their integration into the reception network. Since 2023, Fedasil, in collaboration with IOM and Bruss'Help,⁴² has researched how to **address the needs of single men who experienced homelessness** before integrating into the reception network. Many face addiction issues, mental health challenges, lack of stability, and difficulty adapting to collective living environments. In September 2024, a practical sheet was established to help reception centre workers support this target group. On 12 December 2024, Fedasil organised a meeting with nearly 80 reception and health services professionals to discuss the challenge of addiction, a growing problem in the reception network. Building on this meeting, Fedasil plans to develop a comprehensive approach to substance use and strengthen support systems for users.

⁴² Bruss'Help is a government-mandated association responsible for coordinating emergency aid programmes and integration initiatives, as well as conducting studies and analyses on the issue of homelessness in Brussels. For more information, visit their website: www.brusshelp.org.

Non-accommodated applicants for international protection often rely on humanitarian organisations, mainly in Brussels, to meet their basic needs (see Box 9).⁴³ These NGOs and associations provide emergency accommodation, but places are usually fully occupied. Due to saturation, they also operate with waiting lists. In December 2022, Fedasil and Brussels-Capital Region co-financed 2 000 places in the capital's humanitarian reception network for registered applicants unable to access Fedasil's reception network due to saturation, the so-called 'Brussels deal'. These places are available to anyone in need, not just applicants for international protection. In practice, many applicants for international protection either live on the streets or in occupied empty buildings in Brussels.

Box 9: Role the humanitarian network

The humanitarian network offers material support and socio-legal advice. The 'Humanitarian Hub', composed of various associations (Belgian Red Cross, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières, BelRefugees and SOS Jeunes) provides free services to those in need. In March 2024, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, CIRE, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans frontières, BelRefugees, Caritas international and the Humanitarian Hub published the third edition of their report 'No Reception Policy – State of Play', which provides an overview of the consequences of the shortage of places in the reception network for applicants seeking international protection in 2024.⁽¹⁾ In this report, they estimate that 71% of individuals seeking food, 77% needing clothing and 83% seeking information were applicants for international protection. They conclude that the Belgian state fails to meet its legal obligation to provide reception of every applicant for international protection.

For **information provision**, non-accommodated applicants can also visit the regional Information Point in Brussels, established by Fedasil in collaboration with Caritas International.⁴⁴ In 2024, plans were made to expand these regional information points in cooperation with civil society organisations and urban services. For instance, a biweekly permanence was initiated in Charleroi, which will be further expanded in 2025.

⁴³ References in Box 9:

(1) Ciré, 'Politique de non-accueil : état des lieux – 2024', <https://www.cire.be/publication/politique-de-non-accueil-etat-des-lieux-2024/#:~:text=Le%20rapport%20couvre%20l'ann%C3%A9e,un%20acc%C3%A8s%20limit%C3%A9%20aux%20services>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁴⁴ Information Points are integrated information points, or 'one stop desks', to support and guide migrants in precarious situations, regardless of their legal status. These desks serve as central hubs for accessing information, guidance, and referrals to essential services such as medical care and homelessness shelters.

With regard to **medical support**, applicants for international protection who are not accommodated in the Fedasil reception network can visit the Refugee Medical Point, now located next to the Fedasil Information Point of Brussels and the hospital Saint-Pierre.⁴⁵ In 2024, the Refugee Medical Point provided 16 691 services, with 94.8% of the patients being applicants for international protection, and 92.6% being men. Visits to the Refugee Medical Point increased by 33% between 2023 and 2024.

2.3 Detection of vulnerabilities

Besides broader vulnerability initiatives that target all migrants or even the general population, (**see Chapter 4**), actors within the asylum system and reception authorities develop targeted efforts to address the specific vulnerabilities of applicants for international protection.

In 2024, Fedasil launched an **inter-agency project on vulnerability detection and referral**, in close collaboration with the Immigration Office, the Guardianship Service, the CGRS, and with the support of the EUAA. Other stakeholders such as NGOs active in the reception sector, humanitarian actors and civil society actors, are contributing to the project as consulted actors. The project aims to create a unified approach to identify the vulnerabilities and needs of applicants for international protection, in alignment with the respective mandates of each actor in the asylum chain. By fostering transparency and coordination among stakeholders, the project seeks to implement a harmonised system for vulnerability assessment and referral. Additionally, it aims to enhance service quality through staff training and best practice exchanges. The project is aligned with the broader objectives of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Next to the inter-agency project, in 2023 the CGRS launched a **project focusing on aspects related to the physical and/or mental health** of applicants for international protection. The project focuses on the participation of applicants with physical and/or mental vulnerabilities in the asylum procedure in general and in the personal interview in particular. It also addresses aspects related to the substantive assessment of the need for international protection for this target group. The project examines how the CGRS can strengthen and improve its approach to this. As part of this project, the CGRS consulted various enti-

⁴⁵ Financed by the federal government, the Refugee Medical Point is a frontline service that aims to provide unconditional, low threshold access to basic health care to all people in vulnerable situations. Beneficiaries have access to primary medical and psychological consultations, nursing care and administrative and social support related to health. The Refugee Medical Point was designed as a response to the reception crisis, as its primarily target applicants for international protection outside the reception network, mainly through the presence of cultural mediator.

⁴⁶ References in Box 10:

(1) Superior Health Council, 'Mental health of applicants for international protection', <https://www.hgr-css.be/en/report/9744/mental-health-of-applicants-for-international-protection>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

ties, including the Superior Health Council (**see Box 10**)⁴⁶ and Fedasil's medical service, to develop a series of recommendations on the form and content of medical documents submitted during the asylum procedure. In 2024, these recommendations were shared with various external stakeholders, particularly professionals in the (mental) health sector who report medical findings as part of the asylum process.

Box 10: Advisory report of the Superior Health Council

On 17 September 2024, the Superior Health Council, which offers science-based advice to the Belgian government and health professionals, published an advisory report on the mental health of applications for international protection.⁽¹⁾ The report, titled 'Factors in the psychological fragility and recovery of applicants for international protection', offers specific mental health recommendations to public health policymakers, examiners of applications for international protection, reception authorities, and caregivers of people seeking international protection. It emphasises the need for improved and more qualified access to essential mental health care, and recommends that reception authorities guarantee accommodation for each applicant immediately upon arrival in Belgium. It also advises reception authorities to explore the inclusion of peer helpers and field experts in front-line services of reception centres.

Finally, in 2024, **additional safeguards were implemented by the Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL)** to further tailor the international protection procedure to the specific needs of minors:⁴⁷

- In line with the Council of Europe's guidelines on a child-friendly justice, the CALL adapted its convocation letters for unaccompanied minors. The letters explain the hearing process in **child-friendly language** and highlight the option for them to be accompanied by a trusted person.
- In collaboration with Ghent University, the CALL developed a pilot project for an interview room designed specifically to foster a **calm and attentive interaction** between the minor and the judge, while maintaining the formal nature of the procedure.

⁴⁷ More information on children in the asylum procedure is available on the website of the CGRS, <https://www.cgrs.be/en/asylum/children-asylum-procedure>.

Focus on the Belgian Presidency: activities related to international protection and reception



In the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, on 18 March 2024 the CGRS and the EUAA co-organised a conference on **"Convergence in Asylum Decision-Taking: Taking stock and charting paths"**. The conference brought together representatives of the national authorities of Member States and associated countries, members of the network of Courts and Tribunals, the EUAA, the European Commission and the UNHCR. Participants addressed different areas likely to promote greater convergence in asylum matters, namely the role of the case law of the CJEU, the role of objective information, directives and tools concerning country of origin, as well as the role of training and professional development.

Fedasil and the EUAA, in cooperation with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI Europe) hosted a **conference on 22 May 2024 to explore multi-stakeholder strategies** in three specific areas: reception, information provision, and pre-integration. The conference brought together policymakers and practitioners from international organisations, EU institutions and agencies, national and local authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs), private entities and academia. The conference underscored the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in addressing the complex challenges of migration and asylum in the EU.

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ⁴⁸



- Inform on Governing the accommodation of international protection applicants
- Inform on Practices and challenges in identifying victims of torture and ill-treatment in the context of international and temporary protection (joint EMN-Red Cross publication)
- Inform on Access to autonomous housing in the context of international protection
- Ad Hoc Query on subsequent applications
- Ad Hoc Query on recording vulnerability of applicants for international protection in national internal information systems of Member States
- Ad Hoc Query on financial contributions from applicants for international protection
- Ad Hoc Query on beneficiaries of international protection traveling to their country of origin
- Ad Hoc Query on individuals who received international protection and are of retirement age
- Ad Hoc Query on performing a search for devices within the asylum procedure
- Ad Hoc Query on the validity of residence permits for international protection
- Ad Hoc Query on mechanisms for verifying actual residence in allocated asylum accommodation
- Ad Hoc Query on recording of personal interviews in asylum procedures

⁴⁸ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



TEMPORARY PROTECTION AND OTHER MEASURES IN RESPONSE TO PERSONS FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Following the military invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022, the Council of the EU adopted Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine.⁴⁹ With this decision, persons having fled from Ukraine could register for temporary protection (**see definition**) in the framework of Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001,⁵⁰ referred to as the Temporary Protection Directive. Pursuant to Article 4(1) of the Directive,⁵¹ the initial duration of temporary protection was one year, which was then extended automatically by twice six months, until 4 March 2024. In 2023, the Council agreed to extend temporary protection until 4 March 2025, and on 25 June 2024, another extension was adopted until 4 March 2026.

From the start of the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive, Belgium deployed a wide range of measures to facilitate the registration process and access to information for persons fleeing the war in Ukraine as well as access to the rights laid out in the Directive, such as accommodation, employment, education, social welfare and medical treatment. The Directive also contains provisions pertaining to family reunification, and for beneficiaries to go back to their country of origin.⁵²

Temporary protection

A procedure of exceptional character to provide, in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons from third countries who are unable to return to their country of origin, immediate and temporary protection to such persons, in particular if there is also a risk that the asylum system will be unable to process this influx without adverse effects for its efficient operation, in the interests of the persons and other persons requesting protection.

By the end of 2023, **92 257 persons fleeing the war in Ukraine received a temporary protection status** in Belgium. The highest influx occurred in the first year of the war, when 63 354 people were granted temporary protection, compared to 15 626 in 2023 and 13 277 in 2024 (**Graph 5**).

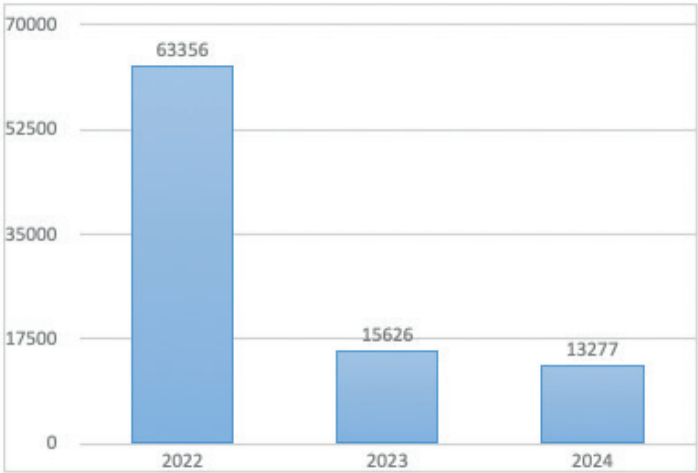
⁴⁹ Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2022/382/oj, last accessed 2 June 2023.

⁵⁰ Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2001/55/oj>, last accessed 2 June 2023.

⁵¹ In Belgium, this Directive was transposed into the Immigration Act in 2003.

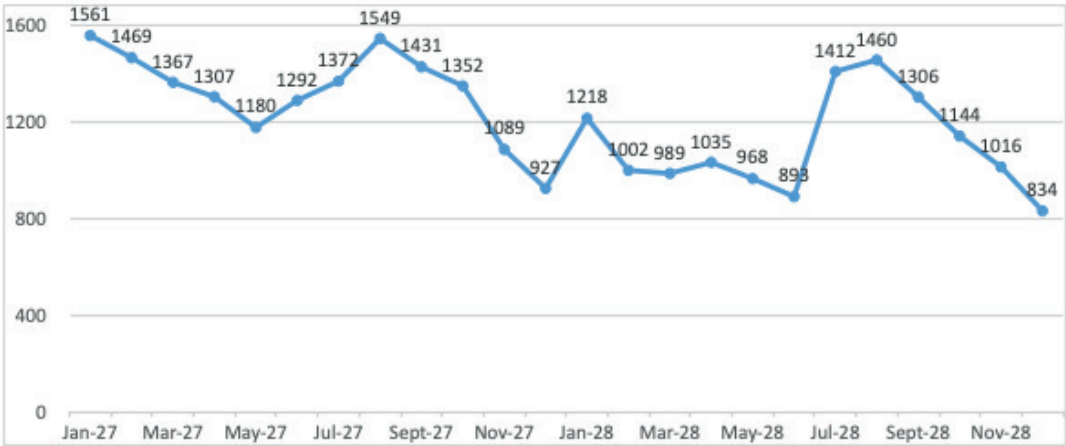
⁵² The measures that have been implemented since the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive are described in detail in our Annual Report on Migration and Asylum for 2022 and 2023, available at www.enmn-belgium.be. Most of these measures were still in place in 2024. The focus of this chapter is on measures that have changed or that have been newly implemented in 2024.

Graph 5: Number of temporary protection certificates issued in Belgium since the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, per year



Throughout 2024, the number of certificates issued has hovered around an average of 1 100 per month, a slight decrease compared to the average of 1 300 per month in 2023 (see Graph 6).

Graph 6: Number of temporary protection certificates issued in Belgium in 2023 and 2024, per month



In principle, persons fleeing the war in Ukraine retain the right to apply for international protection. Nonetheless, since 28 February 2022, the CGRS has suspended the processing of all applications for international protection from beneficiaries of temporary protection for the duration of activation of the Temporary Protection Directive.⁵³

⁵³ Article 51/9 of the Immigration Act.

Following the extension of temporary protection until 4 March 2025, beneficiaries of temporary protection need to **renew their residence card** ('A-card'), which is an electronic proof of registration in the Aliens Registry. Starting 4 January 2024, beneficiaries could request this renewal at their municipality of residence.

Housing assistance was initially provided through emergency reception centres and a coordinated crisis accommodation response, before **transitioning to long-term accommodation**. Long-term accommodation falls under the responsibility of the three Regions (Brussels-Capital Region, Walloon Region, Flemish Region) and the German-speaking Community. Each Region developed its own measures to organise long-term accommodation of beneficiaries of temporary protection. In the fall of 2023, the **Flemish Region** shifted its strategy from focusing on public accommodation centres to facilitating a transition towards the regular housing market. This strategy aims to lever integration and inclusion in the labour market and will intertwine multiple policy areas such as labour, housing and integration. On 6 December 2024, the Flemish Government reaffirmed its commitment to subsidising public accommodation for temporarily displaced persons, while linking this to the gradual reduction of public reception facilities by March 2026. Since January 2025, with the closing of the reception centre in Antwerp, only one centre remains in the Flemish Region, located in Ghent. The same trend can be observed in the **Brussels-Capital Region**, where efforts are made to limit accommodation in collective reception centres and rather incentivise beneficiaries of temporary protection to find their own accommodation. On 19 December 2024, the **Walloon Government** decided to maintain the provision of accommodation in collective reception centres, while gradually reducing this offer, with a 50% reduction by April 2025, 37% by July, and 25% by October 2025, maintaining residual capacity for vulnerable individuals and new arrivals.

The issuance of a residence permit (A-card) for beneficiaries of temporary protection comes hand in hand with unlimited access to the labour market. This access is already mentioned in the Annex 15 that is issued before the residence permit. Like housing, **access to the labour market** is a regional competence. In May 2024, the **Flemish Region** took additional steps to guide beneficiaries of temporary protection to the labour market. This included the deployment of 47 additional mediators at the Flemish Public Employment Service (*Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (VDAB)*) to help beneficiaries find suitable training and jobs. In addition, the VDAB provided 2 000 Dutch training courses.

Belgium's three language-based communities are competent for most issues related to **education**. For children between two-and-a-half and five years old, education is not compulsory but strongly recommended. From five to eighteen years of age, every child is subject to compulsory education from the 60th day after registration as a resident at a Belgian municipality. Beneficiaries of temporary protection fall under the same regime. In the **German-speaking Community**, organisations responsible for recognised language and integration courses are tasked with organising courses for beneficiaries of temporary protection. In 2024, an additional subsidy was provided to continue this measure.

Beneficiaries of temporary protection, as 'entitled residents', have full access to **public health insurance**. They can prove their resident status with a registration certificate or a temporary protection certificate. Even if they are in the process of obtaining temporary protection or have not officially received it yet, they still have the right to urgent medical assistance. Beneficiaries of temporary protection who do not have sufficient means of subsistence are entitled to receive **aid equivalent to the social integration allowance** through the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) (*Openbaar centrum voor maatschappelijk welzijn (OCMW) / Centre public d'action sociale (CPAS)*). The latter verify that beneficiaries meet all the conditions and determine their allowance category based on their living situation (single, cohabitant, with dependants, etc.). The social integration allowance grants automatic access to a social tariff for gas and electricity. Beneficiaries of temporary protection are also entitled to family allowances and can benefit from a one-off 'installation bonus' if they are homeless and find a home that serves as their main residence for the duration of the temporary protection.

Family reunification for beneficiaries of temporary protection is regulated by Articles 57/34 (for family members who are not beneficiaries themselves) and 57/35 (for family members who are beneficiaries in one or more other EU Member States) of the Immigration Act. In March 2024, the federal parliament adopted a new law introducing a number of changes to family reunification, including changes concerning beneficiaries of temporary protection.⁵⁴ The categories of family members eligible for reunification have been extended: in addition to the spouse, registered partner, their unmarried minor children, and "other close relatives", the non-registered partner and the parents of an unmarried minor beneficiary of temporary protection can also reunite (**see section 1.8**).

⁵⁴ Law of 10 March 2024 amending the Immigration Act on the right to family reunification, *op. cit.*

Fedasil provides assistance to Ukrainians and to third-country nationals with legal residence in Ukraine who wish to **go back to Ukraine**. Going back to Ukraine for a period of up to three months does not result in the loss of temporary protection status or the right of residence in Belgium. If beneficiaries of temporary protection leave Belgium for more than three months, they must notify their municipality of residence and ensure that their A-card is still valid upon re-entry in Belgium. The procedure to go back to Ukraine is organised through bus transportation to various cities in Ukraine, including Kiev, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Ternopil, Zhytomyr, Mukachevo, Novohrad-Volynskyi, Uman, Rivne, Stryi, Uzhhorod, and Vinnytsia. Once an application is approved, Fedasil covers the cost of the bus trip between Belgium and Ukraine and provides financial support (€ 50 for adults, € 25 for children). For returnees with certain vulnerabilities, limited reintegration support may be provided locally in Ukraine. For each application, an individual assessment is made to determine whether this is possible and the type of support that can be provided. This may include material and practical support provided by the local partner of Caritas International, for example to start a business, rent or renovate a home, and cover medical expenses.



- Study on the Application of the Temporary Protection Directive: challenges and good practices in 2023
- Inform on Labour market integration of beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine (joint EMN-OECD publication)
- Ad Hoc Query on applications for temporary protection by persons with dual nationality
- Ad Hoc Query on national status for persons fleeing the war in Ukraine

⁵⁵ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



MINORS

Minors (individuals under the age of 18) who arrive in Belgium unaccompanied by parents or family follow a distinct procedure from that of adult applicants for international protection. This procedure is specifically tailored to their needs and is designed to provide additional safeguards, recognising their heightened vulnerability compared to adult applicants.

As in the standard international protection procedure (see chapter 2), the Immigration Office is responsible for registering applications for international protection submitted by minors. The Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) remains in charge of assessing these applications, with specific safeguards or arrangements in place as needed.

The Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum-Seekers (Fedasil) is tasked with the initial observation and orientation of unaccompanied minors – regardless of whether they are applicants for international protection. Upon arrival, unaccompanied minors are first accommodated in one of Fedasil's Orientation and Observation Centres (*Centres d'Orientation et d'Observation / Observatie- en Oriëntatiecentra*). The orientation and observation phase (4.2) aims to identify the young people's vulnerabilities and support network to enable a referral to the most suitable care facility. During this period, the Guardianship Service conducts an age test if there is any doubt about the young person's age.

After approximately four weeks of observation, minors are referred by Fedasil either to designated sections for unaccompanied minors within regular collective reception centres, or to specialised collective reception structures exclusively hosting unaccompanied minors (4.3).⁵⁶ Minors over the age of 15 who are considered independent enough may be placed in individual reception facilities, where they have more freedom and responsibility, while still getting support and help to prepare for living on their own. This is only allowed after they receive international protection, and if the minor, the guardian, and the social assistants who support the young person all agree.

Unaccompanied minors are assigned a guardian to support and accompany them throughout their stay (4.4). This process is managed by the Guardianship Service, which operates under the Federal Public Service (FPS) Justice.⁵⁷ The Guardianship Service ensures that unaccompanied minors receive appropriate care as soon as they are reported – whether by an authority, the police, a private

⁵⁶ The youngest unaccompanied minors (less than 15 years old) or those with a more vulnerable profile can be accommodated in the existing recognised facilities of the youth welfare agencies: Jeugdhulp (Youth Welfare) under the agency Opgroeien (Growing Up) in the Flemish Community and the Administration Générale de l'Aide à la Jeunesse (General Administration for Youth Welfare) in the French Community, or in reception places created by other organisations commissioned for this purpose by the youth welfare agencies. The reception places are located in small-scale structures or living groups and are characterised by intensive and customised focused guidance. Fedasil, which co-finances these places, is responsible for the allocations and its instructions apply.

individual or a lawyer. The Guardianship Service is also responsible for formally determining whether the individual is a minor, which may involve a medical age assessment if necessary. Once minor status is confirmed, the appointment of a guardian is mandatory and must take place without delay. Additionally, the Guardianship Service coordinates communication and cooperation with the relevant authorities involved in international protection, reception, housing, and related matters.

Finally, to prevent a sudden loss of support when unaccompanied minors turn 18, Fedasil is developing a policy targeting young adults aged 18 to 21. This initiative aims to ensure continuity of individual counselling and to support a smooth transition to adulthood (4.5).

4.1 Key statistics on unaccompanied minors

In continuation of the trend observed in 2023, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) reported a decline in the number of unaccompanied minors entering the reception network in 2024 (**see definition**). A total of 2 465 unaccompanied minors entered the reception network, representing a 10.5% decrease compared to 2023. By the end of the year, 90% of these minors were boys. In terms of age distribution, 2.5% were under the age of 12, 30.9% were between 12 and 15 years old, and the majority - 66.6% - were aged between 16 and 18. The principal countries of origin were Eritrea (22.6%), Syria (15%), Afghanistan (13.5%), Guinea (7%), and Morocco (6.5%).

Unaccompanied minor

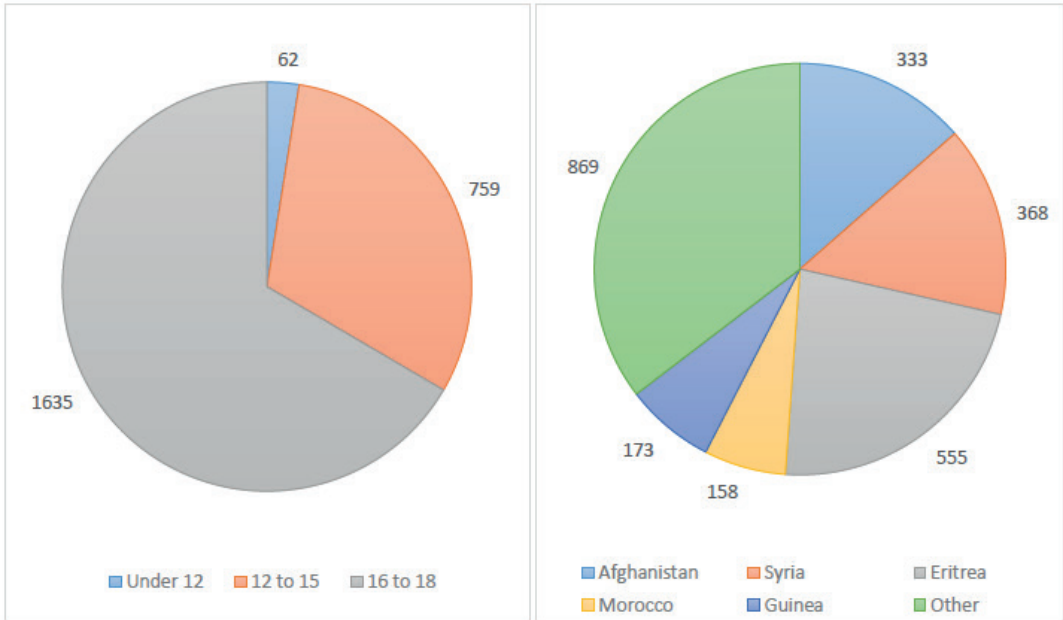
A minor :

Who arrives on the territory of an EU Member State unaccompanied by the adult responsible for them by law or by the practice of the EU Member State concerned, and for as long as they are not effectively taken into the care of such a person, or;

Who is left unaccompanied after they have entered the territory of the EU Member State.

⁵⁷ Since 2014, the Guardianship Service can also appoint a guardian for unaccompanied European minors who are in a situation of vulnerability or have applied for a temporary residence permit due to trafficking and/or smuggling (Loi du 12 mai 2014 modifiant le titre XIII, chapitre VI, de la loi-programme (I) du 24 décembre 2002 en ce qui concerne la tutelle des mineurs étrangers non accompagnés / Wet van 12 mei 2014 tot wijziging van titel XIII, hoofdstuk VI, van de programmawet (I) van 24 december 2002 wat de voogdij over niet-begeleide minderjarige vreemdelingen betreft), https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=fr&sum_date=2014-11-21&lg_txt=f&pd_search=2014-11-21&s_edite=&numac_search=2014009398&caller=&2014009398=&view_numac=2014009398n, last accessed on 11 April 2025.

Graph 6: Number of unaccompanied minors recorded by Fedasil in 2024, by age (left) and by country of origin (right)



4.2 Identification and registration of unaccompanied minors

Before unaccompanied minors can enter the reception trajectory specifically designed for them, they must first be formally identified as such. The Guardianship Service is responsible for conducting age assessments ([see definition](#)) and verifying the existence – or absence – of family links.

In 2024, efforts were made to **improve the identification process for unaccompanied minors**. The collaboration between the Immigration Office and the Guardianship Service was strengthened to increase the accuracy of minor identification, reach a unified consensus on their minority status, and establish more effective information-sharing between the two services.⁵⁸ The initiative aims to streamline communication, facilitate a more organised approach to age assessments, and expedite the availability of age test results, ultimately leading to a more efficient and timely process. The Guardianship Service also

Age assessment

Process by which authorities seek to establish the chronological age, or range of age, of a person in order to determine whether an individual is a child or not.

⁵⁸ In case the guardian is already appointed before the minor started the asylum procedure, the guardian will already be involved at the stage of registering and introducing an application for international protection. Often, however, the minors will already have submitted an asylum application themselves before the Guardianship Service appoints a guardian.

developed and implemented a 'fast-lane' system at the registration centre for applicants for international protection to expedite the process for minors with manifest doubts regarding their status as minors. This system is used when there are clear signs or evidence suggesting that they may not actually be minors. The objective is to conduct a triage process to ensure that individuals who make manifestly implausible claims of being minors are rapidly removed from the 'minor system'.

In 2024, the Guardianship Service received **4 068 initial reports of unaccompanied minors** – a slight decrease compared to 2023 (4 266 initial reports). The initial reports refer to the number of individuals declaring themselves as unaccompanied minors, both asylum seekers and non-asylum seekers, at the time they are reported to the Guardianship Service by the Police, the Immigration Office, or other actors. The actual number of individuals effectively identified as unaccompanied minors may be lower: some may turn out to be older than 18 after age assessment, and others may not be identified because they disappear⁵⁹ (**see Box 11**)⁶⁰. The main countries of origin of reported unaccompanied minors were Eritrea, Syria, and Afghanistan. 84% were registered as male, and 95% provided an age between 11 and 17 years. In 2024, **1 713 age tests were conducted** (compared to 1 728 in 2023), and the Guardianship Service made 1654 age determinations, with just over 30 % (500 individuals) declared as minors.

Box 11: Handbook on Disappearances of Unaccompanied Minors

In 2023, the Guardianship Service, Fedasil, and Child Focus published a handbook on 'Disappearances of Unaccompanied Minors'. The handbook aims to provide all services with concrete guidelines on what to do in the event of a missing minor. In 2024, the authors organised a **roundtable focused on immediate departures**, i.e. unaccompanied minors who go missing from reception centres shortly after arrival. The aim of this roundtable was to raise awareness of the handbook among the various stakeholders involved, including the police, reception partners, guardians, and others.

⁵⁹ Disappearances are by definition difficult to measure accurately. The figures recorded by Fedasil may include the same young person more than once, young people for whom the age was not yet verified, spontaneous departures from reception centres, and refusals of reception, while figure from the Guardianship Service also includes minors who were not registered in Fedasil's reception network.

⁶⁰ Fedasil, 'Guide disparitions de mineurs non accompagnés : directives pour les collaborateurs de première ligne', <https://www.fedasil.be/fr/actualites/accueil-des-demandeurs-dasile/prevenir-les-disparitions-de-mena-0>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

Recent Belgian rulings have clarified the role of **medical age assessments** in determining the age of unaccompanied minors.⁶¹ These decisions reaffirm that official documents are primary in establishing identity, while medical age assessments serve a secondary role. The courts ruled that these assessments should not override official documents that meet international private law standards. While useful, medical age assessments have limitations, and the rulings emphasise the importance of carefully reasoned decisions when using them. In 2024, the collaboration between the Guardianship Service and the University Hospital of Leuven was strengthened, with the objective of creating more capacity for age assessment at the hospital.

4.3 Reception of unaccompanied minors

In 2024, **more than 14 000 young people were residing in the reception network** of Fedasil. Due to the decrease in the influx of unaccompanied minors and a consistently low occupancy rate, the reception capacity for this group was reduced and redirected to accommodate another target group. This reduction was made as part of the groundwork for developing a dynamic management system for reception places, based on forecasts and a buffer policy for both reception capacity and human resources. By the end of 2024, the reception capacity for unaccompanied minors stood at 3 250 places, a reduction of 279 compared to the beginning of the year.

In 2024, a continued **shortage of housing and local reception initiatives (see section 2.2)** hindered the transition of unaccompanied minors over the age of 15 – whose applications for international protection had been approved and who were considered sufficiently independent – from collective reception centres to autonomous housing. In response, a policy change was implemented: if placement in a local initiative within the preferred region is not possible after six months, minors must choose between staying in a reception centre or, if available, transferring to a local reception initiative in another region.

Mental health issues, including addiction, have become an increasingly significant problem for unaccompanied minors. There is a shortage of outpatient services with the expertise needed to address the unique needs of this target group. In 2024, a new circular regarding health insurance was published. **Unaccompanied minors can now be registered for health insurance even if a guardian has not yet been appointed.** Proof that the unaccompanied minor is covered by the Guardianship Service and is awaiting the appointment of a guardian is sufficient to establish eligibility for health insurance.

⁶¹ Court of First Instance of Liège, 22/1560, 16 June 2023; Court of First Instance of Namur, 24/147, 17 April 2024; Council of State, 260.988, 10 October 2024.

4.4 Guardianship of unaccompanied minors

Every unaccompanied minor who applies for international protection or is otherwise detected on the territory or at the border must be referred to the Guardianship Service. The guardian represents the minor in legal proceedings and is responsible for ensuring that all necessary steps are taken during the minor's stay in Belgium.⁶²

With a waiting list of approximately 1 000 unaccompanied minors by the end of 2023, the beginning of the year 2024 was again characterised by a **shortage of guardians**. However, the Guardianship Service implemented different measures in the course of 2024 to eliminate this backlog. These measures included recruiting additional guardians, continuing the tax change introduced in 2023 that allows guardians to accompany eight minors instead of five without being taxed, and adjusting travel expenses. As a result, and aided by a reduced influx of minors, the Guardianship Service successfully reduced the waiting list to zero and was able to assign a guardian to each minor within the standard period of eight weeks. At the end of 2024, there were nearly 695 guardians who supported 3 811 unaccompanied minors in Belgium.

Next to these measures, the Guardianship Service launched a **pilot project around unaccompanied minors in transit**, specifically for minors intercepted in the coastal region. Under this project, a group of guardians geographically close to the coastal region and quickly available was trained to take up these specific guardianships. The aim of this project is to increase the number of unaccompanied minors entering the guardianship system, so they receive proper follow-up support and accurate information about their rights in Belgium, the asylum and migration context in the UK, and the potential dangers of irregular migration (**see also chapter 8**).

⁶² The guardian's missions are outlined in the General Directives for guardians of 2 December 2013. SPF Justice, 'Missions du tuteur', https://justice.belgium.be/fr/themes_et_dossiers/enfants_et_jeunes/mineurs_etrangers_non_accompagne/tuteur/missions_du_tuteur, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

4.5 Transition to adulthood

At the age of 18, both the guardian's role and the specific guidance for minors come to an end. Young adults have to move to adult reception centres where a higher degree of independence is required, which can be disorienting. Since 2023, the 'Youngsters' Unit at Fedasil, which coordinates policy on unaccompanied minors, accompanied minors, and young adults (former unaccompanied minors or vulnerable young adults), **has been developing a new policy for young adults aged 18 to 21.** ⁶³

To develop this new policy, **twelve pilot projects were launched** between autumn 2023 through the end of 2024. For 11 of the 12 pilot projects, this meant extra supervisors for tailor-made guidance for the young adults. The projects offer young adults a pathway towards employment, further education, adult education, etc. They also organise activities and educational sessions on the acquisition of autonomy, orientation towards the future, life after the centre, sexuality and relationship, budget management, etc.

⁶³ The choice for the target group to 21-year-olds is motivated by the size of this group in Fedasil's reception network. At the beginning of 2024, the reception network contained 4460 young adults aged 18 to 21 years (not including the young men on the waiting list for whom there is currently no reception – see section 2.2).



INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

In Belgium, integration falls under the responsibility of the three language-based Communities, each with the competence of formulating their own integration strategy (5.1) and implementing it in collaboration with various actors:

- In the **Flemish Community**, integration is managed by the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering – Agii*), with contact points at some 70 locations across six regions in Flanders, and the reception office for newcomers (*Brussels onthaalbureau voor nieuwkomers – Bon*), in cooperation with the Dutch Language House, in Brussels. In the cities of Antwerp and Ghent, the Agency Integration and Civic Integration Antwerp (*Atlas*) and the Agency Integration and Civic Integration Ghent (*Amal*) are responsible, respectively.
- In the **French Community**, integration is spread across eight Regional Integration Centres (*centres régionaux d'intégration (CRI)*) in the Walloon Region, and three integration offices (*bureaux d'accueil pour primo-arrivants – Bapa Bxl, Bapa Via, Bapa Convivial*) in the Brussels-Capital Region.
- In the **German-speaking Community**, integration is managed by the Info-Integration service of the Belgian Red Cross.

In the EU context, integration is commonly understood as a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation both by migrants themselves and by the host society. Integration is a multi-faceted process that implies policies and measures at various levels. One of the key components is participation in integration programmes, which are designed to provide migrants with essential knowledge and skills to navigate Belgian society (5.2). Integration into the labour market is another critical aspect, to ensure that migrants can find meaningful employment and contribute economically (5.3). Finally, fostering an inclusive society requires opportunities for participation and encounters with the host society, as well as the implementation of measures to combat racism and discrimination (5.4).

5.1 Formulating and monitoring regional integration strategies

In the **Walloon Region**, on 14 March 2024, the **Walloon Government adopted a thorough revision of its integration strategy**, with the amendment of the Walloons Code of Social Action and Health.⁶⁴ This revision aimed to increase the accessibility of the civic integration programme (**see also 5.2**), establish greater equity between participants, professionalise integration services and guarantee the sustainability of their financing. The new strategy emphasises the

⁶⁴ Décret du Gouvernement wallon du 14 mars 2024 modifiant la Partie 2 du Livre II du Code wallon de l'Action sociale et de la Santé relatif à l'intégration des personnes étrangères, https://wallex.wallonie.be/files/pdfs/20/104517_D%C3%A9cret_modifiant_la_Partie_2_du_Livre_II_du_Code_wallon_de_l'Action_sociale_et_de_la_Sant%C3%A9_relatif_%C3%A0_l'int%C3%A9gration_des_personnes_%C3%A9trang%C3%A8res_04-05-2024-.pdf, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

importance of labour market integration of foreigners, for instance through the provision of training for bottleneck professions in reception centres for applicants for international protection, valuing skills over diplomas, and creating pathways to resume training started abroad (**see also 5.3**). Regional Integration Centres will now play a greater role in supporting the socio-professional integration of foreigners and must coordinate with employment services to offer coaching and job-seeking assistance. The Walloon Public Service for Integration and Social Action (*SPW Intégration et Action Sociale*) can now inform newcomers about the integration process, a responsibility previously only held by municipalities. Additionally, citizenship training can be provided in a language understood by the individual, rather than exclusively in French.

In order to monitor and coordinate this new strategy, **a new Walloon Observatory for Foreigners' Integration (*Observatoire wallon de l'intégration des personnes étrangères*) has been established**, with a broader mandate than the previous coordination committee. This body intends to facilitate broader consultation at the sectoral level (representatives of the different components of the Walloon Code for Social Action: Regional Centres for Integration, Local Integration Initiatives, services for unaccompanied minors, housing, health, etc.) and allow for constant monitoring of integration policies (previously, this exercise was done every five years based on a political mandate). In parallel, the Walloon Region also **refined its IT tool for monitoring the public registered in the integration programme** and is examining the possibility of acquiring further tools to calibrate the offer (for example, to be able to register for French language courses online). Regional integration centres, who are responsible for implementing the integration programme, would be able to monitor the integration process of foreign nationals through all stages (social assessment, evaluations, language and citizenship courses, etc.). The Walloon administration would be able to use this tool for sanctions in cases of non-compliance with the obligations of the programme.

In the **Brussels-Capital Region**, **the Brussels Centre for Intercultural Action (*Centre bruxellois d'action interculturelle – CBAI*) was accredited as monitoring actor for the integration programme**. It becomes responsible for evaluating and reporting on the implementation of the integration policy for newcomers. This follows the creation of the bilingual civic integration programme in Brussels and the transfer of the mandate from the French Community Commission (*Commission communautaire française – COCOF*) to the Common Community Commission (*Commission communautaire commune – COCOM*; *Ge-meenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie – GGC*), which is detailed in the following section.

5.2 Integration programmes

Previously, foreigners residing in the **Brussels-Capital Region** had the choice between two integration programmes (**see definition**): one in French (*parcours d'accueil*), organised by the French Community, and one in Dutch (*inburgeringstraject*), organised by the Flemish Community. In 2023, the responsibility for organising the integration programme ⁶⁵

Integration programme

Set of measures put in place by the State and/or civil society organisations to support the integration of legally residing migrants/third-country nationals into the host society.

was transferred from the French Community Commission (*Commission communautaire française – COCOF*) to the Common Community Commission (*Commission communautaire commune – COCOM*; *Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie – GGC*), through its administration, *Vivalis*. Since January 2024, the former French-speaking welcome offices (*Bureaux d'accueil pour primo-arrivants et étrangers – BAPA*) have adopted a bi-communitarian status and **implement a bilingual integration programme** in Brussels. The Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*), through its welcome office (*Brussels onthaalbureau voor nieuwkomers – BON*) continue to provide the Dutch-language integration programme. Therefore, newcomers integrating into the Brussels-Capital Region can choose between the Dutch-language programme offered by the Flemish Community, or the bilingual programme offered by the Common Community Commission. Both options are considered equivalent. The goal of this reform is to aim towards a harmonised bilingual programme that enhances linguistic training and offers a more inclusive and flexible approach to integration in the Brussels-Capital Region.

For the French-speaking integration programme specifically, the property of the case management software for handling the integration of newcomers was officially transferred from the COCOF to the COCOM. This transfer was formalised through a cooperation agreement between the two entities. Since 2024, due to an overload of demand, individuals who wish to follow the integration programme on a voluntary basis are first put on a waiting list, in order to give priority to those who fall under the mandatory target group.

⁶⁵ Ordonnance du 20 juillet 2023 concernant le parcours d'accueil et d'accompagnement des primo-arrivants et des personnes étrangères / Ordonnantie van 20 juli 2023 betreffende het inburgerings- en begeleidingstraject voor nieuwkomers en buitenlandse personen), <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/ordonnance/2023/07/20/2023044135/justel>, last accessed on 24 July 2024.

This shift towards a bilingual integration programme also came hand in hand with the adoption of the Cooperation Agreement of 7 March 2024, amending the Cooperation Agreement of 20 December 2018 between the COCOM, the COCOF, and the Flemish Community. This agreement established a **formal collaboration framework** allowing newcomers to access language learning centres managed by the COCOF for French language courses (through the BAPA) and by the Flemish Community for Dutch language courses (through the House of Dutch (*Huis van het Nederlands*)). By doing so, it aims to strengthen access to linguistic training.

In the **Walloon Region**, the revision of the integration strategy also **introduced changes to the integration programme for newcomers residing in the Walloon Region**. Notably:

- The integration period is extended from 18 months to 3 years for newcomers arriving after the decree's entry into force;
- The deadline for completing the integration programme is suspended for incarcerated individuals;
- The list of categories of people who can be exempted from having to complete an integration programme is extended to persons who have a medical condition or are primary caretakers of a family member, persons who follow a professional training of minimum 19 hours/week for more than 3 months, and beneficiaries of temporary protection. These exemptions apply from 1 January 2025;
- Persons who can attest of an A2 level of French language (average across all competences – written, oral, etc.) are exempted from having to follow the French language courses;
- Newcomers who have less than A2 level in French can now follow the citizenship training in a language that they understand (previously this training was only accessible in French, with some rare exceptions). These changes apply from 1 January 2025.

The announced objective of this reform is to allow everyone to follow the integration programme fairly and give newcomers more opportunities to overcome obstacles related to integration (search for housing, stabilisation of stay, schooling of children, job search, health, etc.), as well as to reduce the administrative burden on persons wishing to integrate. This revision also allows participants to have a quicker access to citizenship without having to wait for obtain proficiency in French.

In the **Flemish Region**, the target group of newcomers under the obligation to complete an integration programme was expanded to include all newly appointed ministers of religious services recognised by the Flemish Region before 1 January 2007.⁶⁶ Previously, this obligation only applied to ministers of religious services in a limited number of faith communities recognised after 1 January 2007.⁶⁷ In addition, the Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*) became responsible for informing and recruiting ministers of recognised religious services who are subject to the integration requirement. Previously, the authority to send recruitment letters to this group lay with the Agency for Domestic Governance (*Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur*).

Box 12: Starting integration from abroad: a pilot project of the Flemish Region

The Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*) launched a **pilot project for future newcomers to begin the integration programme in their country of origin**. The project primarily targeted persons from Arabic countries who were coming to Belgium for family reunification or labour migration and had already received their residence permit. Participants followed the 'social orientation' module online from abroad, which teaches about life, work norms and values in Belgium. Participants were provided with a trajectory counsellor, responsible for conducting an introductory meeting and answering individual questions and needs.

The project aimed to provide newcomers with realistic expectations about life in Belgium and the integration process, as well as to give newcomers the opportunity to focus on the other pillars of the integration programme (such as Dutch language training and individual guidance in the search for work or studies) upon arrival in Belgium.

⁶⁶ Decreet van de Vlaamse overheid van 3 mei 2024 tot wijziging van het decreet van 7 juni 2013 betreffende het Vlaamse integratie- en inburgeringsbeleid, wat betreft de verwerking van persoonsgegevens, de verplichting tot inburgering voor bedienaars van de erkende erediensten en een afwijking van het taalniveau voor NT2 voor personen met een handicap, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=nl&caller=summary&pub_date=24-06-06&numac=2024005214, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁶⁷ In addition to all other categories of newcomers for whom the integration programme is mandatory. The full list of categories can be found on the website of the Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration. Vlaanderen, 'Wie is verplicht tot inburgering in Vlaanderen?', <https://www.vreemdelingenrecht.be/inburgering/inburgering-vlaanderen/plicht-tot-inburgering-vlaanderen/wie-verplicht-tot-inburgering-vlaanderen#:~:text=Je%20bent%20verplicht%20tot%20inburgering,minstens%2018%20jaar%20oud%20was,> last accessed on 28 May 2025.

5.3 Labour market integration

Access to the labour market is one of the key components of migrant integration, as this is generally recognised as a win-win for both migrants and host societies (**see Box 13**).⁶⁸ The European Commission recognises that “the sustainable integration in the labour market is key to ensuring their effective inclusion in the host societies and their positive impact on the EU economy”.⁶⁹ In a current context marked by significant labour shortages in European labour markets, this issue has become more prevalent in public debates and political agendas.

In the **Walloon Region**, the revision of the integration strategy also included **changes to the ‘Training-Integration Plan’ (Plan Formation-Insertion) related to the labour market integration of third-country nationals through vocational training**. The Training-Integration Plan allows employers to train jobseekers for a specific set of skills required for a profession in view of hiring them for a period at least equivalent to the duration of the training. In 2024, the training period was extended from a maximum of 26 weeks to a maximum of 52 weeks for “trainees who experience integration difficulties”. This extension gives the possibility of providing vocational training to third-country nationals who have recently arrived in Belgium and include the teaching of technical vocabulary into their training programme.

Box 13: Access to the theoretical driving license exam for non-native speakers

On 16 May 2024, the Walloon Government adopted a decree for the implementation of a pilot project to improve the accessibility of the theoretical driving exam to candidates who are non-native speakers or who are illiterate.

⁽¹⁾ This project includes the creation of an **adapted session for the theoretical driving license exam** for candidates for whom the language of the test is not their mother tongue or whose literacy level is insufficient. The decree was adopted in response to a parliamentary question to the Walloon Minister in charge of Road Safety on 12 December 2023. This question flagged cases where candidates failed the theoretical driving test repeatedly despite having previously possessed a driving license in their home country. It was brought forward by the association “Lire et Ecrire” (Read & Write) that advocates for the right to literacy for all and argue that not having a driving license can be an important barrier to effective labour market integration, especially in rural areas.

⁶⁸ References in Box 13:

(1) Arrêté du Gouvernement wallon du 16 mai 2024 portant sur la mise en place d'un projet-pilote relatif à l'organisation de l'examen théorique du permis de conduire en session spéciale et en session adaptée, <https://www.code-de-la-route.be/fr/reglementation/2024008504/modifications~rcrgsehgwcw>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁶⁹ European Commission, 'Integration in the labour market', https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration/integration-labour-market_en.

Ultimately, this revision aims to give employers more opportunities to hire a workforce that is adapted to their needs and to strengthen the labour market integration of jobseekers in professions that require specific training.

One key element to effective labour market integration is the recognition of skills. In 2024, **the Flemish government advanced its policy on the recognition of skills acquired through experience**, also known as 'recognition of acquired competences' or EVC (*erkennen van verworven competenties*).⁷⁰ Through this mechanism, newcomers can receive an official recognition of the skills and knowledge that they already mastered through experience. In EVC test centres, individuals can test certain professions, or obtain exemptions for courses (and thus follow a shortened, more targeted course). In 2024, the Flemish government expanded EVC test centres, improved the quality of programmes, and developed tools to better support supervisors and candidates.

5.4 Fostering inclusion and fighting racism and discrimination

Significant developments took place with the adoption of new legislation to combat racism and discrimination. On 4 April 2024, the **Brussels-Capital Region** adopted its first **Code for Equality, Non-Discrimination, and the Promotion of Diversity**, which entered into force on 16 October 2024.⁷¹ The Code consolidates and replaces a previously fragmented body of anti-discrimination legislation, responding to the growing number of ordinances and decrees that had been addressing similar issues in isolation. Unia, the Federal Centre for Equality and Non-Discrimination, has been recommending the creation of a general framework applicable to all regional competencies in Brussels since 2019.

⁷⁰ More information on the EVC mechanism can be found on the website of the Flemish Government: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/erkennen-van-verworven-competenties#ervaring-voor-een-beroep-aan-tonen-in-een-evc-testcentrum>.

⁷¹ Décret et ordonnance conjoints de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, de la Commission communautaire commune et de la Commission communautaire française du 4 avril 2024 portant le Code bruxellois de l'égalité, de la non-discrimination et de la promotion de la diversité / Gezamenlijk decreet en ordonnantie van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest, de Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie en de Franse Gemeenschapscommissie van 4 april 2024 houdende het Brussels Wetboek inzake de gelijkheid, de non-discriminatie en de bevordering van diversiteit, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-04-16&lg_tx-t=n&pd_search=2024-04-16&s_editie=&numac_search=2024003443&caller=&2024003443=&view_nu-mac=2024003443f, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

In addition to codifying existing protections, the Code introduces several important new provisions influenced by national and European jurisprudence. These include:

- The addition of family responsibilities and single parenthood as protected criteria;
- The imposition of stronger penalties in cases of discrimination;
- The recognition of multiple and intersectional discrimination;
- A more comprehensive definition of health status that includes past, present, and future conditions;
- A broadened social origin criterion that now covers both social origin and social condition.

This legislation aims to promote equality and inclusion throughout the region by combatting all forms of discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities and treatment, and fostering diversity in public and private life.

In parallel, the **Brussels-Capital Region** has taken steps to address the challenges posed by digitalisation through the **adoption of the joint ordinance 'Digital Brussels'** on 21 February 2024.⁷² Developed in collaboration with the French Community Commission (COCOF) and the Common Community Commission (COCOM), the ordinance seeks to promote digital inclusion by ensuring that all online administrative procedures and communications are accessible to everyone. This framework introduces new rights for citizens, such as the right to complete formalities online, the right to receive support for navigating digital services, and the right to adequate access and opening hours that reflect both the missions of public institutions and the needs of the public.

However, concerns about potential discriminatory impacts led 24 civil society organisations to petition the Constitutional Court in October 2024, requesting the annulment of certain provisions they viewed as exclusionary. A similar movement unfolded in the **Walloon Region**, where **civil society groups voiced opposition to the 'Digital Wallonia' strategy**. Their main concern was that the push for digitalisation would eliminate physical service counters, along with email and phone-based services, thereby disadvantaging segments of the population without digital access or literacy. In response, lawmakers added an amendment to the decree on digitalisation on 20 November 2024, ensuring that physical service counters would be preserved alongside digital alternatives.

⁷² Décret et ordonnance conjoints de la Commission communautaire française, la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale et la Commission communautaire commune du 25 janvier 2024 relatifs à la transition numérique des autorités publiques / Decreet en ordonnantie van de Franse Gemeenschapscommissie, het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest en de Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie van 25 januari betreffende de digitale transitie van de overheidsinstanties, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=24-02-21&numac=2024000830, last accessed on 25 May 2025.

In the **Flemish Region**, the Flemish Government invested € 400 000 in the establishment of '**warm welcome houses**' in the provinces of West Flanders, Antwerp, Limburg and Flemish Brabant. These centres offer newcomers and their families support in their integration, including guidance to suitable training courses and information about the labour market. In addition, the Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (Agii), in collaboration with the city of Mechelen, Lier, the Agency 'Digital Flanders', and the Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities, developed a '**Welcome App**' to help newcomers navigate their way through the municipality in which they live. The app offers information on leisure, healthcare, housing and education in multiple languages. The project runs until June 2025 and aims for a ready-made solution with which all Flemish municipalities can better inform both newcomers and residents.

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ⁷³



- Inform on Monitoring the Integration of Third-Country Nationals
- Inform on the Implementation of measures for civic training as an important tool for integration of third-country nationals (EMN-OECD joint publication)
- Ad Hoc Query on a successful integration for the parents and a better support for their children's education
- Ad Hoc Query on involving and consulting third-country nationals during the process of developing migration policies
- Ad Hoc Query on integration requirements prior to admission of third-country nationals for the purpose of residence
- Ad Hoc Query on national immigrant consultative bodies
- Ad Hoc Query on language courses as part of the integration procedure
- Ad Hoc Query on linguistic diversity of students and young people with a migratory background
- Ad Hoc Query on young people with a migratory background and associative realities

⁷³ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



CITIZENSHIP AND STATELESSNESS

Belgian citizenship can be obtained through *attribution* (for minors) or *acquisition* (for adults and emancipated minors). ⁷⁴ In most cases, the acquisition of citizenship (6.1) requires the submission of a 'declaration of citizenship', which must answer to a set of conditions outlined in the Belgian Nationality Code ⁷⁵, including language proficiency in one of the three national languages, social integration, and economic participation. Persons without a nationality can be recognised as stateless by one of six family courts in Belgium (*familierechtbank* / *tribunal de la famille*). Recognised stateless persons can submit an application to the Immigration Office to obtain a residence permits on the grounds of statelessness, a new procedure introduced in 2024 (6.2).

6.1 Acquisition of citizenship: amendments to the Belgian Nationality Code

Belgian Constitution

Article 10

No class distinction exist in the State.

Belgians are equal before the law; they are alone eligible for civil and military service, but for the exceptions that can be created by a law for particular cases.

Equality between women and men is guaranteed.

Article 11

Enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognised for Belgians must be provided without discrimination. To this end, laws and federate laws guarantee among others the rights and freedoms of ideological and philosophical minorities.

The Belgian Nationality Code mandates – in some cases – proof of language proficiency in one of the three national languages corresponding to level A2 of the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which includes both an oral and a written component. ⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Acquisition of citizenship can also be done through the process of naturalisation, but it is only granted on the grounds of exceptional merits or for recognised stateless persons.

⁷⁵ Belgian Nationality Code (Code de la nationalité belge du 28 juin 1984 / Wetboek van de Belgische nationaliteit van 28 juni 1984), https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=fr&la=F&table_name=loi&cn=1984062835, last accessed on 25 July 2024.

⁷⁶ Article 12bis of the Belgian Nationality Code.

On 23 March 2023, the Constitutional Court (ruling n°53/2023) ⁷⁷ declared that requiring all applicants, regardless of literacy, to complete both oral and written components violates Articles 10 and 11 of the Belgian Constitution. ⁷⁸ These articles uphold the principle of equal treatment, stipulating that different situations should not be treated identically – meaning illiterate individuals should not face the same requirements as literate ones. The Court argued that the fact that the written component is not achieved cannot necessarily be attributed to an unwillingness to integrate or to a lack of effort, but to a lack of certain basic linguistic competences.

To rectify this, a law was adopted on 27 March 2024 amending the Belgian Nationality Code. ⁷⁹ The concept of “illiterate person” is introduced in the Code and defined under Article 1, §2, 5°. The amended Code foresees that **persons who are illiterate are exempted from having to meet the written component of the language requirement in view of acquiring Belgian citizenship**, and instead only have to prove oral knowledge at level A2 of the CEFR in order to fulfil this requirement. The Code also foresees that the declaration of citizenship must be accompanied by a handwritten statement and signature of the applicant (Article 12bis, §3). This provision was also amended to create an exemption for persons who are unable to handwrite this statement (not only illiterate persons but also persons with a handicap): they will now be able to deliver this statement orally.

The same law also introduced changes concerning the loss of citizenship for minors. According to Article 8, §4 of the Belgian Nationality Code, minors who obtained Belgian citizenship through one of their parents lose their citizenship if the family link with that parent is no longer valid (for instance, if the family link was established based on fraudulent documents). On 19 January 2023, the Constitutional Court made a significant ruling stating that minors in this situation should have the right to appeal (ruling n°12/2023) ⁸⁰. The Court argued that denying the right to appeal the loss of citizenship was disproportionate to the legislative objective. Therefore, if appealed, courts have the authority to retroactively reverse the loss of citizenship if its consequences are deemed disproportional to the individual.

⁷⁷ Constitutional Court, ruling nr 53/2023, 23 March 2023.

⁷⁸ Official translation of the Belgian Constitution, available at https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/constitution/GrondwetUK.pdf.

⁷⁹ Loi du 27 mars 2024 portant dispositions en matière de digitalisation de la justice et dispositions diverses Ibis / Wet van 27 maart 2024 houdende bepalingen inzake digitalisering van justitie en diverse bepalingen Ibis, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=24-03-29&numac=2024002950, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁸⁰ Constitutional Court, ruling nr 12/2023, 19 January 2023.

In response, an additional provision was introduced in the Belgian Nationality Code (Article 7ter). This new article specifies that **if the descent of a Belgian parent is no longer established, the automatic revocation of the child's Belgian nationality does not occur if the judgment annulling the descent specifies that Belgian nationality is maintained**. Additionally, the article states that if Belgian nationality is revoked, the court ruling must include information about the right to appeal the revocation within 15 days of notification. The civil registrar must notify the person concerned or their legal representative of any decision to withdraw citizenship as soon as possible by registered letter. As the notification of withdrawal was not previously regulated in the Belgian Nationality Code, this is a significant development that has important repercussions in practice (**see Box 14**).

Box 14: Time-limit to appeal a revocation of citizenship in practice

Since the entry into force of the new Article 7ter in the Belgian Nationality Code, some civil registrars have interpreted it as meaning **that an appeal against a decision to withdraw citizenship can only be made within 15 days of notification of the decision in all cases where citizenship is withdrawn**. This would include, for instance, cases where minors who have been granted Belgian citizenship because they were born on the Belgian territory and did not possess any other nationality (i.e. children who would otherwise be stateless, in application of Article 10 of the BNC), lose their Belgian citizenship because it has been demonstrated that they have another nationality. These cases have been the subject of debate in Belgium following instances of children from Palestinian origin having their Belgian citizenship revoked on the grounds that they possess Palestinian citizenship. According to NANSEN, a non-profit centre of legal expertise on international protection, this extensive interpretation of this article is contrary to the intention of the legislator to provide minors with accurate information on their right to appeal. They argue that the 15-day window to appeal should be limited to cases foreseen in Article 7ter, namely cases of loss of citizenship resulting from the annulment of the family link between a minor and their Belgian parent, and should not be applied to all other cases where nationality is revoked.

6.2 Statelessness

A significant development took place concerning stateless persons in Belgium, with the adoption of a new law on 10 March 2024 that introduces **a new administrative procedure to grant residence permits on the basis of statelessness**.⁸¹ Previously, stateless persons could only obtain residence based on “humanitarian grounds” (Article 9bis of the Immigration Act). The new procedure is entrusted to the Immigration Office, which is not obliged to hear the person concerned before making a decision. If the Immigration Office decides to take the application into consideration, it requests an opinion from the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), which is not binding and therefore not subject to an appeal and based on which the Immigration Office makes a decision. In the event of a positive decision, a 5-year residence permit is granted, and the applicant is entitled to family reunification under the same conditions as recognised refugees. In the event of a negative decision, a non-suspensive appeal for annulment is opened before the Council for Alien Law Litigation.

Although the main objective of this law is to create a new pathway to residency for recognised stateless persons, one of the effects it creates is **a new stateless determination procedure** alongside the existing one (recognition of statelessness status by family courts). Individuals who have not been recognised as stateless by a family court, but who introduce a request for residence as stateless person will have their statelessness status examined by the Immigration Office and the CGRS. This examination consists firstly of an assessment of whether the applicant falls under the definition of stateless person within the meaning of the UN Convention on Stateless Persons. Secondly, it assesses their application for a residence permit under this new procedure created by the law of 10 March 2024. However, only individuals who follow the procedure at the family court to obtain recognition as a stateless person, and are effectively recognised as a stateless person, receive the ‘status of stateless person’. Their nationality in the National Registry will then be adjusted to ‘stateless person’, and they are entitled to all adequate documentation (in particular travel documents, but also work permit, etc.). This is not the case after a residence procedure on the grounds of statelessness with the Immigration Office.

⁸¹ Law of 10 March 2024 amending the Immigration Act on the right to family reunification, *op. cit.*

Despite its announced objective of filling a gap in legislation, identified by the Constitutional Court in two separate rulings in 2009 (n°198/2009) and 2012 (n°1/2012) ⁸², **the new law was received with concerns**. The European Network on Statelessness (ENS) and NANSSEN published a joint opinion analysing the initial legislative proposal. ⁸³ They welcomed the introduction of a residence permit for stateless persons, but said the proposed procedure also contains several worrying elements, including the imposition of conditions that go beyond the 1954 Convention and UNHCR guidelines (for example, by checking that the individual does not possess an unlimited stay in Belgium or that they have been residing regularly on the territory for more than three months), and the creation of a complex mechanism which is not consistent with Belgium's international obligations. The UNHCR also commented the proposal. ⁸⁴ Like ENS and NANSSEN, the UNHCR welcomes the initiative, but fears that in its current form the legislation could weaken the protection of stateless persons in Belgium rather than strengthen it.

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ⁸⁵



- Ad Hoc Query on the conditions to acquire citizenship by naturalisation
- Ad Hoc Query on citizenship tests as part of the naturalisation process

⁸² Constitutional Court, ruling nr 198/2009, 17 December 2009; and Constitutional Court, ruling nr 1/2012, 11 January 2012.

⁸³ Nansen and European Network on Statelessness, 'Avis conjoint du Réseau européen sur l'apatridie et de Nansen sur le projet de loi modifiant la loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers, en vue de régler le droit de séjour des apatrides', Doc 55 3600/001, 29 September 2023, https://nansen-refugee.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/231205-Avis-conjoint-Apatridie-NANSSEN-ENS_defi-1.pdf, last accessed 25 July 2024. A summary of the joint opinion is available on the ENS website: <https://www.statelessness.eu/updates/publications/joint-opinion-pending-legal-reform-belgium>.

⁸⁴ UNHCR, 'Commentaires du Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés relatifs au projet de loi modifiant la loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers concernant la demande d'admission au séjour pour apatridie', 3600/001, 5 December 2023, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/natlegcomments/unhcr/2023/fr/147077>, last accessed on 25 July 2024.

⁸⁵ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



BORDERS, VISA AND SCHENGEN

In order to enter the Belgian territory, individuals who do not have Belgian nationality must be able to prove that they meet certain requirements for legal entry. As Belgium is a signatory to the Schengen Agreement, which eliminates controls at the internal borders of the Schengen area, conditions for accessing the territory are only checked at external borders **(7.1)** Whereas border security is managed by the **Federal Police**, the **Immigration Office** is responsible for issuing visas **(7.2)**, working hand in hand with the diplomatic and consular network of the **Federal Public Service (FPS) Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation**. Whereas long-term stays (more than three months) are a national competence, access to the territory for short-term stays falls under a common European visa policy, as part of a wider Schengen governance **(7.3)**.

7.1 Border management

The law of 12 May 2024 **allows the deployment of Frontex personnel at Belgian external borders** to carry out border control functions.⁸⁶ The law also specifies the conditions for the use of Frontex agents as escorts in the forced return of foreign nationals **(see chapter 11)**.⁸⁷ If necessary, deployed Frontex staff can use coercive measures or proceed with deprivation of liberty. They also have access to specific national, European and international databases. All these powers must be exercised in accordance with the Belgian Police Service Act. This law was adopted following the recommendations made in the final report of the Commission for the Evaluation of the Policy of Voluntary Return and Forced Removal of Foreign Nationals of 21 September 2020⁸⁸ **(see also section 11.3)**.

As the Schengen area is shared across multiple countries, information sharing is a critical component of border security. In 2024, **Belgium continued the roll-out of digital border management systems** that aim to facilitate this coordination between members of the Schengen area.

⁸⁶ *The Belgian external borders of the Schengen area are: international airports (Brussels, Antwerp, Ostend-Bruges, Brussels South Charleroi, Liège and Kortrijk-Wevelgem); ports (Antwerp-Bruges, Ostend, Ghent, Nieuwpoort, Blankenberge); and the Eurostar terminal at Brussels-Midi railway station (as the United Kingdom is not part of the Schengen area).*

⁸⁷ *Law of 12 May 2024 amending the Immigration Act and the Reception Act on a proactive return policy (Loi du 12 mai 2024 modifiant la loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers et la loi du 12 janvier 2007 sur l'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et de certaines autres catégories d'étrangers sur la politique de retour proactive / Wet van 12 mei 2024 tot wijziging van de wet van 15 december 1980 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen en van de wet van 12 januari 2007 betreffende de opvang van asielzoekers en van bepaalde andere categorieën van vreemdelingen inzake het aanklappend terugkeerbeleid), https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-07-10&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-07-10&s_editie=&numac_search=2024006654&caller=&2024006654=&view_numac=2024006654f, last accessed on 28 May 2025.*

⁸⁸ *Rapport final de la Commission chargée de l'évaluation de la politique du retour volontaire et de l'éloignement forcé d'étrangers, 21 September 2020, <https://www.dekamer.be/finw/pdf/55/1707/55K1707001.pdf>, sheet 18: Removal with Federal Police Escort, last accessed on 25 March 2025.*

- The **Entry/Exit System (EES) (see definition)** is a digital system that will replace the manual stamping of passports for third-country nationals entering and exiting the Schengen area. The EES will store this information in a central database, making it easier to manage external borders and verify compliance with authorised stay periods. On 17 July 2024, a Royal Decree was issued to prepare for the EES.⁸⁹ The Royal Decree outlines national rules of a more technical and operational nature, further implementing the Law of 19 March 2023 which regulates the consequences of the EES for Belgian public services.⁹⁰ The new Royal Decree establishes a complete list of national authorities with access to the EES; sets the rules for a national online reporting procedure considering the future absence of entry stamps in passports; and defines the procedure for creating an EES record within the territory.
- The **European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) (see definition)** is a digital system designed to strengthen security at external borders of the Schengen area by providing a pre-screening process that will identify potential security, migratory and health risks. Visa-exempt visitors will be required to obtain a pre-travel authorisation online before their arrival. This authorisation will be valid for a period of up to three years. On 28 March 2024, the Belgian Parliament adopted the law which establishes the Belgian ETIAS National Unit and defines its organisation and functioning.⁹¹ It will enforce the ETIAS Regulation adopted by the European Union in 2018. The ETIAS-law aims to establish the legal framework needed for the implementation of the ETIAS Regulation (EU) 2018/1240⁹², including the creation of an ETIAS National Unit within the

⁸⁹ Arrêté royal du 17 juillet 2024 modifiant l'arrêté royal du 8 octobre 1981 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers, en ce qui concerne le système d'entrée/de sortie / Koninklijk besluit van 17 juli 2024 tot wijziging van het koninklijk besluit van 8 oktober 1981 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen, wat betreft het inreis-uitreissysteem, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=24-09-18&numac=2024007556, last accessed on 25 March 2025.

⁹⁰ Loi du 19 mars 2023 modifiant la loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers, en ce qui concerne le système d'entrée/sortie / Wet van 19 maart 2023 tot wijziging van de wet van 15 december 1980 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen, wat betreft het inreis-uitreissysteem, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/article.pl?language=fr&lg_txt=f&type=&sort=&numac_search=&cn_search=2023031909&caller=eli&view_numac=2023031909nl, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁹¹ Loi du 29 mars 2024 relative à la création et à l'organisation des missions de l'Unité nationale ETIAS / Wet van 29 maart 2024 betreffende de oprichting en de organisatie van de opdrachten van ETIAS Nationale Eenheid, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-06-17&htit=ETIAS&choix1=et&choix2=et&fr=f&nl=n&du=d&trier=promulgation&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-04-29&s_edite=&numac_search=2024003936&caller=list&2024003936=2&view_numac=2024003936f, last accessed on 25 July 2024.

⁹² Regulation (EU) 2018/1240 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 September 2018 establishing a European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) and amending Regulations (EU) No 1077/2011, (EU) No 515/2014, (EU) 2016/399, (EU) 2016/1624 and (EU) 2017/2226, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1240/oj/eng>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

FPS Interior. This unit consists of two sections: one responsible for security and public health, and the other for migration. The framework also includes setting up the national appeal procedure, data protection rules, and more. Additional technical and operational rules are expected to be provided through a Royal Decree in 2025.

- On 11 November 2024, the Royal Decree implementing the [Schengen Information System \(SIS\) \(see definition\)](#) Act was adopted.⁹³ The additional national rules in the Royal Decree are of a more technical/operational nature, further executing the Law of 2 March 2023 on the operation and use of the SIS.⁹⁴ The Royal Decree aims to provide a solid national legal base for the list of authorities with a right of access to the SIS, as well as a clarification of the cases when an alert in SIS-return is only.

The Belgian Maritime Code (*Code de la Navigation; Scheepvaartboek*) has been amended to **clarify the conditions under which a stowaway must be disembarked**.⁹⁵ The modification also introduces an appeal procedure in cases where a stowaway is detained on board (i.e., not disembarked). This amendment was adopted in response to a Constitutional Court judgment of 9 June 2022, which held that the disembarkation prohibition set out in Article 2.4.4.2 of the Belgian Shipping Code may, in certain circumstances, be disproportionate to the intended objective.⁹⁶ This includes situations involving stowaways in need of urgent medical assistance or those who are minors.

⁹³ Arrêté royal du 11 novembre 2024 portant exécution de la loi SIS et modifiant l'arrêté royal du 8 octobre 1981 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers en ce qui concerne l'exécution de la loi SIS / Koninklijk besluit van 11 november 2024 tot uitvoering van de SIS-wet en tot wijziging van het koninklijk besluit van 8 oktober 1981 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen, wat betreft de uitvoering van de SIS-wet, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-12-09&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-12-09&s_editie=&numac_search=2024011097&caller=&2024011097=&view_numac=2024011097f, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁹⁴ Loi du 2 mars 2023 relatif au fonctionnement et à l'utilisation du système d'information Schengen (SIS) dans le domaine de la coopération policière et de la coopération judiciaire en matière pénale, dans le domaine des vérifications aux frontières et aux fins du retour des ressortissants de pays tiers en séjour irrégulier / Wet van 2 maart 2023 betreffende de werking en het gebruik van het Schengeninformatiesysteem (SIS) op het gebied van politieke en justitiële samenwerking in strafzaken, op het gebied van grenscontroles en voor de terugkeer van illegaal verblijvende onderdanen van derde landen, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=23-03-09&numac=2023030500, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁹⁵ Loi du 16 mai 2024 modifiant le Code belge de la Navigation et des différentes lois relatives à la réglementation de la navigation / Wet van 16 mei 2024 tot wijziging van het Belgisch Scheepvaartwetboek en diverse wetten betreffende de scheepvaartregelgeving, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-07-04&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-07-04&s_editie=&numac_search=2024006481&caller=&2024006481=&view_numac=2024006481f, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

⁹⁶ Constitutional Court, nr 2022/75, 9 June 2022. Appeal lodged on 30 January 2020 by the NGOs 'Ligue des droits humains', 'Nansen', 'Jesuit Refugee Service-Belgium', 'Association pour le droit des Etrangers', 'Coordination et Initiative pour et avec des Réfugiés et Etrangers' and 'Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen'.

7.2 Visa policy

The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum aims to fully digitalise visa procedures by 2025, including the ability to submit visa applications online. In 2023, the FPS Foreign Affairs launched pilot projects to process visa applications from diplomatic posts in Iran, Russia, and China based on scanned documents. External service providers digitise the files and transfer them to the FPS Foreign Affairs' Visa-on-Web platform, where applicants must submit their applications online before scheduling an appointment with a consular or diplomatic post.

In 2024, the FPS Foreign Affairs continued the **digitisation of visa procedures**, with diplomatic posts in Türkiye, Cameroon, Tunisia, and Lebanon. This digitisation process will be further expanded in 2025 to include all other Belgian diplomatic posts. This process aims to reduce the processing time of visa applications.

7.3 Monitoring and evaluating Schengen governance

Following the **visa evaluation** (as part of the Schengen evaluation cycle to which all Member States are subject) that Belgium underwent in 2022 in its diplomatic post in Beirut, the Schengen evaluation report highlighted a number of recommendations which needed to be addressed to put an end to certain shortcomings. In 2024, several of these recommendations were implemented in accordance with the Schengen Evaluation and Monitoring Mechanism or SEMM Regulation (**see definition**).⁹⁷ At the end of 2024, only a few modifications of the regulations, with a limited impact and requiring more in-depth and longer-term work, were still in the pipeline.

On 13 March 2024, the Permanent Representatives Committee of the Council of the European Union (Coreper) adopted a mandate for negotiations with the European Parliament to revise the **visa suspension mechanism** (VSM) of Visa Regulation 1806/2018.⁹⁸ For Belgian authorities, this revision is a priority, since it should make it possible to respond more quickly and effectively in the event of an influx of migrants related to the non-adjustment of third countries' visa policies to those of the EU. Belgian authorities hope that strengthening the credibility of the VSM by introducing new provisions will make non-EU countries more aware of the risk of the re-imposition of visa requirements.

⁹⁷ Council Regulation (EU) 2022/922 of 9 June 2022 on the establishment and operation of an evaluation and monitoring mechanism to verify the application of the Schengen acquis, and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022R0922>, last accessed on 25 July 2024.

⁹⁸ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 as regards the revision of the suspension mechanism, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52023PC0642>, last accessed on 25 March 2025.

Definitions of key abbreviations

Entry/Exit System (EES): system which registers entry and exit data and refusal of entry data of third country nationals crossing the external borders of the Schengen States.

European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS): an automated online system for identifying irregular migration, security or public health risks associated with visa exempt third country nationals traveling to the EU prior to their arrival. Schengen Evaluation and Monitoring Mechanism (SEMM) SEMM): a mechanism established to verify the application of the Schengen acquis in the Schengen Member States to which it applies in full as well as in Schengen Member States to which, in accordance with the relevant Protocols annexed to the TEU and to the TFEU, the Schengen acquis applies in part to ensure an effective, consistent and transparent application of the Schengen rules and regulations while at the same time maintaining a high level of mutual trust between those Member States.

Schengen Information System (SIS) : a joint information system that enables the relevant authorities in each EU Member State, by means of an automated search procedure, to have access to alerts on persons and property for the purposes of border checks and other police and customs checks carried out within the country in accordance with national law and, for some specific categories of alerts (Art. 96 of the Schengen acquis), for the purposes of issuing visas, residence permits and the administration of legislation on aliens in the context of the application of the provisions of the Schengen Convention relating to the movement of persons.

Focus on the Belgian Presidency: activities related to visa policy



The combined efforts of the French, Swedish, and Belgian Presidencies in recent years to **address the credibility issues of the visa suspension mechanism (VSM)** – particularly its limited triggers and restrictive provisions – led to in-depth discussions under the Belgian Presidency in 2024, culminating in the adoption of the negotiating mandate (**see section 7.3**).

Thorough examination took place under the Belgian presidency with discussions in the Visa Waiver Program group (VWP) of 17 January, 20 February and in a Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Counsellors meeting on 8 March where a broad agreement could be reached thanks to progress made by the latter in reaching compromises on three essential issues:

- The grounds for triggering the mechanism;
- The articulation between the suspension visa mechanism and third countries benefitting from EU visa waiver agreements (which contain specific provisions suspending visa exemption needing to be taken into consideration when those third countries are subjected to the activation of the mechanism);
- the urgency procedure (which required a subtle balance between the conditions under which it can be triggered and the respective roles of the EU institutions in it (the Council, the Commission and the Parliament)).

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ⁹⁹



- Inform on Processing the biometric data of third-country nationals
- Inform on Digitalisation of identity documents and residence permits issued to third-country nationals
- Ad Hoc Query on visa misuse
- Ad Hoc Query on visas and the right to work

⁹⁹ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



IRREGULAR MIGRATION INCLUDING MIGRANT SMUGGLING

In 2024, Belgian authorities continued their efforts to prevent irregular migration and combat migrant smuggling. Eurostat data shows that 10 150 individuals were found to be illegally present in Belgium, marking a slight decrease compared to 2023 (10 825) and 2022 (10 965). The fight against irregular migration includes preventive measures such as information campaigns aimed at prospective migrants, designed to raise awareness of existing risks associated with irregular migration, alternative legal pathways, and potential prospects in countries of origin and transit **(8.1)**. When the irregular movement of persons benefits a third-party, directly or indirectly, financial or material, the phenomenon becomes a case of migrant smuggling **(see definitions under chapter 9)**. In response, the **police and judicial authorities** cooperate to investigate and prosecute smugglers and smuggling organisations **(8.2)**. Finally, as a movement that involves the crossing of a border, international cooperation with both EU Member States and third countries plays a key role in addressing irregular migration and tackling migrant smuggling **(8.3)**.

8.1 Preventing irregular migration

Information campaigns are designed to raise awareness about the risks associated with irregular migration. They target audiences in countries of origin, transit countries, as well as within Belgium. Their aim is to inform people about Belgian and EU migration laws and policies, and the consequences of irregular stay, while also highlighting legal and safe alternatives and potential prospects in countries of origin and transit.

In 2024, the Immigration Office launched several **online information campaigns**. One of these featured the Schengen short stay calculator made available by the European Commission, aimed at assisting third-country nationals who enter an EU Member State legally to determine their permitted length of stay. By offering a clear and user-friendly overview of permitted stay durations, the calculator supports efforts to prevent unintentional overstays and to promote compliance with EU entry and stay rules.

In 2024, the Immigration Office and Enabel, the Belgian agency for international cooperation, completed their **awareness campaign in Guinea on the risks of dangerous migration** ("*campagne de sensibilisation sur les risques de la migration dangereuse*"), launched in November 2023 **(see also section 9.4)**. The campaign aimed to raise awareness and inform the targeted population – potential Guinean migrants and their communities, with a particular focus on young people – about the risks of dangerous migration. Deployed over 90 days, the campaign reached around 5 000 persons in total (at least 600 per site), with a focus on vulnerable young people (18-35 years old) and migrants returning to Guinea as well as youth group leaders, local actors and public actors.

8.2 Investigating and prosecuting irregular migration and migrant smuggling

In 2024, Belgium continued to serve as a transit country for migrants attempting to reach the United Kingdom, and the issue remained a priority for the Belgian authorities.

The **Belgian police continued efforts to prevent irregular and dangerous sea crossings** involving flimsy small boats. In 2024, a total of 94 investigations into migrant smuggling by land or sea were launched, including 27 cases specifically related to small boats. For instance, on 14 April 2024, a small inflatable boat carrying 38 migrants was detected off the coast near the town of Koksijde, close to the French border. The migrants had departed from France and intended to cross the English Channel. Rescue services attempted to make the boat turn back, but the passengers refused. For safety reasons, the vessel was escorted to the British border, as interception at sea would have endangered those on board.¹⁰⁰

Such interceptions – whether involving vehicles on land or small boats at sea – often serve as the starting point for broader investigations, which may give rise to coordinated actions at the international level (**see section 8.3**).

In 2024, **several judgments** were handed down in Belgium in relation to migrant smuggling:

- On 5 June 2024, the Criminal Court of Walloon Brabant delivered a ruling in a **large-scale smuggling case involving migrant smugglers who organised the illegal transport of migrants from Belgium to the United Kingdom** between 2019 and 2022. One of the organisers was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment and a fine of € 256 000. In total, 14 defendants were charged, with the court handing down four sentences of five years imprisonment, two of four years imprisonment and three of two years imprisonment.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Agence Belga, 'Le trafic d'êtres humains est de plus en plus courant, une embarcation transportant 38 migrants repérée près de Coxyde', <https://www.rtl.be/actu/belgique/societe/le-traffic-detres-humains-est-de-plus-en-plus-courant-une-embarcation/2024-04-14/article/658437>, last accessed on 12 May 2025.

¹⁰¹ Agence Belga, 'Jusqu'à 7 ans de prison ferme et 256.000 euros d'amende pour des passeurs de migrants', <https://www.rtl.be/actu/belgique/faits-divers/jusqua-7-ans-de-prison-ferme-et-256000-euros-damende-pour-des-passeurs-de/2024-06-05/article/676337>, last accessed on 12 May 2025.

- On 29 August 2024, the Correctional Court of Bruges convicted **two Syrian nationals and a Spanish national of human smuggling**. They received effective prison sentences of up to four years and a fine of € 8 000. The men were apprehended in October 2023 in the Belgian coastal area with, among other things, 41 life jackets, a small boat and an out-board motor in their vehicle. They reportedly intended to use the boat to transport migrants across the Channel to the United Kingdom.¹⁰²
- On 27 November 2024, the Correctional Court of Antwerp convicted **22 Afghan nationals for smuggling at least 113 compatriots** into Western Europe. The court imposed prison sentences of up to 18 years and fines of up to € 2 712 000. The smuggling network operated with a high degree of violence, and several teenage boys were reportedly subjected to sexual abuse. The investigation started in October 2021 and uncovered an international criminal organisation using smuggling routes through Türkiye and Serbia to transport Afghan nationals to France, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Victims reportedly paid between 5 000 and 11 000 euros for the journey.¹⁰³

Box 15: Tackling identity fraud at the Belgian international airport

Effective identity management in the field of migration is essential for enhancing security, preventing irregular migration and optimising immigration processes across the EU. As document fraud techniques grow increasingly sophisticated, Belgian authorities are taking steps to strengthen international cooperation, improve identity management systems, and provide targeted training to detect, prevent and respond to these evolving threats (**see also Focus on the Belgian Presidency**).

The Belgian airport police invested in both policy and operational improvements related to identity fraud:

- **Raising awareness among front-line border control officers** about the risks associated with fraudulent documents. This included developing and disseminating case studies to help officers better understand and identify signs of document fraud.

¹⁰² Ine Philippe, 'Tot vier jaar cel voor mensensmokkel met bootjes na interventie in Watou', <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2024/08/29/tot-vier-jaar-effectieve-celstraf-voor-mensensmokkel-met-bootjes>, last accessed on 25 May 2025.

¹⁰³ Sam De Meulder, '22 Afghanen in Antwerpen veroordeeld tot 18 jaar cel voor gewelddadige mensensmokkel', <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2024/11/27/22-afghanen-in-antwerpen-veroordeeld-tot-18-jaar-cel-voor-geweld/>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

- Conducting **specialised training programmes**, such as the border guard course, designed to inform and empower front-line officers in their critical roles at the border.
- Participating in **Frontex meetings**, where discussions on new document specimens and emerging forgery trends contributed to maintaining an up-to-date understanding of transnational threats related to fraudulent documents.
- Taking part in **Identity Week**, an event that showcases solutions in secure credentials, biometrics, Identity and Access Management (IAM), authentication, verification, border control, and fraud prevention.

8.3 International cooperation to counter irregular migration and migrant smuggling

In light of the increasing complexity of migrant smuggling networks, Belgium continues to prioritise international cooperation. These networks often operate across borders, rely on sophisticated financial structures, and exploit modern technologies – including social media – to recruit migrants and promote dangerous journeys. Their activities pose major challenges to border management and public security, calling for a concerted response from EU Member States and partners.

In this context, the fourth meeting of the **Calais Group** was held on 10 December 2024. Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – along with the European Commission, EUROPOL and Frontex – agreed on a five-point priority plan to tackle irregular migration and migrant smuggling in 2025. Key priorities include targeting illicit financial flows that sustain smuggling networks and countering the use of social media by organised crime groups to advertise Channel crossings.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Government United Kingdom, 'Calais Group Priority Plan on Countering Migrant Smuggling for 2025', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/calais-group-priority-plan/calais-group-priority-plan-on-countering-migrant-smuggling-for-2025>, last accessed on 28 March 2025.

To further combat smuggling across the English Channel, in 2022 EUROPOL launched the Operational Task Force (OTF Wave), which brings together enforcement authorities from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. This investigation successfully uncovered the structure and *modi operandi* of a major criminal network composed of Iraqi and Syrian nationals of Kurdish origin. Operating primarily from Germany, the suspects organised the procurement, storage and transport of inflatable boats used to smuggle migrants from the Calais area to the United Kingdom. The OTF Wave resulted in a **joint action day** being organised on 21 February 2024 by Eurojust, involving judicial and law enforcement authorities from Belgium, France and Germany. It led to 19 arrests (including the leader and the main organisers of the network) and 26 locations raided.¹⁰⁵ The operation dismantled one of the largest migrant smuggling networks active in cross-Channel operations, responsible for transporting migrants in an irregular situation from France to the United Kingdom. Authorities arrested key individuals, seized illegal equipment, and disrupted the network's operations, targeting both the logistical infrastructure and the financial flows sustaining these criminal activities.

Belgium also cooperates with third countries in order to prevent irregular migration. In 2024, **bilateral meetings** were held between Belgian authorities and the authorities of several third countries. For example, in March 2024, the Director General of the Immigration Office visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo). During his visit, he held a press conference in Kinshasa and gave an interview to a local radio station. He drew attention to the sharp increase in asylum applications from Congolese nationals, most of which were found to be unfounded and subsequently rejected. He also addressed the risks associated with irregular migration to Belgium.¹⁰⁶

Other such bilateral meetings took place with authorities from China, Angola, Morocco, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Moldova and Serbia, among others. Belgian authorities regard such exchanges as important opportunities to raise awareness about the dangers of irregular migration, including the risks of exploitation, and to inform local populations about legal and safe alternatives. Through these dialogues, the Immigration Office seeks to counter misinformation and provide accurate and reliable information about the dangers of human trafficking and irregular migration.

¹⁰⁵ Federal police, 'Small Boats: 19 arrestations!', <https://www.police.be/5998/fr/actualites/small-boats-19-arrestations>, last accessed on 28 March 2025.

¹⁰⁶ La Libre, 'Le patron de l'Office des étrangers à Kinshasa face au regain d'immigration illégale', <https://www.rtl.be/fil-info/info/le-patron-de-loffice-des-etrangers-kinshasa-face-au-regain-dimmigration-illegale/2024-07-15/article/691007#:~:text=Outre%20ses%20contacts%20officiels%2C%20le,1238%20nouvelles%20demandes%20de%20protection>, last accessed on 28 March 2025.

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ¹⁰⁷



- Ad Hoc Query on residence permits for victims of migrant smuggling

¹⁰⁷ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

Trafficking in human beings (or human trafficking) is the act of exploiting people for financial gain through sexual (prostitution, child pornography, exploitation) or economic means (degrading working conditions, exploitation of begging), and can include acts such as organ removal or forced criminality (**see definition**). Though human trafficking does not necessarily entail a cross-border element, migrants are particularly vulnerable to trafficking during their journey, and migrant workers are more at risk of economic exploitation.

In Belgium, various actors are closely involved in the fight against human trafficking. The **Inter-departmental Coordination Unit to combat Trafficking in and Smuggling of Human Beings**, under the authority of the Federal Public Service (FPS) Justice, is the main coordinating body (*Cellule interdépartementale de coordination de la lutte contre la traite et le trafic des êtres humains / Interdepartementale Coördinatiecél ter bestrijding van de mensensmokkel en mensenhandel*). A Bureau staffed by representatives from various departments (*inter alia* the Prosecutors' Offices, the Federal Police, the Immigration Office, the Social Inspection Service, etc.) handles the unit's day-to-day work and prepares and executes decisions, recommendations and initiatives. Three **specialised reception centres** for victims of trafficking run by the NGOs PAG-ASA in Brussels, Payoke in Antwerp and Sürya in Liège, which can accommodate adult and minor victims, are part of the Inter-departmental Unit. **Myria, the Federal Migration Centre** acts as the independent National Rapporteur on human trafficking and maintains its role as an observer within the Inter-departmental Unit and its Bureau.

The 2021-2025 Action Plan on Fighting Human Trafficking serves as the guiding framework for Belgium's actions in combating human trafficking.¹⁰⁸ It focuses, among other things, on strengthening legislative or regulatory instruments (**9.1**), training and raising awareness among key stakeholders and the general public (**9.2**), and enhancing international cooperation, which in practice means actively engaging in cooperation between EU Member States (**9.3**), and with third countries (**9.4**).

¹⁰⁸ Service de la Politique criminelle, 'Action plan Fighting human trafficking 2021-2025', http://www.dsb-spc.be/doc/pdf/NAP_TIP_2021_2025_ENG.pdf, last accessed on 14 May 2024.

Trafficking or smuggling

Trafficking in human beings refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Smuggling of migrants refers to the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the irregular entry of a person into a (UN) Member State of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.

Note: Whereas human trafficking is exploitation based, smuggling is transportation based and always involves a cross border element. They can be interlinked, as a crime may start out as human smuggling but quickly turn into human trafficking. Both human trafficking and migrant smuggling are punishable in Belgium.

9.1 New legislative and policy frameworks

In 2024, two new laws impacting the prevention and fight against human trafficking came into force in Belgium. The first, which took effect on 7 February 2024, aims to **strengthen the fight against crime, including trafficking in human beings, covered up by legal activities at the municipal level**.¹⁰⁹ Municipalities can now conduct integrity investigations into specific economic sectors and activities. To do so, they can adopt a police ordinance determining the sectors concerned and the geographical area targeted. These investigations, initiated by the mayor, aim to verify whether establishments have links to organised criminal activities. If negative findings arise, the municipality can refuse or revoke operating permits and even shut down the establishment in question. This law responds to the growing concern that human trafficking, particularly for sexual exploitation and economic exploitation, often operates under the cover of legitimate businesses such as massage parlours or hotels. Authorities have increasingly identified these criminal patterns at the local level.

¹⁰⁹ *Loi du 15 janvier 2024 relative à l'approche administrative communale, à la mise en place d'une enquête d'intégrité communale et portant création d'une Direction chargée de l'Évaluation de l'Intégrité pour les Pouvoirs publics / Wet van 15 januari 2024 betreffende de gemeentelijke bestuurlijke handhaving, de instelling van een gemeentelijk integriteitsonderzoek en houdende oprichting van een Directie Integriteitsbeoordeling voor Openbare Besturen*, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-02-07&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-02-07&s_editie=&numac_search=2024000706&caller=&2024000706=&view_numac=2024000706f, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

The second, which came into force on 1 December 2024, responded to **the increasing awareness of exploitation and human trafficking occurring within the sex work sector**¹¹⁰ (see also **Box 16**)¹¹¹. According to this new law, only employers who have obtained prior authorisation are now allowed to employ sex workers under an employment contract. Without this authorisation, an employer employing sex workers may face prosecution for pimping. The issuance of the authorisation is subject to strict conditions aimed at preventing potential abuses. To be authorised as an employer under this law, the individual must meet these conditions, including the requirement of not having been convicted, either in Belgium or abroad, for criminal offences such as human trafficking. The law also places responsibility on authorities to monitor compliance through regular inspections of workplaces. Employers who fail to meet the law's conditions, including operating without authorisation or violating workers' rights, face severe penalties, such as fines, suspension or revocation of the authorisation, and possible criminal prosecution for offences like human trafficking or exploitation.

Box 16: Myria's annual report on human trafficking: focus on the exploitation of sex workers from Latin America

On 18 December 2024, Myria published its annual report '**Latin American Sex Work: A Risky Carousel**'.⁽¹⁾ Myria's findings highlight that while many Latin American sex workers enter the Belgian sex industry voluntarily, seeking better earnings, some are exploited by intermediaries with direct links to human trafficking networks. Myria notes that sex workers are often highly mobile and tend to work in private settings, which makes it particularly difficult to detect trafficking situations and to distinguish them from voluntary sex work. These workers often do not view themselves as victims, despite exploitation, and their vulnerability is compounded by limited knowledge of their rights, language barriers, and dependence on informal networks. Additionally, a lack of trust in authorities hampers efforts to provide protection and support.

¹¹⁰ *Loi du 3 mai 2024 portant des dispositions en matière du travail du sexe sous contrat de travail / Wet van 3 mei 2024 houdende bepalingen betreffende sekswerk onder arbeidsovereenkomst*, https://www.ejustice.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=24-06-06&numac=2024202750, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

¹¹¹ *References in Box 16:*

(1) Myria, '*Rapport annuel d'évaluation 2024 Traite et trafic des êtres humains – Travail du sexe latino-américain : un carrousel à risques*', <https://www.myria.be/fr/publications/rapport-annuel-devaluation-2024-traite-et-traffic-des-etres-humains-travail-du-sexe-latino-americain-un-carrousel-a-risques>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

Myria stresses the importance of increasing awareness and building resilience within this group, particularly through exchange groups that connect former sex workers with potential victims to raise awareness of exploitation and available specialised support. Myria also highlights the need to give greater attention to this issue in police training, strengthen police capacity (including recruiting officers fluent in the target group's language and familiar with the victims' culture), and further develop specialised local police teams. Additionally, Myria notes the importance of strengthening international cooperation, as well as collaboration with online platforms and messaging apps, where Latin American sex workers are highly active.

In addition to these two new laws, Belgium also reported in 2024 to the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) as part of its commitment to the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. On 1 October 2024, some 30 representatives of government agencies, public bodies and civil society met in Brussels to discuss the implementation of the recommendations from the third evaluation report prepared by the GRETA and the related Committee of the Parties' recommendation.¹¹² The discussions focused on **trafficking victims' access to justice and effective remedies**, including compensation and legal aid, the criminal justice response to trafficking, and the identification and assistance of victims. On 25 November 2024, Belgium reported to the Committee of the Parties on the measures taken to comply with its recommendation.¹¹³ This report provided detailed information on the actions implemented by Belgium to address the identified gaps and challenges in combating human trafficking, as outlined in GRETA's evaluation.

9.2 Training and awareness-raising

Efforts to combat human trafficking rely not only on legislative and policy frameworks but also on strengthening the capacity of professionals working in this field and building awareness.

The 2021-2025 Action Plan on Fighting Human Trafficking places **particular emphasis on the training of various key actors**, such as (non-specialised and specialised in human trafficking) magistrates, police services, frontline professionals from the Immigration Office and Fedasil, guardians, social workers, etc. This training, whether initial or ongoing, is designed to improve their knowledge and skills in recognising the signs of human trafficking and to clarify the role they can play when confronted with a human trafficking situation.

¹¹² Council of Europe, 'GRETA publishes its third report on Belgium', <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/-/greta-publishes-its-third-report-on-irela-1>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

¹¹³ Council of Europe, 'Monitoring of the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings', <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/belgium1>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

Training can take various forms (**see also Box 17**),¹¹⁴ including participation in international meetings that facilitate learning and the exchange of information and experiences. In 2024, members of the Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) Directorate of the National Social Security Office (*Office national de Sécurité sociale (ONSS) / Rijksdienst voor Sociale Zekerheid (RSZ)*) participated in the '**International meeting on sex work policy, the empowerment of sex workers and on combining sex work policy with the combatting of trafficking in human beings**', that took place in the Netherlands on 26 September 2024. This meeting allowed for a deepened understanding of how sex work policy intersects with human trafficking efforts. This topic was particularly relevant in Belgium given the recent Law of 3 May 2024, which regulates the employment of sex workers and establishes strict conditions to prevent exploitation and trafficking (**see 9.1**). The meeting provided participants with research-based insights into the global scope of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, highlighting how these issues manifest in various contexts worldwide. Local policies in this field were explored, particularly in how they engage both government and civil society, including sex workers themselves, to create effective and inclusive solutions. In this regard, experts such as Lieve Huijskens, Prostitution Officer for the City of Antwerp, shared local policy models and experiences from Belgium, offering practical examples of how policies can be designed and implemented to protect sex workers and combat trafficking.

¹¹⁴ References in Box 17:

(1) ECPAT, 'Panorama de la situation des mineur.es victimes d'exploitation sexuelle en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles', <https://ecpat.be/exploitation-sexuelle-des-enfants-en-federation-wallonie-bruxelles-etude-ecpat-2023/>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

(2) The Belgian sections of DEI (*Défense Internationale des Enfants*) and ECPAT (*End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes*) work together to better defend children's rights and eradicate their sexual exploitation.

(3) DEI Belgique, 'Protéger les enfants et les parents en migration dans les centres d'accueil', <https://www.dei-belgique.be/index.php/projets/en-cours/protoger-les-enfants-et-les-parents-en-migration-dans-les-centres-d-accueil.html>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

Box 17: DEI ECPAT Belgium's training in reception centres: focus on the prevention of and action against sexual violence towards children

Following the 'Overview of the Situation of Minor Victims of Sexual Exploitation in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation'⁽¹⁾ conducted in 2023, which highlighted the need to strengthen training on sexual exploitation and human trafficking for frontline actors and workers in all services involved in the care of minors at risk, DEI ECPAT Belgium,⁽²⁾ as part of the "Protecting Migrant Children and Parents in Reception Centers" project,⁽³⁾ provided training to staff from Fedasil, the Red Cross, and Caritas in 2024. The training focused, amongst others, on defining sexual violence, identifying potential signs, and equipping staff with useful tools to prevent such violence. In addition to this one-day training, DEI ECPAT Belgium has implemented "support pathways" with teams from certain reception centres, each lasting 10 days.

Through these activities, DEI ECPAT Belgium identified several key findings. In addition to challenges related to limited financial resources and staffing, it was found that **two-thirds of the workers in these centres lack the necessary tools to identify and respond to situations of sexual violence or exploitation**. There is also a need for increased support for children living with their families in reception centres. These children, while often receiving less focus than unaccompanied minors, still require tailored support. DEI ECPAT Belgium will introduce a new training on "sexually transgressive behaviours" in 2025, aimed at equipping social workers with the knowledge and skills needed to identify and address such behaviours in reception centres.

Complementing these training efforts, **awareness-raising initiatives** have also been strengthened to reach a broader range of actors who may come into contact with potential victims or play a role in preventing exploitation. These initiatives aimed to strengthen the capacity of non-specialised professionals, including those working in sectors such as hospitality or diplomacy:

- Belgian authorities launched an **awareness action targeting staff in the hotel sector**. Hotels in the Brussels Region and its periphery that are members of the Brussels Hotel Association received a letter aimed at raising awareness about human trafficking in Belgium and offering to provide informational brochures for hotel staff. Approximately 20 hotels responded, expressing interest in receiving copies of the brochure. Developed in collaboration with various partners – including the federal police, specialised reception centres for human trafficking victims, DEI ECPAT Belgium, and the Brussels Hotel Association – the brochure describes what constitutes human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and explains how to recognise potential signs of exploitation. It also offers practical advice and useful contacts.

- The **staff of Belgium's diplomatic missions abroad** were also targeted by the awareness-raising efforts on human trafficking. Belgian authorities updated the information brochure providing diplomatic personnel with a deeper understanding of human trafficking, along with the policies and legal frameworks in place in Belgium to address this issue. The brochure, which includes up-to-date examples of how human trafficking manifests in practice, aims to guide diplomats in identifying potential trafficking victims by recognising key indicators, such as physical or psychological abuse, dependence on a supervisor or employer, and suspicious travel documents. It also outlines the crucial role diplomatic personnel play in preventing human trafficking, which includes detecting potential victims through the provided indicators, reporting suspicious activities, and supplying pertinent information to Belgian authorities. The brochure was distributed to diplomatic posts at the start of 2025.

Awareness-raising efforts also targeted the general public (**see also Box 19**).

¹¹⁵ In 2024, Belgium renewed its support for the **Blue Heart Campaign** against human trafficking. The campaign was launched on 22 July in Antwerp by the Belgian Minister of Justice and Vice Prime Minister in collaboration with key stakeholders, including the three specialised reception centres for victims of trafficking (PAG-ASA, Payoke, and Sürya), the national rapporteur Myria, the Social Intelligence and Investigation Service (*Service d'Information et de Recherche Sociale (SIRS) / Sociale Inlichtingen- en Opsporingsdienst (SIOD)*), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). As part of the campaign, the Belgian Federal Public Service (SPF) Justice distributed brochures and posters with the slogan "Let's bring human trafficking out of the shadows" ("*Sortons la traite des êtres humains de l'ombre*" / "*Maak mensenhandel zichtbaar*"). On 30 July 2024, for World Day Against Human Trafficking, a series of events took place, including the Manneken-Pis statue wearing a Blue Heart-inspired costume, and several landmarks across Belgium were lit in blue. Additionally, PAG-ASA set up information stands to engage the public and share information on how to get involved in the fight against human trafficking.

¹¹⁵ References in Box 18:

(1) Samilia, 'Prévention auprès des jeunes en FWB', <http://samilia.org/projets/prevention-aupres-des-jeunes-en-fwb/#:~:text=La%20Fondation%20Samilia%20m%C3%A8ne%20actuellement,de%20la%20F%C3%A9d%C3%A9ration%20Wallonie%2DBruxelles>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

Box 18: Samilia's awareness-raising activities in secondary schools: focus on the sexual exploitation of minors, particularly through social media

In 2024, the non-profit organisation Samilia offered awareness-raising activities to (Belgian and non-Belgian) students in the 4th, 5th, and 6th years of secondary education throughout French-speaking Belgium.⁽¹⁾ These activities aimed to inform young people about the reality of human trafficking in Belgium and Europe and to raise awareness more specifically about sexual exploitation through social media. The objective was to equip students with tools to identify, avoid, and respond to situations of exploitation. The approximately 2-hour sessions combined interactive presentations, video clips, and discussions to maximise interaction with the students, explore their knowledge, views and personal experiences, and gather testimonies from those who may have been victims.

According to Samilia, the activities revealed a **significant lack of awareness among young people regarding human trafficking and the realities of prostitution**. One in three students reported having received paid sexual propositions online, and 30% had already experienced some form of online sexual harassment. Boys often did not see themselves as vulnerable due to their gender and tended to find it more difficult to talk about these issues or share their experiences. The evaluation of the project confirmed the urgent need to inform 14- to 18-year-olds about these risks. However, Samilia observed that schools frequently lack available hours to dedicate to such activities, express reluctance to address the topic for fear of negative reactions from parents, or remain in denial, assuming that trafficking and sexual exploitation do not concern their student population.

9.3 Cooperation between EU Member States

In addition to its Presidency of the Council of the EU (**see Focus on the Belgian Presidency**), in January 2024 Belgium assumed the year-long presidency of the Benelux Union's Committee of Ministers. During its presidency, Belgium focused on strengthening the relationship between the Benelux countries, particularly by enhancing cooperation and information-sharing in key areas, including the fight against human trafficking. On 12 December 2024, **Belgium organised a Benelux Day focused on human trafficking and new technologies**, with the objective of strengthening cooperation between governments, civil society, and digital platforms to improve prevention and enforcement efforts against human trafficking. Participants explored how traffickers recruit victims through social networks and how new technologies can be leveraged in the fight against trafficking. The discussions highlighted the importance of raising awareness and fostering collaboration with the private sector, particularly digital platforms and technology companies, to prevent human trafficking and support victims. NGOs and digital platform representatives presented initiatives to inform and assist potential victims, while technology companies explored their role in combating trafficking through policy measures and partnerships.

Notably, the Senior Public Policy & Government Relations Manager for the Benelux at TikTok participated in a roundtable discussion on the initiatives undertaken by technology companies to address the issue.

In 2024, **Belgium remained active within the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)**. Belgian authorities participated in various EMPACT Action Days, which allow authorities from different EU Member States to collaborate over several days to address specific criminal activities, such as human trafficking, through coordinated operations and information sharing:

- The specialised ECOSOC-labour inspectors of the Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) Directorate of the National Social Security Office (NSSO) took part in the EMPACT Action Days led by the Netherlands from 20 until 27 April 2024.¹¹⁶ These action days targeted **human trafficking for labour exploitation purposes**, in particular the exploitation of non-EU nationals and refugees. In one major case, a concerted and joined inspection with the Portuguese authorities was set up to investigate the posting of Indian/Pakistani workers from Portugal to Belgium to work in carwashes and night shops and to detect possible indications of trafficking in human beings. In another case, the ECOSOC-labour inspectors investigated the provision of workers (mainly Bulgarians) from a Lithuanian company by a Dutch temporary employment agency to a Belgian company.
- The specialised ECOSOC-labour inspectors of the Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) Directorate also took part in the EMPACT Actions Days (Global Chain) led by Austria between 3 and 9 June 2024.¹¹⁷ These actions days targeted **trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced begging and other offences**. The operation resulted in the arrest of 219 persons and the identification of over 1 374 victims, including 153 children.

¹¹⁶ Europol, '51 persons arrested in crackdown on labour exploitation', <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/51-persons-arrested-in-crackdown-labour-exploitation>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

¹¹⁷ Europol, 'Human trafficking action week: 219 criminals arrested and 1 374 victims identified', <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/human-trafficking-action-week-219-criminals-arrested-and-1-374-victims-identified>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

In the framework of the EMPACT Operational Action Plan on Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Belgium also carried out a pilot experiment from September to December 2024. The Belgian Federal Judicial Police used **new software to detect suspicious digital exchanges related to prostitution, with a particular focus on minors**. The experiment led to the identification of 112 cases of child prostitution. Over the four-month period, findings indicated that current police actions detect only 10 to 15% of prostitution cases, given the volume of advertisements published. Additionally, the experiment revealed that in cases of trafficking for the sexual exploitation of minors, male and female victims are represented in equal proportions. The initiative and key lessons learned will be presented at the EU level during the EMPACT meeting scheduled for April 2025.

9.4 Cooperation with third countries

Information campaigns are key to informing specific target groups in third countries about the risks of engaging in irregular migration, including the risk of human trafficking and exploitation, and about legal and safe alternatives. In 2024, Belgian authorities have not launched new information campaigns in third countries but have finalised three initiated at the end of 2023. The campaign launched in Vietnam in October 2023 was completed in April 2024. Similarly, the campaign launched in Guinea in November 2023 concluded in April 2024, while the campaign launched in Nigeria in November 2023 was finalised in May 2024. The year 2024 was the moment to assess the impact of these campaigns, from which some conclusions can be drawn (**see Box 19**).

Box 19: Information campaign in Vietnam: first results

It is considered good practice to evaluate information campaigns once completed, in order to quantify their reach and to assess changes in perception and knowledge, specifically to what extent beneficiaries have improved their understanding of trafficking risks and protection measures. For example, in Vietnam, according to the partner organisation Pacific Links Foundation, **the campaign reached over 1 880 000 students, community members and other stakeholders**. Pre- and post-campaign tests, conducted and interpreted by the organisation, indicated a significant improvement in students' ability to protect themselves from trafficking and in their understanding of who could be at risk of trafficking. Additionally, stakeholders demonstrated a greater capacity to identify, protect and support potential victims of trafficking and trafficking survivors. By using insights from the evaluation, Belgian authorities seek to refine future campaigns.

In parallel, Belgian authorities pursued **bilateral cooperation** with third countries to strengthen efforts against trafficking and irregular migration. In 2024, bilateral meetings were held with national authorities and key stakeholders of several third countries to strengthen cooperation in combating human trafficking and irregular migration. Given the high number of Nigerians involved in irregular migration and the significant presence of young Nigerian women among victims of prostitution in Belgium, **bilateral contacts with Nigeria were particularly reinforced**. From 28 January until 3 February 2024, the General Director of the Immigration Office, accompanied by a migration liaison officer, conducted a mission to Nigeria. Consultations with the Head of Consular Affairs at the FPS Foreign Affairs and the Controller General of the Nigerian Immigration Service facilitated a review of the existing Memorandum of Understanding. Press conferences were held by the Director General to reinforce the message of the ongoing information campaign in the country, aiming to inform young people about the risks associated with irregular migration and human trafficking.

Meetings with project stakeholders and NGO representatives also took place. On the last day, the Belgian delegation was invited to the screening of 'Eunice Street', a documentary about Nigerian girls who have fallen victim to forced prostitution in Belgium. Following the screening, the Director General of the Immigration Office participated in a panel discussion on the issue.

In addition to bilateral cooperation with countries of origin, Belgium also supported a project in Ukraine, where the risk of labour exploitation and human trafficking is significantly exacerbated among **displaced Ukrainians** within the country and abroad. In this context, a project was set up to "contribute to the prevention of human trafficking and labour exploitation among refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), develop entrepreneurship, and support Employers' and Workers' organisations"¹¹⁸ (**see also chapter 3**). The government of Belgium is the development partner of this project, which is part of the International Labour Organization (ILO) support to Ukraine and which runs from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2025. In this framework, members of the Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) Directorate of the National Social Security Office (NSSO) participated in the ILO workshop that took place on 3-4 September 2024 to discuss and validate the recommendations and action plan to enhance the national strategy of the State Labour Service of Ukraine to tackle human trafficking for labour exploitation amongst displaced persons.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/ilo-support-ukraine-prevention-labour-exploitation-and-human-trafficking>

Focus on the Belgian Presidency: activities related to trafficking



In the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU during the first half of 2024, Belgium organised, on 17 and 18 June 2024, the **Meeting of the EU Network of National Coordinators and Rapporteurs on Trafficking in Human Beings**. The meeting aimed at fostering collaboration and the exchange of information among EU Member States on trafficking in human beings for the purposes of labour exploitation and forced criminality.

Regarding **labour exploitation**, participants exchanged practices on how they address challenges in:

- Detecting and qualifying labour and social law offences as trafficking in human beings, particularly when traffickers use deception rather than visible coercion;
- Identifying cases of labour exploitation in less common sectors or specific situations, such as domestic exploitation occurring in private homes;
- Assisting victims, especially when a large group is discovered at a single site, putting pressure on reception capacity, as seen in the Borealis affair in Antwerp;
- Preventing labour exploitation, for example through measures such as joint liability, which holds main contractors accountable if their subcontractors engage in human trafficking.

Regarding **forced criminality**, participants discussed, among other issues, the difficulty of applying provisions relating to the non-punishment of victims, particularly when they are initially perceived and treated as offenders rather than as victims of trafficking.



INFORMING AND GUIDING IRREGULARLY STAYING MIGRANTS TOWARDS LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

In response to the growing complexity of the migration landscape in Belgium, Fedasil and the Immigration Office have developed various projects to guide migrants in irregular stay (**see definition**) towards long-term solutions.

10.1 Legislative developments

On 12 May 2024, a **law establishing a “proactive return policy”** was adopted.¹¹⁹

The law’s announced objective is to introduce a “coherent, firm and humane return policy” to prevent third-country nationals from staying in Belgium irregularly (**see chapters 8 and 11**).

The law introduces several key changes concerning irregular stay. It imposes a duty on third-country nationals to cooperate with the return procedure. Failure to comply with this

obligation may lead to the application of preventive and less coercive detention measures. Conversely, the government is obliged to provide relevant and accessible information to the individuals concerned. Additionally, the law harmonises the possibility of imposing criminal sanctions for unlawful residence with the provisions of the Return Directive (EU) 2008/115¹²⁰, as interpreted by the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

Irregular stay

The presence on the territory of an EU Member State, of a third-country national who does not fulfil, or no longer fulfils the conditions of entry as set out in Art. 5 of the Regulation (EU) 2016/399 (Schengen Borders Code) or other conditions for entry, stay or residence in that EU Member State.

10.2 Offering individual coaching towards a long-term solution

The law of 12 May 2024 also **reinforces the use of Individual Case Management (ICAM)** coaching, a structured guidance process first introduced in 2021. ICAM is designed to help individuals in an irregular residence situation work towards sustainable solutions by assessing their legal status, identifying residence or return options, and addressing practical or administrative barriers. The support process is offered to foreign nationals who have received an order to leave the territory and are not subject to detention or alternative coercive measures.

¹¹⁹ Law of 12 May 2024 amending the Immigration Act and the Reception Act on a proactive return policy (Loi du 12 mai 2024 modifiant la loi du 15 décembre 1980 sur l'accès au territoire, le séjour, l'établissement et l'éloignement des étrangers et la loi du 12 janvier 2007 sur l'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et de certaines autres catégories d'étrangers sur la politique de retour proactive / Wet van 12 mei 2024 tot wijziging van de wet van 15 december 1980 betreffende de toegang tot het grondgebied, het verblijf, de vestiging en de verwijdering van vreemdelingen en van de wet van 12 januari 2007 betreffende de opvang van asielzoekers en van bepaalde andere categorieën van vreemdelingen inzake het aanklappend terugkeerbeleid), https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article.pl?language=nl&sum_date=2024-07-10&lg_txt=n&pd_search=2024-07-10&s_editie=&numac_search=2024006654&caller=&2024006654=&view_numac=2024006654f, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

¹²⁰ Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32008L0115>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

This individualised approach aims to promote cooperation and help individuals explore long-term options, including regularisation in Belgium, voluntary return to their country of origin, or relocation to a third country where they may reside legally.

10.3 Institutionalisation of information and orientation services for migrants

In 2024, IOM Belgium and Luxembourg, in collaboration with the Conex network of Fedasil ¹²¹, launched the **Incentive Fund to support civil society organisations and public services in Belgium**. The fund aimed to facilitate community-based initiatives that provide protection services and guidance to vulnerable migrants, particularly those in precarious administrative situations, such as undocumented individuals and those outside formal reception structures. The selected projects reached over 1 500 migrants, enabling access to information and support to make informed decisions about their future. The fund also helped local actors to sustain these services.

The **RUM Project (Reaching Undocumented Migrants)** was a collaborative initiative led by ICMPPD's Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF). Key partners included Fedasil, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), and the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-Europe). Several countries contributed by sharing experiences and best practices. Running from January 2024 to January 2025, the project aimed to enhance outreach strategies for undocumented migrants by developing evidence-based tools and practices. Outputs included an interactive dashboard reflecting the profiles, needs, and migration intentions of 1 000 migrants, along with policy-relevant materials such as a blueprint, monitoring framework, and a policy brief.

In 2024, **Fedasil expanded the mandate of its Info Point**. The Info Point was reopened in 2023 at a new location in Brussels (rue Héger-Bordet 3), adjacent to the Fedasil reception centre 'Bordet', after a nearly two-year closure. Renamed and with expanded scope, the Info Point now serves a broader group, including asylum seekers outside the reception network, migrants in transit, and individuals without a residence permit. Fedasil works in close collaboration with various partners, including Caritas International, the EUAA (which provides interpreter support), and the Red Cross. In July 2024, the Red Cross's Refugee Medical Point also moved to the site, enhancing coordination between medical and counselling services for vulnerable groups, particularly those living on the streets. Between September 2023 and September 2024, the Info Point recorded nearly 11 500 visits. Most visitors were single men, 36% of whom were Palestinians. Over 8 000 were asylum seekers seeking information on accommodation. The experience in Brussels is expected to inform the creation of similar Info Points in other Belgian cities.

¹²¹ A network of partners in Belgium, including Fedasil, city administrations, IOM and Caritas International Belgium.



RETURN AND READMISSION

The Belgian return policy has two pillars: voluntary and forced return. Fedasil manages the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme in partnership with Caritas International and IOM (11.1). The return journey is organised from Belgium to the country of origin and, based on the returnee's situation, the programme may include reintegration support in the country of origin. In cases of non-compliance or refusal to leave the country voluntarily, the Immigration Office may proceed with forced return operations (11.2). In 2024, Belgium introduced significant legal reforms and new initiatives aimed at improving the management of both voluntary and forced return operations.

11.1 Voluntary return

The law adopted on 12 May 2024 amended both the Immigration Act and the Reception Act to implement a “proactive return policy.” These amendments introduced various changes to the return process, including the legal embedding of “open return places” – facilities that have existed within certain Fedasil collective reception centres since 2012 – into the Reception Act. The purpose of these facilities is to support rejected asylum seekers in making an informed decision about their future and voluntary return by providing accommodation and guidance.

Since 1 April 2024, Fedasil has **strengthened its role in the European Reintegration Programme (EURP)**, collaborating with Caritas International Belgium to provide reintegration assistance in 17 countries. Fedasil has also contributed to the development of the Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (QMEF) for the programme.

Fedasil continued to focus on improving cooperation and knowledge sharing with its return and reintegration partners. For the third consecutive year, Fedasil, in collaboration with IOM and Caritas International, organised **a Partner Week focusing on the voluntary return and reintegration of families**.

Fedasil participated in **a workshop on return and reintegration in Nepal for European Reintegration Support Organisations (ERSO)**¹²². The workshop was organised by Caritas and aimed to discuss migration trends, reintegration programmes, and political factors influencing migration in Asia. The workshop highlighted Belgium's EURP approach and shared best practices from ERSO.

Fedasil conducted **observation missions for frontline staff** in Cameroon, Jordan, Mongolia, Georgia, Burundi, and Colombia to improve cooperation with local partners and enhance support for returnees. **Evaluation missions** were carried out in Moldova and Guinea to assess the effectiveness of local partners' services, focusing on financial and operational performance.

¹²² ERSO is a network of several European Reintegration Support Organisations working together to exchange and collect expertise, best practices and information concerning voluntary return and reintegration. For more information, visit: www.ersonetwork.org.

Fedasil **co-chaired the ICMPD's Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF)** ¹²³ with Sweden. Fedasil also continued to co-chair the **Technical Working Group on Reintegration and Development (TWG R&D)**, implemented by the RRF. The TWG R&D functions as a collaborative platform connecting return and reintegration (R&R) efforts with external dimensions. It seeks to provide technical and operational solutions to enhance the return and reintegration process and ensure effective fund allocation. The TWG hosts representatives from the Return, Reintegration and Development sectors, as well as officials from the European Commission (DG INTPA, DG NEAR, DG HOME) and IOM, as well as the EMN Return Expert Group (REG), and experts in migration and development, practitioners, and policymakers from different EU Member States. Within the TWG, Fedasil is an active contributor to the Operational Framework and driver of pilot projects, such as investments in strengthened referral mechanisms in various countries of origin. Through these efforts, the TWG aims to advance collaborative strategies that address the complexities of return and reintegration, striving for sustainable solutions that benefit returnees and their communities (**see also chapter 12**).

In 2024, 1032 individuals with an order to leave the territory returned voluntarily, with assistance from the Immigration Office and Fedasil. This also included 106 Dublin transfers. However, the total number of supported voluntary returns from Belgium in 2024 was higher, as Fedasil, in collaboration with IOM and Caritas, also facilitated the voluntary return of asylum seekers and migrants without legal residence, regardless of whether they had an order to leave the territory. **With this support, the total number of registered voluntary returns reached 3 371.**

11.2. Forced return

The law adopted on 12 May 2024 **expanded the range of qualified escorts for forced return operations**, increasing the pool of personnel authorised to accompany individuals during forced returns, Dublin transfers, and refoulement. In addition to the Aviation Police, officers from the Immigration Office and Frontex are now authorised to serve as escorts. Standardised rules are being developed for the deployment of escorts, particularly for Immigration Office personnel, including protocols on their use of force.

A key component of the same legal reform is the **obligation for foreign nationals without legal residency in Belgium to cooperate with return, removal, transfer, or expulsion processes**. This obligation is a core element of the proactive return policy, aiming to ensure the effective execution of these procedures. Individuals must cooperate by providing personal identification details, including names, nationality, date and place of birth, countries of origin or

¹²³ The Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF), funded by the European Commission and implemented by ICMPD, supports EU Member States and Schengen Associated Countries in enhancing return and reintegration programmes. For more information, visit: www.reintegrationfacility.eu.

prior residence, travel routes, travel documents, and biometric data. They are required to assist in obtaining travel documents, attend appointments with the Immigration Office, and remain reachable. Failure to cooperate can lead to preventive measures, such as detention, if there is a risk of absconding or if less coercive measures are insufficient. The law also **requires the government to inform individuals about the duty to cooperate and the consequences of non-compliance**, in a language they understand or can reasonably be assumed to understand.

The legislation also formally **prohibited the detention of families with minor children in closed centres**. These families are to be housed in designated family units, a practice already in place since 2008. These units, located in local communities, provide accommodation adapted to the needs of families, with supervision from return coaches. Families may leave the units for essential activities such as legal consultations or medical visits, but one adult in the family must remain in the unit. Families can stay in these units until their return or until a residency decision is made. Return coaches assist with identification, voluntary return, residency procedures, and collaborate with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Finally, the reform also introduced and formalized **several alternatives to detention**, including the Individual Case Management Coaching (ICAM-coaching) programme, which has been in place since 2021. Under the new legislation, individuals are required to cooperate with the coaching process, respond to invitations, and actively engage in the coaching trajectory. Home visits may also be conducted as part of the process. Preventive measures to reduce the risk of absconding are introduced, such as the obligation to submit or surrender travel or identity documents, regular reporting to authorities, and the possibility of house arrest. These less coercive measures offer a flexible approach that aims to encourage compliance while reducing the use of detention.

In 2024, the Immigration Office recorded a total of **3 270 forced returns**¹²⁴. Forced return refers to the removal of foreign nationals who are illegally residing in Belgium, organised by the Immigration Office, whether from closed centres or detention facilities. These returns included 2 188 forced returns to countries of origin, 819 Dublin transfers (the transfer of individuals to the EU member state responsible for processing their asylum claim under Regulation (EU) 604/2013, also known as Dublin III¹²⁵), and 263 returns under bilateral agreements be-

¹²⁴ This figure refers only to individuals in irregular residence who had already been issued an order to leave the territory. For more information, visit: www.dofi.ibz.be/nl/figures/removals/effective-removals/nationale-statistieken.

¹²⁵ Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/604/oj/eng>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

tween Belgium and the respective country. Additionally, 1 883 foreign nationals were returned at the border for failing to meet the entry requirements or for having their asylum claims rejected. Furthermore, 90 convicted foreign nationals (illegally residing) were transferred to the state of their nationality to serve their sentence (prison term) in that state.

Focus on the Belgian Presidency: activities related to return



In the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU during the first half of 2024, Fedasil, in collaboration with ICMPD, the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-Europe), and Frontex, co-organised a **two-day Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration**. The conference explored the evolving dynamics of EU return and reintegration policies and provided a platform for ongoing discussions on sustainable reintegration.

Key objectives included improving stakeholder collaboration, supporting returnees, securing long-term funding, and enhancing the sustainability of reintegration programmes. Participants emphasised the importance of aligning funding with national development policies, improving inter-agency coordination, and leveraging EU support in voluntary return and reintegration initiatives. Collaboration, innovation, and evidence-based policymaking were highlighted as essential to addressing complex issues related to return and reintegration.

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- Ah Hoc Query on alternatives to detention and their feasibility in practice
- Ad Hoc Query on the implementation of detention provisions in EU Member States
- Ad Hoc Query on the procurement of a return service outside Europe
- Ad Hoc Query on the detention of third-country nationals without judicial review

¹²⁶ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.



MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

In recent years, the nexus between migration and development cooperation has gained prominence in Belgium's international cooperation policy. Several institutional actors are involved in this field. At the federal level, the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) of the Federal Public Service (FPS) Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation is responsible for coordinating Belgian development cooperation. [Enabel, the Belgian agency for international cooperation](#), implements government priorities, including projects that address human mobility and displacement, labour mobility, sustainable approaches to (re)integration and diaspora engagement. [IOM Belgium and Luxembourg](#) also contributes through initiatives focused on diaspora engagement, skills mobility, and remittance-related development. In addition, [Fedasil](#) collaborates on efforts to foster the sustainable reintegration of returnees, particularly through partnerships that link return assistance to broader development objectives. This chapter outlines initiatives implemented in third countries that promote synergies between migration and development, including projects focused on resilience, remittances, reintegration, and local capacity building. Activities related to temporary and professional migration, including skills partnerships and mobility schemes aimed at enhancing legal labour pathways, are detailed under chapter 1 ([section 1.10](#)).

In 2024, Belgium intensified its efforts to create coherent links between migration and development through targeted initiatives in partner countries. These actions reflect a broader strategy to address displacement, promote diaspora engagement, and support reintegration, while strengthening institutional and community resilience. In May 2024, the Minister for Development Cooperation approved a [one-year programme in the Sahel](#), implemented by IOM. The project aims to strengthen the resilience of displaced populations, migrants, and communities in Mali, promoting sustainable natural resource management and improving data on mixed migration, especially the environment-migration nexus. It includes a regional component to enhance state capacities for data collection and evidence-based policy development, and a national component in Mali to improve data access, train communities on green economy opportunities, and support conflict resolution related to resource use. The project began in July 2024 and will run for one year.

Complementing these resilience-focused efforts, another initiative addressed financial inclusion and diaspora contributions to development. Launched in December 2022 by the then Belgian Minister for Development Cooperation, the O-REMIT project, implemented by IOM Belgium and Luxembourg, aimed to improve remittance services and promote diaspora investment in 14 partner countries. By April 2024, the data collection phase was completed, revealing insights into the remittance behaviours of the diaspora in Belgium.

Five workshops on financial inclusion were held in 2024 for diaspora communities and recipients from countries like Senegal, Morocco, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, covering transaction options and investment opportunities. In June 2024, the first National Remittance Summit brought together 100 stakeholders to discuss optimising remittances for development.¹²⁷

In parallel, long-term development challenges related to forced displacement were addressed through targeted inclusion programmes. Enabel launched a **project to support the inclusion of refugees and displaced persons in Mauritania**. Running from September 2024 to September 2028, the 'Socio-economic integration based on agro-pastoral activities for displaced persons and host communities in Hodh El Chargui (MIRECAM)' project is a development-oriented project acting on the nexus between humanitarian and development challenges linked to displacement, with a focus on social cohesion and stability.¹²⁸ Funded by the EU through the Flexible Mechanism, it aims to strengthen local capacities to manage displacement, improve pastoral resource governance to prevent conflict, and expand socio-economic opportunities for displaced persons and host communities – particularly women. The project supports Mauritania's National Strategy on Migration Management in the Hodh El Chargui region.

Further reinforcing the migration-development link, targeted efforts were undertaken to support the sustainable reintegration of returning migrants through institutional capacity-building. In 2024, Enabel launched **two new projects focused on strengthening local and national systems to facilitate the socio-economic reintegration of returning migrants**: the MIGRET project in Côte d'Ivoire, titled '*Sustainable Reintegration of Migrants Returned to Côte d'Ivoire and Fight Against Trafficking*'¹²⁹, which began in July, and the AMIS project in Guinea, titled '*Guidance, Mobility, Integration and Awareness*'¹³⁰, which was launched in December.

¹²⁷ IOM, 'National Remittance Summit 2024 – Transforming Diaspora Remittances', <https://belgium.iom.int/resources/national-remittance-summit-2024-policy-brief>, last accessed on 28 May 2025.

¹²⁸ Enabel, 'Intégration socio-économique à base agropastorale des personnes déplacées et des communautés hôtes dans le Hodh El Chargui', <https://open.enabel.be/en/MRT/2791/p/integration-socio-economique-a-base-agropastorale-des-personnes-deplacees-et-des-communautes-hotes-dans-le-hodh-el-chargui.html>, last accessed on 25 May 2025.

¹²⁹ Enabel, 'Réintégration durable des personnes migrantes de retour en Côte d'Ivoire et lutte contre la traite', <https://open.enabel.be/fr/CIV/2669/p/reintegration-durable-des-personnes-migrantes-de-retour-en-cote-d-ivoire-et-lutte-contre-la-traite.html>, last accessed on 25 May 2025.

¹³⁰ Enabel, 'Accompagnement, Mobilité, Insertion et Sensibilisation', <https://open.enabel.be/fr/GIN/2682/p/accompagnement-mobilite-insertion-et-sensibilisation.html>, last accessed on 25 May 2025.

These projects focus on strengthening the capacity of national and local institutions to integrate reintegration services within existing governance structures. The goal is to support these institutions in adapting their services to facilitate sustainable reintegration. This involves strengthening territorial governance mechanisms, enabling local actors to integrate reintegration-sensitive approaches into their planning frameworks and service delivery. Additionally, these projects enhance coordination and referral mechanisms, ensuring better links between social services, employment programmes, and economic development initiatives. By reinforcing institutions responsible for reintegration, Enabel aims to anchor migration governance within existing structures, and to ensure a sustainable and locally driven process. These approaches are designed to be fully complementary with those implemented by national and international stakeholders involved in case management and post-return assistance (**see chapter 11**).

Finally, as a strategic partner at European level, in 2024 Fedasil remained committed to the topic of return and sustainable reintegration by continuing its **co-chairmanship of the Technical Working Group on Reintegration and Development**, implemented by the Return and Reintegration Facility (under ICMPD) (**see chapter 11**).

Learn more: related EMN publications in 2024 ¹³¹



- Inform on Migration and development cooperation
- Inform on Migration diplomacy: an analysis of policy approaches and instruments (joint EMN-OECD publication)

¹³¹ All publications are available on our website: www.emnbelgium.be.

ANNEX: PUBLICATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION NETWORK IN 2024

The present annex lists the **studies** and **informs** published by the European Migration Network (EMN) in 2024. Studies are the longest publication format, with information collected and analysed over the span of four to six months. They compile the answers provided by Member and Observer Countries to around 18 to 25 detailed questions on a specific topic. For most studies, EMN Belgium produces an additional '**standalone**' publication specifically on the Belgian context. Informs are a shorter publication (approximately 6 to 10 pages) and aim to provide a quick but comprehensive overview of the practice and policies of Member and Observer Countries on a specific topic. They compile the answers provided to a total of 12 detailed questions.

The EMN also produces **ad-hoc queries**, which are the fastest and most used outlet to collect information across the network. Following a quality and relevance-check internal system, anyone can make use of the ad-hoc query system and launch a query on any topic related to asylum and migration.

All EMN publications are available for download at: www.emnbelgium.be.

Studies	
November 2024	Application of the Temporary Protection Directive: challenges and good practices in 2024

Informs	
February 2024	Access to autonomous housing in the context of international protection
March 2024	Digitalisation of identity documents and residence permits issued to third-country nationals
April 2024	Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection
May 2024	Labour market integration of beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine (joint EMN-OECD Inform)
July 2024	Monitoring the integration of third-country nationals (joint EMN-OECD Inform)
September 2024	Coherent return and reintegration assistance
September 2024	Migration and development cooperation
September 2024	Practices and challenges in identifying victims of torture and ill-treatment in the context of international and temporary protection (joint EMN-Red Cross Inform)
October 2024	Implementation of measures for civic training as an important tool for the integration of third-country nationals (joint EMN-OECD Inform)
November 2024	Governing the accommodation of applicants for international protection
November 2024	Migration diplomacy: an analysis of policy approaches and instruments (joint EMN-OECD Inform)
December 2024	Processing the biometric data of third-country nationals

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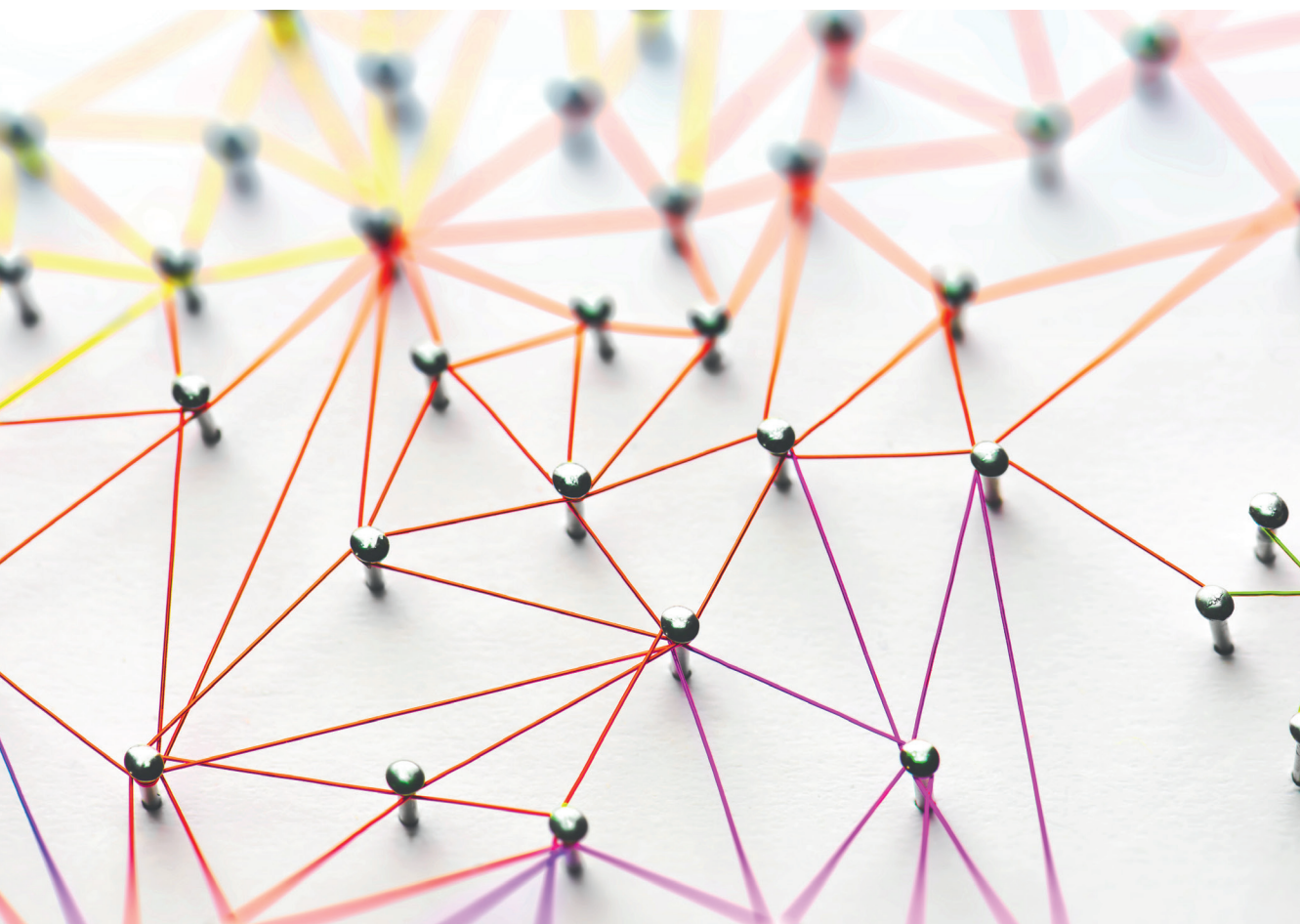
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Rue de Louvain 1
1000 Bruxelles, Belgique
emn@ibz.be
www.emnbelgium.be

 European Migration Network (EMN) Belgium