# Chapter 5

## Belgium as a country of destination

Belgium has been receiving foreign populations uninterruptedly for more than a century and nowadays migration and the presence of migrant populations are one of the "hot" social and political topics in the country. In this chapter, we will present the history of Belgium as an immigrant receiving country and will outline the primary immigration trends. We will proceed by summarizing the developments in Belgium's foreign population as a result of active policies for recruitment of foreign workers and free movement of citizens from neighboring countries. Subsequently a separate section will be dedicated to the flow of asylum seekers and refugees, the latter constituting a distinct immigrant population, which is also one of the primary sources creating stocks of undocumented migrants.

*1. General immigration trends*

Before briefly presenting the history of Belgium as a country of immigration, it should be mentioned explicitly that the term "immigrant" in Belgium connotes mainly guest workers and their families. Until the middle of the 1980s, these were Italians, Spanish, Moroccans, and Turks (Martens & Moulaert, 1985). Nowadays the concept "immigrant" is used to refer mainly to the country's minorities of non-European origin.

The history of Belgium as a country of immigration began in the early 20$^{th}$ century, when the net migration ratio was positive. In the period 1890-1996, the foreign population in Belgium increased both in numbers (from 3% to 9%) and with respect to the diversity of national origins of the newcomers: while in the past the people migrating to Belgium were

mainly from neighboring countries, by the 1990s the stock of foreigners included people from all around the globe (Eggerickx *et al*., 1999).

The first organized migration wave to Belgium started in the interbellum period with the recruitment of North-Italians and Central and East-Europeans, mainly from Poland and Yugoslavia, and to less extent from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Ukraine, for heavy industrial work in Wallonia and Limburg. Within the ten-year period from 1920 to 1930 Italian and Polish workers were the third and the fourth most represented foreigners' groups in Belgium, respectively. In the late 1940s, Belgium also began recruiting South-Italians and by 1961, Italians represented 44% of the foreign population in Belgium (Eggerickx *et al*., 1999).

The first significant diversification of the immigrant population was observed in the 1950s with the official recruitment of Spanish and Greek workers, which was followed by the import of a labor force form Morocco and Turkey in the 1960s (Leman, 1987). Nevertheless, the foreign population in Belgium did not rise significantly from the 1940s to the 1960s and increased from 4.31% in 1947 to only 4.93% in 1961.

The second wave of migration to Belgium occurred between 1961 and 1970 when the immigrant population increased from 453 to 716 thousand people. In this period the number of the Turkish, Moroccan, Spanish, Greek and Portuguese immigrants rose very quickly but Italians were still the most represented group (Martens, 1973). The expanding foreign population did not settle in the regions where they were recruited and by the 1960s there was a substantial internal migration towards the big cities, which as a result became transformed from relatively homogeneous places to multicultural conglomerations. The increased immigration flow in the 1960s resulted also in an increase in the number of children born by foreigners. While in 1962, 12.5% of newborn children in Brussels, 10% in Wallonia, and 3.8% in Flanders were of foreign decent; in 1970, this percentage rose to 28.7% in Brussels, 17.4% in Wallonia, and 5.25% in Flanders (Martens, 1973).

Taking into account all nationalities in Belgium during the period 1947-1970, it should be noted that nationals of Holland, France, Germany, and Luxembourg were the most represented foreign groups, constituting 41% of the foreign population in 1947 and

24% in 1970. Italians were the second largest foreign group in the country constituting 23% in 1947 and 37% in 1970. In third place came the Polish nationals constituting 64% of the foreign population in 1947, 11% in 1954, and 7% in 1961 or, in absolute numbers: 58,542 in 1947, 39,325 in 1954, and 32,009 in 1961. The population of Spaniards, Greeks, Turks, and North Africans in Belgium started to increase in 1961 (Martens, 1973). In 1970, the Spanish, Greek, Turkish, and North African populations represented respectively 11%, 3%, 2%, and 6% of the foreign population in Belgium. The spatial distribution of the immigrant population in Belgium was not equal in the country's three regions. At the end of the 1970s, the region of Brussels offered residence to 50.2% of the Spaniards, 44.3% of the North Africans, and 38.6% of the Greeks. The Italians were resided mostly in the Walloon region (80.7%) while the Turkish immigrants were almost equally represented in the Walloon region (41.2%) and the Flemish region (40.1%).

Officially, the recruitment of a foreign unskilled labor force stopped in 1974, but this decision did not come fully into effect immediately and clandestine migration continued until 1976 (Castles *et al*., 1987). Later on, the process of family reunification contributed to the increase of the immigrant population in Belgium. After the official end to labor migration movements to Belgium, the majority of the foreign population began to concentrate in Brussels. In 1996, 30% of Brussels' residents were foreigners, compared to 4.8% in Flanders and 10.4% in Wallonia (Eggerickx *et al*., 1999).

In the time span 1991-1996, the predominant immigration trend in Belgium was one of slight decrease in the Turkish and Moroccan populations and an increase in the stock of Northern European and Eastern European nationals[1].

[1] In the case of immigrations from Northern Europe, this increase was highest in the case of Finland (30%), followed by Sweden (13%), Norway (10%) and Denmark (5%). The major augmentation in migration from Eastern Europe was from the former USSR (44%), followed by the former Czechoslovakia (12%), the former Yugoslavia (8%), and Hungary (5%) (Eggerickx *et al*., 1999).

From 1962 to 1985, the natural growth of the foreign population in Belgium was positive. Since 1985 however, the numerous amendments of the nationality code[2] have resulted in a significant decrease of the registered foreign population and, consequently, has hindered estimating the foreign part of the Belgian population.

*2. Belgium as a destination for asylum seekers and refugees*

A specific immigration reality in Belgium that should be tackled separately from the migration patterns discussed above (economic migration or family reunification) is the immigration of people under the provisions of the asylum system. Indeed, since the 1980s when the regular channels for economic migration were sealed, migration to Belgium has been characterized by asylum-seekers. In the following paragraphs, we will proceed by describing how the Belgian reception system operates as well as the provisions for asylum seekers. Then we will focus first on the changing position of Belgium as a preferred destination for asylum seekers and then on the main groups of asylum seekers in the past and today. Looking at the recognition rate for asylum seekers will reveal one of the major reasons for the large stock of undocumented immigrants on the territory of Belgium.

[2] The conditions for acquisition of Belgian nationality have been continuously relaxed since 1985. In January 1985, the nationality code was amended to allow that every child born on Belgian soil, having at least one Belgian parent, acquires Belgian nationality. In 1 January 1992, a provision for nationality acquisition has been made also for children of non-Belgian parents, if the child is born on Belgian territory, with at least one parent born on Belgian soil who has lived at least five years in Belgium in the ten years before the child was born. The most significant changes in the nationality code were introduced in March 2002 when the procedures and requirements for obtaining Belgian nationality were modified such that a broader foreign population could be integrated to the Belgian society. A few of those amendments include: the minimum years of residence in Belgium before applying for nationality have been reduced from five to three years for general cases and from three to two years for recognized refugees and stateless persons; the requirement for proving integration into Belgian society has been abolished; the procedures are now free of charge; the conditions for nationality acquisition for children born in Belgium have been further relaxed.

*2. 1. The reception system*

The standard definition of a "refugee" has been provided by Article 1(2)[3] of the Convention Related to the Status of Refugees from 28 July 1951 (1951) and each state that has ratified the Convention guarantees the provision of protection to people who qualify for refugee status. Each country however, has its own regulations for assessing asylum applications, the possibility to appeal a decision of deportation, the legal conditions for employment, the family reunification process, etc.

Belgium ratified the Convention on 22 July 1953 and defined the legal basis of the asylum procedure in Chapter 2, Articles 48-57 of the Law from 15 December 1980 for access to the territory, residence, and the establishment and removal of aliens[4].

Initially, asylum applications[5] filed in Belgium were assessed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refuges (UNHCR) but since 14 July 1987, asylum requests are judged solely by three Belgian institutions, namely the Office of Foreigners' Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior, the General Commissioner for Refugees and Stateless Persons (hereafter GCRS), and the Permanent Commission of Appeals for Refugees.

The asylum procedure in Belgium is composed of two phases during which both the admissibility and legitimacy of the application are examined. In the very first place, however, the Office of Foreigners' Affairs determines if Belgium or another state is responsible for reviewing the application according to the Dublin Convention from 15 June

[3] Article 1(2). "The term "refugee" should apply to any person, who as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

[4] Wet van 15 December 1980 Betreffende de Toegang tot het Grondgebied, het Verblijf, de Vestiging en de Verwijdering van Vreemdelingen (BS, 31 December 1980).

[5] "Application for asylum" means a request whereby an alien seeks protection from a European Union member state under the Geneva Convention by claiming refugee status. An "applicant for asylum" or "asylum seeker" means an alien who has made an application for asylum upon which a final decision has not yet been taken.

1990[6]. Once it is proven that Belgium is the responsible country for assessing the application, the so-called *admissibility research* is conducted. At this stage, any manifestly unfounded claims can be rejected while any insufficiently documented asylum seekers may be detained until a decision regarding admissibility is made. GCRS may review any rejected applications and decide that it is indeed admissible if enough evidence is available. Once an application is found admissible, the second stage or the so-called *legitimacy research* begins. The legitimacy evaluation of a given application is conducted by the GCRS, which commences the procedure by a second and independent investigation of the admissibility decision. Concluding that an application is indeed admissible, the GCRS has to make a decision whether the applicant should be recognized as a refugee. A negative decision by the GCRS could be appealed at the Standing Appeals Committee, at which stage the UNHCR plays a consultative role.

The Council of State is the highest administrative power, which could control the legitimacy of the application investigation and can suspend or annul orders for leaving the country but has no power to recognize someone as a refugee in place of the authorized institutions.

At the first step of the asylum procedure, while awaiting admissibility decision, asylum seekers in Belgium who require assistance have to live in a reception center. At this stage, they receive food, medical aid, and education for their children, but they are not permitted to work. This assistance is not provided for asylum seekers whose claims are in the admissibility stage but who decide to live outside a reception center. The reception system in Belgium is composed of reception centers of the federal government (seven main centers plus two emergency centers for short stays) and the Red Cross (eight in Wallonia

[6] The Dublin Convention was created as an instrument for determining which EU member state is responsible for examining an application for asylum, a matter that is not settled by the Convention on the status of refugees. The application of the Dublin Convention will ensure that every asylum-seeker's application will be examined by a member state, unless a "safe" non-member country is considered responsible. This avoids situations of refugees being shuttled from one member state to another, with none accepting responsibility, as well as multiple serial or simultaneous applications, (Official Journal of the European Union, C 254, 19/08/1997 pp.1-12).

and 14 in Flanders). Other bodies specialized in asylum issues include some non-governmental organizations[7] and local reception initiatives, the so-called Public Centers for Social Welfare. All reception institutions provide accommodation, food, clothing, medical services, and sanitary products. The reception centers are equally distributed around the country to prevent the overcrowding of asylum seekers at one place. The increasing number of asylum seekers requires constant improvements of the reception infrastructure[8]. The measures include increasing the capacity of the reception centers, developing special facilities for families, unaccompanied minors, people with psychological problems, and female asylum seekers. Until 2002, the Belgian reception system did not experience any significant practical difficulties with accepting new asylum seekers insofar as the reception centers had more than 2000 free places, according to the administration of Klein Kasteeltje (2002)[9]. To what degree this is true is a delicate question since in 2001 the available places in the reception centers were 8,615 while the asylum applications numbered more than 24 thousand. In 2002, the number of asylum seekers in Belgium was around ten thousand more than available reception places.

The applicants who are allowed to enter the stage of legitimacy research could move to local communities where they are provided for or they can choose housing. At this stage, asylum seekers have the right to work. Working legally is possible after obtaining a Provisional Working Permit for which the employer has to apply and which is valid only

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[7] The two organizations providing assistance for asylum seekers are OCIV (Overlegcentrum voor Integratie van Vluchtelingen, the Consultation Center for Integration of Refugees) and CIRÉ (Coordination et Initiatives pour Réfugiés et Étrangers, Coordination and Initiatives for Refugees and Foreigners).

[8] In January 2001, there were 5,771 places in the federal reception centers and 2,844 places in the OCMWs. In January 2002 these two reception institutions offered 8,786 and 5,240 places, respectively, thus in one year the reception capacity increased from 8,614 to 14,032 places. In 2001, nine new reception centers were opened in Arendonk (137 places), Bovigny (190), Houthalen (750), Westende (498), Wommelgem (132), Manhay (120), Manderfeld (185), Hotton (200), and Sint-Niklaas (150), and the capacity in some already existing centers was expanded.

[9] Klein Kasteeltje is the first reception center in Europe and the biggest federal reception center in Belgium. It offers facilities for 640 persons and is currently further developing its infrastructure.

for positions with the same employer. The Provisional Working Permit is issued for one year and is renewable if the applicant is still in the asylum procedure. Since 1999, recognized refugees do not need a work permit to be legally employed in Belgium. Recognized refugees can apply for family reunification once they have obtained official status in the country.

Since 2001, financial assistance for asylum seekers whose applications were first pronounced inadmissible, but who are waiting for decisions on their appeals has been terminated and the cash financial support has been replaced by the provision of food, shelter, and emergency medical assistance[10].

The last two points – e.g. the provision for employment without a work permit only after a final positive decision on the application has been made and the lack of financial support – have been designed to discourage those asylum seekers who apply in Belgium just in order to get access to the labor market or financial support. Indeed these measures have resulted in a decreasing number of asylum applications (see Table 5.3). However, with over 20,000 applications in 2001 and a recognition rate of less than 10%, one could guess that undocumented and unreported work and irregular residence in Belgium have not ceased to exist. Given that an asylum application can remain pending for more than five years, the practice of irregular employment can be estimated to reach significant proportions.

An asylum seeker whose application is rejected a second time may appeal to the Council of State regarding the legitimacy of the application's processing. At this stage, asylum seekers are not entitled to financial support. Applicants are protected from repatriation only in the case of an appeal of "highest necessity", such as a life-endangering political or environmental situation in the country of origin.

Belgium has readmission agreements with Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, the Slovakia, and Albania but as

[10] Het Belgisch Staatsblad, (2001) Wet Houdende Sociale, Budgettaire en Andere Bepalingen. January 3, 2001. (Belgian Official Journal, Law concerning Social, Budgetary and Other Regulations. January 3, 2001 [My translation]).

was already shown in the case of Bulgaria and Poland, this does not keep economic migrants from abusing the asylum system in order to get access to the Belgian territory. The latter are by definition rejected but are not effectively repatriated and in most of the cases remain undocumented in the country.

The final stage of the asylum procedure refers to the GCRS decision of expulsion or non-expulsion for asylum seekers whose admissibility was rejected. The Office of Foreigners' Affairs could further disregard a decision for non-expulsion. A decision of non-expulsion is usual in situations of civil war or violations of human rights in the country of origin. It is made systematically by nationality for a given period. Since 1991, the non-expulsion status was granted to 3% of the rejected asylum seekers coming from Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Zaire, Rwanda, Algeria, the former Yugoslavia, and Albania (De Gryse, 2001) thus granting protection to only a minority of all rejected asylum seekers. Finally, a decision for non-expulsion can be granted individually to persons for humanitarian reasons, or in situations when removal from the territory of Belgium would physically endanger the individual (e.g. health reasons).

*2. 2. Asylum seekers*

Belgium has a relatively short history as a refugee receiving country. Even though the country ratified the Convention for refugee protection in 1953, very few asylum applications were filed in Belgium before 1985. Going back in history until the time when the first asylum application was submitted in Belgium reveals that in the early 1970s Belgium was the least attractive country for asylum seekers after Portugal and Turkey. The countries receiving the most applications during that time were Germany, Italy, Austria, and France[11]. During the next five years, significantly more applications were lodged in Belgium (See Table 5.1), but the most preferred countries in Europe remained Germany, France, and Austria with Greece appearing as a new attractive destination.

[11] Between 1970 and 1974 the number of asylum applications filed in Germany was 34,341; 11,037 in Italy; 8,740 in Austria; and 5,121 in France (UNHCR, 2001).

**Table 5. 1. Asylum applications in Belgium, 1970-1979**

| Year | 1970 | 1971 | 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1975 | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 | 1979 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of applications | - | - | 680 | - | 1,010 | 924 | 1,250 | 945 | 1,082 | 2,427 |
| | **Total for 1970-1974: 1,690** | | | | | **Total for 1975-1979: 6,628** | | | | |

Note: A dash (-) indicates that the value is zero, rounded to zero, not available, or not applicable.
Source: UNHCR, 2001.

Although the next five years saw a 100% increase in asylum applications (See Table 5. 2), Belgium's international reputation remains as one of the industrialized countries that receives the least asylum seekers (along with Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Japan and Finland). The countries receiving major numbers of asylum applications for the same period are Germany (249,647), the United States (171,762), France (106,344), Austria (63,236), Sweden (41,926), Canada (29,400), and the United Kingdom (171,762). Among the 15 EU member states, Belgium ranked sixth in its amount of asylum applications received after Germany, France, Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

**Table 5. 2. Asylum applications in Belgium, 1980-1989**

| Year | 1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of applications | 2,727 | 2,287 | 2,908 | 2,908 | 3,646 | 5,299 | 7,644 | 5,976 | 5,078 | 8,112 |
| | **Total for 1980-1984: 14,476** | | | | | **Total for 1985-1989: 32,109** | | | | |

Source: UNHCR, 2001.

The position of Belgium as a preferred destination country occurred significantly in the period 1985-1989 when the total number of applications reached over 32 thousand. Belgium became the sixth most important receiving country in Europe (after Germany, France, Sweden, Austria and the Netherlands) and the ninth most preferred country by

asylum seekers, internationally. The primary attractiveness of Belgium for asylum seekers has not changed since. From 1995 to 1999 Belgium received 93,733 asylum applications and remains the sixth major destination for the asylum seekers in Europe (after Germany with 661,565 applications, the United Kingdom: 223,230 applications, the Netherlands: 171,075 applications, Switzerland: 146,374 applications, and France: 113,494 applications). After 1999 Belgium and the Netherlands have received the most asylum applications in comparison with all other EU countries.

Similar to the trend in all Western European countries, Belgium experienced two waves of increased asylum applications: one in the period 1989-1994 with a peak in 1993 when 26,882 applications were filed, and another in the period 1998-2001 with a peak in 2000 with 42,691 applications (See Table 5.3).

**Table 5. 3. Asylum applications submitted in Belgium, 1990-2003**

| Year | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of applications | 12,964 | 15,173 | 17,647 | 26,882 | 14,363 | 11,420 | 12,433 |

| Year | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of applications | 11,787 | 21,964 | 35,776 | 42,691 | 24,549 | 20,033 | 22,064 |

Sources: Klein Kasteeltje, 2002; USCR County Reports, 2002; UNHCR 2001; UNHCR, 2003b

During the years, significant changes occurred not only in the number of asylum applications but also with regard to the origins of the asylum seekers in Belgium. Between 1980 and 1990 the ten major flows of asylum seekers to Belgium were from Africa (Ghana and Congo as primary sending countries) and Asia (Turkey, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Pakistan, and Iran). During the 1990s, Congo, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Ghana were still important sending countries, but they were outnumbered by asylum seekers from Eastern Europe. The former Yugoslavia and Romania were the primary countries of origin for

asylum seekers in Belgium, followed by Bulgaria, Albania, the Russian Federation, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Poland (See Table 5.4). This tendency has remained, to a large degree, unchanged from 2000 onwards and in the period January 2000 to September 2002 most of the asylum seekers in Belgium came from Congo, the Russian Federation, Algeria, Turkey, Kosovo, Slovakia, Albania, and Iran.

**Table 5. 4. Origin of asylum applicants in Belgium, 1980-1989 and 1990-1999**

| Origin | 1980 - 1989 |
|---|---|
| Ghana | 8,992 |
| Turkey | 6,098 |
| Other/Unknown | 4,165 |
| India | 3,690 |
| DR Congo | 3,668 |
| Vietnam | 3,420 |
| Pakistan | 2,842 |
| FR Yugoslavia | 2,542 |
| Iran | 2,539 |
| Poland | 2,086 |
| Chile | 851 |
| Romania | 773 |
| Angola | 720 |
| Cambodia | 657 |
| Sri Lanka | 612 |
| Bangladesh | 574 |
| Hungary | 467 |
| Lebanon | 454 |
| Laos | 433 |
| Syria | 377 |
| Afghanistan | 169 |
| Czech Republic | 156 |
| Ethiopia | 144 |
| Iraq | 89 |
| Somalia | 50 |
| Palestine | 17 |

| Origin | 1990 - 1999 |
|---|---|
| Other/Unknown[12] | 43,423 |
| FR Yugoslavia | 29,160 |
| Romania | 19,595 |
| DR Congo | 18,939 |
| India | 8,584 |
| Turkey | 7,732 |
| Pakistan | 6,523 |
| Bulgaria | 5,804 |
| Ghana | 5,527 |
| Armenia | 4,538 |
| Albania | 4,511 |
| Nigeria | 3,991 |
| Russian Federation | 3,295 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 3,087 |
| Angola | 2,772 |
| Algeria | 2,299 |
| Poland | 2,282 |
| Somalia | 1,547 |
| Iraq | 1,507 |
| Iran | 1,292 |
| Afghanistan | 1,109 |
| Sri Lanka | 1,081 |
| Lebanon | 949 |
| Vietnam | 493 |
| Ethiopia | 393 |
| China | 316 |

Sources: UNHCR, 2001; UNHCR, 2003b.

[12] The UNHCR publications provide no information concerning the people with "other/unknown" origin". Keeping in mind the widespread practice among asylum seekers of destroying or hiding their identity papers, one could hypothesize that at least in some of these cases an attempt at undocumented migration has been made.

As outlined above, the trends in number and origin of asylum seekers can enlighten us to the gradually increasing stock of undocumented migrants in Belgium. It is not farfetched to guess that the current stock of undocumented migrants is the outcome of low recognition rates. It is recognized that rejected asylum seekers, especially those who have been in a process of application evaluation for more than a year, seldom leave the territory of a reception state unless forceful measures are applied. Voluntary and unassisted return is nearly nonexistent and rejected asylum seekers tend to remain and work in the country without documentation. Bearing in mind Belgium's termination of financial support for asylum seekers as well as the length of time an application decision can take (several years), it is not surprising that asylum seekers work without documentation. Once the labor market has been accessed, voluntary return to a country where no possibilities for sustenance are available is far from a realistic expectation. An evaluation of recognition rates in Belgium will testify to the many asylum seekers who have been, de facto, transformed into undocumented migrants. Since 1990 the recognition rate for asylum seekers in Belgium has been less than 10%. For example, in 1991, only 595 persons out of more than 15 thousand asylum seekers received refugee status; in 1993 the statistics show 1,025 persons out of 26,882[13]. The recognition rate in Belgium has not increased with an increase in asylum applications. Thus, during two years when the maximum number of applications was received (1999 and 2000), less than 1,300 people were granted refugee status out of 35,776 in 1999 and 42,691 in 2000 (USCR, 2002). It should be noted that the highest recognition rates do not correspond with the primary sending countries. During the twelve-year period from 1988 to 2000 the highest recognition rates have consistently been for asylum seekers from Rwanda (78.1%), Burundi (65.6%), Afghanistan (39%), Iran (29%), and Iraq (29%), countries which are minor sending territories. These facts, together with the fact that EEIs are not granted refugee status since their countries of origin are

[13] One should bear in mind that these figures comprise a large population of victims of the wars in the former Yugoslavia who received temporary protection in different European states but were rarely granted refugee status.

perceived as “safe” after 1989, clearly point to the creation of an undocumented population from Eastern Europe currently residing in Belgium.

In this context, special attention should also be given to a significant and vulnerable group of asylum seekers who rarely attract attention: unaccompanied asylum seekers who are minors or children below the age of 18 who arrive in Belgium alone (without a parent or a legal representative) and request refuge. The number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Belgium is quite impressive. For the period 1988-1999 there were 11,340 children. Most of the unaccompanied children in 1999 were from the former Yugoslavia (28.7%), Rwanda (16.2%), and Sierra Leone (8.5%), followed by children from Congo (7.8%), Guinea (4.9%), the former USSR (4.5%), Burundi (3.7%), Romania (2.9%), Albania (2.3%), Angola (1.9%), and other countries (18.6%). The recognition rate for unaccompanied minors is also low. Out of 11,340 children, only 2,215 were recognized as refugees (De Smet, 2001). No data exists about what happened to those who have not been granted refugee status, but it is highly unlikely that they have been returned to their countries of origin. The issue of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors does not only raise questions about their future after rejection but also how they have been accepted into Belgium in the first place. The existing facilities are usually not developed to satisfy the particular needs of children. There is still no firmly established system for assisting children, such as trained personnel specialized in working with children and juniors, no adapted reception centers providing the relevant and comprehensibly presented legal help for children; and no guaranteed psychological support.

*3. Conclusions*

With a risk of being repetitive, we will conclude this presentation of Belgian history as an immigrant receiving country by pointing out one simple fact: Belgium was transformed into a major player on the international migration scene and the foreign population in the country is far from being homogeneous and composed of only former guest workers and nationals of neighboring countries. The latter are indeed the largest immigrant groups in the country but the nearly one million legally residing foreign

nationals in Belgium come from more than 250 origins (See Appendix 2), testifying not only to the numerical magnitude of immigrants to Belgium, but also to vast cultural diversity.

The detailed presentation of the position of Belgium as an asylum country also leads to a few simple conclusions. Belgium has become increasingly popular as a destination for asylum seekers throughout the years. The numbers of asylum seekers has augmented progressively to transform the country to one of the primarily preferred European destinations. Simultaneously, the chances for obtaining refugee status has decreased and the facilities for accepting new applicants are not being developed to cope with the continuous refugee flow. The lower recognition rate has, over time, significantly decreased the population of refugees on the Belgian territory (from around one thousand refugees per 1,000 km² in 1995, 1996, and 1997, to around 400 from the year 2001 onwards). The number of recognized refugees per 1,000 inhabitants is also decreasing: from four recognized refugees per thousand inhabitants in the middle of the 1990s to less than two from 1998 onwards (UNHCR, 2003b). The most important issue in this context is the creation of an undocumented population as a result of restrictive recognition rates, especially as applied towards applicants from primary sending countries. The issue of undocumented migrants in Belgium and more particularly in Brussels will be addressed explicitly in the next chapter.