Immigration and Regional Attitudes in Belgium: Lessons from the Early 2000s



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This article was written by Rania El Ghalbzouri. It is a novel summary of a quantitative research project developed by Rania El Ghalbzouri, Weiwei Wang, Firdaous Akhloufi, Saskia Greczko, Riki Mala Sari, and Morgeane Hammadi as part of the MBA Bridging Programme at KU Leuven's Faculty of Economics and Business. The research was completed in the OLA "Quantitative Research Methods" under the supervision of Prof. Goedele Dierckx.*

Introduction

In the early 2000s, as Belgium navigated a politically charged period with immigration moving to the centre of national debate, the European Social Survey captured attitudes of 1,145 native Belgian respondents—that is, Belgian-born citizens evaluating immigration as a social phenomenon (European Social Survey, 2002). Their answers reveal something unexpected: attitudes were shaped less by economic threat than by institutional trust, education, political orientation, and cultural openness; mechanisms that continue to define migration politics across Europe's uneven territorial economies.

Belgium sits at the heart of Europe's mobility networks. Home to EU institutions and shaped by decades of labour migration, Belgium is marked by sharp geographic contrasts: between Brussels and the periphery, between post-industrial and service regions, and between different political cultures and visions of solidarity. In 2002, 18.8% of the population had a foreign background; by 2022, that figure had grown to 33.4% (Statbel, 2024).

Attitudes beyond economics

Public debates about immigration are often framed in economic terms. Concerns about jobs, wages, or welfare dominate political discourse. But analysis spanning employment, education, ideology, trust, religiosity, and domicile reveals that attitudes cannot be reduced to labour-market competition alone.

Economic perceptions mattered. Respondents satisfied with the national economy held more favourable attitudes (Garcia-Munoz & Milgram-Baleix, 2021). But employment status produced a counterintuitive result: employed respondents held slightly less favourable views than those not in paid work. This suggests that perceived labour-market competition operates even among the employed, and that employment may strengthen identification with a "worker" identity or heighten concerns about who deserves access to jobs, a dynamic easily missed in aggregate analyses but critical for understanding regional labour markets (Dustmann & Preston, 2007).

Household financial strain showed no significant effect. If immigration attitudes were driven primarily by personal economic anxiety, struggling households would report more negative views. Instead, findings point to a subtler mechanism:

concern is less about individual hardship and more about broader perceptions of economic fairness and who deserves access to collective resources (Zamora-Kapoor, 2013).

Belgium's geographic diversity made these dynamics visible. Urban respondents expressed significantly more favourable attitudes, reflecting patterns in which cities become focal points of diversity and mobility (Goubin, Ruelens, & Nicaise, 2022). This urban-rural divide has since become defining across Europe.

The role of institutional trust

What emerged most clearly was the role of trust. Trust acts as a cognitive buffer: individuals who maintain baseline confidence in others are less likely to translate uncertainty into hostility toward outsiders (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Higher generalised social trust predicted more favourable attitudes (Mitchell, 2021).

Institutional trust emerged as one of the clearest patterns: both trust in the legal system and satisfaction with government were associated with more favourable immigration attitudes, independent of economic circumstances (Halapuu et al., n.d.). When people believe institutions function effectively, they are more confident that migration can be managed fairly. Conversely, when institutional trust erodes, migration becomes a symbolic outlet for frustrations about representation, inequality, or insecurity (Scholten & Penninx, 2016).

This remains highly relevant. Immigration debates are interpreted as cultural conflicts, but they are equally debates about governance capacity. Geographic areas experiencing decline, weak investment, or demographic pressure become more receptive to narratives that frame migration as an institutional failure.

Belgium's federal structure offers a useful illustration. Flanders, with stronger economic performance and lower unemployment in the early 2000s, nonetheless saw the rise of migration-sceptic politics, suggesting that institutional trust and political narratives matter independently of economic conditions. Wallonia, facing post-industrial decline, experienced immigration amid scarce resources and weakened public services. Brussels, as an international hub hosting EU institutions and relying on international workers, developed more cosmopolitan framings. Economic performance, labour markets, and political identities vary

across these three regions, shaping not only migration patterns but also how migration is interpreted.

Education, cultural openness, and connected regions

Education emerged as one of the strongest demographic predictors. Each additional year was associated with more favourable attitudes (Umansky, Weber, & Lutz, 2025). But education alone does not explain attitudes. Cultural openness, measured by the importance respondents placed on understanding people from different backgrounds, was independently significant (Nariman, van der Linden, & Spini, 2021). This relationship is particularly relevant in Belgium's regional context. Higher education institutions and internationally connected labour markets tend to expose individuals to greater cultural diversity, making migration a more familiar rather than abstract phenomenon. As a result, educational differences increasingly overlap with geographic divides between globally connected urban centres and more peripheral regions.

Unexpectedly, religiosity showed a positive association with pro-immigration attitudes, counter to predictions that religious Belgians would view immigration from Muslim-majority countries as threatening (Meuleman, Billiet, & Maddens, 2017). This contradicts a common public assumption: that religiosity and support for immigration are incompatible. The finding suggests that for some, religious identity may activate values of compassion and moral responsibility toward strangers. However, religiosity in early-2000s Belgium may have mapped differently onto immigration attitudes than in contexts where religious-secular divides align more strongly with immigration politics, making this relationship context-dependent rather than universal.

Political orientation was strongly associated with attitudes. Right-wing respondents held markedly less favourable views (Hannuksela, Koivula, & Saarinen, 2024). Ideology captures more than policy preferences; it reflects worldviews about national identity, cohesion, and the legitimacy of diversity.

This reflects a broader reality: regions integrated into global knowledge economies display more cosmopolitan attitudes. Universities, international labour markets, and connected urban economies normalise diversity and mobility. Educational divides increasingly overlap with territorial divides.

Why the early 2000s still matter

The early 2000s marked a formative phase: EU enlargement was reshaping labour mobility, debates about multiculturalism were intensifying, and regions were adapting to post-industrial restructuring. Belgium at that moment offers a valuable baseline for understanding how attitudes formed within an increasingly interconnected Europe (Jacobs, Wuyts, & Loosveldt, 2017).

Debates have evolved substantially. Yet the explanatory mechanisms identified—institutional trust, education, political orientation, cultural openness—continue to shape attitudes today (Meuleman, Davidov, & Billiet, 2009). This persistence suggests that immigration debates reflect broader anxieties linked to territorial inequality, democratic trust, and transformation.

Europe's connected future

Migration is increasingly embedded within interconnected systems. Healthcare relies on international workers. Universities compete globally for talent. Metropolitan regions and ageing economies depend on mobility to function. Consider Brussels, where international healthcare workers staff hospitals serving both the capital and surrounding municipalities, while smaller towns in rural Wallonia face demographic decline and struggle to attract the labour needed to maintain public services. This is what interconnected systems look like in practice: labour shortages in one area are tied to demographic decline in another.

Yet political backlash emerges most strongly in places experiencing insecurity, institutional distrust, or limited exposure to diversity (Blinder & Richards, 2020). This creates a central challenge: sustaining openness while maintaining cohesion across uneven territorial landscapes.

Belgium's experience demonstrates that attitudes are shaped through interactions between economic structures, political trust, cultural values, and geographic experience. Understanding these interactions matters because attitudes influence not only electoral outcomes but the capacity of regions to attract labour, manage demographic change, and participate in broader networks.

For policymakers in Europe's interconnected regions, sustaining labour mobility requires not only recruitment policies or skills matching, but place-based

investment in institutional trust, educational infrastructure, and inclusive political narratives—especially in peripheral regions experiencing decline. This might mean strengthening local governance capacity, ensuring visible public investment, or creating pathways for civic participation that rebuild confidence in democratic institutions.

If Europe's regions are truly connected systems, migration cannot be treated solely as a border issue. It is also a question of institutional legitimacy, territorial inequality, and social trust. The question is not whether mobility will continue—it must—but whether the social conditions exist for it to be understood as collective opportunity rather than threat.

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Note

The original research employed European Social Survey Round 1 data and utilised multiple linear regression analysis to examine how socio-economic, cultural, political, and demographic factors shape native Belgian attitudes toward immigration. The full academic paper, including detailed statistical methodology, diagnostic tests, and complete regression output, is available upon request.

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