

Local practices of integration and local networks

The case of Ninove

Ona Schyvens, Stijn Oosterlyncx, Elise Schillebeeckx, Silke Peeters

Figure 1. The Social House (*Sociaal Huis*) that gathers all social welfare services of Ninove



1. Introduction

Belgium has become a permanent country of settlement for many types of immigrants over the past five decades (Petrovic 2012). According to Statbel (2020) 174.591 individuals migrated to Belgium in 2019¹. In 2021, 24,2% of the total population in the Flemish region had an immigrant

¹ The number of migrants decreased to 144.169 individuals in 2020, but this is probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Statbel 2021). Given the unusually low level of migration in 2020 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, the numbers for 2019 are more representative for long term trends.

background² (Statistics Flanders 2022). Antwerp is the municipality with the highest absolute number of persons with foreign nationality³ in Flanders, followed by Ghent, Leuven, Mechelen and Turnhout. These demographic transitions present significant challenges for municipal governments, who have responded by developing integration policies. Although major cities still receive the largest inflow of immigrants to this day, migration is increasingly less confined to these large 'gateway' cities. Between 2012 and 2016, 109.500 residents, of which one in three had a non-Belgian nationality, moved from the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) to municipalities in the surrounding Flemish region (Charlier *et al.* 2019). Recent statistics indicate that in 2020, 15.165 residents, of which 6.992 had an immigrant background, moved from BCR to the neighbouring Flemish municipalities. Smaller towns in the wider periphery of Brussels, such as Denderleeuw, Ninove and Geraardsbergen, are marked as increasingly important destinations for immigrants (Pelfrene 2015). However, the international academic literature only recently started to focus on the effects of migration in small and medium-sized municipalities and towns (Grossmann, Mallach 2021; Wagner, Growe 2021). Therefore, this report focuses on the incorporation of immigrants in these small and medium-sized municipalities, more specifically in Ninove, a medium-sized town in the periphery of Brussels.

Ninove has witnessed more than a doubling of the portion of residents with an immigrant background in the last ten years (Provincie in Cijfers 2022). In 2011, only 10,8% of the population in Ninove had an immigrant background. In 2021, this number had already increased up 20,4%. If we look at foreign nationality, statistics indicate that in 2010, 2,94% of the Ninove population had a foreign nationality, which increased up 6,68% in 2021, meaning that 2.629 out of a total population of 39.369 have a foreign nationality (Statistics Flanders 2021). The five most common countries of origin of people with an immigrant background in 2021 were non-Maghreb countries (5,4%), Maghreb countries⁴ (4,8%), Netherlands (2,5%), South-EU countries⁵ (1,8%) and Asian countries (1,4%) (Provincie in Cijfers 2022).

These rapid demographic changes have led to socio-political tensions within the local community. The Local Integration Scan indicated that 45% of the inhabitants of Ninove feels that there are too

² Persons with an immigrant background includes persons with a current foreign nationality, persons with a current Belgian nationality but with a foreign birth nationality and persons with a Belgian birth nationality but with at least one parent with a foreign birth nationality.

³ Persons with foreign nationality are persons with a current non-Belgian nationality. Belgians are persons with a current Belgian nationality, including persons with dual nationality.

⁴ Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia Libya and Mauritania.

⁵ Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and Malta.

many residents with a different origin and that this makes living together in the town difficult⁶. These tensions rose to the surface in the federal elections of 2014, where far-right and anti-immigration party '*Vlaams Belang*' obtained 19,72% of the votes. This electoral victory was followed by even higher scores for this political party in 2019, when it attracted 38,03% of the votes thus becoming the biggest local party by far (IBZ Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2019). The combination of increasing polarisation and the successive electoral victories of a far-right party led to the development of an integration policy in Ninove from 2015 onwards. The local integration policy in Ninove has mainly been developed in response to the concerns of the established inhabitants and not in response to the needs of immigrants, even though the latter are the primary targets of this integration policy. This research project aims to change the perspective and analyses how immigrants experience and (can) participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of integration policies.

Focusing primarily on immigrant's participation in small and medium-sized municipalities and towns, PISTE analyses incorporation⁷ (*'inburgering'*) policies from a multi-scalar perspective and creates an overview of integration practices through an assessment of the policy tradition in the Flemish region. In the next section, we briefly discuss the conceptual definition of integration and political participation, before moving on to the Flemish integration policy and the shifts in emphasis over time. We then analyse the local integration policy, the coordinating role and administrative capacity of municipalities and the political participation of immigrants and explain the current integration policy and the participation of immigrants in Ninove, complementing the report with an explanatory model for political participation as identified in the scholarly literature. Next, we will present three innovative practices of immigrant participation in Ninove and finally we will describe the existing territorial networks in this medium-sized town.

2. Conceptual definition

2.1 Integration policy

According to Hammar (1985), the integration policy for immigrants can be divided into two domains: a direct and an indirect integration policy. The term direct integration policy is used when

⁶ Proportion of inhabitants who when asked disagreed, were neutral or agreed to the following statement: 'I think that there are too many people of different origins living in my municipality'.

⁷ In Flanders the incorporation process consists of a trajectory with four pillars: Dutch lessons, social orientation, career development, social networking and participation.

governments make arrangements with the specific aim of meeting the immigrants' need. The direct integration policy in Flanders is developed in the Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2013 and establishes an 'incorporation trajectory' (*inburgering*) which consists of four pillars (Dutch language lessons, social orientation, economic self-reliance and social networking and participation) and is implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs ('*Binnenlands Bestuur*'). In this decree integration is defined as "a dynamic and interactive process whereby individuals, groups, communities and facilities, each from a context of the enforceability of rights and obligations inherent to our democratic constitutional state, constructively relate to one another and deal with migration and its consequences in society" (Art. 2 Integration and Incorporation Decree 2013, own translation). Integration is the intended result of the incorporation process, in which the incorporation policy is an instrument of a broader integration policy: "incorporation is a guided trajectory to integration whereby the government offers persons who are integrating a specific programme, which increases their self-reliance and promotes their professional, educational and social participation" (Art. 2 Integration and Incorporation Decree 2013, own translation). Policies and service provisions that are part of the general offer of the Belgian welfare state - regardless of migration status - but that may have an effect on the integration process of immigrants are considered to be indirect integration policies (Hammar 1985). Indirect integration concerns policy domains such as housing, education and employment. This report will only focus on direct integration policies, since including indirect integration policies would excessively widen the scope of the report.

In addition to direct and indirect integration policies, there are different perspectives in the content of integration policies. In the early years of (labour) migration to Western countries, 'integration' was not widely discussed, especially since migration was expected to be a temporary phenomenon (Goeman, Van Puymbroeck 2011). Social organisations, individuals and local policy makers seeking to support immigrants focused on direct needs. Implicitly, assimilation was the dominant perspective. The normative expectation was that over time ethnic minority groups would adapt to the norms and values of the majority by distancing themselves from the history, cultural practices and beliefs of their own ethnic group. Multiculturalism arose in response to the assimilation perspective and rejects the idea that members of the minority group should assimilate the dominant culture (Song 2017). Instead, multiculturalism believes that minority groups should be able to maintain their ethnic identities and cultural practices. Multiculturalists see this as a matter of human rights and believe that minority groups should be actively supported to improve their position in society. A multicultural policy does provide a framework of voluntary integration, such as learning the Dutch language, but - importantly - it is not mandatory or connected to the acquisi-

tion of Belgian nationality (as it is the case now in Flanders and Belgium). This kind of multicultural policy often consists of facilitating self-organisations, which represent ethnic-cultural minorities as communities to policymakers (Van Puymbroeck *et al.* 2018). While the integration policy in Flanders used to be partially based on a multicultural ideology, in recent years more emphasis has been placed on immigrants' own accountability to integrate (De Cuyper, Wets 2007; Van De Pol *et al.* 2013). In this context, authors such as Joppke and Morawska (2003), Saeys, Albeda, Van Puymbroeck, Oosterlynck, Verschraegen and Dierckx (2014) claim that over the past two decades integration policies shifted back towards the assimilation logic, after two decades in which multicultural policies were (tendentially) dominant in the approach. As a political ideology, neo-assimilation - the resurgence of the assimilation perspective - rests on the premise that multicultural policies have promoted ethnic-cultural segregation and thus may 'disintegrate' from society (Loobuyck 2003). More recent literature has proposed interculturalism as an alternative framework that keeps an intermediate approach between multiculturalism and assimilation (Zapata-Barrero 2017). Interculturalism opposes the strong multiculturalism dichotomy between a cultural majority and minorities, because this would result in segregation. Instead, interculturalism focuses on dialogue, social cohesion and is less concerned with groups and their cultural characteristics. An interculturalist policy does not start from universal values, but tries to stimulate mutual contact and understanding.

2.2 Political participation

Political participation is commonly defined as: 'all activities that have the intention or the effect of influencing political decision-making within the institutional features of representative democracy' (Verba Schlozman, Brady 1995: 38). The political participation of immigrants can take on many forms. Martiniello (1997) makes a distinction between direct and indirect political participation. Direct political participation refers to participation in elections and systems of representation, but also arrangements set up by local governments, such as advisory councils. Indirect political participation refers to demonstrating, signing petitions, being a member of an action group or founding ethnic self-organisations. Since Belgium has a constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of expression, all residents of Belgium are free to engage in indirect political participation.

For immigrants political participation is often difficult to engage in (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Immigrants frequently have limited discursive power, lack financial resources and time. Their most pressing concerns are closely tied to the immediate fulfilling of basic needs rather than the long-term goals that are often central in political decision-making. That is why we propose to use a more expansive definition of political participation, that centres the social needs of immigrants.

To do so, we draw on Fraser's (1989) definition of political participation (Dean 2015). In this analytical framework political participation is closely tied to the basic needs of people, as it is not disconnected from everyday life. According to Fraser (1989: 161) 'in late capitalist welfare societies, talk about needs is an important species of political discourse'. Needs become 'political' when made public, hence the question is raised whether there is a collective (rather than merely individual) responsibility to satisfy those needs. 'Making needs public' can happen in different ways, such as influencing policy-making through formal channels of participation. Other possibilities are telling your story to a journalist, doing a survey or being part of an advisory council (Dean 2015). We suggest that political participation is in place as long as there is some kind of 'communication' about 'needs' with people outside your own group - in an attempt to appeal them to take responsibility to satisfy those needs. Recognising the importance of power relations, Fraser (1989: 164-65) emphasises that different groups dispose of different 'sociocultural means of interpretation and communication' to engage in the expression of those needs. In Fraser's perspective the emancipation of excluded groups implies a redistribution of sociocultural means of communication, which is an aspect highly relevant to immigrants. The micro-level 'foundation' of citizen participation is what Putnam calls 'social capital' (Putnam 2000) or Fraser (1989) prefers to call 'sociocultural means of communication and interpretation'. Social capital has a structural (networks) and a cultural or attitudinal component (norms and values). Fraser more than Putnam is sensitive to the social inequalities generated in the political participation informing campaigns and phrases the cultural component more in terms of unequally distributed resources. However, if one conceptualises the micro-level foundation of participation, it is clear that there are important pre-conditions to participate politically.

3. Research design

A document analysis was carried out on different policy files, such as Decrees on integration⁸; decisions of the Flemish Government⁹, the Ninove multi-annual plan (2020-2025) and the Flemish coalition agreement (2019-2024) on the redesign of the integration policy. Through this explicit policy documents analysis, it was possible to distinguish the intended objectives of the integration policy at Flemish and local level. Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with

⁸ Art. 28 Minorities Decree of 1998, Integration Decree of 2009, Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation of 2013.

⁹ 'Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering tot toekenning van taken en kern taken aan een lokaal bestuur' 2014, 'Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering participatie organisatie en aanbod NT2' 2020, 'Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering testen en bewijzen van het taalniveau Nederlands' 2018.

the aim of developing a better insight into the local integration policy and the various integration partners or projects active in this medium-sized town. The respondents were key actors operating on different policy levels and organisations. We interviewed three supra-local policy actors, seven local public policy actors, eleven civil society organisations present in Ninove and in the surrounding region, three representatives of local immigrants' associations, two experts on integration and immigration policies and one expert in participatory policy making. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to compare the different interviews, but also to deviate from the questioning protocol (Mortelmans 2018). The flexibility of this research technique allowed the researcher to explain a question to the respondent, ask for examples or ask additional questions in order to rule out any misunderstandings. This proved necessary as concepts such as integration and participation can be interpreted in different ways.

The questionnaire was divided into six themes: definitions and understandings of integration and related concepts, history of integration, local integration policy, territorial networks of actors involved in the integration policy, political participation of immigrants and budgets. The central research questions were: 'What are the concrete objectives of the local integration policy?' 'Which policy interventions or projects had a desired effect and which factors were important for their success?' 'What can small towns do in order to stimulate the political participation of immigrants?'

Chapter ten deals with a focus group which was created with nine local actors. The respondents consisted of two supra-local policy actors, two local public policy actors, four civil society organisations and one inhabitant with immigrant background. In the focus group we presented our findings in the form of statements about the public and private organisations working on integration, the services they offer and their cooperation and asked them to respond. The added value of focus groups over individual interviews is that we were able to collect additional information by letting participants talk to each other (Mortelmans 2018). The result is a more nuanced understanding of integration.

3.1 Data analysis and quality assurance

The interviews and the focus group were audio recorded, transcribed and imported into the software Nvivo. A coding tree was constructed based on the questionnaire six themes. Then, the six themes were divided into several subcategories. The interviews were systematically compared for connections or differences. After the document analysis and interviews, the data was used to complement the academic literature, which made the analysis more complete. However, interview material was used more extensively for section seven, eight and ten, as less information was

found on these topics through literature review and document analysis. All quotes in the report were translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

The researchers are well aware of how their personal characteristics might impact the data (Mortelmans 2018). There could be an urban bias in the researchers' mentality because Ninove is only recently confronted with migration and its governance challenges and therefore they may not always have been sufficiently sensitive to the specific context of small municipalities. To minimise this impact, reflexive thoughts were noted during the interviews, pointing out the possible ways in which the data could be biased. The researcher emphasised that he did not evaluate the single respondents and that the aim was just to capture the respondents' personal opinions.

Topics such as immigrants' political participation and integration could have a political value. The integration process may be accompanied by frustration, which in some cases might provoke strong reactions. As far as civil servants or civil society actors are concerned, statements about the political participation of immigrants could be politically sensitive, so they arouse fear of repercussions for their own position in the political hierarchy. By using an informed consent form, explicit permission was requested from the respondent to conduct the interview (Mortelmans 2018).

4. The Flemish integration policy

Due to Belgium's multi-scalar governance system and the high degree of autonomy at the regional and municipal level, there is a lot of room for territorial variation of integration policies (Yar, Laurensyeva 2020). For a long time, when integration policy was still a federal competence, it was a rather '*laissez-faire*' policy without direct or indirect measures to support integration. Since the institutional reforms of the 1980's, integration has been the exclusive responsibility of the French or Flemish community (Goeman, Van Puymbroeck 2011; Deprez *et al.* 2018). However, migration policy¹⁰ remained a federal competence. Given the strong connections between migration and integration policies, the need to align them requires negotiations and governance across different scales of government. Despite the competence federalisation for integration policies in the

¹⁰ Within the federal government, the State Secretary is responsible for Asylum and Migration and different government departments (FOD) are indirectly involved (e.g. foreign affairs, employment and justice). Other important actors are the Immigration Department (DVZ) which is responsible for the registration of asylum applications and the voluntary return or removal of illegal immigrants, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), General Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGVS), which is responsible for granting or rejecting the refugee status and the Council for Immigration Disputes, which is competent for appeal procedures against the CGVS and the DVZ.

1980's, a direct integration policy in Flanders only emerged in the early 2000's with the idea of incorporation (*inburgering*).

4.1 The slow emergence of the Flemish integration policy

The integration policy in Belgium started only decades after the country became an 'immigration country' and relatively late in comparison to other European countries (Van De Pol *et al.* 2013; Saeys *et al.* 2014). After the Second World War, and especially from the 1960's onwards, Belgium became an immigration country. A migration policy was established to address the needs of the Belgian labour market. To compensate for labour shortages in the mining sector, steel and textile industry, bilateral agreements were concluded with different countries, starting with Italy, then Spain and Greece, lastly Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). Since these immigrants were initially seen as temporary workers who would return to their country of origin, the migration policy – directing migration according to labour market needs – was not accompanied by an integration policy.

The mining disaster of Marcinelle in 1956, which cost the lives of 136 Italian immigrant workers, marked the end of the Italian decade (Martiniello *et al.* 2006). Belgium did not sufficiently meet the demands of the Italian state to provide better working conditions for the Italians, so other labour reserves had to be recruited. In the beginning, the focus was mainly on Spain and Greece, but when the economy started to industrialise in these countries, bilateral agreements were concluded with Turkey and Morocco. Due to the large mobility of the guest workers, Belgian employers had to constantly attract and train new immigrants, which demanded time and financial resources. In an attempt to retain the recruited guest workers, Fédéchar, the coal mine employers' association, started investing in family reunification. This resulted in large numbers of foreign-born families concentrating in a few local neighbourhoods of industrial cities. Martens (1973) argues that the corporate world had asked for workers, but had not taken into account that guest workers would need housing, education and health care.

After the oil shock in 1973 and the subsequent economic crisis, further labour migration was halted through the migration ban in 1974 (Martens 1973). The main policy focus was now on the integration of immigrants who were already on the Belgian territory. There was still no policy to help immigrants with their settlement and participation in the host society (Goeman, Van Puymbroeck 2011). The non-policy of this era reflected the idea that integration was a spontaneous process that could not be influenced by policies. At the same time, civil society initiatives emerged at a local scale in Flanders. Local volunteers set up services to help immigrants. Historically, inte-

gration was the domain of the local civil society, but - as we shall see later - this was gradually taken over by the Flemish government.

In the early 1980's, it became increasingly clear that many immigrants would not return to their country of origin (Martens 1973). Three laws that addressed the demands of trade unions, immigrant organisations and other activists from the 60's were adopted: Aliens Act of 1980, Anti-Racism Act of 1981 and the Nationality Act of 1984. The first law regulated who was and who was not allowed to stay on the Belgian territory. The second act was to ensure that those allowed to stay had opportunities to fully participate by prohibiting discrimination based on race. The third law granted full civil rights through the acquisition of Belgian nationality for certain categories of foreigners. Foreigners could declare their will to become Belgian citizens after seven years of continuous residence in Belgium. It was expected that access to Belgian citizenship would lead to a successful integration. This law has been amended several times¹¹, but still forms the basis of the current nationality legislation.

It is important to understand that the integration policy evolution developed parallel with different state reforms (De Cuyper, Wets 2007, Van De Pol *et al.* 2013). The law on institutional reforms of 1980 stipulates that the competence for person-related matters, including the reception and integration of immigrants, belongs exclusively to the French or Flemish community. This means that since then, the migration and integration policy in Belgium has been located on different scales of government. The competence of the migration policy lies with the federal government and that of the integration policy with the French or Flemish community and municipalities. As a result, different policy emphases emerged in Flanders and Wallonia. Since 1987, integration has been a competence of the Flemish community. The French community concentrated more on the French assimilation and adaptation policy, while the integration policy in Flanders was initially more focused on multiculturalism.

In 1989, the strictly economic character of the policy towards guest workers was abandoned in favour of a more cultural approach. Paula D'Hondt was appointed head of the Royal Commission for Migrants Policy (KCM) (Van De Pol *et al.* 2013). The KCM was established in response to the politi-

¹¹ In March 2000, the law was amended (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). The minimum number of years of residence in Belgium was reduced to three years and even to two years for stateless people and refugees. Belgium was the only European country where residence alone was sufficient to acquire citizenship, the integration requirement was removed. Fearing integration problems, conservative political parties criticised the flexible citizenship policy and proposed stricter conditions. The law, nicknamed the 'quickly-Belgian law' (*snel-Belg-wet*) by its opponents, was reversed in 2012. On the one hand immigrants could acquire Belgian nationality after five years of residence if the integration requirements were met. On the other hand, an immigrant could be naturalised after ten years of legal residence. Knowledge of one of the national languages and proof of economic participation was required for both processes.

cal shock effect on the established parties caused by the overwhelming election victory of the anti-immigrant far-right party '*Vlaams Blok*'. In order to prevent a new election victory, the established parties were forced to tackle with the urban problems that the *Vlaams Blok* kept on referring to in their election programme - to justify an immigrant stop and deportation policy. D'Hondt was given the task of developing an integration policy. The integration policy institutionalisation in Flanders was not finalised until 1991, which is quite late compared to other countries. The integration policy in Flanders evolved into an inclusive 'categorical' policy, that followed two tracks (1) an equal opportunity policy to promote the integration of immigrants in important sectors and (2) a cultural '*inpassings*' or 'fitting into' policy that was mainly interpreted as an 'ethnic minorities policy', where a major role was assigned to the 'cultural identity' of immigrants (Blommaert and Verschueren 1992), a term which according to Blommaert and Verschueren has an assimilationist connotation, while avoiding and even explicitly rejecting the term 'assimilation'. Various ethnic associations and self-organisations were subsidised in order to stimulate the emancipation of immigrants (Saeys *et al.* 2014). At the same time the local authorities were encouraged to take more responsibility for their own integration initiatives. In the Minorities Decree D'Hondt stated that "municipal authorities are the closest to the daily coexistence of Belgians and migrants" (Art. 28 Minorities Decree, own translation). The 1998 Decree stated that local authorities had an important role in the field of integration policy, they were responsible for "the elaboration, coordination and implementation of the inclusive policy and for involving the target groups". The focus on integration grew dramatically in the 1990's, resulting in new institutions, policies and associations. The year of 1996 marked a historical turning point for the integration policy (De Cuyper, Wets 2007). For the first time, the Flemish government recognized the need for a 'reception policy' for immigrants. With the coalition agreement and the September Declaration of 1999, the government launched the idea of incorporation (*inburgering*). Geets, Pauwels, Wets, Lamberts and Timmerman (2006) argue that there was a shift from the multicultural idea of integration as a collective endeavour in which immigrants' ethnic identity was preserved to an individual idea of integration. In other words, the responsibility for integration was put on the immigrants themselves instead of the host society. The aim of the Incorporation Decree (2003) was to promote a certain degree of language and cultural assimilation, in which minorities merge into the dominant culture. However, there is a lot of academic discussion about whether or not the integration policy entails assimilation (Loobuyck 2003).

The appointment of the first Flemish Minister of Integration in 2004 marked the beginning of the direct integration policy in Flanders, where integration became an autonomous policy domain (Schillebeeckx *et al.* 2016). The Decree specified how the incorporation process was supposed to

take place. Non-EU immigrants were obliged to follow a pre-set incorporation trajectory. The trajectory consisted of three pillars: social orientation, career development and Dutch language lessons (Pauwels *et al.* 2010). It was obligatory to participate, but not to achieve a certain level of knowledge. The Flemish integration policy evolved from a voluntary 'reception policy' to a more obligatory 'integration policy' (Geets *et al.* 2006). However, in 2005 the government started subsidising mosques and granting holidays on religious festivities for Jews and Muslims in the Flemish education system. The government hence combined a program of obliged incorporation trajectories with a multicultural framework for longer established newcomers.

In 2009, the Integration Decree released a policy with an emphasis on the promotion of 'living together in diversity' (Deprez *et al.* 2019; Art. 28 Integration Decree). The government had the responsibility to ensure that everyone had equal opportunities, while at the same time immigrants were expected to fully utilise the opportunities offered by the government and adapt to the Flemish culture. The Integration Decree (2009) and the Incorporation Decree (2003) merged into one single decree in 2013, titled the Integration and Incorporation Decree. The new Decree had to prevent fragmentation of regulations that arose in the previous decrees. Incorporation and integration were intrinsically linked in the Decree, in which incorporation was seen as a first and necessary step towards integration. Knowledge of Dutch was regarded as an important prerequisite for obtaining citizenship and as a lever for participation. Local authorities were assigned a coordinating role: "The cities and municipalities have a coordinating role over the integration policy on their territory. This means that they take care of the elaboration, direction, coordination and implementation of the inclusive local integration policy" (Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation Decree).

4.2 Towards a new decree on integration in Flanders

As mentioned above, over the past twenty years the multicultural integration policy has a shift toward cultural assimilation (Geets *et al.* 2006; Saeys *et al.* 2014). Whereas the Flemish integration policy was previously based on a multicultural ideology in which the integration of minority groups was possible while preserving one's own identity, in recent years more emphasis has been placed on immigrants' own accountability to integrate and adapt to the host society (De Cuyper, Wets 2007; Van De Pol *et al.* 2013).

The current Flemish integration policy is mainly based on the Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2013, which states that the incorporation trajectory is mandatory for non-EU immigrants who wish to reside in Belgium for more than three months (Yar, Laurentsyevea 2020). After foreign-language immigrants arrive in Flanders or Brussels, the municipalities and towns direct them to

the integration centres to start their incorporation trajectory. This trajectory consists of three pillars: a social orientation, Dutch language lessons and career development. The Flemish Agency for Integration and Incorporation ('AGII') explains the exact content of the incorporation programme. AGII manages the social orientation package, which has goals established by the Flemish government. With regard to the Dutch language component, immigrants are expected to achieve the A2 level of the EU-Framework of Reference for Modern Foreign Languages. Illiterate immigrants are expected to achieve an adjusted language level. The third pillar, career development, is guided by the Flemish Employment Service ('VDAB') and 'Actiris' (Brussels). The entire integration program is supported by a trajectory counsellor, who helps with career orientation, gives insight into the Belgian labour market and the educational system.

In 2021, the Flemish government approved the draft decree amending the current decree on integration (VVSG 2021; VUB 2021). The amended decree implements the ambitions of the Flemish Coalition Agreement 2019-2024 on the redesign of the integration policy. From 2022 onwards, the incorporation process will consist of four pillars instead of three: Dutch lessons, social orientation, career development and, the fourth pillar, social networking and participation. A migrant who is not active on the labour market or not enrolled in education at the time of signing the integration contract, takes part in a 'social networking and participation' trajectory of 40-hours. This can consist of a buddy project, an introductory internship at a company or voluntary work. The aim of this fourth pillar is to achieve more participation of migrants and to establish a network. The social networking and participation component of the incorporation trajectory can be seen as reflecting an intercultural approach, giving its focus on micro-level interaction and dialogue between immigrant and established citizens. Local authorities will be given the coordinating role of this fourth pillar. One of the supra-local policy actors, who is working on the elaboration of the fourth pillar, declared that resources are scarce for local authorities to make it a qualitative pillar:

"I think it would have been better if all local governments had been provided with effective resources. You have to train volunteers who are buddies of newcomers, you have to motivate them to keep contact and sometimes this can be hard when they have to hear personal stories. So, you really have to provide them with a support framework and that requires commitment. (...) for small local governments it is not realistic to make qualitative work of this fourth pillar" (I.6, supra-local policy actor of AGII).

It is important to note that immigrants need to pay for their incorporation trajectory (minimum of 360 euro) (VVSG 2022; VVSG 2021). Immigrants who do not pass their Dutch exam, also have to pay to re-sit the exam. Anyone who fails to sufficiently comply with the integration obligations

(for example does not attend classes without reason) risks losing their residence permit. This amended decree was heavily criticised from civil society and local authorities (VUB 2021) as it seems to strengthen the assimilationist character of the integration policy. It was argued that this kind of policy, with strict and chargeable integration requirements, promotes exclusion rather than inclusion. In 2014, the European Commission (EC) stated, in the context of its policy on family reunification, that integration courses should be as accessible as possible and free of charge (EC 2014). Thus, we can see that since 2021, the integration policy has been focusing even more on immigrants' own accountability to adjust themselves to the receiving society. This criticism of civil society was also expressed by a majority of the local policy actors:

“What I do want to say is that it is all coming to us from above. We have a Flemish government that turns a bit to the other side (...). There are frustrations due to roads closing by decisions of the Flemish government. They say 'each person who registers for integration is going to pay 360 euro', so I don't know who else is going to be motivated to join that story and meanwhile they have to be integrated and be part of that story. That is very contradictory” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

5. The local integration policy

Even though many relevant integration policies are decided at the national scale, they are essentially implemented locally (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Yar, Laurentsyeveva 2020; VVSG 2022). Local authorities may execute national policies in different ways and design their own unique programmes. The local economy, degree of housing availability and demographic composition of the municipality all influence the number and type of incoming immigrants. Consequently, immigrants that live in the same country and face the same institutional frameworks may follow very different integration paths, depending on local factors.

5.1 The decentralisation of the integration policy in Flanders

In recent decades, the idea that integration policies should be primarily designed and implemented at the local level was increasingly welcomed (Deprez *et al.* 2018; VVSG 2022). In September 2020 the EC announced the ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’, with explicit emphasis on supporting integration in local communities (Yar, Laurentsyeveva 2020; EC 2022). This pact indicates that successful integration benefits immigrants and argues that it is crucial to look into existing local integration policies in order to benefit from the lessons learned across Europe. Since 2004, when the Flemish integration policy was formulated, emphasis was placed on the important role

of local authorities. This could already be seen in the Minorities Decree of 1998, which assigned a coordinating role to local actors (Art. 28 Minorities Decree). The current integration decree of 2013 stipulates that municipalities are responsible for the coordination of an inclusive local integration policy and for leading the relevant actors (Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation Decree). Furthermore, research states that Flemish integration policy is increasingly decentralised (Schillebeeckx *et al.* 2016; Deprez *et al.* 2019). In the following section, we will discuss the various funds and expertise the Flemish government provides to support local authorities in developing local integration policies and assuming a coordinating role.

In terms of budgeting, municipalities can decide autonomously on the allocation of funds to projects aimed at fostering immigrant integration (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Yar, Laurentsyevea 2020; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2020). Up to 2015, municipalities could apply for a local integration subsidy, in addition to the financial resources they receive annually from the Municipal Fund¹² of the Flemish government. In order to be eligible, a municipality had to fulfil three conditions: (1) 10% of the inhabitants had to be persons of foreign nationality (2) they had to adopt a coordinating role and (3) they had to include the integration policy in their strategic multi-annual plan. In this plan, the municipalities had to indicate how they would respond to the following five policy priorities: social cohesion, language policy, accessibility of municipal facilities, accessibility of non-municipal facilities (e.g. Public welfare organisation ('OCMW'), Flemish Employment Service ('VDAB') and policy participation. In 2015, 57 out of 300 municipalities in Flanders received a local integration subsidy (Art. 2 Decision of the Flemish government of 26 October 2012). Fifty-one additional small municipalities and towns were eligible, but did not receive funding due to insufficient resources. It is important to note that from 2016 onwards, the subsidy for local integration is included in the Municipal Fund. This means that the subsidy is incorporated in the general resources of local governments and is no longer subjected to conditions decided by the Flemish government. In practice, this means that the same municipalities and towns as in 2015 are eligible, but the funds are no longer earmarked. One of the supra-local policy actors, who is working for AGII, linked the abolition of earmarked funds to the loss of a common Flemish framework for integration policies at the local level:

¹² The Municipalities Fund is one of the main sources of income for local governments, 20% of the income of municipalities is derived from this Flemish subsidy (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2020). Local authorities can spend these resources as they wish. The fund is distributed among municipalities and OCMW's based on various criteria: (1) centre cities or '*centrumsteden*' and coastal municipalities (40,96%), (2) centre function based on employed population and pupils in secondary and higher education (7,97%), (3) fiscal capacity (30%), (3) public space (5,98%) and (4) social welfare criteria such as number of social housings or living wage recipients (14,95%).

“I think that this is a trend in Flanders. In the past, local administrations received very little local integration subsidies, but there were five policy priorities attached to them and they were followed-up by the Flemish government (...). Local authorities received guidance on 'which priorities they should definitely focus on'. What I receive now, because I train integration officers, is the question: 'where should we start with the integration policy', so they no longer have a framework or steppingstone” (I.6, supra-local policy actor of AGII).

Given the lack of a framework on integration priorities, the question arises of how this actually influences local policies. One of the local policy actors confirmed that on the one hand the lack of a clear framework gives the municipality the freedom to adjust integration policies to the local context, but on the other hand it causes fragmentation between municipalities:

“It is great that we are given this coordinating role to be able to do what we want and adapt to the local context. But at the same time, it creates such a fragmentation within Flanders, which means that if you go ten kilometres further, you end up in a completely different context. In my opinion, there should be general guidelines from Flanders (...), it is exactly like 'trying to reinvent the wheel', because it has to be done over and over again” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Municipalities can also apply for various project subsidies that help to implement the Flemish integration policy on the local level (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022). In 2015 project grants were distributed among projects of inter-municipal collaboration with a double focus: welcoming policies for immigrants and living together in diversity. Because of this, municipalities all around Flanders were given joint grants in order to build more comprehensive integration policies. In 2019 the ‘*Vlaamse Randfonds*’ was introduced (Vlaamse Regering 2019; Vlaamse Rand 2021), this fund specifically targets the municipalities in the periphery of Brussels (‘*Vlaamse Rand*’¹³) that are being confronted with metropolitan problems. The use of the given funds were not predetermined by the Flemish government, which makes this a bottom-up subsidy. In April 2022 the Flemish government approved the project subsidy of 33 million euro for ‘*Plan Samenleven*’ (2022-2024), which focuses on 28 local authorities¹⁴ with more than 7.500 inhabitants of non-EU nationality. Other municipalities can only draw on the resources of *Plan Sa-*

¹³ Cities that belong to the ‘*Vlaamse Rand*’ are Asse, Beersel, Dilbeek, Drogenbos, Grimbergen, Hoeilaart, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Machelen, Meise, Merchtem, Overijse, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Sint-Pieters-Leeuw, Tervuren, Vilvoorde, Wemmel, Wezembeek-Oppem and Zaventem.

¹⁴ Antwerp, Brussels (VGC), Ghent, Leuven, Mechelen, Genk, Vilvoorde, Sint-Niklaas, Aalst, Ostend, Zaventem, Bruges, Kortrijk, Hasselt, Beringen, Sint-Pieters-Leeuw, Dilbeek, Grimbergen, Turnhout, Maasmechelen, Asse, Heusden-Zolder, Roeselare, Lokeren, Halle, Willebroek, Machelen, Houthalen-Helchteren and Ronse.

menleven through inter-municipal collaborations. *Plan Samenleven* sets seven objectives¹⁵, which municipalities can fill in themselves in terms of content. They are free to decide how they wish to achieve these objectives, which makes this a bottom-up subsidy.

Municipalities can also draw on funds at the federal level, but these subsidies are administered through a more top-down approach (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Yar, Laurentsyeva 2020). The federal Impulse Fund for Migration Policy (FIPI) is used to fund integration related activities. FIPI funds both public and private initiatives for language courses, employment support, projects to prevent discrimination and promote intercultural dialogue. Next to federal funds, local authorities can apply for project-related funds of the EU. The most prominent EU fund for the integration is the AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund). For the period 2021-2027 the EC has proposed 5.08 billion for AMIF, of which 40% is for countering irregular migration, 30% is for asylum requests and 30% (1.52 billion) is devoted to legal migration and integration. Every EU member state will receive a fixed amount of 5 million euro. Belgian regions and local authorities will be able to apply for these funds.

In addition to funding, municipalities can rely on the expertise of the *AGII* (Deprez *et al.* 2018). Municipalities can contact the *AGII* for the development of language policy, volunteer activities, accessibility of services and communication of the local authorities. The City and Municipal Monitor offer local authorities' information about demographic developments, economic figures, living conditions of residents to enable local authorities to plan policies adapted to their local environment. Although Flemish municipalities are not directly or formally involved in developing Flemish integration policies, some cities (Antwerp and Ghent) have established separate agencies who are responsible for the implementation of the integration policy: Atlas vzw (area of Antwerp) and IN-Gent vzw (area of Ghent).

Yar and Laurentsyeva (2020) formulated various points of criticism on the extended responsibilities of local authorities. Firstly, the awareness of integration issues in local policy makers is widely diversified. The majority of municipalities are not actively involved in integration policies, but rather leave other stakeholders (e.g. *AGII*) to deal with the issues in a decentralised way. Some municipalities, however, are well aware of the importance of their role in integration and see it as an integral part of their socio-economic policies. Secondly, local authorities often encounter difficul-

¹⁵ (1) Increasing safety and quality of life, (2) strengthening Dutch, (3) strengthening competences, (4) preparation to the labour market, (5) strengthening citizens' networks, (6) fighting discrimination and combating exclusion and (7) strengthening diversity at school, in the youth organisations etc.

ties in ensuring the continuation of successful integration projects, mostly due to the lack of resources.

5.2 The coordinating role and administrative capacity of local governments

According to the Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2013, local authorities have a ‘coordinating role’ in the field of integration (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Art. 12 Integration and Incorporation Decree). The introduction of the coordinating role can be associated with the shift from government to governance (Van Dooren 2013). This shift implies that society has become so complex, that governments alone lack sufficient capacity and expertise to govern. Therefore, governments become reliant on cooperation with non-state actors to develop and implement policies. The shift to governance creates an increased need for coordination amongst all actors involved in policy-making and implementation. In the field of integration policies, local governments are expected to take up this coordination role. The Flemish government has this expectation because they are convinced that the local level is closest to the citizen and therefore in the best position to detect problems.

The coordinating role could be defined as ‘a special form of management aimed at harmonising actors, their goals and actions into a coherent whole’ (Pröpper *et al.* 2004: 7-14). Based on two dimensions: (1) perseverance power (‘the potential of an actor to exert sufficient influence to compel unilateral cooperation from other parties’) and (2) own policy framework (‘the extent within which a local authority can shape his own policy script’), Pröpper, Litjens and Weststeijn define four types of coordinators: (1) the control coordinator, who has both perseverance power and policy autonomy (2) the implementation coordinator, which has perseverance power, but is limited by the policy framework imposed from above (3) the visionary coordinator, who has his own policy framework and whose cooperation is based on volunteering and (4) the facilitating coordinator, in which the local government has neither perseverance power nor its own policy framework. According to the VVSG (2021; 2022) local governments in Flanders have little perseverance power, so they are more likely to assume the role of visionary or facilitating coordinators. Nevertheless, the Flemish integration policy is a horizontal policy that touches on different policy areas. Therefore, it may happen that local authorities act as control-oriented coordinator within some aspects of integration policy (Deprez *et al.* 2019). We also have to take into account that the degree of coordination among local authorities and key players of the integration policy varies across municipalities. In municipalities where different institutions face conflicts of interest and lack communication channels, the integration of immigrants appears to be less successful. Conse-

quently, a larger municipality with several policy instruments can operate more efficiently in the local integration policy than a small municipality with fewer resources:

“Local governments do have the local coordinating role now, but I think that in many local governments it is an empty box. If it is not high on the political agenda and you are a small local government with little administrative power, then it is simply not a priority” (I.6, supra-local policy actor of AGII).

One of the conditions for taking on the coordinator role is that the local government has sufficient administrative capacity. Administrative capacity can be defined as the ability of the civil service to support policy preparation, implementation and evaluation in the context of local government policy objectives (Deprez *et al.* 2018). Deprez and colleagues have shown that more than half of Flemish local authorities believe that they have not sufficient capacity to adopt this role. This was also proved by the interviews; they feel as if the integration policy was increasingly shifted to small municipalities and towns that do not have enough capacity:

“That is always put under the guise of autonomy of the municipality, but you get no resources (...). We have also noticed with the corona crisis how important local government can be (...) local employees know best how to deal with local people. A town like Ninove with one integration officer, that is not serious, she is drowning. Haaltert is now half of Ninove and there, one person has to care for integration and participation, that is not possible. That is not the responsibility of the town, but it is due to the fact that they do not have the means. (...). We are now trying to unite through intermunicipal collaboration, so that we are stronger together” (I.4, local policy actor in Ninove).

Since capacity is a broad concept, we have to deal with the question of what capacity is required to be able to coordinate. Conversely, it can be assumed that effectively adopting the coordinating role as a local government creates extra capacity by involving new actors in integration policy. Policy actors in Ninove indicate that taking on the coordinating role has led to increased capacity. By focusing on collaborations with external partners who have expertise in the field of integration policy, a more efficient integration policy can be pursued compared to when the town itself has to provide an offer:

“We have many collaborations, especially with AGII. They bring integration officials together, and that is also very instructive with information sessions and study days. VVSG also does this in its own way. For the coordinating role, we have a few small local partners (...) ‘CAW’ [Private welfare organisation], ‘Kind en Gezin’ [Public welfare organisation for young children and their families] which help

us find out how we are going to set things up. In my opinion, things have improved a lot, such as Habbekrats, which came from Ghent. For us taking on the coordinating role means that we have to make sure that partners, both internal and external, are engaged. We bring the partners to the table and we make sure there is a plan” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

6. Political participation of immigrants

As mentioned above, the Flemish integration policy has mainly been developed in response to the socio-political tensions around migration. However, given that immigrants are the group that is subject to integration policies, it is important to analyse the political participation of immigrants in this policy. This question is especially significant, given that ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in both candidate lists and Municipal Councils in Flanders (Van Trappen and Wauters 2018).

6.1 History of voting rights of immigrants in Belgium

For a long time, the Belgian legislation made the right to vote conditional on having Belgian nationality (Wauters, Eelbode 2011). Only Belgian citizens were allowed to take part in elections. Having no right to vote constituted an important mechanism of political exclusion for people of foreign origin. The enfranchisement of foreigners was for the first time put on the political agenda by the trade unions in the early 1970's. However, the Belgian government refused to approve their demands. In 1976, immigrant self-organisations and trade-union organisations launched several actions targeting enfranchisement. In 1978, the social movements succeeded in making voting rights part of the election campaign. The government Martens-I included the subject in the coalition agreement of 1979. Despite the efforts of action committees, the resistance to the enfranchisement of immigrants proved to be stronger and no voting rights were granted.

From the beginning of the 1980's onwards, the presence of immigrants in Belgian society became contested (Wauters, Eelbode 2011). Anti-migration parties appeared on the political scene and obtained increasing success. In 1989, '*Vlaams Blok*' obtained almost 25% of the votes in Flanders. The established parties feared that by introducing 'foreigners enfranchisement', they would make *Vlaams Blok* even stronger. The social democrats distanced itself from the idea of voting rights for foreigners. In other words, no party would dare to speak openly in favour of separating the exercise of political rights from citizenship. However, the nationality legislation ('*snel-Belg-wet*') made it easier for immigrants to obtain Belgian nationality and consequently obtaining the right to vote. In 1992, following the Treaty of Maastricht, member states were obliged to grant EU citizens the

right to vote in local elections. Belgium finally amended its Constitution in 1998, in which nationality and the right to vote were disconnected. Consequently, the enfranchisement of foreign citizens (both EU and non-EU) could be introduced by an ordinary law.

In 2000, EU citizens could participate in local elections for the first time (Wauters, Eelbode 2011). For non-EU citizens politicians were more reluctant, but pressure was increased by civil society and left-wing political parties. In 2004, the proposal was finally adopted and people without Belgian nationality were allowed to vote, but only for local elections (municipal level) and they were not permitted to run for office nor to hold a seat in any representative assembly or government. On top of these restrictions, the following conditions were applied to immigrants: they must have lived in the country for five years, they have to register themselves and sign the declaration of the Belgian Constitution and the EU Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Wauters and Eelbode (2011) revealed that the registration rate of the local elections in 2006, ranged from more than 40% (in Herentals and Lier) to less than 4% (in Zaventem, Ninove and Mechelen). Smaller municipalities and those with a mayor from the centre-right liberal party did few efforts to inform foreign voters. As a result, the electoral participation of these people tended to be low. Up to now, non-EU citizens are excluded from EU, federal, regional, provincial and OCMW-council elections.

6.2 Self-organisations and the Minorities Forum

Next to voting rights, the Flemish government officially recognised immigrant self-organisations in 1995 (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). Immigrant self-organisations can be defined as organisations established by and for people belonging to the same ethnic group. In order to avoid having to deal with a multitude of independent groups, the organisations are encouraged to join umbrella organisations (Sierens 2003). Immigrant umbrella organisations were specifically set up to support and represent immigrant self-organisations. Immigrant self-organisations may also apply for subsidies since 1999.

The Flemish government subsidises the Minorities Forum (*'Minderhedenforum'*), an organisation founded in 2002 that brings together federations of immigrant self-organisations, giving them a collective voice to advocate their interests as a recognised dialogue partner of the Flemish government (Van den Broucke *et al.* 2015). From the late 1990's onwards, immigrant self-organisations were accorded an important role in political decision-making. According to Sierens (2003), the Flemish government recognized the importance of a person's own identity for the integration and emancipation of immigrants. However, Flemish and local government support for the political role of self-organisations has dwindled. In 2020, the Flemish government decided not to recognize

the Minorities Forum any longer and a tender for a ‘participation organisation’ was introduced with strict conditions for the board of directors (e.g. not only members of ethnic minorities groups, but also experts and a focus on “living together” rather than only representing interests of minorities). In 2021, a new participation organisation ‘LEVL’ was established. Civil society organisations criticised the decision to abolish the Minorities Forum and fear that *LEVL* will not be an independent critical centre of expertise, but will become a subcontractor of the Flemish government (MO 2021). In table two (p. 51), we created a timeline of the legal framework of immigrant integration and political participation.

7. The regulatory framework of Ninove

In this chapter, we briefly provide a contextualisation on the socio-demographic- and economic development of Ninove, before moving on to the current integration policy. Finally, the political participation of immigrants in this medium-sized town will be described.

7.1 Local context

During the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Ninove was widely known for its textile industry (Loopmans 2007). The small town of Ninove experienced an influx of guest workers in the 1960 and 1970’s, but in comparison to large cities such as Antwerp, Brussels and Liège, this influx remained limited. The 1970’s marked the beginning of the economic decline and Ninove - just like many other Belgian industrialised cities in the same period - was confronted with problems of increasing unemployment and a strong decrease in the number of inhabitants in the inner-city neighbourhoods. The main policy focus of the Flemish government was to invest in major cities with the Social Impulse Fund (SIF), while the federal government focused on social and economic reconversion in a limited number of industries, notably coal mining and steel production. The inhabitants of Ninove and more generally in the Dender region¹⁶ (*‘Denderstreek’*) received minimal policy attention to cope with the de-industrialisation. To this day, Ninove has a large supply of small working-class houses where, over the years, mainly immigrant families have settled.

Statistics Flanders (2020) indicate that municipalities and towns around BCR - such as Ninove - receive many immigrants from Brussels because of the low housing prices. In 2020, 344 persons mo-

¹⁶ The Dender region (*‘Denderstreek’*) is a sub-region located in the province of East Flanders, which includes Ninove, but also Aalst, Buggenhout, Dendermonde, Erpe-Mere, Haaltert, Herzele, Lebbeke, Lede, Sint-Lievens-Houtem, Wichelen en Zottegem. The sub-region is named after the river Dender.

ved from BCR to Ninove, of which 62% had an immigration background. The five most common countries of origin in 2020 were (1) Morocco, (2) Romania (3) Congo, (4) Guinea and (5) Italy. In 2011, only 10,8% of the total population in Ninove had an immigrant background (Provincie in Cijfers 2022). In 2021, this number already increased up to 20,4%. In 2020, 71 integration contracts were signed, 52 integration certificates were obtained and 311 persons followed *NT2*-language courses. One of the interviewees explained that this rapid increase in Ninove is different than in the major cities:

“The diversity of this neighbourhood [Ninove], (...) it is comparable with numbers of the cities today. That didn't happen from the 1970's on, but in the last 15 years. The rate at which that has happened... that's very fast. That's at a different pace than it has been in the cities. So, it's understandable that it seriously affects people” (I.10, civil society member active in the Dender region).

The influx from BCR consists of mostly French speaking Belgian citizens who have already lived in Belgium for several years and cannot be demanded to follow an incorporation trajectory. The majority of the interviewees pointed out that the integration policy of Flanders is focused on ‘external’ immigrants, with the result that the influx of ‘internal’ immigrants from Brussels are excluded from this policy. There is no existing Flemish framework adapted to this specific target group. Local policy actors explained that the immigration from Brussels causes language related tensions within the community and that Ninove has evolved into a ‘dormitory town’. This means that on the one hand, work and leisure time of people with an immigrant background is not spent locally, but rather in BCR, on the other hand, the ‘autochthonous’ population also often works in Brussels and not in Ninove:

“This is real rural Flanders and a lot of those people [with an immigrant background] really want that. They live in a flat in Brussels (...) what do those people do? They always speak French, they come and live in a village, which is in East Flanders, they don't always realise that. Of course, the children go to school there, so within two or three years they will speak Dutch, but these people keep working in Brussels and they don't know Dutch” (I.10, civil society member active in the Dender region).

Due to the Flemish policy focus on major cities, the rapid demographic changes and tensions around language, the existing community is extra sensitive to the arrival of new groups and feel as if they are ‘forgotten’ and pushed aside. Forty-five percent of the inhabitants of Ninove feels that there are too many differences in origin amongst the residents which causes problems of co-exi-

stence within the town¹⁷ (Statistics Flanders 2021). These tensions came to light in the federal elections of 2014, where the far-right party '*Vlaams Belang*' had 19,72% of the votes. In 2019, these percentage increased even further to 38,03% of the votes, which represents almost a doubling of the votes for the anti-immigration party (IBZ Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2019):

"When I went to school and there was one African boy in the whole school, nobody voted far-right. Now at all the schools, there's a mix of African people, Asian people and never before have so many young people voted for the far-right" (I.9, civil society member active in Ninove).

Ninove is currently governed by a Liberal Party-led coalition government (2019-2024), but the opposition counts numerous members of the anti-immigrant party '*Forza Ninove*'¹⁸ in the Municipal Council (which despite being the biggest local party is excluded from the ruling coalition). One of the experts on participatory policy making indicated that the rise of an anti-immigrant party could have been predicted due to the history of Ninove:

"If you talk about the Dender region, you could have seen it coming with the de-industrialisation (...). If you don't invest in it [municipalities in the Dender region] and if there is a big migration influx, Ninove will explode. Flanders also has a role to play in this. As a local authority, you have no control over this, because you cannot restore the economy on your own" (I.16, expert in participatory policy making).

Table one shows a number of general statistics of Ninove compared to the average in the Flemish region. The table below shows that most of the indicators for Ninove closely resemble to the Flemish average, although Ninove scores significantly higher for the share of signed obligatory integration contracts.

¹⁷Proportion of inhabitants who answered disagree, neutral or agree to the following statement: 'I think that there are too many people of different origins living in my municipality'.

¹⁸Distribution of seats: Forza Ninove (15), Open VLD (9), Together or '*Samen*' (7) and N-VA (2).

Table 1. General statistics of Ninove compared to the Flemish region

	Ninove	Flemish region
Population density (inh./km ²) in 2021	538	488
% people with an immigrant background in 2020	20.8%	24.2%
% signed integration contracts in 2020 (obligatory)	76.6%	46.4%
Employment rate in 2018 (% of employed population in the population at working age of 20-64 years old)	75.7%	74.2%
Average income per inhabitant in 2018	19.776 euro	20.236 euro

Source: Statistics Flanders 2020; 2021

7.2 Integration policy

As mentioned above, we can see that the socio-political tensions around migration led to the development of an integration policy in Ninove from 2015 onwards. This policy was initiated in 2015, because then the town could apply for a local integration subsidy of the Flemish government, in addition to what the town received annually from the Flemish Municipal Fund. The Department of Welfare applied for the subsidy. The first integration initiative was NinoMundo, an annual intercultural culinary market where people with different ethnic backgrounds served self-prepared food from their home country or region, which still exists today. A local policy actor indicated that the main purpose of NinoMundo was to reduce polarisation within the town, but expresses doubts about its positive effect, nonetheless, other interviewees stated that NinoMundo does bring inhabitants together:

“I think NinoMundo was a positive start, but I don't know what the effect is (...) if I look at the costs and the benefits of such events, that is fairly non-existent, you see people thinking 'it's those blacks again who are coming here' and that is not always positive. This actually draws attention to the differences” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

“I think that it [NinoMundo] is a pretty good initiative. I used to go there quite often, I used to help out sometimes and I think that it should be pushed more, even from the political side, because I think that (...) those people also deserve a platform and attention” (I.21, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

The local policy actor indicated that in this period the Department of Welfare had minimal knowledge of what integration entailed. This changed with the appointment of the first full-time integration officer in Ninove, who focused on developing a vision for an immigrant reception policy. Because of the increased migration from the BCR to Ninove, the town had to act in a proactive manner and inform the newly arrived immigrants about their policy: *“The principle of the welcome policy is to preventively inform people and not wait until they have lived in Ninove for one year, when they suddenly come knocking at our door and say ‘I have a search warrant for my house because I did not understand that document’”* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Later, the integration officer worked on a horizontal and inclusive policy, including other policy domains such as employment, housing and education in the reception policy (reflecting an attempt to align direct and indirect integration policies). In the past, the different departments of Ninove still worked separately from each other and anything that had a connection to integration was passed to the integration officer:

“All the departments worked on separate islands and everything that had to do with a foreigner (if I can call it that) was just radically shifted to ‘that’s for the integration service’ while it was about sports or about certain basic rights. Even at the reception desk, they saw someone of colour and they already called to say ‘yes, this is someone for integration’ when that person had just come for a building permit (...). That’s where we come from” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

The ‘*Denderfonds*’, introduced in 2019, targeted municipalities in the periphery of Brussels (Vlaamse Rand 2021). The Flemish government made funds available to address the rise of typically urban problems in small municipalities and towns like Ninove, Denderleeuw, Geraardsbergen and Zottegem. The fund was conceived to help to compensate for the problems and costs of poverty, unemployment and the inflow of foreign-language immigrants. The Flemish Minister for Home Affairs, Public Governance, Incorporation and Equal Opportunities mentioned that some of these cities fulfilled a central function in terms of mobility in the region because of the high number of commuters on public transport per day (Vlaamse Regering 2019). For this reason, the *Denderfonds* was generally perceived as a grant for small town municipalities with a mobility hub (Lokaal Bestuur Vlaanderen 2021; Vlaamse Rand 2021). Ninove is an exception to this rule though. Ninove does not fall under the grants for cities with a mobility hub, but receives grants for metropolitan issues¹⁹. The multi-annual plan of Ninove indicates that the *Denderfonds* provided the

¹⁹ The grants for cities with a mobility hub are granted based on population (min. 20.000 inhabitants), they did not receive benefits from a prefix?? in the Municipal Fund and have a min. of 2.700 train passengers per weekday (Agen-

town with 6.245.358 euros for six years, which translates into 1.040.893 euros per year (Ninove 2022). The mayor of Ninove, Tania De Jonge, mentioned that she had made a plea for extra resources: *"I have been advocating for additional resources for a long time and in recent months I have been increasing the pressure within our party. So, I am a satisfied mayor"* (Ninofmedia 2019). However, the Flemish government did not specify where the resources should be spent on. Many of the interviewees indicate that this lack of substantive policy framework of the *Denderfonds* caused fragmentation between the municipalities in the Dender region:

"The Flemish government needs to have a vision on how to spend resources and not just offer a blank cheque (...). You can see that there are political reasons that no framework has been set for these resources, that there is a political conflict between the Flemish and local levels (...). That there is room to adapt to the local context, but this is a blank cheque and simply on the basis of the good-will of the Municipal Council that it will or not will be used for what it should be used for. I actually find that bad governance" (I.16, expert in participatory policy making).

When we asked where the resources of the *Denderfonds* were spent on, a member of the Municipal Council answered that most of the funds were spent on security:

"We spent that budget on security. So, for example, we decided to strengthen our neighbourhood police with nine people, because we think that the threshold should be lowered to bring the neighbourhood police to our inhabitants" (I.3, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

Looking further into the multi-annual plan of 2020-2025, the grant is being used for a combination of security actions, language policy and enhancing social welfare (Ninove 2022). Firstly, Ninove wants to reduce the feeling of insecurity by investing in the local police force reinforcement, by expanding the camera network to tackle illegal waste dumping and by investing in community service workers to be employed in the most vulnerable areas needing social cohesion. If we look at the statistics on feelings of insecurity in Ninove, we see that it is far above the Flemish average (Statistics Flanders 2020; 2021). In 2020, 17% of the inhabitants of Ninove felt unsafe in their town compared to 7% in the Flemish region²⁰. However, in 2020 the average crime rate in Ninove

tschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022). The grants for metropolitan issues are based on population density of 500 habitants per km², the percentage of non-EU nationality (or third country nationals), the percentage of living wage recipients all in relation to the entire population of the city or municipality that is in the highest quartile of all Flemish cities and municipalities.

²⁰ Proportion of inhabitants who feel unsafe in their municipality, citizens' questionnaire of the Municipality-City Monitor, Agency for Internal Affairs.

(76,1%) was not much higher than in the Flemish region (74,1%)²¹. One of the reasons that the largest share of the *Denderfonds* is spent on reducing feelings of insecurity is the pressure of the anti-immigrant party *Forza Ninove*. Multiple interviewees argued that local political decisions are often instrumental to the next elections:

“Our opposition, ‘Forza Ninove’, has been around for a long time. But people thought that they would not get anywhere and they just carried on. And it was only after October 2018, when the new legislature started, that they realised ‘we have to see that we do something for all our people and therefore also for those people from the 40% who are not satisfied’. This is now also a difficult consideration, for example, when a project is set up, people are already thinking about what the 40% will say and whether they would agree to it” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Secondly, the multi-annual plan states that sufficient knowledge of the Dutch language is vital for successful integration (Ninove 2021; 2022). Therefore, Ninove is pursuing an active language policy through investing in Dutch language education. Since 2015, ‘*Babbelonie*’ has been set up - a partnership between *AGII*, The Social House²², the library and *Avansa*²³ - where immigrants can practise Dutch by talking with inhabitants of Ninove about everyday topics. Next to that, children can practice Dutch in a project that provides playground animation (‘*speelpleinwerking*’), where activities are organised with the specific aim of improving the Dutch language. Previously, only French speaking children were put together, but since 2020 the project has been incorporated in the general activities of the playground animation. The Department of Welfare also works together with ‘*Ligo*’ (offering different courses for adults e.g. computer lessons) and ‘*Groeipunt*’ (providing general education for adults) and *AGII* for Dutch language lessons for immigrants (‘*NT2*’). In the interviews with local policy actors, it was mentioned that civil servants at the reception desk are afraid of speaking French because of inspections of the opposition party *Forza Ninove* and that this arouses the fear of repercussions for their own position. Civil society members states that the strict language policy of Ninove hinders integration because it perpetuates immigrants’ strong link with Brussels, where they can easily interact with social service providers like hospitals speaking in French. Therefore, the Department of Welfare is working together with *AGII* and The Social House to establish a clear language policy. The town will provide a mix of communication

²¹ Statistics of offences recorded by the police. It is the place where the registered offence took place, not the place of residence of the victim.

²² The Social House gathers all social welfare services of Ninove, such as ‘*OCMW*’ or ‘*Kind en Gezin*’.

²³ Socio-cultural organisation active in Flanders and Brussels.

tools, taking into account the different language skills and information needs of immigrants. Clear guidelines will be established for situations in which a civil servant is allowed to speak French. On the other hand, they will work on an awareness policy giving insights of what learning a new language or to being illiterate means:

"It is important to give insights into what it is like to learn a new language, what it is like to be illiterate or uneducated. Some people can't write Arabic (their mother language) and then all of a sudden they're expected to be able to fill in Dutch forms" (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Thirdly, the town wants to strengthen social welfare by investing in local integration and building bridges between the communities (Ninove 2021; 2022). A community service 'The Social House' was established as a gateway to integral assistance of the various welfare partners for all inhabitants of Ninove. This action was then further broken down into more specific components, such as taking on the coordinating role for the local integration policy and promoting integration while also providing maximum participation opportunities for newcomers. Ninove wants to support associations and inhabitants through quality meeting spaces and leisure infrastructure by establishing a youth centre. All young people from Ninove and the surrounding area can meet here and organise activities supported by professional youth welfare workers. This youth centre of Habbekrats²⁴ was established in 2021 and focuses on vulnerable young people from eight to eighteen years old. The youth centre is attended by thirty children with diverse backgrounds coming over every day. Before Habbekrats, 'LEJO' had a covenant (2003-2020) with the town of Ninove, but because of disagreements about the terms of cooperation the contract was not renewed:

"We focused on young people in a socially vulnerable position and youth with an immigrant background (...). petty criminals from Ninove who were also around, but with us they found a place where they could just be themselves and (...) we treated them as human beings without having to justify themselves (...). The police and the mayor noticed that these young people often came to us and half a year before our departure, they wanted us to report which people came to us, with whom they had contact, what the conversations were about and if we picked up signals of things that weren't okay, that we reported it" (I.17, civil society member active in Ninove).

Ninove is working on several projects to foster immigrants' integration (Ninove 2021; 2022). In 2015 Ninove started annual intercultural dialogue evenings, where the Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Muslim communities come together to discuss different topics in order to achieve a

²⁴ Habbekrats is a socio-cultural association that provides activities for youth in Flanders.

more mutual understanding. The Social House, Ligo and *AGII* started a mother group with AMIF funds in 2017, where non-EU mothers and their children younger than three years could join classes for ‘societal orientation’ in which they learn how the Flemish society and its institutions work and receive parental counselling from ‘*Kind en Gezin*’ and ‘*Huis van het Kind*’²⁵. From the eleven participating mothers, seven registered their child in a childcare centre in 2017, because they were going to follow Dutch classes, began a new educational path or started working. The mother group still exists today, but is supported by the resources of Ninove. Since 2017 Ninove has been investing in the so-called ‘outreach social workers’ or ‘*toeleiders*’. The interviewees described these outreach social workers as persons with an immigrant background that can be either placed within a town welcome policy or within the broader horizontal integration policy. Ninove has currently four outreach social workers working within the reception policy. In 2021 the Department of Welfare, PIN vzw and SAAMO started a community centre (STEK) in the ‘Pollare’ neighbourhood: “*The idea is to listen to what is going on in the neighbourhood and see what we can do to improve living together*” (Ninofmedia 2021). The STEK refers to an accessible meeting place in the immediate neighbourhood, where inhabitants can (informally) meet and get informed about their social rights. In the same year, Ninove started a pilot project - together with The Social House, ‘*Teledienst*’ and the Poverty Network²⁶ - where cycling lessons were given to adults. In 2022, the integration officer and *AGII* initiated a project called ‘*Dender 360°*’ about depolarisation, with the objective setoff setting up an action plan to manage the perceived tensions within the community. Lastly, Ninove is working on inter-municipal cooperation with Denderleeuw and Geraardsbergen for ‘*Plan Samenleven*’ (2022-2024). The municipalities and towns chose three policy priorities: increasing employment opportunities, guidance to sport and leisure activities and connection in and around the school. In general, we notice that most of the projects to foster immigrants’ integration focus on micro-level dialogue between immigrants and established inhabitants and primary needs of immigrants (welfare related topics). We have also observed that in recent years several projects to foster immigrants’ integration have been launched:

²⁵ ‘*Kind en Gezin*’ is a Flemish public welfare organisation, with the mission to contribute to the welfare of young children by providing services in the fields of family support, childcare and adoption. ‘*Huis van het Kind*’ is also a public welfare organisation that supports families with childcare, health care, parenting etc.

²⁶ *Teledienst* is a private welfare organisation for people in poverty, working together with OCMW, CAW and Ninove itself. The Poverty Networks is also a private welfare organisation that consists of a steering committee of poverty experts.

“The city has good intentions. The fact (...) that they are putting SAAMO here, the fact that they are bringing Habbekrats here to actually do something with it, so there is something good going on. But how are they going to solve it? Or can they solve it?” (I.9, civil society member active in Ninove).

Some aspects in the multi-year plan are mentioned very briefly, others are described multiple times (Ninove 2022). One of the local policy actors mentioned that the reason behind these broadly formulated policy objectives is that they can categorise different integration actions within its scope. It must be pointed out that the plan does not indicate how much progress the town has made in the process of building an integration policy., in addition the interviewees reported that until 2020 the integration policy was a one-person operation. From 2020 onwards, the capacity increased and a team of four project officers was hired within the Department of Welfare to work on integration projects. Moreover, the operational budget for integration (2020-2025) has more than doubled since the last legislature. Ninove started investing in several projects fostering immigrants’ integrations from 2020 onwards and professionalised its own integration policy (e.g. writing annual reports, collecting data):

“In some municipalities there was no integration policy, in fact it is a new issue for local governments. Major cities have always been the pioneers in elaborating a policy around that and I think that (...) this is something new from the last decade. Since the ‘Denderfonds’ provided additional resources, especially in Ninove, you feel that there has been a capacity building (...) there are now three to four additional staff members to deal with this” (I.16, expert in participatory policy making).

All in all we observe that in recent years (2020-2022) more capacity has been created to develop an overall vision on immigrant integration and set up actions and initiatives to pursue an integration policy, partly due to the *Denderfonds* given by the Flemish government. A local policy actor states:

“The evolution is mainly the realisation that something needs to be done about integration. If you look at it from 2015, at the time it was like ‘we are just doing something’. But now it is one of the priorities in the policy plan, we have to ensure a harmonious society (...). In four years, we have made enormous progress, integration is recognised as a part of every service” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

7.3 Political participation of immigrants

If we look further into how the town of Ninove faces the political participation of immigrants, the multi-annual plan of 2020-2025 demonstrates that Ninove aims to be a 'modern' administration willing to engage in continuous dialogue with all its inhabitants (Ninove 2022). Participation must be established before decisions are made. In 2018, the reception policy of Ninove started to inform immigrants about the upcoming elections. They organised information sessions about the different political parties and their political programs. However the local policy actors indicated that there were barriers for immigrants to attend these sessions (e.g. these sessions could only be organised in Dutch by Flemish law). The sessions tended to always reach the same persons:

"We organised the information session about all the parties and the explanation behind it, but you cannot get these people [immigrants] to come to you because an information session is such a threshold. It is a challenge to get the information to them. If you don't see them much, don't hear them much, don't have much contact with them, that's a threshold, because we can't do the explanation in French, it's difficult" (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

In 2019 Ninove started an online participation platform '*Mijn Ninove*' (Ninove 2022). The online platform works in two directions: it offers the inhabitants of Ninove information, launches questionnaires about current projects and the inhabitants can post their own proposals for the town administration. Through this platform Ninove wants to develop popular support for its policy decisions and wants to include proposals in the multi-annual plan. The municipality launched the project '100 times 100', where inhabitants could submit online proposals within 100 days for which they had to obtain 100 votes. These platforms do not specifically target people with immigrant background, but are focused on all inhabitants of Ninove. One of the local policy actors pointed out that efforts were made to include hard-to-reach groups:

"We are conducting a survey on the services in the swimming pool, so I am trying to submit the questionnaire through the integration officer and through our projects such as Babbelonië. I also try to reach people through community work and 'Teledienst', because I think that they are not always involved online (...) but I work for the 'Ninovieters', so whoever lives or works here gets the same treatment from me" (I.4, local policy actor in Ninove).

In the interviews it was mentioned that Ninove wants to invest in an 'Advisory Participation Council' supported by the Department of Welfare. This council intends to work with a bottom-up perspective, in which inhabitants (including residents with an immigrant background) and civil society

actors (e.g. *PIN vzw*) identify needs in town and bring these needs to the council. However, this Advisory Participation Council has not been established yet because of alleged disagreements within the Municipal Council. But when asked whether it was intentional not to install the Advisory Council, a member of the Municipal Council of Ninove responded: *"No, not really, because everything we do is also shared by those communities (...) we do notice that there are reactions from all directions to our participation platform"* (I.3).

In general, the interviewees concluded that the initiatives to stimulate political participation of immigrants were limited. When asked if enough was being done to involve immigrants in the policy, one supra-local policy actor answered: *"No, very little. Ninove is still far behind (...). There is no newcomer consultation, no refugee consultation, no diversity council, nothing at all"* (I.7, supra-local policy actor of *AGII*). One of the reasons for the limited attempts to include immigrants in policy-making is that the knowledge and capacity to reach this target group is restricted. Moreover, interviewees state that the strict language policy hinders participation and that policy actors and civil servants of Ninove are sometimes fearful of the response of the far-right electorate:

"The fact that they [the town of Ninove] do all these things, shows that they are of good will (...). I hope I can take the liberty of saying this, but I think that sometimes they want to be careful not to give the far-right a breeding ground. But I find them courageous nevertheless" (I.13, representative of a local immigrants' association).

8. Explanatory model for political participation

This chapter deals with the analysis of the implementation of integration local practices considered critical in promoting immigrants' political participation. The following is a presentation of the factors identified at micro- and macro-level by the scholarly literature that make immigrants participate or not in policy-making. These factors originate from different academic sources, using various definitions of political participation. As mentioned above (see section two), this report uses an expansive definition of political participation, namely Fraser's concept of 'making needs public' (1989). Due to this Fraser's expansive and broad definition, all the factors described below fall within the scope of this report.

8.1 Micro-level explanatory factors

When explaining immigrants' political participation, we distinguish between micro-level and macro-level factors. The former refers to the level of social interaction between people, while the lat-

ter refers to the level of public policy making and broader societal structures like labour and housing markets. The first micro-level explanatory factor for political participation mentioned in the literature is resources (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Having the necessary financial resources, time, know-how and skills is an important condition for political participation. On average immigrants have fewer financial resources than people with a Belgian nationality. This can have an influence on political participation, as participating may have a certain financial cost, such as transport cost or membership fees. The financially most vulnerable social group in Belgium are persons born outside the EU (Statistics Flanders 2022). When looking at nationality, statistics indicate that between Belgians and non-EU citizens there is a difference of almost 9.300 euro in median yearly income²⁷.

In addition to financial resources, participation requires an investment of time (Hustinx 2012). The effect of time is curvilinear: too much time pressure leads to low participation, but low time pressure also has an inhibiting effect. A measurement of time allocation of immigrants is not available, but there are specific groups that may feel hindered from participating, due to a lack of time (Quintelier 2009). For example, in some cases immigrants might need most or all of their available time to fulfil their primary needs, such as employment or learning the Dutch language. This fact of lacking time to participate was also repeatedly mentioned during the interviews to immigrants: *“The immigrants are coming from another country and many of them don’t have educational qualifications. Moreover they have to work in factories or do something else to support their families, sometimes they have to work in shifts: sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening (...), so it is very difficult, because they don’t have the time”* (I. 22, representative of a local immigrants’ association). Participation requires cognitive and social skills, such as the ability to communicate and to be critical towards policy or organisational decisions (Hustinx 2012). Limited fluency in the Dutch language is an element that can be a direct barrier to political participation of immigrants (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). As for language mastering, we have only identified some indirect determinants, such as educational level. Research shows that among persons born outside the EU, the proportion of low-skilled people (37.4%) was significantly higher than among those born in Belgium (13.0%) or in another EU country (20.4%) (Statistics Flanders 2022).

The second micro-level explanatory factor for political participation is motivation (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). This factor includes variables, such as political interest or political engagement. Immi-

²⁷ Median income per person is calculated starting from the total net income of the household in which the person lives. That household income is standardised: it is adjusted to the size and composition of the household. This is done by dividing the household income by an equivalence factor. This equivalence factor is equal to 1 in the case of a single person and is increased by 0.5 for each additional person in the household aged 14 or over and 0.3 for each child under 14.

grants' institutionalised forms of political participation do not always reach the same level of those exercised by people of Belgian origin. Only 11% of foreigners with voting right registered to vote at the municipal elections of October 2018 (Statistics Flanders 2022). This proportion was slightly higher for people with EU nationality (12%) than those with non-EU nationality (10%). As explained in section two, political participation may also be recognised in contexts broader than just participation in elections. The SCV survey (*'sociaal-culturele verschuivingen in Vlaanderen'*) examined thirteen activities of political participation²⁸. In the period 2016-2018, 45% of the residents born in Belgium could be considered as political participants. The proportion was significantly lower for those born in EU countries (43%) and those born outside EU (31%). The strict requirements to satisfy to participate in elections²⁹ probably was a demotivating factor for migrants to participate politically. Their sense of commitment to both the country they live in and their country of origin also affects their motivation for policy participation (Martiniello 2005). If immigrants feel little or not at all represented in the political life of the country they live in, they may also feel less involved and have lower interest in influencing policy making (Leighley 2001). The stronger the political representation of persons with immigrant background, the greater the willingness of these groups to communicate their opinions to politicians. This finding was also mentioned during an interview with an expert in political participation:

“If immigrants don't feel represented, then a person with immigrant background is going to think: ‘if their workforce is white and their mentality too, are they going to be open to what I'm saying?’ I would say make sure you represent diversity, then people feel more included in the whole story and then they can feel commitment. (...) working on your image as a local authority: ‘What is the image you project?’ ‘Is the municipality's staff diverse enough?’ If you look up a local government on Google and if they use ‘foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’ on their website, how does that feel to people with an immigrant background?” (I. 24, expert in political participation).

²⁸ Participating in political manifestations, donating or collecting money, being a member of a political party, standing for election, being a member of a local advisory, consultative or discussion body, a neighbourhood or action committee, signing a petition, boycotting or deliberately buying products for political reasons, expressing one's opinion to a politician or in the media, participating in a political forum or discussion group on the Internet.

²⁹ Since 2004, people without Belgian nationality are allowed to vote, but only for local elections (municipal-level) and they are not permitted to run for office nor to take a seat in any representative government (Wauters and Eelbode 2011). On top of these restrictions, the following conditions were applied: they must live in Belgium for five years, they have to register and have to sign the declaration of the Belgian Constitution and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Another factor that influences motivation to participate politically is a persons' own political ideas, whether one considers their presence in the country to be temporary or permanent as well as their own experiences with politics in their own country of origin (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Persons coming from a country where democratic participation is not tolerated or penalised may be distrustful towards governments and therefore refrain from being involved politically in Belgium. Being unfamiliar with the country's political system is also connected to not having the necessary language skills (Martiniello 2005).

The third micro-level explanatory factor concerns one's own personal networks (Quintelier 2009). Research by Berger, Fennema, van Heelsum, Tillie and Wolff (2001) evidence that having a clear ethnic identity may encourage immigrants to participate in policy making with the focus of strengthening the position of their own ethnic group. The closer the ethnic community of immigrants, the higher the chance of political participation. Berger and colleagues (2001) proved that a government that supports the institutionalisation of networks of ethnic minorities creates a lever for stronger participation of these groups. Research shows that the group identity strength is an accelerator for participation. This may involve identifying with a group of people from the same ethnic-cultural background (Fennema, Tillie 1999) as well as people from different backgrounds (Quintelier 2009). In other words, having a close and/or ethno-culturally diverse network appears to be a premise for policy participation. Lastly, being 'asked' is one of the main reasons for political participation. People who are active in a number of networks are more likely to be asked to join other policy making networks (Hooghe *et al.* 2001).

8.2 Macro-level explanatory factors

While the three above-mentioned factors (resources, motivation, networks) are situated on the micro-level, other factors are situated on the macro-level (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). To get a complete picture of the barriers and opportunities for political participation of immigrants, we should not only look at group-specific characteristics, but also the policy of the local government itself and hence assess whether the institutional environment is accessible enough to participate.

From this perspective Tilly (1978) proposed the concept of the 'political opportunity structure'. An open system with many 'points of contact' stimulates political participation, while a closed system with limited points of contact makes it difficult to bring demands to the political level. A closed system would especially promote non-institutionalised forms of participation. For example, some municipalities offer various possibilities for inhabitants of diverse backgrounds to interact with the administration through advisory councils, while in another municipalities the possibilities for political interaction are limited to what is strictly compulsory. In this second situation, non-institutio-

nalised forms of political participation are more frequent. In general, it can be assumed that an open system with many opportunities for participation in policy-making and sufficient resources, motivation and networks at micro-level, is able to gain wider political participation.

A Flemish research by Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) formulated several guidelines for local governments to foster immigrants' political participation. They found that there is a strong willingness among both local policymakers and civil society actors to involve immigrants, but that there is often no explicit vision on how to include them. Therefore, the local authorities should consider three aspects to foster immigrants' political participation: with whom, how and on which topics. Firstly, if we examine which target groups the local authorities should include, the research of Vermeersch and colleagues does not offer a conclusive answer, however, the study found that people do not like being approached based on their nationality, but rather because of their commitment and expertise on a certain subject. It might therefore be better to concentrate on the involvement of young people, parents or culture enthusiasts rather than one specific ethnic community, while trying to reach enough people of diverse backgrounds. This fact was also expressed during the focus group:

“We learned during our EU project that they [immigrants] don't like to be addressed on their origin, they want to give their opinion on education or employment, it's about the needs and opinions of those people” (I. 28, expert in political participation).

Secondly, in regard to how the municipality can foster immigrants' political participation, the research indicates that participation is broader than the approach to 'ask for participation' or 'collect input', which is a one-sided view of participation (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). It is recommended to organise political participation as a comprehensive process, which includes support to participants as well as capacity building or empowerment. Participants should be approached actively and a relationship of trust should be built, they should be adequately informed on the subject and supported through the process of participation. Especially for hard-to-reach or vulnerable groups a political participation expert recommends a structural framework of contact with trusted persons (e.g. outreach social workers) :

“If you want to talk about a certain target group, go to their environment, go to the mosques for example. Gather those people, profile yourself in a very accessible and low-key way and listen to what they have to say” (I. 24, expert in political participation).

Lastly, looking at the topics around which political participation should be organised, the research shows that a strictly sectoral approach should be avoided (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). Immigrants do

not only want to participate in integration policies, but in all kinds of policy domains that affect their daily life (e.g. labour, education or culture). A policy vision should therefore be transversal in the sense that it includes the participation of people with diverse backgrounds in various policy domains. Furthermore, the research suggests that the participation processes should focus on concrete policy themes (e.g. participating 'education policy' is abstract, while 'school enrolment procedures' is more concrete). Participants must have some connection and expertise on the topic. If immigrants see what impact a certain policy has on their own lives, they will be more motivated to participate. An expert in political participation explained that thematic recruitment is preferable, rather than looking for an arbitrarily person of foreign nationality to diversify an initiative:

“If people want to talk about diversity, schedule an evening for people who want to talk about that and if you want to talk about education, just invite (...) people that really want to say something about education. In this way you only get to hear motivated voices and want to change something in society” (I. 24, expert in political participation).

9. Innovative practices for political participation in Ninove

In this chapter, we will present three innovative practices for immigrant political participation. As mentioned in section 7.3, we can conclude that the initiatives to stimulate political participation of immigrants in Ninove are limited. However, in each of the interviews, the researcher asked whether there were any local practices of integration in Ninove that were connected in some (direct or indirect) way to political participation, as the participation of immigrants can take on many forms (Fraser 1989; Martiniello 1997). Based on these answers, we identified three cases. In the previous chapter, we have discussed the various scientific factors at micro-level and macro-level that make immigrants participate or not in policy-making. In this chapter, we will assess whether the factors quoted by scientific literature are applicable in these cases or whether new explanatory factors emerged from the interviews.

9.1 Database of outreach social workers

The first case that we selected is the database of the town of Ninove used by the outreach social workers (*toeleiders*), in which each help request is recorded. This database is not only used to get a better overview on how things work within the town, but also with the objective to align the different internal and external services with the needs, demands and obstacles experienced by the

immigrants. However, the immigrants are not aware that their needs are communicated to policy-makers, which makes this system an indirect and top-down approach of political participation, anyway their needs are still communicated to the relevant policy-makers within the integration policy.

This system of keeping track of the needs of immigrants provides a tool for horizontal policy-making, since the database indirectly identifies the trends, opportunities and challenges that the city's most vulnerable inhabitants (may) face: *"What you do deduce from the database is how the cooperation with other departments is going. When a subject who has been recorded comes back and says: 'Yes, I haven't been helped there', we talk to civil affairs and see what is the reason behind it: 'Why hasn't that person been helped?' In that way a lot of internal issues come to the surface"* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Another example is the pilot project of cycling lessons for immigrants in 2021, this need for cycling lessons had been identified through the database and thus provided an indirect lever for policy participation:

"What I try to do with these cycling lessons, is that I had already picked that up (...) in the database of the reception interviews (...) then you do think: 'that must be something important or that is a topic people are concerned about (...) and why does it always come up' and then we do something about this need" (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Since 2017 Ninove has been investing in these 'outreach social workers' (Ninove 2022). The interviewees described these figures as people with an immigrant background who speak various languages widely spoken among immigrants. They try to help immigrants in a pragmatic way and can be deployed both within a town reception policy as well as within a broader horizontal integration policy. Since 2022, Ninove has four outreach social workers in the framework of the reception policy:

"There is a language barrier and they have little contact with the schools. I can use other languages, but I am between the parents and the schools (...) to motivate parents who have time and are not working to go to Dutch classes (...). That is a good initiative because when I still lived in Liedekerke, I wanted someone who understood my language and my questions to be able to find everything. People I helped, five years ago, are still happy (...). I compare it with myself in the beginning. It is like you come into a forest where you have ten different roads to find something and you have to take one of those roads to find it" (I.12, civil society member active in Ninove).

The interviewees judged this practice critical in promoting immigrants' participation, because it applied a proactive and outreaching approach, such as welcoming immigrants immediately on

their arrival in town through the reception policy (aligning with the macro-level factor of Vermeersch *et al.* 2016, in which they state that participants should be actively approached). A new explanatory factor that emerged from the interviews is the multilingual and culturally sensitive approach. The fact that the outreach workers were former immigrants themselves and speak multiple languages ensures trust, mutual understanding and better support for the new inhabitants. The outreach social workers cooperate with different kinds of partners (e.g. *AGII*, schools and different departments of Ninove), allowing to bridge the gap between the internal and external services: *“That helps immigrants in a very concrete way and we pay attention to the fact that people's self-reliance is taken into account (...).The local government authorities are well aware that the outreach social workers are bridging the gap between many different services”* (I.06, supra-local policy actor). However, the interviewees also indicated some challenges in terms of setting boundaries to the tasks of outreach social workers. Because of the multiple needs among immigrants, the outreach social workers are often pushed into the role of aid provider.

9.2 Intercultural dialogue evenings

In 2015 Ninove started annual intercultural dialogue evenings, where Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Muslim communities came together to discuss religious topics in order to achieve mutual understanding (Ninove 2022). However, the intercultural dialogue evenings now no longer focus exclusively on religious topics, but have been expanded to various themes linked to the community of Ninove. For example, in 2022 the topic of polarisation was on the agenda, so Christophe Busch - director of the Hannah Arendt Institute³⁰ - was invited to give a guest lecture explaining the factors behind polarisation. The participation criteria are not restricted to association to the different religious communities in Ninove, but is also open to inhabitants, members of the Municipal Council and staff of the Department of Welfare. Due to the fact that also policy makers attend these dialogue evenings and the discussion topic range has been expanded, the needs of immigrants are indirectly taken into account in the integration policy, thus aligning with the vision of Fraser (1989). In other words, the intercultural dialogue evenings seem to be an indirect lever for political participation. One member of the Municipal Council stated that the dialogue evenings are a useful initiative because they allow to detect signals on how to shape the integration policy:

“It is about vulnerabilities that people identify and initiatives that are proposed there. One of the participants said: ‘Look in the corona period, across all communities we did suffer from loneliness,

³⁰ The Hannah Arendt Institute is a platform, set up by the UA and the VUB, that connects scientific knowledge about diversity, urbanisation and citizenship with the insights of policymakers, citizens and organisations.

but also from grief, when we had to lose someone and when we could not say goodbye, why don't we do something collectively around that? To show that we are much more similar than people sometimes think" (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

Furthermore, the first member of the Municipal Council with an immigrant background participated in the intercultural dialogue evenings. This person was 'asked' to be on the election list of Ninove during these evenings: *"I do admit that it is good that finally there is someone, and I look at it objectively, that finally someone in the Municipal Council will be a voice for the people who are perhaps less heard in the streets. And I do feel that it is appreciated, that I can represent that voice"* (I.21, Municipal Council member of Ninove). As mentioned above (section eight micro-level explanatory factors), 'being asked' appears to be one of the main reasons for political participation (Hooghe *et al.* 2001).

The intercultural dialogue evenings were mostly perceived as positive, since they were part of the regular municipal policy. The success, continuation and possible expansion of a project depends on its integration in the regular municipal policies: *"You have to be mindful with that temporary nature (...), the call for projects because you have to focus on long-term plans because if a project ends, you might end up with unsatisfied participants"* (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Local authorities often encounter difficulties in ensuring the continuation of successful projects, mostly due to the lack of resources (Yar, Laurentsyevea 2020). However, the intercultural dialogue evenings are well established and do no longer focus exclusively on religious topics, they imply a strong co-operation between the town administrators and the project staff, in other words it is vitally important to build a stable network.

Some interviewees mentioned that these types of initiatives always reach the same person profile, people already in some way empowered, who have some relevance within the community. However, other respondents pointed out that these people are a good base to work with as also other people can be reached through them (snowball-effect).

9.3 KRAS youth parliament

The KRAS youth parliament is an annual voluntary programme about political participation that takes place during the leisure time of secondary school pupils (Globelink 2022). Despite the fact that this initiative is not specifically focused on immigrants, yet it proves to be relevant when we look at the changing demographics of the inflow of school pupils in Ninove³¹ (e.g. in the KRAS

³¹ In 2012, 245 secondary school pupils came from families in which Dutch was not their native language, in 2021 the number increased to 563 pupils (Statistics Flanders 2021). In 2021, the number of non-Dutch-speaking pupils in Ninove

group of 2022, 12 out of 23 pupils had an immigrant background). This initiative seems to be a direct lever for political participation, since the pupils will directly confront the policy-makers of Ninove with their demands and needs (Fraser 1989; Martiniello 1997). Most KRAS groups include different schools from the same town. The programme content is organised by the Belgian youth service Globelink³². The youth service organises discussions and role-plays around an annual topic (e.g. 2021: inequality, 2022: identity), with the goal of teaching them how to discuss local issues. A KRAS year consists of six two-hour and one full-day session in the Flemish parliament with all the KRAS pupils. The sessions consist of an introduction on the year's specific topic, three role-plays, an expert session - in which they prepare critical questions together with local experts - and a closing session in the Municipal Council, in which they confront local politicians with their demands. When looking at the success factors of this project, the interviewees indicate that the teachers have a crucial role. The KRAS project in Ninove was initiated by a teacher, who gathered other teachers and pupils from different schools, building a relationship of trust with the participants and ensured financial support from Ninove for the next edition. The connection between the teachers and the Globelink social worker was also important, both had the same vision on how to organise the youth parliament. This factor seems to reflect the second macro-level explanatory factor of Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) to actively approach participants and build a structural framework of contact between trusted persons. A second new success factor is the application of techniques to stimulate debates. The facilitator pits students against each other, makes connections between the opinions and selects certain discussion topics. Thirdly, the Globelink social worker indicated that it is recommended choose locally relevant topics as they should be as close as possible to the living environment of the pupils and connected to what is happening in their towns. With this method the pupils can learn how politics affects their daily lives:

“There is a big hole in our education now. We learn a lot about politics, who the prime minister is and a lot of history (...) but very little on ‘how am I an active citizen’ and ‘how do I decide’ and ‘how does policy affect me’? I think a lot of pupils don't realise how much influence politics actually has on them or how much influence that they could make (...). Some really say: ‘Before KRAS, I couldn't express my opinion and I couldn't give critical comments or anything and now I feel really comfortable

(19.7%) was higher than the Flemish average (16.4%). The number of non-Dutch-speaking pupils in part-time vocational secondary education in Ninove (41.0%) was significantly higher than Flemish average (29.4%) in 2021. Thus, it can be stated that there is an increasing share of secondary school pupils with immigrant backgrounds in Ninove.

³² Youth service Globelink is a recognised, national youth service that works with young people in leisure time to set up projects around political participation (Globelink 2022).

in doing that'. (...) So, you do notice that shift in those pupils towards the end of the course" (I.18, civil society member active in Ninove).

A fourth success factor is the format of the sessions, focused on skill and knowledge development (e.g. role-plays and local expert sessions), reflecting the second macro-level factor of Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) in which they suggest concentrating on capacity building or empowerment. The role-play is a suitable approach for introverted pupils, since expressing their own opinion in a public debate can be frightening. Playing a role brings a kind of safety net, because it is separate from the person they are in the real world. The expert sessions allow the pupils to look at their ideas from a different perspective and to prepare themselves against the responses from local politicians. The participants gain more confidence through this approach: "*It's also about confidence: if you ask them in the first session 'are you ready to stand in front of politicians next week', I think they would say 'no', but after the sessions I think most of them would say 'yes, I feel ready', so you notice that change in confidence*" (I.18, civil society member active in Ninove).

While the project was positively evaluated by the participants, the Globelink social worker observed that the project mainly attracts pupils from general secondary education. The project is focused on language and takes place outside the school hours, making it challenging for some students to participate. This finding reflects the micro-level factor of Vermeersch *et al.* (2016) about resources (e.g. limited knowledge of Dutch and time). A local policy actor specified that some topics brought to the Municipal Council fell outside of its competence and suggested that it would be more valuable if certain suggestions were followed-up (e.g. holding multiple debates with local politicians) and implemented in cooperation with the pupils themselves. By applying this approach, the pupils would get a deeper understanding of the different responsibility compartmentalisation local authorities are faced with.

In this chapter, we discussed two practices of indirect political participation (database of outreach social workers and intercultural dialogue evenings) and one practice of direct political participation (KRAS). In general, we can conclude that the initiatives of direct immigrants' political participation are limited in Ninove. Some explanatory factors found in scientific literature were applicable to these three cases. However, we also found new factors such as applying a multilingual and culturally sensitive approach, embedding a project in the regular municipal policies, applying techniques to stimulate debate and connecting locally relevant topics.

10. Territorial networks in Ninove

In this chapter, we will discuss the different territorial networks (public-public, immigrant and external networks) active in Ninove. In annex two (p. 52), we created an overview of all the actors working on immigrant integration in Ninove. In general, we can conclude that Ninove has a limited number of local immigrant self-organisations and local civil society actors, which makes it difficult for immigrants to participate in local policy-making. Most actors working on integration are in the Department of Welfare of Ninove or are external socio-cultural organisations (e.g. Habbekrats), government agencies (e.g. *AGII*) and public or private welfare organisations (e.g. OCMW). In the section below deals with the cooperation of the different actors.

10.1 Public-public networks

As mentioned above (see section 7.2), the integration policy of Ninove is concentrated within the Department of Welfare. Therefore, the integration policy is strongly focused on providing social services and mainly targets immigrants in vulnerable positions. According to the statistics the Ninove immigrant population mainly consist of French speaking citizens who have already lived in BCR for multiple years and cannot be legally obliged to follow an integration trajectory (Statistics Flanders 2021). There is no existing Flemish framework conceived for this specific target group. As a result, the majority of the less vulnerable and self-reliant influx of people from BCR are not specifically targeted:

“What is certainly still missing is a policy that is horizontally supported by all departments (...). Integration falls under the Department of Welfare and is focused on people who are less self-reliant, have more social vulnerability, without this being the major influx into Ninove. The following questions are not asked: 'What happens to the large proportion of people who are self-reliant?' 'What does integration mean for those people?' (...) 'How do they get that warm welcome to the town?' 'How can we involve these other services?' (...) So, these questions do not seem to be raised and there is a one-sided focus on that social pathway” (I.27, civil society actor in the Dender region).

The focus on providing social services can be recognised in the fact that the largest share of the public-public cooperation around immigrant integration occurs within the Department of Welfare and not with other departments. For example, many interviewees indicate that the cooperation with the Police Department is challenging. The Department of Welfare wanted to run trajectories with the police forces on subjects such as diversity or racism. They suggested appointing a youth inspector - a police officer who's not wearing a uniform and can be easily contacted by both

young people and the police forces – in order to develop a policy that functioned preventively instead of after the offences took place. However, the Police Department were not open to any kind of cooperation:

“We actually don't get the chance to work preventively and exchange information. (...) they really take out the youngsters with an immigrant background, the others can just go free, we also feel that there is quite some polarisation and racism there with the police services and we would like to run trajectories with them to first look: ‘What is diversity?’ To gain insights into the multicultural society, but they have some resistance, they don't really want to cooperate, there is also a difference in vision, but also a lack of manpower and time (...). Our police services are still too rural, when someone has a racism complaint (...) they're just laughing, you're going to notice very clearly: ‘What are you coming up with now?’” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

As mentioned in section 7.2, Ninove is working on a horizontal policy, which incorporates other policy domains in the reception policy for newcomers, reflecting an attempt to align direct and indirect integration policies. However, most of the interviewees state that other departments, such as housing, employment or culture, are not involved enough in the integration policy of Ninove. Local- and supra policy actors state that the underlying reason behind the limited cooperation between the different departments is due to the fact that the local government staff does not match the changing socio-demographic composition of the population and is a reflection of the political situation of Ninove:

“If Ninove has 40% Forza Ninove voters, I am convinced that there is a part of them in our staff. You can see that in education, civil affairs, the police, the library, it's everywhere (...). I experienced this when I had to introduce [a particular] policy, which has to do with: ‘Is that another thing that we should take into account or be sensitive to?’ Some civil servants still want to work as they could 15-20 years ago” (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

The Department of Welfare cooperates across different scales of government (Flemish-level). The local integration officer has regular collaborations with the *AGII* (Flemish Agency for Integration and Incorporation). For example, the *AGII* helped with the establishment of the mosque - in fact they developed a strategic plan to create support for the mosque within the neighbourhood - and assisted the integration officer with formulating a language policy for civil servants. *AGII* is also cooperating with the integration officer of the ‘*Dender360°*’ project, which deals with the prevention of polarisation in the Dender region and takes part in the projects of *Plan Samenleven*, *Babelonië* and the mothers group (see section 7.2). The integration officer has also regular contact

with the 'VVSG' ('*Vlaamse Vereniging van Steden en Gemeenten*') for general assistance and study days. The VVSG is a Flemish advocate organisation, reporting policy issues of local authorities to the Flemish government. However, some interviewees notice a scaling-down of the local presence of the Flemish services such as AGII (and other civil society organisations such as trade unions), which is connected to the distribution of the Municipal Fund (further discussed in 10.3 external networks):

"If you look at the deployment of AGII: 'Where do the most staff members work?' 'Where are the most actions done?' That is not here in the region, while a large proportion of persons with a immigration background live here. You have Antwerp as a large area, but actually second largest are the outskirts of Brussels, but there is no investment in that. The same with trade unions, not present enough (...) and I see that a local government cannot coordinate that either and that's not necessarily an example of bad will, they just don't have the manpower" (I.27, civil society actor in the Dender region).

The Department of Welfare also collaborates with a range of external socio-cultural organisations coming from other towns such as Habbekrats, Globelink, Ligo, Groeipunt and Avansa (see section 7.2 and annex two). However, some local policy actors mentioned that attracting external socio-cultural organisations to Ninove is difficult in some cases, partly because the town has a certain reputation due to the political situation, that is the strong rise on the anti-immigrant and far-right party *Forza Ninove*. This causes uncertainty about the permanence of employment in integration-related occupations:

"Suppose that next time the far-right party comes to power, what will happen to my job?' These issues are really of concern with the staff. (...) In the Municipal Council, Forza Ninove has abstained on the extension of the community work project. But it's also not that people are then going to put down on paper in black and white that that's the reason, but you do feel that somewhere" (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

Lastly, the Department of Welfare is working together with Flemish public and private welfare organisations such as OCMW and CAW. These collaborations mainly entail practical issues related to integration, such as social employment trajectories, reception of refugees, social housing or providing financial support.

10.2 Immigrant networks

Ninove has three immigrant self-organisations: centre '*Barmhartigheid*', football club '*EOSA*' and the Evangelical church '*E.I.E.N.*'. *Barmhartigheid* is a self-organisation for the Maghreb community. Besides giving Muslims a place where they can practise their religion, this non-profit organisation coordinates iftars, neighbourhood gatherings, exhibitions, homework support for children and Dutch language lessons. The centre of *Barmhartigheid* has collaborated with the Department of Welfare on events such as NinoMundo (an intercultural culinary market where people with different ethnic backgrounds served self-prepared food) and the annual intercultural dialogue evenings (where Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Muslim communities come together to discuss various topics). However, the organisation wants to present itself as a politically neutral organisation and, as a result, does not apply for structural subsidies from the town of Ninove. The organisation is entirely financed by donations from local community:

"I want in any case to avoid as many political discussions around the centre. Centre *Barmhartigheid* is politically neutral and if we would apply for subsidies from the town, a political discussion could be initiated. The centre has already led to political discussions in the past (...) and those discussions, they actually always come from the same source, from the far-right who think that the multicultural society is a big failure, you shouldn't encourage that, you shouldn't reinforce that in any way, you see? And the political discussions once started with (...) the reclassification of a building" (I.13, representative of a local immigrants' association).

EOSA is a voluntary youth football association for non-professional players and was initiated by a member of the African community. The football association has around 100 pupils from four up to fifteen years old, the training sessions are held four times per week. Around 70% of these pupils have an immigrant background. When we asked why the founder of the football association had started this project, the founder replied: "*I developed this initiative because many children want to play football, but they don't have the qualities to play in a professional club.*" The founder is planning to establish an 'African House', where members of the African community can come together, promote their culture and Dutch language lessons are given for illiterate adults. Despite the founder verbally asked the town of Ninove for providing public infrastructure for the African House or the football club, the organisation did not receive any financial support.

Lastly, Ninove has an Evangelical church *E.I.E.N.*, where mainly people from the African community come together. *E.I.E.N.* does not only hold church services, but also pedagogical classes for parents and children. The church mainly collaborates with the town during the intercultural dialogue eve-

nings. This local immigrant self-organisation is also not financially supported by nor gets public infrastructure from the town of Ninove. When we asked a member of the Municipal Council of Ninove why local immigrant self-organisations are not financially supported by the town, the answer was:

“Either they then don't submit for financial support because they think: ‘This is going to lead to controversy’ or they don't want it? I think it's more something of: ‘I don't want to apply for this, because I don't want to enter into that controversy and I also want to be able to do my own thing. We also have associations, Dutch-language associations, that don't apply for subsidies because they don't want the burden of submitting an application. I can imagine, that people who may not have a good knowledge of the language, that it requires a greater effort for them than for an inhabitant of Ninove. But we can't exclude organisations because they are from a different culture (...) that would be straightforward discrimination” (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

10.3 External networks

Looking at the external collaborations with other municipalities and small towns, we can see a clear trend towards cooperation in the so-called reference regions³³ and inter-municipal collaborations (Deprez *et al.* 2018; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022; Ninove 2022). Ninove is working on inter-municipal cooperation with Denderleeuw and Geraardsbergen for *Plan Samenleven* (2022-2024). *Plan Samenleven* is a project subsidy from the Flemish government - focusing on 28 local municipalities with more than 7.500 inhabitants of non-EU nationality or multiple local municipalities through inter-municipal collaborations - and contains seven objectives, which municipalities may freely choose in terms of content. The local authorities elected three policy priorities: increasing employment opportunities, guidance to sport and leisure activities and connection in and around the school. The choice of working together with Denderleeuw and Geraardsbergen was due to practical reasons, the municipalities and towns close to each other. Local policy actors underlined that this kind of collaborations between local authorities are often due to financial reasons, where the call for a project from the Flemish government exceeds the municipality's inten-

³³ Reference regions are determined by the Flemish government and are the foundation for all forms of inter-municipal and supra-local cooperation in Flanders.

ded budget. This can be seen in the fact that the Key Performance Indicators (KPI)³⁴ are not achieved jointly, but at region level:

“We submitted with Geraardsbergen and Denderleeuw, because of practicality and convenience. Those [municipalities] are next to each other (...). I think everyone just takes their money and does their own thing, not that this is a negative, because it's simply not easy to start sending people to another city or municipality for labour activation, it's also so easy to keep working locally with your own partners” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove).

Since 2022, Ninove has been working with Aalst, Liedekerke, Geraardsbergen and Denderleeuw on the project ‘*Dender360°*’, trying to prevent polarisation. The objective is to create an action plan through interviews about the perceived tensions within the communities. By applying this approach of inter-municipal collaboration, the Flemish government wants to strengthen its coordinating role by expanding its networks and offering the possibility to find a suitable solution to shared local issues (Deprez *et al.* 2018). However, the interviewees mention that the city of Aalst - with more than 88.000 inhabitants - does not adopt this coordinating role because they belong to the thirteen centre cities³⁵ in Flanders and therefore receive a higher share of the Municipal Fund (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2022). Aalst is therefore not financially obliged to engage in inter-municipal collaboration with smaller towns: “*Aalst is large enough to submit alone [for Plan Samenleven], if you have more than 7.500 people from outside the EU, you can submit alone and you can also obtain higher funds. This is also meaningful issue for them: 'Why do we have to engage with the little ones, when we can do it ourselves and not have to share?' But I think we can certainly learn a lot from Aalst (...) they have three mosques, they have a bigger civil society*” (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove). Furthermore, Aalst and Ninove also differ in terms of perspective on integration. While Ninove is more focused on social welfare by investing in local integration and building bridges between the communities, Aalst is mainly investing in Dutch language education. The distribution of the Municipal Fund frequently is quite controversial (Standaard 2022). According to the interviewees, the criteria used for the distribution of the financial resources of the Mu-

³⁴ Local authorities must report Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for *Plan Samenleven* from the Flemish government. KPI are annually reviewed to examine whether a continuation of the project and disbursement of the balance is justifiable.

³⁵ Flanders has thirteen centre cities, specifically the two major cities of Antwerp and Ghent and the eleven regional cities of Aalst, Bruges, Genk, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Leuven, Mechelen, Ostend, Roeselare, Sint-Niklaas, Turnhout. About a quarter of the total Flemish population lives in one of the thirteen centre cities. The centre cities exercise a central function in terms of employment, care, education, culture, leisure and they receive a higher share out of the Municipal Fund.

municipal Fund do not match the objective local needs. Statistics show that the local authorities that had a political majority in the Flemish parliament at the time of the distribution, receive the most funds³⁶. For example, Geel does not have significantly more inhabitants than Ninove and is objectively wealthier, but each year it receives five million euros more than Ninove, which is 100 million euros in twenty years. Furthermore, other funds are often calculated using the same distribution criteria, such as investment programs of public transport (e.g. 'NMBS', 'De Lijn'³⁷ or Roads and Traffic Agency):

"I think that Ninove is really under-financed and okay, we had an extra grant through the 'Denderfonds', but if you look at the problems we are facing today as a small town and compared to others, we are one of the main disadvantaged towns in terms of funding (...). The Municipal Fund is based on what criteria that, I wouldn't know, but I suspect that there was a kind of us know us story there, especially politically and not a story of: 'let's make sure that every Flemish person is entitled to equal treatment. And okay, if I live in a village, I don't have the facilities of a city, you can live with that (...), but the problem areas have become the same as in many cities now and we don't have resources for that" (I.25, Municipal Council member of Ninove).

In general, the interviewees point out that the degree of communication and cooperation with external local authorities is still too limited. This causes fragmentation between the integration programmes being offered within the Dender region, as well as conflicting objectives, a lack of mutual recognition and additional costs for immigrants in terms of time to navigate through the system of social service provision. Furthermore, many local policy stakeholders highlighted the need for exchange of information and coordination of actions between different municipalities, but also with major cities, which could act as leaders providing example and sharing (proven) best practices (and often a longer history of policy initiatives on immigrant integration):

"The same with equal opportunities, all thirteen centre cities are in there. I registered for the session like: 'I'm going to sit there too, even though I'm not in the centre city' (...). Also, with Bruges, I just called and said: 'How did you start with the rainbow policy?' And then you actually hear the steps that we have to take and that is nice that you can skip a few steps (...) and then we are as a small town stronger because we learn from other major cities." (I.1, local policy actor in Ninove)

³⁶ Ninove, a town on the periphery of Brussels with 39.000 inhabitants, receives 9.8 million from the Municipal Fund. Oudenaarde, a wealthy city in a rural region, receives 10.2 million euros for 32.000 inhabitants. Maasmechelen, with an equal number of inhabitants, receives 13.4 million euros, Sint-Truiden with 41.000 inhabitants 14.8 million euros and Geel receives 14.9 million for 41.000 inhabitants. Turnhout, a centre city with 46.000 inhabitants: 26.5 million euros.

³⁷ NMBS is the national company of the Belgian railways and *De Lijn* is a Flemish external agency for public transport.

Conclusion

The Flemish integration policy started relatively late in comparison to other European countries (Van De Pol *et al.* 2013; Saeys *et al.* 2014). Despite the federalisation of the competency for integration policies took place in the 1980's, a direct integration policy in Flanders only emerged in the early 2000's with the idea of incorporation. If we look at the evolution of the perspective on the Flemish integration policy, we can see that it was initially more focused on the Dutch model of multicultural society, but in recent years the focus was placed on cultural assimilation and on immigrants' own accountability to integrate into the host society (De Cuyper, Wets 2007). This also can be seen in the amended Integration and Incorporation Decree of 2021, which states that immigrants will have to pay for their incorporation trajectory. However, the fourth pillar 'social networking and participation' of the incorporation trajectory can be viewed as an intercultural approach, giving its focus on micro-level interaction between immigrants and inhabitants (Zapata-Barrero 2017). Furthermore, research states that the Flemish integration policy is increasingly decentralised (Schillebeeckx *et al.* 2016; Deprez *et al.* 2019). There is a growing common idea that integration policies should be primarily designed and implemented at the local level. This is proved by the abolition of various funds which the Flemish government used to grant to municipalities. The majority of the interviewees link this fact to the loss of a common Flemish framework for integration policies at the local level, which causes fragmentation between municipalities and towns. In addition, local authorities are assigned a 'coordinating role' in the field of integration by the Flemish government. More than half of Flemish local authorities believe that they have insufficient capacities and expertise to adopt this role (Deprez *et al.* 2018). However, policy actors in Ninove state that assuming the coordinating role creates extra capacity by involving external actors who have expertise in the field.

If we look at the local integration policies in Ninove, we can see that the socio-political tensions around immigration have led to the development of an integration policy from 2015 onwards. The introduction of the *Denderfonds* given by the Flemish government in 2019 created more capacity in planning and managing an integration policy (Ninove 2022). The operational budget for integration (2020-2025) was more than doubled since the last legislature, the town started investing in several projects fostering immigrants' integration and also professionalised their local integration policy. The current integration policy of Ninove is focused on three topics: security, language and social welfare (multi-annual plan 2020-2025). The largest share of the *Denderfonds* is spent on reducing feelings of insecurity, partly because of the pressure from the radical right electorate (although the anti-immigrant party '*Forza Ninove*' is excluded from the ruling coalition). Next to that,

Ninove is pursuing an active language policy through investing in Dutch language education and is willing to strengthen social welfare by investing in several projects to enhance immigrants' integration.

Assessing the political participation of immigrants in Ninove, we can conclude that the attempts to include immigrants in policy-making is quite limited. However, this research found that there is a strong willingness both among local policymakers and civil society actors to involve immigrants, but often there is no explicit vision or know-how to include them. Therefore, this research identified three scientific factors on micro- (resources, motivation and networks) and macro-level (with whom, how and which topics) that make immigrants participate or not in policy-making (Vermeersch *et al.* 2016). In regard to the micro-level factors, we can conclude that having the necessary financial resources, time, Dutch language fluency is a pre-condition for political participation. Motivation - such as whether immigrants feel represented in the political life of the country - and networks - such as whether networks of ethnic minorities are institutionalised - seem to be key explanatory elements. As to the macro-level factors, most interviewees state that immigrants do not want to be approached based on their nationality, but rather because of their commitment to a certain issue. It is recommended to organise political participation as a comprehensive process, in which participant support and capacity building are taken into account. Looking at the topics around which political participation should be organised, thematic recruitment seems preferable, rather than looking for an arbitrary person of foreign nationality to diversify an initiative. Additionally, this research identified three innovative practices for immigrant political participation in Ninove, two of which involved indirect political participation (database of outreach social workers and intercultural dialogue evenings) and one direct political participation (KRAS). In most of these cases the factors cited by scientific literature were applicable. However, also new explanatory factors emerged from the interviews, such as applying a multilingual and culturally sensitive approach, embedding a project in the regular municipal policies or choosing local area relevant topics.

Looking at the different territorial networks, we can conclude that Ninove has a limited number of local immigrant self-organisations and local civil society actors, which makes it difficult for immigrants to participate in local policy-making. Most actors working on integration are concentrated in the Ninove Department of Welfare or are external Flemish socio-cultural organisations, government agencies and public or private welfare organisations. In addition, we noticed a clear trend of reference regions and inter-municipal cooperation. In general, we observed that the level of communication and collaboration with external local authorities is still low, this causes conflicting objectives, a lack of mutual recognition and additional costs for immigrants in terms of time to navigate through the system. Furthermore, many local policy stakeholders highlighted the need for

exchange of information and coordination of actions with other municipalities, but also with major cities, which could act as leaders providing example and sharing best practices.

References

- Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur. 2022. *Subsidies niet-centrumsteden*. Published online: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/stedenbeleid> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2020. *Gemeentefonds: soorten dotaties*. Published online: shorturl.at/dmsw7 (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Berger, M., Fennema, M., van Heelsum, A., Tillie, J., Wolff, R. 2001. *Politieke participatie van etnische minderheden in vier steden*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) & Institute for Migration & Ethnic Studies (IMES).
- Blommaert, J., Verschueren, J. 1992. *Het Belgische migrantendebat: de pragmatiek van de abnormalisering*. EPO.
- Charlier, J., Debuissou, M., Hermia J.P., Pelfrene, E. 2019. *Rapport 'Migratie tussen gewesten van België'*. BISA, Statistiek Vlaanderen, Iweps. Published online: shorturl.at/qCEFP (last checked 31st January 2023).
- De Cuyper, P., Wets, J. 2007. *Diversiteit in integratie. Een evaluatie van de vormgeving, efficiëntie en effectiviteit van het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid*. HIVA; Leuven.
- Dean, H. (2015). *Social Rights and Human Welfare*. New York: Routledge.
- Deprez, I., Platteau, E., Hondeghem, A. 2018. *De invulling en versterking van de regierol van lokale besturen op vlak van integratiebeleid*. KU Leuven Instituut voor de Overheid.
- Deprez, I., Hondeghem, A., Steen, T. 2019. *Ambtelijke capaciteit en de regierol van lokale besturen: Een casestudy van het lokale integratiebeleid*. KU Leuven Instituut voor de Overheid.
- EC European Commission. 2014. *Communication from the commission to the European Parliament and the Council on guidance for application of Directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification*. Published online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2022. *New Pact on Migration and Asylum, priorities 2019-2024*. Published online: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/new-pact-migration-and-asylum> (last checked 31st January 2023).

- Fennema M, Tillie J. 1999. *Political participation and political trust in Amsterdam: civic communities and ethnic networks*. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 25, 4:703-726.
- Fraser, N. 1989. *Unruly Practices. Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Geets, J., Pauwels, F., Wets, J., Lamberts, M., Timmerman, C. 2006. *Nieuwe migranten en de arbeidsmarkt*. HIVA/Oases; Leuven/Antwerpen.
- Globelink. 2022. KRAS 2022-2023. Published online: <https://www.globelink.be/kras> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Goeman, H., Van Puymbroeck, N. 2011. *De bestuurlijke complexiteit van het migrantenbeleid: een conceptueel, institutionele en operationele schets*. "MInteGRATIE, over nieuwe vormen van migratie en integratie", 47.
- Grossmann, K., Mallach, A. 2021. *The small city in the urban system: complex pathways of growth and decline*. Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 103, 3:169-175.
- Hammar, T. 1985. *European immigration policy: A comparative study*. Cambridge University.
- Hooghe, M., Elchardus, M., Smits, W. 2001. *Wie participeert er nog?* In Elchardus, M., Huyse, L., Hooghe, M. eds. *Het maatschappelijk middenveld in Vlaanderen*. VUB Press.
- Hustinx, L. 2012. *Participatie: een sociologische benadering*. In *Participatie: what's in a name? Een multidisciplinaire kijk op maatschappelijke participatie*. Vanden Broele Academics, pp. 63-84.
- IBZ Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken. 2019. *Resultaten in cijfers - Kanton Ninove*. Published online: <https://verkiezingen2019.belgium.be/nl/resultaten-cijfers?el=VL&id=VLK41048> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Joppke, C., Morawska, E. 2003. *Integrating immigrants in liberal nation-states: Policies and practices*. In *Toward assimilation and citizenship: Immigrants in liberal nation-states*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-36.
- Leighley, J. E. 2001. *Strength in numbers? The political mobilisation of racial and ethnic minorities*. Princeton University Press.
- Lokaal Bestuur Vlaanderen. 2021. *Subsidies voor gemeenten met mobiliteitsknooppunt*. Published online: shorturl.at/pqFO0 (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Loobuyck, P. 2003. *Het Vlaams minderhedenbeleid: een status quaestionis*. "MIGRANTEN RECHT (UTRECHT)", 17, 3:84-88.
- Loopmans, M. 2007. *From SIF to City Fund: a new direction for urban policy in Flanders, Belgium*. "Journal of Housing and the Built Environment", 22, 2:215-225.

- Martens, A. 1973. *25 jaar Wegwerparbeiders. Het Belgisch Immigratiebeleid na 1945*. Leuven: KULeuven.
- Martiniello, M. 1997. *Citizenship, ethnicity and multiculturalism: Post national membership between Utopia and reality*. "Ethnic and Racial Studies", 20,3:635-641.
- . 2005. *Political participation, mobilisation and representation of immigrants and their offspring in Europe*. Malmö, Sweden: School of International Migration and Ethnic Relations, Malmö University.
- Martiniello, M., Khader, B., Rea, A., Timmerman, C. 2006. *Immigratie en integratie anders denken: een Belgisch interuniversitair initiatief*. Brussel: Bruylant.
- MO. 2021. *Het grootste risico in integratiesector schuilt in de fascinatie voor toverwoorden en een flitsend discours*. Published online: <https://www.mo.be/commentaar/LEVL-grootste-risico-fascinatie-toverwoorden-flitsend-discours> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Mortelmans, D. 2018. *Handboek kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden (5de editie)*. België: Acco.
- Ninofmedia. 2019. *Extra geld voor de drie Dendersteden*. Published online: shorturl.at/aEX37 (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Ninove. 2021. *Traject taalbeleid*. Published online: <https://www.ninove.be/taalbeleid> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2022. *Meerjarenplan 2020-2025*. Published online: <https://www.ninove.be/meerjarenplan-2020-2025> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2022. *Onthaalgesprek voor nieuwkomers*. Published online: <https://www.ninove.be/kansen-voor-nieuwkomers> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Pauwels, F., Clycq, N., Timmerman, C. 2010. *Nieuwkomers in Vlaanderen - Meso en Micro Perspectieven*. In M. Martiniello, A. Rea, C. Timmerman, J. Wets. eds. *Nieuwe migraties en nieuwe migranten in België*. Gent: Academie Press, pp. 177-249.
- Pelfrene, E. 2015. *Binnenlandse uitwijking uit Brussel wordt kleurrijker*. SVR-st@ts. Brussel: Studiedienst Vlaamse Regering.
- Petrovic, M. 2012. *Belgium: A country of Permanent Immigration*. Published online: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/belgium-country-permanent-immigration> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Pröpper, I., Litjens, B., Weststeijn, E. 2004. *Lokale regie uit macht of onmacht? Onderzoek naar de optimalisering van de gemeentelijke regiefunctie*. Vught: Partners en Pröpper.

- Provincie in Cijfers. 2022. *Rapport nationaliteit en herkomst Ninove*. Published online: <https://provincies.incijfers.be/databank> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and schuster.
- Quintelier, E. 2009. *The political participation of immigrant youth in Belgium*. "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies", 35, 6:919-937.
- Saeys, A., Albeda, Y., Van Puymbroeck, N., Oosterlynck, S., Verschraegen, G., Dierckx, D. 2014. *Urban policies on diversity in Antwerp, Belgium*. Collection of open reports in transport research.
- Schillebeeckx, E., Oosterlynck, S., De Decker, P. 2016. *Een veerkrachtige ruimte ten aanzien van immigratie? Exploratief onderzoek in 3 Vlaamse case gebieden: Case Antwerpen-Noord*. Steunpunt Ruimte.
- Sierens, S. 2003. *Zelforganisaties van minderheden en emancipatie 'revisited'. Wat kan de overheid leren van recent wetenschappelijk onderzoek?*. "Vorming". 6, 4:103-128.
- Song, S. 2017. *Multiculturalism*. In Z. Edward N. eds. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University: Metaphysics Research Lab.
- Standaard. 2022. *In de Denderstreek wonen kennelijk alleen derderangsburgers*. Published online: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20221010_97545312 (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Statbel. 2020. *Migratiesaldo van 55.031 personen in 2019*. Publied online: <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/nieuws/migratiesaldo-van-55031-personen-2019> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Statistics Flanders. 2020. *Jouw gemeentescan: Ninove*. Published online: shorturl.at/aBUVX (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2021. *Lokale Inburgerings- en Integratiemonitor editie 2021*. Published online: shorturl.at/clyNQ (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2022. *Lager persoonlijk inkomen bij personen geboren buiten EU*. Published online: shorturl.at/eLPRO (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2022. *Maatschappelijke positie en participatie van personen van buitenlandse herkomst*. Published online: shorturl.at/bclQ3 (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Tilly, C. 1987. *From mobilisation to revolution*. Reading: Addison- Wesley.
- Van De Pol, S., Michielsens, J., De Cuyper, P. 2013. *Integratiebeleid in Vlaanderen*. Fact Sheet 5. Inburgering en Integratie.

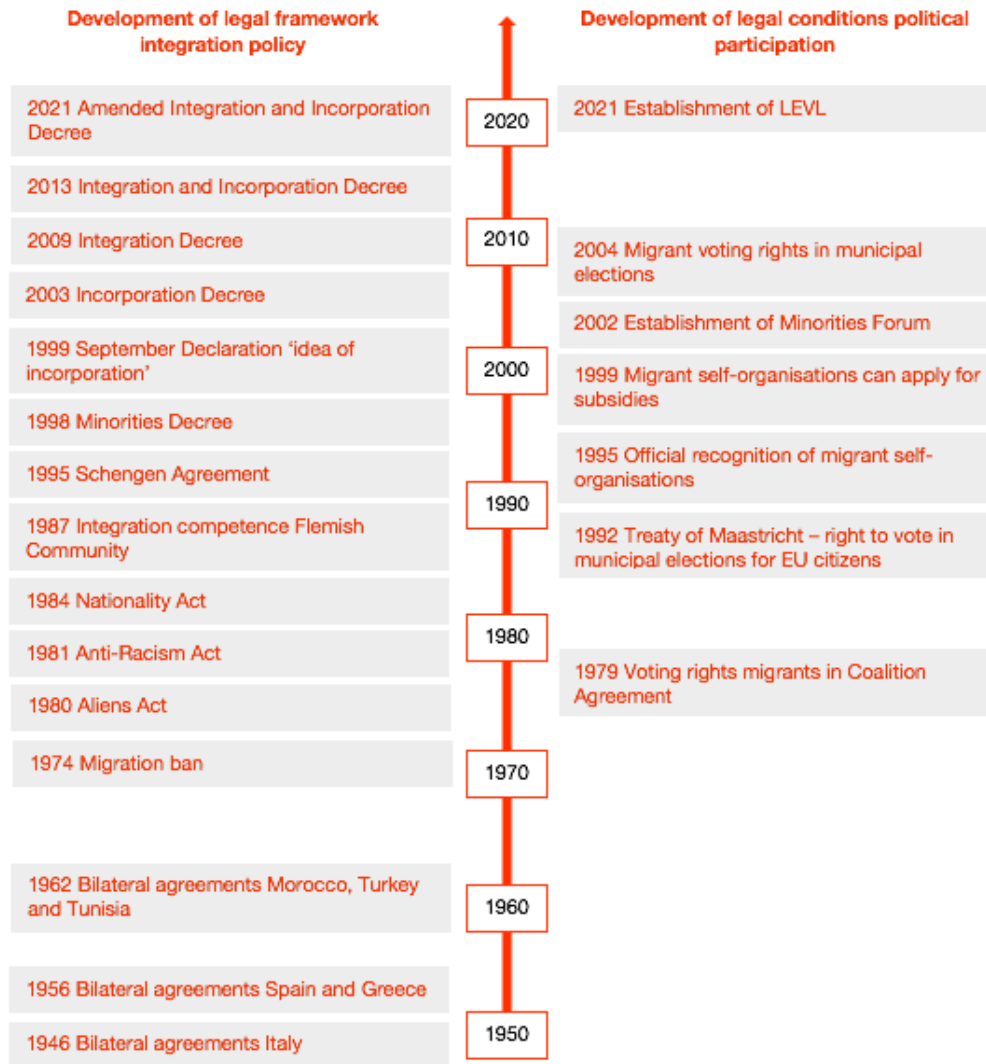
- Van den Broucke, S., Noppe, J., Stuyck, K., Buysschaert, P., Doyen, G., Wets, J. 2015. *Vlaamse migratie- en integratiemonitor 2015*. Vlaanderen.be.
- Van Dooren, W. 2013. *Maatschappij, bestuur en bestuurskunde: een historische schets*. In Hondeghem, A., Van Dooren, W., De Rynck, F., Verschuere, B., Op de Beeck, S. eds., *Handboek Bestuurskunde*. Brugge: Vanden Broele, pp. 73-95.
- Van Puymbroeck, N., Van Dam, S., Dierckx, D. 2018. *Het migrantenmiddenveld in Antwerpen: de historische contouren geschetst (1964-2013)*. In G. Verschraegen eds. *Over gevestigden en buitenstaanders : armoede diversiteit en stedelijkheid*. Acco.
- Van Trappen, S., Wauters, B. 2018. *Gekleurde lijsten? De aanwezigheid van kandidaten met een migratieachtergrond in 13 Vlaamse steden bij de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen van 14 oktober 2018*. GASPAR. Ghent University.
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., Brady, H. E. 1995. *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Vermeersch, L., Van den Broucke, S., De Cuyper, P., Herbots, K., Van Damme, J. 2016. *Beleidsparticipatie van personen van buitenlandse herkomst in Vlaanderen*. KU Leuven HIVA.
- VVSG Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten. 2022. *Bouwen aan een breed sociaal beleid*. Published online: shorturl.at/qsHT3 (last checked 31st January 2023).
- . 2021. *Ontwerp integratie- en inburgeringsdecreet goedgekeurd: impact op lokale besturen?* Published online: shorturl.at/dzGHJ (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Vlaamse Regering. 2019. *Beleidsnota 2019-2024: Binnenlands Bestuur en Stedenbeleid*. Published online: <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/32209> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Vlaamse Rand. 2021. *19 Gemeenten*. Published online: <https://www.vlaamserand.be/19-gemeenten> (last checked 31st January 2023).
- VUB Vlaamse Universiteit Brussel. 2021. *VUB-politicologen over het nieuwe inburgeringsdecreet*. Published online: shorturl.at/jltKO (last checked 31st January 2023).
- Wagner, M., Growe, A. 2021. *Research on small and medium-sized towns: Framing a new field of inquiry*. "World". 2, 1: 105-126.
- Wauters, B., Eelbode, F. 2011. *Political participation of ethnic minorities in Belgium: From enfranchisement to ethnic vote*. In *Dossier Politische Partizipation und Repräsentation in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung, pp. 41-45.
- Yar, A. W. A., Laurentsyeve, N. 2020. *Migrant integration policies at the local level in Belgium*. CEPS. Published online: shorturl.at/hjmU6 (last checked 31st January 2023).

Zapata-Barrero, R. 2017. *Interculturalism in the post-multicultural debate: a defence*. "Comparative Migration Studies". 5, 1:1-23.

Annexes

Annex 1

Figure 2. Timeline legal framework integration and political participation



Source: Own illustration

Annex 2

Table 2. Overview of actors working on immigrant integration in Ninove

Organisation	Level	Type	Projects	Partners
AGII	Flemish and local	Government agency	Dender360°	Ninove, Aalst, Geraardsbergen, Liedekerke, Denderleeuw
			Plan Samenleven	Ninove, Denderleeuw, Geraardsbergen
			NT2, social orientation, participation	Ligo
				CAW
				Groeipunt
			Babbelonië	Avansa
				Social House
				The Library
			Language reception policy	Integration officer Ninove
				Social House
			Mothers group	Kind en Gezin
				Huis van het Kind
				Integration officer Ninove
Avansa	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	Babbelonië	Ligo
				Establishment of the mosque
				CC Barmhartigheid
CAW	Flemish and local	Private welfare organisation	Social participation trajectory	AGII
				Social House
				Library
CC Barmhartigheid	Local	Immigrant self-organisation	Intercultural dialogue evenings	Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical communities

Local practices of integration and local networks. The case of Ninove

Organisation	Level	Type	Projects	Partners
				Integration officer Ninove
	(Ninove)		NinoMundo	Integration officer Ninove
				E.I.E.N
E.I.E.N	Local (Ninove)	Immigrant self-organisation	Pedagogical classes for youth	
EOSA	Local (Ninove)	Immigrant self-organisation	Football lessons for youth	
				Schools (GO! Atheneum, Hartencollege)
Globelink	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural asso- ciation	KRAS youth parliament	Integration officer Ninove
			PISTE	Integration officer Ninove
				Habbekrats
Groeipunt	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural asso- ciation	NT2	Ligo
				AGII
Habbekrats	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural asso- ciation	Youth centre	Ninove
				AGII
Huis van het Kind	Flemish and local	Public welfare orga- nisation	Mothers group	Kind en Gezin
				Integration officer Ninove
				Ligo
				AGII
Kind en Gezin	Flemish and local	Public welfare orga- nisation	Mothers group	Integration officer Ninove
				Huis van het Kind
				Ligo
			Playground animation	Schools of Ninove

Organisation	Level	Type	Projects	Partners
Library	Local (Ninove)	Public cultural organisation	Language projects	Integration officer Ninove
			Toy library	Integration officer Ninove
			Babelonië	AGII
				Social House
				Avansa
Ligo	Flemish and local	Socio-cultural association	Courses for adults	
			NT2	AGII
				Groeipunt
			Mother group	AGII
				Integration officer Ninove
				Huis van het Kind
OCMW	Federal	Public welfare organisation	Reception of refugees	Ninove
			Social employment trajectory	Ninove
			Social housing	Ninove
SAAMO	Flemish and local	Private welfare organisation	STEK (community centre)	PIN vzw
Social House	Local (Ninove)	Public welfare organisation	Bicycle lessons	Poverty Network
				Integration officer Ninove
				Teledienst
			Babelonië	AGII
				Library
				Avansa
Teledienst	Local (Ninove)	Private welfare organisation	Bicycle lessons	Social House
				Poverty Network
				Integration officer Ninove
			Social store 'sociale kruidenier'	

Organisation	Level	Type	Projects	Partners
PIN vzw	Regional and local	Private welfare organisation	STEK (community centre)	SAAMO East Flanders
				Integration officer Ninove
			Plan Samenleven	Integration officer Ninove
Poverty Network	Local (Ninove)	Private welfare organisation	Bicycle lessons	Integration officer Ninove
				Social House
				Teledienst
VVSG	Flemish	Advocate organisation	Seminars and interventions	