

**TRANSMIGRATION IN BELGIUM:  
AN ISSUE CROSSING BORDERS**

*By Axelle Vandendriessche*

The issue of transmigration is literally and figuratively crossing borders. **In the recent years, due to do the dismantlement of the Jungle migrant camp in Calais (France) and a general increase of migrants traveling to Europe, the number of transmigrants has been steadily increasing in Belgium.** As a consequence, the concerns regarding the security challenges of transmigration have been growing.

**Transmigrants are described as economic migrants who refuse to demand asylum because they do not have the opportunity to receive a refugee status or they intend to demand asylum in another country.** Many of these migrants today, use Belgium as an intermediate country on their way to the United Kingdom.

According to the governor of the province West Flanders, Carl Decaluwé, there is a link between the dismantlement of the refugee camp in Calais, France, which was concluded at the end of October 2016, and the recent increase in the number of transmigrants in Belgium. In January 2018, the British government promised France that it would increase their financial contribution by 50.5 million euros to tackle transmigration. The money would be allocated to protect the borders between both countries. Today transmigrants increasingly choose to travel via Belgium to reach the United Kingdom.

Public attention to the issue of illegal transmigrants traveling through Belgium increased following the incident on May 17 when 26 Kurdish migrants and 4 minors were found by police in the back of a van after it was chased for having a fake license plate and halted by 15 police cars in Bois du Gard, Nimy. The van tried to flee when police began chasing it. The police fired warning shots and aimed at the tires. A 2-year-old girl, Mawda, who was among the group of migrants, was fatally injured by a stray bullet and died in the ambulance on her way to a hospital.

**According to the Immigration service, in Belgium, there were 3,916 transmigrants in 2015, 9,915 in 2016, and 9,347 in 2017.** The issue concerning transmigration appears to be particularly significant in the western part of Belgium that borders France and where the port of Zeebrugge is situated. According to official data, in January 2018, 867 transmigrants were detained in the province of West Flanders;

in February - 619; and in March - 983. Since the beginning of the year, there have been 2469 arrests in West Flanders. As some people were detained multiple times, in total, 1130 'unique' individuals have been detained.

Authorities also indicate that the number of Algerian transmigrants in the province West Flanders rose by 15%. Other transmigrants travelling to Belgium come from Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Eritrea, Iraq, Sudan, and Palestine.

According to the 2016 Annual Report on Asylum and Migration Policy in Belgium, the Medusa border operation was launched on February 23, 2016, aiming to strengthen the controls at the border and at key motorways. 717 transmigrants were intercepted between February 23 and mid-March 2016. In the coastal region, a total of 1483 transmigrants were intercepted. In October 2016, when the dismantlement of Calais was finalized, Belgium launched Medusa 2 which resulted in the interception of 1736 transmigrants between October 2016 and January 2017.

**Particular visibility the issue of transmigration received in Brussels where transmigrants camp in the area of the North Station and Maximilian Park, situated in front of the Immigration Service headquarters.** In 2015, during the migration crisis, thousands of migrants were staying in Maximilian Park waiting to receive asylum. Since 2017, according to the declaration of Belgian authorities, most of the people in Maximilian Park are transmigrants who have no intention to stay in Belgium and who want to travel to the United Kingdom. In the summer of 2017, some 400 were remaining in the park, mostly people originating from Sudan or Eritrea.

**The issue of migrants in Maximilian park for months occupied the headlines of Belgian press, while the reactions of civil society and security authorities on the issue were different.** A citizen movement was created on September 2, 2017 at Park Maximilian to organize meals, healthcare, accommodation, and activities for migrants. According to the Citizen's Platform for Refugee Support, since the summer of 2017, 101,000 overnight stays were organized in which 70% stayed with host families.

Since 2017, police significantly intensified the raids in North Station and Maximilian Park in an attempt to prevent the establishment of 'a new Calais' in Belgium. In October 2017, Karine Lalieux, an alderman of the city of Brussels, announced that Brussels city authorities will open a center for transmigrants. However, this initiative has not been supported by the Federal government.

Also since 2017 **security authorities warned about a growing number of security incidents, involving transmigrants, in the sea ports and at parking lots along the main roads.** To prevent further deterioration of the situation the provincial prosecutor of West Flanders, Frank Demeester, demanded that the government set up a center to manage the issue of transmigration. According to Demeester, since the beginning of the year, 1,233 undocumented migrants were apprehended in ports and highway car parks. These are usually migrants who wish to join the United Kingdom via Belgium. They now face a lengthy administrative procedure due to their arrest. The Interior Ministry proposed the deployment of mobile teams from Brussels to deal with the issue.

Since the beginning of the year **ESISC reported about a series of security-related incidents at parking lots along the highways in Belgium and a growing number of human traffickers who are developing their networks along those roads. Belgian police have intensified operations against illegal migrants and human traffickers in parking lots in an attempt to secure the areas.**

- On January 18, the federal police officers were attacked while conducting a targeted control operation at a parking lot in Groot-Bijgaarden. It is known to be used by migrants as a place where they sneak into trucks that are heading for the United Kingdom.
- On February 28, 13 illegal migrants were detained during an operation by federal and local police at a truck stop along the Brussels-Ghent highway E40 in Groot-Bijgaarden.
- On April 5, 27 illegal transmigrants were detained in the port of Antwerp. They were from Eritrea and were trying to reach the United Kingdom.
- On April 7, 10 illegal migrants were detained during a police operation at the Stella Maris Church in Zeebrugge. 3 other illegal migrants managed to flee the area.

A series of other incidents were reported over the past months, often involving smugglers armed with knives and iron bars, threatening the truck drivers and the police. They also clashed with other human trafficking gangs.

Along the E313 in Ranst, several trees were pruned in April in order to stop the transmigrants from hiding there. According to the Agency for Road and Traffic of the Ministry of the Flemish Community, there is an agreement between the Ministry of Interior, the police, and the governors to cut the flora along highways, as it has been observed that transmigrants use them to hide themselves.

In July 2016, the Belgian government launched the campaign “Give smuggling of people no chance”. The aim was to raise awareness among the truck drivers and to give them practical tips regarding where to park, how to control their vehicles and their merchandises.

On January 29, “Plan Transmigration” was announced by the Minister of Interior and Security, Jan Jambon. Since the beginning of the plan and until March 4, 408 transmigrants were detained at parking lots, in particular 148 transmigrants were detained at the parking lot of Groot-Bijgaarden, 57 in Wetteren, 30 in Rotselaar, 26 in Ranst, and 25 in Spy.

**In February 2018, Belgium and the United Kingdom expressed their intentions to cooperate on the issue of transmigration after the Brexit.** According to Jan Jambon and Theo Francken, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, “they will establish a single point of contact to exchange information related to transmigration between both countries.” **Earlier, on May 19, 2016, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands expressed their will to set up a task force on illegal immigrant smuggling in the North Sea region.**

In the following months, a series of meetings will be organized by Belgian and British authorities with France and the Netherlands to develop a common strategy regarding transmigration.

The Belgian authorities are improving their cross-border cooperation, especially with the United Kingdom, to tackle human trafficking and other criminal effects of transmigration, such as petty crime and clashes between rival gangs. In an attempt to prevent the establishment of 'a new Calais' in Belgium, the Belgian security authorities have multiplied their efforts to control the flow of transmigrants travelling through the country.

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