

5 Belgians and Dutch across the border

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Abstract

The share of citizens of the European Union living in a European country other than that of their citizenship has increased over the last two decades. This chapter examines the situation with respect to Belgians and Dutch living elsewhere in Europe by using Eurostat data on their countries and regions of residence as well as demographic characteristics. The proportions of Belgians and Dutch living elsewhere in Europe are relatively low compared to other nationalities. Destination countries and demographic characteristics of Belgians and Dutch living elsewhere are quite similar.

5.1 Introduction

Over the last two decades the proportion of citizens of the European Union (EU) living in an EU country other than that of their own citizenship has increased (Arnholtz & Leschke 2023). Since the EU enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007 mobility from the new EU member states in the east has grown substantially. After the Great Recession in 2009, mobility from the EU member states in the south also started showing a more upward trend. Mobility from the EU member states in the north and west is much lower, but has also been slightly increasing over time. How do the Low Countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, fit within these general

trends? To what extent do Belgian and Dutch citizens live in European countries other than that of their citizenship? Which countries do they prefer and how do they relate to each other in this respect? Is there more mobility between the two neighbouring countries than mobility with other countries? And do demographic characteristics of Belgian and Dutch living in another EU country differ from each other or between destination countries?

According to Eurostat statistics around 330 thousand Belgians and around 600 thousand Dutch, i.e. people with Belgian or Dutch nationality, live outside their country of citizenship and elsewhere in Europe (Eurostat 2024). These are respectively 3.1 per cent of all the 10 million Belgian citizens and 3.5 per cent of all the 17 million Dutch citizens living in Europe. This puts the Belgians and the Dutch below the average for the European Union (EU): 4.7 per cent of all EU citizens do not live in their own country of citizenship, but in another country in Europe. Especially relatively large percentages of Romanians (16.5 per cent), Croats (14.1 per cent), Lithuanians (14.0 per cent), Bulgarians (13.9 per cent), and Portuguese (13.2 per cent) do not live in their own country. Romanians also form the largest group in absolute numbers: over 3.7 million Romanians live in another European country (of which a million in Italy), followed by Poles (2.6 million) and Italians (2.2 million). On the other hand, relatively low percentages of French (1.5 per cent), Germans (1.8 per cent), and Scandinavians (around 2 per cent) do not live in their own country of citizenship. Over the last two decades, both the numbers and percentages of Belgians and Dutch abroad have substantially increased (for both nationalities by roughly 80 per cent). In 2001 around 180 thousand Belgians (1.9 per cent) and around 340 thousand Dutch (2.1 per cent) lived elsewhere in Europe.

5.2 Belgians and Dutch across Europe

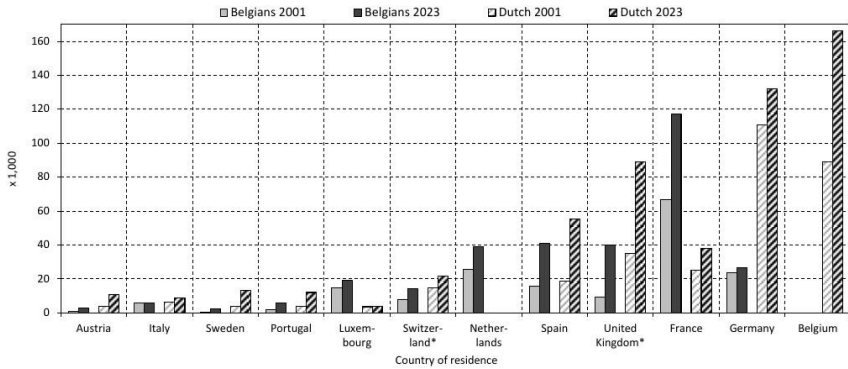
Belgians and Dutch living outside their country of citizenship mainly live in the neighbouring countries. Almost 62 per cent of the Belgians living elsewhere in Europe live in the four neighbouring countries of Belgium: 36 per cent in France, another 12 per cent in the Netherlands, 8 per cent in Germany, and 6 per cent in Luxembourg. Almost 50 per cent of the Dutch living elsewhere in Europe live in the two neighbouring countries of the Netherlands: 28 per cent in Belgium and

22 per cent in Germany. This makes Belgium the top destination for the Dutch and France the top destination for the Belgians (see Figure 5.1). However, over time the shares of all the neighbouring countries have declined for both countries. In 2001 still 72 per cent of the Belgians living elsewhere in Europe lived in one of the neighbouring countries, whereas 59 per cent of the Dutch did. Countries that have become more popular over time with the Belgians and the Dutch are the United Kingdom, Spain and (to a lesser extent) Portugal. For the Dutch the United Kingdom has been the third important destination over time. The share of Dutch abroad living in the United Kingdom increased from 10 to 15 per cent since 2001. For Belgians the share of those living in the United Kingdom increased even more over two decades: from 5 to 12 per cent. Spain and Portugal have become more popular destinations too. The number of Belgians living in Spain is nowadays actually somewhat larger than the number of Belgians living in the Netherlands, making Spain the second largest destination for Belgians. It is clear from Figure 5.1 that Belgium is a much more important destination for the Dutch than the Netherlands is for the Belgians, which will undoubtedly be affected by the distinctive regional difference between the Dutch-speaking Flemish in the north and the French-speaking Walloon in the south of Belgium. The Dutch community in Belgium is also relatively large from a Belgian perspective: Dutch people make up 10 per cent of all Belgian residents with a foreign nationality. In other countries, that percentage is much lower. In Germany for instance, only 1 per cent of all non-Germans have Dutch nationality. Belgians make up only 2.7 per cent of all residents of the Netherlands with a foreign nationality, but 6 per cent of all residents of Luxembourg with a foreign nationality.

5.3 Belgians in the Netherlands and Dutch in Belgium

Although Belgium is a much more important destination for the Dutch than the Netherlands is for the Belgians, with 166 thousand Dutch living in Belgium and 39 thousand Belgians living in the Netherlands, the regional distributions within the countries show some similarities. Figure 5.2 depicts the regional distributions of Belgians in the Netherlands and Dutch in Belgium at the NUTS-3 regional level (= 40 COROP regions in the Netherlands and 44 arrondissements in Belgium). Clearly the Dutch in Belgium are concentrated near the Belgian-Dutch border.

Figure 5.1: Number of Belgians and Dutch living in Europe outside their country of citizenship, by country of residence in 2001 and 2023.



Notes: Countries of residence sorted ascending by number of Belgians and Dutch combined in 2023. Most recent figures of Switzerland and United Kingdom refer to 2021. Source: Eurostat and ONS (UK).

Most of them, 39 thousand, live in the region of Antwerp, including the city of Antwerp, the second largest city of Belgium. Both in the regions of Turnhout (east of Antwerp) and Maaseik (east of Turnhout) live 25 thousand Dutch. In the region of Tongeren (south of Maaseik) live another 17 thousand Dutch. The concentration of Dutch is the strongest in the latter two regions: the percentage of Dutch is 6 times higher in Tongeren and 7 times higher in Maaseik than according to the Belgian national average. The four regions mentioned cover 64 per cent of all the Dutch living in Belgium. Very few Dutch live in the French-speaking Walloon region, especially in the Belgian-French border regions.

Belgians in the Netherlands are also strongly concentrated in the Belgian-Dutch border regions. Most Belgians in the border region, 8,400, live in the region of Zeeland Flanders (Zeeuws-Vlaanderen), an area west of Antwerp, due to the broad water of the Western Scheldt estuary easier accessible from Belgium than from the Netherlands. Another 4,100 Belgians live in the region of West-North-Brabant (north of Antwerp) and almost 3,200 Belgians live in the region of South-Limburg, the most southern region of the Netherlands in the east. All

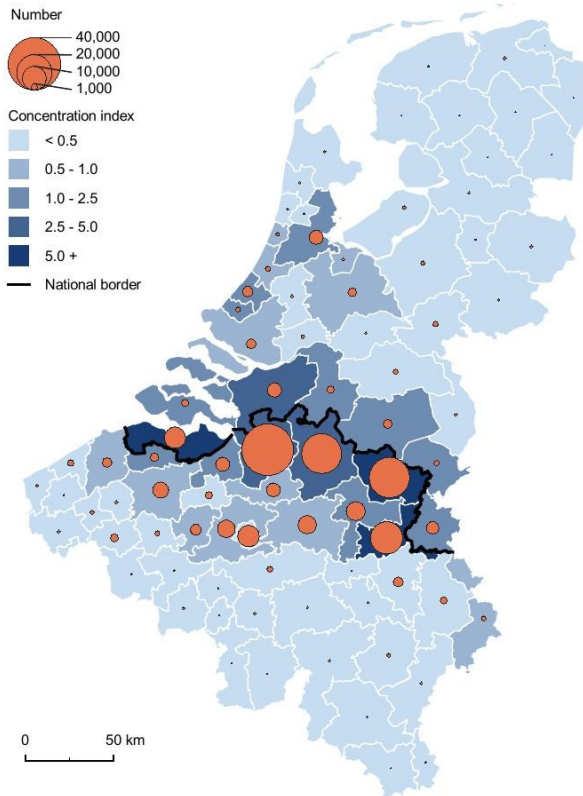
Dutch regions bordering to Belgium cover together 50 per cent of all the Belgians living in the Netherlands. Another 28 per cent of the Belgians live in the urbanized west of the Netherlands, like in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. Very few Belgians live in the north and east of the Netherlands. The concentration of Belgians in the Netherlands is by far the strongest in Zeeland Flanders (36 times higher than according to the Dutch national average).

5.4 Demographic characteristics

Although the number of men and women is more or less equally divided among all Belgians living elsewhere in Europe (49.7 per cent men versus 50.3 per cent women), there are large differences between countries. The share of women among the Belgians is particularly low in Finland, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania (ranging from less than a third to a tenth). Only in France, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom the share of Belgian women is higher than the share of Belgian men (52 to 56 per cent). There are also large differences between countries in terms of age distribution of the Belgians. The share of older Belgian people (aged 65+) is relatively high in Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Spain (22 to 34 per cent), but low in the Baltic countries, Scandinavia, and Ireland (less than 10 per cent). Especially in Italy and Spain the relatively high percentages of Belgians aged 65+ go together with relatively low percentages of young Belgians: only around 25 per cent of the Belgians in these countries is below the age of 40. In Luxembourg, Austria, Switzerland, Norway and Sweden the share of younger children (aged below 15) among the Belgians is relatively high (12 to 16 per cent), indicating an above average presence of families with young(er) children.

The demographic characteristics of the Dutch living elsewhere in Europe are quite similar to those of the Belgians. Although overall the share of men (51.8 per cent) among the Dutch is slightly higher than the share of women (48.2 per cent), the share of Dutch women is higher than that of men in France, Italy and the United Kingdom (51 to 55 per cent). As is the case for Belgians, the share of women among the Dutch is also particularly low in Finland, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania (14 to 27 per cent). Also, the differences between countries in terms of age distribution of the Dutch

Figure 5.2: Number and concentration index of Belgians living in the Netherlands and Dutch living in Belgium, by NUTS3 regions in 2023.



Notes: Concentration index = regional share of foreigners in population / national share of foreigners in population (calculated for each country separately). Source: Eurostat and Statbel.

are in line with those of the Belgians. The share of older Dutch people (aged 65+) is, like for Belgians, relatively high in Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Spain (24 per cent or more), but also in Germany (27 per cent). The share of Dutch elderly is

also relatively low in the Baltic countries, Scandinavia, and Ireland (5 to 13 per cent). The share of younger Dutch children is relatively high in the same countries as is the case for Belgians. In addition to that, the share of younger children is highest for the Dutch residing in Belgium (almost 17 per cent), whereas the share of younger children is much lower among Belgians in the Netherlands (8 per cent). On the other hand, the share of Belgians in the Netherlands aged 15 to 40 is 38 per cent compared to 31 per cent for Dutch in Belgium; there are hardly any differences for the older age groups. Although the age distributions of Belgians and Dutch in France and the United Kingdom are not available from Eurostat, recent Dutch emigration data from Statistics Netherlands (2021-2023) show the Dutch emigrating to France are relatively old (compared to those emigrating to Spain) and the Dutch emigrating to the United Kingdom are relatively young (40 per cent in their twenties, 6 per cent aged 50+).

5.5 Demographic characteristics within the Low Countries

To what extent do demographic characteristics of the Belgians and Dutch living abroad within the Low Countries themselves differ at the regional level? Focusing on the most important areas of residence (see Figure 5.2), we do see differences between the Belgians living in the Netherlands near to the Belgian-Dutch border and those living in the urbanized west of the country. In particular in the border regions more to the east, the share of elderly Belgians (aged 65+) is relatively high (21 to 25 per cent). The picture of the most southern region of the Netherlands, South-Limburg, fits within that pattern with more than 18 per cent elderly Belgians, but is also characterized by almost 30 per cent Belgians in their twenties, most likely attracted by the international University of Maastricht. The border regions in the west, Zeeland Flanders and West-North-Brabant, accommodating most Belgians in the Netherlands, show more average percentages of elderly Belgians (around 15 per cent) combined with relatively high percentages of children below the age of 15 (around 12 per cent). This latter group is also overrepresented in the region of The Hague (14 per cent Belgian children below 15), a region that is home to many international organizations and attracts many expats. The regions of Amsterdam and Rotterdam have much younger age profiles, both showing relatively high shares

of Belgians in their twenties (30 to 35 per cent). The share of elderly Belgians (65+) in the region of Amsterdam is rather low, with about 6 per cent. There are hardly any differences with respect to the share of men/women except for the region of Delft with 66 per cent Belgian men, primarily in their twenties, most likely attracted by the Delft Technical University.

The demographic profiles of Dutch living in the Belgian regions that accommodate the largest numbers of Dutch are quite similar. The regions of Turnhout, Maaseik, and Tongeren show slightly above average percentages of elderly (17 to 18 per cent aged 65+), around average percentages of the youngest age group (15 to 18 per cent aged below 15), and around average percentages of Dutch in their twenties (16 to 17 per cent). The region of Antwerp somewhat differs from the regions of Turnhout, Maaseik, and Tongeren with a lower share aged 65+ (13 per cent) and higher share aged below 15 (21 per cent). The percentages of Dutch aged 40+ and 65+ are in general much higher in the French-speaking Walloon part of Belgium, however the total number of Dutch in this part of the country is quite low.

5.6 Conclusions

The Belgians and Dutch may not be European front runners in trying their luck in another European country, but compared to their neighbours and Scandinavians, the Belgians and Dutch live abroad relatively more often. In the past two decades, the number of Belgian and Dutch people living elsewhere in Europe has also grown considerably. Belgium appears to be a much more important destination for the Dutch than the Netherlands is for the Belgians. The demographic characteristics of the Belgians and the Dutch living in EU countries other than that of their citizenship are pretty similar. The share of Belgian and Dutch women is higher than that of men in France, Italy and the United Kingdom. The share of Belgian and Dutch women is also particularly low in Finland, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania. The share of Belgian and Dutch people aged 65+ is relatively high in Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Spain, but relatively low in the Baltic countries, Scandinavia, and Ireland. The share of Belgian and Dutch children aged below 15 is relatively high in Austria, Switzerland, Norway and Sweden, indicating an above average presence of Belgian and Dutch families

with young(er) children in these countries.

Afterword

Our first contact with Frans Willekens was in 1978 at the annual Chair Quetelet meeting in Louvain, dedicated to the *Approche systémique en sciences de la population*. At that time Frans had already a long migration history with positions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the USA (Evanston Illinois), and in Austria (Laxenburg) as researcher at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis. Frans started to work at the then Netherlands Interuniversity Demographic Institute in The Hague, Netherlands in May 1980. He settled in a suburb of The Hague, a region where relatively many Belgians lived. Later on he became a professor at Groningen University, in the extreme north of the Netherlands, where he lived for several years, quite an exceptional place for Belgian citizens. Later on he returned to the region of The Hague. As varied as his geographic life course was his interest in demography. We worked together with Frans on census data on the variation in age at marriage after WWII, on multiregional population projections and on the construction of a database with mortality by age, sex and birth cohort over the period 1850-2000, that formed the basis for the Dutch part of the Human Mortality Database and various studies on long-term mortality trends.

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