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Inclusivity and Diversity in Belgium

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On 2nd and 3d December 2020, in the framework of the MAX project, EPN organized the online Diversity Dialogue Forum with the aim of presenting the social, personal, and economical challenges for newcomers in Belgium that are currently tackled by various organizations, but also to have an open discussion about the opportunities, to learn how migration can benefit the socio-economic development and to give migrants and refugees a voice.

In the first session of the Belgian DDF on December 2nd, there were 3 representatives invited from 3 different organizations in Belgium that support their original initiatives: the integration of migrants and refugees. Caritas International Belgium, DUO for Job, and SINGA Belgium presented their organizations and explained to the participants the trends, challenges, and opportunities and the positive effects and impact of their actions contributing to a diverse and inclusive society. The purpose of the second session was to gather a small group of people interested in the labor market in Belgium and dive in and analyze its challenges and opportunities and to guide the participants, that would mostly be migrants and refugees, interested in this domain.

Belgium is known as a diverse and international country in the heart of Europe and also very open towards newcomers. As explained by one of the speakers in the first session, Elise Kervyn, Advocacy Officer of Caritas International, 17% of Belgian's total population is born abroad and up until 45% of Brussel's population. In Belgium, migrants are overqualified for the jobs they do, and still have a higher unemployment rate than the native population. Nevertheless, migrants contribute 3,5% of the GDP. For this reason, it is important to highlight the positive contributions of migrants to the economy. Kervyn made an important remark, that though migration can have a positive (economic) impact in the host country, this should not be a requirement for solidarity.

Julie Bodson, Deputy Managing Director, presented the initiative of DUO for a Job, which matches young immigrant job seekers with people over 50 years old who accompany and support them in reaching their professional goals. Bodson explained that with this initiative, 3 out of 4 mentees (so are the immigrant job seekers called) found a job, an internship, or training and 9 out of 10 mentors (person who supports jobseekers with guidance) repeated the experience. The third speaker of the session, Chloe Overlau, Co-founder of the initiative SINGA, after realizing that it was difficult for migrants and refugees to build a social network, especially with locals, tackled this issue by trying to support the creation of bonds between newcomers and local people thorough different initiatives like organizing group activities, a “buddy” and a “cohabitation” program to help newcomers to find temporary housing and starting their social circle.

Following the presentations of the organizations, three refugees shared with the audience their journey, struggles, and opportunities they encountered during their journey up until now. Challenges and mixed feelings were palpable in their testimonies.

One of them, Zeynep, expressed she was grateful and hopeful for the future thanks to the initiatives the organisations presented previously. When she arrived in Belgium, she followed with motivation all the steps that would supposedly help her to integrate, like learning French, doing the recognition process of her university diploma, following an integration course and even travelling around Belgium “to know it well and have topics to discuss about with Belgians”, only that what she did was “not enough to find a job or to have a better life” said Zeynep. She believes that the language skills, contributing to the Belgian system and integration in the society can improve if newcomers are given a chance in an

environment to practice it and she finalized her speech with a powerful message: “I hope that one day we can discover the unity in diversity altogether”. The second testimony was from Metin, who doesn't consider himself a “newcomer” since he has been living in Belgium for 4 years now. This is a good reflection that makes us think about - added Metin, up until when someone is not considered a newcomer anymore? And if he is not a newcomer, will this mean he is integrated?

For Metin, the main barriers when arriving in Belgium were neither cultural nor finding accommodation. Language and recruitment, however, he found to be a major challenge, as the authorities require a C1 language level for hiring executives.

An interesting message Metin wanted to give to the audience, especially, to recruiters was: “Do not try to hire a newcomer who just arrived in the host country, as he/she is firstly facing post-traumatic disorders, especially refugees due to political issues”. He states that they should be relaxed and should take some time months or even years to study the language and advises the mentors to first ask for how long is the person now in the country.

The third testimony was presented from Sezgin, an English teacher that migrated to Mauritania where he spent 7 years, to finally in 2017 being forced to migrate to Belgium alone. He was not able to reunite with his family until 9 months later, which was his biggest challenge. Integration in Belgium was very difficult, especially getting the recognition of his diploma, finding a job in his profile and adapting to the education system which is very different. Now he feels he is not receiving enough social assistance since the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, he can't wait to become a teacher in Belgium and he is eager to contribute to Belgium.

At the end of the session, there was a very interesting debate between the speakers and the participants. In this DDF, we had the opportunity to hear about actual initiatives of organisations that try to advocate for integration and diversity as well as give voice to the protagonists of our purpose. It was a successful session with 68 participants attending, from which 10 were organisers and panellists.

The second day session of the DDF had a total of 31 participants. This was organised on December 3rd and the point of this session was to present Belgian's labour market and its challenges and opportunities. Mikelle Dorame, Research Analyst in the employment area,

was invited as a keynote speaker to the second day of this DDF. She spoke about trends and forecasts, biggest hurdles of job seekers, and tips about the workplace culture, etc. The target group was newcomers, and the aim was to introduce them to the Belgian employment scene. Dorame highlighted the drastic move of the labour market in Belgium to digitisation and the proliferation of IT companies and job opportunities in this sector. She also pointed out that the demand not only in this sector but also in health care and education will be unfilled up until 18% in 2030. The participants seemed to be very interested with the topic as they made many questions, which was the initial purpose of this second session. Many questions came up during the session inquiring about the details specifically about the hiring process and specifically about the job interviews. For instance, some of the questions were about finding a job for a university graduate, experienced individuals trying to find a job in a different field by changing the sector and taking additional courses, especially in the IT industry. There were questions on the dress for a job interview, the effect of the status, nationality and age on job applications in the Belgian labour market. Lastly, a final interesting reflection was made about the hiring process, where participants were interested to know whether CVs capture much of what it takes to make the journey a refugee has to make, as most CVs are focused on the local labour market need rather than capturing the life experience of the potential employee.

The MAX project is a project funded by the AMIF programme of the European Union and that aims to improve the public image of migrants in Europe by changing the narrative around the immigration discourse and putting on the front the stories of real people.



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