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Motivations, Networks and Future Plans of Bulgarian Newcomers in Waterschei/Genk: Qualitative Evidence to Improve Local Governance of Migration

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COLOPHON

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Preface

In front of you is the report "*Motivations, Networks and Future Plans of Bulgarian Newcomers in Waterschei/Genk: Qualitative Evidence to Improve the Local Governance of Migration*" which has been made possible by the invaluable contributions of many individuals and organizations.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Bulgarian migrants who shared their personal migration journeys and experiences with us, as well as to the members of the Bulgarian community in Waterschei who supported us in conducting this research.

We are also thankful for the knowledge and experiences shared by representatives of various departments of the City of Genk and the members of the involved civil society organizations. This information has been essential in contextualizing the narratives of the Bulgarian community and gaining a better understanding of the relationship between migrants and different institutions.

Finally, we would like to express special thanks to the Steering Committee of the Waterschei Neighborhood Improvement Contract, which shared background knowledge prior to this research, as well as to the Core group of the project. Its members supported the research throughout all phases and consistently provided valuable, constructive feedback to achieve better outcomes. We believe that this report offers a clear and accurate portrayal of the topics studied and we take full responsibility for its content.

Executive summary

This report presents an analysis of the motivations, social networks, and future aspirations of Bulgarian migrants in the Waterschei neighborhood of Genk, Belgium. Conducted between June 2023 and November 2024, this study provides qualitative evidence aimed at informing local governance to enhance migrant integration within the community.

Bulgarian migration to Belgium has been notable since Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007, with a marked increase after labor restrictions were lifted in 2014. This influx has contributed to Genk's super-diversity, a city historically shaped by migration and known for its multicultural population. As of 2024, the Bulgarian population in Genk is estimated to be 893 registered residents, although many remain not registered, posing challenges for the governance and support systems implemented by local authorities. Waterschei, a district with high poverty and unemployment rates and a dense population, has become a focal point for Bulgarian migrants. This report explores the complexities of migrants' experiences and challenges they face in relation to housing, employment, registration, healthcare, and education.

Methodology
The research employed a qualitative methodology centered on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 Bulgarian migrants and 12 interviews with city officials and civil society actors. To gain a complete understanding of the local context, data collection included observation notes and photos from Waterschei, internal document analyses, anonymised statistical data, and participant observations during meetings.

The socio-demographic profile of the Bulgarian respondents is composed mostly of Roma Bulgarians (49%), followed by Turkish Bulgarians (42%) and a smaller percentage of ethnic Bulgarians (9%). The overall educational level is generally low: 16% had only completed primary education, 35% had finished lower secondary education (till the age of 12), and 40% had completed upper secondary education (till the age of 18). Most Bulgarian migrants live with their families in Waterschei, and 38% have underage children living with them in Belgium. The socio-demographic profile of the sample aligns with the City of Genk's observations on the general demographics of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei.

Motivations
The report's findings reveal an interplay of economic, familial, and personal factors that drive Bulgarian migrants to Genk. Economic motivations are the primary reason for migration, with many respondents citing high unemployment, precarious working conditions, and low wages in Bulgaria as significant push factors. Among Roma respondents, unemployment was particularly high, with many having never held a job in Bulgaria. In contrast, Turkish Bulgarians often had prior employment, though in low-paying jobs that could not adequately support their families. Additionally, many Bulgarians' motivation for migration are influenced by a culture of migration that has developed over time, making migration a widely accepted path to improving life prospects.

Family dynamics play an important role in migration. The decision to migrate is often a collective family choice, with many migrants aiming to provide financial support to relatives in Bulgaria or to migrate alongside family members. Personal traits such as a

sense of adventure and the ability to envision life in different places also play a role in the migration decision-making process. These attitudes often influence their choice to migrate despite uncertainties and potential hardships. Many Bulgarian migrants decide to leave spontaneously, with little to no preparation or research on their destinations. This lack of preparedness is directly linked to their social networks in Genk, reflecting their reliance on these networks for information and support upon their arrival in Belgium.

Social networks

Social networks influence the decision to migrate specifically to Genk rather than elsewhere, as many interviewees noted that these networks strongly motivated their destination choice. These networks are primarily classified into strong-tie networks, consisting of close and extended families, and weak-tie networks, consisting of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. The largest social network in Waterschei is composed of migrants from Ruse, a southeastern province of Bulgaria, with many interviewees hailing from the same few villages. Respondents with strong ties indicated that they rely on family and friends for initial accommodation and job referrals. The majority of Bulgarian migrants have a strong-tie in Genk before migrating. Weak-tie networks also significantly affect migrant trajectories. While these connections may have lower levels of trust compared to strong-ties, they offer essential information and support. There are also migrants who have both strong and weak ties in Genk and are considered to be in the most favorable position in terms of support. A few migrants reported arriving in Genk with the assistance of Bulgarian minibus drivers, who offered initial support in exchange for clear economic benefits. While social networks provide essential resources, they also tend to reinforce patterns of low-wage labor, precarious employment practices, and poor living conditions, as migrants remain confined to limited opportunities within their social circles.

The ethnic enclave networks of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei, among the Turkish-speaking Roma and Turkish Bulgarians, are closely connected to the local Turkish community in Belgium. These ethnic networks are essential for finding employment and housing, and play a key role in helping migrants navigate life in Belgium, including assistance with registering with the city hall, medical appointments, and managing administrative duties. However, while these ethnic enclaves provide crucial support, they also expose migrants to substandard living conditions and precarious employment. This setting fosters dependency, increases vulnerability, and limits migrant opportunities for broader integration.

Social networks have been found to have both direct and indirect influences on various domains, including housing, employment, registration, health, and education.

Housing

The housing situation of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei is marked by significant challenges related to housing quality. Many of the housing units in Waterschei built during the mining industry have outdated infrastructure that does not meet modern living standards. Inspections by the housing department of the City of Genk have revealed many instances of poor living conditions among Bulgarian migrants, including outdated facilities, molds, inadequate insulation, and overcrowding. Migrants often face difficulties finding suitable housing due to high demand and limited availability, with traditional methods such as advertising, proving ineffective. Ethnic networks are crucial in housing arrangements, as many Bulgarian migrants rent from landlords of Turkish descent who constitute the majority of rental property owners in Waterschei.

Rack renting is a significant issue affecting Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei, according to city officials from the City of Genk and civic organizations. Landlords charge excessively high rents for properties that are poorly maintained or even slated for demolition. Some migrants reported living in inadequate housing while paying standard market prices. Additionally, there have been cases where renting a bed in a shared room resulted in an excessively high total cost for the room. This problem is further compounded by the lack of formal rental agreements, particularly for those renting rooms, and reliance on cash transactions, which leaves tenants vulnerable to exploitation without legal protection. Despite these challenges, some migrants have managed to secure 'normal' accommodations through proactive efforts, including taking the initiative to renovate their living spaces themselves.

Employment

Bulgarian migrants in Genk are employed in various sectors, with agriculture being the most prominent, followed by the household sector, manufacturing, construction, transportation, and logistics. Many migrants secure employment through referrals of their social networks and are often employed by the local community with a Turkish background. The employment landscape is characterized by a mix of formal, informal, and hybrid arrangements situated in Belgium and the Netherlands. A significant proportion of those interviewed worked or are currently working in the Netherlands, where recruitment agencies play a key role in the hiring process. Migrants employed through intermediaries frequently encounter issues such as retrospective contract changes, inadequate workplace insurance, withheld holiday pay, and lack additional compensation for working on holidays or weekends. Additionally, some migrants rely on their employers for both accommodation and employment, heighting their dependence and vulnerability.

Among those employed in Belgium, the majority hold formal jobs—often after initially working in the Netherlands—while a small percentage of respondents remain in hybrid or informal employment structures. There is a significant presence of bogus self-employment among Bulgarian migrants in Genk, where they are registered as self-employed but work under conditions similar to those of regular employees. Their employer pays their social contributions instead of them, and there are cases where migrants need to repay significant social security debts due to the employer not keeping their promises. The lack of awareness of their rights and obligations, combined with language barriers and absence of professional qualifications, complicates Bulgarian migrants' overall ability to seek better employment conditions.

Registration

In Waterschei, a significant number of Bulgarian migrants remain not registered in the local municipality. Estimates from the City Genk suggest that between 300 and 500 Bulgarians reside unofficially. European and Belgian laws require intra-EU migrants to register within three months of arrival, as this registration is crucial for municipalities to effectively manage public services and facilitate migrant integration into the local community. Many Bulgarian migrants interviewed reported difficulties with the registration process, often because of specific requirements that they could not meet. Nearly half of the interviewees mentioned that it took them years to obtain a Belgium residence permit. A common challenge is landlords' refusal to allow migrants to use their address for registration, often because the properties were unsuitable for residential purposes or had already had too many residents registered. Additionally, migrants, particularly those working informally or temporarily through recruitment agencies in the Netherlands, faced difficulties in providing proof of financial means to the municipality for registration. A few participants admitted to deliberately avoiding

registration due to concerns about administrative responsibilities, which they found challenging to navigate, as well as potential tax obligations.

Healthcare
Bulgarian migrants in Genk often fail to meet the legal requirements necessary to access social security rights, including healthcare. This issue is prevalent among those who are not registered, work informally, or employed in hybrid arrangements. Many interviewees expressed concerns about recruitment agencies in the Netherlands, not paying for their social contributions including health insurance coverage. In Belgium, not registered migrants lack access to essential services, such as healthcare, and rely solely on emergency aid, which can be costly. To avoid these expenses, many migrants return to Bulgaria for healthcare when necessary. Although there is an EU system for transferring social security rights, only a few migrants reported knowing about it, and many were unfamiliar with how the Belgian system functions or their obligations to secure these rights.

Education
Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei face several challenges regarding their children's education, primarily due to language barriers, a lack of awareness of the Belgian education system, and difficulties in communication with teachers. Local schools in Waterschei, along with officials from the City of Genk, have identified frequent school absence as a significant issue, particularly among Roma Bulgarian children. There are also concerns that some children of unregistered migrants in Genk may not be enrolled in school, and that compulsory education does not apply to them. The City of Genk noted that the slow administrative response to school absenteeism hinders timely intervention and exacerbates the risk of educational disengagement. Thanks to the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract and targeted support for Bulgarian families, significant improvements in school attendance in Waterschei have been observed over the past year.

Future plans
Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei can be divided into three groups based on their future plans: those intending to stay in Belgium in the long term, those planning to return to Bulgaria, and those who are uncertain about their future. Migrants aiming to remain in Belgium are often registered, and typically have minor children living with them. For these individuals, settling in Belgium offers an opportunity for better life and stability for their children. By contrast, those who are unsure about their plans or who intend to return to Bulgaria often face job instability and engage in seasonal work.

The concept of liquid migration is relevant to the experiences of Bulgarian migrants, as many have lived in various European countries before settling in Genk. This reflects their ongoing search for better economic opportunities and mobility in the EU. A common migration pattern involves circular movements, with some respondents initially coming to Genk for short periods for seasonal work. Interviews revealed that some migrants have become less mobile over time, particularly those who have secured regular employment, whereas others continue to engage in cross-border mobility. Despite their varying intentions, all Bulgarian migrants share a common aspiration for health and the pursuit of a stable and dignified life for their families, whether in Belgium, Bulgaria, or elsewhere.

Recommendations

The recommendations outlined in the last chapter of the report address the key challenges faced by Bulgarian migrants in Genk across multiple policy domains. These recommendations are intended to provide guidance to policymakers, stakeholders, and community leaders for improving the social integration and well-being of migrant populations. The proposed actions emphasize the importance of a coherent and integrated approach, recognising that migrant challenges often span multiple domains, including housing, employment, education, registration, healthcare, and social cohesion. Thus, effective migration governance requires collaborative efforts among local, national, cross-border, and intra-European authorities.

1. Introduction

This report presents the results of an extensive study on Bulgarian migration to the Waterschei district, Genk, conducted between June 2023 and November 2024. The study is conducted within the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract titled "Instroom van Bulgaarse arbeidsmigranten noopt Genk tot nieuwe en versterkte aanpak in Waterschei" (2022-2025). Funded by the Flemish government, the aim of these contracts is to enhance the quality of life and social well-being in neighborhoods by addressing socioeconomic issues and building stronger communities (Vlanderen, n.d.).

The migration of Bulgarians to Genk is part of the larger phenomenon of rising intra-European migration. The European Union promotes intra-European mobility within a unified labor market, allowing European citizens to move freely to regions where they have access to jobs. Even though Bulgarians have been migrating to Western Europe since the early twentieth century, their numbers significantly increased after Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007. Labour restrictions were lifted in 2014, resulting in large waves of labor migrants across Western Europe (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021).

While EU, national and supra-national legislation primarily regulate migration, local municipalities play a vital role in the governance and integration of migrants, particularly given the highly diverse profiles and temporary and circular movements characterizing intra-European mobility (van Ostaijen & Scholten, 2018). These dynamics pose new challenges for municipalities, including those like the City of Genk, which has a long history of migration and well-established policies towards migrants and ethnic minorities.

Waterschei is a neighborhood in Genk with a rich history and diverse population. It scores high on several poverty indicators, such as the high number of individuals receiving social welfare, births in underprivileged families, high unemployment rates, and high population density (Genk in cijfers, 2023). The arrival of Bulgarian migrants to Waterschei further complicated the local governance and support systems. The Bulgarian population in Genk has seen a significant increase in recent years, with 893 registered residents by 2024 (Burgerzaken, 2024). However, these numbers are underestimated because many Bulgarians are not officially registered in the local municipality. While some have successfully found their way in Belgium, many encounter numerous challenges, including weak positions in the labor and housing markets, barriers in accessing health care, and struggles with registration and the education of their children.

This study aims to provide evidence-based insights into the Bulgarian community residing in Waterschei and their migration trajectories to guide the development of effective, comprehensive policies for migrants and their integration into municipal and neighborhood levels. Publicly available information on this group in Flanders is currently very limited, largely outdated, based on other Belgian cities e.g. Tomova, 2013 and/or anecdotal. For instance, an article by VRT titled "Gent draaischijf voor sociale uitbuiting van Bulgaren" published on 5 June 2023 sheds light on an organized network exploiting Bulgarian migrants in Ghent (VRT, 2023), which raises concerns about similar situations in other Belgian cities.

This study aims to investigate 1) the profile of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei and the reasons for their migration, 2) the structure and role of social networks, and 3) the future plans and aspirations of Bulgarian migrants.

The report is divided into five sections. First, it discusses the relevant scientific literature on Bulgarian migration, motives for migration, role of social networks, and prospects of returning to Bulgaria. The research methodology, the socio-demographic profile of the sample and procedures are then outlined. The case of this study is provided by describing the diverse policies of the City of Genk related to Bulgarian migrants. The results section presents the findings within the three-fold aim: migrants' motivations to migrate, their networks, and their future plans. The report concludes with recommendations for the City of Genk based on the insights from this research.

2. Literature review

This section provides a brief review of the relevant scientific literature on Bulgarian migration, focusing on the demographics of the Bulgarian population, motives for migration, role of social networks in migration, and perspective on return and liquid migration.

2.1. Bulgarian migration

Bulgarian migrant communities exist in more than 70 countries worldwide. Bulgarian citizens residing outside the Republic of Bulgaria are diverse in terms of ethnic origin, language, and religious beliefs. This section provides a summary of the migration patterns of Bulgarians since the early twentieth century, and discusses the demographics of the Bulgarian population.

Migration waves of Bulgarians since 1900
Records from the early 1900s show that Bulgaria has a long history of migration. The country's involvement in international wars between 1912 and 1945 led to significant territorial and economic losses, severely impacting its economy (Hristov, 2015). During this time, economic hardship led to an increase in transatlantic labor migration, with many unskilled workers leaving Bulgaria permanently, establishing a Bulgarian diaspora in the West (Manolova, 2018). Between the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1946–1989), Bulgarian migration was heavily restricted by the socialist regime. However, mobility persisted, largely due to political factors. Bulgarian workers were sent abroad for construction projects in socialist countries and the Arab world, and bilateral agreements with allied socialist nations encouraged educational exchange, student migration, and tourism (Manolova, 2018).

The collapse of the socialist regime and the subsequent economic recessions in the 1990s and the 2000s led to a sharp increase in migration from Bulgaria. Scholars attribute this migration primarily to economic factors, with many migrants leaving permanently (Bogdanov & Rangelova, 2010). It is estimated that approximately one million people emigrated during this period (Lesenski et al., 2008). From 2001 onwards, Bulgarians could travel visa-free to Schengen zone countries for up to three months, leading many to migrate to Southern European countries, such as Spain, Greece, and Italy (Markova, 2009).

Before Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007, the country experienced a period of economic stability and a decrease in net migration, with a noticeable shift from permanent migration to temporary and seasonal migration (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021). EU membership allowed Bulgarians to work as self-employed across other member states. However, research shows that many Bulgarian migrants who initially entered these countries legally later became undocumented workers in sectors such as construction, cleaning, and agriculture (Markova, 2009). The 2008 economic crisis significantly altered migration patterns as it negatively impacted Southern European countries, causing a shift in migration toward Western Europe (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021). By 2013, Bulgaria was grappling with the peak of an economic crisis, with more than half of the population at high risk of poverty. This coincided with the lifting of labor market restrictions for Bulgarian citizens in the EU in 2014, which triggered a significant wave of Bulgarian migrants to Europe.

According to Eurostat Director Krasteva, approximately 900,000 Bulgarians reside in

various European countries (European Data Journalism, 2019). The largest Bulgarian community is in Germany, consisting of approximately 430,000 residents, followed by Spain, which has around 117,000 Bulgarian migrants (Statista, 2023). Other significant Bulgarian communities are found in the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. Additionally, the Bulgarian population in Belgium has grown considerably from an estimated 25,000 in 2014 to nearly 48,500 by 2023 (Statista, 2023), with the largest community residing in Ghent.

Demographics of the Bulgarian population

According to data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI), Bulgaria's population in 2021 was approximately 6.5 million, a decrease of one million compared to the previous census a decade earlier (NSI, 2021). Bulgaria has seen the largest population decline (-7.0‰) among the EU27 countries, along with the highest mortality rate, recorded at 15.5‰ (NSI, 2020). The country's population comprises three main ethnolinguistic groups: ethnic (Slavic) Bulgarians (85.7% of the population), Turkish Bulgarians (8.5 %), and Roma Bulgarians (approximately 5%) (NSI, 2023). Most Bulgarians (approximately 85%) belong to the Christian Orthodox Church (NSI, 2022). Among Turkish Bulgarians, Islam is the predominant religion, while the Roma population practices a variety of faiths, including Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism.

During the socialist period in Bulgaria, the government implemented policies aimed at assimilating Turkish Bulgarians. These measures included restrictions on religious practices, mandating individuals to adopt Slavic names, and imposing a public ban on the use of Turkish. These actions led to a mass exodus of Turks from Bulgaria (World History Commons, n.d.), with many losing their Bulgarian citizenship. With the fall of socialism, those restrictions were abandoned. Following Bulgaria's entry into the European Union, there has been a wave of return migration and a growing number of Turkish Bulgarians restoring their Bulgarian citizenship. However, this process has been fraught with challenges, resulting in numerous cases where individuals hold one official name in Turkey and a different one in Bulgaria, leading to significant personal and administrative complications often highlighted in Bulgarian media.

The Roma ethnic group in Bulgaria consists of various subgroups, the main one being Bulgarian Roma and Turkish Roma, which differ in culture and lifestyle. This report does not distinguish between these subgroups but refers to them collectively. Where necessary, clarifications regarding their linguistic background and proficiency in Turkish are provided in the Results section. The term "Bulgarian" is used to refer to the entire population of Bulgaria, including those of ethnic Turkish and Roma descent.

Romas are traditionally known for their nomadic lifestyle and mobility. However, not all Roma subgroups in Bulgaria have maintained this way of life, as some have settled permanently over the previous generations. In the 1950s, a law was introduced that mandated compulsory sedentarisation and the assignment of a permanent address to all Bulgarian nationals (Slavkova, 2008). Efforts to promote Roma integration in Bulgaria have seen limited progress despite the introduction of the National Roma Strategy (2012-2020), which was built on earlier initiatives such as the Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (1999) and the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) (Integro Association, 2017). Critics argue that the lack of effective policy implementation specifically targeting Roma has hindered progress, with both governmental institutions and civil society organizations failing to take sufficient steps toward their integration.

Bulgarian is a Southern Slavic language that uses the Cyrillic alphabet and is the only

official language in Bulgaria. Turkish is the second most widely spoken language and is used by approximately 9.2% of the population (NSI, 2020). It is a dialect of Ottoman Turkish (Rumelian, Balkan) and differs slightly from modern Turkish spoken in Turkey. The majority of the Roma population speak Romanes as their mother tongue, and many are fluent in Turkish and Bulgarian.

In terms of population distribution, Turkish Bulgarians are primarily concentrated in the northeastern and southeastern parts of the country, near the border with Turkey (NSI, 2020). In contrast, Roma Bulgarians spread more widely across the country. In the Kardzhali region, they constitute the majority, accounting for 56% of the population, while in the Razgrad region, they make up 50.02% (NSI, 2012). The northwestern part of Bulgaria also has a significant concentration of Roma and is considered one of the poorest and most rapidly declining regions.

Figure 1 illustrates that international migration rates in Bulgaria are not evenly distributed across the country. The northeastern part of Bulgaria, which borders Romania, has the highest emigration rates. In contrast, the areas surrounding the capital, Sofia, and those near the Black Sea—such as Burgas—exhibit lower emigration rates.

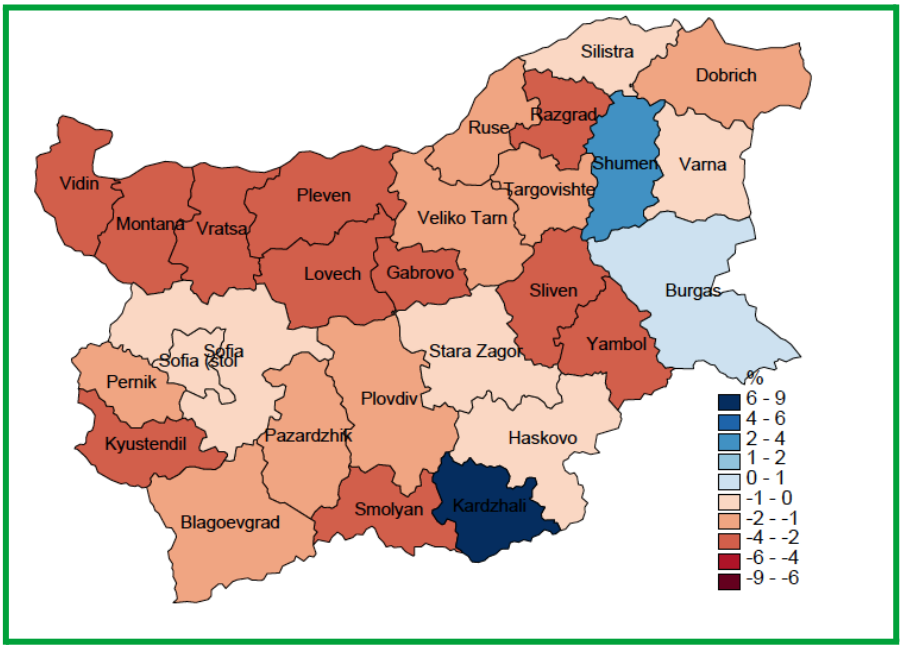

Figure 1: Bulgaria net international migration 2007-2019 (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021)

Kyustendil, a municipality in southwestern Bulgaria known for its large Roma population, was the focus of the study by Kazakov et al. (2023). This research examined the urban development and infrastructure of the Roma Ghetto Urban Settlements (GUSs), where approximately 70% of the buildings were constructed without proper permits. These segregated neighborhoods are characterized by substandard housing, overcrowding, and a lack of essential amenities such as sewage systems. Inadequate housing is also linked to issues with electricity and water supply, with many households lacking proper sanitation facilities, such as bathrooms and toilets. The study found that around 20% of Roma residents in these GUS areas had worked abroad, and upon returning, many purchased proper homes outside the GUS areas, which has been viewed as a step toward reducing segregation.

Education

In Bulgaria, one in three people (33% of the population) holds a university degree (European Commission 2021). However, early school dropout remains a significant issue, particularly within Roma communities, where around 18% are illiterate and only 10% have completed secondary education (Bulgarian Partners, n.d.). To encourage school attendance, the Bulgarian government withholds child allowances from parents whose children do not attend school regularly. According to Kazakov et al. (2023), some Roma parents try to enroll their children in schools where attendance is not monitored closely. Previously, the primary reason for Roma children's absence from school was their parents' lack of motivation to send them. Today, however, many Roma children stop attending school because they migrate with their families. When they return to Bulgaria, they often cannot provide the necessary documents for their education abroad to be recognised by the Bulgarian school system. As a result, these children are placed in lower grades, but frequently feel too ashamed to study alongside younger students, leading to further dropouts.

Employment

By 2023, Bulgaria's unemployment rate stood at 4.3%, reflecting a significant improvement in the country's labor market. This marks a considerable decline from 15% in 2003 to 13% in 2013 and 4.6% in 2021 (NSI, 2023). However, regional disparities persist, with some areas, particularly those with large Roma populations, still experiencing unemployment rates of 15% or higher. Despite these challenges, the Roma community in Bulgaria has made progress in terms of employment over the years. In 2011, only 19% of Roma were employed, but by 2019, this figure had risen to 45% (MediaPool, 2022). Nevertheless, labor market discrimination against Roma Bulgarians remains prevalent, with many employers still reluctant to hire them for positions other than undesirable, low-wage jobs (Kazakov et al., 2023).

The wage gap between Bulgaria and other EU countries remains substantial. Figure 2 compares the average gross salaries (in euros) of Bulgaria and Belgium from 2007 to 2023. These data highlight the persistent disparity in earnings, with Bulgaria continuing to lag behind more affluent EU member states such as Belgium, despite gradual increases in wages over time.

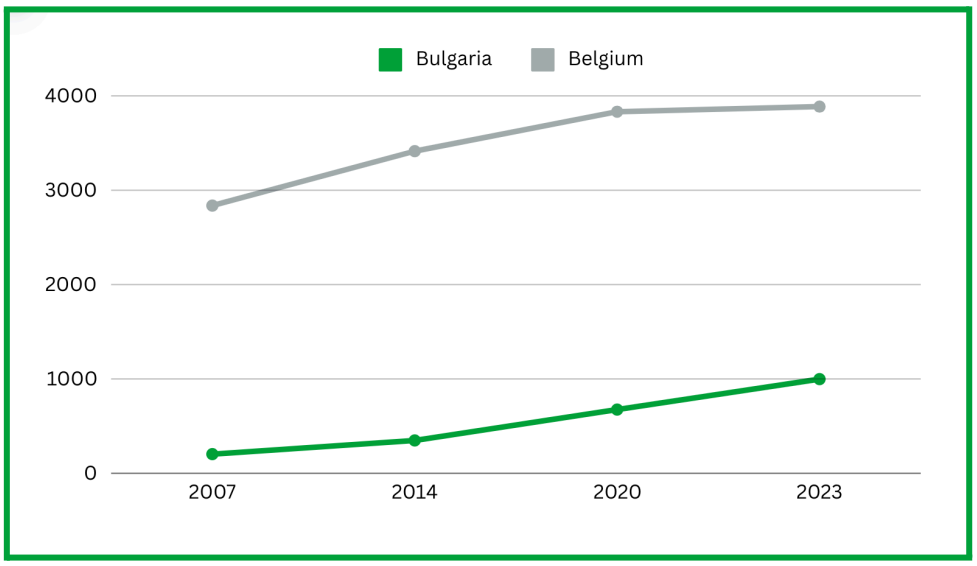

Figure 2: Average salary Belgium- Bulgaria 2023 (NSI 2023 / Statista 2023)

When Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, the average monthly salary in Belgium was more than ten times higher than that in Bulgaria. Although salaries in Bulgaria have grown over the past 15 years, wages in rural areas remain significantly lower than the national average. The average salary is skewed by the higher wages in the capital, Sofia, owing to the presence of foreign businesses and investments. Another factor affecting the reported average salary in Bulgaria is the widespread practice of employees receiving part of their wages "in an envelope", leading to unreported income (BNT News, 2023) and reduced social security contributions.

2.2. Migration motives

Understanding the motivations behind migration is essential for society, policymakers, and the migrants themselves (Czaika et al., 2021). While the academic literature traditionally emphasizes that migration decisions are highly rational, based on a thorough assessment of costs and benefits, in reality, unique personal circumstances often play a significant role. The following section discusses various factors that influence the decision to migrate.

The push-pull model (Lee, 1966) remains a foundational theory in migration studies. Push factors are the conditions that compel individuals to leave their home country, whereas pull factors are the appealing aspects of a new location that attract migrants. Economic opportunities are one of the main motives for migration, driven by differences in economic conditions between the country of origin and potential destinations. Research conducted by Marchand et al. (2019) on migrants in Germany, including Bulgarians, indicates that 60% of respondents identified poor economic conditions in their home country as the primary push factor. Piore (1979) introduced the concept of dual-market theory, which focuses more on "pull" factors at a macro level. He argued that the demand for cheap labor in advanced industrial societies is a key driver of migration. Consequently, migrants often find themselves in low-paid, undesirable jobs in labor-intensive sectors that local workers tend to avoid (Massey et al., 1993).

The influence of welfare benefits on migration decisions has sparked considerable debate in both political and academic circles. One point of debate is the welfare magnet effect, which suggests that robust welfare states attract low-skilled migrants but deter high-skilled migrants due to higher income taxes (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). However, Marchand et al. (2019) find that access to social security is rarely cited as a motivation for intra-EU migration. Respondents were unaware of any social security benefits before migrating and emphasized that their primary goal was to find work and fulfill tax obligations in the host country.

Political factors have been identified as significant drivers of migration (Dubow et al., 2019); however, they are considered less relevant for intra-EU migrants compared to other migrant groups. Bulgarians have low trust in their national governments and institutions, resulting in resistance to the political system (Tilkidjiev, 2011). This distrust is particularly strong towards politicians, political parties, and parliaments. However, Bulgarians tend to have higher trust in external institutions like the European Parliament and the UN, suggesting a common belief that EU membership helps guide the country toward a more stable future.

Migrant families play a crucial role in the migration process, as households help manage the income risks and uncertainties associated with migration (Czaika and Reinprecht, 2022). The family acts as a decision-making unit that shapes the

motivations and values of individual migrants. Bulgarian migrants, for example, often send financial support back home to cover essential needs, such as food, bills, healthcare, and education. In 2010, remittances accounted for 7% of Bulgaria's gross domestic product (GDP) (The World Bank, n.d.).

Migrant networks also play a significant role in facilitating and sustaining migration (Boyd, 1989), and influence migrants' destination choices (Haug, 2008). These networks can create a chain effect, where migrants from a specific area follow others to the same destination, strengthening social networks and communities. The size of a migrant's social network is typically measured by the number of people from the same family, town, or country living in the destination area. These networks can also influence the skill composition and gender distribution of incoming migrants (Hoang, 2011; McKenzie & Rapoport, 2010, as cited by Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022).

Ongoing migration can foster the development of a migration culture over time, influencing societal attitudes toward migration, as noted by Massey et al. (1993). This cultural aspect is visible at both individual and community levels. As migration becomes more common within the community, it turns into an accepted practice even among those without direct ties to migrant networks (Kandel & Massey, 2002). At the individual level, those with prior migration experience are more likely to migrate again.

Personal traits, such as open-mindedness, ambition, and a spirit of adventure, consistently influence migration intentions (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). Manolova (2018) argues that migrants' ability to dream and strive for a better life also plays a critical role in human mobility. She discusses migration not merely as a physical relocation but as a form of "imagination technology" (Vigh, 2009), where the desire to migrate is closely tied to the capacity to envision a life offering greater fulfillment than their current circumstances.

In her study, "Going to the West is my last chance to get a normal life", Manolova (2018) explored the perspectives of aspiring Bulgarian migrants toward the West. Cold War politics significantly shaped public perceptions by creating a symbolic divide between the eastern communist bloc and the capitalist West. The idealization of the West as a utopian haven serves as a powerful motivator for migration (Yurchak, 2006). For Bulgarian migrants, the West represents not only economic opportunity but also the promise of a normal and dignified life, fuelling their aspirations to migrate despite the challenges and uncertainties involved.

2.3. The role of networks

Bulgarian migrants, driven by the prospect of better economic opportunities, often encounter significant challenges upon arriving in their host countries, and rely on their networks for support. While the previous section explored how social networks influence the decision to migrate, this section examines their role in assisting migrants settle in their new locations. The section concludes with a case study of Bulgarian migrant networks in Ghent conducted in 2013.

Social networks
Research on migration has demonstrated that social networks significantly impact migrants' lives upon arrival in the host country. These networks provide valuable insights into job opportunities, application processes, and labor market trends, which are often informally shared (Granovetter, 1995). Bilecen and Seibel (2021) emphasize

that this information is typically acquired effortlessly through everyday interactions and spreads rapidly among migrants. Consequently, social networks reduce transaction costs and enhance the reliability of job searches by offering more detailed and trustworthy information than official channels (Granovetter, 1973).

Social networks consist of ties which vary in their usefulness. Granovetter (1973, 1975) distinguishes between “weak” and "strong" ties, while Herman (2006) expands on this by analyzing both the quantity and quality of these ties. Migrants with strong ties, such as close family relationships with spouses, fiancés, parents, siblings, and children, tend to receive the most support. According to Herman, one strong tie is as valuable as six weak ties. In contrast, weak ties, such as friends and distant acquaintances, are considered less helpful but still play an important role. While friends may be less helpful than distant relatives, the number of weak ties matters; individuals with more weak ties have a higher likelihood of receiving assistance than those with fewer weak ties. Although those without a network are expected to face the most challenges, Herman argues that the presence of strong ties is more important than the overall presence of a network. Consequently, migrants without a network often find themselves in circumstances comparable to those of individuals with only weak ties. Migrants with both strong and weak ties are in the most advantageous position, as they benefit from substantial support through their strong ties while also having weak ties as a supplementary resource.

Connections with the local population are also important for navigating the labor market and adapting to cultural norms in the host country (Bilecen & Seibel, 2021). Since locals are more likely to secure jobs and understand the hiring process, migrants with more local contacts tend to experience better employment outcomes and improved job prospects (Kanas et al., 2009, 2011; Lancee, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, as cited by Bilecen & Seibel, 2021).

However, while social networks can offer valuable support, they may also have negative effects on the wages and working conditions of new migrants (Leschke & Weiss, 2020). These drawbacks are often associated with social networks directing migrant workers into sectors already saturated with migrant labor, typically characterized by low-skill jobs and repetitive tasks (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). Consequently, migrants may accept positions of lower status than they could have secured through traditional job searches, such as responding to job advertisements (Seibel & van Tubergen, 2013).

Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe are often perceived as having a competitive advantage in Western European job markets compared to other migrant groups, due to cultural similarities and a reputation for a strong work ethic (Garapich, 2008; Samaluk, 2014; Wills et al., 2009, as cited by Leschke & Weiss, 2020). They are often seen as willing to accept jobs that local workers may avoid, frequently enduring low wages and poor working conditions due to their dual frame of reference. For instance, Bulgarian labor migrants have been reported to avoid complaining about substandard working conditions, such as 12-hour workdays, as long as they receive payments according to agreed terms (Velizarova & Kirov, 2018).

Over the past decade, the role of social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and LinkedIn has grown significantly in the context of migration, serving as key channels of communication that shape migrant social networks (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013). They enable users to build diverse networks, increase their number of weak ties, and strengthen them. Additionally, social media allows migrants to maintain strong

connections with family and friends regardless of their location. These online platforms may also enhance job opportunities, as they help maintain relationships and connections that are "technologically possible but not yet active" (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Ethnic enclaves and migrants' (in)formal work

Migrant networks are typically formed among individuals who share common ethnic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds, and have migrated to a new country. Ethnic-specific migrant networks often manifest as "ethnic enclaves", a concept originating from North American sociology literature. In the employment context, this refers to businesses (partially) owned by individuals of a particular ethnic group who in turn hire workers from the same ethnic background (Portes, 1981). Newly arrived migrants, often lacking proficiency in the host country's language, frequently rely on ethnic enclave businesses for job opportunities (Ryan et al., 2008).

While many studies portray ethnic enclave businesses in a positive or negative light, their roles are more complex and nuanced (Bloch & McKay, 2015). On the positive side, these businesses provide migrant workers with relatively easy access to jobs free from discrimination and exclusion (Fong & Shen, 2010). Typically, these are micro-enterprises operating in competitive, low-barrier markets (Kitching et al., 2009) where ethnic networks play a key role in staffing by offering informal recruitment channels and a cheaper labor force. However, working in an ethnic enclave can, in the long run, hinder language acquisition and limit the development of social networks outside the ethnic community, which are critical for integration and career advancement (Elrick & Lewandowska, 2008; Lancee, 2012; Mampaey & Zanoni, 2013; Nakhaie et al., 2009; Portes & Bach, 1985, as cited by Bloch & McKay, 2015).

The literature frequently highlights labor exploitation and precarious working conditions within ethnic enclave networks, with research consistently demonstrating that migrants rank among the most vulnerable groups in the labor market across multiple indicators (McKay et al., 2012). Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants in low-skilled jobs are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Velizarova & Kirov, 2018). The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2015) defines labor exploitation as "work situations that deviate significantly from standard working conditions as set out by legislation or other binding regulations concerning remuneration, working hours, leave entitlements, health and safety standards, and decent treatment". Zwolinski and Wertheimer (2017) identified two perspectives to understand exploitation: the transactional approach, which focuses on unequal exchanges between individuals, and the structural approach, which addresses systemic injustices that advantage certain migrant groups over others.

Precarious work is characterized by indicators such as low job security, inadequate social security entitlements, restricted access to skills development, and limited benefits, such as vacation days and travel reimbursement (Keller et al., 2013). This type of work marks a deviation from the standard employment agreements for both employees and employers. Although precarious work and labor exploitation share similarities, the latter typically involves violations of legal norms and regulations, while precarious employment reflects breaches of labor laws that may not necessarily constitute criminal offenses. Not all deviations from standard employment contracts result in precariousness as conventional contracts can include precarious elements (Keller et al., 2013). A key aspect common to both precariousness and exploitation is the utilization of workers' vulnerabilities to benefit others (Zwolinski & Wertheimer, 2017).

Migrants subjected to labor exploitation and precarious working conditions may not always see themselves as victims, except in extreme cases, often due to differing working conditions and expectations between their home and host countries (Cleiren et al., 2015; Staring, 2012; Tielbaard et al., 2016, as cited by Vandermeerschen et al., 2020). As a result, addressing these issues is challenging, and many instances of labor exploitation go unnoticed (Cleiren et al., 2015; Staring, 2012; Tielbaard et al., 2016, as cited by Vandermeerschen et al., 2020).

The informal labor market, often the least regulated segment of the economy, is where undocumented migrants frequently seek employment (Bloch, 2013). Workers in this sector are often treated as disposable and interchangeable, facing poor working conditions, low wages, and unfavorable employment terms. Research suggests that employers often hire workers informally to reduce expenses and increase profits by bypassing legal requirements, such as minimum wage laws and health and safety provisions. Avoiding taxes and social contributions is a common motive for employers to hire workers informally. The absence of social contributions can have severe implications, particularly regarding access to healthcare (Winters et al., 2018).

Research indicates that many individuals with formal jobs also engage in informal employment through off-the-book transactions, either as self-employed individuals or as employees (Williams, 2009). Williams discusses a type of employment called "hybrid", which lies between formal and informal work, partially adhering to legal regulations. This form of employment is more prevalent in CEE countries but can be found to varying degrees across Europe.

Housing networks

Social networks play a crucial role in securing housing for migrants, often serving as key resources for finding accommodation upon arrival. Migrants frequently rely on their networks to locate affordable housing, negotiate rent, and navigate interactions with landlords. This support is particularly valuable for overcoming language barriers and navigating local housing markets. However, such reliance can sometimes lead to migrants residing in ethnic enclaves, which may limit their opportunities for broader integration (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.).

The increasing influx of CEE labor migrants within the European Union has revealed a rise in complaints regarding poor housing conditions across various countries, indicating a widespread issue throughout Europe (Baalbergen et al., 2023). In Belgium, the ongoing housing crisis, exacerbated by rising rental prices, has worsened conditions for many migrants. Low-income individuals, in particular, struggle to secure decent and affordable housing, especially in major cities in Flanders (Deckmyn, 2023). Arundel and Lennartz (2020) establish a connection between dualisation in the labor market and the housing market, demonstrating that individuals classified as outsiders in the labor market, such as lower-income workers, are 7.7 times more likely to also be outsiders in the housing market.

A recent study on migrant housing in Ghent revealed exploitative practices by landlords who rent substandard living spaces at disproportionately high rents (Deckmyn 2023). Although academic research on this subject is limited, numerous Belgian media outlets discuss how landlords exploit migrants, including Bulgarians, in the private housing market, a practice known as rack renting. Migrants often engage in house swaps and find other migrants from within their networks to take over their accommodations. While this system benefits both migrants and landlords willing to rent to them, it can also perpetuate a cycle of inadequate housing conditions.

Recent studies have found that Bulgarian migrants often experience nonlinear housing trajectories, which include extended periods of shared housing with unrelated individuals (Manting, 2022). Shared housing is often viewed as an in-between phase before renting separate housing units, characterized by negative aspects such as a lack of privacy, insecurity, and poor living conditions. While it can help migrants save on costs and alleviate loneliness (Druta et al., 2021), prolonged periods in such arrangements may hinder the integration of EU migrants and contribute to resentment within host societies towards intra-European migration (Manting, 2022).

Bulgarian networks in Belgium

A study by Tomova (2013) on Bulgarian Roma migrants in Ghent highlighted the specific characteristics of their social networks. She found that most Bulgarian migrants in Belgium, particularly those with a Turkish ethnic background and Turkish-speaking Roma, tend to seek employment within the local Turkish-speaking community. While Bulgarian Roma are not part of the Turkish ethnic group, their proficiency in Turkish allows them to tap into ethnic networks, which is particularly beneficial given their limited proficiency in French, Dutch, and English. To mitigate discrimination and enhance their access to labor and housing markets abroad, many Bulgarian Roma choose to self-identify as Turkish Bulgarians.

Typically, these migrants secure their initial accommodations through Turkish-speaking employers, often renting rooms in their employers' homes (Tomova, 2013). They are willing to accept any job offered, agreeing to the wages their employers dictate. Beyond employment, these employers play a crucial role in providing support and guidance on municipal registration, social welfare applications, and mortgage loans. For medical care and legal advice, migrants frequently turn to professionals of Turkish descent referred by their employers. As Tomova argues, this complete dependence on their employers in Belgium leaves migrants highly vulnerable.

The study also emphasizes the role of Bulgarian minibus drivers, who not only transport migrants between Bulgaria and Belgium but also provide logistical services, such as introducing migrants to potential employers and assisting them in securing housing. When migrants lack sufficient funds, they may arrive in Belgium on credit, with transportation costs paid back from their first salary. In some cases, family members of the drivers are also involved in facilitating these arrangements.

2.4. Return and “liquid” migration

In their study on migration within the European Union, Marchand et al. (2019) found that only a small proportion of participants from EU nations had clear mobility plans regarding the duration of their stay. Many were uncertain how long they would remain after arrival and preferred to adapt their plans as circumstances evolved. Only a few EU nationals have migrated with the intention of settling permanently in their destination country, often motivated by lifestyle changes or joining a partner. For others, returning home was considered a backup option.

The decision to return to one’s home country is shaped by a combination of economic and non-economic factors in both origin and destination countries (Mintchev & Boshnakov, 2018). Economic push factors such as job loss or the end of seasonal work play a significant role in prompting returns. Mass returns often indicate changing conditions in the destination country. Research also indicates that emotional factors,

including nostalgia and the longing for family, significantly influence the decision to return, alongside negative experiences such as culture shock and difficulties in adapting to the new environment (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021).

Returning migrants can have a significant positive impact on their country of origin by bringing back valuable skills, technological expertise, international connections, and work experience (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021). Bulgaria's National Migration Strategy (2021-2025) focuses on facilitating the return of Bulgarian migrants. It includes programs to support those who have already returned, as well as targeted campaigns to encourage more Bulgarian citizens to come back (National Migration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2025, 2021).

Engbersen and Snel (2013) highlight that evolving migration trends in contemporary Europe have led to "liquid migration," which mirrors earlier forms of circular or temporary migration. This concept underscores the fluid nature of migration, where individuals frequently move between countries instead of settling permanently. Factors like open EU borders, technological advancements, and affordable transportation have facilitated this trend (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017). Liquid migration is especially common among labor migrants who adapt to shifting job opportunities across Europe, often moving between countries in search of better economic conditions. While some choose this lifestyle voluntarily, others feel compelled by circumstances. Engbersen and Snel (2013) describe individuals who find themselves in a continuous cycle of migration between countries as "footloose migrants”.

This migration style poses several challenges for local and national governments, as many intra-European labor migrants face difficulties integrating into host countries, making them vulnerable to exploitation and social exclusion. Despite experience with seasonal labor, host countries struggle to address the complexities of liquid migration, affecting areas like housing, healthcare, education, and social integration.

Engbersen (2012) notes that legal migration status significantly influences migration patterns, particularly for Bulgarians, who have the right to reside in other EU member states. He raises concerns about the absence of official data on migration, complicating the understanding of circular labor migration from CEE. Tracking short-term migration is particularly challenging in European statistics. Marchand et al. (2019) emphasize that information on return migration is scattered across various sources and often not publicly accessible. Although the EU has implemented initiatives like the Integrated Return Management Application (IRMA) to track return migration, the data remains insufficient and lacks detail.

3. Methodologie

This study uses a qualitative research methodology to explore the motivations of Bulgarians to migrate to Genk, the role of their social networks, and their future plans. The qualitative approach, centered on semi-structured interviews, was chosen for its ability to capture migrants' experiences from their own perspectives, offering insights that cannot be obtained through quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). To address the research questions, 45 in-depth interviews were conducted with Bulgarian migrants, complemented by 12 semi-structured interviews with city officials from Genk and representatives of civil society organizations. Additionally, an orientation tour of the area was conducted, along with document analysis and introductory meetings with members of the core group of the Neighbourhood Improvement Project. This section outlines the sampling strategy, the sociodemographic profile of the sample, and the data collection procedures.

3.1. Sampling strategy

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods was used to conduct interviews with Bulgarian migrants. Convenience sampling, frequently employed in community-based research, involves selecting participants based on their accessibility (Guest, 2014). A Bulgarian supermarket in Waterschei was chosen as the primary recruitment location. Snowball sampling took place as participants referred others from their social networks. This method is especially effective for reaching marginalized groups (Guest, 2014), including Roma Bulgarians and undocumented migrants. Participants who agreed to take part in the study received shopping vouchers worth €35 for the supermarket; no incentives were provided for referring additional participants. To boost participation, flyers in Bulgarian were designed and distributed at various locations in Waterschei frequently visited by Bulgarians, such as supermarkets, kebab shops, and cafés. Additionally, the community center Singel in Waterschei and other organizations working with Bulgarian migrants were asked to assist in recruiting respondents. In total, 45 individuals participated in the interviews.

Purposeful sampling was employed for the interviews with city officials from the City of Genk and representatives of civil society organizations. Participants were selected based on their professional roles in collaboration with the core group of the Neighborhood Improvement Contract, focusing on those who worked directly with Bulgarian migrants or had insight into the challenges they faced. In total, 12 city officials were interviewed, including eight employed by the City of Genk in policy, housing, registration, and related fields, as well as four civil society representatives from partnering organizations.

3.2. Socio-demographic profile of the sample

The basic socio-demographic statistics of the respondent sample are presented below, including gender, age, ethnicity, educational level, family composition, year of first migration to Belgium, and registration status. These demographics are important for understanding the diversity of the interviewee sample and effectively interpreting the results.

The Bulgarian migrants selected for the study met the following criteria: they were 18 years or older, held Bulgarian citizenship, and resided in the Waterschei neighborhood. During the interviews, a few respondents indicated that they lived outside of Waterschei, in areas such as Vennestraat, Genk Center, and Heusden-Zolder. However, due to the small sample size and the similarity of their profiles to those of other respondents, their interviews were included in the study, as their participation did not significantly affect the overall research findings.

This study is not statistically representative of the registration records of the City of Genk, which indicate that 354 Bulgarian migrants reside in Waterschei, spread across 117 addresses. This study aimed to capture a sample that reflects the sociodemographic diversity of the community as closely as possible. To achieve this, an estimate of the sample's distribution by gender and age was made based on the demographic profile of Bulgarians registered in the City of Genk.

Gender

The gender distribution in the sample is relatively balanced, with 53% females (n=24) and 47% males (n=21). This distribution differs slightly from the data on registered migrants collected by the City of Genk, where males account for 54% and females account for 46%.

	n	%
Female	24	53
Male	21	47
Total	45	100

Table 1: Gender distribution of the sample

Age

The majority of interviewees fall within the 40-49 age group, making up 40% (n=18) of the total respondents. The second largest group consists of individuals aged 30-39, who account for 27% (n=12). Meanwhile, those aged 50-59 represent 18% (n=8) of the participants, while only 13% (n=6) are under 29 years old. The percentage of individuals aged 60-69 is relatively small, at 2% (n=1). Consequently, it can be concluded that the participants in this study predominantly belong to the active working-age group, which will be considered further when discussing the results.

	n	%
18-29	6	13
30-39	12	27
40-49	18	40
50-59	8	18
60-69	1	2
Totaal	45	100

Table 2: Age distribution of the sample

Ethnicity

In terms of ethnicity, Bulgarian Roma comprise the largest proportion of respondents at 49% (n=22), followed by Turkish Bulgarians at 42% (n=19). In contrast, ethnic Bulgarians represent only a small portion of the sample, accounting for 9% (n=4). Among the Turkish Bulgarian participants, one migrated to Turkey during the socialist period and later regained Bulgarian nationality. The ethnic composition of the sample aligns with the City of Genk's estimates regarding the ethnic distribution of Bulgarians living in Waterschei.

	n	%
Roma Bulgarians	22	49
Turkish Bulgarians	19	42
Ethnic Bulgarians	4	9
Total	45	100

Table 3: Ethnicity distribution of the sample

Educational level

The participants are grouped into five educational categories: primary education up to 4th grade (16%), primary education up to 8th grade (35%), secondary education (40%), university degree (4%), and no formal education (4%).

	n	%
No formal education	2	4
Primary till 4th grade (ages 6-12 years)	7	16
Primary till 8th grade (ages 12-15 years)	16	35
Secondary (ages 15-19 years)	18	40
University (19 +)	2	5
Total	45	100

Table 4: Educational profiles of the sample

Family composition

The majority of Bulgarian migrants in Genk live with their families (89%), whereas a smaller percentage (11%) live alone. The definition of "family" used here is broad, encompassing migrants living with long-term partners, even if not officially married, as well as parents residing with their adult children.

	n	%
Met eigen gezin	40	89
Alleen	5	11
Totaal	45	100

Table 5: Family composition of the sample

Number of children

In Waterschei, 38% of survey participants live with their underage children, accounting for a total of 23 minors among the respondents, five of whom were born in Belgium. Additionally, 16% of participants do not live with their underage children in Belgium, as their children reside with other parents or grandparents in Bulgaria. One participant was expecting a child at the time of the interview.

	n	%
Children in BE 18-	17	38
Children in BE 18+	9	20
Children not in BE 18-	7	16
Children not in BE 18+	5	11
No children	6	13
Pregnant	1	2
Totat	45	100

Table 6: Number of children of the sample

First migration to Belgium

The largest percentage of migrants interviewed arrived in Belgium either 1-3 years ago or 9+ years ago, with both groups representing 35% of the sample. A significant portion also arrived 4-6 years ago, comprising 20% of the respondents, while the smallest group (4%) arrived 6-8 years ago. It is important to note that not all migrants have remained in Belgium since their initial arrival; some engage in circular migration, while others establish permanent residency. The years listed below refer to their first arrival in Belgium.

	n	%
Less than 1 year	2	5
Between 1-3 years	16	35
Between 4-6 years	9	21
Between 7-8 years	2	4
9 years +	16	35
Total	45	100

Table 7: First migration to Belgium of the sample

Registration status

The sample includes nearly equal numbers of registered and not registered migrants, with 44% registered and 42% unregistered, reflecting only a one-person difference between the two groups. Additionally, six Bulgarian migrants indicate that they are awaiting registration (Bijlage 19). The ratio of registered to not registered migrants in the sample differs from the City of Genk's estimates, which report 893 registered migrants and between 300 and 500 unregistered migrants.

	n	%
Registered	20	44
Not Registered	19	42
Awaiting registration	6	14
Total	45	100

Table 8: Registration status of the sample

3.3. Data collection procedures

The research began in June 2023 with a guided orientation tour of Waterschei, facilitated by the neighborhood manager from the City of Genk. The purpose was to gain an initial understanding of the area and the Bulgarian migrant community residing there. During the tour, the researcher took notes on housing conditions, local businesses along Stalenstraat and Hoevenzavellaan, schools, De Singel’s community center, and recreational and religious facilities. Additionally, attention was paid to the community dynamics that could affect the experiences of migrants. These observations were complemented by photographs and textual descriptions.

From June to August 2023, internal documentation and statistical data were gathered with the support of the City of Genk. These included documents on registration policies, employment, and regulations concerning labor migrants, along with anonymised databases containing statistics specific to the Waterschei district and Bulgarian migrants. This information was incorporated into a broader data analysis and triangulated with the interview and observational data in the Results section.

From June to October 2023, the researcher participated in a series of meetings organized by the City of Genk to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Bulgarian migrants. These meetings included “Tafel Bulgaarse gemeenschap Waterschei” and regional gatherings with neighboring municipalities to exchange information about Bulgarian migrants, as well as discussions with the core group of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract. Detailed notes were taken during these sessions and later integrated into the overall research analysis.
Between September 2023 and April 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the City of Genk and civil society actors. A general interview guide was developed that included themes such as migration policy, employment, housing, registration, health, education, safety, and migrant integration. Questions were tailored to the specific roles of each interviewee and adjusted during the interviews based on the participants' responses, as is common in qualitative research. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and all participants signed informed consent forms. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and processed anonymously.

Between November 2023 and February 2024, in-depth semi-structured interviews with Bulgarian migrants were conducted in two phases, including an interim evaluation of respondent profiles. The sociodemographic profiles of the first 20 interviewees, including age, gender, ethnicity, registration status, employment, and housing, were shared with the core group of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract to ensure diversity in the sample. An interview guide was developed that included personal data, migration background, employment, housing, social networks, health, registration, children’s education, and future plans. The questions were based on insights from previous data collection and other academic research reports, such as "Vanuit Pools perspectief" (Vancluysen & Hennau, 2011) and "Gescheiden werelden" (Seidler et al., 2022). Three test interviews were conducted with migrants familiar with the researcher to assess the clarity and flow of the questions. The interview guide was translated into Bulgarian, and a native speaker with translation experience reviewed it to ensure its accuracy.

Interviews were conducted in Waterschei on weekdays and weekends to accommodate full-time worker participation. Some interview appointments were scheduled in advance, while others were conducted spontaneously with passersby. Word-of-mouth referrals were essential for recruiting participants, and the shopping voucher contributed to increasing their participation. Before each interview, the researcher explained the research goals and the interview structure to the participants. Informed consent forms translated into Bulgarian were signed by all interviewees. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and processed anonymously. The length of the interviews varied, with some participants sharing extensive life stories, while others required more prompts to express their views. The shortest interview lasted 20 minutes, and the longest 1 hour 10 minutes.

Data analysis
Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data gathered from interviews with Bulgarian migrants and key informants from city officials and civil society actors. This method was used to identify, analyze, and present patterns or themes within the data, allowing for detailed organization and description while also enabling deeper interpretation of various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). Microsoft Word and Excel were used as the primary tools for organizing, coding, and evaluating the textual information collected. Codes were assigned to specific segments of the text that represented different factors, facilitating

the creation of categories. These categories were then organized into overarching themes and subthemes. To support these key findings, quotes from the coded data were incorporated into the analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Given the sensitive nature of the information collected, particularly concerning undocumented migrants working in precarious conditions and living in substandard housing, participants were provided with additional assurances regarding confidentiality both during and after the interviews. All collected data, including interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes, were anonymised to protect participants' identities and stored securely in the UHasselt cloud space, accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisor of the project.

Particular attention was paid to the vulnerabilities faced by Roma Bulgarian participants, and a culturally sensitive approach was adopted during data collection. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of UHasselt (registration number: 2022 2023 55 R4D). The first draft of the data management plan was submitted on 22 September 2023 and finalized on 30 September 2024.

Limitations and self-reflectivity

The adopted methodology had several limitations related to the sampling procedure. The use of convenience and snowball sampling may have resulted in a skewed sample that did not fully represent the entire Bulgarian migrant population in Waterschei, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Recruiting participants primarily from the Bulgarian supermarket in Waterschei may have overrepresented certain demographics that are reflective of the store’s customer base. Although additional recruitment channels were used during the second stage of the fieldwork, the supermarket remained the primary source of participants. Similarly, offering shopping vouchers as an incentive may have led to oversampling of migrants in vulnerable situations, who may have been more motivated by the incentive than by an intrinsic desire to contribute valuable insights to the study.

Limitations also arose regarding the data quality, which may have been influenced by language barriers and participants' trust in the researcher. All interviews were conducted in Bulgarian, but some participants, particularly those whose native languages were Turkish or Romani, occasionally struggled to fully articulate their thoughts in Bulgarian. This may have resulted in shorter and less detailed responses than if they had been able to speak in their native language. In addition, participants who disclosed their undocumented status expressed concerns about being identified, which may have affected the completeness and accuracy of their responses.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the researcher’s nationality, as well as ethnicity, gender, age, language, and educational background, likely influenced the interview process, as is often the case in qualitative research. The interviewer is ethnic Bulgarian, university-educated, female in her 30s. Respondents from various backgrounds may have emphasized the aspects they deemed socially desirable when responding to questions. To mitigate the potential influence of the researcher's profile on the collected data, a scientific approach was maintained throughout all phases of the qualitative methodology. Guidance from a senior supervising researcher ensured data reliability. Additionally, triangulating interview data with information from other sources, was used to enhance the quality and credibility of the findings.

4. The case

This section offers an overview of the Waterschei district and examines the City of Genk's policies related to Bulgarian migrants, addressing key areas such as housing, registration, employment, education, healthcare, and integration. The information is based on interviews with 12 city officials from the City of Genk and civic actors, as well as available statistics and internal documents.

The research area is located in Genk East and consists of the neighbourhoods of Waterschei Zuid, Waterschei Noord, and Oud Waterschei. In addition, the Nieuw-Texas neighborhood is part of the research area due to its proximity to Waterschei (see Figure 3).

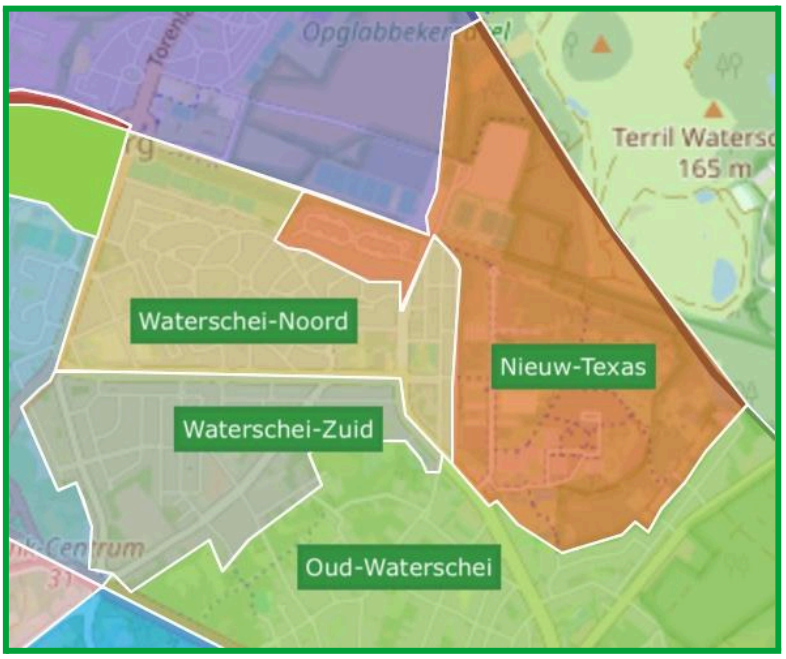

Figure 3: Map Waterschei (Stratenplan Genk (n.d.))

Originally known as Waterscheyde, Waterschei got its name from being a water separation point between two water basins. Until the late 1800s, the area was sparsely populated mostly by farmers. However, with the discovery of coal by André Dumont and the establishment of mines in 1909, Waterschei transformed into a mining community with the first migrants coming from Poland, Hungaria, Romania, and Ukraine. The recruitment of low-skilled labor migrants from Italy in the 1940s, Spain, Greece, and Portugal in the 1950s, followed by Morocco and Turkey in the 1960s and the 1970s, respectively, turned Waterschei into a hub for migrant communities seeking economic opportunities (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 2021).

The establishments associated with the mines played a leading role in integrating migrant workers by offering support in housing, education, cultural activities, and various services. Migrants were primarily viewed as economic resources and temporary labor (gastarbeiders) that would eventually leave the country. In 1974, due to the economic crisis, the Belgian government implemented a strict policy known as the "migration stop" to limit the influx of unskilled labor workers (Agentschap

Integratie en Inburgering 2021). Efforts to integrate migrants remained fragmented until the 1980s when the Royal Commission for Immigrants' Program was established, focusing on citizenship, anti-racism, and social policy. The decline in coal resulted in changes to the workforce, characterized by fewer labor migrants and an increase in family reunification. The village of Waterschei was officially incorporated into the city of Genk in 1977, and shortly thereafter, the Waterschei mine closed in 1987.

By 2023, the population of Genk was estimated to be approximately 67,600, comprising more than 120 nationalities (Genk in cijfers, 2023). Over half of its residents come from various backgrounds outside Belgium, making it a "super-diverse" city (Vertovec, 2007). Waterschei-Zuid has approximately 2,900 inhabitants, while Waterschei-Noord has around 2,600 residents, with 75% to 85% of them being of non-Belgian origin (Genk in cijfers, 2023). The largest group is made up of people of Turkish descent, many of whom are third- and fourth-generation Belgians who were born and educated in the country. Additionally, there are significant populations of Italians, Moroccans, Portuguese, Spaniards, and Greeks, along with Eastern Europeans, such as Bulgarians, Poles, and Romanians residing in the area. There are also native Belgian residents, although their number has declined through the years.

Approximately 20 years ago, the first few Bulgarian families settled in Waterschei and maintained positive relationships with local communities and authorities. However, in recent years, their numbers have increased significantly. In 2024, there were 354 registered Bulgarians residing in Waterschei (Burgerzaken, 2024), comprising approximately 40% of the total 893 officially registered in Genk. This number includes individuals waiting for registration, meaning that they are currently in the process of applying for a Belgian residence permit. It is suspected that the official number of Bulgarian residents is underestimated because, according to the City of Genk, there are an additional 300-500 Bulgarian migrants who are not officially registered.

The data presented in Figure 4 illustrates the growth of the Bulgarian migrant community in Genk since 2010. Bulgarians now rank as the fourth-largest migrant group in Genk based on nationality (Genk in cijfers, 2023), with a significant increase over the past couple of years.

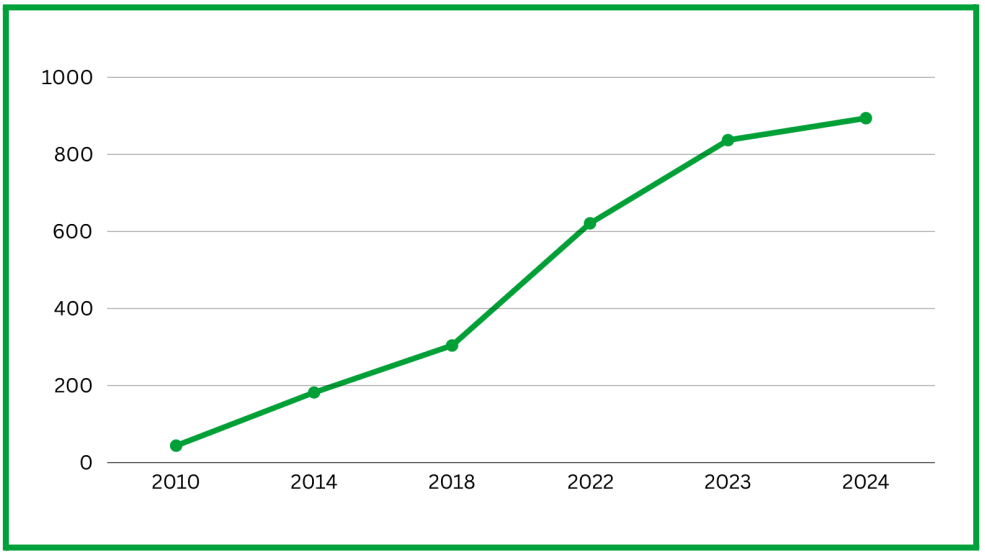

Figure 4: Bulgarian population in Genk 2010-2024 (Dienst Burgerzaken, 2024)

The gender distribution of registered Bulgarians in Genk is 46% male and 54% female (Burgerzaken, 2023). The breakdown by age showed that 78% of the participants are adults, 17% are children (under 11 years), and 6% are teenagers (aged 12-17). Data on ethnic background are not officially collected, but the City of Genk estimates that around half of the Bulgarian migrants in Genk are Roma Bulgarians, followed by Turkish Bulgarians, and a small number of ethnic Bulgarians.

The increasing number of Bulgarians, along with concerns about their housing, employment, education, health, and social integration, as well as disturbances reported by local residents of Waterschei, prompted the City of Genk to apply for the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, of which this study is a part.

4.1. Policies of the City of Genk

Genk is often referred to as the "city of neighborhoods" because of the strong ties residents have with their local communities and the wide range of amenities available in each neighborhood. In the 1990s, following the closure of the mines, several neighborhoods faced significant challenges, prompting the City of Genk to pursue a new governance model. Drawing inspiration from the neighborhood-oriented approach of Deventer in the Netherlands, Genk adapted this model to meet its specific needs. Other Belgian cities, including Leuven and Ghent, have implemented similar strategies. Genk is divided into eight districts, each consisting of three to four neighborhoods, for a total of 30 neighborhoods. Each district has a neighborhood manager responsible for overseeing the implementation of local strategies.

In the past, the City of Genk implemented targeted policies to address the specific needs of traditional labor migrants in the mining industry, who shared cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds and lived in cohesive neighborhoods. However, with the rise of super-diversity and an increase in mobile populations residing in multicultural neighborhoods, the City of Genk has shifted towards an inclusive policy. This approach better acknowledges the unique needs of various migrant groups while aiming to address the diverse integration requirements of the entire population.

The City of Genk collaborates closely with various non-governmental organizations located throughout its neighborhoods, recognising them as valuable resources because of their close proximity to the community and strong connections with residents. These organizations often maintain an open-door policy and provide referral services when needed. In Waterschei, the neighborhood manager and several civic society organizations form the neighborhood team, which regularly meet to discuss developments in the area. This team includes job coaches, youth associations, housing authorities, local service providers, educational services, and health representatives.

The “Table of the Bulgarian Community Waterschei” was established before the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract in response to the increasing Bulgarian migrant population in Waterschei. This team, composed of city officials from the City of Genk and representatives from NGOs directly engaged with the Bulgarian community, meets several times a year to share information and address individual cases.

In the past five years, the City of Genk adopted an administrative approach to combat crime by bringing together stakeholders from different sectors, including the police, Flemish services for social and labor inspections, government departments,

representatives of housing, security, and preventative sectors. This approach aims to combat criminal activities that undermine society by facilitating communication and information-sharing among different actors.

The numerous collaborative groups formed between various departments of the City of Genk and civil society actors reflect the city's commitment to fostering a culture of open dialogue at all levels. Genk's long-standing slogan, "Iedereen Genkt" (Everyone Genk/Thinks), along with the current policy, "Samen Genk Verbinden" (Connecting Genk Together), underscores the importance of unity and building connections within the community. The five-year city policy plan for 2020-2025 emphasizes horizontal collaboration, leveraging the strengths of various departments and partners to tackle complex challenges.

The following sections examine current policies across key areas relevant to the Bulgarian migrant population in Waterschei, including housing, registration, employment, health, education, and integration. These domains are closely interconnected, with challenges in one area potentially impacting others and creating a vicious cycle. Conversely, improvements in one domain can positively influence others, fostering a virtuous cycle.

4.2. Housing

The neighborhoods of Waterschei-Zuid and Noord are primarily composed of garden-style homes, with approximately 1,500 housing units in total. Oud-Waterschei is known for its higher-end homes and Nieuw-Texas for its social housing units. Urban development in Waterschei primarily took place between the 1920s and the 1970s, beginning with housing built by the mining industry and continuing with further expansion in the following decades. As Waterschei developed, vibrant streets like Stalenstraat emerged, and the influx of migrants led to a growth in businesses owned by people of Turkish descent, such as bakeries and tailors, enhancing both the cultural diversity and economic activity in the area. However, over time, the area has become less lively, and in the past decade, streets like Stalenstraat have lost much of their former vitality. Demographic shifts have taken place as elderly Belgian residents have moved from their homes in Waterschei to apartments in Genk’s city center. At the same time, more families from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those with Turkish heritage and existing ties to the area, have purchased homes in Waterschei.

According to the City of Genk, many houses in Waterschei, particularly along Stalenstraat, Hoevenzavellaan, and A. Dumontlaan are deteriorating, facing issues related to housing quality and compliance with modern standards. Currently, there is a growing trend toward the renovation and refurbishment of older homes, particularly among owner-occupied properties. However, this trend has not extended to rental properties. In areas like Hoevenzavellaan and Stalenstraat, adapted living spaces are common, with the upper floors of commercial buildings often converted into subdivided apartments, further reducing housing quality. During the orientation tour, houses were observed to be split into multiple units sharing a single entrance. This maze-like setup provided access to multiple apartments from the same entryway, with some units lacking mailboxes or doorbells, making it difficult to locate specific addresses.

The City of Genk adheres to the Flemish Housing Codex and works with the Flemish Housing Inspectorate to conduct safety and quality inspections. In recent years, the number of inspections in Waterschei has increased, uncovering various issues and revealing that many Bulgarian migrants live in substandard conditions. Approximately 42% of registered addresses in Waterschei, where Bulgarian migrants reside, have been identified as having poor housing quality. This percentage may be even higher, as there could be additional properties not yet identified by the Housing Department. According to records from the City of Genk, most landlords of the buildings housing Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei are Belgians of Turkish descent.

Overcrowding is another persistent issue uncovered during housing inspections, with many Bulgarian migrants found living together in small, shared rooms. To ensure safety and health standards, the Flemish government has issued recommendations, including occupancy guidelines. However, there are no specific regulations outlining the maximum number of occupants allowed to address overcrowding. Additionally, verifying overcrowding is challenging when individuals living in a house are not registered with the municipality.

The City of Genk suspects that the poor living conditions experienced by some migrants in Waterschei are linked to exploitative rental practices, such as rack renting, with a few official cases already registered. During housing inspections, tenants frequently pointed to small groups of landlords and middlemen, reinforcing these suspicions. While such practices are not limited to Waterschei and affect various migrant communities, city officials note that Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei are particularly susceptible. Stad Genk has also observed that many Bulgarian migrants lack written rental agreements, which is closely linked to rack renting. While verbal agreements are legally binding, they have significant drawbacks, especially when rent is paid in cash, which creates opportunities for landlords to exploit the arrangement. Additionally, there are no formal property descriptions, where third-party inspections document pre-existing damage before tenants move in or out. This lack of documentation further complicates matters.

According to the City of Genk, there are instances where recruitment agencies from the Netherlands hire Bulgarian migrants and provide accommodation in Genk. This practice aligns with findings from a study conducted by RIEC (2021), which revealed that Dutch recruitment agencies often arrange both housing and employment for labor migrants. The housing provided by these agencies varies from regular homes to specialized units, including containers, hotels, caravans, and rack-rented properties (Rijksoverheid, 2021). When labor migrants are employed in one country but housed in another, it can result in ineffective oversight and increase the risk of exploitation due to differing legal frameworks (Rijksoverheid, 2021). City officials have also expressed concerns about migrants' dependence on these agencies for employment, transportation, and housing, which could further contribute to their exploitation.

The City of Genk aims to enhance housing quality in Waterschei by collaborating with property owners, allowing them sufficient time to meet their responsibilities and upgrade their properties to current standards. However, landlords who consistently neglect their obligations may face fines, legal disputes, and even property closures. Recently, the City introduced a rental property certification process, known as the Conformiteitsattest, for properties built before 1981. This certification mandates inspections to ensure compliance with basic safety and quality standards. The initiative will be implemented in phases over the next ten years.

Additionally, the City of Genk is exploring the possibility of establishing a Temporary Housing Framework for Workers (Kader tijdelijke huisvesting voor arbeidskrachten). While the Flemish government has enacted a decree for this initiative, further research and local coordination are necessary to evaluate its feasibility in Genk.

4.3. Registration

One of Genk's primary objectives under the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract is to encourage Bulgarian migrants to register; however, several obstacles impede this process. City officials estimate that between 300 and 500 undocumented Bulgarian migrants reside in Genk. To register, migrants must declare their primary residence in Belgium within three months of arrival and fulfill specific legal requirements. According to Article 40 of the Vreemdelingenwet (IBZ, n.d.), the requirements for a long-term stay in Belgium vary depending on an individual's specific circumstances. The most common status and criteria for Bulgarian migrants are as follows:

- EU employees: must provide an employment contract if working in Belgium, or proof of financial means and health insurance if working in another EU country.
- Self-employed: individuals need to register with the Crossroads Bank for Enterprises and show proof of their social insurance affiliation. According to the law, self-employed individuals are presumed to have sufficient income, and no additional financial information is required.
- EU jobseekers: must demonstrate a realistic chance of finding employment, typically requiring higher education or specialization in a "bottleneck" occupation to qualify for a residence permit.
- Family members of EU citizens, including (grand-)parents and (grand-)children: can register in the municipality if they meet the criteria of financial dependency when reunifying with an economically active EU citizen in Belgium. Alternatively, they must show sufficient financial independence.

Meeting these criteria often poses a challenge for Bulgarian migrants, leading to delays in their registration upon arrival in the country. Migrants who initiate the registration process but fail to complete it due to missing documents receive two notifications of refusal according to the EU residence procedure (Annex 20). After the first refusal, the individual is recorded as having been removed from the registers, resulting in a loss of residency rights. Following the second refusal, the residence procedure is terminated, effectively reverting the person to undocumented status. Both notifications are issued without an order to leave the country, as EU regulations uphold the right to free movement. Furthermore, the absence of border controls between EU countries complicates the determination of whether a migrant has entered the country within the three-month window or has overstayed.

Civil Affairs is legally obligated to register individuals at the address they claim as their residence, regardless of the living conditions. This rule permits registration in non-traditional accommodations or buildings that may not meet basic standards. For example, if someone registers at an undeclared building located behind a main property, they are often listed under the address of the main house, leading to multiple households being registered at the same address. Additionally, there are no specific regulations governing the maximum number of individuals allowed to be registered at a single address. City officials believe it is preferable to have people registered somewhere, even if the property conditions are suboptimal, rather than denying registration altogether.

In 2022, Belgium introduced a Royal Decree to tackle the issue of non-Belgian residents lacking official primary residence. This decree enables municipalities to automatically register individuals in the waiting register through a process known as Ambtshalve Inschrijving. If individuals cannot provide the necessary documents for registration, the Immigration Office may issue a notice for them to leave the country. While Ambtshalve registration is in place in Genk, it had not yet been fully operationalized by the Internal Affairs Department at the time of this research.

4.4. Employment

In 2022, the employment rate in Genk for individuals aged 20 to 64 was 68.5%, one of the lowest in the country (Steunpunt Werk, 2024; Genk in cijfers, 2022). Although the unemployment rate has decreased slightly over the past two years, city officials note that the continuous influx of newcomers poses a barrier to achieving more significant improvements. Similar to other Belgian cities, Genk faces a substantial employment gap between migrants and natives, with the job market demanding high qualifications (Timmerman et al., 2018). Job opportunities for migrants are restricted by language requirements, with VDAB highlighting language proficiency as a key factor for employment. Most employers generally expect candidates to have at least an A2 level of Dutch, although formal certification is not always required.

The City of Genk has limited information about the employment of Bulgarian migrants living in the city, particularly those who are undocumented. Many Bulgarian migrants are believed to work in the Netherlands while residing in Genk. The Dutch Regionaal Informatie en Expertisecentrum (RIEC) has reported precarious practices by Dutch recruitment agencies, including retroactive changes to employment contracts, wage deductions, inadequate insurance coverage, and lack of social contributions (RIEC, 2021). Additionally, there are growing concerns regarding the financing and business structures of these agencies. Current regulations in the Netherlands governing the temporary employment sector lack sufficient measures to address unethical practices effectively. However, a new law set to take effect on January 1, 2025, aims to combat labor exploitation and unfair competition (Nu.nl, 2024).

Another challenge related to the employment of some Bulgarian migrants in Genk is the practice of self-employment. The City of Genk suspects that some Bulgarian migrants are being pressured into self-employment, even though they are effectively working under the control of an employer, a practice known as "bogus self-employment". This issue has long existed in Belgium but gained traction among Bulgarian migrants between 2007 and 2014 due to labor market restrictions. During this period, self-employment often became the only means for Bulgarian migrants to access jobs and secure residence permits in Belgium (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). For instance, Tomova (2014) noted that Bulgarians working for Belgian employers of Turkish descent in Ghent were reportedly taking 1–10% of company shares in order to legalize their residence. Despite the removal of labor mobility restrictions, bogus self-employment remains a prevalent practice among Bulgarian migrants in Genk.

The City of Genk views issues related to bogus self-employment and precarious employment practices by recruitment agencies as crimes that undermine society, emphasizing their negative impact on the local community. These matters are addressed through the city’s administrative approach, as previously outlined in this

chapter. Furthermore, Genk collaborates closely with the Euregionaal Informatie- en Expertisecentrum (EURIEC) to combat cross-border criminal activities and works with the Arrondissementeel Informatie- en Expertisecentrum (ARIEC) Limburg at the regional level. However, executing cross-border actions remains complex and challenging. Direct information exchange with other EU countries, particularly the Netherlands and Bulgaria, is not facilitated at the local level, limiting the city's efforts due to restricted access to information and opportunities for collaboration. Additionally, proving instances of bogus self-employment is difficult, which hampers the local government's ability to intervene directly. As a result, the City of Genk focuses on identifying and reporting these cases to higher authorities to encourage action against bogus self-employment practices.

The City of Genk aims to tackle employment challenges in the community, particularly long-term unemployment and the difficulties faced by new migrant groups. Individuals struggling with Dutch language proficiency are encouraged to enroll in various language courses tailored to their educational backgrounds. The Werkstation in Genk and VDAB offer support for creating CVs, job searches, and short-term training programs that can lead to employment. Additionally, foreign academic qualifications can be recognized for employment purposes, a process overseen by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) in Flanders. Through the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, the City of Genk strives to assist Bulgarian migrants in securing stable employment, even if they lack Dutch language skills. Several Bulgarians have successfully obtained secure jobs through partnerships with social economy sector initiatives, which provide on-the-job language training as part of their employment.

4.5. Healthcare and welfare

The City of Genk has observed that specific groups of registered migrants, including Bulgarians, encounter significant obstacles in accessing primary healthcare. These challenges include difficulties in finding a primary care physician, language barriers, a shortage of doctors and dentists, long waiting times for appointments, and limited understanding of the Belgian healthcare system.

Citizens from EU countries are entitled to legal and social benefits, such as pensions, unemployment benefits, healthcare, and child allowances, provided they have accrued the necessary rights. Mobile workers can transfer these benefits between EU countries using standardized documentation. However, intra-EU migrants who are not registered in Belgium and lack legal employment contracts generally cannot access these benefits. They are limited to emergency medical care through the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), which does not cover routine medical treatments or preventative care. Additionally, many doctors in Belgium may refuse to treat uninsured patients, and when treatment is provided, the costs can be very high.

Organizations such as Huis van het Kind and Kind en Gezin aim to increase healthcare awareness among migrant communities through various initiatives. In Genk, informative sessions covering health topics such as first aid, pregnancy, and diabetes are held regularly. The community health worker program, supported by mutualities, aims to help people in vulnerable social positions gain access to healthcare and support them in using the healthcare system. In Waterschei, Turkish-speaking fieldworkers are actively involved in supporting anyone with questions about health and welfare. Within the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, Bulgarian migrants receive information on how the healthcare system works and their responsibilities.

In 2010, the Belgian government enacted a decree that permitted the withdrawal of residency permits from EU citizens suspected of exploiting welfare benefits. Although EU migrants officially residing in Belgium have the right to request social welfare assistance under the RMI-Wet, receiving support from the OCMW within their first five years in Belgium may compromise their residency status, which is evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Despite objections from the EU Commission, this policy was introduced to restrict access to welfare benefits as a means of controlling migration (Barbulescu et al., 2015). OCMW records indicate that 17 Bulgarian households in Genk received benefits in 2023. Under current regulations, individuals allocated a social housing unit are required to present a language certificate at the A2 level.

4.6. Education

In all EU member states, education is compulsory, although age requirements vary slightly. In Belgium, education is mandatory until the age of 18, whereas in Bulgaria, it is compulsory until age 16. When migrants move to Belgium, they must ensure their children are enrolled in school within two months of arrival. However, the children of undocumented migrants may fall through the cracks in the compulsory education system; while they have the right to education, there is no legal obligation for them to attend school. This is of particular concern for the City of Genk.

One of the first indicators that city officials noticed regarding the increasing number of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei was the low school attendance rate of Bulgarian children. The Flemish administration manages a system for monitoring and addressing school absenteeism. However, according to city officials, the system is slow to detect cases of absences, preventing municipalities and other stakeholders from responding promptly.

In Waterschei-Noord and Waterschei-Zuid, approximately 50% of children and 30% of children in Oud-Waterschei do not speak Dutch at home (Genk in cijfers, 2024). Newly arrived Bulgarian children reportedly struggle with the Dutch language, affecting their ability to complete homework and impacting overall school performance. The City’s policy aims to improve language skills in young, vulnerable children who are at high risk of dropping out. They collaborate closely with Campus O3, which offers various programs and initiatives to target children. One such program is Taal en Talent Weeks, a summer school for children aged 5-12 who have recently relocated to Genk. Another key initiative is Brugfiguren (Bridge Figures), which supports primary education by fostering communication between parents from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and schools. These bridge figures reach out to parents, help form parent committees, and play specific roles within the school administration.

Additionally, the School Bubbles initiative from Ligo LiMiNo helps parents navigate their child's school agenda, understand informational letters, and use digital platforms, such as Smartschool. Kind en Taal vzw promotes parent-child interaction, language development, and parenting support through programs designed to strengthen families and foster social inclusion.

According to the care coordinator of a school in Waterschei, significant progress has been made over the past year in addressing absence rates among Bulgarian children, thanks to the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract. Bulgarian families with children facing difficulties receive personalized assistance on a case-by-case basis. During parent-school meetings, Bulgarian-speaking translators (Taalhulp) are available to facilitate communication. Children lacking parental support for homework can attend

weekend homework support sessions organized by SAAMO. In 2023, as part of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, the Groeikracht project was launched, offering Bulgarian children intensive Dutch language learning and executive skill development during school days.

4.7. Integration and social cohesion

Numerous factors influence integration and social cohesion in Waterschei. This section highlights the integration programs, welcoming policies for newcomers, common challenges faced by Bulgarian migrants, and various development initiatives in the area.

The Flemish region has been running civic integration programmes for migrants since 2003. The Societal Orientation course usually consists of 60 to 90 hours spread over three months, whereas the Dutch as a Second Language (NT2) course varies from 90 to 240 hours, depending on the individual's educational background. However, intra-EU migrants such as Bulgarians are exempt from mandatory participation in these programs. By 2023, the City of Genk estimated that one in eight registered Bulgarians had completed the integration program and obtained certification. The City argues that attending an integration program is essential, regardless of nationality, as challenges such as adapting to a new language, institutions, and social norms are common to all migrants. The City of Genk is concerned that the introduction of a course fee by the Flemish government in 2023 may further discourage participation.

As part of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, the City of Genk developed a comprehensive welcome policy for new migrants. Feedback from Bulgarian migrants indicates that newcomers require more extensive assistance when relocating to Genk, such as information about city services, school enrolment for children, waste management, and other essential information that may not be easily accessible.

The City of Genk faces considerable challenges in the integration of the Bulgarian Roma, as their integration needs differ significantly from those of other migrant groups.The European Union has established policies to support the integration of marginalized communities, including the Roma (Integro Association, 2017). At the national level, initiatives and funding, such as the National Strategy for the Integration of the Roma 2022, are designated for promoting the inclusion of Roma communities. Despite these efforts, a significant gap persists between Bulgarian Roma communities and the broader society in areas such as education, healthcare, housing, and employment (Integro Association, 2017). As part of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, city officials organized workshops with experts on the Roma community for local institutions, highlighting the unique aspects of Bulgarian Roma culture and strategies for effective communication.

Waste management is a significant issue in Waterschei, particularly around properties rented to temporary residents. Illegally discarded waste frequently accumulates in backyards and on busy streets, such as Hoevenzavellaan, where residents dispose of rubbish bags without proper labeling. This problem is especially common among those unfamiliar with the local waste disposal system, leading to complaints from neighbors. Additionally, unregistered migrants lack access to Genk’s container park for the proper disposal of large items and recycling. The City of Genk emphasizes that this issue is not solely attributable to Bulgarian migrants but is instead linked to the broader challenges posed by inadequate housing conditions. In response, the city has

implemented measures to tackle littering in Stalenstraat, which include installing cameras for improved monitoring and increasing police inspections.

Despite these challenges, residents of Waterschei express high levels of satisfaction with living in the area and take pride in the neighborhood's diversity. However, ensuring social cohesion remains difficult, particularly because some groups, such as mobile workers, are transient and invest less in the community's well-being, as noted by city officials. Issues surrounding the use of public spaces sometimes arise, with different migrant communities establishing distinct gathering places. For instance, the Turkish mosque serves as a hub for the Turkish community, while various Greek and Italian cafés and restaurants cater to their respective groups. Although the Bulgarian migrant population is growing, they lack a dedicated gathering space, except for a small Bulgarian supermarket on Stalenstraat, which has become their meeting point. As a result, small groups of men often congregate outside the supermarket after working hours, causing discomfort for pedestrians and local residents.

The City of Genk has been working to improve the image of Waterschei and Stalenstraat through various projects. In collaboration with SAAMO, initiatives like "100% Genks" have been launched to promote community bonding. Future activities aim to strengthen ties between Waterschei and less diverse neighborhoods in the coming year. The community center De Singel in Waterschei plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion and development. It offers various programs, such as adult education classes, swap shops, communal meals, group health walks, and digital assistance, with most activities provided at minimal or no cost. Last year, Ligo LiMiNo organized driving lessons at the community center, attended by a group of Bulgarian women, many of whom had successfully completed the course. The same group later enrolled in Dutch language classes offered at the center.

As part of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, the City of Genk manages a Facebook page specifically for Bulgarian residents. This page provides essential information on living in Belgium and invites people to participate in Bulgarian community events and other local activities. The page has successfully increased participation in community events and attracted a growing number of followers.

5. Results

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei. The results are organized into three sections, each focusing on one of the key research questions of this study.

Migration motivations: This section explores the reasons that led Bulgarians to migrate to Genk, examining the economic, social, and personal push factors. It also delves into the profile of Bulgarian migrants residing in Waterschei.
Networks: This section examines the structure of social networks among Bulgarian migrants and how these networks influence various aspects of their lives after arriving in Belgium. It considers the direct effects on housing and employment, as well as the indirect influences on registration, access to healthcare, and education.
Future plans: The final section delves into the future plans of Bulgarian migrants in Genk, highlighting the factors that lead some individuals to seek long-term residency while others view their stay as temporary. It explores various aspects, including family composition, job security, language acquisition, integration into the local community, and their overall sentiments about life in Belgium.

Each section aims to provide a detailed account of migrants' experiences using quotations to convey their perspectives in their own words. To contextualize the interview excerpts, each respondent's gender, age, ethnic group, and years since migration are provided. Relevant statistics and data are also presented to enhance understanding, alongside insights gathered from interviews with city officials from the City of Genk and civic actors. Individual migrant stories are showcased using fictional names in separate text boxes to provide a more comprehensive portrayal of their experiences and viewpoints.

The majority of Bulgarian migrants interviewed in Waterschei are of Roma descent, followed by Turkish Bulgarians, while ethnic Bulgarians represent the smallest group. This distribution is also reflected in the sociodemographic profile of the sample on page 25, where additional statistical information about the sample can be found. The first Bulgarian migrants interviewed arrived in Genk in 2007 following Bulgaria's accession to the EU. Until 2013, only a small number had settled in the city. However, after labor restrictions were lifted in 2014, nearly half of the respondents arrived between 2014 and 2018. The remaining respondents migrated after 2019 and are referred to in this report as "new migrants". In terms of age distribution, there is a significant increase in new migrants aged 40 and older, particularly in the 50-59 age group. It is important to note that migration year, indicated in brackets next to each quote, refers to the year in which each migrant first arrived in Belgium. In some cases, this initial arrival may not accurately reflect their length of stay, as some migrants engage in circular migration.

5.1. Migration motivations

This section delves into the various factors motivating Bulgarians to migrate to Genk. It examines a range of interconnected reasons, including the broader economic context, family ties, personal circumstances and attitudes, and societal influence. By analyzing these elements, this study aims to provide background information on the realities faced by Bulgarian migrants before their departure, and to shape the profile of Bulgarian migrants living in Waterschei.

Economic motivations

The majority of the Bulgarians interviewed migrated to Genk primarily due to economic push factors, such as high unemployment rates, precarious working conditions, and low wages in Bulgaria. These issues affect all respondents to varying degrees, with some differences observed based on ethnicity. Among Roma respondents, unemployment is the most frequently cited reason for migration. Many interviewees had been facing high unemployment rates long before their decision to migrate, with several having never held a job in Bulgaria. A few Roma had temporary, low-skilled positions in areas like factory work, cleaning, and informal employment. The older generation of Roma nostalgically recalled the job security of the socialist era before 1989. Reflecting on the current job market in Bulgaria, one participant shared:

> *Finding work in Bulgaria is really tough. You need connections to find work. In our region, there is only one factory and people only get in if they know someone* (male, 50 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

Another participant highlighted the harsh reality they experienced by saying:

> *If the borders had remained closed, can you imagine what would have happened? And I'm not just talking about us* (Roma Bulgarians)*, but also others. Many young people would be living in prison now. For example, if you are a father and your child is going hungry day after day, with no means to earn money, you might even consider robbing or hurting someone for just five levs* (female, 46 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 13 years in Belgium).

In contrast to the Roma respondents, who were primarily driven by high levels of unemployment, Turkish Bulgarians participating in the interviews indicated that most had jobs in Bulgaria before migrating to Genk. However, these jobs were largely low-paying and often associated with precarious working conditions, providing inadequate compensation for the migrants and their families. A few participants shared their difficulties in the Bulgarian labor market by stating:

> *I worked in a store as a sales consultant. I worked six days a week, including Saturday. I worked an average of 10 hours per day for a salary of 800-900 lev (around €450)* (female, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

> *I worked in a bakery because I am skilled in baking bread and pastries. I worked, but the lack of salary was a major issue. They did not pay me regularly - I went on without a salary for three months, and I never got it […]* (female, 44 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 5 months in Belgium).

All interviewed ethnic Bulgarians were employed in Bulgaria before departure, but also expressed concerns about low wages not meeting the needs of their families. One interviewee stated:

> *I always had a job* (in Bulgaria)*, yes. But it was mainly thanks to my husband* (who worked abroad)*, who earned more, that we were able to get by back then. If we had to depend only on my salary, we probably wouldn't have managed* (female, 40 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 7 years in Belgium).

Lalka is a 52-year-old Roma Bulgarian who first came to Belgium two years ago. With a cheerful face and a warm personality, she reflects on her childhood, which was marked by hardship. Her parents were woodcutters who worked in the forests. When they went into the forest, there was no one left in the village to take their children to school, so they often took all their children with them and lived in tents for months at a time. She managed to attend school until the second grade, around the age of nine. Despite her limited education, she was a diligent student, and her teacher always praised her dedication and hard work. Lalka can read and write. As an adult, she continued to work in the forest, but the landscape changed dramatically after the privatization of public lands following the fall of socialism. Regulations regarding woodcutting became stricter, and work opportunities dwindled. Lalka has three grown children and a few grandchildren in Bulgaria. Though she couldn't further her own education, she ensured that all her children obtained secondary degrees and earned their driving licenses, including her stepdaughters, which fills her with pride. Lalka was the first member of her family to migrate abroad. Before settling in Belgium, she spent several years working in France with her husband. She recalls her initial departure from Bulgaria, tearfully riding the bus for two days, mourning the separation from her children. Although she did not see them for years, she had a clear goal: to provide her family with a home. The money they earned in France enabled them to buy a small house in a Bulgarian village. Now, by migrating to Belgium, Lalka hopes to make renovations to that house and secure a better future for her children, though she is uncertain about whether she will achieve this goal.

Among the broader economic motivations, some migrants leave Bulgaria with a specific financial objective related to real estate, which involves purchasing, constructing, or renovating houses or apartments in Bulgaria. At the time of the interview, several respondents indicated that they had bought a house in Bulgaria after migrating. These individuals were long-term migrants who had lived not only in Belgium but also in other countries. Three respondents are currently focused on renovating the properties they have acquired in Bulgaria. However, none of the newer migrants interviewed mentioned buying a house as their reason for migrating. One respondent stated:

> *From Greece, I managed to buy myself three houses. I have achieved much more from Greece than here. Here, with all the bills, gas, electricity, and water, all of our money stays in the country. We just earn enough to get by* (female, 54 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

Family-driven motivations

Family dynamics significantly influence the economic factors driving migration. Before migrating, all Bulgarian interviewees lived with close family members, including partners, children, and parents; none lived alone in Bulgaria. The decision to migrate, including who would make the move, is always a collective family decision. Two common scenarios emerge: some migrants relocated to Belgium to provide financial support for their families remaining in Bulgaria, while others moved with their families to settle together in Belgium.

Among the interviewees, fifteen migrants provided financial support to family members in Bulgaria. The recipients of this support are mostly children, including adult children.

> *I have two children in Bulgaria, one is 14 and the other is 24. I send money almost every month. The older one is grown up and wants a car like any young man. My wife lost her job a month ago, so I need to send money* (male, 49 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

Some migrants also send money back to Bulgaria to provide occasional financial assistance to their parents or siblings during difficult times, such as health issues. One interviewee elaborated on this practice, saying:

> *I send money whenever my family needs it. I do not have a fixed amount every month, just when they ask me. This is normal family practice. They would do the same for me* (male, 28 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

A few participants also sent money to family members living in Germany and England, when needed.

The second group of migrants resides with their immediate families in Waterschei and does not remit financial support back to Bulgaria. A total of 17 migrants live in Belgium with their minor children. Some shared that their main motivation for relocating to Genk was to secure a better future for their children: *The education of my children, the future of my children. It was a complex decision, not purely economic* (female, 40 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 7 years in Belgium).

Among the migrants living in Waterschei with their families, some had one family member (typically the male) migrate first, work for a while, and then bring the rest of the family over. While this scenario falls under the category of "family reunification", many migrants reflect on the economic motivations for their migration collectively as a family unit. Another group consists of migrant families who arrived in Genk all at once or within a short timeframe, which is particularly common among recent migrants. There are also cases of parents coming to Belgium to reunite with their adult children. One participant, the eldest in the sample, moved to Genk to assist her family by taking care of her grandchildren. She shared:

> *I initially came here for a visit. However, I ended up staying here for the sake of my children. When my grandchild was seven months old my daughter-in-law started attending school. They provide me with food and they look after me* (female, 62 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

None of the participants mentioned the social security and welfare system in Belgium as a reason to migrate, which aligns with existing literature. Only one respondent cited the inability to earn enough in Bulgaria to cover his young son's hospital treatment as the primary motivation for moving to Belgium.

Individual open-mindedness amidst a culture of migration

The decision to migrate is deeply rooted in a cultural context. A significant majority of participants had family members in Bulgaria who had migrated previously, either permanently or temporarily. Only individuals aged 40 and older indicated that they were the first in their families to migrate. This suggests a "culture of migration", as documented in existing literature, that is prevalent at both personal and community levels. Two respondents described this sentiment as follows:

> *Growing up, I noticed everyone going abroad. Upon their return, they had new Western cars, money and more. I told myself that when I was old enough, I*

would try my luck as well. And just like that, 20 years have passed since living abroad (male, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 6 months in Belgium).

A respondent who has worked for many years as a vendor selling jeans at markets across Bulgaria shared his insights on the culture of migration in Bulgaria as follows:

> *At the markets, I noticed fewer and fewer people. Many of them were migrating abroad. There were no customers, only elderly women. They asked me if I sold tsarvuli (traditional peasant footwear). No one was interested in jeans. So, I decided to sell off my stock and leave as well* (male, 51 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

In discussing their migration journeys, participants exhibited an "open" and "adventurous" mindset, often expressed through the ambition to pursue another life in a different country. This aligns with literature that highlights such attitudes among migrants. One participant explained this as follows:

> *I was looking for something new and something different. Like an adventure, to put it this way. Not specifically related to work or money. Not economic; just adventurous. To discover life in new places* (male, 28 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

The role of social networks in the decision to migrate

A significant number of Bulgarian migrants who participated in the interviews came from rural areas in the southeastern and northeastern parts of Bulgaria, including Ruse, Shumen, Razgrad, Sliven, and Kardzhali. These areas, characterized by high concentrations of Turkish and Roma Bulgarians, have high unemployment rates and declining populations. Notably, there were no participants from the Bulgarian northwest, which is one of the poorest and most rapidly declining regions in Bulgaria, with a significant Roma population.

More than half of the study participants came from the region of Ruse. Although the qualitative methodology used in this study does not allow the establishment of a definitive chain migration pattern from Ruse, there are clear indications of its existence. The presence of a social network from Ruse is evident, as migrants frequently mention several villages in the region as their places of origin. One participant explicitly stated: *I am from Ruse. Most people here are also from Ruse* (female, 46 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Bulgarian migrants in Genk often identify social networks as a significant factor in their migration. However, these networks typically influence the specific choice to come to Genk, rather than the general decision to migrate, as confirmed in the literature. One migrant explained:

> *We already made the decision with my husband to migrate because we saw we can't live in Bulgaria. If it were not Belgium, it would have been the Netherlands, or Germany, or England. But the decision was made* (female, 47 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

Almost all Bulgarian migrants settled in Genk immediately after arriving in Belgium, with a few first arriving in neighboring cities like Maasmechelen, Zutendaal, and Heusden-Zolder. When asked why they chose Genk as their destination, many referred to their families, with one explaining:

> *My husband's relatives have been living here in Genk for 15 years […].They helped us a lot. We would not have come here if it were not for them. We also have many acquaintances from our village, who live in Genk. We have a strong community here* (female, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

The level of information and preparedness that migrants possess prior to migrating to Genk is influenced by their social network. The interviews revealed that almost none of the participants proactively sought information before departure. One participant mentioned: *I did not search for information. I just took the bus and departed. I knew I would be working in construction, but beyond that, I was clueless where I was going* (male, 42 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium). Despite most migrants having access to the Internet prior to migration, very few conducted any research beforehand, highlighting their dependence on social networks for information. The reliance on social networks can be both beneficial and misleading. When asked about what they had heard from their social networks, one person said:

> *From friends, I know about the salaries here. They make €400-500 per week. Even if you pay for accommodation and what not, you can still be left with €300. This is 600 lev. And then you do a simple math, and you realize that it is better to be here than there* (referring to Bulgaria) (male, 34 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

However, there are also instances in which migrants feel misled by the information they receive in advance. For instance, one person stated:

> *I recall people saying that life is really good here. However, once I arrived and saw the reality, their words were less convincing. I believe that this is all about fate. If you are lucky and find a good job, you will have a good life. If not, then you will not. That's the way it is* (male, 51 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Nevertheless, a small number of individuals from both Turkish and ethnic Bulgarian backgrounds, with higher educational profiles, conducted extensive research and were well-prepared before departing.

> *I heard that the quality of life is better in terms of healthcare, education, and higher salaries. Overall, a higher standard of living and my expectations were fulfilled. I did not have unrealistic fantasies about coming to a perfect place where all my problems would be solved effortlessly. Everything I hoped to find, I found* (female, 40 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 7 years in Belgium).

Social networks not only play a role in providing information before departure but also impact the spontaneity of their migration. During the interviews, it was noted that many migrants decided to migrate from one day to another, without extensive planning. This is also observed in the literature, in which migration is described as a life-changing event that may not always be carefully considered. One migrant mentioned:

> *It was a very spontaneous decision to come to Genk. I was at first going to Austria to be with my mom, but due to some issues, I almost immediately left to be with my father in Genk instead* (female, 22 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 2 years in Belgium).

At times, the reason for spontaneous migration to Genk can be linked to prior migration experiences, which instill a sense of readiness in migrants to make swift decisions about relocating once more. Conversely, in other instances, the opposite may be true.

> *When I moved to England, it was a spontaneous decision. However, in Belgium, I took the time to plan. I spent 2-3 months preparing, figuring out what I needed, what documents to bring, and learning about the job market and life in Belgium* (male, 28 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

In conclusion, the migration patterns of Bulgarians to Genk are shaped by a complex interplay of economic push factors, family dynamics, culture of migration, social networks, and personal circumstances and attitudes. Economic drivers such as high unemployment and low wages are the primary motivators, with some variations across different ethnic groups. Family plays a crucial role in migration decisions, which are often made collectively with the goal of either moving together or providing financial aid back home. Additionally, the prevalent culture of migration in Bulgarian society, reinforced by the experiences of relatives and friends, encourages individuals to seek better opportunities abroad. Social networks significantly influence the decision to migrate specifically to Genk, offering essential pre-departure information, though this information is not always reliable.

5.2. The role of social networks

While the previous section examined the influence of social networks on pre-departure decision making, this section focuses on their role once migrants are in Belgium. It explores how these networks impact various aspects such as housing and employment, as well as their indirect effects on registration, healthcare, and education.

The structure of Bulgarian migrants' social networks
Prior to their initial migration to Belgium, the social networks of Bulgarian migrants were mainly concentrated in Genk or nearby cities, with two exceptions where networks were based in Brussels and Wallonia. Bulgarian migrants' social networks are classified by the quantity and quality of their ties and are divided into strong-tie and weak-tie networks.

Strong-tie network

Networks consisting of close and extended families are considered strong-tie networks for Bulgarian migrants. Of the 45 respondents, 14 had close family members such as partners, children, grandparents, or siblings living in Genk. A close family network is common among Roma and Turkish Bulgarians. For these migrants, the decision to migrate to Genk was relatively straightforward, as they could rely entirely on their families for their support.

> *I came to join my husband, he had everything here […]. He came here in 2018. We came for a holiday, and I ended up staying. The children were having summer vacation at that time. In the end, I stayed here. On September 15, I sent them* (the children) *back for school* (in Bulgaria)*, and I stayed because I started working here with documents* (female, 33 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 4 years in Belgium).

A number of Bulgarian migrants benefit from a combination of close and extended family networks in Genk, creating an advantageous situation for receiving support. The extended family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, forms the largest network of Bulgarian migrants residing in Genk. In total, thirty-five Bulgarian migrants reported having extended families in Genk. Turkish Bulgarian respondents reported the highest number of extended family connections, followed by Roma Bulgarians, with two ethnic Bulgarians also indicating similar ties. An extended family network, especially one composed of many members, offers a lot of support and reliability. Many migrants shared that they counted exclusively on their extended families for their support when they arrived.

> *My uncle and my aunt were here […]. They said to me, there is work, you want to come. And so I came to them* (female, 32 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 5 years in Belgium).

The quantity of the strong network is particularly evident among Turkish Bulgarians, many of whom reported having a large extended family in Genk. For instance, a woman who had been residing in Germany shared:

> *My cousins are here. They came a long time ago, already 10-11 years. Some have their own houses and properties […]. You cannot normally rely on anyone; you need to come with your own money. However, in difficult moments, they are here for me. They have never let me down* (female, 44 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 5 months in Belgium).

Weak-tie network

Weak-tie networks, comprising friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, were mentioned by six respondents who noted that these connections aided them in their journey to Genk. Despite being considered weak ties, they still contribute to the migration trajectory of Bulgarians. One migrant shared:

> *I didn't have relatives in Genk, just acquaintances. They told me, "There is work" and I left for Genk. Like every new beginning, this was very difficult […]. I managed to save a little money before departure, around 2000 lev (€1,000). When I arrived here my money flew away instantaneously. With help from one acquaintance and another, I managed to get by* (male, 57 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

Additionally, four migrants reported having no network in Genk prior to their arrival. Their primary motivation for moving to Genk was to seek employment, as they had established contact with someone in Bulgaria who promised to assist them in finding a job. These respondents were all Roma Bulgarians, comprising two new migrants and two who arrived in 2014. One respondent shared: *A man we knew from Bulgaria took us. We travelled in his van. We had no money, but we paid him back later* (female, 49 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium). The literature highlights the role of Bulgarian minibus drivers in providing transportation and referring migrants to jobs. Their role is further examined in the sections on housing and employment.

Housing

This section explores how social networks influence migrants' housing arrangements and living conditions upon their arrival in Belgium. Social networks composed of close and extended family members in Genk play a significant role in assisting migrants with housing. This support is manifested in three ways.

Firstly, upon arrival, migrants often find temporary accommodations in the homes of close or extended family members. While this arrangement typically lasts a few weeks, it can sometimes extend until the migrants are able to support themselves. Respondents expressed a reluctance to stay with extended family members for long periods, as these households usually have their own families and limited living spaces, which can lead to overcrowding. Consequently, migrants are motivated to secure their own housing as quickly as possible.

Close and extended family members often assist migrants in securing housing by leveraging their broader social networks in Genk. Housing arrangements typically occur through word of mouth, which simplifies the process for migrants who have connections in the area. Practices such as household swapping and subletting are prevalent; when one Bulgarian migrant vacates a rented property, they usually help find another Bulgarian to take it over. Additionally, subletting arrangements are common, where the primary Bulgarian tenant sublets part of their accommodation to another migrant to share the rental costs.

Many migrants in this study indicated that they did not search for housing online or through real-estate agencies. Only three respondents mentioned that their extended family helped them find accommodation through advertisements. One participant, , who currently works in transportation, described, their experience as a vicious cycle:

> *We were always asked to prove that I had an income in Belgium. As I was still looking for a job at that time, I could not provide any proof. At the same time, potential employers wanted me to provide them with my address in Belgium. Fortunately, within a week, I found a company willing to hire me. I used the contract from my new job to show it to the accommodation owner. And to my new employer, I presented the rental contract […]* (male, 44 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 8 years in Belgium).

The third way in which family networks support housing arrangements is through the reunification of newly arrived migrants with their spouses or parents. In these instances, they often move in directly with family members who have already secured housing in Genk. Occasionally, these family members upgrade from shared rooms to apartments to provide better accommodation for their newly arrived relatives.

Many individuals expressed gratitude to their close and extended families for their assistance and support upon arrival. There is a strong sense of pride among Turkish Bulgarians, who share that their families have established good lives in Genk, owning their homes and businesses. One interviewee, who had been living in Genk for ten years, shared that he initially had an extended family in Brussels but helped them relocate to Genk, where living costs are lower, and he assisted them in finding accommodation.

Interestingly, even migrants with weak networks relied on these connections for temporary accommodation until they secured employment. One Roma Bulgarian shared that he stayed with friends until he could get on his feet. Another interviewee mentioned that she and her husband knew only one person in Genk, who assisted them: *We left for Belgium, and we had one acquaintance here. This person said to us, "I am going back to Bulgaria, and your husband can take over my job and accommodation". Bless this man, it really turned out to be good* (female, 47 years old, Roma Bulgarian).

A female migrant who arrived in Genk five years ago through an acquaintance shared that she initially stayed at a camping site in Belgium. Two others have also mentioned the use of camping sites as temporary housing for new migrants. One person shared:

> *I lived at the camping when I first arrived, but man, what do I tell you? The living conditions are not bad there, but the people who live there […] they asked to pay €300 per month per person. We were with 4-5 people in one room […] I ended up living there through a Polish guy I had met, who said it was best to rent there because everywhere else was more expensive. And so he brought us there. And we were 4-5 in a room in the beginning, but then more and more started coming. So, I moved out […]* (male, 57 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

Four interview participants found housing through a Bulgarian minibus driver with whom they had arrived. Unlike simple acquaintances, who might expect future help and solidarity from their networks without demanding anything in return, minibus drivers have a clear economic interest in relation to migrants. Typically, those migrants rent a room in a shared apartment, rather than separate housing units. One migrant explained: *Someone we knew from Bulgaria arranged our transportation and accommodation. We had no income but we managed to repay him after I started working. You know how it goes […]. No, we did not have any family or friends in Genk* (female, 29 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

Additionally, four interviewed migrants reported that they either lived in or were currently residing in housing provided by their employers. All of these migrants are Roma Bulgarians, three of whom are new migrants, with one arriving in 2014. In some instances, it is suspected that the term "employer" actually refers to a Dutch recruitment agency that offers jobs in the Netherlands while also facilitating housing arrangements for migrants in Belgium. Those usually refer to their employers as a single person and indicate that they have a Turkish background. Whether these individuals are from Belgium or the Netherlands is unclear; however, in three cases, migrants say that they are working in the Netherlands. In one case, a migrant reported that their rent was directly deducted from their salaries. In this arrangement, the migrant does not pay rent or bills; however, their salary is much lower than what they would normally receive.

Another participant who lives in an accommodation provided by her employer works as a caretaker for an elderly woman with a Turkish background. In this unique work-living arrangement, her employer covers not only her private room but also all bills and consumption.

Among migrants, no one reported experiences or fears of becoming homeless or living on the streets.

Mila, a 49-year-old migrant from Sofia and mother of three children, arrived in Belgium with her husband a year ago in search of a normal life. They travelled from Bulgaria with a minibus driver, whom they could not pay upfront, and agreed to repay once they secured employment. The minibus driver referred them to accommodation in a city near Genk. Initially, Mila and her husband stayed in a shared apartment with other migrants, paying €300 per person and €600 for both Mila and her husband, inclusive of all bills. However, Mila was not allowed to register

at this address. When their eldest son joined them, the rent increased to €900 for the shared apartment. After a few months, Mila decided to move out and found new accommodation through a person with a Turkish background, whom she refers to as her "employer." Currently, she pays €200 per person in the new home and lives on a separate floor with her family. Mila has no direct contact with the landlord. Her employer handles rent payments, and Mila has not signed a rental contract. Mila is allowed to register her address at this new place, which is a priority for her. Her other two sons, one of whom is underage and needs to attend school, recently came to Belgium as well. Although Mila relies on her employer for both work and housing, she is grateful for their assistance. They also provide her with information on registration. As she points out, one always depends on someone else in life.

Rack renting in Waterschei

The primary aim of this section is to explore the City of Genk's concerns regarding exploitative practices in housing among Bulgarian migrants and to shed light on the potential networks involved in these issues. It examines indicators of housing exploitation, with a focus on housing quality, rental prices, and the presence of formal rental agreements.

Housing quality

During the interviews, Bulgarian migrants expressed their awareness of the outdated housing units prevalent in Waterschei, as highlighted in the case study (Chapter 4). One individual stated: *All buildings here are old, all are old. The new ones, they do not give to us* (male, 53 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium). This sentiment reflects a shared experience among Bulgarian migrants concerning the quality of available housing. Housing inspections conducted by the City of Genk confirmed these concerns, revealing that many registered Bulgarian migrants live in substandard living conditions.

Assessing housing quality from migrants' perspective is not entirely objective for two reasons. First, their points of reference are shaped by previous housing experiences, which, in some cases, such as those described in the literature regarding individuals living in the GUS, involve significantly worse conditions. As a result, some migrants may view their current living situations as satisfactory even if they do not meet Belgian standards. Second, migrants may hesitate to voice complaints because of fear that expressing their discontent could lead to eviction.

Since the initiation of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, the frequency of inspections in Waterschei has increased, which has not gone unnoticed by Bulgarian migrants. While these inspections may prevent some migrants from complaining, they also raise awareness among others about their right to decent housing. When asked whether the landlord had made any repairs in the house they rented, one migrant explained: *It's required by law. They come once a year to check us, and when they see that this and that is not ok, they require the owner to fix it* (female, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium). Clarification: the City of Genk does not conduct annual inspections, but this was how this migrant described their experience.

Half of the migrants interviewed did not express any complaints about their living conditions when asked about the quality of their accommodations or issues, such as mould or needed repairs. This group includes all migrants who obtained housing through Bulgarian minibusdrivers or whose accommodations were provided by their

employers. Additionally, nearly all migrants renting shared apartments were reluctant to share insights regarding their living conditions. A common characteristic among those who do not complain is that the majority are Bulgarian Romas. This lack of complaints can be attributed to several factors, including low expectations, fear of repercussions, and a sense of contentment with temporary circumstances. As one migrant illustrated:

> *It's okay for me. As long as I have a roof over my head, I do not need more. I just need a job. I have a bed here where I can sleep. This is not my home, where I need to take care of things. A small room is enough. A little table inside. I come back from work, lie down, sleep, and then back to work. That is how I want it, simple […]. It's only temporary. I do not know what might happen tomorrow* (male, 52 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 2 years in Belgium).

The next group of migrants, comprising twelve interviewees, reported that the quality of their housing was good. Several mentioned that their accommodation was either new or had recently been renovated when they moved in. This reflects a positive shift towards improved living conditions for some migrants, offering them a safer and more comfortable living environment. One participant described their experience as follows:

> *My apartment is nice and good, and everything inside is new. Yes. You know, when I say new, the toilet, bathroom, kitchen, everything is new. It is not an old apartment. I am the first renter; I have been there for two years. And I waited for this apartment to be ready so I could move in* (female, 38 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 6 years in Belgium).

It is common for Bulgarian migrants to undertake renovations in the housing they rent. Four participants mentioned making significant renovations, while others discussed handling minor repairs themselves instead of relying on their landlords. This proactive approach underscores their commitment to improving their living conditions for as much as they can. One migrant shared:

> *Well, we rented a house. It was of bad quality, but my partner is very handy. When we moved in, he immediately started renovating. He did everything inside - the bathroom, the toilet, and the rooms - he did everything. And our landlord came in and said, "You know, with the renovation, for the first two or three months you can live for free". Everything is now fixed. It has become nice for living. No dampness or various other things. It's very, very nice now* (female, 46 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Ten interviewees rated their housing conditions as poor, with an equal representation from both Turkish and Roma ethnic backgrounds. Despite having ties with close and extended family members in Belgium, these individuals often found themselves in substandard housing. This pattern suggests that migrants might unintentionally steer each other toward inadequate living conditions, creating a difficult cycle to break free from. A few Bulgarian migrants have used illustrative comparisons to describe their living conditions, such as "*if you let a cat inside, it will run away*" and "*the rooms were made for dogs*". One migrant reported living in an adapted garage in the back alleys of the main streets of Waterschei. Another is living in a building listed for demolition, and is aware of the situation. She hopes that the city of Genk will provide them with new accommodations when they are evicted.

Some migrants express dissatisfaction with how the landlord manages the property where they live, and actively seek other options. As illustrated by one migrant:

I'm not satisfied anymore. It's falling apart. Yes, this is broken; that is broken; this is old; that is old. I tell him (the owner), *"Let's renovate, let's make it new, let's invest". However, people do not want to give money. And so, I told him that by the end of December, I found an apartment in the center, and I will take that one. At the moment, there are still people living there* (male, 51 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Anna, a 44-year-old Turkish Bulgarian, faced significant housing issues shortly after arriving in Belgium in the summer of 2023. She migrated together with her husband and son, renting an apartment with the assistance of their extended family. The apartment was located in a semi-attached house in the back alleys of Hovelzavelaan. According to Anna, the rental agreement was legitimate, complete with a contract and a two-month deposit. However, in December, their gas and electricity were suddenly cut off. It turned out that the building they rented was registered under a number on the main street where another family lived, meaning that Anna's utilities were billed under other renters' names. Despite paying a share of €200 per month for gas and electricity, as requested by the landlord, Anna never received an invoice for those utilities. Consequently, Anna's family was left in the cold with no fault of their own. The owner refused to address the issue, insisting that it was their problem to resolve with the other renters. One week later, Anna fell ill with bronchitis and battled it for 40 days. Although the electricity was eventually restored, the heating remained nonfunctional until they moved out. The family used tea-water heaters and purchased an external refillable gas bottle for cooking. Upon moving out, the landlord withheld the deposit for one month, claiming that they had used too much electricity during the months without gas. Anna has since moved on from these difficult times and is currently grateful for their new accommodation, where they maintain a comfortable temperature year-round.

Rental agreement

The possession of written rental agreements among Bulgarian migrants varies based on the type of housing. Individuals living in separate apartments or houses, which account for the majority of Bulgarian migrants, typically have written agreement with their landlords. However, it is likely that many migrants have not thoroughly reviewed and understood the terms of their contracts, including their legal rights and responsibilities. Additionally, none of the migrants reported having an official property description and were unaware if their contract is registered with the Federal Public Service (FOD).

In contrast, migrants renting rooms in shared apartments do not have formal rental agreements. Renting without a contract can be appealing to Bulgarian migrants, as it provides them with the flexibility to move out whenever they wish without the burden of having paid a security deposit. Moreover, those renting a room from their employer or referred to by a Bulgarian broker do not feel pressured to pay rent by a specific date if they encounter financial difficulties, they expect understanding and patience in such situations. However, living without a contract places migrants at a significant disadvantage, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Many rental transactions are handled in cash, leaving migrants without legal rights in the event of disputes or evictions.

Housing Prices

The monthly rent paid by migrants for apartments in Waterschei typically ranges from €650 to €800, excluding utility bills. Surprisingly, there is little variation in rental rates between units described as poor and those considered good by the migrants. For example, migrants living in buildings slated for demolition reported paying €700 per month. The highest rent observed was €980 for a renovated three-bedroom house. During the interviews, it was challenging to pinpoint the precise living situations of Bulgarian migrants renting apartments in terms of their level of independence. Maze-like houses on streets such as Stalenstraat and Hoevenzavellaan are often divided into different apartments, as highlighted in the case study. Consequently, it remains unclear whether all migrants claiming to live in apartments have separate bathrooms and kitchens.

The respondents noted that room rents have been steadily increasing over the years. Approximately five years ago, the cost was €250, which has since risen to €300, and currently stands at €350 per month. Rents often include utility bills, and Internet access. However, there are still some unanswered questions regarding shared rooms. For instance, it is unclear whether the price is per room or per person, and there is uncertainty regarding whether migrants share rooms with unrelated individuals and the number of occupants in each room. One migrant, who shares a room with their partner, arranged by a Bulgarian minibus driver, pays €350 for the room. Another respondent reported the same price, indicating that she was alone in the room. In contrast, a Bulgarian man shares a room with his son, each paying €350 per month directly to the landlord. He noted that leaving clothes outside his wardrobe caused them to absorb various smells and dust from the house, suggesting poor housing quality. In addition to the €700 they pay for the room, they also contribute to the water bill every three months.

Determining whether a specific living situation qualifies as rack renting can be challenging, especially when based solely on Bulgarian migrants' accounts. Furthermore, assessing the extent of exploitative living conditions is difficult when migrants do not complain. However, situations where migrants live in converted garages or buildings slated for demolition, as noted during interviews, while still paying standard rental rates, are indicative of rack renting. Similarly, instances in which individuals pay €700 per month for a room shared by two people in poor condition are unmistakable examples of rack renting in Waterschei.

Based on the qualitative data from the interviews, it was not possible to obtain a clear understanding of the existence of a network related to housing exploitation. Some migrants mentioned that their current residence was the second property they had rented from the same landlord, or that another family they knew also had rental agreements with the same owner. In addition, migrants often find it difficult to openly discuss the details of these arrangements, making it challenging to fully comprehend the scope and impact of these practices.

The role of ethnicity and shared language in housing

Most Bulgarian migrants living in Waterschei rent accommodation from landlords of Turkish descent. This trend is influenced by two main factors. First, a significant portion of the properties in Waterschei is owned by individuals with a Turkish descent. Second, most migrants interviewed in this study speak Turkish, which facilitates easier communication with Belgian Turks. The shared language fosters the development of networks, particularly for migrants who do not speak the local languages. These enclaves encourage strong relationships between Turkish-speaking Bulgarian migrants

and local Belgians of Turkish descent, leading to increased social and economic interactions.

In conclusion, social networks play an important role in assisting Bulgarian migrants secure initial housing. However, the quality of housing varies widely, with many migrants facing substandard living conditions, such as outdated housing units, and residing in unofficial buildings. These issues underscore the overall poor quality of housing in Waterschei, where Bulgarian migrants are especially vulnerable to rack renting and often pay disproportionately high prices for inadequate housing units.

Employment

This section explores how social networks influence the employment pathways of Bulgarian migrants. It investigates the connections between network structures and various forms of employment including formal, informal, hybrid, and self-employment. The analysis distinguishes between migrants working in Belgium and those in the Netherlands, acknowledging structural differences in these labor markets. The data presented encompass not only the current employment status of Bulgarian migrants but also their employment journeys since their initial arrival in Belgium. Consequently, some insights and quotes may not always reflect current circumstances or employment situations.

At the time of the interviews, thirty-seven migrants were employed, eight were not working, and only one was officially unemployed (DOP). Figure 5 provides an overview of the industries in which the interviewed migrants were typically employed.

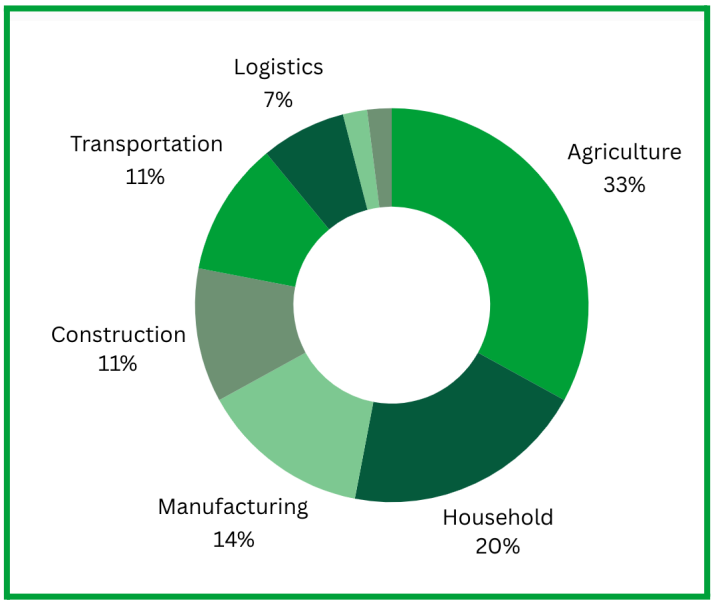

Figure 5: Employment sectors among interviewees

As illustrated in Figure 4, agriculture, including greenhouses, fruit picking, and flower cultivation, represents the most common sector of employment for Bulgarian migrants. Several interviewees also mentioned that they had previously worked in agriculture before moving on to other sectors. The second most common field of employment is household work, mainly organized through the voucher system. Manufacturing ranks third, including jobs in packaging, food production, and meat processing. Some interviewees frequently switch between manufacturing and agricultural work throughout the year. Construction jobs such as roofing, roadwork, and furniture assembly are also common, along with a few migrants employed in

logistics and transportation. Additionally, one respondent worked in the care sector, while another worked in the engineering sector. Several respondents mentioned prior employment in supermarkets and fast-food restaurants, although none currently worked in these sectors.

The sectors of employment for the interviewed migrants show clear distinctions based on gender and ethnicity. Women predominantly work in domestic roles. In agriculture, there is a slight majority of women among workers, although this may be influenced by the limited sample size. Both men and women are involved in food processing and packaging. Men are more frequently employed in construction, logistics, and transportation. Ethnically, Roma participants predominantly fill positions in agriculture, whereas Turkish Bulgarians primarily occupy jobs in construction. Employment in other sectors is more evenly distributed across the ethnic groups. The migrants who participated in the interviews worked in Belgium and the Netherlands. Of these, 17 indicated that they were working in the Netherlands, while the others were either employed in Belgium at the time of the interviews or were unemployed. Recruitment in the Netherlands typically takes place through recruitment agencies, whereas employment in Belgium is typically obtained directly.

Social networks remain important in helping migrants secure employment, with nearly all Bulgarian migrants finding work through information gained from their strong and weak ties. However, these networks play a less active role in employment than in housing. As one respondent stated: *I did not get help from my family in finding a job; they only introduced me to a Turk who offered me a job* (male, 44 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 9 years in Belgium).

In the four cases where Bulgarian migrants lacked a social network in Belgium and arrived in Genk with minibus drivers, these drivers also referred them to their first jobs. It is believed that these middlemen have spent time working in Belgium or the Netherlands and have connections with employers seeking personnel. Minivan drivers can also provide transportation to migrant workplaces. Insights from the interviews, supported by information from city officials, indicate that there are three Bulgarian middlemen in the Genk area. However, it remains unclear if all of them are connected to the interviewed participants and are still active in this intermediary role.

Hybrid employment in the Netherlands

This section begins by examining the employment networks in the Netherlands, where the largest group of Bulgarian migrants interviewed is employed within the same structure. At the time of the interviews, 17 migrants were working in the Netherlands, while others had previously held jobs there. Most labor migrants in the Netherlands are employed in the agricultural sector, followed by logistics and manufacturing. Almost all respondents were Roma Bulgarians, with only five being Turkish Bulgarians. The majority were new migrants, with an equal gender ratio and balanced distribution across age groups ranging from 30 to 59 years. All Bulgarian migrants working in the Netherlands have low levels of education; two migrants reported having no formal schooling, and very few had completed secondary education. Notably, a significant portion of this group was from the Ruse region in Bulgaria.

The cross-border mobility of Bulgarian migrants in Genk is influenced by higher accommodation prices in the Netherlands relative to their earned wages, as well as the overall scarcity of housing. Additionally, the regulations and permit policies in the Netherlands regarding housing for foreign workers, along with associated inspections, make it challenging to accommodate labor migrants working off the books or under

dubious arrangements, according to city officials. Three migrants reported that during their stay in Belgium, they attempted to relocate to the Netherlands, but were unable to afford the living costs. As a result, many migrants travel back and forth, sometimes covering over 200 km per day, to secure employment.

It is believed that nearly all Bulgarian migrants employed in the Netherlands work via Dutch recruitment agencies. Some of these agencies, mentioned in the previous section on housing, also provide accommodations for migrants in Belgium. Many respondents refer to them as their "employer", often implying a single individual rather than an organization. It remains unclear whether this is because the agencies are one-person operations or because migrants primarily interact with just one representative. Online research on the recruitment agencies mentioned has revealed significant variation in size and scope. While some agencies have a limited online presence, others have extensive websites, large portfolios, and broad networks across multiple provinces in the Netherlands. Some participants mentioned working for Dutch recruitment agencies that employ over 300 Bulgarian migrants, while others reported that around 100 Bulgarians were employed at their workplaces. This suggests that despite the existence of thousands of recruitment agencies, a select few predominantly facilitate employment for Bulgarian migrants.

Recruitment agencies connect Bulgarian migrants to various companies, primarily in the agricultural, manufacturing, and logistics sectors, that are seeking workers. One interviewee described this process as follows:

> *I met my employer through a friend. The Turk arranges everything; he tells you, you will work here, you will work there. You cannot choose yourself. When you are at the workplace, he translates for you – you need to do this, that, and that [...]. He tells you how much you will earn. He takes your passport and makes a contract. Always with a contract* (female, 33 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 4 years in Belgium).

Employment networks in the Netherlands are characterized by a complex system involving multiple intermediaries. When a company, such as a greenhouse, requires labor workers, it typically contacts a Dutch recruitment agency to source employees. The agency may directly connect with Bulgarian migrants seeking work, or involve middlemen with connections in Belgium to find suitable candidates. Companies may not be fully aware of all the intermediaries involved, as they only interact with the official recruitment agency in the chain. The role and structure of these middlemen are not well understood or clearly defined in this study.

Working arrangements in the Netherlands are generally formalized, with most migrants having contracts. However, illegal and precarious practices also exist within the legal framework, a situation referred to as hybrid employment (Williams, 2009). Most Bulgarian migrants working in the Netherlands receive weekly contracts and payslips during their employment. According to the interviewees, these contracts are automatically renewed, so there is no need to sign them each week. Some migrants describe these as "*some kind of contract*", suggesting doubts about the legitimacy of the agreements. In a few instances, migrants working in the Netherlands were unaware that they had working contracts.

According to most interviewees, payments from Dutch employers are typically deposited into Dutch bank accounts that their "employer" (recruitment agency) helped them open. Others received payments into their Bulgarian bank accounts, and one participant mentioned using Revolut to receive their salary. While the reported hourly

wages are close to the minimum, there is a general lack of awareness among Bulgarian migrants regarding the official minimum wage. One migrant stated: *We never get less than €10.50 per hour* (female, 49 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium). The average hourly rate reported by others is around €12, with a maximum of €13.27 reported by one migrant.

One migrant described the working conditions in the Netherlands as follows:

> *[…] the working conditions are hard. The EU made us slaves to these people. We work like robots. They monitor your percentages on the screen. If your percentage falls below 50% on one day, they may keep you the next day, but then they say goodbye. You do not have the right to sick days in the Netherlands. No way. I tell you, people think that in Bulgaria we are a cheating nation. But here they are much bigger cheaters than us. You know why? Say you registered a company. The factory owner does not care for the worker. He is not interested in them. He pays the company €30-40 per hour. And the Turk pays me €10-12. […] What I also found out is that the company also takes your vacation money. […] No doctor coverage, no insurance. Nothing. I get paid €12.50 per hour for 7 hours and 15 minutes per day. I receive €400 per week* (male, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

Another concern raised by Bulgarian migrants working in the Netherlands is the lack of insurance on the workfloor and lack of healthcare coverage. One migrant mentioned an instance in which his girlfriend had an accident at work with a forklift. She had to cover her own medical checkup costs after the accident, because she did not have health insurance in Belgium or the Netherlands. Due to her injuries, she could not return to work for two months and did not receive any financial compensation from her employer, or sick days during her unemployment. The topic of healthcare coverage is explored in more detail later in this chapter.

The payment system of holiday allowances and tax returns is also not well understood by migrants. The majority of them do not receive holiday allowances, and there were a few who mentioned that their employers deduct €1 from their salary per hour or day (it was unclear) to provide a holiday allowance, but they could not elaborate further. Many Bulgarian migrants have limited knowledge of their rights and obligations, and even if there is misconduct, they are unable to identify it.

None of the Bulgarian migrants reported concerns about irregular breaks, inhumane behavior, or fines deducted from salaries. These issues, often highlighted in the literature on labor exploitation, were specifically explored during interviews. There were a few cases in which migrants had to purchase company shoes for work, but this did not raise any concerns. Weekends are typically off for many migrants, and if they do work, they do not receive a higher pay for weekend shifts.

Nikolay is a 43-year-old man who migrated to Belgium three years ago. He comes from a hardworking family with a background in grape farming in Bulgaria, and he takes pride in his agricultural knowledge and work ethics. He secured a job in the Netherlands through a cousin whose daughter had worked for the same employer. Every morning at 4 o'clock, Nikolay quietly leaves his home to avoid waking his

child. He drives around Genk in his minibus, picking up four to five coworkers from different addresses who work alongside him in Venlo. He covers an average of 1,500 km per week, yet his employer does not reimburse him for the transportation costs. Despite repeatedly asking for €100 per week of gas, he did not receive any compensation. Instead, he relies on his colleagues for contributions - €10 per person per day- which helps to cover gasoline expenses and leaves some extra for vehicle maintenance. However, when the van breaks down, repair costs often exceed extra earnings. Nikolay's employer, a recruiter of Turkish descent, provided him with a temporary contract rather than a weekly contract. Last year (2023), his salary was €11.50 per hour, but he hopes to earn more this year. He rarely sees his employer in person as he does not visit the workplace often. Nikolay feels that he is frequently taken advantage of. He recalled one instance when he worked on a holiday; the Dutch team leader jokingly told him he needed to work extra hard because he would be paid double for that day. However, when Nikolay received his payslip, he realized that he had not received double pay for the holiday. This is just one of the many instances in which he feels unfairly treated by his employer.

Questions remain regarding whether any misconduct occurs on the direct employer's side (e.g. the greenhouse). Several checks conducted in 2023 by the City of Genk, in collaboration with EURIEC, have found that operations on the direct employer's side are legitimate. Migrants have expressed a desire to find direct employment and avoid intermediaries, but they report that contracts are structured to prevent them from being hired directly, without a one-year interval.

When migrants who experienced precarious working conditions were asked why they did not switch to another recruitment agency, one respondent replied: *All of them are cheaters. There are many of them; I've heard from other people as well. In the Netherlands, but also here in Genk, only these kinds of Turkish companies* (male, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

A recurring theme in the interviews was the scarcity of jobs, especially in the agricultural sector, which is highly seasonal. Since the interviews were conducted in the winter months, this likely reflects the lack of available work during that period. One migrant shared:

> *I came here a few weeks ago, but there is no work. I hope that, after New Year, there will be more work. But I do not know when. It is very difficult, and I am also here with my child* (18+)*. I am stuck. I cannot go back to Bulgaria; you know how it is there* (female, 49 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

Bulgarian migrants working in the Netherlands often aspire to find regular employment in Belgium, following the example of other migrants who have succeeded in doing so.

Multiple forms of employment in Belgium

Most migrants working in Belgium are employed in the household sector, transportation, and construction, with a lower presence in agriculture and food processing. The employment structure of Bulgarian migrants in Belgium is more

diverse than in the Netherlands. This diversity includes formal, hybrid, informal, posted-workers, and self-employment. Twenty respondents were employed in Belgium at the time of interviews. Networks facilitating these various employment categories tend to be less complex and more easily understood from migrants' narratives compared to those in the Netherlands.

Formal employment

The second largest group of Bulgarian migrants, after those employed in the Netherlands, consists of individuals working within the formal employment structure in Belgium. Fourteen migrants who participated in the interviews held full- or part-time jobs. Those working under regular contracts in Belgium did not report experiencing precarious work conditions. This group primarily includes Turkish and ethnic Bulgarians, with only two Roma representatives having regular contracts. Most of these migrants have been in Belgium for a longer period, unlike the majority of Bulgarian migrants working in the Netherlands, who are primarily recent arrivals (2019 onwards). The quote below is from a respondent explaining how he found employment in Belgium:

> *[...]The barber next to my home here told me that a friend of his has a furniture store. Very big. And he offered to ask him if he needed employees. As a matter of fact, I have a diploma in this field* (secondary education with a specialization in furniture manufacturing and assembly)*. He called and asked me to go for an interview. He works with VDAB and offered me a job via them. He said the salary is very small, 1150 euros per month. But said, if you make it, in a sense physically and financially, after six months I will give you a permanent contract. I said I agree and that he can count on me. I earned his trust. I like the job, I am working diligently. As he promised, he gave me a permanent contract, and now I have it* (male, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 13 years in Belgium).

Most migrants in formal employment in Belgium possess higher educational levels than those working in the Netherlands, with many having completed secondary education. This suggests that low educational attainment acts as a barrier for individuals seeking formal employment, with only a small number of those with lower education being able to secure such positions. Notably, half of the formally employed migrants come from the Ruse region, indicating that the social network from Ruse play a role not only in employment within the hybrid structure in the Netherlands, but also influence formal employment opportunities in Belgium.

Among those currently in formal employment, only a few were able to secure jobs immediately upon arrival in Belgium, primarily in the transportation sector. A common trajectory can be observed, where most migrants initially worked in the Netherlands or were self-employed in Belgium before obtaining formal employment after several years. This pattern is exemplified by one migrant who shares her experience:

> *When I arrived, I started working in agriculture. We went to work for two or three months. We did not have any regular address. We did not have an apartment. Right now, I am working here at YY* (voucher system). I *have worked there for two years. They gave me a contract. They provided me with health insurance [...]. They completed all the necessary documents. I earn between €1,200 and 1,800. When there are hours available, I work. I take my grandchild to kindergarten and I am satisfied. In the beginning, it was very difficult. You know, the first years, they did not offer us work; we just went to two or three other places. Well, whoever wants to work, takes this job. For cleaning. If you do*

> *not steal, if you do not cause trouble, and you just want to live in Belgium without problems, nobody bothers you. I have no problem with anyone. I take my bag, I clean, and then I go home* (female, 46 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Several Bulgarian migrants in Belgium secured formal employment through ethnic enclave networks. A common example mentioned by multiple interviewees is found in the household sector, where a voucher system company operated by a local woman of Turkish descent offers jobs to Turkish-speaking Bulgarians in Turkish-speaking households. She is recognised for her efforts to help Bulgarian migrants obtain their first formal jobs in Belgium as well as for providing support with health insurance and registration.

Hybrid employment

Instances of hybrid employment in Belgium are limited, with only two migrants currently engaged in such arrangements. However, the small sample size is insufficient to draw broad conclusions. One of these migrants works in the care sector and indicates that she receives part of her payment from Brussels, presumably as a personal assistant, while the remainder of her salary is paid in cash.

Another Bulgarian migrant, who had lived in Belgium since a young age and completed her education, shared her experience of finding employment at a hotel in Genk. She remarked: *The woman was very nice, but the problem was that she registered me as a job student. I couldn't work more than 18 hours officially; the rest she was paying me in cash* (female, 20 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

There are also accounts of Bulgarian migrants who used to work in the agricultural sector in Belgium a few years ago. One migrant shared that he had a temporary contract and worked year-round rather than seasonally. He explained that he received his payment only when production began, stating: *The payment was correct. But you can't find a normal person who is ready to wait 7-8 months to get his salary.* Regarding his employer, the migrant commented: *They are a bit of cheaters. At first, they paid all in cash. Then they started paying via bank account and the half again in cash* (male, 47 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 11 years in Belgium).

Bogus self-employment can be categorized as a type of hybrid employment, which is further explored in this section.

Informal employment

Four respondents were believed to be engaged in the informal economy, specifically in agricultural or food processing roles. All four are of Roma ethnicity and arrived between 2014 and 2018. They engage in circular migration between Bulgaria and Belgium, maintaining official addresses in Bulgaria. These migrants reported that very little work is currently available to them. The primary reason for classifying them as part of the informal sector is their lack of awareness regarding having a contract. While one respondent mentioned receiving payments through their Bulgarian bank account, another stated that they received their wages in cash in an envelope:

> *I tried using my card once, but I panicked and almost blocked it. Now they pay me in cash, which is better than transferring it to a bank account. My money is always correct; I calculate it on my phone. I have never had problems with my boss* (female, 42 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 5 years in Belgium).

Hourly wages received by these migrants were not disclosed. Similar to those working in the Netherlands, migrants in Belgium reported that they do not have health coverage in Belgium. Some of these migrants have close or extended family members living in Genk, while others are referred to their employers by Bulgarian minibus drivers. No other intermediaries, such as recruitment agencies, were mentioned by the interviewees. The details of their informal employment and the extent of this phenomenon were not thoroughly understood based on the interviews.

Posted employment

One interviewee reported working as a posted worker in Belgium. This individual was employed directly by a Bulgarian company and worked alongside a group of fellow Bulgarians from Ruse as well as some local workers in road construction. He explains:

> *I work outdoors on the road. We dig all day, cut stones, that kind of work, even when it's raining. Yesterday, for example, we did not work because there was a yellow code due to the strong wind [...]. I'm registered under a Bulgarian company. I'm not under a Belgian company. They do not give me unemployment benefits, for example, if we do not work this week. This week, we have worked four days. The rest of our Belgian colleagues get, for example, €40-50 unemployment benefits per day, we don't* (male, 49 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

According to city officials, this particular arrangement does not qualify as 'genuine' posted employment. Individuals already residing in Genk who wish to work for the company are initially registered with the Bulgarian company to reduce labor costs. Only after some time, if the individual demonstrates that they are a "good employee", are they directly hired by the company in Belgium.

Bogus self-employment

Although none of the respondents were currently working as bogus self-employed individuals during the interview, seven reported having engaged in such work in the past. The sectors where self-employment was mentioned include construction, supermarkets, and fast-food restaurants. The practice of bogus self-employment among Bulgarian migrants in Genk, as revealed through interviews, is directly linked to ethnic enclave networks. Two types of self-employment arrangements were identified during interviews with migrants. The first involves individuals who are shareholders in a company while also working as regular employees. One migrant, who had lived in Belgium for 13 years, arrived at a time when labor restrictions were still in place. He has struggled with the consequences of his self-employment arrangements ever since. As he explained:

> *I managed to register* (at the municipality) *quite quickly after my first arrival in Belgium, but I worked with some Turks as self-employed, like a partner. To this day, I am still struggling with lawyers […]. I paid thousands of euros. I owe a fine of €20,900. I had 5% of the company shares. I worked between 2011 and 2015. They have trimesters, you know. Back then, it was €750 every 3 months. The owner was depositing them. He showed us that he had been depositing them. He then withdrew the money. Well, I will probably go to court soon. I spoke to my lawyer. I gave him €500 a month ago. €20,900 is a lot of money […]. There were also others in the company. They barely escaped the consequences. What kind of partner am I with 5%? And what kind of institution is this—you pay them and then pull the money back? […] Back then, it was like this: no one gave you a contract. It was difficult to find jobs with permanent contracts* (male, 42 years old, Turkish Bulgarian).

The second type of bogus self-employment, as shared by other Bulgarian migrants, involves being registered as self-employed but working as regular personnel under an employer. One migrant recounted:

> *I worked in a supermarket, a Turkish one, but they had me registered as self-employed. […] I worked there for one and a half years. They were paying for my social security, and not long ago, I received another letter. […] I do not owe any money; everything is paid. I am very grateful to these people. They helped me a lot with documents for all things. […] I was receiving €1,400 per month, but I had a free day every Tuesday. It was €1,400, working from 8 in the morning until 9 in the evening. Many hours, but okay. They always paid me what they promised* (female, 46 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 13 years in Belgium).

Notably, among those who had previously worked as bogus self-employed, four were unemployed at the time of the interview. One individual received unemployment benefits (DOP), whereas the others did not. Additionally, none of the participants received any other benefits from the OCMW; the only form of social assistance they received was child allowance for families with minor children residing in Belgium.

In conclusion, the employment landscape for Bulgarians in Genk is characterized by diverse structures in both Belgium and the Netherlands. Social networks continue to play a significant role primarily in referring migrants to job opportunities. In the Netherlands, Bulgarian migrants work via recruitment agencies, and hybrid employment arrangements are common. In Belgium, employment is often secured through direct hiring practices; however, bogus self-employment remains prevalent. There is a clear trajectory of migrants transitioning from informal, hybrid, and bogus self-employment to formal employment, indicating a gradual improvement in their employment situations. However, in both the Netherlands and Belgium, Roma individuals often face precarious working conditions, with some engaging in informal work.

Healthcare

The health coverage of Bulgarian migrants living in Waterschei is closely linked to their employment and registration statuses. As EU migrants, Bulgarians have the right to transfer their social security benefits to other EU countries. However, those who are not registered in Belgium lack access to the healthcare system, except during emergencies. Non-insured Bulgarian migrants have developed coping strategies to overcome their lack of health coverage. When they need specific medications that cannot be obtained from a Belgian pharmacy without a prescription, they rely on minibuses who regularly travel between Bulgaria and Belgium to supply them with the necessary medicines. For more serious health concerns, many migrants seek care from a Greek doctor in Waterschei, leveraging their knowledge of Greek acquired during previous migrations. Others consulted with Turkish-speaking physicians.

Migrants are aware of the high costs associated with medical care in Belgium, leading many to choose to return to Bulgaria for treatment during emergencies. One man recounted his experiences: *I broke my finger and was forced to go back to Bulgaria. I stayed there for two months and then I came back* (male, 42 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 16 years in Belgium). Upon returning to Bulgaria for medical care, many migrants encounter the additional challenge of not being covered by health insurance there and having to repay their social security debts incurred during their time abroad.

All migrants officially working in Belgium have health insurance. However, Bulgarian migrants interviewed who work in the Netherlands through recruitment agencies were unaware of having any insurance or other social benefits there. Additionally, these migrants are not aware of the transferability of their social security rights to different countries. Further research is needed to investigate potential oversights by Dutch recruitment agencies and the steps that Bulgarian migrants need to take to secure health care coverage.

Education
According to the interviewees, all children of Bulgarian migrants under the age of 18 years were enrolled in the Belgian school system and attended school regularly, with the exception of a recently arrived minor who had not yet been enrolled at the time of the interview.

One respondent shared her experiences regarding her children's adaptation to school.

> *Well, I would say it was difficult. Everyone says that it happens very easily and that children have no problem, "don't worry about them" but I wouldn't say it was very easy. First, because they* (her two children) *were young and got sick a lot, missing a lot of school. They couldn't attend regularly. And second, because I always felt they needed additional help with the language and just attending school wasn't enough for them, but they didn't receive extra support […]. I myself didn't know that in the final kindergarten year the attendance was obligatory. The teachers failed to inform us […]. And at the end of the school year, the teacher came to me with some note listing all his absences and said, "Well, he was very sick and missed a lot of school. How can he go to first grade?" And it almost happened that he wouldn't go to first grade, but in the end, he did, and it was at his own expense because it was extremely difficult for him in first grade* (female, 40 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 6 years in Belgium).

Most migrants reported that their children were doing well in school and did not elaborate on the challenges they faced. Language remains a significant barrier for newly arrived children, and parents often feel powerless to assist them with their homework.

There is clear evidence of the positive impact of ethnic enclave networks on the education of Turkish-speaking Bulgarian children. Several migrants have noted that some teachers in schools speak Turkish and provide valuable assistance and guidance.

Migrants' registration
Based on their registration status, Bulgarian migrants in Genk can be categorized into three groups: registered, not registered, and awaiting registration. The numbers of registered and not registered migrants are nearly equal (see the socio-demographic profile on page 25). Many individuals who are not registered face challenges in meeting the requirements for registration, primarily because of their employment and housing situations. Some migrants reported that finding housing where landlords permitted the use of their address for official registration was difficult. They are often told that they cannot use their current address for registration because either too many other residents are already registered at that address or they are living in unauthorized structures. Although the City of Genk is willing to register them, regardless of the number of residents or the condition of the buildings, it is ultimately landlords who prevent them from doing so. One respondent, shared:

> *My previous accommodation was provided by my employer. For seven years, I stayed without registration […] And then one day, I said, sorry,[…], I am here, I live here. I went to the municipality, showed them my address, and asked for a Belgian card* (male, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 13 years in Belgium).

The employment status of migrants is also a barrier to registration. Those working in the Netherlands often struggle to provide the necessary documentation to demonstrate their financial independence because of the temporary and seasonal nature of their jobs. Weekly contracts and the absence of permanent positions hinder their ability to obtain a regular EU employee status in Belgium. A Bulgarian migrant working in the Netherlands shared the following:

> *I went to register. I went two times, three times to make registration. To my children, they gave them this kind of passport. But to me, they still do not give […]* (male, 57 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

Self-employment within an ethnic network is also related to registration. Migrants working as bogus self-employed can register with the municipality with the status of self-employed. Normally, they can arrange their own domiciliation, but in many cases, the Bulgarian bogus self-employed rely on their employers for the necessary administrative tasks.

> *I worked at a Turkish supermarket. Ten months, I worked there. They lied to me that they would register me; they did not do it. I still did not get a Belgian card from them* (female, 33 years old, ethnic Bulgarian, 5 years in Belgium).

In addition to housing and employment issues, some migrants struggle to understand and manage the administrative procedures involved in registration. Fear of potential financial burdens, such as high taxes and a lack of awareness about the benefits of being registered, contribute to their reluctance to complete the process. One participant who was registered previously shared the following:

> *To tell you honestly, I had registration till last year. But once you have an address, there is a lot of work that comes your way. For payment. For taxes. Whatever I earn in the Netherlands, they ask where I work. They want to see, every year, how much money I made and how much I need to pay. I could not do this all. And that's why I left the address, and now I am not registered here* (female, 38 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 6 years in Belgium).

Owing to these challenges, there is a noticeable delay in the registration of Bulgarian migrants in Genk. Among the participants, only a few managed to register within the required three-month period, with the majority registering years after their arrival. This delay hinders their ability to integrate into the local community and to access essential services.

5.3. Future Plans

This chapter explores the third research question regarding the future plans of Bulgarian migrants living in Waterschei. Determining whether migrants intend to remain in Genk for an extended period, return to Bulgaria, or relocate elsewhere is not straightforward. Similar to the push factors that motivated their arrival in Genk, the primary pull factors keeping them include economic opportunities and family ties. Challenges such as language barriers, difficulties integrating into Belgian society, nostalgia for Bulgaria, and personal experiences significantly influence their future plans.

Based on their future plans, the responses from the interviewees revealed three groups of Bulgarian migrants: those who wish to settle in Belgium, those who plan to return to Bulgaria, and those who are uncertain about where their future lies. Nineteen migrants expressed a general intention to stay in Genk long-term, although the term "long-term" remains ambiguous—it could refer to five years, ten years, until retirement, or indefinitely. Seventeen migrants were unsure about their future locations, while nine were certain about their plans to return to Bulgaria. However, most participants in the last two groups, also could not specify an exact timeline for their departure.

Bulgarian "liquid" migration
The concept of "liquid" migration partially captures the experiences of Bulgarian migrants in this study, emphasizing the ongoing search for better economic opportunities and mobility within the EU. Prior to arriving in Genk, over half of the interview respondents had migrated to various countries across Europe, particularly in southern nations such as Spain and Greece. This observation aligns with the existing literature, which indicates successive migration flows from Southern European countries to more economically stable Western European countries during the economic crises (Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2021). Notably, the Bulgarian Roma community had the highest number of migrants with prior experience living in other countries, highlighting their extensive mobility within Europe.

> *Because the jobs in Greece have not been good. Money was scarce. So from there, I came here* (male, 47 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 11 years in Belgium).

> *We are wanderers, you know. In Spain, the crisis hit, you know. Otherwise, life is very nice. Cheap, peaceful. The Spaniards are much warmer, while the Belgians and Germans are cold. I used to stop and talk to locals in the center, on the main street, and they were always ready to help me out. That cannot happen here* (male, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 5 months in Belgium).

Other respondents had previously lived in countries such as the UK, Germany, France, and Austria. Their migration to Belgium was not solely driven by immediate economic reasons but rather by the pursuit of better personal opportunities and influenced by their social networks. Some had migrated to multiple countries before settling in Belgium. Many of these individuals exemplify what Engbersen (2012) describes as "footloose migrants," who do not settle permanently in one place but continuously move from one country to another in search of better opportunities. One participant shared:

> *Well, first we were in Greece, let me tell you. The whole family. We then went to Germany. Then we came here. We just change countries* (female, 54 years old, Roma, 3 years in Belgium).

Another aspect of liquid migration among Bulgarian migrants is the pattern of circular migration, which is often characterized by seasonal work. This form of migration involves repeatedly moving between countries to capitalize on temporary employment opportunities. As one migrant highlighted:

> *I come for a short time. When there is work, I stay; when there is none, we go wherever. I come for one, two, three months. If someone calls me from somewhere that there is work, maybe in Spain, we go everywhere. Wherever there is work. We all want to earn a piece of bread* (female, 32 years old, Roma, 5 years in Belgium).

Among the interviewed migrants in Waterschei, circular migration is particularly pronounced among those who arrived between 2014 and 2018, as they typically stayed for only a few months at a time. Insights from the interviews revealed that many who initially came on a temporary basis have become less mobile in recent years. One migrant, who first arrived in Belgium ten years ago, explained:

> *In the beginning, we were coming for three months, 65 days. Agricultural, seasonal work, and good money. Then we started staying six to seven months a year here [...]. We tried to live in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam. We loved it there. But we didn't have luck with accommodation. It's very difficult in the Netherlands with the accommodations. I could not pay so much, so I say, let's pack our stuff and we came back to Belgium* (female, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Currently, this migrant lives permanently in Belgium and only returns to Bulgaria during holidays. Many other migrants who had previously engaged in circular migration shared similar insights, indicating a shift in their mobility patterns. They are now less mobile than they once were, especially those who have secured stable employment in Belgium.

Factors influencing permanent stay in Waterschei, Genk

This section explores various factors that encourage some migrants to settle in Genk in the long term. Key considerations include family, economic opportunities, integration, language, support networks, and the overall feeling about life in Belgium. Examining these elements provides a deeper understanding of the motivations and circumstances that shape Bulgarian migrants' future plans.

Family

As previously noted, most migrants live in Genk with their families, and 17 have underage children residing with them. The presence of children significantly influences the long-term plans of Bulgarian migrants. Among the respondents with underage children in Belgium, the majority expressed an intention to stay long term. For many, the presence of their children in Belgium outweighed their desire to return to Bulgaria. A mother of three children shared the following:

> *[...] there is no chance that we will go back. How? My big daughter will turn 16 this year, she needs to follow driving license courses. Then the middle one will follow. The baby will enter school here. Whether I want it or not, I will stay here. My future is here. I will only go back to Bulgaria for two weeks when they have a school holiday* (female, 33 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 4 years in Belgium).

Many migrants believe that their children will have a better life in Belgium, which strongly influences their decisions to stay. As one respondent noted, the thought of moving their children again and the potential impact on their education and integration are significant reasons to avoid further migration:

> *Until last year, I thought differently… But now, you know, as the years go by, you start to think differently. How am I going to raise the little kid, ruin him again from school? Maybe here, there will be a better future, not in Bulgaria […] I do not even believe that the children will ever return to Bulgaria. I do not believe it at all* (male, 43 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

However, children are not always a determining factor for migrants deciding to stay in Belgium. Some respondents, especially among the Roma Bulgarians, have underage children yet do not intend to remain long-term. One mother remarked:

> *I do not want to stay here. My little one, she is 10 years old; she also does not want to stay here. For now, we stay, we will see when we go back […]. At the village* (where the mother comes from)*, it is a different life. Children there play outdoors all day* (female, 46 years old, Roma, 13 years in Belgium).

Employment

Employment opportunities for Bulgarian migrants have an important influence on their future plans. There is a clear connection between stable employment and the intention to settle long-term in Belgium. By contrast, migrants working in the Netherlands through recruitment agencies experience noticeable uncertainty about their long-term plans, often stemming from weekly employment contracts, the demanding nature of their work, and the precarious working conditions they face. Additionally, there is a link between unemployment and the intention to return to Bulgaria among those who were not employed at the time of the interview. The literature confirms that lack of satisfactory employment is a major factor driving migrants to return to their home country.

Some migrants' employment is closely tied to specific financial goals, which dictate their future plans. For these individuals, their time in Belgium is viewed as a means to an end. They focus on achieving their financial objectives before considering returning to their home country. One respondent exemplified this mindset by sharing the following: *I will stay as long as I reach my final goal. I came here with a goal. And then I will go back […]. I do not know how long this goal will take to achieve* (male, 34 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

Language and integration

The ability to communicate in the local language is important for migrants, as it has a substantial influence on their quality of life in the host country. The overall Dutch level among Bulgarian migrants is generally low. While several migrants claim to speak Dutch, only four have attended Dutch courses. Generally, the longer a migrant spends in Belgium, the more likely they are to learn the language. This is particularly noticeable among migrants who arrived between 2014 and 2018, as they often report speaking "some" Dutch, whereas newer migrants frequently mention not speaking it at all.

There is a clear correlation between the intention to improve Dutch language skills and long-term plans to stay in Belgium. Those who intend to stay express a

willingness to improve their Dutch language skills, but are not always aware of the time investment required. For low-educated individuals, reaching level A2 can require a year of daily lessons, posing a significant barrier to participation, as this commitment often conflicts with the need to earn income. One respondent shared the following experience:

> *I registered for a course, but when I started working, I did not have time anymore to continue. You know how it goes, and money is always in the first place. And now years have passed, I regret not learning the language first. Now it's hard. I have grandchildren, I try to help them* (female, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Similarly, migrants who are uncertain about their long-term stay or who have decided not to remain in Belgium show little intention to improve their Dutch in the future. This lack of motivation is typically due to their plans to relocate or return to their home country, making language learning unnecessary or unproductive for their perceived future needs. One individual expressed the following:

> *It does not make any sense. Whatever I learned, I learned. I do not have intentions to stay here. Maximum 5 more years. Why study the language?* (male, 38 years old, Turkish, 10 years in Belgium).

Working within ethnic enclaves hinders the language development of Bulgarian migrants as they often work with Turkish-speaking individuals. This limits their contact with native speakers, thereby restricting their progress in learning Dutch. One migrant explained:

> *Everywhere I go to work, I do not see any locals. Only Bulgarians and Turks. And how to learn Flemish or Dutch? There is no way I can learn it. If you work with locals, you learn a little while working with them. A word here and there, but if you do not hear the language, you cannot* (male, 57 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 1 year in Belgium).

There is a noticeable connection between attending an integration course and the intention to stay in Belgium in the long term, as observed among the four migrants from the sample who participated in the integration course. Among the registered respondents, there is an awareness of the integration course as they received an invitation to participate. One respondent stated:

> *When I came in the beginning and I made address registration, a letter came. But I was going to work back then and did not have time* (male, 44 years old, Turkish, 9 years in Belgium).

Many of those expressing an intent to stay in Belgium also expressed a desire to follow the integration course, with some mentioning details such as course dates they have checked and options for participating from a distance. Nonetheless, many not registered migrants are unaware of the existence and content of the integration course and do not have the right to participate in it.

Diana, a 33-year-old ethnic Bulgarian from Ruse, first arrived in Belgium in 2018 for seasonal agricultural work. This was her first experience abroad and she was the first member of her family to migrate. The work was demanding, requiring her to wake up at 3 AM and work under harsh conditions, often through mud and rain. After several years of seasonal employment, Diana sought stability. In 2021, she transitioned to self-employment and thereafter secured a regular position in the household sector. With assistance from the Bulgarian staff working under the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, she recently landed a job that she greatly appreciates, and received a bus pass and meal vouchers for the first time. Diana feels she is finally getting back on her feet. In addition to her work, Diana focuses on her integration. She is currently enrolled in Dutch courses at the CVO, attending twice a week at A2 level, and plans to take a societal orientation course (MO) after completing her language course. She has also applied for social housing. The only thing she misses is her teenage son, who remains in Bulgaria and has no plans to join her in Belgium. Despite this, Diana is determined to build a stable life in Belgium.

Life in Waterschei

Many Bulgarian respondents hold a positive view of the Waterschei neighborhood, considering their overall experience of life there to be favorable. One respondent described their experience:

> *I like my neighborhood. It's actually considered the small center of Genk. Stalenstraat here. Because, when you look from here downwards, you have all kinds of shops. Everything you need is here. I mean, if you do not have a car or a driver's license, you will not need it because everything is here. Here is the clinic, bakeries, butchers, grocery stores, everything [...]. As a neighborhood, what I don't like - the noise. I hate noise the most. Especially during the day there's no problem, everyone's at work. But, there's a law here. For example, until 10 PM, after 10 PM, especially in the summer, there are motorcycles and cars with loud noises when I am lying to sleep. Thankfully, our bedroom faces away from the road. But as a neighborhood, yes, I like it. It is a beautiful place. I feel safe here. I have no issues here* (male, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 13 years in Belgium).

Although only positive experiences are shared about Waterschei, some cultural differences are also noticed. One migrant shared:

> *We had gathered there in one place, and some locals started to stare at us [...]. Because now in the evenings, for example, in front of the hospital here, we sit, that's how we gather. Well, in Bulgaria, we do the same, it's part of our culture. They are used to the local culture here; you know, when they see something, a crowd, ten people, gathering to talk, they think you are going to do something criminal, things like that. They even called the police, asking what we were doing. I said, it's a Bulgarian shop, it's here, we grab a beer, we talk, some are coming from work, others are coming from work. What can you do* (male, 51 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium).

Despite the cultural differences, the sense of community and convenience of the neighborhood make Waterschei an attractive place for Bulgarian migrants to live.

Housing

Among the respondents, the decision to purchase property in Belgium significantly influences their long-term plans and commitment to remaining in the country. This is particularly evident among the four migrants, including both Turkish and ethnic Bulgarians, who have bought a house in Waterschei. By contrast, for many other migrants, owning a home or obtaining social housing remains a distant aspiration, hindered by uncertain long-term plans and financial constraints. One respondent, who initially considered purchasing a house in Belgium, shared how his plans evolved due to doubts about his future in the country:

> *I had plans to buy my own home, but now I started considering going back to Bulgaria. I do not know, yet […]. I think I might go back because here, similar to Bulgaria, I stay only for one piece of bread. I can earn a piece of bread in Bulgaria also* (male, 44 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 9 years in Belgium).

Additionally, two respondents applied for social housing and are currently on the waiting list, underscoring their intention to stay in Belgium. However, for the other two, ownership of property in Bulgaria affected their eligibility for social housing in Belgium, leading them to withdraw their applications.

Support networks in Belgium

The support networks of Bulgarian migrants in Genk play a role in shaping their future intentions, though this influence may be less direct. As migrants spend more time in Belgium, their social networks typically expand. Most respondents reported that their primary social interactions are with fellow Bulgarians.

> *The people around me are from Bulgaria. I get to know them through work, friends, acquaintances of acquaintances—that's how we connect. Most of them are Bulgarians; it's normal because we share the same language* (female, 38 years old, Roma, 6 years in Belgium).

Many interviewees expressed challenges with personal administration in Belgium and often sought assistance from outside their Bulgarian community. Ethnic enclave networks, particularly those consisting of Belgians of Turkish descent, play a vital role in offering this support. One respondent emphasized the importance of this support network as follow:

> *If I can't handle something, I go to my landlord. He helps me a lot; he is Turkish. I also have a colleague from work, who is also Turkish, and he helps me too* (male, 44 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 9 years in Belgium).

Approximately ten respondents reported seeking assistance from the Bulgarian-speaking city officials working under the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, highlighting the value of their support in navigating bureaucratic challenges: *Well, here we have two Bulgarians, F. and D., who help me. When I have letters I don't understand, they help me* (female, 46 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 10 years in Belgium). Another added: *When I encounter difficulties, I go to them. They also helped me with registration and other matters* (female, 33 years old, Bulgarian, 5 years in Belgium).

The Bulgarian supermarket where the interviews were conducted also functions as a support hub for the local Bulgarian community. Migrants often rely on the store owner

for food on credit during financial hardships, reflecting a practice of mutual aid similar to that found in neighborhood supermarkets in Bulgaria.

Interactions between Bulgarian migrants and local Belgians are often constrained by the language barrier, which is widely recognised in the literature as a significant obstacle to enhanced employment opportunities and successful integration. Despite limited contact, many migrants maintain a positive impression of the local population. *The people here are kind, they always smile on the street. This motivates me to want to stay* (female, 37 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

A few migrants who speak Dutch have formed friendships with local Belgians:

> *Actually, I have many Belgian friends. It feels, how should I put it. Because I am a foreigner in this country. I don't see them as inferior or superior; they are interesting people. When you understand the local language, work here, and eat the local bread, it makes me happy to be here* (male, 47 years old, Turkish Bulgarian, 13 years in Belgium).

Aspirations for the future

Many Bulgarian migrants express strong feelings of longing and nostalgia for Bulgaria when discussing their futures. They hope that improved economic conditions in Bulgaria will make returning a viable option one day. One respondent reflected: *What can I say? If you ask anyone here, everyone would want to return to Bulgaria. If the economy was better, I wouldn't stay here. I prefer the way of life in Bulgaria* (male, 43 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 3 years in Belgium).

On a personal level, Bulgarian migrants most frequently wish for good health for themselves and their families. They frequently express a strong dedication to working hard to create a better future for their children and provide them with a stable environment to grow up in. The aspiration for a normal life and stability is a recurring theme in their aspirations, reflecting their desire for a dignified existence, regardless of whether they remain in Belgium, return to Bulgaria, or relocate elsewhere. One migrant summarized this sentiment as follows: *I dream of a normal life with my family. I'm not after money or anything like that. I just want a normal life* (male, 36 years old, Roma Bulgarian, 5 months in Belgium).

Conclusion

Among the interviewed migrants, nearly half are certain of their intention to stay in Belgium, whereas the other half are either uncertain or plan to return to Bulgaria. Regardless of their intentions, many migrants find it challenging to define a clear timeline for their plans because their decisions are influenced by a complex interplay of economic factors, family considerations, and personal experiences. The concept of liquid migration is relevant to the Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei, as many lived in various European countries before coming to Genk, reflecting their ongoing search for better economic opportunities. Despite facing challenges such as cultural differences, language barriers, and integration issues, many Bulgarian migrants maintain a positive outlook on life in Belgium and aspire to achieve a stable and dignified existence for themselves and their families.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study aims to explore the motivations, networks, and future plans of Bulgarian migrants living in Waterschei, Genk. To gain insight into their experiences and perspectives, 45 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Bulgarian migrants were conducted. The data were further enriched through interviews with 12 city officials from relevant departments of the City of Genk, as well as representatives from civic society organizations that provide services to Bulgarian migrants.

This concluding section starts with a brief overview of the profiles of the interviewed Bulgarians, followed by a summary of the findings based on the three research questions. It concludes with policy recommendations and related actions for each policy domain discussed in the report, emphasizing the interconnections and synergies between these domains where applicable. Each recommendation is contextualized by addressing the main challenges faced by Bulgarian migrants. The final recommendation focuses on policy setting and governance of (intra-European) migration at the municipal level. While this recommendation is based on the insights gathered through this study, its relevance extends beyond the specific focus on the Bulgarian migrant community.

6.1. Conclusion

In recent years, the city of Genk has seen a significant increase in the number of Bulgarian migrants, many of whom live in Waterschei. This migration from Bulgaria to Genk is part of a broader trend of intra-European mobility, driven by EU expansion and integration. The Bulgarian community in Genk is ethnically diverse, primarily comprising Roma Bulgarians, Bulgarian Turks, and a small number of ethnic Bulgarians. Many of the migrants interviewed hail from rural areas where per capita income is below the national average and unemployment rates are high. Additionally, most Bulgarian migrants residing in Waterschei have low educational levels and limited professional skills.

Interviews revealed that the earliest Bulgarian respondents arrived in Waterschei in 2007, albeit in minimal numbers. Following the removal of labor restrictions in 2014, nearly half of the Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei arrived by 2018, with the remainder arriving in the past four years. Notably, there has been a significant increase in the representation of individuals aged 40 and older among the recent arrivals compared to those who arrived earlier.

The influx of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei reflects broader migration trends primarily driven by economic factors, which serve as the main "push" factors. The significant wage gap between Bulgaria and host countries like Belgium, coupled with the economic crisis in Bulgaria around 2013, contributed to a substantial wave of migration from the country. Although unemployment rates in Bulgaria have improved over the past decade, high unemployment has persisted, particularly within the Roma community. Some Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei aim to financially support their families in Bulgaria, while others have relocated to Belgium with their families. Additionally, Bulgaria's long history of migration contributes to the development of a culture of migration that further influences individuals' decisions to migrate. Half of the interviewed migrants had previously lived in other EU countries, such as Greece and Spain, but were compelled to seek new opportunities elsewhere in the EU due to

the economic crises, aligning with the EU's policy ambition to facilitate intra-European labor mobility.

A key "pull" factor encouraging Bulgarian migrants to settle in Waterschei and Genk is the presence of social networks that consist of close and extended family members, along with acquaintances. Nearly all interviewees indicated that these social networks significantly influenced their decision to relocate to Genk over other potential destinations. A few Bulgarian migrants arrived in Genk without an existing social network and instead relied on a Bulgarian minibus driver who provided transportation to Belgium and offered initial referrals for housing and employment. Migration decisions are often spontaneous and largely dependent on information from social networks rather than being the result of careful planning. In Waterschei, the largest group of Bulgarian migrants comes from the Ruse region in Bulgaria, comprising more than half of the interviewees, which points to a clear pattern of chain migration.

Upon arriving in Waterschei, many Bulgarian migrants are introduced to the local community with a Turkish background through their family and acquaintances. Approximately 8.5% of the Bulgarian population consists of Turkish Bulgarians who speak Turkish, and many Bulgarian Roma also communicate in the language. This ethnic and linguistic connection facilitates the integration of Bulgarian migrants into the existing Turkish ethnic enclave, which plays a significant role in helping them find housing and employment. However, while this network provides essential support, it also contributes to migrants living in substandard housing and working under precarious conditions. The Bulgarian migrants interviewed recognized the dual and often contradictory nature of ethnic enclaves. Despite the challenges they present, they recognized the crucial role these enclaves play in helping them establish their lives in Belgium.

Regarding future plans, Bulgarian migrants can be categorized into three groups: those who plan to remain in Belgium long-term, those who wish to return to Bulgaria, and those who are uncertain about their future. The group planning to stay long-term primarily includes those who are registered in Belgium and have children living with them in Genk. By contrast, those planning to return to Bulgaria or who remain uncertain often face job insecurity and participate in seasonal work. None of the groups provided specific timelines for their stay or departure. Despite their varying circumstances, all Bulgarian migrants share a common aspiration to achieve a stable and dignified life.

6.2. Recommendations and actions

This section presents a set of recommendations centered on key policy domains relevant to the experiences of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei, Genk. These recommendations are derived from the challenges identified through the research and aim to offer actionable insights and strategic guidance for policymakers, stakeholders, and community leaders. Since the challenges faced by migrants often span across various domains, recommendations and proposed actions reference multiple policy domains where appropriate.

Recommendation 1: Increase the number of registered Bulgarian residents in Genk

In Waterschei, a significant number of Bulgarian migrants are not officially registered in the municipality. Projections from the City of Genk estimate that in addition to the

893 registered Bulgarians, there are an additional 300–500 not registered Bulgarian residents. According to European and Belgian legislation, intra-EU migrants are required to register within three months of their arrival. Registration is crucial for municipalities to monitor migration flows, gather accurate population data, prevent fraud, and manage public services effectively, all of which contribute to migrant participation and integration in the local community. Consequently, registration has a direct impact on key aspects of migrants' lives such as housing, employment, healthcare, and education.

Many Bulgarian migrants interviewed indicated that the registration process poses specific challenges, making it difficult for them to fulfill the requirements. A common issue cited is that landlords often refuse to allow migrants to use their address for registration. This is often because the properties rented by migrants are not suitable for residential use, either due to zoning restrictions or a lack of proper urban planning permits. Another housing-related obstacle is that too many people may be registered at a given address. Furthermore, Bulgarian migrants often struggle to provide proof of financial stability in Belgium, particularly those working informally or temporarily, through employment agencies in the Netherlands. Several respondents mentioned that it took them years to complete the registration process.

Some migrants intentionally avoided registration, citing concerns over the administrative burden both during the registration process and in fulfilling subsequent requirements. Many of the Bulgarians interviewed sought external help for every letter they received in Belgium, as navigating administrative procedures proved challenging. In addition, registered migrants are required to file an annual tax return, and there is widespread fear among Bulgarians that they will be required to repay a large sum of taxes to the Belgian government.

Recommended actions:

- Information campaigns targeting the (Bulgarian) migrant population in Waterschei can play an important role in raising awareness about the importance of registration, the potential negative consequences of failing to register, and providing clear guidance on the registration process.
- The integration of detailed information about the registration procedure into the City of Genk’s new reception policy, tailored specifically to the needs of intra-EU labor migrants, can ensure that migrants receive the support they need upon arrival.
- The employment of a Bulgarian-speaking staff member at the City of Genk, even after the conclusion of the Neighborhood Improvement Contract, can ensure that Bulgarian migrants continue to receive assistance during the registration process.
- Providing additional assistance to migrants who have started the registration process could enhance their chances of successfully completing it.
- A simplified and streamlined registration process for labor migrants who are staying in Genk temporarily can reduce barriers and encourage compliance with registration requirements.
- Research into the policies of other Belgian municipalities can provide valuable insights and help identify best practices that could be adopted to improve the registration process.
- Collaborating with authorities in the Netherlands to harmonize policies and regulations regarding migrants, employers, and landlords can facilitate the registration of individuals residing in Belgium while working across the border.

- Advocating the creation of a legally compliant, EU-wide information exchange system (e.g. as a database) by Belgian federal authorities could streamline the registration of migrants across borders.

Recommendation 2: Improve access to housing and the housing conditions of Bulgarian migrants

As highlighted in interviews with both migrants and city officials, many Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei live in substandard conditions. These include poor insulation, structural issues such as cracks and mold, inadequate sanitation, and cases of people living in unauthorized buildings such as converted garages. Despite these deficiencies, rental prices remain high and are often comparable to those of renovated housing. Additionally, some participants reported sharing rooms, with rent reaching up to 700 euros for two people, indicating clear rental exploitation in Waterschei.

Bulgarian migrants face considerable challenges in securing housing through traditional means, such as rental advertisements, due to the tight housing market and rental discrimination. As a result, they often rely on the local community with Turkish backgrounds for accommodation. Although there is a trend toward renovation in Waterschei, many rental properties remain unrenovated. In some instances, migrants perform maintenance and renovation tasks themselves, despite not being responsible for these repairs.

In 2023, the City of Genk launched the Conformity Certificate to enhance housing standards, mandating that property owners meet specific criteria for rental properties, including maximum occupancy limits. The inspection and certification process will begin with the oldest buildings and gradually extend to all rental properties in Waterschei built before 1981 over the next ten years.

The City of Genk is also exploring a legal framework for temporary collective accommodation for workers, known in Dutch as Kader tijdelijke huisvesting voor arbeidskrachten. This initiative aims to meet the growing demand for labor migrants in response to increasing labor shortages and seasonal needs. The city has developed a comprehensive vision and guidelines for implementing this policy, including the issuance of operator permits that establish regulations for managing these housing arrangements.

Recommended actions:

- Campaigns aimed at informing (Bulgarian) migrants about their rights as tenants under Belgian law, as well as the health risks of poor housing conditions, can raise awareness and encourage them to report issues to local authorities and request housing inspections when necessary.
- Encouraging individuals who register with the municipality to voluntarily share their accommodation contracts can provide valuable data on rental prices, property conditions, and other key details. This information can help the City better understand housing issues and offer more informed advice to tenants.
- An area-focused housing quality policy centered on prevention and enforcement, with adequate resources allocated to police, housing authorities, and other relevant bodies, can prioritize combating housing exploitation. Regular inspections by the Housing Department can ensure that property owners in Waterschei are completing necessary renovations.

- Evaluating the current system of sanctions against landlords can assess whether it effectively deters the rental of substandard properties. Tighter measures, such as mandatory property sales in cases of repeated violations, can be considered for dishonest landlords.
- Support for (Bulgarian) migrants facing eviction or living in properties slated for demolition should include temporary housing options for emergency situations, ensuring their housing security during transitions.
- Access to the FOD Financiën database of registered rental contracts can play an important role in collecting essential data to enforce housing policies and ensure compliance with regulations.
- Investigating the prevalence of housing discrimination in Genk, possibly through mystery shopper studies, can help ensure equal access to housing for all residents by identifying discriminatory practices.
- The development of a housing policy by the City of Genk that addresses the specific needs of intra-EU labor migrants and migrant families as part of a comprehensive housing plan can ensure that the housing needs of multiple underserved social groups are met. The plan can identify key areas in the city and map stakeholders who can play a potential role, such as local businesses, employers, grassroots non-profit organizations, public housing agencies, real estate businesses, and operators managing logements. Public investment for expanding public housing and the requalification of targeted urban areas can be included, along with financial incentives for private parties to build or renovate properties under clear and strict conditions. These conditions can include maximum rents, the profile of tenants over a well-defined time period, minimum residence time, maximum income levels, and employment status for home buyers. The plan can also include the provision of advice and legal support to individuals from underserved communities, including migrants, to help them access social housing and renovation subsidies.
- Exploring the legal feasibility and benefits of regulating the rental market more closely, following the example of neighboring countries that control rental prices based on housing categories, can help ensure fair and affordable housing.
- In developing the Kader tijdelijke huisvesting voor arbeidskrachten, conducting a feasibility study that builds on existing knowledge and policies regarding temporary accommodations for labor migrants can provide valuable insights. The framework should ensure that migrants are integrated into local communities and services to prevent isolation and vulnerability. Measures such as separating work and rental contracts, regulating rental payments by employers, and setting limits on the duration of accommodations after employment ends can reduce dependence on employers for housing. Non-market actors can manage accommodations in adherence with legal standards, including maximum rental prices, while coordination with other municipalities can ensure a balanced distribution of accommodations. Access to housing can be made conditional on employment within a defined radius of the accommodations.

Recommendation 3: Improve the employment conditions of Bulgarian migrants

Interviews with Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei reveal that many work, or have previously worked, under precarious conditions across various employment structures: hybrid employment in the Netherlands, bogus self-employment in Belgium, and informal work in the Netherlands and/or Belgium. Additionally, many of the

interviewed migrants earn minimum wages and struggle to secure stable employment because of the seasonal nature of available jobs.

Bulgarian migrants also face significant challenges in finding regular employment, primarily due to language barriers, limited education, and lack of professional skills. Those working in the Netherlands face further complications from having to navigate the legal systems of the two different countries. Migrants employed through intermediaries such as recruitment agencies often encounter issues such as retroactive contract changes, insufficient workplace insurance, withheld holiday pay, and the absence of additional compensation for working on holidays or weekends. Moreover, some migrants rely on their employers for both housing and employment, which increases their vulnerability and dependence.

A new law set to take effect in 2025 aims to regulate recruitment agencies in the Netherlands more strictly and eliminate unethical practices; however, its impact on the situation remains uncertain at the time of writing.

Recommended actions:

- Raising awareness among (Bulgarian) migrants about precarious working conditions, along with providing information on complaints procedures and legal support, can empower them to navigate the labor market more effectively and defend their rights. The establishment of a reporting center, potentially in collaboration with local trade unions, can offer support and address employment misconduct.
- Strengthening the verification process during migrant registration at the municipality for self-employment status can help identify and prevent cases of bogus self-employment.
- The continuation of work placement initiatives for (Bulgarian) migrants, in collaboration with social economy organizations, can build on the success of efforts initiated by the Neighborhood Improvement Contract, which has helped many migrants secure legal and stable employment.
- Exploring ways to strengthen cooperation between the City of Genk and VDAB can enhance support for (Bulgarian) migrants in securing employment under fair conditions.
- Collaboration with academic institutions can provide deeper insights into the precarious working conditions faced by intra-EU migrants in Genk and help develop more effective strategies for supporting them.
- Systematic data collection on bogus self-employment should be maintained, with advocacy for stricter enforcement of legislation to prevent such practices.
- The establishment of structural cross-border collaboration and data-sharing mechanisms with the Netherlands can be key in addressing the precarious working conditions of labor migrants. The City of Genk can continue to strengthen its partnership with EURIEC to thoroughly investigate labor exploitation. Strengthening coordination with Dutch labor inspections can lead to the systematic identification and prosecution of illegal activities by labor intermediaries and employers. Given their expertise in labor migration, exploitation, and social security fraud, trade unions can be consulted in developing strategies to protect migrant workers.
- Advocating with federal authorities for additional resources for the labor inspectorate can allow for increased inspections to ensure work quality and to identify and combat informal work and bogus self-employment among migrants in Belgium.

- Advocating for federal legislation that requires individuals to register for self-employment with the KBO and various social secretariats in person can ensure that migrants are fully informed about social security contribution costs, the risks of accumulating social security debt, and the potential legal consequences of non-compliance.

Recommendation 4: increase access to education for Bulgarian children

Local schools in Waterschei and city officials have highlighted several educational challenges faced by Bulgarian children. These include difficulties with school registration, high absenteeism rates, communication barriers between parents and teachers, struggles with homework, and overall educational outcomes. School absenteeism is especially prevalent among Roma Bulgarian children, according to local schools in Waterschei. Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the children of not registered Bulgarian migrants who do not attend school. Although compulsory education in Belgium does not apply to them, they still have the right to receive it. In interviews with migrants, the language barriers faced by children were highlighted as a major obstacle. However, significant improvements in school attendance rates among Bulgarian migrant children have been noted due to the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract and the direct support provided to Bulgarian parents.

Recommended actions:

- Providing information about the Belgian education system to (Bulgarian) migrants during their registration as part of the new reception policy of the City of Genk can ensure that migrants are informed about their children's educational rights and obligations.
- The important role of Brugfiguren (community mediators between schools and families) in education can be supported by allocating sufficient resources to maintain and expand their work, ensuring they continue to bridge gaps between schools and migrant families.
- Increasing funding for additional support and care for specific target groups in education can enhance the resources available to address the unique needs of migrant children.
- Support for school boards through Local Education Platforms (LOPs) and educational networks by providing materials, information, and training for staff can help them engage professionally with migrant children, particularly Roma children and their families. This support is essential for creating an inclusive school environment that promotes children's well-being, educational outcomes, and long-term prospects.
- The provision of OKAN (Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige kinderen) classes in schools near where migrant children live, as well as language immersion programs (Taalbad) for Bulgarian children, can support language acquisition and ease their transition into further education.
- Continuing translation assistance (taalhulp) for (Bulgarian) migrants can ensure effective communication between schools and parents, enabling better understanding and engagement.
- Encouraging greater participation of (Bulgarian) migrant parents in "School Bubbles" organized by Ligo LiMiNo can equip them with the necessary skills to navigate their child's school agenda, understand information letters, and use digital platforms like Smartschool more effectively.
- Improved coordination between municipalities and the Flemish Department of Education can help ensure that all newly migrated Bulgarian children in Genk

are enrolled and attending school. Clear guidelines from the Department, along with faster responses, can proactively address cases of unregistered children.
- Accelerated procedures to address school absenteeism should involve local municipalities, such as the City of Genk, to improve effectiveness and complement the ongoing efforts of the Flemish administration.
- Advocating for legal amendments to subject children who have resided in Genk/Flanders for at least three months, even if not officially registered, to compulsory education in addition to their right to education can help ensure that all children receive the education they are entitled to.

Recommendation 5: Increase Bulgarian migrants' access to health and social security rights

Bulgarian migrants, like all Belgian and EU citizens as well as legally residing non-EU citizens, are entitled to access health and social security benefits. However, a significant portion of the interviewees do not meet Belgian and European legal requirements and do not accrue sufficient rights. This is often the case for Bulgarian migrants in Genk, who are either not registered with the municipality and/or work without valid employment contracts in hybrid or informal arrangements. Nearly all participants expressed concerns that recruitment agencies in The Netherlands do not provide health insurance coverage, but whether this is accurate or due to administrative gaps on the migrants' side could not be determined through this research.

Although a system exists for transferring social security rights between EU countries, almost none of the migrants interviewed who worked in the Netherlands transferred their social security rights to Belgium or Bulgaria. The process of transferring these rights within the EU is difficult for migrants to navigate. There is a significant lack of knowledge and awareness among the Bulgarian migrant population regarding the functioning of Belgium's social security system, including the rights and obligations necessary to secure benefits. This issue also affects those who are bogus self-employed, many of whom do not fully understand their responsibilities regarding social contributions, or the consequences of failing to meet them. Even when employers claim to handle the payments of social contributions, many migrants are unsure how to verify whether these contributions have been made, leading to the potential discovery of substantial debts years later.

The long-term effects of undocumented residency, combined with working in hybrid or informal sectors across different EU countries, have serious consequences for Bulgarian migrants, both in Belgium and Bulgaria. In Belgium, they lack access to essential services such as healthcare, unemployment benefits, or holiday pay, receiving only emergency aid in health crises, often incurring high costs. To avoid these expenses, many migrants return to Bulgaria as soon as possible. However, upon returning, they face further difficulties as they are often ineligible for social security rights until they repay debts owed to the Bulgarian state for their time abroad. Additionally, many migrants receive inadequate pensions due to insufficient social security contributions, impacting their quality of life and long-term financial stability.

Recommended actions:

- The provision of basic information to (Bulgarian) migrants about their social security and healthcare rights, the Belgian system, the process of transferring these rights, the importance of an official work contract and registration, and

coverage for self-employed individuals can help migrants better navigate the system. Including this information in the City's new orientation policy can ensure that newcomers receive proper guidance, with referrals to mutualities and trade unions for further details on their rights and obligations.

- Assistance to recently arrived (Bulgarian) migrants in accessing primary healthcare providers, such as general practitioners and dentists, can be facilitated by community health workers. Additionally, providing information about available healthcare services based on the migrants' residence during their registration at the municipality can improve their access to essential care.
- Strengthening labor inspections with a focus on identifying and sanctioning cases of labor exploitation, particularly instances of bogus self-employment, hybrid, and informal work, can better protect migrants' social security rights.
- Advocating with Belgian federal and EU authorities for the harmonization of social security and healthcare rights for European citizens can address cross-border challenges. The introduction of a European Social Security Card, along with a European health insurance scheme that allows access to healthcare services across EU member states, could simplify this process.
- The continued provision and expansion of support from community health workers appointed by mutualities can ensure ongoing assistance for (Bulgarian) migrants, including those who are undocumented.
- Encouraging (Bulgarian) migrants living in Belgium and working in the Netherlands to proactively seek information from their employers regarding their health insurance status and social security rights can enhance their understanding. Referrals to GrensInfoPunten, which offer free advice on tax and social security systems for cross-border workers, can further support these migrants. Ensuring that GrensInfoPunten are well-equipped to handle inquiries from labor migrants can improve the effectiveness of this service.
- The exploration of establishing neighborhood-level health centers that provide accessible primary care can ensure better healthcare access for migrants.

Recommendation 6: Foster the integration of Bulgarian migrants in the local community

Many Bulgarians in Genk face significant barriers to integration into the local community, primarily because of their limited proficiency in Dutch. Despite the availability of various language courses in Genk, participation rates remain low. The respondents pointed out the difficulty of balancing language training with full-time employment and daily responsibilities. Additionally, their social networks are mostly composed of fellow Bulgarians and members of the Turkish-speaking community in Waterschei. Within this enclave, there is little need to speak Dutch, limiting their exposure to the language, and reducing opportunities to practice and improve their skills. Learning a new language in a traditional classroom setting is particularly challenging, especially for individuals of the Roma ethnicity.

The integration programme, including its language-training components, was previously free for migrants, but since 2023, the Flemish government has introduced fees. The City of Genk is concerned that these fees, combined with the lack of a formal requirement for intra-EU migrants to attend the course, may further discourage participation.

Recommended actions:

- Provision of sufficient expertise within the general reception policy to effectively meet the needs and questions of newcomers from EU countries.
- The active promotion of integration courses to newly registered (Bulgarian) migrants can encourage participation. The recently introduced fourth pillar of the integration course, which includes local coaching, can help expand the social networks of (Bulgarian) migrants and support their integration. Special attention should be given to the specific needs of the Bulgarian Roma community in communication and course offerings. For example, participating in a course with fellow Roma can greatly enhance motivation to attend.
- Advocacy with the Flemish government to waive fees for the integration program for all migrants can remove financial barriers and encourage greater participation.
- Reducing barriers to language acquisition by offering NT2 courses in alternative formats, such as online learning or courses held in convenient locations, can address time and mobility constraints. Additionally, raise awareness among (Bulgarian) migrants in Waterschei about existing options like vriendENtaal.
- The establishment of collaborations with the *Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering,* employers, and trade unions can lead to the development of tailored training programs for companies employing a significant number of migrant workers. These programs can address important topics such as residency and labor law, inclusive HR policies, and workplace language use.
- Stimulating and supporting non-profit organizations through targeted guidance and funding can help them develop and implement inclusion policies in their activities, with a focus on groups with low participation.
- Encouraging participation in low-language-barrier activities in Genk can help expand migrants' social networks. School-organized events centered around children and activities hosted by the community center (De Singel) can further support the integration of (Bulgarian) migrants into the local community.
- Enhancing communication with Bulgarian migrants by focusing on effective existing channels, such as the Bulgarian Facebook page, can improve outreach and engagement.
- The exploration of creating an app similar to the Dutch MYinfoNL, designed to inform labor migrants about housing, work, and living in the municipality, can improve communication and interactions between employers, the municipality, and labor migrants. This app could be integrated by the Flemish government or the City of Genk to streamline communication and services for labor migrants.

Recommendation 7: Empowering Bulgarian migrants

In addition to policy initiatives in the aforementioned domains, it is recommended to support Bulgarian migrants from the ground up by fostering empowerment within their own community. Many Bulgarian migrants interviewed are aware of their disadvantaged position but feel trapped in a vicious cycle. Although some long-term migrants eventually find a way out, this process is often slow and challenging. As a first-generation community in Genk, Bulgarian migrants currently lack a strong network to support and uplift one another. Many of the interviewed migrants view their precarious employment, substandard living conditions, and limited participation in society as "normal".

This perception often stems from their prior experiences of hardship and disadvantages in Bulgaria and other European countries. Consequently, they typically

lack a clear understanding of their rights and face difficulties navigating administrative procedures, which hinders their ability to identify and seize opportunities to improve their situations. Additionally, their social networks can unintentionally perpetuate their disadvantages, reinforcing the sense that precarious conditions are a normal part of life for Bulgarians in Genk.

Recommended actions:

- Awareness campaigns carried out in places frequently visited by Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei, as well as online, can help raise awareness in key areas such as healthcare, housing, and employment. By providing clear information and resources, these campaigns can enable migrants to make informed decisions, understand their rights, and better manage their responsibilities. For maximum effectiveness, campaigns created in Bulgarian, combined with striking images and referral information, can be shared on platforms like the Facebook page of the City of Genk, and other Bulgarian community pages.
- Collaboration between the City of Genk and academic institutions can offer valuable insights into the most effective use of digital media channels to reach the Bulgarian community and its members.
- Workshops that provide practical guidance and detailed information on healthcare, housing, and employment rights can help Bulgarian migrants better navigate these areas.
- The development of a vision that includes procedures to consult with members of the Bulgarian migrant community in policy-making can foster trust in local institutions. Participation in this process will not only strengthen trust but also enhance the effectiveness of policies. Studying the most appropriate forms of participation in collaboration with academic institutions can contribute to this effort.
- Strong relationships with key figures within the Bulgarian community can play an important role in effectively disseminating information and guiding fellow migrants living in Waterschei.
- Success stories of Bulgarian migrants who have improved their working and living conditions can inspire others in the community. Sharing these stories can create a positive ripple effect, contributing to the overall well-being of the community.
- The continuation of legal support and guidance currently provided to Bulgarian newcomers through the staff of the Neighborhood Improvement Contract can ensure that migrants receive the necessary administrative assistance. This support can be further facilitated through intermediary organizations.
- The provision of public spaces where the Bulgarian migrant community can gather is essential for strengthening their social networks and fostering community solidarity.
- Public events that encourage the Bulgarian community to participate, receive recognition, and engage with other communities can foster a greater sense of belonging and inclusion within the local community.

Recommendation 8: Improved governance of migration by the City of Genk

Migration is a structural phenomenon in contemporary societies with significant societal, cultural, economic, policy, and governance implications for municipalities. Despite Genk's strong administrative tradition of representing and serving a super-diverse population, it is currently grappling with challenges in effectively

managing the most recent wave of migration resulting from increased mobility within the European Union.

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Bulgarian migrants in Waterschei and the challenges they face. These insights build upon the extensive knowledge and expertise the City of Genk has developed through activities undertaken in the framework of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract, in collaboration with all other involved partners.

In this final recommendation, we offer broader conclusions on policy development and implementation to enhance the governance of migration in Genk. While these insights are based on a specific case of the Bulgarian community, they can largely inform policies addressing (intra-EU) migrants more generally, as many of the challenges faced by Bulgarian migrants are not unique to them. Similarly, the difficulties encountered by institutions, such as public administrations, schools, trade unions, and health insurance organizations, in communicating with, integrating, serving, and enforcing regulations among migrants are rarely exclusive to the Bulgarian population.

Recommended actions:

- The development of a long-term vision and goals on migration can help recognise the structural nature of migration, its heterogeneous aspects (e.g., intra-EU and non-EU, temporary versus long-term migration), and its contributions to society. This vision can also guide the creation of effective migration governance. Particular attention to intra-EU "temporary" labor migration is essential. Within this policy, we advise to pay particular attention to intra-EU "temporary" labor migration. Such a vision needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of the specific challenges encountered by migrants as opposed to other vulnerable groups that are often clustered together with them through policy on diversity and inclusion. In developing this vision, we advise to acknowledge key stakeholders with vested interest in migration (e.g., employers seeking personnel, property owners) and formulate expectations towards them, next to migrants themselves.
- The development of a comprehensive, integrated policy approach and governance structure can address the multiple challenges related to key aspects such as registration, housing, employment, education, health and wellbeing, integration, and empowerment, as well as their interconnectedness. The experience of the Neighbourhood Improvement Contract has demonstrated the importance of establishing decision-making bodies that include representatives from different departments of the City of Genk as well as leverage collaboration with civic society organizations holding key expertise and capacity, to ensure policy coherence and effectiveness.
- Strengthening, expanding, or setting up governance mechanisms (e.g. task forces, communication protocols, and international coordination bodies) that structurally coordinate migration-relevant policies across the Belgian-Dutch border can help improve collaboration.
- The establishment of systems for continuous data collection, data analysis, and policy evaluation can ensure that migration policies are evidence-based and of high quality, supporting effective action.
- Foreseeing clear modalities for the participation of migrant communities in policy development and implementation, ranging from consultation to co-creation, can foster trust in local institutions and promote integration.

Investing in such participation can yield long-term benefits for the entire community.

- Hiring staff from the major migrant communities in the City of Genk can support interactions between migrants and the municipality, bringing essential language skills and cultural knowledge. This approach can improve administrative efficiency and better address the specific needs of migrants, while also highlighting Genk's commitment to serving all citizens equitably and contributing to the integration of migrants into the broader community.
- With support from federal and Flemish administrations, the sharing of migration-related data among Belgian municipalities can enhance efficiency by preventing redundant efforts. This approach can be particularly beneficial for smaller municipalities with limited resources.
- Raising awareness of the challenges municipalities face with intra-EU migration at the Flemish, Federal, and EU levels can ensure these issues are considered in migration policy-making.
- Focusing on projects and initiatives that generate resources, experience, and best practices for establishing and implementing improved migration governance at the local level can continue to strengthen the City of Genk's efforts.
- Advocating for the collection and analysis of statistical data on intra-EU returns and circular migration can provide a better understanding of migration patterns, leading to improved policy-making and resource allocation.
- The advocacy for a unified EU database for national registration numbers can facilitate information exchange between countries, improve migrant registration processes, and help prevent fraud.

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