

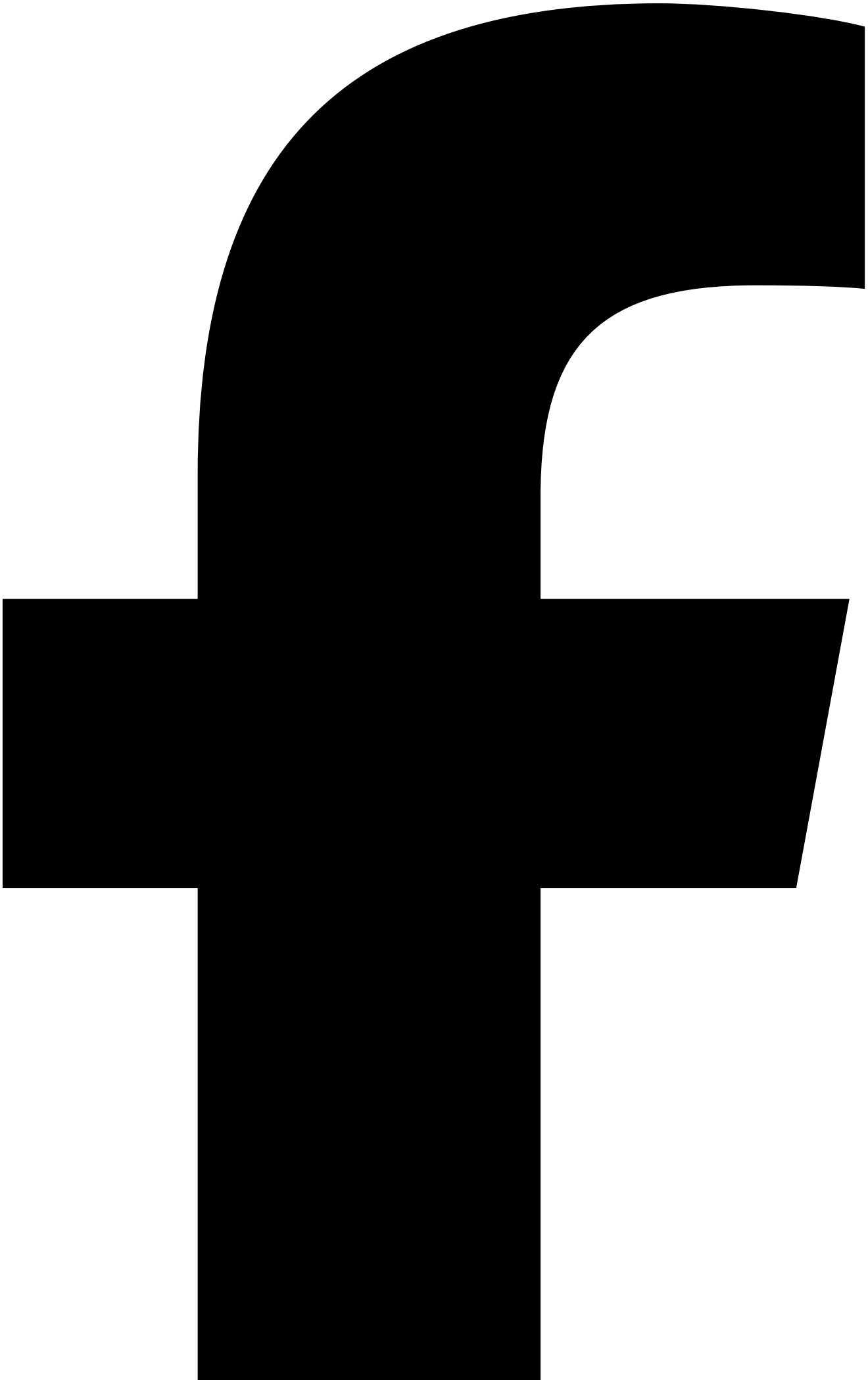


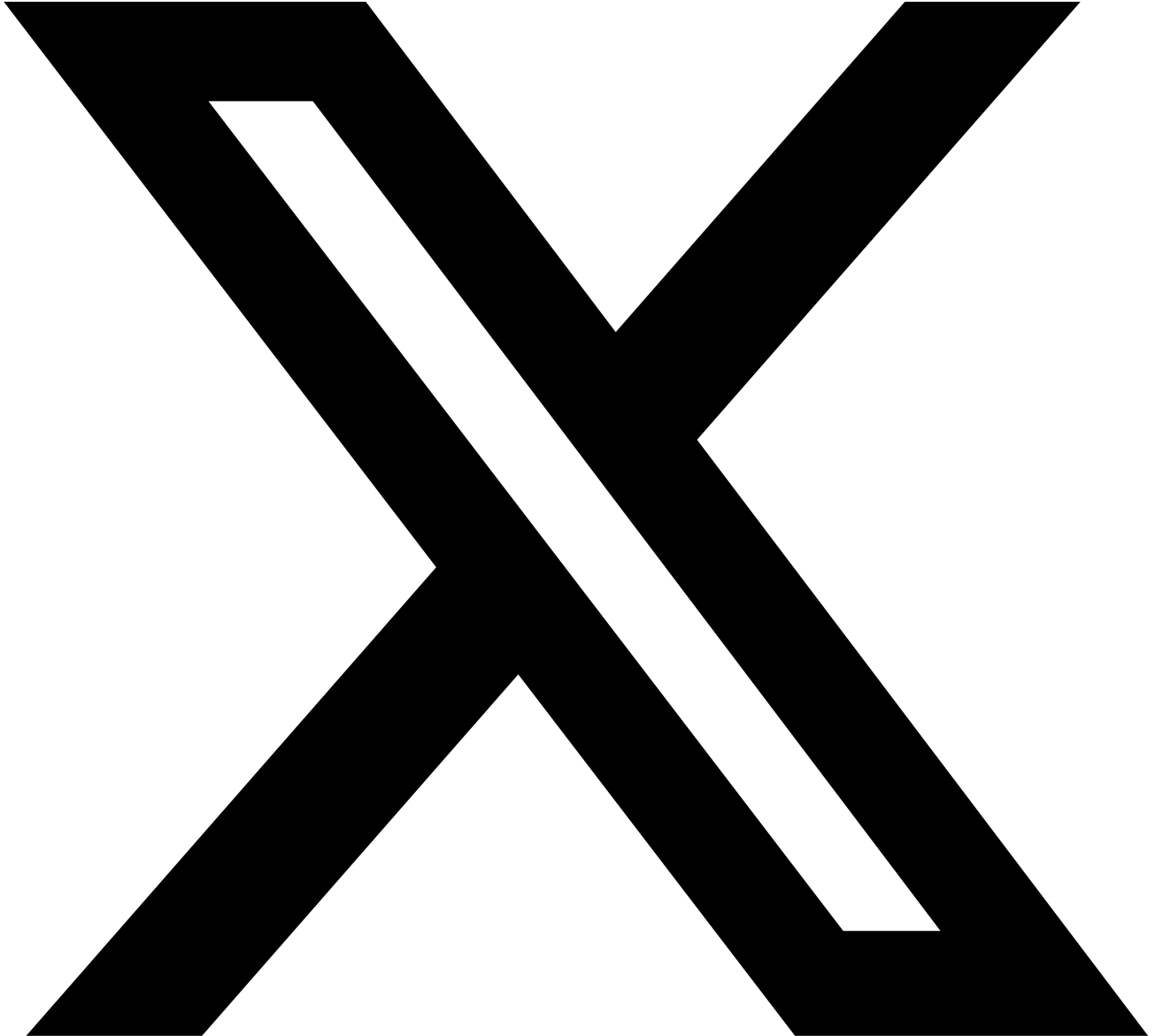
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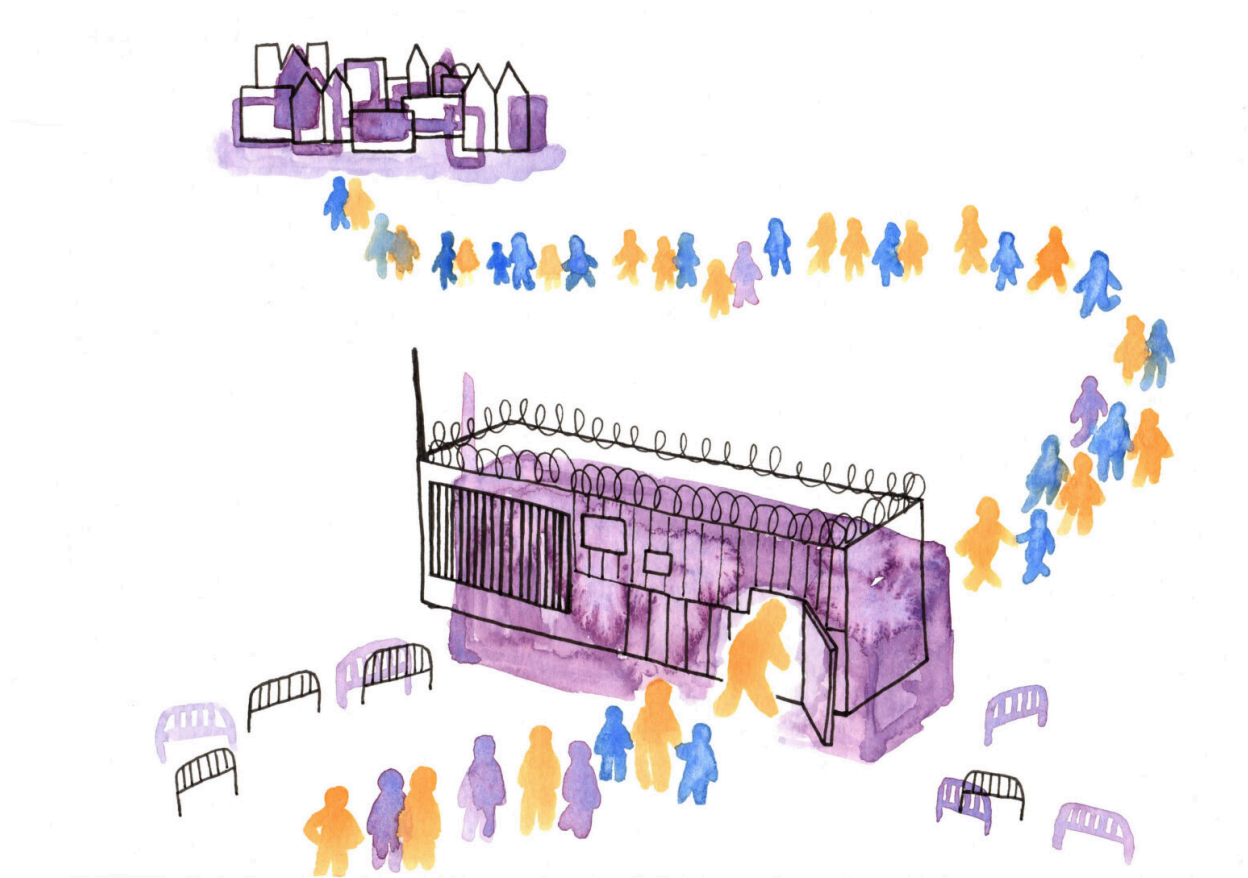
SOCIETY

#3 A review of the reception model in Brussels: the Ukrainian lesson

PUBLISHED 19/12/2022 · UPDATED 22/03/2023

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Is the approach to migration immutable? “Reception crises” occur one after the other in Brussels. However, Belgian and European policy makers seem to persist in wanting to be able to rely on deterrent mechanisms against migrants. The reception of Ukrainians shows us that other possibilities exist. Several lessons can be learned from this, particularly in Brussels.

Since the summer of 2015, “reception crises” have occurred one after the other in Brussels according to migratory flows, the gradual disinvestment in the federal accommodation system, and an overflow in the processing of asylum applications. Migration deterrence has become the priority, to the detriment of the respect for the right to asylum. In 2022, more than 5,000 homeless asylum seekers referred the matter to the Labour Court of Brussels in extreme urgency to have their right to accommodation in a reception centre recognised and won the case¹. A 7 June 2022 ruling questioned the government’s implementation of a “deliberate, concerted and persistent practice” of not granting the right to reception². These elements were supported by the European Court of Human Rights, which notified Belgium of its obligation to provide accommodation and material assistance to the 148 applicants, as provided for by Belgian law³.

These considerations suggest that public policy on immigration constitutes an exceptional case in Belgium. While economic, educational and cultural policies evolve according to political changes – with a change of majority being synonymous with a reassessment of priorities and a revision of the instruments implemented – this is not the case in terms of immigration. After being an economic necessity during the post-war economic boom, immigration has been considered a social burden and a political problem since the 1980s⁴. The public authorities implemented a series of mechanisms aimed at deterring migrants from coming to pursue a life in Belgium, to the detriment of reception and integration policies.

From then on, for 40 years, regardless of the majorities in power, the fundamentals of this approach have remained largely unchanged – the only noteworthy evolution being that its logic became more radical under the pressure of the growing electoral influence of the extreme right. While deterrence remains the main priority of public migration policies, the instruments used to reach this objective are less and less in keeping with the respect of the fundamental rights of migrants and have progressively integrated coercive practices⁵. At European level, the inefficiency and moral failure of migration policies are also highlighted by reports of the disproportionate financial and human costs of deterring intra-European mobility⁶ and by events such as the fire in the Moria camp in 2020, which was overcrowded with more than 12,000 asylum seekers living there⁷. But nothing happens. The different Belgian governments as well as the European decision-makers have clung to the repressive approach and have consistently presented it as the only possible pragmatic answer⁸.

Hence our surprise, beginning in March 2022, at the reception of Ukrainians fleeing the military aggression in their country. The measures implemented on this occasion broke with the logic of closure and were therefore very enlightening in several respects⁹. Firstly and most importantly, the approach to migration is not immutable. Alternatives are not only conceivable, but feasible. Secondly, the reception of Ukrainians involved several political innovations designed to be temporary and exceptional, whose expansion and continuation could be relevant.

THE RESPONSE TO THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS: REVERSING THE LOGIC OF SUSPICION AND ENCOURAGING SECONDARY MOVEMENTS

The first innovation was at European level. Rather than requiring each of the more than 6.5 million Ukrainian displaced persons to begin a lengthy, costly and complicated (for applicants as well as states) process of compiling and assessing individual cases, the Commission proposed the activation of the “Temporary Protection Directive”¹⁰. It had been part of its legal arsenal for some twenty years but had never been used until then. In a rare occurrence in the highly polarised European debate on immigration, the proposal was accepted immediately and unanimously by the members of the European Council. The exceptional activation of this directive made it possible for every citizen of Ukraine to receive a legal status in the Union automatically, after a simple registration with the national authorities. This status – valid for one year and renewable twice – allows them to have a legal existence as well as access to the labour market, health care and education for their children¹¹.

In terms of principles, this mechanism completely reverses the logic of suspicion which normally prevails, and which leads the authorities to consider any asylum seeker as a “false refugee”, unless he or she is able to provide irrefutable proof of the contrary¹². The directive acknowledges the fact that Ukraine is the victim of a war of aggression by Russia and that anyone who flees this territory does so in order to find refuge. According to this logic, there is no need to burden these people with inquisitive procedures; on the contrary, their rapid integration is facilitated. While each situation is unique, we are nevertheless entitled to ask ourselves whether the Syrians who fled the civil war or the Afghans who fled the advance of the Taliban could benefit from similar measures, or at least from this reversal of the logic of distrust¹³. It is known that on the contrary, a few days before the advent of the Taliban regime in August 2021, the Belgian government obstinately demanded the possibility to continue the deportation of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan¹⁴.

Secondly, the European Union has broken another political taboo in this unprecedented sequence. In European forums, it has long been considered a priority to prevent “secondary migration”¹⁵. The fear was that asylum seekers would move within the European space to submit several applications in the countries most likely to recognise them. Hence the establishment of the Dublin Regulation, whereby any person seeking asylum must lodge his or her application in the first member state via which he or she enters the territory of the Union. But it has also been known for a long time that the Dublin Regulation creates as many problems as it solves, due to the narrowing of safe and legal gateways to Europe. It places a disproportionate burden on the member states most exposed to migratory flows – mainly the countries on the Mediterranean coast and in eastern Europe. The more or less systematic referral to the country of entry varies among the 32 signatory countries, according to the application of the discretionary clauses under Article 17 of the regulation¹⁶. In Belgium, the predominant practice since 2015 has been a strict interpretation of the regulation. Asylum seekers who did not comply were suspected of “asylum shopping” and were even deprived of the right to reception in Belgium in order to make room for “real

newcomers”, according to the former Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Maggie De Block¹⁷. This logic continues in the new “proactive return policy”¹⁸ of the Belgian government. Dozens of civil servants recently recruited by the Immigration Office have been given the task of providing individual support to people who have been ordered to leave the country or to return to their country of entry¹⁹.

In the exceptional case of Ukraine, the European Union has therefore completely changed its stance on secondary migration²⁰. It is now a matter of encouraging migrants to leave the countries bordering Ukraine in order to promote a spontaneous and more equitable distribution among member states. In short, Ukrainians are asked to spread themselves geographically by going to the countries where they already have family or social ties. The organisation of migration flows in Europe is therefore based more on trust in the individuals in exile and their social capital than on a bureaucratic verdict²¹.

EUROPEAN INNOVATIONS, LOCAL IMPACT: (RE)DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL TIES AND THE DECENTRALISATION OF RECEPTION

The Brussels-Capital Region has been particularly affected by the reception crises in recent years. Its government has been heavily involved in supporting and financing emergency accommodation solutions provided by citizens and associations for migrants in the territory who are excluded from federal measures, in transit and homeless. These instruments for the decentralised management of reception were (re)developed following the arrival of the Ukrainians²².

Furthermore, the encouragement of secondary movements in Europe reflects a practical recognition of the role played by social ties in the integration of Ukrainian newcomers. The possibility for them to settle in the cities where they have ties is now recognised as an instrument for managing arrivals, which pursues above all a practical objective: that of delaying the opening of places, by counting on the private support of citizens who show their solidarity in the host countries. This encourages the host society to play a role in the objectives of integration and social cohesion, in particular by involving citizens in the search for long-term housing, access to the job market and language learning.

Accompanied by a positive institutional discourse on solidarity and citizen involvement in the reception of Ukrainians, the new political stances in this matter also allow a review of the firmness and hostility which marked the stances of previous federal governments on citizen mobilisation, including its criminalisation in the most extreme cases²³. The current sequence corroborates what has been put forth in studies of public opinion on migration²⁴: political will and positive discourse on immigration can change citizens’ perceptions of immigration and its challenges.

A second aspect of the local impact of these innovations is that the automatic granting of a temporary protection status represents a major innovation for the governance of reception and integration in Belgium. While the management functions of migration policy – in particular the organisation of reception during the examination of an application for asylum

and the granting of residency status – are the responsibility of the federal state, policies for the integration of foreigners once they have obtained residence status are community and regional responsibilities. The special status which Ukrainian citizens benefit from therefore implies a redistribution of competences among the different levels of authority and a decentralisation of reception and emergency strategies to the regional authorities. In other words, the migrant skips the “reception” (federal) stage and goes directly to the “integration” (regional) stage. A decentralisation of competences therefore has the capacity to redefine the politics of the migration issue.

We might therefore ask ourselves whether the decentralisation of reception would be worth considering for other categories of migrating people. The main impact of the current deterrent policy is that individuals are kept in situations of precariousness and inequality related to the absence of the right to residence and autonomy. As regional governments are responsible for aid to individuals, the presence of homeless migrants, mainly in Brussels, has required the Region to support local solutions to manage homelessness and growing social insecurity. Giving the Regions the legal capacity and financial means to adopt a policy to grant the right of residence would allow them to break with crisis management, temporary reception and social emergency, and develop sustainable regional housing and integration policies.

TOWARDS AN OVERHAUL OF THE APPROACH TO RECEPTION

Evidently, there are lessons to be learned from the reception of Ukrainians, especially in Brussels. The repressive approach is not immutable. And the Belgian and European authorities are even willing to completely reverse the principles of their migration policies when it suits them. Therefore, rather than relying on the logic of distrust (of “fake” refugees) and deterrence (of all other migrants who cannot claim refugee status), in certain circumstances they are able to view refugees with kindness and be encouraged to build a migration policy based on confidence in their ability to make good use of their social capital in order to accelerate their integration.

Is it a reception model beyond reproach? Not necessarily. It is refreshing to see that other migration policies are possible. But we must remain alert. The authorities did not agree to this revision of the migration policy because they were suddenly persuaded by a discourse which they had ignored for 40 years. There has not been a revolution in government philosophy. It is first and foremost the ordinary obstacles which have prompted the Belgian government and the European institutions to change their approach. By seeking to ensure that Ukrainians can become self-sufficient and secure their livelihoods as quickly as possible, the authorities are able to offload their responsibilities. And by making secondary migration the instrument for redistributing refugee populations, the rigidity of the Dublin Regulation is broken; but this will not be enough to ensure real justice in the distribution of the migratory burden between member states. What links all of these examples is that each time, the public authorities have relaxed their repressive approach in order to seek more pragmatic solutions – which, for the most part, had been suggested by stakeholders in the field. This liberalisation of migration policy is motivated more by considerations of practical

efficiency than by a need for justice. Let us make no mistake: abandoning a political practice based on a repressive model is not enough to create an equality policy. It is just a precondition.



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To cite this post: COSTA SANTOS Adriana, DELEIXHE Martin, EL MOUSSAWI Hala, NGO Sotieta and VERTONGEN Youri Lou, 2022. A review of the reception model in Brussels: the Ukrainian lesson. In: *BSI Position Papers*, no 3, 19/12/2022. Available at: <https://bsiposition.hypotheses.org/1660>

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bsipositionpapers (December 19, 2022). #3 A review of the reception model in Brussels: the Ukrainian lesson. *BSI Position Papers*. Retrieved August 9, 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.58079/m5ag>

