

MARRIAGE MIGRATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET: *The case of migrants of Turkish descent in Belgium*

Abstract

This article starts by asking whether economic motivations can explain why so many youngsters with a migrant background choose to marry a relatively unknown partner from the same region as their parents came from, a region that is largely unknown to them, and conversely why so many young people in countries in the South are opting for an unknown partner living in a far away country. In answering these questions Turkish marriage migration to Belgium will be used as a case study, since it offers several helpful insights in understanding the dynamics of marriage migration. The main focus of this article is on the relevance of socioeconomic explanations in understanding this issue. Economic reasons obviously play a role, but it is clear that they alone do not fully explain this phenomenon. The case described shows that reasons for migration go beyond economic benefits, permitting the conclusion that the popularity of marriage migration can only be explained by taking multiple frames of reference into account. Given the poor prospects and poor labour market situations for Turkish migrants, economic motivation seems an insufficient explanation of the phenomenon. It is clear that the existence of a "culture of migration" that binds the region of origin with the region of destination, one in which "the family" as an institution is capable of bridging the traditional praxis and the challenges linked to international migration, is complementary to understanding the enduring popularity of marriage migration between Emirdağ and Flanders.

Keywords

Belgium • family • labour market • marriage • migration • Turkey

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1 Introduction

The persistently high popularity of migration marriages within large immigrant populations in Western Europe is an interesting phenomenon. Since the bilateral agreements between Western European countries and Turkey in the 1960s, the Turkish diaspora has steadily grown, even though legal provisions in the host countries are limited. On the one hand, Turkish men and women in Western European countries are looking for brides and grooms in the home country of their parents or grandparents. On the other hand, young people in Turkey are still deciding to leave their country of birth and to move to countries like Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands, in short, to move to live and work abroad.

In this article we ask whether economic motivations are sufficient to explain fully why so many young people who are born and raised in Western Europe opt for a relatively unknown partner from a region that is by and large unknown to them, even though it is where their parents or grandparents came from. Conversely, why do so many young people born and raised in other countries like Turkey opt for an unknown partner living in a far away country? We develop our arguments using Turkish marriage migration to Belgium as a case study. Belgium is a small country centrally located in Western Europe, and the challenges it has to face in relation to on-going migration flows are generally comparable with those in the surrounding Western European countries. On the other hand, Turkish migration has already been affecting Western Europe, especially

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Germany, but also France, the Netherlands, Austria and Belgium, for several decades. We will demonstrate that the case of Turks in Belgium can offer us several interesting insights which are helpful in understanding the dynamics of marriage migration.

In order to situate Belgium, we will first look at its relationship with contemporary international migration, and specifically Turkish migration and Turkish marriage migration. To evaluate the relevance of economic motivations in the context of marriage migration, we will further elaborate on the economic situation of the populations involved in Turkish migration, and especially Turkish marriage migration. For this we will rely on secondary data, but also on empirical data gathered in the context of some recently concluded studies. To conclude, we will point to some alternative explanatory perspectives, described in earlier publications, in order to grasp fully the dynamics of this phenomenon.

2 Belgium and its foreign population

Belgium is a highly developed welfare state with well-developed social security programmes.

The welfare system Belgium has adopted is an expensive one, providing broad coverage that might attract immigrants and consequently give rise to anti-immigrant sentiments. On the other hand, the system might need immigrants' labour power to keep it going in the future (United Nations Population Division 2001).

Belgium is a country of about ten million people and is home to many immigrants and asylum-seekers. More than 9.1% of Belgium's population is of foreign nationality. However, if one takes into account the total number of people who did not have Belgian nationality at birth, the population of foreign origin is much higher, reaching almost 13% of the Belgian population (Martiniello & Rea 2003). Nonetheless immigration into Belgium was and still is mainly European, due to its strong attraction for many EU citizens, especially the French and the Dutch. Almost 69% of foreigners in Belgium are EU nationals. The largest non-EU migrant communities are the Moroccans and the Turks (see [Statistics Belgium: www.statbel.fgov.be/](http://www.statbel.fgov.be/)).

Turkey became involved in labour migration after the Second World War in response to a labour shortage in the Federal Republic of Germany. Germany and Turkey signed a bilateral agreement in October 1961 regulating the short-term emigration of Turkish workers. The economic situation in many other European countries was similar to the German one, and shortly afterwards Belgium too started importing foreign labour to fuel the post-Second World War economic boom, specifically to meet the demand for coal workers. The Belgian government established several bilateral agreements to bring in foreign labour to compensate for the declining domestic work force. The agreement with Turkey was signed on 16 July 1964 (see e.g. www.socialsecurity.be).

The oil crisis of 1973 and the economic downturn of the 1970s led to a recession. The following year, 1974, Belgium and its neighbours

established strict immigration legislation. It was difficult for the Turkish miners to adapt to the labour market after the mines closed down, for they were unable to speak Dutch or French. However, despite the fact that work opportunities ceased to exist and that there seemed to be no future prospects due to the new restrictive policy, immigration was not brought to a halt. The law of 1974 limited labour migration on the one hand while permitting immigrant family reunification and formation on the other (Bayar 1992).

In the mid-1980s, the Belgian government accepted the fact that what was planned as temporary migration seemed to have acquired a more permanent character, and it began to develop policies to encourage immigrants to settle in the country and to integrate into society. The law on entry, residence, settlement and the return of foreigners, which is still in force, was passed in December 1980. The Nationality Code introduced the principle of *jus soli* in 1984, and this was revised again on 1 March 2000. Since then, any foreigner legally residing for at least seven years in Belgium who has a permanent residence permit can become Belgian by means of a simple declaration, without any verification of his or her "desire to integrate." Of all the naturalisations effected in 2007, 8% were for Turks to acquire Belgian nationality. The Turkish community remains the second largest community when it comes to asking for naturalisation, after Moroccan citizens (CGKR 2009: 93).

Belgian immigration legislation is still largely defined by the migration stop of 1974, similar to measures that were taken all over Europe. This implies that access to the country is restricted. There are four official ways to enter the country: (1) labour migration, (2) family reunification or formation, (3) asylum, and (4) non-migration such as student mobility and tourism. The fifth way – irregular migration – is the same as in most European countries.

Migration policy is to a large extent demand-driven. The possibilities for entering the country legally are fairly limited. Labour migration and other forms of migration such as student migration and family migration are all subject to strict legislation.

Nevertheless, the latter has by and large been the most important form of migration for over three decades, that is, since 1974. Asylum migration gives a better chance to enter the country, but not a better chance to stay: only a limited percentage (15%) of all applicants finally acquire refugee status and a permit to stay.

3 Turkish migration and marriage migration

After Moroccans, Turkish residents form the second largest community in Belgium from outside the EU. In 1998, there were 79,460 Turks (7.9% of the total foreign population) living in Belgium. In 2000, the number of Turkish nationals went down to 56,172 when in the same year 17,282 Turks acquired Belgian nationality. Since 2007 the number has dropped below 40,000 (39,419 in 2007). By 2005 the majority of people of Turkish origin had acquired Belgian nationality (Statistics Belgium). It is estimated that the number of

people of Turkish descent substantially exceeds 100,000. Between 1991 and 2005, 100,898 Turkish nationals adopted Belgian nationality (CGKR 2008: 54). And there is still an annual inflow of roughly 3,000 Turkish citizens a year. According to the data of the Belgian Statistical Service, 2,965 Turks entered the country in 2007.

Chain migration is one of the legal ways, mentioned above, of entering the country and obtaining a long-term residence permit. Where chain migration is a matter of the reunion of (future) spouses, we refer to it as *marriage migration*. Contrary to expectations, the tendency within Turkish communities in Belgium to marry someone who grew up in the country of origin has remained steady (Lesthaeghe 1997). However, the pattern of Turkish chain migration into Belgium has gradually changed, and nowadays it is divided equally between male and female migrants. Population data show that from 1 January 2001 until 15 April 2005, 46% of Turkish newcomers who entered Belgium on the basis of marriage were women (Deschamps 2005). Initially chain migration applied exclusively to women and children joining their husbands or fathers who were already in Belgium as guest workers. Before 1974 economic migration was male and chain migration was female. In general, men chose to migrate, while women and children merely followed their husbands or fathers. Gradually this pattern changed as the second generation grew up in Western Europe and started to marry (Timmerman et al. 2009).

In recent decades, chain migration has become by far the most popular way to enter Belgium; in other words, the majority of newcomers have arrived in Belgium as the (future) spouses of Belgian residents. This certainly applies to Turkish migration. What is particular to Turkish residents in Belgium, including the second generation, is that the majority still end up marrying someone who grew up in Turkey (Timmerman 2008; Timmerman, Lodewyckx & Wets 2009).

For this we rely on a dataset extracted from the National Register of Belgium. The dataset contains records of all married couples or couples living together in Belgium on 1 January 2004 in which one of the partners has at some time had Turkish nationality. The dataset consisted of 19,251 couples (Yalçın et al. 2006). We see that among Belgian male residents who once had Turkish nationality, nearly three-quarters of the “in-between” generation and 60% of the second generation married a partner from Turkey. The percentage of women of Turkish origin marrying a partner from Turkey is even higher: nearly 80% of the women who arrived in Belgium between the ages of 7 and 18 years, the so-called “in-between” generation (in-between the first and second generations), against 60% in the second generation.

Within the Turkish community in Belgium, 60% of both men and women of the second generation are married to a partner who lived in Turkey until the marriage. In other words, 6 out of 10 youngsters with a Turkish background who are raised in Belgium opt for a partner who lives in the country from which their parents or grandparents came (Timmerman et al. 2009).

A study from the 1990s (Reniers 1997) shows that Turkish migrants mainly originate from a cluster of central Anatolian provinces. According to data on migrants from the State Institute of Statistics in Ankara, the three provinces that provided the most Turkish immigrants were Afyon, Eskisehir and Kayseri. Almost one-third of the Turkish immigrants in Belgium originate from Afyon, in particular Emirdağ (Reniers 1997). This district consists of about 70 villages, of which the town of Emirdağ (approximately 20,000 inhabitants) is the administrative centre. This town is situated in a poor, arid area that is greatly affected by emigration (Timmerman 1999; 2000).

Being the most important Turkish region of emigration for Belgium, the region of Emirdağ is an important location for understanding the dynamics of marriage migration. As can be expected, a lot of young people leave Emirdağ as marriage migrants heading for Western Europe. A dataset from the marriage register in Emirdağ, which gives data about the wedding, the birthplaces of the partners, their nationality, age, the age of marriage, the civil status of both partners before the wedding and the place of residence after the marriage, gives us more accurate information on this issue. For the period between January 2004 and June 2005, the marriage register showed that the majority (57%) of the couples who married also emigrated to Western Europe. The majority of these migration marriages are contracted in the summer, the holiday period when West European Turks visit their region of origin (Timmerman et al. 2009).

On the basis of the material mentioned above, it is clear that Turkish marriage migration remains popular. In order to understand the dynamics that might explain this phenomenon, it is relevant to consider the socioeconomic situation of those involved.

4 The socioeconomic situation

4.1 In Turkey

In Turkey itself, the socioeconomic situation has been improving drastically over the last few years, even if it is still lagging behind Western Europe. According to World Bank data, Turkish Gross National Income per capita rose between 2000 and 2007 from US\$ 3,930 to US\$ 8,030. Turkey still trails the rest of the OECD countries, but its GNI/c is higher than that of Bulgaria and Romania – two EU member states – and continues to rise. Compared with other important non-European immigration countries such as Morocco, the economic situation in Turkey is remarkably good. Turkey’s GNI/c is nearly three times higher than that of Morocco.

According to different theories of economic migration, it is assumed that people leave their own countries in order to improve their socioeconomic situations (De Haas 2008; Faist, 2000; McDowell & De Haan 1997; Wets 2001). In theories of the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), migration is not regarded as an individual decision, but as a decision taken by a larger group of people such

as a household. According to this theory, a household in a migrant-providing country will decide to assist one of its members in their bid to emigrate in order to compensate for a shortage in various markets and for the risk related to agricultural activities. Furthermore, such a decision is dependent on the relative status of the household in the community. The decision is therefore based on relative rather than absolute deprivation (De Haas 2008: 40).

On the basis of previous research conducted in Emirdağ, we know that people there feel that they are well informed about the economic differences between Emirdağ and the Turkish communities in Belgium (Timmerman 2000). In conversations with local people in Emirdağ, the incomes of the Turkish residents in Belgium are a popular topic. People in Emirdağ are convinced that Belgian Turks have an easy time of it. These opinions are based upon the spending habits of the Belgian Turks when the latter return to Emirdağ. Compatriots living abroad own substantial houses in Emirdağ, drive expensive cars, go on holiday in the popular Turkish tourist resorts, celebrate costly weddings and provide financial support to relatives left behind in Turkey. All in all, people in Emirdağ see plenty of evidence that the socioeconomic conditions of Turks living in Western Europe – and specifically in Belgium, where the overwhelming majority of emigrants settled – are better compared to their own situation in Turkey (Timmerman 1999; Timmerman et al. 2009).

Sometimes, respondents in Emirdağ indicated that they were aware that the lifestyle their European compatriots flaunted in Emirdağ is not representative of their lifestyle in Belgium. They confirmed that they were aware of the economic hardships that many of their compatriots encounter in Belgium: unemployment, low-skilled employment and the high cost of living in Western Europe, including Belgium. Despite the fact that this information is available in Emirdağ, it seems generally to be ignored, or at least not taken into consideration. Is there therefore a real basis for this assumption?

4.2 In Belgium

There is a lot of evidence that the socioeconomic situation of Turkish migrants in Belgium is indeed problematic compared to that of mainstream Belgian society. Data from the Belgian National Health Survey for 2001 indicate that 59% of people of Turkish origin in Belgium are living below the poverty line (Van Robays 2006). Unemployment among people with a Turkish background is high, especially amongst young people. Research also shows that ethnic minorities – often Turks – encounter considerable discrimination, in addition to their under-representation in the labour market, due to their poor educational background.

The educational level among the second and third generations, especially compared to other groups, still falls short. Recent research has mapped the school achievements of children with a foreign background (Duquet et al. 2006; De Meyer 2007; Groenez, van den Brande & Nicaise 2003; Hermans, Opendakker & van

Damme 2003). This research reveals the socio-ethnic gap in the field of education in Flanders, despite the notable position of the Flemish system in international comparative research. The position of youngsters of Moroccan and/or Turkish descent is especially problematic. According to Duquet et al. (2006: 51) they score worse than other pupils of foreign descent on every indicator of success. In sum, they lag far behind their classmates and are confronted with persistent and cumulative arrears, even before the age of compulsory education. All the different pieces of research record that the school careers of “immigrant” youths are characterised by low achievement, failure, being left behind, moving on less frequently to better disciplines and post-secondary education, higher numbers of (unqualified) school drop-outs, etc. (Levrau 2009).

A direct consequence of poor schooling is the lack of vocational qualifications. Compared to mainstream society, the socioeconomic situation of Turkish migrants in Belgium is problematic. Unemployment is high, especially among young people. Research from 2005 demonstrates that ethnic minorities – mostly Moroccans and Turks – encounter considerable discrimination (Martens et al. 2005), in addition to their under-representation in the labour market, due to their poor educational backgrounds (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul 2003). The average unemployment rate among Turks in Belgium is much higher than the overall unemployment rate. An analysis of some labour market data for Flanders in 2003 illustrates the poor position of the Turkish population on the labour market. The Turkish population represents only 0.5% of the labour population in Flanders, but represents 1.9% of the unemployed. If the overall unemployment rate was 8%, for people with a Belgian nationality it was 7%, for non-Belgians it was 15% and for the Turkish population it was 29%.

Turkish labourers in Belgium work more than any other group as blue-collar workers, earn less than the Belgians or other migrant groups, are mainly active in industry and the service sector and are seriously over-represented in agriculture and horticulture, metallurgy and the waste-processing industry (Verhoeven 2000). Male Turks have a much lower employment rate than the male Belgian population. In addition, Turkish women are less represented in the labour market. And yet research by Martens and others found that Turks with Belgian nationality do slightly better than Turkish nationals working in Belgium (Martens et al. 2005).

4.3 Those involved in marriage migration

It is evident that the overall economic situation of Turkish residents in Belgium is far from rosy, but what of those involved in marriage migration? For this we can rely on a dataset of the Crossroad Bank of Social Security. Almost everybody living in Belgium is registered in one way or another: if you are working, if you receive unemployment allowance, if you are ill or handicapped, if you receive child benefits or a pension. All this is registered by different institutions

within the social security system. Since 1989 all this data has been linked in the Crossroad Bank of Social Security, although it is only partially accessible to researchers due to stringent privacy legislation. However, the dataset has been used in research on marriage migration in Belgium (Heyse et al. 2007).¹

The data of the Crossroad Bank of Social Security only gives information on social security and does not include civil status. It contains enough information, however, to create a proxy for “marriage migration”. The family situation as such is classified in what is called the LIPRO code, which makes a distinction between people living alone, living with parents, living with a partner (married or unmarried), living with a partner and with children, etc.

We selected, independently of their nationality, men and women who were living with their parents or alone in the reference year of 2000 and whose position had changed in 2001. In our cases, the household positions of these people changed to a category code which indicated that they were living together with a partner they had selected. Next, the new partners of this selected population were checked. Only those people who were living together with a foreigner who had not been living in Belgium the previous years were selected for the research. The data were gathered for 2001, 2002 and 2003 and consisted of 8,942, 9,579 and 11,333 couples respectively. These data allow us to draw a picture of the socioeconomic profile of the immigrants and their partners in Belgium. Privacy regulations prevented information on specific nationalities being disclosed, so instead migrants had to be grouped in *nationality clusters*. The largest group of immigrants who entered the country with the purpose of settling with a person residing in Belgium were citizens of the wider region of the Mediterranean and the Arab world. The great majority of people within the cluster “Mediterranean and the Arab world” originated from Morocco or Turkey.

An analysis of the data showed that, for Flanders, “marriage migration” in general is more female (6/10) than male (4/10), although there are important regional differences. Southeast Asian and Eastern European migration is, at 97% and 81% respectively, predominantly female. Migration from the southern rim of the Mediterranean shows contrasting figures, however, and is slightly more male than female (53% versus 47%). All marriage migrants are young, with three-quarters being under 35 and 21% under 25. A small percentage (2%), virtually all of whom originate in Morocco or Turkey, are even younger than 20. There is a strong correlation (Cramer's $V = 0.33$; $\chi^2 < 0.0001$) between age and gender in this group from the southern rim of the Mediterranean. All migrants under the age of 20 are female, and almost eight out of ten (79.1%) of the newcomers under the age of 25 are women. The male weighting can be found principally in the age groups between 30 and 44 (65%).

A focus on the data of the partners living in Belgium tells us that more than eight out of ten (83%) have Belgian nationality. We have to bear in mind that, as stated earlier, Turks very often opt for Belgian nationality, and in doing so, they disappear statistically. An analysis of the nationality of those migrants coming from the

southern rim of the Mediterranean shows that they either marry Belgians or other Europeans or else people from the same region of origin. In a further analysis, we based our examination of the labour market position of the partners living in Belgium on the region of origin of their newly arrived brides or grooms. Nevertheless, this gives us a good idea of the socioeconomic situations of the Belgian Turkish population who marry brides or grooms from Turkey.

One relevant observation that can be derived from the dataset is that in Belgium, one of every five people marrying a foreigner coming from abroad was unemployed at a time when the overall unemployment rate was less than one in ten. A focus on the cluster of people who “marry” somebody from the sub-region of the Mediterranean and the Arab world reveals an even more important deviation from the average: one in every three of the partners living in Belgium who marry into this group is unemployed.

A large proportion of those who are employed have a low income. The average monthly income for people who marry somebody from the area of the Mediterranean is remarkably low. Almost half of them (45%) have a monthly gross income of less than €1,250, compared to 29% for the overall group. Two out of three (66%) earn less than €1,500 a month before taxes. Only 8% of the employed have a gross income of more than €2,000 a month (compared to 33% of the overall group). The new migrants who are working earn even less than the partners living in Belgium: 54% have a gross income of less than €1,250 a month.

The data also shed new light on some of the myths that circulate about new migrants. One of these is that they come to Europe to enjoy the benefits of the social security system. In our sample, newcomers can hardly be found in the social security databases at all (e.g. the welfare system). If they come to “profit”, there would have to be a time lag. The *new migrants* in our research population are also hard to trace back on to the labour market. Two in every three new migrants do not enter the labour market during the first year after their arrival: they are not (officially) working, and are neither unemployed nor self-employed. Women especially stay away from the labour market. In the case of a spouse from the Mediterranean and a partner living in Belgium who has nationality from the same region, the figures show that 93% remain inactive (82% if the partner has Belgian or other European citizenship) in the years analysed. An analysis of the family situation of the couples one year after the arrival of the new partners reveals that 64% of all couples with at least one partner coming from the southern or eastern rims of the Mediterranean consist of partners and children. Although the figures do not show whether the children are born in the time span analysed or joined the family together with their father or mother (one of the spouses may have married a partner with children), it is most probable that this is the case. Further analysis of the family data also shows that, after three years, 3–4% of the research population is registered as a one-parent family and between 6 and 7% as a single-person household. Apparently, such relationships do not prove very stable.²

These results from the study of Heyse, Pauwels, Wets and Timmerman (2007) show that Turkish marriage migrants on average marry Belgian residents with a weak socioeconomic background (albeit most probably of Turkish descent). This makes us confident in concluding that the socioeconomic situation of the Turkish community in Belgium into which Turkish marriage migrants marry is rather problematic.

5 Beyond economic explanations

In several of our ethnographic studies,³ it was demonstrated that in Emirdağ young people associate the advantages of marriage migration specifically with living in a modern, democratic and prosperous country. Men are particularly motivated to emigrate in order to improve their socioeconomic situations. They are convinced that earning a living will be much easier in Western Europe.

“The most important reason for men is the lack of employment here. They admire all the possessions of those living in Europe: their big cars.... On top of that people have also more rights in Europe, e.g. unemployment allowances, allowances for childcare (...)” (woman, citizen of Emirdağ). (Yalcin et al. 2006: 58)

This also applies to girls, but they often stress the broader advantages of living in a democratic, prosperous country with a sound social security system: access to health care, more social rights for women, better financial provisions in cases of sickness, unemployment and retirement and also greater sociocultural opportunities (Timmerman 1999, 2000; Yalcin et al. 2006). Notwithstanding this economically motivated discourse on marriage migration voiced by residents in a region of emigration, namely Emirdağ, it is clear from the previous section that economic reasons alone are not sufficient to explain the success of this on-going marriage migration. Although economic reasons remain relevant for local people in Emirdağ as a cause of emigration, the improving economic situation in Turkey and the feeble economic condition of the Turkish communities in Belgium must both be acknowledged, specifically for those who enter Belgium for reasons of marriage migration.

We have mentioned already in previous articles (Timmerman 2008; Timmerman et al. 2009) that it is necessary to look for complementary mechanisms to explain the consistently high popularity of migration marriages within the Turkish communities in Flanders or Belgium and in Turkish regions of emigration. Let us briefly recapitulate the most convincing ones. Many migration theories underline the importance of transnational networks in understanding migration processes (Faist 2000; Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec 2003; Nell 2004; Ostergard-Nielsen 2003; Van Heelsum & van Amersfoort 2007). The mere existence of transnational Turkish communities is an asset that smoothens the process of migration. Another element that enhances the existence of transnational networks between the

emigration areas and the diasporas is the strong feeling of Turkish nationalism, secular as well as religious. This is also an important factor in understanding the strong ties between areas of emigration and the Turkish diaspora (Kandioly 1991, 1995).

“Previously, it was unthinkable to go for Belgian nationality,” one of the girls said. “Now they are aware that Belgian nationality has some advantages”, she continued. Another girl, Banu, declared that she had already had Belgian nationality from when she was a child. All the other girls were very surprised at that. Banu told them that her father made them Belgian for practical reasons, but that until recently they were ashamed of it (...). (Excerpt from a meeting of Turkish girls in a sociocultural centre in Belgium, Timmerman 1999: 219)

We can observe that this commitment within the Turkish diaspora in Europe seems to have become even stronger with Turkey’s ambition to join the EU (Rohtus 2008).

As stated earlier (Timmerman 2008; Timmerman et al. 2009), the existence of a “culture of migration” that binds Turkish regions of emigration with the Turkish diaspora might offer the most promising explanatory scheme for understanding the success of marriage migration. The rosy “imaginings” of Western Europe that are created, as well as the “tradition” of migration towards Western Europe, have an significant appeal for people who dream of improving their socioeconomic and sociocultural positions in Emirdağ.

“People think that they will be freer (in Europe). They think they will earn a lot of money, they will have a house of their own, an expensive car, etc. For all these reasons people want to leave. In Turkey you cannot have faith in the future. There (Europe) you will have security. This is the most important reason” (man, citizen of Emirdağ). (Yalcin et al. 2006: 59)

“Migration is part of Emirdağ, we live with migration here. Everyone knows at least someone who migrated. We see it (migration) every day in our environment.” (woman, citizen of Emirdağ). (Yalcin et al. 2006: 62)

On the other hand, within the Turkish diaspora in Flanders or Belgium, language, religion, social networks, family relations and ethnic identities are all still extensively inspired by the migrants’ original regions of emigration.

“My mother warned me that they will only accept my choice (of a marriage partner) if he is the same as we, otherwise my parents will not give their consent. My mother will not accept a young man with other traditions. In other words, he has to come from our region (in Turkey).” (Turkish girl, citizen of Belgium) (Timmerman 1999: 178)

“Probably I will marry a boy from our village of Suvermez (near Emirdağ)” (Turkish girl, citizen of Belgium). (Timmerman 1999: 178)

This “culture of migration” is nurtured by a migration which is still continuing in very close communication between the Turkish communities in Flanders or Belgium and the regions of origin, as well as by the creative memory of the “authentic” places of origin.

As already noted, family migration, and more specifically marriage migration, is the most popular emigration regime in Emirdağ, and has been for several decades. As demonstrated in previous publications, unravelling this “culture of migration” is crucial for understanding the dynamics of marriage migration (Timmerman 2008; Timmerman et al. 2009). There it was demonstrated that the specific characteristics of the concepts of “family” and “marriage” within the sociocultural praxis of these Turkish communities – both within the regions of origin and at their destinations – are key elements in explaining the success and centrality of marriage migrations within contemporary Turkish communities in Western Europe.

In the local culture of Emirdağ, as elsewhere in Turkey, marriage is one of the key social institutions (Yalcin et al. 2006; Delaney 1991).

“Everyone marries in Emirdağ. Even people who are not able to live independently marry; for example, people with a mental handicap also marry and continue living with their parents or parents in law after marriage” (woman, citizen of Emirdağ). (Timmerman 1999: 200).

As noted already, in recent years half the marriages contracted in Emirdağ have been migration marriages (Timmerman et al. 2009). Migration opportunities have a major impact on changing conceptions of “family” and “marriage”, not only within the local praxis in Emirdağ, but also within Turkish communities in Western Europe (Manco 1999).

“(…) the European (Turkish) family comes and asks permission to marry. One day later, the young couple is engaged. A week later, they marry. They hardly know each other (…)” (woman, citizen of Emirdağ). (Yalcin et al. 2006: 69)

“It is foreseen that I will marry the son of my uncle. He studies in Antalya and will become a lawyer. He is 19 years old. He will come to Belgium. (...) I never talked with him about an eventual marriage. But my mother wants it, because he is the son of her brother (who lives in Turkey)” (Turkish girl, citizen of Belgium). (Timmerman 1999: 179)

This implies that marriage also plays a crucial role within the local “culture of migration” of Emirdağ and the Turkish communities in Flanders and Belgium. In addition, the traditional praxis of “marriage” within (semi)-rural Turkish communities proves to fit contemporary migration aspirations well.

Therefore, as we argued earlier, the popularity of marriage migrations has to be understood by taking the dynamics related to family formation as the starting point (Timmerman et al. 2009). The traditional concept of the “arranged marriage” – marriage first seen as a negotiated contract between two families – fits perfectly

with the conditions in which a migration marriage has to be negotiated. Given the restriction that the parties involved live in different countries, a contemporary migration marriage greatly resembles the traditional arranged marriage.

Another facilitating element in the popularity of marriage migration can be found in its power to alter existing gender roles and to rebalance power relations to one’s own benefit (Beck-Gernsheim 2007). Turkish girls in both Belgium and Turkey see in a migration marriage an opportunity to emancipate themselves. Girls in Emirdağ aspire to take advantage of the more liberal gender roles that prevail in the West; Turkish girls in Belgium aspire to greater independence by having their parents-in-law in Turkey, too far away to intervene directly in their new established household (Luyckx 1999). The wish of Turkish men in Belgium to marry a girl from Turkey might also be motivated by the desire to alter their own gender roles in Flanders and Belgium. It was found that men often aspire to have a bride who confirms more to the patriarchal ideal of traditional gender roles, so that a match with a girl from Turkey seems most promising (Yalcin et al. 2006).

In line with other studies, in the Turkish diaspora the discourse on marriage migration is mainly dominated by emotional and sociocultural motivations (Riano & Bagdadi 2007).

“(…)(they prefer a marriage partner from Turkey) because, people think that young people in Turkey are raised in a better way” (Turkish man, citizen of Belgium). (Yalcin et al. 2006: 161)

For all parties involved in the Turkish immigrant communities in Flanders in Belgium, marriage with partners from the original homeland strengthens their sense of continuity.

This fits well with theories of ethnicity which stress the importance people attach to preserving an “authentic” ethnic identity, especially within situations of uncertainty (Roosens 1996).

But apart from the “cultural” reading, there are other, more trivial or economic mechanisms that can be relevant in explaining the preference of Belgian Turkish parents for their children to marry a partner from their region of emigration: debts towards relatives who have stayed behind in Turkey (Beck-Gernsheim 2007), the assurance of a “dependant” daughter-in-law or son-in-law, and occasional financial benefits such as a high brideprice or dowry, or a cheap labour force (Timmerman et al. 2009).

6 Conclusion

The main focus of this article has been the relevance of socio-economic explanations in understanding why so many young people who are born and raised in Western European countries – in this case in Flanders in Belgium – opt for a marriage with an unknown partner from a region that is by and large unknown to them, even though it may be the region of origin of their parents or grandparents. Because of this, one can raise the question as to why so many

young people born and raised in countries like Turkey opt for an unknown spouse in a far away country. The historical situation – the ties between Turkey and Belgium that can be traced back more than four decades – and the fact that, apart from marriage migration, there are few possibilities to enter a Western European country like Belgium, does not provide a full explanation: they only sketch out the institutional setting. Another part of this setting is the presence of Turkish communities in Flanders or Belgium for whom a Turkish identity remains a relevant frame of reference and which remain well-connected with their regions of origin and their compatriots in the European Turkish diaspora. Although they are apparently in Belgium to stay, the younger generation continues to import its spouses.

Potential emigrants in Emirdağ – especially men, but to lesser degree also women – clearly aspire to improve their socioeconomic situations by engaging in a migration marriage. Indeed, there is still a big difference between the socioeconomic situations of countries like Belgium and Turkey, but according to World Bank figures the situation in Turkey is steadily improving and is even better than the situations in other countries that recently joined the EU like Romania and Bulgaria. However, the socioeconomic situation of the Turkish community in Belgium – even for those who are naturalised – is far from favourable. Turks and Belgians of Turkish descent are less represented in the labour market, and if they are, they are often unemployed or employed in less attractive trades, earning considerably less than other groups, even less than other non-European immigrant groups. It has been demonstrated that people in Belgium – the large majority of Turkish descent – who marry spouses from Turkey are living in relatively difficult socioeconomic conditions.

Economic reasons obviously play a role, but it is clear that alone, however important they are, they do not fully explain this phenomenon. All this demonstrates that the reasons for migration go beyond mere economic benefits and allows us to conclude that the popularity of marriage migration can only be explained by taking multiple frames of reference into account. Given the poor prospects for Turkish migrants in their future host countries, and given the poor performance of their spouses, who have been born and raised in Belgium, in the labour market, economic motivation seems a far from adequate explanation for the phenomenon in general. It is clear that the existence of a “culture of migration” that binds the region of origin

with the region of destination, one in which “the family” as an institution is capable of bridging the traditional praxis and the challenges linked to international migration, is complementary to understanding the enduring popularity of marriage migration between Emirdağ and Flanders.

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Notes

1. In this inter-university research, we investigated marriage migration into Belgium from Morocco, Turkey, Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, using quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
2. See Heyse et al. (2006). These data result from an analysis of administrative databases. Further information on who and why cannot be derived from the available statistics.
3. One of the authors, Christiane Timmerman, conducted extensive fieldwork in the Turkish immigrant communities in Flanders/Belgium and in a region of emigration in Emirdağ from 1990 to 1995 and for brief periods in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2010 (see bibliography).

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