

Language policies in election campaigns in Flanders

Proposals put forward by political parties concerning language requirements and education for children and non-native speaking adults

Ghent, June 6th 2024, Silke Eloot - On 9 June 2024, several key elections will be held in Belgium. Belgian citizens will vote in their federal and regional elections, as well as in the elections of the European Parliament. Although it may not have been a prominent subject of debate during the election campaigns, several mentions of language and related topics can be found in the election programmes of the various parties. For instance, most political parties in Flanders – one of Belgium's three regions – have clear positions on the role of Dutch in education, especially concerning non-native newcomers and children. This article provides an overview of their standpoints on language requirements and education.

Belgium is a federal state, meaning that it has multiple parliaments and governments corresponding to its regions and so-called language communities. Additionally, there is a federal, or central, government. Each parliament is vested with distinct powers; the federal parliament's powers do not overlap with those of the other parliaments. In the context of Flanders, language education and integration policies are strictly regulated by the Flemish parliament.

Opposing views on language policy often stem from the broader debate on the rights of newcomers versus their perceived responsibilities. Many parties argue that the ability to speak Dutch is fundamental for integration into Flemish society, whereas others advocate a multicultural society that respects linguistic diversity. In other words, the diverging views held by the various parties on language policies reflect their broader ideological approaches to cultural identity and integration.

For context, a brief description of each of the seven most prominent political parties in Flanders is provided below.

cd&v (“Christian Democratic and Flemish”): a Christian-democratic party with a more or less centrist stance. The party is left-leaning in its social and economic policies, but holds conservative views on ethical issues such as family values.

N-VA (“New Flemish Alliance”): a Flemish nationalist party that advocates devolution of powers from the federal level to Flanders. The party’s ideology is conservative and is situated to the centre-right of the political spectrum.

Vlaams Belang (“Flemish Interest”): a Flemish nationalist party aiming for Flemish independence. It is a far-right party known for its strong stance against immigration.

Open Vld (“Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats”): a liberal party with progressive views on individual freedoms and a conservative stance on social and economic matters, such as free-market policies and minimal state intervention.

Vooruit (“Onward”): a centre-left socialist party committed to social democracy, equality and solidarity. The party has leftist views on social and economic matters and individual freedoms.

Groen (“Green”): a green party focusing on environmental sustainability, social justice and civil rights. The party is situated to the left of the political spectrum.

PVDA (“Workers’ Party”): a far-left party that advocates workers' rights and extensive social welfare programmes. Its ideologies are rooted in socialism and Marxism.

Not all the proposals in this article apply to everyone considering migration to Flanders. Each proposal has therefore been paired with a symbol, with each one relating to a certain group of people.

★ EU citizens: everyone with the nationality of any of the EU member states. EU citizens do not need a permit to stay in Belgium because of the freedom of movement and residence provisions established by the European Union.

▲ Labour migrants from outside the EU: any individual from a non-EU country who relocates to Flanders for the purpose of employment. Labour migrants typically require a work permit or visa to legally work and reside in the region.

■ Immigrants to whom an obligatory civic integration programme is presently applicable: non-EU citizens who are not covered by any of the [exceptions](#) to the obligatory civic integration programme.

● French-speaking Belgian citizens: French-speaking Belgians who want to move from Brussels or Wallonia to Flanders.

◆ Any non-native speaker of Dutch who wants to relocate to Flanders. This includes EU citizens, non-EU citizens and Belgians.

♣ Students and pupils, both native and non-native speakers of Dutch

N.B. the viewpoints outlined below are proposals rather than current regulations. Some proposals may find their way into a coalition agreement after the elections and, if so, may be included in new legislation during the following legislative term. If you are looking for information on current requirements for newcomers in Flanders, please visit this [website](#).

Not all parties adopt an explicit stance on every topic; the proposals included in this article are limited to those explicitly mentioned in the election programmes. However, parties may also hold implicit views on topics not included in their programmes.

Dutch language classes for non-native speakers

In Belgium, migration is a shared responsibility between the federal and regional governments. The federal government is in charge of regulating immigration policies, visas and asylum procedures. Integration policies fall under Flemish jurisdiction. The Flemish government is, therefore, responsible for the integration of newcomers to Flanders, including mandatory civic integration programmes and language courses.

Dutch language classes for non-native adults are the most prominently discussed of all the language-related topics in the election programmes. In Flanders, these classes are considered an essential component of the integration programme, which also includes a course on social orientation, indicating that many parties associate language skills directly with integration. Consequently, any debate on migration often includes arguments regarding the Dutch proficiency of newcomers. Flemish nationalist parties, for instance, closely associate cultural

identity with the Dutch language and therefore place a higher emphasis on Dutch language skills in their election programmes.

Expanded mandatory civic integration programme

Participation in the civic integration programme is not currently obligatory for labour migrants and EU citizens living in Flanders.

▲ N-VA and cd&v want work visas for labour migrants to be conditional on their knowledge of the Dutch language.

★ cd&v wants Dutch language classes to be mandatory for EU citizens. However, this proposal is not in line with EU legislation, which ensures freedom of movement and residence for all EU citizens.

● N-VA and Vlaams Belang propose language requirements for French-speaking Belgians moving from Brussels or Wallonia to Flanders, but their proposal runs contrary to the Belgian Constitution, which states that Belgian citizens have “freedom of language use”, as well as the right to reside and move freely within the country.

Stricter language requirements

Some parties favour stricter language requirements within the civic integration programme. Presently, the programme’s participants are expected to achieve an A2 level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

■ Cd&v and Vlaams Belang propose raising this requirement to a B1 level. N-VA is also in favour of increasing the requirement to B1, and eventually even B2. Open Vld does not explicitly reference CEFR levels but expects medium- and highly-skilled newcomers to achieve a higher level of proficiency in Dutch.

Social benefits linked to language skills

- Vlaams Belang and N-VA propose using stricter language requirements for immigrants as a prerequisite for accessing social benefits, such as child benefit, social security and social housing.

- In the Brussels periphery, N-VA suggests tying school allowances to the willingness of parents to learn Dutch. However, penalising children for their parents' actions could jeopardise their rights.

- Vooruit is in favour of replacing social security for those who have lived in Belgium for less than three years with an "integration support" programme, which would be conditional on attending Dutch classes.

- In contrast, Groen and PVDA oppose linking social benefits to language requirements. Cd&v does not support making child benefit contingent on parents' proficiency in Dutch, either.

Free classes and tailored courses

Stricter language requirements tied to social benefits would lead to more non-native adults taking Dutch classes. A different approach to achieving a larger number of students would be to increase the accessibility of the classes.

- PVDA advocates free language lessons for asylum seekers, while Vooruit supports free lessons for all immigrants up to a B1 level. Groen proposes a broader range of courses, and cd&v favours tailored lessons to accommodate different educational levels.

Online classes

- Several parties (Vlaams Belang, N-VA, Open Vld, cd&v, and Vooruit) want the integration programme, including Dutch language classes, to start before immigrants leave their home countries. These lessons could take place in person in their countries of origin or online, but this raises questions concerning the teachers' willingness to transition to online teaching and the potential impact on lesson quality.

Language education at work

◆ Open Vld, Vooruit and cd&v want more funding for language education in the workplace. They are in favour of a greater use of IBOT, a programme designed to integrate individuals – particularly those who are non-native speakers – into the workforce by providing both vocational training and language education simultaneously.

◆ Vooruit also proposes easing language requirements for hard-to-fill vacancies.

● Open Vld and cd&v encourage employment services to promote job opportunities across the Dutch/French language border. They argue that French-speaking Belgians working in Flanders should receive language coaching and lessons to improve their Dutch proficiency in the workplace. This shift to more learning in the workplace would imply the need for a greater number of language coaches specialising in learning in the workplace.

Language policies in schools

Belgium's complex federal structure is reflected in the way its education is organised. The education system is regulated at community-level, with the Flemish Community, the French Community (of Belgium) and the German-speaking Community each managing their own educational policies. This means that the Flemish government is responsible for education in Flanders and certain schools in Brussels where Dutch is the language of instruction.

Emphasis on Dutch proficiency

N-VA, Vlaams Belang, Open Vld, Vooruit and cd&v all argue that a solid command of Dutch is the foundation for learning other subjects. They, therefore, propose the following measures as a way of enhancing Dutch proficiency among students.

♣ N-VA proposes allocating half the lesson hours in primary education to Dutch and mathematics. Vooruit is also in favour of increasing the number of hours dedicated to Dutch. Open Vld wants a “Flemish plan for Dutch and mathematics” without detailing what such a plan would involve. For cd&v, language skills should also be enhanced across all classes, and

writing and reading skills should be integrated into various subjects. Vooruit favours adding an extra Dutch language module to teacher training programmes to ensure that all teachers are proficient in Dutch regardless of their subject.

Language support and assessments

♣ At the moment, all five-year-old children in Flanders are required to complete a mandatory language assessment, which is designed to identify which children need additional language support, such as individual tutoring or language immersion classes.

♣ Cd&v questions whether this assessment should be mandatory for all children and favours only requiring it for children with language deficiencies according to their teachers. Vlaams Belang and N-VA advocate a binding language assessment to determine whether a child is linguistically competent to enter the first year of primary school.

◆ Vlaams Belang wants all children who are not native speakers of Dutch to complete a Dutch language assessment before attending a Dutch-speaking school. Those who do not pass the test would be required to attend so-called summer schools and language immersion classes and pass a final test before joining the school.

Summer Schools

Summer schools in Flanders offer additional educational opportunities during the holidays, allowing children to practise and improve their Dutch language skills.

♣ Vooruit, cd&v and N-VA support expanding summer schools for language practice, although they do not insist on making them compulsory.

Classes for newcomers

◆ Children who have recently migrated to, or are seeking asylum in Flanders can enrol in special classes with a focus both on integration and Dutch language learning before transitioning to regular education programmes. However, due to a limited capacity, not all newcomer children can attend these classes. Therefore, cd&v and PVDA advocate increased funding.

Language diversity

♠ While the primary focus of many party programmes is on Dutch proficiency, some parties also highlight the importance of other languages. Open Vld considers multilingualism an asset and stresses the importance of foreign language education. N-VA wants more emphasis on Latin and Greek and views these subjects as essential to understanding what it means to be a human being living in Flanders.

♠ PVDA puts an explicit value on multilingualism. The party wants schools to respect the mother tongues of all students, and frames education as a "multicultural pedagogical project." Conversely, Vlaams Belang wants Dutch to be the sole language spoken in schools, even in playgrounds and in communication with parents.

Language Policies in higher education

The debate over language policies extends into higher education, with differing views being held on the language of instruction.

♠ On one hand, N-VA wants Dutch to be the primary language of instruction at universities and university colleges and believes that that would ensure the democratisation of higher education. On the other hand, Open Vld advocates the internationalisation of higher education and proposes more programmes taught in English as a way of attracting international students and preparing Flemish students for the global job market. Both Vooruit and cd&v seek a balance between internationalisation and democratisation. They support the inclusion of both Dutch and English courses.