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HISTORY AS GATEKEEPER: THE ROLE OF STATE-SPONSORED HISTORY IN CIVIC INTEGRATION IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This article analyzes how civic integration programs in Flanders (Belgium) and The Netherlands have evolved into sites of state-sponsored historical production. Since the turn of the century, both countries developed civic integration trajectories, based on the premise that the integration of immigrants requires mutual effort. Today, almost all non-EU+ migrants in the Low Countries are required to follow these trajectories, which combine language training with courses or tests on societal knowledge. Drawing on policy documents, teaching materials used in civic integration courses, and participatory observation, this article identifies three discernable trends over the past 25 years. First, the scope of mandatory integration has expanded significantly, encompassing an ever-larger population. Second, these trajectories have grown increasingly compulsory and coercive. Third, there is a culturalization of citizenship, particularly evident in the growing emphasis on history. By analyzing the treatment of colonial history within these courses, the article demonstrates how civic integration courses constitute a distinct site of state-sponsored historical production. Unlike the often-implicit influence of states on historical narratives, here it is overt and deliberate. Through selective storytelling, the host society constructs a moralized self-image vis-à-vis the newcomer, reinforcing a "we-they" dichotomy. History thus functions as a community-building tool, though not necessarily to integrate newcomers into that community.

Keywords: Civic integration, state-sponsored history, coloniality, othering.

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Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, both Belgium and the Netherlands have become attractive destinations for immigrants. Labor

migration was actively encouraged by the respective governments for an extended period, and many of these labor migrants were later joined by their families.[1] In addition, the number of refugees arriving in both countries steadily increased (Creve et al., 2021, p. 225). Although immigration was initially promoted, there was no official reception or integration policy in place for these migrants. The governments mistakenly assumed that migrants would eventually return to their countries of origin. The limited policies that did exist focused primarily on encouraging and facilitating the preservation of migrants' cultural heritage, based on the belief that this would support their eventual return (Creve et al., 2021, p. 225).

It was only around the turn of the century that policymakers in the Low Countries began to realize that a significant portion of the migrant population would settle permanently. In Belgium, integration policy became a regional competence following the state reform of 1980. However, in the early years, Flanders – one of the three communities in Belgium – allocated very limited funding to this domain (*Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse overheid,* 2024).[2] In the Netherlands, the first civic integration law was introduced in 1998, becoming a pioneer in Europe as the first country to implement such a policy (Wet inburgering nieuwkomers, 1998). Flanders followed five years later, in 2003 (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, 2003). In this article, I analyze the civic integration policies of the Low Countries and investigate how they employ the teaching of history as a tool in the civic integration process.

Civic integration policies are based on the premise that the integration of immigrants requires mutual effort: the host society must provide a structured program that 'newcomers' are expected to follow, thereby facilitating their integration (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, 2003).[3] The goal is, in their words, enabling newcomers to "adapt to their new social environment" and achieve "full participation" in society (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid, 2003). These trajectories typically include language classes and a civic integration course or test that imparts knowledge and skills about the host society. In both Flanders and The Netherlands, almost all non-EU+ newcomers are required to follow a civic integration trajectory (Baele, 2024).[4]

This article examines three discernible trends in civic integration programs in the Low Countries. First, it demonstrates that over the past 25 years, the population subject to mandatory civic integration trajectories has expanded significantly. Second, it argues that these trajectories have become increasingly compulsory and coercive in nature. Third, it identifies a growing culturalization of citizenship within civic integration programs, particularly evident in the prominent role assigned to history. Both the Flemish and Dutch governments

have progressively emphasized the historical dimension of the knowledge imparted in these programs. Moreover, this 'history' is being defined with increasing precision, as authorities explicitly determine which historical narratives are to be taught. As such, citizenship no longer concerns formal, practical matters, but increasingly revolves around values and norms, tradition, and history (Duyvendak et al., 2016, p. 3).

Civic integration trajectories thus constitute a distinct site of state-sponsored historical production. While state influence over historical narratives is often indirect or implicit, in this context it is overt and deliberate (Bevernage & Wouters, 2018, p. 5). By selecting specific historical accounts, the state assigns particular moral valences to the past. The integration course thereby becomes a unique, almost tangible space in which the host society narrates its historical self-image to the 'Other.' This process not only reveals what political authorities in the Low Countries wish to communicate to newcomers, but also how these societies choose to represent themselves – and the narrative foundations upon which that representation rests (Grever & Ribbens, 2007, p. 13-14).

As this article contends, such practices reinforce a 'we-they' dichotomy, positioning the host society as morally superior. History is thus employed as a community-building tool, though not necessarily with the aim of integrating newcomers into that community. This dynamic is illustrated through an analysis of the historical narratives surrounding the colonial past in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

Expansion of the Target Group

Over the past 25 years, the target group of civic integration courses has steadily expanded. Initially, civic integration was mandatory for all non-European adults. But the years directly after the implementation of the Civic Integration Law in The Netherlands (1998), they developed policy that was extended beyond 'newcomers' to also encourage 'long-term residents' – which are individuals who had already been living in the Netherlands for some time – to participate in the integration trajectory (Inburgering; Brief minister met de tweede voortgangsrapportage in het kader van het Groot Project Inburgering oudkomers, 2002). In 2006, The Netherlands lowered the minimum age to 16 (Wet inburgering nieuwkomers, 2006).

That same year, the Civic Integration Abroad Act came into force. From then on, individuals seeking to enter the Netherlands for purposes of family reunification or to work as religious clerk were required to pass a Basic Civic Integration Examination in their country of origin (Bonjour, 2010, p. 299). This exam tests reading and speaking skills, as well as knowledge of Dutch society (Wet inburgering in het buitenland; Brief minister onder meer over de evaluatie

van de Wet inburgering in het buitenland, 2006). It is mandatory for all non-European nationals, with exceptions for citizens of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States (van Helden et al., 2011). These exceptions are made based upon the assumption that these countries are "western" – an assumption that is contrary to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, as ruled by the Dutch court in 2024 *Rechtbank Den Haag, NL23.15395,* 2024).

In Flanders, the target group remained more stable for a longer period. While long-term residents are also welcome to participate in the course, there has been no explicit policy focus on this group. However, concrete plans have recently emerged. Flanders now as well intends to introduce a Civic Integration Abroad program for individuals entering through family reunification, as well as for refugees in resettlement programs. These individuals would be required to complete a course and pass a test – administered by external partners – while still in their country of origin or before being allowed to enter Belgium (*Request for clarification on the evaluation of the pilot projects for integration from abroad and the planned cooperation with Morocco,* 2025). With these plans, Flanders will become only the second (after The Netherlands) government to require exams abroad. Cyprus, Austria, and Germany do require proof of language proficiency, but no other country expects knowledge of the host society (*EMN Nederland – Europees Migratienetwerk Nederland,* 2024).

Moreover, the responsible minister, Hilde Crevits, has explicitly expressed her desire to make at least the language component of the integration course mandatory for European newcomers as well. Although this likely conflicts with EU regulations on the free movement of persons, she has already initiated discussions at the European level (*Request for clarification on the evaluation of the pilot projects for integration from abroad and the planned cooperation with Morocco,* 2025).

In summary, the target group for civic integration in both Flanders and the Netherlands has expanded beyond national borders, the temporal definition of 'newcomer' has been stretched, and in Flanders, even one of the cornerstones of the European Union – the free movement of persons – is being called into question. Of all European countries, Flanders and the Netherlands expect the largest group of newcomers to follow an integration program.

Increasingly Coercive Nature of Civic Integration Policies

A second observation is that civic integration policies in the Low Countries have taken on an increasingly coercive character. Initially, newcomers in the Netherlands were required to attend Dutch language classes and courses on knowledge of Dutch society, and to take exams on both components.

However, these exams were not binding at first. This changed in 2007, when passing the exam became mandatory and subject to a fee of €250. In 2013, the courses were privatized and no longer mandatory (Groenendijk et al., 2021, p. 2723). This meant that newcomers who wished to learn Dutch and acquire Knowledge of Dutch Society in a classroom setting had to independently find a school on the private market and pay a substantial fee for it (approximately 700 euros) (Wet inburgering, 2013).

The Civic Integration Abroad Act introduced an additional mandatory requirement for newcomers wishing to enter the Netherlands – an obstacle that even was condemned by a court in Den Bosch for violating the European Family Re-unification Directive (*Wet Inburgering Buitenland in strijd met Europese Gezinsherenigingsrichtlijn,* 2012). Those who failed to complete the integration trajectory on time faced financial penalties (Wet inburgering in het buitenland; Brief minister onder meer over de evaluatie van de Wet inburgering in het buitenland, 2006).

Flanders, by contrast, long adhered to a model based solely on free courses. Since 2015, three agencies are responsible for delivering these courses (one in Antwerp, one in Ghent, and one responsible for the rest of Flanders). Next to Social Orientation courses, they also offer Dutch classes and provide support in the mandatory work- and participation trajectories. At first, all these courses were taught physically, but since Covid pandemic, about ±60% of the courses are online. About 10% follows a self-study track, working independently after an initial contact session. The assigned case manager determines which trajectory is most suitable for each newcomer (Baele, 2024)[5].

Newcomers were not required to take an exam; mere attendance in the language and social orientation courses sufficed (Baele, 2024, p. 10). In 2022, however, Flanders followed the Dutch example by introducing a mandatory final exam at the end of the courses. Participants must now score at least 70% to obtain their integration certificate. The course and exams together cost €360, and – as in the Netherlands – non-compliance with integration obligations is subject to fines (Baele, 2024, p. 24).[6] As mentioned earlier, a pre-arrival exam abroad will soon be added to the Flemish system as well.

This tightening of civic integration policy can be understood in the context of a growing influence of far-right political parties in both Flanders and the Netherlands. In Flanders, Vlaams Belang ('Flemish interest') is a far-right party that makes migration its main issue. After gaining momentum in the 1990s, the party experienced a decline in electoral support. However, this trend reversed – partly due to the so-called migration 'crisis' of 2015. Over the past decade, the party has tripled its vote share. In Flanders, a 'cordon sanitaire' prevents other parties from forming a coalition with Vlaams Belang, meaning the party must become politically unavoidable (*incontournable*) to enter govern-

ment. Fearing this scenario, mainstream political parties have significantly shifted their programs to the right, particularly on issues related to migration (Abts, 2024). In The Netherlands as well, politics has shifted noticeably to the right, particularly on the issue of migration. Parties like Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) and later Forum for Democracy (FvD) led by Thierry Baudet have significantly influenced political discourse by placing 'mass immigration' at the center of debate. The PVV's electoral victory in 2023, which made it the largest party in the House of Representatives, marked a turning point. In response to these electoral gains, mainstream parties have also hardened their positions, especially regarding migration. Analysts suggest that this rightward turn is driven not only by cultural anxieties and distrust in the political establishment, but also by strategic repositioning among traditional parties seeking to maintain their electoral relevance (De Waal, 2019).

This political shift to the right has not only resulted in stricter immigration policies, but also in an increasing emphasis on identity. Dutch and Flemish 'values' or 'culture' – and the need to protect them – have moved to the fore-front of political discourse, even becoming central themes in recent elections. As I will show in the next chapter, this shift is clearly reflected in the evolving content of civic integration programs, particularly in the course on Social Orientation.

Culturalization of citizenship

In addition to demonstrating proficiency in the Dutch language, newcomers are also required to prove their knowledge of the host society. Over the past years, a third trend has become increasingly apparent: this knowledge component has shifted more and more towards cultural aspects, values, and norms.

History, in particular, has come to play an increasingly explicit role in this process. In Flanders, the curriculum is structured around eleven learning environments, one of which – City and Country – is dedicated to history, traditions, customs, and practices. In the Netherlands, there are eight learning environments, including one specifically focused on History and Geography. Other domains include housing, healthcare, and education.

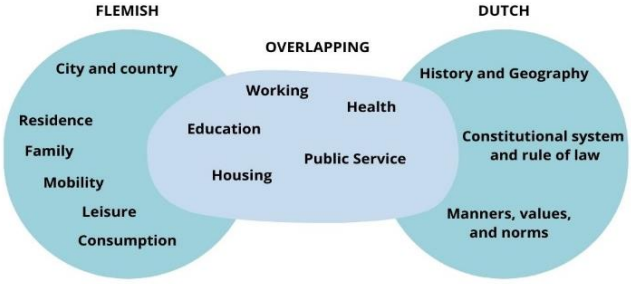

FIG I: Learning environments in Flanders and the Netherlands

In the earliest legislative frameworks in the Netherlands, history was mentioned as a topic to be addressed, but without further specification. As early as 2003, the Dutch House of Representatives called for a stronger emphasis on history in the integration course, and this was implemented in 2007. In the final attainment targets, it was stated that "By acquiring knowledge of Dutch history and geography, the civic integration participant is enabled to engage with the Netherlands and its society in a meaningful way" (Eindtermen KNS 2013, 2013, p. 6).

In 2013, the history component was expanded again: four general themes were identified and further explained: "delving into the history of the Netherlands", "dealing with sensitive relationships and events for the Netherlands", "using geographical knowledge of the Netherlands in daily life", and "Knowing the ideas accepted in the Netherlands (since the 1970s)". The first theme should cover knowledge of the Dutch Golden Age, including wealth, colonialism, shipping, waterworks, and migration in the 20th century, as well as awareness that the Wilhelmus is the national anthem of the Netherlands. The second theme should cover World War II and its effects on daily life in the Netherlands, and the role of the United Staes, Canada and Great Britain in the liberation of Western Europe in World War II (Eindtermen KNS 2013, 2013, p. 19). In 2025, even more detailed learning objectives were introduced (see fig II).

Since participation in a course is no longer mandatory in the Netherlands, it is primarily private publishers who have had to adapt and expand their textbooks accordingly. If you look at the different textbooks from various publishers, you'll see that there are quite some differences between them. Yet all of them do cover the shipping past, the colonies, and the Second World War. Some go further by even talking about the 1800s, others keep it very concise (Bakker, 2014a; Gathier, 2015; Van den Broek et al., 2023).

As described, newcomers who come to the Netherlands through family reunification must already take a civic integration exam abroad. The questions on these exams are asked in Dutch and answers must also be given in Dutch. The exam consists of thirty questions selected from the one hundred questions found in the photo booklet, which can be downloaded from the 'Naar Nederland' (*To The Netherlands*) website. Out of the 100 questions, the section 'Government, Politics, and the Constitution' contains the largest number (24 questions), followed by 'Geography, Transportation, and Housing in the Netherlands' (23 questions), and 'Parenting and Education' (18 questions). History has thirteen questions. These photos are, in turn, stills from the video 'Naar Nederland', which newcomers are required to watch in preparation for the exam (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2014).

The video covers a period of nearly 500 years. It discusses the Eighty Years' War and William of Orange, and highlights the importance of migration and foreigners for the wealth and urban development during the so-called 'Golden

Age'. It also reflects on the Dutch maritime trade and the trade in spices and slaves. Through the example of the French Revolution and the resulting fear of the king, the parliamentary system and the constitution are introduced, which form the foundation of today's democracy. The video also mentions the Netherlands' neutrality during the major wars of the twentieth century, the women's movement in the interwar period led by Aletta Jacobs, and, through Anne Frank, it reflects on the Holocaust and the occupation by Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. Post-war developments include the independence of Indonesia and Suriname, particularly in relation to their migration consequences for the Netherlands, as well as the 1960s and the sexual revolution. The video concludes with the arrival of guest workers and family migration.

Interestingly, the content of the video does not directly correspond with the learning objectives developed by the government for the exam that newcomers *in* The Netherlands must take. In fact, the video that newcomers are required to watch in their country of origin covers *more* history than what is expected to be known in the Netherlands. History extends beyond the story of the current nation state, creating a sense of a shared history that spans centuries. According to the video, this past has shaped today's society in an almost consistently progressive manner.

5.1. Deepening Knowledge of Dutch History

5.1.1 Knows some aspects of Dutch history and can identify certain remnants of this past.

- Knows that the Netherlands experienced economic and cultural development in the seventeenth century through shipping and trade, and recognizes expressions of this in painting and architecture.
- Knows that the Netherlands founded colonies, enslaved people, traded them, and employed them in colonies on agricultural plantations.
- Knows that the Netherlands has a long tradition of living with the threat of water, and that polders, windmills, dikes, and Delta Works are testimonies of this.
- Knows that the Wilhelmus is the Dutch national anthem and what the Dutch flag looks like.

5.1.2 Knows some developments and themes from recent Dutch history and knows that these are still recognizable in society.

- Knows that the Netherlands was occupied by Germany during the Second World War, knows what the Holocaust entails and that many Dutch Jews were killed, and knows that antisemitism is prohibited by law.
- Knows that the Netherlands was liberated in 1945, that National Remembrance Day takes place annually on May 4, and that Liberation Day is celebrated on May 5.
- Knows that since the Second World War, people from former colonies, labor migrants, and refugees have immigrated to the Netherlands.
- Knows that after the Second World War, the Netherlands began intensive cooperation with other countries, including in the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the United Nations (UN).
- Knows that especially since the 1960s, many Dutch people attach great importance to individual freedom, emancipation, tolerance, and self-determination.
- Knows that the right to abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia are legally established.

Fig II: final attainment targets (2021)

In Flanders, the government initially granted teachers of the Social Orientation courses considerable freedom, and history was not explicitly defined. In 2006, a commission led by Marc Bossuyt, under then-Minister Marino Keulen (from the liberal party VLD), identified five core values – freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, and citizenship – as guiding principles for the course (Bossuyt, 2006). In 2008, the learning environments were first operationalized in a teacher's manual developed by pedagogical staff at Karel de Grote Hogeschool. Newcomers were expected to "situate *milestones* in Belgian and Flemish history in relation to broader historical developments". The manual emphasized that comprehensive historical knowledge was not required; rather, newcomers should be able to recognize local or regional events and their traces. No specific milestones were prescribed, and teachers were referred to Wikipedia and the website 'Klean' for support (Baeten et al., 2008, p. 148-151).[7] In 2016, a working group of Social Orientation instructors specified nine historical processes deemed essential for understanding contemporary society, including the Enlightenment, the Congo Free State, and Belgium's political structure (Agentschap integratie en inburgering, 2018, p. 4-5). In 2022, the curriculum was revised again, expanding the historical component to thirteen "processes that had shaped the host society", such as universal suffrage, colonialism and decolonization, and secularization. Notably, with the exception of the Flemish emancipation and language struggle, the list reflects a Belgian rather than explicitly Flemish historical narrative (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering et al., 2023).

As mentioned before, a standardized civic integration exam was installed in 2022. Participants must answer 41 questions (30 on general knowledge, 11 on values and norms). History is included in the second part of the exam, which focuses on values and norms, albeit in an implicit way. For example, candidates are not asked when universal suffrage was introduced, but rather about voting as a principle within a democratic constitutional state.[8]

The introduction of a standardized exam inevitably reduced teachers' pedagogical autonomy. At the end of the course, all newcomers are required to take the same uniform test, consisting of a randomized selection of questions. This meant that all participants have to be informed in the same way about the full range of topics that can appear on the exam. To ensure sufficient uniformity in content delivery – and to guarantee that newcomers were adequately prepared – significant efforts were made to develop online modules. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, a strategic shift toward online teaching was implemented, supported by Google Classroom and interactive slide-based modules.[9] Given the scope of the learning objectives and the need to produce materials in multiple languages, this became a long-term undertaking.[10] Meanwhile, however, another political project was set in motion.

In 2019, the Flemish government commissioned the creation of a Canon of Flanders (Opdrachtbrief commissie canon van Vlaanderen, 2020). Initially framed as a tool to define Flemish identity, it was later rebranded – after heavy academic critique – as a contribution to collective memory and intercultural dialogue[11]. A committee of nine scholars (including two historians) published the canon in 2023, comprising sixty 'windows' on Flemish history (Gerard, 2023). These 'windows' are entry points to historical events that are ought to be important for Flanders' history, and consist of an 'eye-catcher', a theme, and two focal points. Although originally intended as a reference tool for secondary education and Social Orientation courses, the canon now plays an explicit role in civic integration classes (Beleids- en begrotingstoelichting Integratie en Inburgering en Samenleven Begroting 2025, 2024). Even before its publication, the Agency and the canon committee collaborated to make an online module based on the canon (Beleids- en begrotingstoelichting Integratie en Inburgering en Samenleven Begroting 2025, 2024; Gerard, 2023).[12] During my participatory observations in Social Orientation classes, I noted that since 2024, this module has been actively used. It draws on ten canon 'windows', each presented with explanatory text, visuals, and multiple-choice questions. Strikingly, the module is titled History of Belgium, despite being based on a Flemish canon[13].

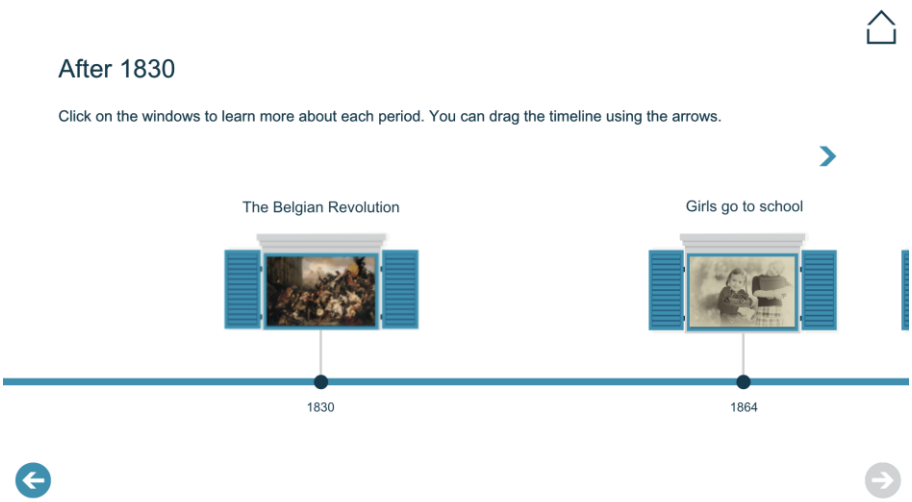

FIG III: Still from the online module based upon the Canon of Flanders

In Flanders as well, newcomers will have to pass an exam in their country of origin. Other than in the Netherlands, this will be based upon the same online modules that were made for the course in Flanders, along with online classes. After passing the exam in their country of origin, they can do an exemption test in Flanders. If they pass, they won't have to follow the course anymore. If

they don't, they still have to follow the complete course (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 2025).

Above, I outlined how over the past 25 years, an increasingly large group of people is required to follow a civic integration trajectory that has become progressively more mandatory and extensive in its testing. In both Flanders and the Netherlands, growing attention is being paid to the historical dimension of this knowledge. Moreover, this 'history' is being defined with increasing specificity, as governments explicitly determine which historical narratives are to be taught.

State-Sponsored History in Civic Integration: Constructing the Past, Defining the Present

The civic integration trajectory constitutes an explicit site of state-sponsored history. Unlike more implicit forms of historical transmission, this context allows the state to actively shape *the* historical narrative of the host society (Bevernage & Wouters, 2018, p. 5). By selecting specific historical accounts, the state attributes moral significance to particular interpretations of the past. This makes the civic integration course a unique, tangible space in which the dominant society recounts its version of history to newcomers. As such, it reveals not only what the political authorities in the Low Countries wish to communicate to newcomers but also reflects how these societies construct and project their collective self-image (Grever & Ribbens, 2007).

Civic integration policy reinforces a binary opposition between 'us' and 'them', positioning the host society as morally superior. I argue here that history is indeed employed as a community-building practice, but not necessarily with the aim of including newcomers within that community. As Blankvoort et al. note, civic integration handbooks in the Netherlands assume the nation-state as a given, promoting a narrative that endorses 'modern values' – such as the 'modern family' or the 'modern woman' – as universal (Blankvoort et al., 2021, p. 3518-3519). The "we" (i.e., the Dutch citizen) is portrayed as the ideal citizen, the embodiment of modernity – "We say U [polite form] to elders, because this is polite." Or "[on a wedding] you congratulate the bride and groom and give a gift. Then you can talk with other guests" (Van den Broek et al., 2023, p. 22-26). Similarly, the Flemish civic integration teaching material emphasizes a set of values and norms explicitly labeled as "Belgian/Flemish." These were defined in 2006 by the Bossuyt Commission, composed of seven academics, and have since formed a central thread throughout the course[14]. In supporting materials, these 'modern' values are consistently articulated in the first-person plural. This "we" often extends beyond Flanders or Belgium to refer more broadly to "the West." This is particularly evident in discussions of

gender roles and family structures, a recurring theme in the course, where references to “Western families” are frequent and “western” gender divisions are explained: “in our western world, gender and sex were considered as a classical binary division” (*fieldwork*, 2024). These values are also placed in historical perspective: Flanders/Belgium is portrayed as having undergone a developmental trajectory toward contemporary values – e.g., from a past without gender equality or social security to a present where these are established. This historical framing is strategically used to create distance between the “We” and the “Other”, based upon a western ideology of progress (*fieldwork*, 2024).

Descriptions of the “We” in civic integration courses implicitly construct assumptions about the “other” as well. The Other is often racialized, implicitly marked as non-white. For example, questions such as “What do we call someone who is not Dutch?” are placed next to images of Black men, or a picture of a black child next to the sentence “I was born in Africa.” The emphasis on ‘modern values’ imply a non-modern participant.

This “we/they” construction is not limited to value discourse but also appears in how history is addressed. It is, of course, no coincidence that history plays a central role in civic integration material. States often seek to shape historical narratives and public memory to legitimize their sovereignty – both internally and externally. History is here used to present the “autochthonous” cultural identity as homogenous and rooted, while the newcomer is introduced to it as an outsider. It binds a specific group to a specific past, thereby implicitly defining who does not belong to that past (Bertossi et al., 2021; Grever & Adriaansen, 2017). Such history lessons offer little space for identification by newcomers. The history presented is a Belgian/Dutch narrative, explaining contemporary Belgian/Dutch society and heritage from a Western perspective. As such, it reinforces a one-way dynamic that sharpens the “we-they” dichotomy between citizen and immigrant (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 25).

To illustrate this dynamic, I will focus on one particular case: the narrative surrounding the colonial past in both Flanders and the Netherlands.

The Colonial Past in the Flemish Integration Curriculum

Belgium, under King Leopold II and later as a state, colonized what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo for over sixty years. This period was marked by extreme violence, apartheid-like structures, exploitation, and mass atrocities. For decades, Belgium suffered from a form of collective amnesia regarding its colonial past (Bobineau, 2017, p. 108). Public knowledge remains limited, and attitudes toward this history and its legacy are generally moderate (Brouwers

et al., 2022; Verbeeck, 2020). Politically, there is also reluctance: the 2020 parliamentary commission on Belgium's colonial past never had its final report approved, largely due to fears of financial consequences (*Aanbevelingen Congocommissie krijgen nieuwe kans (minus excuses),* 2023). There is still no official policy regarding colonial references in public space.

In contrast, the online module used in Flemish integration courses – based on the Canon of Flanders – presents a different picture, devoting significant attention to the atrocities and the responsibility of the Belgian state. The introduction of the Canon adds a new dimension to the "we"-narrative. This canonized narrative is a textbook example of how history is politically mobilized to construct a particular version of the past with a specific purpose (Boone, 2021, p. 45-47). For this and other reasons, the canon project faced widespread academic criticism (Aerts, Koen et al., 2020; Boone, 2021; Grever, 2006; Paepe et al., 2019). The final version, written by scholars aware of these critiques, aimed to construct a nuanced, diversified, and explicitly non-teleological perspective. By combining thematic windows with emblematic features, the commission sought to incorporate recent insights on agency, gender balance, diversity, and other contemporary concerns. The window on the colonial past, for example, is introduced through Paul Panda Fernana, the first Congolese intellectual to openly criticize colonialism.

It must be acknowledged that the window used in the lessons today, based upon the canon, is indeed more historically accurate than the 'Congo Free State' theme that was to be covered until 2022. That description implied a focus solely on the colonial past during the reign of Leopold II and thus ignored the complicity of the Belgian state. Today, the window provides newcomers with a scientifically substantiated account of the colonial past. However, the explicit focus on diversity and agency remains absent in the version of the canon used in the Social Orientation course. Although one paragraph mentions that "dissatisfaction of the Congolese turned into resistance," the narrative remains predominantly Belgian. Paul Panda Farnana is not mentioned. Thus, the theme of colonialism is not used as an entry point for a global history of colonizers, the colonized, resistance, and revolution. Instead, it reinforces a national perspective, limiting the potential for broader identification and critical reflection.

From another angle, the way colonial history is presented in the Social Orientation course reinforces coloniality. The very fact that it is addressed in detail – acknowledging both Leopold II and the Belgian state – contrasts sharply with the broader societal and political relationship to this past, which is marked by limited knowledge and a lack of consensus on its harmful impact on the Congolese population. The course's educational objectives thus construct a more favorable moral image of Belgium's reckoning with its

colonial past than is warranted by reality. The stated aim of the course and its historical component is to foster understanding of Flemish historical culture and promote a sense of belonging (Adriaansen & van der Vlies, 2021; Grever & Adriaansen, 2017).[15] However, by presenting a narrative that diverges from the dominant historical culture, the course fails to open access to the community (Assman, 2010, p. 40-43). The Flemish government sponsors a version of history that constructs moral superiority, treating the colonial past as a closed chapter, exactly by discussing it so thoroughly. This narrative is not only celebratory ("we, the Flemish, have come to terms with our past"), but also indirectly obstructs the integration of newcomers, by sketching a wrong image of the present historical culture.

The Dutch Case: Silence and Simplification

In the Netherlands as well, debates around colonial memory are ongoing. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the Dutch transported nearly 600,000 Africans to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade and colonized territories such as Indonesia, Curaçao, and Suriname. Public references – such as statues of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the infamous "butcher of Banda" – continue to provoke fierce protests, both for and against their removal (Balkenhol, 2023). National responsibility for this past remains contested and politically sensitive (Allen et al., 2023, p. 48).

Notably, the colonial past is mentioned only very briefly in the 'Naar Nederland' movie newcomers have to watch before the Civic Integration Abroad Exam. They mention the slave trade and later the independence of Indonesia and the subsequent wave of migration to the Netherlands as a consequence, without addressing the actual process of colonization and its impacts. By immediately shifting the narrative towards the migration wave in the Netherlands, they once again center the Dutch perspective, neglecting the broader, non-Dutch consequences of colonization (Bakker, 2014b).

Once arrived in the Netherlands, however, the narrative changes. In a same way as in Flanders is the case, textbooks for newcomers to prepare for their exam do not reflect the contested memory of colonization. Instead, the materials subtly suggest that the Netherlands has come to terms with its colonial past, as seen in prompts like: "The Dutch are not proud of their history of slavery. Why do you think that is?" In comparison with a survey done in 2021, this is downright misinformation. In this survey, Dutch people were asked "Thinking about the Netherlands' former Empire, would you say it is more something to be proud or more something to be ashamed of, or neither"? more than 50% stated it was more something to be proud of, only 6% that it was something to be ashamed of (Bettache, 2021).

The Dutch case, however, differs from Flanders in an important way: the textbooks are written in Dutch. In Flanders, civic integration material is taught in a contact language, which means the courses are available in over thirty languages. In Flanders, newcomers can take Social Orientation before, during, or after Dutch language classes. This system provides newcomers with greater autonomy in shaping their integration trajectory and enables them to acquire knowledge in Social Orientation classes without requiring prior (extensive) proficiency in Dutch. This flexibility allows for earlier access to SO and deeper engagement, as participants can follow and discuss the material in a language they fluently understand. It also affects the profile of instructors: agencies must recruit teachers fluent in specific languages, many of whom have migration backgrounds themselves.

But in the Netherlands, all material is in Dutch. This implies that newcomers have to follow Dutch courses first and understand Dutch before being able to learn for the Knowledge on Dutch society exam. This has consequences on their civic integration trajectory, but also on the content. Since newcomers' Dutch is still very basic at the time they study the textbooks, the private publishes in the Netherlands adapted their content to this reality. As a result, the narrative is often simplified. For example: "Slaves were not free. They had to work hard and their lives were often difficult. […] In the twentieth century, the colonies became independent. The Netherlands was no longer in charge." Or in another textbook: "They paid nothing at all for the goods they took from the colonies!"

Conclusion

Integration trajectories are increasingly compulsory for an ever-larger group of people. So is the growing role that history plays in this. Civic integration courses are not history lessons in the traditional sense. They are introductions to the host society – its laws, customs, and norms. As such, the role of history here is not only to convey factual knowledge, but to shape how the past is perceived and remembered in the present. One could argue that the Flemish and Dutch governments are offering a scientifically accurate version of history. However, the discussion of how the colonial past in the Low Countries plays a role in integration programs demonstrates how history does not play a purely informative role in the course. The receiving governments, consciously or unconsciously, construct a 'We' group by linking a certain past to them and placing an explicit focus on themselves in their narrative, with very little attention to mutual foreign influences or global evolutions. Moreover, it assumes a homogeneous population that has learned from its past – 'moved forward' – while this does not correspond with reality.

By omitting the contemporary historical cultures of the receiving society, they construct a celebratory, state-sponsored history that does not reflect reality; a reality in which newcomers are expected to "adapt" and achieve "full participation". In doing so, they risk undermining the very goal of civic integration – whatever that may ultimately mean.

Notes

[1] This research is supported by the FWO.

[2] Initially, the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) were given authority over integration. After Belgium was divided into cultural communities (Dutch, French, and German), the second state reform of 1980 transformed these cultural communities into 'communities' with powers over matters related to individuals. In addition, a Flemish, a Walloon and a Brussels Region were established, each with authority over economic affairs. From the outset, Flanders chose to merge the region and the community, resulting in a single government (Flemish Executive) and a single parliament (Flemish Council). In the third state reform of 1988, the communities and regions received more powers. Finally, in the fourth state reform of 1993, Belgium became a fully-fledged federal state, and the Councils were renamed Parliaments, which from then on were directly elected. A fifth state reform in 2002 granted even more powers to the regions and communities and changed the functioning of the Brussels institutions.

[3] In this paper, I adopt the definition of the target group used by the Flemish and Dutch government in its civic integration policy. The term 'newcomers' refers to "individuals who have recently, for the first time, and for an extended period settled in Flanders" (Decreet van 28/02/2003 betreffende het Vlaamse inburgeringsbeleid (2003)). This includes persons with a non-Belgian nationality who settle in Belgium for the first time and for more than three months, as well as Belgian nationals who have been registered in the population register for less than twelve months. Similarly, the Dutch government defines newcomers as: "the foreign national who is permitted to reside in the Netherlands, who has reached the age of eighteen, and who has been admitted to the Netherlands for the first time, […] and the Dutch national who was born outside the Netherlands, has reached the age of eighteen, and for the first time has become a resident in the Netherlands." (Wet Inburgering nieuwkomers (1998)). While the term newcomer is subject to critique – such as the question of how long one remains 'new' – I use it here due to its official status and the absence of a more precise alternative.

[4] EU+ refers to nationals of all European Union and EFTA countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

[5] Case managers are in charge of the program of the newcomer. They help the newcomer with all administrative tasks and guide them through the civic integration trajectory.

[6] Exemption tests are, however, available. If their case manager thinks the newcomer is able to, they can do an exam before entering class. If they score at least 80%, they do not have to follow the course.

[7] Today, the website Klean.be is no longer active. It was originally the site of “a young folk music group from the Waasland region.” The SO teacher’s manual referred to a specific page on this website about the Battle of the Golden Spurs, but this page is no longer accessible.

[8] I got this information through my fieldwork, which included numerous conversations with pedagogical staff, teachers and people who have taken the exam.

[9] These online modules were developed by AGII, Atlas (Antwerp), Amal (Ghent), and the KU Leuven Centre for Language and Education with support from European funding.

[10] The Social Orientation classes are taught in a 'contact language' – the mother tongue or a language the participant is proficient in – allowing the courses to be offered in over thirty languages.

[11] For critiques on an historical canon, see for example Aerts, Koen et al., 2020, 2020; Boone, 2021; Grever, 2006; Paepe et al., 2019; Van Doorsselaere, 2022.

[12] Notably, the report published alongside the release of the Canon makes no mention of an online module. The commission merely states that the Canon may be useful 'for teachers seeking information or suitable angles to clarify certain (abstract) processes.

[13] One of the criticisms directed at the canon was precisely that it was a Flemish initiative. Belgium is a federal state composed of three communities, and Flanders is one of them. The Flemish political party that introduced the idea of the canon is the N-VA, a Flemish nationalist party advocating for the independence of Flanders. Critics therefore interpreted the commissioning of the canon as a politically motivated attempt to construct or reinforce a distinct Flemish identity.

[14] These “Belgian/Flemish values” were defined in 2005 by the Bossuyt Commission as freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, and citizenship. The commission consisted of jurist Marc Bossuyt, philosopher Ludo Abicht, senior lecturer in Arabic and Cultural History Abied Alsulaiman, political scientist Naima Charkaoui, anthropologist Marie-Claire Foblets, theologian Rik Torfs, and philosopher Etienne Vermeersch (Bossuyt, 2006).

[15] With the notion of historical culture, I refer to definition of Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, namely people their relationships to the past, which include historical narratives and performances of the past, mnemonic infrastructures and conceptions of history.

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