

Recycling My Emotions: A ‘Good’ Migrant’s Integration Narrative

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My entry to Belgium at the end of November 2015 went more straightforward than I expected. While visa processes for Iranian nationals are known to be excruciatingly long and hard – long and hard they were for me – my entry to the country went quite smoothly. As an academic with some experiences of international mobility, I had experienced lots of ‘random’ checks and body searches and scans. In Brussels, I was let in with no ‘extra’ questions. I took this ‘*be fale khosh*’ as we say in Farsi, with the hope that things have started on the right foot.

My migration to Belgium was my first long-term relocation from my home country, Iran. It was not the most ‘voluntary’ relocation, but that is a story for another time. On a personal level, my timing to enter Belgium, could not have been worse, I learned later. I started my new job in December 2015, and before I had the time to meet my colleagues or anyone adequately, everyone disappeared to go on winter vacations. The results were about two months of isolation in a land where I knew no one, and no one knew me. Sure, walking in the streets and alleys of small Flemish cities felt like walking inside live impressionist paintings, and the cities caressed the senses in all possible ways; but it was the cold season, and as it often goes when you relocate to a new place, the people felt colder than the weather. That the sun did not show its face a lot did not help my mood. It was nothing like the sunny homeland I had left behind.

As a self-exiled person, I had mulled over on my decision to migrate, and I had been prepared to take on the difficulties that came with it. As a realist and a pragmatist, I started every morning by counting my privileges, jogging around, and familiarizing myself with my new city, to make it feel like ‘home.’ I also rushed to the bookstore first thing and picked up a self-study Dutch book before my classes started a few months later. I was ready to embark on my journey with a very clear end-goal in mind: to integrate. Integration in Flanders, however, proved to be trickier than expected. The reason for this was that some of my presumptions came out to be strikingly false. Let me illustrate: I started my self-integration by doing Flemish things and learning about Flanders. I took Dutch language courses out of free will and without any other incentives than to get to communicate with people better. I familiarized myself with Belgian politics ardently and maybe a little obsessively. I took city tours to get to know the local history. I avidly read local news and started picking up regional jokes, although I did find the humor dry and cringeworthy. I adopted biking as my primary mode of transportation; I started despising rain. I even called fries, ‘Belgian,’ and started considering them a main course.

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While successful in the practical and logistic matters, it seemed to me that I failed disastrously in social skills, something in which I had always taken pride. I unsuccessfully tried to establish rapport with my neighbors, who made it clear that they did not fancy small talk with the happy looking new foreigner. I walked in the corridors of my workplace, trying to make conversations that did not take off. I tried to join a local biking group, but I was so subtly and politely declined that it struck me only some hours later that I was rejected. I greeted people in lifts and caused chaos and confusion. I went to local events and attempted to befriend people. I then invited the people I had met to come to my house, but they never came. Those who occasionally showed up never returned. And I waited for similar invitations that never arrived. I learned that I was perceived as different inside and out, and one of the two would always be an obstacle for me being part of other people's lives.

Later I realized that my eagerness and futile attempts to 'blend in' had been a desperate longing for the good life that I had left behind, and to which I knew I could never return. However, as time went by, the sting of nostalgia turned into a tingle, and my efforts to integrate started to appear unnecessary. So, after four years of trying to make friends with Flemish people, colleagues, and neighbors, I stopped, moved on, and decided to fill the void with books and video games. So, you can imagine that when the time came, taking a course and/or an exam to prove my civic integration did not sound like a very fair or pleasant idea, precisely because no one had ever cared to help me 'integrate' until that point.

I dare say that my own integration program had been much more aggressive and radical than the Flemish integration trajectory put in front of me by the state, and yet, it had been 'unsuccessful.' Ironically, I was also a person who was teaching Belgian students at the university level about diversity and gender in the society, and I sparked discussions on migration in my classrooms. I had been researching and writing on Iranian migrants in Belgium and had been active in organizing social events around similar topics. So, I did get offended by the idea that I needed to prove I was integrated enough, when all I had done since I arrived in Flanders was not only trying to integrate, but also trying to understand and analyze what the integration discourses in Belgium entailed and lacked. Lucky for me, I lived in a city where the integration office is known to be a welcoming place to migrants, while not all Flemish cities have the same favorable reputation. The person who was assigned my 'file' ended up being a fellow Farsi speaker, and they told me that I could prove my integration by examination and without taking a course first. Only if I failed, I would have to take the course. That sounded fair to me.

Appreciating my case worker's honesty and professionalism, I decided to give the integration office the benefit of the doubt. After meeting them, I went home and googled the Flemish integration exam, and much to my surprise, the exam questions were nowhere to be found. The secrecy around the previous examinations was striking to me because of the goal that was supposedly set for the whole integration process: teaching, guiding, and integrating migrants. It certainly did not look right to promote integration and then hide the exam preparation material and examination questions. So, as a researcher, this only sparked more interest in me.

Speaking to other migrants in Belgium about integration – both on a personal and institutional level – was an illuminating process. Many migrants had gone through a very similar personal experience to mine. The experience of wanting to belong, to build networks, and to make friends was almost as universal as the heartbreak and disappointment after realizing that their efforts had not been fruitful. Most migrants stayed in close contact with other migrants whom they had met in language classes and integration courses. Most narratives highlighted that the courses had not taught them a whole lot of useful things but had helped them make friends or feel less lonely. The examination stories were the most negative ones. The questions in the exams were mostly perceived as stereotypical, if not insulting. Talking to other people who have gone through the integration exam made me curious, to the point that I was almost looking forward to taking it. I was, however, annoyed when thinking of the perspective of failing it and having to take the course.

Most of what I remember from the day of the exam is shadowed by the fact that I had a severe shoulder and neck pain on that day. My less than ideal bodily condition on the day made it difficult for me to focus and take notes. After arriving at the exam center with another ten to fifteen people, we had to wait to be welcomed to an examination room. Waiting for the examiner to arrive, I talked to a fellow examinee, and we made jokes about how we expected to be asked about ‘yogurt containers.’ This refers to a running joke among migrants in Belgium as they are constantly reminded of the country’s recycling ambition and rubbish separation system. Rubbish separation is no joke per se, of course, and is a task that I perform meticulously to the point of irritating others. However, the ‘funny’ part that turns the yogurt container problematic into a joke is that the other examinee and I lived with Belgian partners, and we both were much more reliable than our partners when it came to recycling. Yet, *we* were there to prove our worth through demonstrating knowledge on recycling, and not them. We were making the whole group laugh when the examiner arrived and led us to the examination area. The examiner was trilingual and professionally repeated everything they said in three languages French, Dutch, and English. This served the examinees well as we were in three groups of English-, Dutch-, and French-speaking.

The process of the exam was straightforward, and we were given enough time to go over the questions once. It was not a surprise for me that the ‘yogurt containers’ question was asked, and when I arrived at that question, I managed to catch some smiling glances from other examinees who had encountered that same question at the same time as me. The other questions were, however, less amusing. While my memory failed me after the examination, I paraphrased some of the questions and wrote them on a piece of paper, as soon as I stepped out of the examination room. The exam sheet asked us, for instance, if it was correct to punish a child physically. We were asked if stealing a random bike – within a scenario where your own bike was stolen – was the right thing to do; if women should become stay-at-home mothers after giving birth; if we would go to the emergency room if we had a cold; if we would decide who our adult children live with and where, or we would leave the decisions to themselves; if we sent cards to people who have had a newborn, or those who lost their loved ones.

While these questions can be asked from anyone, and people might have different ideas on how to answer them, the presumptions behind them were more than disturbing. The questions were evidently drawing on very familiar and highly stereotypical narratives on migrants' 'background' and behavior. To imply that migrant women could be burdens on the economy by staying at home, and to assume that sending cards, not stealing bikes, and not hitting your children are the things that make you Flemish and worthy of living in Europe was senseless.

As a fellow examinee explained to me after we got out of the room, 'it was so insulting that I felt an irresistible urge to answer all the questions wrong; what do they think about us?' Yes, what do *they* think about *us*? I received the news that I succeeded soon after. I am now officially 'integrated.' I can now add this to the count of privileges I have. However, for many other migrants, integration is a road on which they still must step. Formal integration is only the first stop on their path to full citizenship, and on their way, they need to answer silly questions on recycling and whatnot. My experience, discussion and observations with migrants in Flanders have mostly led me to believe that for most migrants, integration advice and guidance is a process they actively seek and welcome; but what they usually take out of it is the company of each other, the networks and the sense of togetherness. Studies on the integration processes in Belgium have shown that while migrants have no part in the determination of the conditions and modalities of integration, they alone are held responsible for the success or failure of their integration.¹ With frameworks so detached from migrants' everyday life realities and struggles, it is hard to understand what the current integration process aims to do.

As I write this piece in my apartment in Belgium in April 2020 at the height of the COVID19 pandemic, I am reminded, again, of how little I am connected to people around me, my Belgian neighbors, and Belgian colleagues. My life is different today than what it was four years ago, and I am no longer seeking that feeling of 'belonging.' But I still find it curious that my successful formal integration process has meant close to nothing for my social life and networks in Belgium. Being officially integrated does not mean that you will land in a better place in the spectrum of desirability in your community. It means that you have successfully lifted the barriers put in front of you in the name of integration. I am still as much an outsider as I was before 'integrating.' My skin is still too dark, and my hair is even darker. My Dutch accent is 'recognized' for all the wrong reasons. I still receive no invitations, and my invitations are still politely declined. It is a good thing that I separate my rubbish and recycle my yogurt containers on par with, if not better than, any Belgian citizen. That, in itself, must be a perfect indication that I seemingly am a 'well-integrated' and 'good' migrant.

¹ Reinhilde Pulinx and Piet Van Avermaet, "Integration in Flanders (Belgium)—Citizenship as Achievement: How Intertwined Are 'Citizenship' and 'Integration' in Flemish Language Policies?," *Journal of Language and Politics* 14, no. 3 (2015).