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Imams in Flanders: A Research Note

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This article presents the results of an exploratory, mixed-method study on imams in Flanders. The research question was mainly *who are they?*, in an attempt to draw a first picture of their socio-demographic background, ethnicity, functions, and expectations with respect to their position in Flanders, or in Belgium more broadly speaking. The first three sections give context information about Muslims, Islam and mosques in Belgium and Flanders. In the next sections the research design and the results are presented. This presentation focuses on four issues: imams as immigrants; their tasks and workload; their job situation and attitude towards official recognition and payment; and finally their ambiguous attitudes toward government initiatives. We give also some reflections in dialogue with research on imams in other Western European countries. The conclusion discusses the challenges for imams and the government to become real partners within the further integration process of the Muslim community in Flanders and Belgium.

Keywords: Imams; Flanders; integration; European Islam

Introduction

This article presents the results of a first exploratory empirical study on imams in Flanders¹. The research question was mainly *who are they?*, in an attempt to draw a first picture of their socio-demographic background, ethnicity, functions, and expectations with respect to their position in Flanders, or in Belgium more broadly speaking. Before we start with this presentation, we give context information about Muslims, Islam and mosques in Belgium and Flanders.

The next section describes the research background of this study and briefly discusses the methods used to gather our data, while the following section presents the main results. It focuses on three themes: imams as immigrants; their tasks and workload; their job situation and attitude towards official recognition and payment. At the end of this section, we elaborate on our finding that imams have ambiguous attitudes toward government initiatives. On the one hand, the study shows that they have great expectations of the government but, on the other, they seem to be quite suspicious of every government initiative and fear illegitimate state control. In the section before the conclusion, we set our research in a broader context: the study is new for Flanders, but it fits with the growing social, political and academic interest in imams as important actors for the further integration of Muslims/Islam in the European immigration context. The conclusion discusses the challenges for imams and the government to become real partners in the further integration of the Muslim community in Flanders and Belgium.

Muslims in Belgium

There are no official population figures available regarding Muslims in Belgium. The figure usually given is 500,000, but some estimate that the number of the population with a Muslim background has now increased to approximately 7-800,000 (e.g., figures given by some

embassies or on <http://www.npdata.be/>). Depending on the source, Muslims thus represent between 5% and 8% of the 11 million people living in Belgium. In some cities, neighbourhoods, and schools, however, that percentage is much higher (Dassetto 2008, 2011; Fadil 2013, 100–1).

Almost the whole Muslim population in Belgium has migrant roots. The majority of the current younger generation, however, is part of the so-called second and third generation, that is, born and socialized in Belgium. Many of these youngsters also have Belgian nationality. Approximately 320,000 of Belgium's Muslims have a Moroccan background and 112,000 a Turkish background. And although the Moroccan and Turkish communities – labour migrants of the 1960s and 1970s along with their descendants – make up the majority, the Muslim population is diverse and also includes Balkan, African, Asian and Mediterranean people. Only 30,000 Muslims are converts of Belgian or European origin (Torfs 2012, 71). The overwhelming majority of the Belgian Muslim population are Sunnis – Muslims with a Moroccan background belong mainly to the Malaki school, while Muslims with a Turkish background follow mainly the Hanafi school.

Muslims are perhaps the most conspicuous, but also the most contested, religious minority in Belgium. Several issues have led to a polarization of the public debate on Islam (see, for example, Zemni 2009; Bousetta and Jacobs 2006; Shadid and Koningsveld 2005): the attacks of 9/11, the November 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, the electoral success of the radical right in Flanders, and the discussions about the ban on headscarves in schools and for civil servants. Growing secularization is another reason why Islam is on the agenda, as it makes religion in the public sphere not only more striking but also more problematic. Islam, which has a visible orthopraxis, actually came in at that point in time when secularization in Belgium reached a historical high (Dobbelaere and Billiet 2010; Loobuyck 2013, ch. 1).

But the discourse on Islam is not only critical. As a consequence of the realization that Islam was going to be a part of the Belgian religious landscape, a more pragmatic discourse developed and the conflict model is increasingly being replaced by a new model, characterized by cooperation between actors from the Muslim community and the (local) authorities (Manço and Kanmaz 2005).

Islam as a recognized religion

Since its foundation in 1830, Belgium has combined freedom of and (financial) support for religion. Article 181 of the Constitution asserts that the government must pay the salaries and pensions of the clergy and ministers of the recognized religions and worldviews. This legal recognition also implies other privileges: free air time on state radio and television; state subsidized material goods and housing for clergy; and public schools have to offer religious education in the recognized worldviews.

Today, seven worldviews are recognized in Belgium: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam and non-confessional humanism. Buddhism has begun the application process and will probably be a recognized worldview in the near future. Financial support for the different worldviews is not evenly distributed, however (Franken and Loobuyck 2012), and Islam currently lags behind. While Islam has been an officially recognized religion in Belgium since 1974, the implementation of this recognition was not easy and took a long time (Torfs 2012; Husson 2012; Panafit 1999). Take the right to free public broadcasting time, for instance: in Flanders, Muslim television and radio programmes only started in September 2011. And though Islamic religious education in public schools began in 1978, mainly under the supervision of the contested Islamic Cultural Centre (which was under the influence of Saudi Arabia), the first school inspectors of Islamic religious education were appointed in 2005. Before 2007, no

local mosque communities had been recognized and the Belgian government had not paid a single imam.

Part of the explanation for this is to be sought in the hesitant attitude of successive Belgian governments to implement the legal recognition of Islam, and there was for a long time a lack of political incentive to put the formal recognition of Islam into practice. In addition, Muslims struggled to organize themselves and to create an effective functioning representative body, which is necessary to gain the advantages of legal recognition. The Executive of Muslims in Belgium was established only at the end of the 1990s and it never functioned smoothly or effectively (Torfs 2012, 76–82; Loobuyck, Debeer and Meier 2013). Finally, the division of competencies within the Belgian state also makes this a complex issue. Due to a state reform in 2001, the Belgian government is no longer exclusively in charge of implementing the recognition of religions and worldviews. While recognizing religions and financing their clergy and ministers are still responsibilities of the Belgian state, the regions (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia) now have jurisdiction over the recognition of the local (e.g. church or mosque) communities of recognized religions. This recognition of local religious communities by the regions is a necessary prerequisite for the Belgian state to pay the salaries of clergy, in this case imams.

If we look more closely at the regions, the difference between Wallonia and Flanders is remarkable. Only the latter has chosen to implement its own Decree on the recognition of new local religious communities. This decree was voted into law in 2004, but it took until 2007 for the first local communities to be recognized in Flanders. Wallonia and Brussels also began to recognize Muslim communities in 2007 and, while Wallonia immediately recognized 43 local Muslim communities, Flanders took a step-by-step approach. In December 2007, Flanders recognized six local mosque communities (four of them Turkish, one Pakistani and one Moroccan), and Brussels five. By autumn 2011, 24 Muslim

communities had been recognized by the Flemish government and by the beginning of 2013 28. These mosque communities have to accept language conditions and comply with human rights conventions. They are also obliged to have an imam who is willing to participate in civic integration courses if necessary. These courses are free of charge, but compulsory for non-EU foreigners aged 18 and over who come to Flanders to take up long-term residence. The programme is intended to acquaint them with the Flemish context and language.

A minority of the mosques in Flanders are officially recognized, and only a minority of these recognized mosques, eight in 2012, also have a recognized imam paid by the Belgian government. In Belgium as a whole, by the end of 2013, 46 imams were being paid by the government – a number that is increasing (the government was paying 40 imams in 2012, four in 2009 and two in 2007 (Loobuyck 2012).

The fact that the regional government in Wallonia has recognized more Muslim communities than Flanders, can partly be explained by its generally more open attitude to immigrants and a political landscape that is less conservative and less focused on its own identity than is the case in Flanders. The spectrum of Flemish political parties is marked by both the radical right, which has flourished over the last three decades, and by the Flemish nationalists, who have prospered over the last decade. This has caused the other political parties to shift more towards the right than their Francophone counterparts and makes for a generally more conservative political landscape than in Wallonia, where the left socialist party is still dominant.

The difference in the number of recognized communities can also be explained by the high standards the Flemish government set in its 2004 decree. Applications for recognition take time and expertise. Many local mosque communities, run by volunteers, do not have the necessary resources to apply for recognition, which is complicated and sometimes too great an administrative burden.

Mosques in Belgium

At the end of 2012 the Belgian Executive of Muslims counted 310 active mosques in Belgium: 158 of them were Moroccan and 137 Turkish. More than 150 of these were in Flanders: 75 of them Moroccan, 65 Turkish, and 10 Pakistani.

The Turkish mosques are mainly associated with a Belgian branch of international Turkish organizations such as Belçika Diyanet Vakfı (Diyanet) and Belçika İslam Federasyonu (Millî Görüş). Diyanet, the official Directorate for religious affairs in Turkey, has been responsible since 1971 for supporting the religious activities of Turkish emigrants (Turan 2008, 371; Landman 1997). Aside from financial support, it also sends Diyanet imams and teachers, trained in Turkey, to Belgium to serve in mosques for a period of five years. These imams are paid by the Turkish government and serve close to two-thirds of the Turkish mosques in Belgium. Several of these mosque communities are officially recognized by the governments of the regions, although the imam is not paid by the Belgian government. The more conservative Millî Görüş movement (Diyanet's political opposite before the Islamic Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) took power) first opened a mosque in Belgium in 1985, and after that established more than 20 mosques in Flanders. It has close connections with the European Millî Görüş headquarters in Germany.

The other mosques are mostly united under the Association of Mosques and Islamic Organizations (*Unies van Moskeeën en Islamitische Verenigingen*), branches of which have been established in each Belgian province since 2000. These associations represent 80 mosques in Flanders, uniting various schools of religious jurisprudence (Kanmaz and El Battiui 2004, 22), and are organized from the ground up, largely from within the Moroccan community. They provide administrative and legal support, offer education, organize the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and manage contacts with (local) government institutions.

Besides the Turkish and the (mainly Moroccan) associations, we also encountered during the research project some smaller, locally operated associations, such as the Turkish *Belçika İslam Kültür Merkezleri Birliği* (*Süleymanlı* – three mosques in Flanders), the mainly Pakistani Ahmadiyya Muslim Association Belgium (three mosques in Flanders), the mainly Anatolian *Belçika Alevi Dennekler Federasyonu* (four assembly houses, or *cemevi*, in Flanders), and *Rijaset*, a Bosnian association.

Studying imams in Flanders

In Belgium, almost no research has been carried out on imams and mosque communities and associations. Some descriptive work has been done (Torfs 2000; Husson and Dury 2007; Kanmaz and El Battiui 2004), and the institutionalization of Islam has received some attention (Panafit 1999; Kanmaz 2002; Foblets and Overbeeke 2002, 2004; Godard 2007; Maussen 2007; Shadid and Koningsveld 2008; Loobuyck, Debeer and Meier 2013; Debeer, Loobuyck and Meier 2011a; Torfs 2012), but there is no empirical research about who the imams are, what they think, what they do, how they see themselves and how they are perceived by Muslim believers and other actors in society.

Given the limited amount of information on imams in Belgium, we conducted an exploratory study on imams at the request of the Flemish government.² The research question was descriptive, intended to explore the profile of imams active in Flanders, as well as to seek their opinions on their (social) position as spiritual leaders in an immigrant context. The research attempts to draw a first picture of their socio-demographic background, functions, and expectations with respect to their position in Flanders, or in Belgium more generally.

Because there is no consistent definition of what an imam is, we chose a pragmatic sampling approach by providing our contacts within the community with these guidelines: “Imams are those who, on a regular basis lead (Friday) prayers and/or perform other

important functions within the mosque community. We are interested in the one person who fulfils the most important role in the mosque, not in all volunteers.”

The research used a mixed-method approach, consisting of a quantitative and a qualitative component. The quantitative component aimed at building a broad picture of the imams active in Flanders. A questionnaire was developed covering the following topics: the imam’s geographical and social background; family status and situation; motivation for migration to Belgium; level of education; professional trajectory, including his professional background before coming to Belgium; work as an imam in Belgium – or in a migrant context – as compared with that work in the home country; relations with the mosque authorities and community; his status as an imam in Belgium, and expectations with respect to the Belgian public authorities.

The questionnaires were set up in Dutch, translated into Arabic, English and Turkish, and back again into Dutch to ensure their compatibility. They were tested and were then distributed to the imams active in Flanders in cooperation with the mosque associations and federations as well as with various integration service organizations.

The research was met with considerable suspicion by the imams and their associations, as is shown by the questions they often asked: Why is the government only now interested in the imams, when Islam was already recognized as a religion back in 1974? Why does the research only focus on Islam and does not cover the clergy of other religions? Does the government want to control the imams or even define or determine what a good imam should be like? Will the dissemination of the results of this project not further increase the existing Islamophobia? They feared that the findings could be used against them. This shows that the position of Islam in Flanders is still a delicate issue. These questions and concerns could not simply be ignored. They reflected real concerns, requiring an answer that would motivate the imams to participate in the project. Therefore, the research team took the imams’

concerns seriously from the start. A number of meetings were organized with representatives of imam associations and organizations at the very beginning of the project. The project's aims and design were presented and the researchers guaranteed that the project's results would not serve an Islamophobic discourse.

Questionnaires were distributed with stamped self-addressed envelopes in the period January through May 2011. The response rate was about 40%, given that 60 imams answered the questionnaire while the Executive of Muslims in Belgium mentions about 150 mosques in Flanders. Nearly all participating imams were born abroad, with Turkey (41) and Morocco (12) ranking highest among the countries of origin. The other respondents were born in Egypt (2), Syria (1), Mauritius (1), Belgium (1) and Kosovo (1). One imam did not state his place of birth.

Respondents range in age from 28 to 60. The majority of imams are aged between 30 and 45. In our sample, Diyanet imams are overrepresented because the Belgian branch of the organization decided to support the project. Though this prejudices the representativeness of the questionnaire, it does provide a quasi-complete overview of the Diyanet imams. Overall, of the 60 participating imams, there were 30 Diyanet imams, 11 other Turkish imams, 12 Moroccan imams, and 7 with other backgrounds (including Belgian) (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

Not all the questions were answered by all the imams. This item level non-response is the reason why the number of respondents varies across questions.

In addition to the questionnaires, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out in March and April of 2011 in order to deepen the findings from the quantitative component. The interviews were evenly distributed over the various national groups involved and covered the Flemish territory. Seven interviews were conducted with the help of a translator, three

were assisted by one, and five interviews were held in Dutch. Seven interviewees were Turkish (three of them were affiliated with Diyanet, four of them with Milli Görüs), four were Moroccan, two were Ahmadiyya, one was Bosnian, and one was a Belgian convert.

INSERT TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

Who are the imams in Flanders and what do they do?

In what follows, we present the research findings. In general, we give the information from the questionnaires first, followed by additional information from the interviews. Citations from interviews are our own translations.

Imams are immigrants

The questionnaires show that many roads lead to the position of being an imam in Flanders. Almost all respondents were born abroad but not all of them came to Flanders with the intention or prior experience of being an imam. The latter particularly applies to the imams associated with Diyanet. The Diyanet imams stated that “to work in Belgium as an imam” was their most important incentive to immigration. Of the Moroccan imams, only three came to Belgium to work as imams; most of them (eight of the 12) came in the context of family reunification or marriage. Other imams came to study or to work (but not as an imam). One imam came as a refugee. The interviews confirmed the diversity of the imams’ personal trajectories. While some came officially as imams for a limited time but stayed to apply for citizenship, others became imams almost “by accident,” replacing an absent imam or filling a long-standing vacancy.

The imams in Flanders were primarily trained in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan and France were also mentioned. The only convert imam, who was born in Belgium, studied abroad. University degrees were found mostly

among Turkish imams. In contrast, for Moroccan imams the *madrassa* (religious seminary-type Muslim institution) was apparently the more usual form of education. Among Diyanet-imams, almost one-third also responded that they had received “other” education, usually referring to the *Egetim Merkezi*, local centres for Diyanet-provided training.

Most of the respondents felt comfortable with their level of education. When asked whether it prepared them adequately for their task as an imam in Belgium, only one respondent answered negatively (n=50). However, we heard in the interviews that not all imams were convinced of their peers’ competence:

In many mosques the imam’s level of training is not satisfactory. (...) This creates many problems. Belgium lacks sufficient good imams. Theology requires extensive training; it is not just a matter of giving your opinion. (Interview, Moroccan imam)

I see only a few imams making the effort to learn the official language of the country. (Interview, imam from Kosovo)

The respondents also had the impression that some – especially younger – members of their mosque community thought that the imams could not provide them with the support they expected, so almost all respondents gave a positive answer to the question “Should there be a training programme for imams in Belgium?” The five imams who were not convinced were Diyanet imams. The reason for this probably lies in the fact that they have their own training programmes in Turkey.

The interviews confirmed that, in the eyes of the respondents, a “good imam” distinguishes himself by having received adequate and extensive education – both in religious as well as in worldly, social matters. His authority stems from his charisma as well as his religious knowledge. However, despite being satisfied with their training abroad, most imams were in favour of additional training about the local context. They almost unanimously

agreed with the need for clear additional information and training on how Belgian society works and how they could maximize their participation in it as an imam.

I also think that future imams need training on the contemporary norms and values of the place they live. (Interview, Moroccan imam)

In my view, the first issue is: training of all imams within the context in which they work. (Interview, imam from Kosovo)

The imams acknowledged that a limited knowledge of Belgian society made it difficult to participate, to form a bridge between society and the Muslim community and to fulfil the task of advising their community on how to live a Muslim life in a Western, secular environment. The respondents felt ill-equipped to face these tasks, and at this level also felt the need to improve their language skills. Only two questionnaire respondents had Dutch as their mother tongue and most of the respondents estimated their knowledge of the vernacular as rather low (2.88 on a scale from 1 to 5). Diyanet imams rated themselves slightly lower than their peers. Nevertheless, the imams recognized the need to speak the vernacular: knowledge of the vernacular was held by about half of the respondents to be a necessary condition for fulfilling their responsibilities (see Table 3). One third – mostly Moroccan, Millî Görüş, Bosnian, and convert imams – attested that Dutch was (one of) the most frequently spoken language(s) in their mosque.

The importance of language was also expressed in the interviews. Many imams seemed to agree with the comment of one of their colleagues: “Without knowledge of the language, there is nothing we can do.” The imams knew that an active knowledge of Dutch facilitated contact both with the native Flemish community and with the wider Muslim community, among whom many, especially young members, no longer spoke the language of their (parents’) country of origin.

An imam who does not master the language has no added value. (Interview, Moroccan imam)

Language is important to communicate with the state, the people, and also the third generation growing up here. The imam has to operate in the language of the country. (Interview, Imam from Kosovo)

Hence it came as no surprise that many imams were involved in language training programmes. Nearly half of the respondents had participated in the Flemish civic integration programmes over the previous 12 months. Language courses are an important part of the integration course curricula and were strongly welcomed by the respondents. Language training independent of the integration course was even more popular among the respondents. Although many imams (had) made an effort to learn the language, their knowledge of Dutch remained poor in many cases.

In general, Muslim communities are often mentally divided between their country of origin and the country of arrival (Peach and Glebe 1995), but this seems to be especially true for the many imams in Flanders. As a consequence, these imams generally face a double challenge: they are apparently distinguished members of a new, not yet established or fully recognized religion, and they are themselves newcomers to Flemish and thus Belgian and European society.

Tasks and workload

According to the survey, the imams' tasks and requirements were centred around religion and counselling. The core requirements included conducting Friday services, providing religious education, knowing the religious canon, and giving advice to the community (see Table 3). Moroccan imams in particular, and to a lesser extent Diyanet imams, attributed great

importance to being *Hafiz* (that is, having memorized the whole Qur'an), and having knowledge of Classical Arabic.

INSERT TABLE 3 NEAR HERE

When we look at the tasks the imams actually performed, the respondents answered: providing theological advice, religious education and psychological support, leading prayers and reciting the Qur'an. A majority also led additional religious rituals, gave the call to prayer and gave confidential counselling.

These core tasks more or less overlapped with the core tasks performed abroad. However, even though satisfaction rates remained the same, the majority of the imams with experience in their country of origin said their current workload was heavier than it had been abroad. Only nine respondents said there was no difference, and five considered the workload lighter than abroad (n=42). Activities performed more often in Flanders than abroad included monitoring religious education, performing religious rites and funerals, counselling converts, and giving practical advice to Muslims on how to live their life according to the Qur'an. Tasks that were less frequent in Flanders were performing birth rituals, assisting other imams, counselling prisoners, monitoring a place of worship and the daily organization of the mosque.

The results of the interviews on this issue were not unanimous. Some imams mentioned an increased workload compared with working abroad, while others stated the opposite; some said the composition of the tasks was "totally different," while others simply attested to performing more or less of the same activities. However, it was unanimously confirmed that answering Muslims' questions on how to live in a Flemish, Belgian or European context was an important responsibility. Imams spoke about "adapting fatwas,"

“taking account of contextual factors” and suggesting pragmatic solutions to deal with problems that might arise from being a member of a religious minority.

The idea is to facilitate people’s lives by providing them with a red thread to live their life (...) People need to be able to apply theology to their everyday life.

(Interview, Moroccan imam)

If you would ask me: “what is your biggest aim?,” it is to help a Muslim to be a Muslim in everyday life without their being a Muslim becoming an obstacle for themselves or for others. (Interview, converted Flemish imam)

I don’t think one is a good imam if one tackles issues in a Friday prayer without having an idea of what is on people’s minds. He has to analyse a case of what people have done right and wrong and present this. (Interview, Imam from Kosovo).

Payment and recognition by the government

Only two of the respondents were recognized and paid by the Belgian government at the time of the research. They were full-time imams and did not have any other employment. Being full-time also applied to the majority of the Diyanet imams: 18 of the 23 Diyanet respondents who answered this question said that they did not have another job, and were not looking for one. Most of the other respondents either had or were looking for additional employment and income. Several imams combined full-time or part-time employment (9) or self-employment (8) with their work as an imam (n=43). Six respondents were retired or students. Apart from the imams recognized by the Belgian government and the Diyanet imams, none of our respondents was currently receiving an income from any government, foreign or domestic, for performing the role of imam.

While most of the respondents who had other employment besides being an imam reported that they were happy with dividing their work between their regular job and being an imam, one-third (working either part-time, full-time, or self-employed) said they would prefer to leave that job altogether for full-time employment as imam.

The interviews with the imams confirmed that official recognition of their function was an important issue for them: all the imams – especially Moroccan and non-Diyanet affiliated Turkish imams – said they would prefer to be recognized by the government in their function as imam and receive an income for that function. The imams recognized by the government attested that official recognition provided a positive road to stability. It led to an overall improvement, leaving them with both a higher income and financial independence, and also made the imam more independent of the mosque board and committee in his task. While the officially recognized imams underlined that the payment had no negative effect on the respect they enjoyed in the Muslim community, some other imams expressed hesitation regarding eventual recognition, fearing that they would be perceived as a government spokesmen.

Most imams who are not officially recognized and financed by the government are either volunteers or (part-time) employees of the local mosque community. In the interviews, such imams reported that this kind of employment was characterized not only by instability but often also by questionable working conditions. They were at the mercy of the local mosque community. Pay was often limited and irregular, strongly depending on the money the local mosque community managed to raise. This financial dependence spilled over into the content and organization of the work as an imam, involving in many cases, according to the respondents, the subordination of the imam to the local mosque board and committee. The respondents added that this discouraged competent Muslims who were keen on their independence and chose either not to become an imam or to combine it with a financially

more sustainable job. Only Diyanet imams were not really interested in receiving a salary from the Belgian government, due to the fact that they were paid by the Turkish state, which guaranteed them some autonomy vis-à-vis the local community and the mosque board.

An ambiguous attitude towards government initiatives

Imams have a variety of tasks in a country of immigration. Some are the same as in Muslim countries, others change slightly or are even new. While the imams did not seem to perceive these new tasks negatively, they doubted their and their colleagues' ability to carry them out successfully. Their limited knowledge of Belgian society and the vernacular made it difficult for them to meet the increasing demands for advice on how to live a Muslim life in a Western, secular environment. In the interviews, some respondents acknowledged that they were ill-equipped, and even more respondents argued that many of their colleagues were ill-equipped, to take on this task, especially in relation to the younger members of their mosque community. In some mosque communities this caused a generation gap.

Awareness of the new tasks in an immigrant context explain why the participants confirm unanimously the need for additional information on Flemish and Belgian society. They want to improve their participation in society as imam and form a bridge between society and the Muslim community. However, the quest for additional training in the country where they live and work is not unambiguous. The imams warn that Islam is diverse, not a monolithic religion. Moreover, the quality and content of a potential training in Belgium are doubted, especially concerning Islamic theology. Some respondents doubt new centres of study could compete with long established institutions Al Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, or a similar institution in Tetouan, Morocco. The West not much experience providing an accurate theological curriculum for imams. Some imams are therefore in favour of a good theological training in an (international) centre with expertise and experience, but agreed that

they would like opportunities to top-up this education to increase their knowledge of the Western context – for example, through training in counselling, pedagogical and language skills and knowledge about the social and political history of the country (for this idea, see also Geaves 2008; Ferrari 2012, 109).

Many imams also feared that the separation of church and state might be lost and religious autonomy decline if these training and education programmes were financed by the government. At this point, it is notable that the same ambiguous and defensive attitude emerged on the issue of official recognition and payment by the government. On the one hand, government recognition and a government-provided income was seen as a way to financial stability, professional autonomy, and a more consistent and better provision of services to the Muslim community. On the other, the imams were suspicious of any government initiative as they feared far-reaching state control. The policy of state recognition was also partly perceived as an attempt to control and influence mosques and imams. This defensive attitude, alongside some practical and administrative problems, explains why some mosque communities and imams do not want to apply for recognition.

All mosques applied for recognition and three to four months later they withdrew it. They say, indirectly, that the government wants to control the mosques and that the imam has to show what he says or intends on saying during the Friday prayer. (Interview Moroccan imam)

One imam mentioned that the board of a Turkish mosque feared that they would be obliged by the government to accept a Moroccan imam. The interviews also showed that suspicion of the government was part of a broader suspicious attitude. Many respondents had a sense that they were living in a society hostile to Islam and Muslims. This also made them less likely to speak out in public debates. Some imams had spoken out – for example, in the debate on the headscarf ban in public schools or the debate about radicalization and anti-democratic

Muslim organizations such as Sharia4 Belgium. But many had not. Some of them did not feel they were sufficiently acquainted with the Belgian political and social context. In addition, what they perceived as the radicalized anti-Islamic discourse in the media and in the public debate, as well as the radicalization and lack of integration of young Muslims, also played a part in explaining their absence from public debate. They abhorred the violence committed in the name of their faith, but feared being misunderstood and their words being used against them. They are frustrated about the ‘sensationalist media’, which they feel emphasizes negative reporting and the radicalization of Islam.

Many imams fear the media. In the sense that the media often present issues in a negative way. (Interview, Millî Görüş imam)

Finally, a word on extremism and fundamentalism in Flemish Muslim communities: Muslim extremism is a substantial issue in the public and political debate in Belgium. In particular, Sharia4Belgium, a Belgian radical Salafist organization that denounces democracy and calls for Belgium to be reformed and made into an Islamic state, has received a lot of media attention since 2010. Their actions have been provocative and, in December 2012, their spokesman was sentenced by the court for incitement to hatred. Increasing attention is also being paid to political Islam and the growing Salafist community in Brussels (see, for example, Benyaich 2013; Touag 2012; Fraihi 2006); there have regularly been news items on Belgian Muslims participating in jihad in Islamic countries; articles have appeared in newspapers and documentaries on television about sexism, homophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes and beliefs among the youngsters in the Muslim communities, especially in Brussels³. As a consequence, there is a tendency to perceive Islam as a problematic and dangerous religion, feeding the increasingly popular discourse that democratic societies have to protect themselves against “Islamization.” The selective arguments made against Islam as a threat to gender equality and democracy that are often used in public debate and political

discussions about headscarves and the burka bans are relevant here (for a critical analysis, see Brems, Vrielink and Ouald-Chaib 2013).

The existence of Islamic extremism in Belgium cannot be denied, although current media coverage may not give an accurate understanding of its extent, but no extremism or virulent anti-Western discourses were encountered during this research project. Generally speaking, the imams who participated were in favour of more integration of Islam in the country of immigration. They argued for more mutual acceptance and recognition of Islam in Western society. That said, the reason why extremism was absent from the study was that extremists did not participate. They are not easy to contact, being well aware that the government, state security services and other agencies regard them with suspicion, and so they stay out of sight. This is also the reason why the Executive of Muslims in Belgium makes no impact on them. Extremist imams and mosque communities do not associate with the Executive, and the Executive does not even know who or where they are. The results of our research show that many imams are against extremism and in favour of further integration and mutual recognition, but one should be aware that the absence of extremism in the research data gives no indication of the number of radical imams in Flemish Muslim communities.

A growing interest in imams

The research we present here is new and original in Flanders in particular and Belgium as a whole, as no previous studies have been conducted on this issue. From a broader perspective, this research is in line with the growing social, political and academic interest in imams as social actors. Imams are increasingly considered to be important figures in European Muslim communities, not least when it comes to the position and role of Islam among immigrants in a Western, secularized and plural society. The “widespread political concerns with Islam and

its incorporation into European states” is indeed an important explanation for the heightened interest in the study of Muslim religious authorities (Peter and Arigita 2006, 537).

Policymakers, opinion makers and civil society see imams not only as community leaders with a certain religious and moral authority, but also as community representatives and possible “bridges” between the Muslim community and wider society (Boender 2007 278ff.; Kamp 2008). As a consequence they are receiving growing attention in what is called the integration debate and an increasing number of studies focus on religious authority and the institutionalization of imams and mosques (see, for example, Reeber 1991; 1993; Frégosi 1998; Shadid and van Koningsveld 2002; Kroissenbrunner 2002, 2003; Boender 2007; Kamp 2008).

The attention paid to the imam in the integration debate must be understood from the perspective that it would be desirable that a British/Dutch/German/Flemish/etc. or European Islam should emerge, an Islam compatible with European values and with limited foreign influence (see, for example, Kamp 2008, 133ff.; Tezcan 2008, 127ff.; Boender and Kanmaz 2002; Boender 2007, 47–108). In the wake of 9/11, imams have also been perceived as important but so far not very successful actors in the discouragement of extremism and jihad (Birt 2006). Integration and training initiatives targeting imams are presented as a tool for producing “moderate” imams able to lead their Muslim constituency to an acceptance of the legal and moral precepts of a European society (Haddad and Balz 2008), despite an on-going process of individualization, which is resulting in a decline of the influence of imams and mosques, especially on the younger generations (Peter 2006, 107). These are the reasons that have raised the issue of imam training in various European countries (Frégosi 1998; Geaves 2008; Siddiqui 2007; Husson 2007; Husson and Dury 2007; Drees and van Koningsveld 2008; Mukadam et al. 2010; Ucar 2010; Ferrari 2012). No academic training for imams and Muslim teachers has so far become available in Flanders. Muslim communities in Flanders

looking for a well-trained imam have no alternative but to turn to foreign-trained imams. Neither is there any opportunity to study Islamic theology at university, as is the case now in Germany or the Netherlands. At the time of writing (December 2013), the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven) has announced that it will offer a course in Islamic theology from the academic year 2014–2015. Two high schools already offer training for teachers of Islam but their graduates do not meet the needs of the Flemish labour market. (All public schools in Flanders have to offer Islamic education upon request, and requests are growing.) In the French-speaking part of Belgium, the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve (UCL) has provided Islamic religious studies since September 2006. This is a respectful but critical course in Islam, taking the problems European Muslims face as a starting point (Ferrari 2012, 112).

This first study on imams in Flanders, presented here, should be understood as an expression of a growing interest in imams. It was commissioned by the Flemish minister in charge of civic integration of migrants and newcomers. The government wanted to get a picture of the imams in Flanders as a first step towards setting up a joint reflection between political and religious actors on how imams can make a positive contribution to the integration of Muslims in Western society. Furthermore, and specifically for Flanders, the Flemish authorities also want to know how imams think about state recognition and funding, since they also come under the responsibility of the commissioning minister.

The Flemish project confirms a number of findings from other research conducted across Western Europe. The essential meaning of imam is “prayer leader,” but the responsibilities and functions of the imam in an immigrant context cover much more than that (Kamp 2008, 143ff.; Kroissenbrunner 2002, 195; Boender 2007, 127ff., 183ff.; Birt 2006, 687). In fact, imams function as moral and religious leaders of particular mosque communities and are perceived by Muslims as informed guides who point out the correct

religious interpretation of how to live. However, the Flemish imams also acknowledged their responsibility in relation to the migrant context and they unanimously confirmed the importance of answering Muslims' questions in a way that is relevant to the European, Belgian, and Flemish context. How to live an Islamic life in a secular, European context is not obvious for many believers, and imams are seen as important compasses to guide believers on their way. As the conclusions of research on imams in Germany underline:

It seems as if the variety of duties, typical for the situation in the Diaspora, has become part of the self-image and self-claims of the imams. The variety of duties fits into the self-image insofar as the imams feel a comprehensive responsibility for the psychological and social well-being, as well as for the religious concerns of the believers. (Kamp 2008, 158)

Conclusion: imams as partners in the integration of Muslims in Europe?

This study on imams in Flanders reflects a growing interest in the role of the imam in the process of the integration of Islam in a West-European context. The research confirms what we already know from other countries receiving immigrants: the new diaspora context affects the job description of an imam. A great number of them feel that their workload is heavier than that of a traditional imam, either because of new tasks or because of the quantity of work. One of the new tasks concerns the increased demand for advice on how to live a Muslim life in a Western, secular environment. However, many imams are uncomfortable about their limited knowledge of the vernacular and Western European societies, which makes some ill-equipped to face these new challenges.

Since imams in Flanders were almost invariably born in Mediterranean Muslim countries, they become acquainted with the language and culture of Flanders only later in life. The lack of domestic training programmes and the fact that Turkey is still sending its own

Diyamet imams, mean that, although Islam has been an officially recognized religion in Belgium since 1974, there are (as at 2013) almost no “Belgian imams,” i.e. imams socialized and trained in Belgium. It seems that there are not enough incentives and (training) opportunities for second-generation migrants to become imams. This is in stark contrast to, for instance, the UK where the imamate has become a common career choice for British-born Muslims, and where there are over 30 centres for training them.

The research reported here was commissioned by the Flemish government in an effort to understand the role imams could play in the integration of Muslims and the fight against extremism. It is therefore appropriate to conclude with some policy recommendations. From our findings, we can deduce that it makes sense for the government to invest in and support initiatives that will make it possible to recruit imams from the local community. The imams themselves, at least those who participated in the project, asked for this. Coming from abroad themselves, they had experienced the difficulties of taking up a leadership position in the local Islamic community while being themselves migrants with no in-depth knowledge of the language and society in which they were operating. One option would be to support comprehensive imam training; another would be to offer only supplementary training, after theological training in officially recognized international centres. The consensus on the need for supplementary (non-theological) training is strong enough to warrant moving in this direction.

If the Belgian and Flemish governments intend to aim for more cooperation with imams, they will have to take account of the ambivalent attitude of imams to public authorities. Imams are very hesitant about state intervention and quickly adopt a defensive stance. The research project initially faced a lot of resistance and difficulty in establishing a relationship of trust with its target group. Many imams seemed to assume that they were living in a society that is suspicious of and hostile towards Islam and Muslims. Their

ambivalent attitude showed up in the research results: on the one hand, the study shows that imams had great expectations of the government in terms of official, legal and symbolic recognition and equal treatment, and in terms of training initiatives but, on the other, they were quite suspicious of any government initiative and feared illegitimate state control. It seems that the imams would easily doubt the intentions of the state with regard to both training for imams and official state recognition and support. They were afraid that the state would attempt to control and influence mosques and imams. The results show that if the government, and society more generally, want to cooperate with imams on issues such as integration, they should at least be aware of this ambivalent attitude. Establishing trust between the partners involved should be integral to policy strategy, and policy initiatives should be accompanied by efforts in that direction.

The research project shows the positive attitude of many imams when it comes to the integration of Islam in Europe and the construction of a barrier against extremism, but it also points to the fact that imams are not yet fully able to fulfil this role. However, the recently acquired understanding that Islam is to constitute a lasting aspect of Belgian society, as well as the agreement within the Muslim community that there is a need for more locally embedded imams, opens the way for new perspectives.

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Notes

¹ Belgium is a federal state with three official languages. Besides a Dutch and French-speaking community, there is also a very small German-speaking area. The Dutch speaking-part of Belgium is Flanders, the French-speaking part is Wallonia and Brussels is bilingual. Flanders has its own jurisdiction not only over 'space-bounded' matters, such as regional economy, agriculture, environment, infrastructure and transport, but also over 'person-related' matters, such as health care, social policy, culture, the use of language and education. Consequently, Flanders has its own minister and legislation for, e.g. education and migrant integration. Immigration law, however, is still the responsibility of the Belgian government. Because this study on imams is commissioned by the Flemish Government, imams in Brussels and Wallonia could not participate.

² The empirical data were gathered by Jonathan Debeer in a research project funded by the Flemish Government within the framework of the second Policy Research Centre Programme (2007–2011). Given the funding criteria, only imams active in Flanders could be included in the study. For the full report, see Debeer, Loobuyck and Meier 2011b.

³ These articles and programmes were often inspired by the data of sociological research among youngsters in the Flemish cities (esp. Vettenburg et. al. 2011, 2013) with conservative (negative) results for Muslims concerning tolerance, e.g., toward homosexuality.