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Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Immigrant Belonging in Belgium: Laws, Localities, and Living Together

Abstract:

Massive migration into Europe amid the Syrian civil war has revitalized long-standing debates about immigrant integration. Nationalistic Europeans increasingly vocalize their belief that migrants do not “belong” in their countries -- a position amplified by recent terror attacks, nearly all of which were committed by persons with migrant backgrounds. Yet a clear understanding of what defines “integration” remains elusive. Many scholars (often implicitly) conceptualize integration as an idealized end-state wherein migrants adapt and become absorbed into a homogenous host society. Politicians largely adhere to this same perspective; they actively construct ideas of who the host society is and how “others” (*i.e.*, immigrants) are supposed to behave to become like them. Politicians then use laws to achieve their goals. However, despite similar academic and policy approaches to integration, scholars to date have largely failed to address how laws aimed at immigrant integration influence relations between local citizens and migrants.

This study seeks to remedy this gap by examining recently enacted state integration laws in Belgium and using them as a reference point to illuminate how migrants and citizens coexist within, and negotiate, a sense of shared space in local environments. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research analyzes Belgian laws regarding “integration” and uses in-depth interviews with immigrants and native Belgians in hopes of revealing how “integration” discourses and practices on local levels do or do not correspond with what Belgian integration laws dictate. This contributes to broader immigrant integration debates by showing the connection - or lack thereof - between state laws and migrants and citizens living together in various localities.