Something must have happened in Brussels in 2000, something unpredicted and unpredictable, that abruptly reversed several decennia of demographic decline. Before venturing some conjectures about what might have done the trick, a brief glance at the past.

Brussels was born around the year 1000 with a settlement on the small island of St Gorik (St Géry) in the middle of the (now invisible) river Senne. Ever since then, the population of what became the territory of the nineteen communes of the Brussels-Capital Region has kept growing, with a few more or less protracted regressions owing to wars and plagues. It reached an unprecedented peak in 1968, with about 1,050,000 inhabitants. However, by the time the Brussels-Capital Region was created twenty years later, it was down to about 950,000, owing to a steady exodus of Brusselers to the more remote suburbs in Flanders and Walonia. It then stabilized for a while and reached the end of the century at the same level. This was not good: there is no better simple indicator of the bad health of a city than demographic decline.

In 2000, however, the population of the Brussels Region suddenly started growing again, even twice as fast as the other two regions, and it is still going strong, now approaching 1,200,000 inhabitants, far above its 1968 peak. What is it that happened in 2000 to have such an impact? Was it Brussels’ way of celebrating its 1000 years of existence? Was it the first edition of the Zinneke Parade, a festival organized since then every second year in order to express and celebrate Brussels multi-coloured, multi-cultural identity? Was it the EU Council’s decision, at the Nice summit, to start holding all its regular meetings in Brussels? Was it the subsequent publication of a report sponsored by the President of the European Commission under the bold title “Brussels, Capital of Europe”, an expression carefully avoided until then by EU authorities?

Some of these conjectures contain a grain of truth, which can be identified by looking at Brussels’ sustained demographic growth as the net effect of three phenomena. Firstly, ever since the automobile started becoming a must for any middle class household, there has been a constant net outflow of Belgo-Belges, i.e. people whose parents and grandparents were born Belgians. Thousands of them migrate into Brussels every year from the whole of Belgium, but far more of them migrate out of Brussels into the rest of Belgium, mainly but not only into the two neighbouring provinces of Flemish and Walloon Brabant. Had Brussels been able to count only on...
the Belgo-Belges, its population would have shrunk today to about one third of what it was in the 1960s, countless buildings would be abandoned, and whole neighbourhoods would have degenerated into ghost towns.

This Belgian exodus, however, has been partly offset since its inception and more than compensated since the beginning of this century by a net inflow from abroad, both from outside Europe — mainly Morocco — and from other European countries — with France at the top. This second phenomenon partly offset and next more than compensated the first one, but it also partly caused it: less Belgo-Belges would have moved to the suburbs, had immigration not made many parts of Brussels as multicultural as they have become and all of them more expensive than they would otherwise have been.

This second phenomenon in turn is at the source of a third one: both the ethnic and the age composition of the Brussels population resulting from this immigration pattern led to a surplus of births over deaths significantly higher than in Flanders and Wallonia. This surplus sufficed to stabilize the Brussels population in the last decade of the twentieth century and has been contributing to its growth ever since.

The snapshot outcome of the combination of these three phenomena is a Brussels population made up of roughly three thirds. One third that keeps shrinking is made up of what’s left of the Belgo-Belges (down from over 90% in the 1960s). Next, a swelling third is made up of Belgian citizens of recent foreign origin, who acquired Belgian citizenship either as a result of being naturalized themselves or as a result of the naturalization of at least one of their ascendants. The bulk of this second third consists of people of non-EU origin, for whom the acquisition of Belgian citizenship, often compatible with keeping their own native citizenship, offers significant practical advantages. For lack of direct data, the exact share between these two categories of Belgian citizens cannot be determined precisely. It can only be approximated using indirect estimation methods. (See Graph 1.) This is not the case for the third third, also swelling, made up of Brusselers without Belgian citizenship. Most of them are EU citizens, with no good practical reason nor any intention to become Belgians.

One direct consequence of the combination of these three phenomena is that the difference between Brussels and its two neighbouring regions has deepened dramatically. Since 1989, when the Brussels region was created, Flanders and Wallonia grew closer to one another demographically: the proportion of foreigners, initially higher in Wallonia than in Flanders, has shrunk in Wallonia while rising in Flanders, and the proportion of Belgians of recent foreign origin has been increasing in both regions, but proportionally more in Flanders than in Wallonia. In both cases, however, the Belgo-Belges remain an overwhelming majority of the population. (See Graphs 2 and 3.) In the Brussels region, by contrast, they are now a small and shrinking minority.

The fast growth of Brussels’ population is arguably a very good sign. It is at any rate a sign that the city is doing much better than before 1989, when it became one of Belgium’s three regions. But with the Belgo-Belges reduced to less than a third of the total population, moreover divided between two linguistic communities, it should be clear that the very notion of “integration” of newcomers into the host society must acquire a sense very different from the one it can still realistically have in Flanders and Wallonia. Brussels’ superdiversity will not wither away. It is there to stay. Is it compatible with a thriving economy, with a fair distribution of opportunities, with some degree of social cohesion, with the feeling of forming a community? If not, Brussels’ demographic success is heading for disaster. It is high time to think harder — and all together — about what needs doing to prevent this — and to do it.

**PROPORTION OF THE POPULATION OF THE THREE REGIONS THAT CONSISTS OF**

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<th>Belgians of Belgian origin</th>
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<th>Non-Belgians</th>
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*Graph 1: Brussels*

*Graph 2: Flanders*

*Graph 3: Wallonia*

Estimates by Jan Hertogen (Non-Profit Data, www.npdata.be)