

Brussels, a new direction for a ship without course.

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Teun Voeten is a cultural anthropologist who's been working for 20 years as a war photographer. He spent a long time living in New York and spent several months with a group of subterranean homeless people in Manhattan, about whom he wrote a book called "Tunnel People". At the moment he is working on a project about drug violence in Mexico. He's been living in Molenbeek since 2005 and lays out a few practical suggestions to tackle the problems in Brussels.

In 2005 I moved to a loft in Molenbeek. I was part of the new wave of white, educated yuppies who, with a healthy mix of good intentions and pragmatism, dared to move to the other side of the canal.

We all loved that we had a Moroccan contractor; we hoped our children would play in the street with brown children. We thought the streets in our neighborhood would gradually get better. Less dirt, less crime, a hip gallery and trendy bar here and there and our lofts would increase in value.

Six years later Molenbeek is, to put it gently, still a very stagnated neighborhood. Our contractor Hassan turned out to be a crook who disappeared with 100.000 euro. Our kids still don't play in the street cause cars drive around at 70Km/h. We hardly interact with our neighbors, we're seen as intruders. Trash lies rotting on the street and on every corner you find large piles of waste.

The girl living next door was robbed in the middle of the day in front of her door. She screamed and shouted for help but in a street packed with people, but nobody batted an eye lid. Poverty, social exclusion, crime, chronic unemployment is endemic, riots and unrest occur every so often. How could it come this far? Three different parties are to blame. The government, the Belgian citizens and the Moroccan community.

The laughing stock of Europe.

The government? Which government? Many people in Belgium find it charming we hold the world record for being without a government¹. I'm sorry, this is not charming. It's embarrassing. In serious circles Belgium is the laughing stock of Europe. The world is being confronted with enormous challenges but our politicians can't overcome the problems with Brussels - Halle - Vilvoorde². With governing bodies on country, capital, Flemish, Walloon and last but not least, municipal levels it's simply unclear who's in charge. Everyone claims the other guy is responsible.

Large cities like London, New York and Paris have one mayor with one vision, one head of police with one policy that is implemented. A megalopolis like Rio has huge problems that make Brussels' issues pale in comparison. But the reaction in Rio is one of courage, imagination and creativity. Thanks to a decisive approach the problems in the *favelas* are reaching manageable proportions.

Brussels is made up of 19 communes that each have their own mayor, magistrates and members of parliament - I was told there are about 200 of them. Governing is a difficult task and statistically it's impossible to have so many capable members occupy all these positions. It's unavoidable that dozens of useless and incapable officials manage to infiltrate and occupy positions of power. Brussels is stuck in a swamp of indifference and mediocrity, it's a ship on the loose and nobody knows who's the captain. When I was talking about this with mayor Moreaux of Molenbeek he was highly indignant how someone from "the country of Wilders" that just arrived in Molenbeek dared to criticize the powers that be.

Belgians.

Johan Anthierens once described Belgians as a people that "as long as they are in their little houses with a mouth full of 'tomate crevette', everything is fine". In Belgium the government is seen as a hostile entity whereby the people spend a lot of time figuring how to make it bother them the least and how they can profit it from it the most.

"Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country", said

¹ It took Belgium 589 days to form a government after the June 2010 elections.

² Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde, the names of three towns, are symbolic for the language problems in Belgium.

John F Kennedy. In the Belgian culture of hustling, it's precisely the other way round. From the creatives that are glorified "chommeurs" through the highly coveted "artist" statute, to the tax evader on his plot of land surrounded by garden gnomes.

Racism, or the nicer word, Xenophobia, is part of Belgian, and especially Flemish life. I've been living in Brussels since 1992, I'm a catholic from Brabant who speaks with a soft "g" and according to many friends makes the best frites carbonnade in town. But after all these years I'm still just "a Dutchie" for most people. When I asked a colleague why I had so few assignments here, he embarrassingly stated they prefer to work with their "own people". I don't know what it's like to be called Mohammed and to have to look for a job; I can only imagine. Don't underestimate the anger, frustration and rancor that's caused by hitting a wall time and time again.

Moroccans.

Yes, you don't get let off either. Like it or not, research shows that young Moroccans are responsible for most of the crimes. The good news is that most of the so-called "f*cking Moroccans" are absolutely a minority. Most Moroccans are hard working, tax paying citizens that don't like their problematic youths either. Go shopping on the Chaussée de Gand just across the canal and you'll see a thriving middle class.

One of the reasons is that a good education was never a priority for most Moroccans. Their parents and grand parents were Berbers from the Rif Mountains who barely completed a basic education. Just like the black youth culture in the US where getting good grades at school is seen as "acting white", Moroccan youths see studying as uncool.

Conformism is rife. Have you ever seen a Moroccan punk or hippie? They exist, but in Casablanca or Marrakesh and not in Molenbeek, where everyone wears the same annoying caps and Adidas outfits. On top of that, and in this aspect Moroccan youths have adjusted well, they've internalized the Belgian culture of complaining, they love blaming government and wallow in the fact they feel like victims. In the US, Latinos and Koreans bypassed the Afro American community with an attitude of "stop complaining and work hard". The children of the first generation dish washers and laundromat owners are now studying to be lawyers and doctors and are moving in to the suburbs. At the moment, Moroccans in Belgium are rapidly being bypassed by the new East

Europeans.

These are all big problems. But they can be solved. Twenty years ago, Harlem in New York was a lost cause. Now it's a thriving neighborhood with a diverse population consisting of European artists, white students and black entrepreneurs. I'd like to advocate a policy of engaged pragmatism in which undesirable situations are dealt with not only out of a moral obligation but also for practical reasons. Simply because they are detrimental to society and will end up costing everyone a lot of money. Allow me to make a few suggestions.

1. Solve problems by admitting they exist. Unemployment, social exclusion and the resulting criminality may be invisible to the average Belgian who never sets foot in Molenbeek, but it is a disaster waiting to happen.

2. Research and define the problem. Let a bunch of anthropologists, sociologists and criminologists loose in the neighborhoods. Go and have a look in New York, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Rotterdam, Ciudad Juarez, Antwerp. Talk to the policy makers there about their successes and failures.

3. Society can be controlled with sanctions. Positive and negative ones. Reward good behavior. Punish bad behavior. Farmers and Americans call this the "stick and carrot" policy and it's known to mobilize even the most stubborn donkey.

4. Create opportunities and hope. Fifty percent unemployment in some neighborhoods calls for a Belgian version of the Marshall Plan. The Tennessee Valley Authority project managed to provide jobs for tens of thousands of Americans during the Great Depression.

5. End lawlessness. Purse snatchers are free on the street a few hours after being arrested, machos tear through red lights at at 80Km/h. Citizens no longer have any faith in the government and fall in to apathy, indifference and cynicism - three things that are known to seriously undermine society.

6. Deal with crime effectively. A recipe: Take a large map of the city and use red flags to indicate where incidents are taking place. After a year a pattern will emerge. Most crimes take place on the same street corners by the same little crooks. Crimes are hopelessly predictable. There's probably about a thousand crooks active in Brussels. Identify, target, isolate and eliminate this group.

7. Create a police force that reflects society. Most cops in Brussels are Flemish that have no relations with the city. In some areas they are seen as a foreign, occupying force. Actively recruit cops from minority groups. Look at New York, where white, black, yellow and brown cops patrol the streets together. Bring cops on horses back in to the city, they evoke a feeling of respect.

8. Tackle chronic unemployment. In Molenbeek there are families in which the third generation receives unemployment benefits. Rotterdam started a project where the unemployed have to answer for themselves and through further education and employment return to the working force, benefitting everyone. Increase minimum wages and decrease unemployment benefits. Let the chronically unemployed and artists with privileged statutes work the garbage trucks every now and then, and give the garbage collectors themselves a few days off. Solidarity you know?

9. Punish in a creative and original way. Don't put pick pockets in jail. It costs society a ton of money, they'll only learn more advanced crimes, while at the same time thinking it's all super cool. In the black ghettos of the US, prison is no longer a punishment but a rite of passage. Send repeat offenders off to work in African refugee centers for six months. That way they are not only removed from society but more importantly, they learn to look further than Belgium while at the same time doing useful work and developing feelings of self worth and respect.

10. Create special scholarships for minority groups. Send the 25 smartest Moroccans off to study in the US for a year.

11. Remind the Moroccan community about their responsibilities. Again as in Rotterdam, which by the way has a Moroccan mayor, a successful project is being carried out where Moroccan parents talk to the youth about their bad behavior and the bad reputation they are creating for themselves.

There are many creative and original solutions to the problem. Society can largely be created. If the political will is there. And that's the biggest problem.