

Flemish Government

Animal Welfare Department

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OPINION 29/09/2022 – Flemish Animal Welfare Department

Import of stray and shelter dogs

In Flanders, there has been a **significant increase** in the number of **stray and shelter dogs** imported by organisations in recent years. Besides an increase from the regular importing country Spain, there has also recently been a sharp rise in dogs from Eastern European countries such as Romania. Private veterinarians also report consultations with dogs imported from third countries such as Ukraine, Belarus and Turkey. Imports from third countries do not have to be officially registered, which is why there are no figures for them.

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council itself took the initiative to revisit the issue. Back in 2010, the then Animal Welfare Council published an opinion on the issue, but no further action was taken after that.

In this discussion, there are **supporters and opponents** of importing stray and shelter dogs. The former, like many organisations importing these dogs and the owners involved, are often emotionally driven by the motivation to help dogs in need. The other group (including vets) focuses on the health and behavioural risks associated with importing stray and shelter dogs.

The **risk of health and behavioural difficulties** in imported stray and shelter dogs is also a major concern of the Flemish Council. For example, (exotic) diseases, including zoonoses, are more common in imported dogs (e.g. rabies, Echinococcus, Leishmania, Babesiosis, Ehrlichiosis, Hepatozoonosis, heartworm, brucellosis, Leptospira canicola).

Furthermore, these dogs do not always have the same family dog status in their home countries as in Western Europe. They have less emotional and financial value and are treated accordingly. The dogs are often taken in at local shelters and adopted from there. This history results in a higher incidence of **deviant behaviour** such as stress, fear of people and separation anxiety in these animals¹.

¹ Munkeboe, N.; Lohse-Lind, A.; Sandøe, P.; Forkman, B.; Nielsen, S.S. Comparing Behavioural Problems in Imported Street Dogs and Domestically Reared Danish Dogs—The Views of Dog Owners and Veterinarians. *Animals* 2021, 11, 1436. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11051436>

Remote adoption based on photos and descriptions and without rigorous screening of prospective adopters also limits the matching of a dog and an adopter, and increases the risk of impulse adoptions. Moreover, **Flemish animal shelters** are simultaneously struggling with a structural **overpopulation** of dogs.

An overwhelming majority of Council members oppose the import of stray and shelter dogs. The Council therefore calls for a **ban on the import of these dogs**.

If a ban on the import of stray and shelter dogs is not legally possible, the Council suggests at least imposing **rules and conditions** on the import of stray and shelter dogs (see addendum).

This opinion concerns dogs only. The import of stray and shelter cats was not addressed.

ADDENDUM:

In case a ban is not legally feasible, the Council recommends importing only **socialised and healthy family dogs**, as these have a lower risk of health and behavioural difficulties. Indeed, the Flemish Animal Welfare Council recognises that there is a significant **difference** in the risk of difficulties depending on the history of the imported dogs, e.g. whether they are relinquished family dogs, stray dogs, or dogs that have been in a shelter for a long time.

The Council is of the opinion that the **organisation** importing the dog is **responsible** for only importing this category of dogs, as well as ensuring a good match with the prospective adopter. If there are difficulties or the dog does not turn out to fit into a family situation, the organisation must take the dog back. The above principles also apply to licensed animal shelters.

The Flemish Council for Animal Welfare therefore proposes the following **rules and conditions**:

- Registration of the importing organisation: Organisations have an **obligation to register** with the Animal Welfare Department of the Department of Environment and Spatial Development, Flemish government.
- Identification and registration of the dog: The organisation only imports dogs that are **correctly identified**. In Flanders, dogs are **registered in the adopter's name** and include the name of the organisation.
- Dogs must be provided with a **mediation contract** from the importing organisation, containing the following conditions:
 - Age of the dog: Minimum 6 months (i.e. the dog has lost all its primary teeth)
 - Health: The organisation guarantees that the imported dog is healthy. This means that the dog is examined by a veterinarian in the country of origin. The dog may show no clinical signs indicating infectious disease. The dog must be vaccinated against infections and tested for absence of infections. The list of these health tests and vaccinations is specified. If these tests or vaccinations have not been carried out and the dog is found to be a carrier of any of the diseases within a reasonable time after arrival, the organisation will be liable for veterinary costs.
 - Behaviour: The organisation places only dogs that are people-oriented, social and adapted to family life. Fearful, aggressive or feral animals may therefore not be imported.
 - Contact location: The dogs may not be handed over to the adopter on public roads. The organisation will also designate a location or contact to which the dogs can be returned (see below).
 - Return policy:
 - The organisation will take back imported dogs that fail to comply for any reason within 6 months of arrival.
 - It compiles a clear policy plan stating what happens to imported dogs that have to be returned after adoption (i.e. Where and how will the returned animals be accommodated (available shelter capacity)? What happens to those dogs? Do they receive behavioural counselling? Will other adopters be sought? Will they be sent back to their countries of origin?).
 - If an imported adoptable dog is surrendered to a recognised shelter by the adopter or not, the organisation is bound, if desired by the shelter, to take possession of that dog regardless of the period after adoption.

- If the organisation works with foster families (to take in returned dogs), it will keep a register of the dogs in those foster families.

Footnote:

- *These conditions do not provide for quarantine, whereas they do for dogs commercially imported by traders. Anizoo and Andibel are calling for quarantine to be abolished for commercial imports as well and/or replaced by compliance with the necessary waiting period after mandatory vaccinations.*
- *The Lucky Ones and ACE|SHIN do not agree to a minimum age of 6 months for importing stray and shelter dogs. They prefer the legal minimum age of 15 weeks given the socialisation the puppies would partly miss out on. They also think dogs having lost all their primary teeth is a poor indicator because not all dogs have done so already at 6 months. ACE|SHIN also has reservations about the tests and vaccines to be carried out, as these are not yet specified here, and, for example, blood tests instead of the current SNAP tests would impose a very heavy financial burden on the organisation. The organisations wish to stress that they are not in competition with Flemish shelters. They believe that rather than general rules in importing street and shelter dogs, rules should be imposed that exclude rogue organisations.*