

Flemish Parliament Act of 21 November  
2008 on the support of the Circus Arts  
in Flanders

Circus in Flanders

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In federal Belgium, culture policy is an exclusive competence of the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) and Walloon (French and German-speaking) Communities. The Communities may enact laws in this regard, which in Flanders are known as Flemish Parliament Acts. The support of the circus arts in Flanders is a matter of cultural policy, making it a Flemish competence.

In Flanders, the cultural policy aims to provide the widest possible range of circus arts for the widest possible audience. Over the last decade, the circus has become fully integrated in this policy following the enactment of a special Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts. The circus arts, which are linked not only with the amateur and professional arts, but also with heritage, socio-cultural work, youth work and sport, now have their own place in the policy thanks to the creation of a separate legal framework for this art form. The Flemish Parliament Act offers new and much-needed opportunities for the further development, reinforcement and innovation of the circus arts.

This brochure provides an introduction to the circus policy of the Government of Flanders, with a particular emphasis on circus policy in the past and the Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts today. We also focus on the circus landscape in Flanders in more detail.

## Long live the circus!

In Flanders, circus policy gradually took shape as from the end of the 1970s when Flemish circuses were included in the list of cultural manifestations by the Ministry of Dutch-language culture. If an organiser booked a circus troupe on this list, part of the fee was reimbursed. In the early 1980s, the sector launched the “S.O.S. circus” campaign. The campaign group aimed to bring about a circus-friendly government policy. Successive Ministers of Culture expressed their interest but there was no systematic support of the circus arts and there was no clear vision. At the end of the 1990s, Circus Ronaldo received an important symbolic boost when it was recognised as a Cultural Ambassador of Flanders. An important turning point in the recognition of the circus arts as a valuable art form was the establishment of Circusvlo (the Flemish Organisation for Circus Arts) with five circus workshops in 2001. This non-profit organisation aimed to support, encourage and promote the circus arts as an amateur art form. One year later, the Government of Flanders signed a memorandum of understanding with seven traditional circuses. It also increased its support and launched a promotional campaign to create additional opportunities for Flemish nomadic circuses. This led to a number of structural measures in the following years aimed not only at providing support for the traditional circus but also at creating a framework for new forms of circus art. From 2007 onwards, support for



the Flemish circuses was extended to all circus arts under a temporary regulation. One of the conditions was that circuses could not use wild animals. This condition was subsequently also included in the Flemish Parliament Act of 2008.

In recent years, the Flemish circus sector has grown both in size and in quality thanks to strong incentives for the creation and distribution of the Flemish circus arts. For example, in the last few years this has led to the emergence in Flanders of a new circus generation with spectacular shows that push the boundaries of all types of performing arts and other arts, such as theatre, dance, contemporary music, multimedia and so on, in addition to the traditional itinerant nomadic circuses.

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# Circus policy today

With the Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts, policy-makers recognised the circus arts structurally. The *Flemish Parliament Act of 21 November 2008 on the Support of the Circus Arts in Flanders* provided a major and pioneering boost for the development of the circus sector, setting out a vision, a dedicated budget and a clear framework for circus arts subsidies in Flanders for the first time.

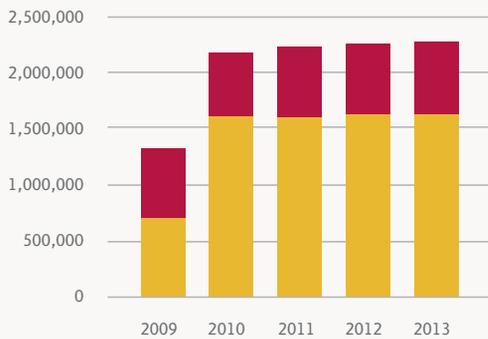
With this Flemish Parliament Act, the Government of Flanders aims to support, stimulate and promote a diverse range of circus arts throughout all of Flanders while paying attention to the international context. Traditional circus arts and new forms of circus are included in this, regardless of whether they are performed by amateurs or professionals. The Flemish Parliament Act contains targeted measures for the production, creation, distribution, support, promotion and training of the circus arts. The strength of the Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts is that it brings together all forms of circus, targets amateur, semi-professional and professional circus artists and positions the attention paid to the sector within a strong policy framework. With this Flemish Parliament Act, the Government of Flanders wishes to provide incentives for the circus arts in Flanders and put Flemish circus arts on the map again, both nationally and internationally.



## Subsidies for the circus arts

The Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts aims to provide the best possible opportunities to all the circus arts by funding the creation, distribution, professionalisation and promotion of the circus arts. In 2013, subsidies in the amount of EUR 2,279,000 were granted.

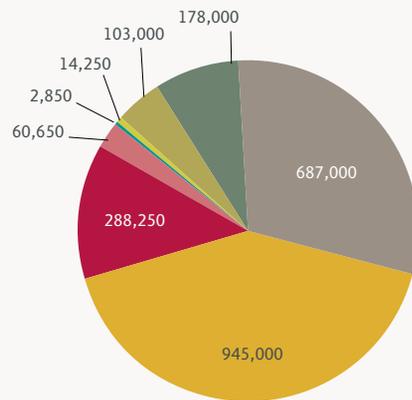
> Chart 1: total amount of subsidies for the circus arts (2009 – 2013)



■ Structural subsidies ■ Project subsidies

Remark: From 2010 three festivals, which previously received subsidies based on the Flemish Parliament Act on the Arts, now receive structural subsidies based on the Act on Circus Arts.

> Chart 2: distribution of the Circus Arts subsidies in 2013



■ Creation  
 ■ Distribution of a nomadic tour  
 ■ International distribution  
 ■ Festivals receiving project-based subsidies  
 ■ Festivals receiving recurring subsidies  
 ■ Promotion  
 ■ Education & training  
 ■ Circuscentrum

## Creation of circus art productions

New and experienced circus artists and troupes can apply for subsidies for the creation of a high-quality production aimed at a wide and diverse audience. The applications are assessed by a committee of experts regarding their artistry and their contribution to innovation or the extension of public reach, feasibility, the quality of previous productions and the involvement in the Flemish circus arts. Natural persons are also eligible, for amounts up to EUR 5,000. Amounts higher than this are only granted to entities with a legal identity (for example non-profit organisations and other companies).



## Distribution of circus art productions

The Flemish Parliament Act also provides support for the performance opportunities of the Flemish circus art productions, both in Belgium and abroad.

Itinerant circuses with their own programme can receive subsidies for their **tour of Flanders** in order to safeguard the nomadic nature of part of the circus sector.

**Flemish festivals** that put high-quality circus arts at the top of their bill are also eligible to receive subsidies for a period of up to five years. Street theatre or related hybrid forms may also be offered at such festivals.

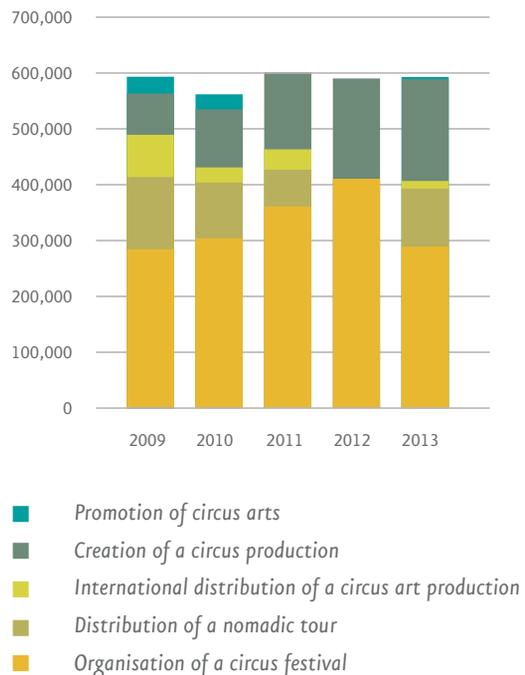
Finally, and with a view to **foreign distribution**, circus art productions which are included in foreign events and in festivals with an international appeal can also apply for subsidies. After all, travelling and crossing borders are eminent characteristics of the circus arts.

These subsidy applications will also be evaluated by a committee of experts, based on criteria relating to the artistry and the content of the production, the applicant's involvement in the Flemish circus arts and the practical feasibility. In the case of tours, the quality of previous tours may also be considered in the evaluation. In the case of festivals, public reach and international appeal will be used as additional evaluation criteria. The event's international appeal and opportunities for networking and exchanges of expertise are also important factors taken into account with a view to foreign distribution.

## Promotion of circus arts

The Flemish Centre for Circus Arts (Circuscentrum) serves as a hub for the implementation of this tangible circus policy. Thanks to the provision of support for the production and distribution of the circus arts, a solid base has now been created for a stronger and more diverse circus landscape in Flanders. The Government of Flanders can also invest in additional initiatives that contribute to a positive circus image and the Flemish Parliament Act provides for annual support of up to two major promotional activities.

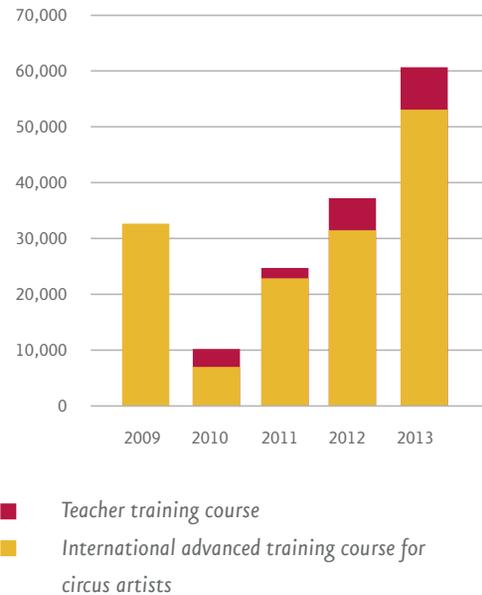
> Chart 3: overview of project subsidies (2009 - 2013)



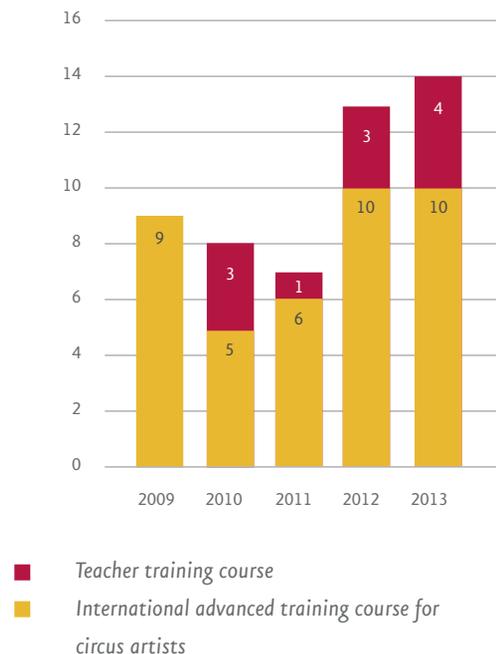
## Training and refresher courses for circus artists

Talented circus artists from Flanders are given every opportunity to follow international refresher courses and advanced training courses. Every year the budget provides a margin for sending the most gifted circus artists to international training events or having them take part in a teacher training course for the circus arts. We are thus investing today in the Flemish circus landscape of tomorrow. The subsidy covers up to 80% of the travel and accommodation costs and enrolment fees. The applications are evaluated based on the applicant's involvement in the Flemish circus arts, circus knowledge and skills and the candidate's career perspectives.

> Chart 4: overview of subsidies for international training courses (2009 - 2013)



> Chart 5: number of candidates who received subsidies for an international training course (2009 - 2013)





## Establishment of a Flemish Centre for Circus Arts

The Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts provides for the support of a Flemish Centre for Circus Arts (Circuscentrum). The Circuscentrum aims to turn Flanders into a flourishing circus region, with wide cultural support and the best possible development opportunities through various activities and projects. The Circuscentrum constitutes the link between the Government of Flanders and the sector. In the last five years, the Circuscentrum received an average annual subsidy of EUR 685,000 for its operations. The activities of the Circuscentrum are built around five pillars.

- **Artistic support.** Provide career support to Flemish circus artists - for new emerging talent and established performers alike. The keywords are creation, artistic advice, distribution and promotion.
- **Training and leisure network.** Provide the necessary refresher training for teachers, artists and young artists. Monitor the artistic and educational value of the network of circus workshops.
- **Heritage and documentation.** Protect, promote and honour Flemish circus heritage. Preserve and provide access to relevant literature and images.
- **Promotion and communication.** Promote the Flemish circus sector, Flemish circus policy and the Circuscentrum itself through various channels. Put the circus arts higher on the agenda of the media, policy-makers and other art sectors.
- **International branding.** Position the Flemish circus arts as a high-quality brand abroad. Engaging in relevant European networks and projects.



### Charter for high-quality circus in the cities and municipalities

At the end of 2012, the Circuscentrum drew up a charter, in consultation with the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) and the circus sector, to reconcile travelling circuses and the cities and municipalities and to create a place for high-quality circuses in our local communities once again. Nomadic or travelling circuses experience significant difficulties when visiting our cities and municipalities. Some local councils are no longer enthusiastic about circuses coming to town following bad experiences with circuses which did not comply with the agreements made. Or circuses are required to set up on the city limits. It is not always easy for travelling circuses to be informed about all the regulations relating to labour conditions, fire safety, animal welfare and local police regulations. The charter aims to encourage consultation and cooperation between local councils and circuses based on mutual trust. The goal is to achieve a good working relationship, better locations and workable agreements between local councils and the circus world.

# Profile of the Flemish circus sector

In the heyday of circus, Flanders had about twenty travelling circus companies that would pitch their big top in every village square and attract a full house time and again. A circus performance was a highlight in the village. From the 1950s onwards, the emergence of other leisure activities, including television, ate away at their success. The circus sector experienced a real recession and until the 1980s there was a generalised crisis in the sector. Only a few circuses succeeded in keeping a strong tradition alive.

From the 1980s onwards, a few foreign circuses explored new directions and new artistic impulses were created. This international wave of innovation helped strengthen the position of various major circuses across Europe and worldwide, with Cirque du Soleil from Canada as perhaps the best-known company, while also creating a margin for smaller companies which perform all kinds of circus.

The circus arts in Flanders only changed significantly in the last few decades: from a limited landscape, which was mainly populated by travelling circuses with a big top, to a comprehensive art discipline with influences from theatre, dance, music and many other disciplines. Circus is no longer limited to the travelling circuses of days gone by. Several companies and artists perform in cultural centres or at festivals, either indoors or in the open air. The policy of the Government of Flanders is to provide strong opportunities for all these circus arts, allowing them to develop their own dynamic identity, in Flanders and beyond.





## Travelling circuses

Today, Flanders still has a number of travelling big top circuses. Originally these were itinerant families that performed a “traditional” programme: a sequence of circus acts, introduced by the ringmaster (often the director of the circus). Some examples include Circus Barones, Circus Bavaria, Circus Pauwels, Circus Picolini, Circus Pipo, Circus Rose-Marie Malter and Wiener Circus.

However, circus companies working with new forms of circus arts (circus theatre-dance-street theatre) also often feel the urge to travel around with a big top. Some examples include Circo Ripopolo, Circus Plusminus, Circus Marcel, Circus Ronaldo, Cirque Cirq’u’laire, Hendrik & Co, Théâtre d’un Jour, Hoetchatcha and Cie Circ’ombelico.

## Indoor and outdoor circuses

Besides the travelling big top circuses, there are several companies and artists who perform in indoor venues or in the open air. The indoor performances especially have a clear link with other performing arts such as dance and theatre because of their context: indoor circus is no longer produced by a few artists. A director, dramatist, set and light designer, choreographer, composer and in some cases even a filmmaker are of great importance. Ever more cultural centres are including circus performances in their regular programming. But of course, circus continues to be an art form that works perfectly in the open air. The raw and unpredictable nature of the street is ideally suited to companies and artists who build a performance with elements such as improvisation, humour, interaction with the audience and impressive visual acts. Street theatre festivals and city festivals also seem to attract a lot of circus acts.

## Festivals

Three major festivals are considered as pioneers for the distribution and promotion of the circus arts: Theater op de Markt (Hasselt/Neerpelt), Humorologie (Kortrijk/Marke) and MiramirO (Ghent). And in recent years, many other festivals have started to focus more and more on the circus arts: Circo Roma (Borgerhout), Cirque Plus (Bruges), the International Street Art Festival Kempen (Mol), the Youth Circus Festival during the Ghent Festivities, Cirk! (Aalst) and the Summer of Antwerp to name just a few.

A number of cultural centres regularly feature circus acts on their calendars. The growing importance of circus arts in theatre productions and festivals in recent years is also noteworthy, for instance Villanella and the Bronks Festival, Laika, Ensemble Leporello, Luxemburg vzw, HETPALEIS, Theater FroeFroe, les ballets c de la b, and so on.



## Training and educational programmes

If you wish to follow circus training in your free time, Flanders has several circus workshops (circusateliers) to offer. Every week more than four thousand children, young people and adults attend classes in one of the many circus workshops being held in Flanders today. Every year the Circuscentrum itself also organises a number of interesting courses for hobbyists, young talented performers, teachers and artists with partners from the sector. Besides the extensive network of circus workshops and the initiatives of the Circuscentrum, Flanders also has its own circus training programme at the Atheneum Redingehof in Leuven. Children in the first two years of secondary education can choose the circus skills option. Brussels is also an important place for circus training programmes: Espace Catastrophe and Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles organise refresher courses for anyone wishing to specialise in circus arts, and the Ecole Supérieure des Arts du Cirque (ESAC) is one of the most renowned colleges of higher education for the circus arts in the world. Finally, Flemish students can also study at numerous circus schools abroad.



# Contact

The circus policy is implemented by the Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for Youth and Adults. For more information about the Flemish Parliament Act on Circus Arts and the subsidy rules, please contact:

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**[www.sociaalcultureel.be](http://www.sociaalcultureel.be)**

For more information about circuses in Flanders, about nomadic circuses, artists and companies, circus festivals, circus heritage and circuses abroad, please contact:

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