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The impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on ties between the Vlaams Belang in Belgium and the Putin regime

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Abstract

The populist Radical Right party, Vlaams Belang (VB), has consistently proved itself a successful electoral competitor in Belgian politics. Already in 2004, the party obtained 24% of the vote in Flanders, focusing on issues such as immigration, Flemish nationalism, crime and law and order. As of 2007, however, the party faced increasing competition from the Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), which has been able to present itself as a democratic alternative to the populist VB. In recent years, the VB has tended to radicalize rather than moderate its tone to differentiate itself from competitors. While foreign policy has not been a salient issue within VB ideology, various party members have developed close ties to the Putin regime since 2010. For example, Filip Dewinter, a prominent member of the VB, has met Russian officials and appeared in Russian media. Following the invasion of Ukraine, the VB was forced to shift its position on Putin’s regime. The current leader, Tom Van Grieken, has admitted he was seriously mistaken about Putin. Even Dewinter has strongly condemned Putin. At the same time, the VB remains sceptical about sanctions against Russia.

Keywords: *Vlaams Belang, Belgium, Russia–Ukraine war, nationalism, Flanders, Populist Radical Right*

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Introduction

The Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB) has consistently been one of the most successful populist Radical Right parties in Europe. In its early years, the VB was a real fringe party focusing almost exclusively on the goal of an autonomous Flemish state. As a result, only its leader Karel Dillen, who previously had shown sympathy towards the collaboration movement during German occupation, managed to gain representation in the national parliament when he was elected in 1978. However, after ideological and organizational changes, the party made its electoral breakthrough at the 1991 general elections (also known in Belgium as “Black Sunday” due to the VB’s success), gaining more than 10 % of the votes in Flanders.

In the south of Belgium, the Front National (FN) tried to reproduce the success of its French counterpart led by Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1990s and 2000s. Despite some occasional successes, the Belgian FN failed to break through. Led by the erratic Daniel Féret, who was unable to organize the party in a coherent way, the Belgian FN is no longer represented in the national parliament. Using evidence from interviews with media practitioners, De Jonge (2019) suggests that in the absence of a credible right-wing populist challenger, media practitioners in Wallonia adhere to a strict demarcation, whereas the Flemish media have become gradually more accommodating to the populist Radical Right. Since the populist Radical Right has been only successful in the Flemish part of Belgium, this report will focus entirely on the VB.

The structure of this report is as follows. First, we will briefly provide an overview of the ideology of the VB before turning to the organizational and electoral development of the party over time. The final section explores the relationship with the Putin regime and the impact of the war with Ukraine on VB’s ties with the Kremlin.

The ideology of the Vlaams Belang

The VB can be considered a textbook example of a populist Radical Right party focusing on *nativism, populism and authoritarianism*. Therefore, it is worth briefly outlining what each of these themes means and how they apply in the case of the VB.

Nativism is an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native people and ideas

are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state (Mudde, 2007). Since the Flemish “nation” does not coincide with the state (Belgium), it has been evident to the VB that the artificial Belgian state should cease to exist and that the Flemish and the Walloons should go their separate ways. An independent Flemish republic has always been the principal goal of the VB. With the challenge of immigration, the VB has come to further underscore the need for internal homogenization. In 1992, Filip Dewinter developed a seventy-point programme, which provided an operational plan for the guided repatriation of non-European foreigners to their countries of origin (Mudde, 2000). These harsh stances have been softened throughout the years, and by 2003, Dewinter admitted that the plan was no longer realistic. Today the VB sees non-European immigrants and particularly Muslims, as one of the main threats to the nation. The party stresses the fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between Islam and Western values and argues that Muslims increasingly impose their values upon the Flemings.

Even though the party featured elitist viewpoints in its early phase, the VB has increasingly presented itself as *populist* since the 1990s. The “pure people” is the equivalent of the common Fleming, who is honest, works hard and pays taxes but is politically quiescent. These people, the VB alleges, have been betrayed by a corrupt political class, which is willing to sell the Flemish cause due to self-interest. This corrupt mechanism is reinforced by the media, which is dependent upon subsidies (and is hence biased). Like other populist parties, the VB favours *direct democracy* to remove power from the establishment and give it back to the people.

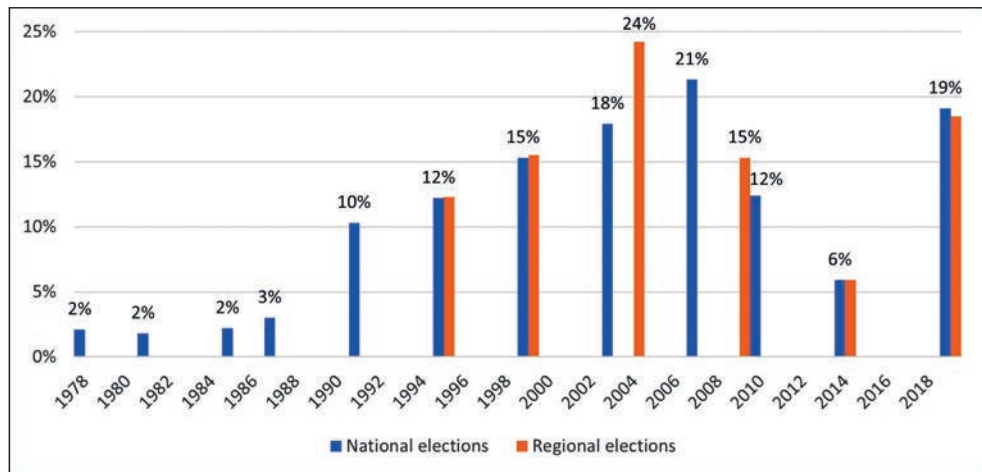
Consistent with its nationalist–populist ideology, the VB thinks the individual cannot be separated from tradition and can only develop within his ethnic community. The traditional family, consisting of a heterosexual couple whose duty is to contribute to the continuity of the Flemish people, is considered the smallest unit of a harmonious, organic society. The party favours the promotion of traditional values to combat what it sees as an ongoing process of moral decay. In line with traditional ethics, it is argued that human life is only possible in a well-ordered community focusing on law and order (*authoritarianism*).



The development of the party over time

Figure 1 shows the electoral results of the VB in national and regional elections from 1978 until 2019. It reveals that the party has gone through roughly four phases: (1) party development at the margin of the Belgian party system (1978–1990); (2) electoral breakthrough (1991–2004); (3) new competitors causing electoral decline (2005–2014); and (4) renewal and electoral comeback (2015–present).

Figure 1: Electoral results for the Vlaams Belang in regional (Flemish) and national (Belgian) elections, 1978-2019



Source: Pauwels, 2014; Vlaams Parlement, 2019; Note: Figures represent the share of the vote the VB achieved in Flanders at each election (national and regional)

Phase I: Early developments at the margin of the party system (1978–1990)

The Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) emerged in 1978 following rising dissatisfaction with the Flemish nationalist Volksunie (VU). In the second half of the 1970s, the VU's perceived overly moderate and left-leaning stances drew increasing criticism from the Flemish movement. This frustration peaked when the VU signed the so-called Egmont Pact, which envisioned a reform of the Belgian state leading to autonomy for the regions while also granting the French-speaking population in the periphery of Brussels some privileges. As a result, one VU member, Lode Claes, quit the party and established the Vlaamse Volkspartij (VVP). At the same time, Karel Dillen founded the Vlaams-Nationale Partij (VNP). The two parties decided to participate in the federal elections of 1978 under the name Vlaams Blok (VB). Against expectations, Dillen, and not Claes, was elected. The latter decided to leave politics, and Dillen absorbed the nationalist wing of the VVP. In May 1979, the VNP was dissolved, and the VB was officially established. The VB remained a small fringe party dominated by Dillen in its early years. Its programmatic focus was almost entirely directed against the Egmont Pact while striving for an independent Flemish state.

Phase II: Cordon sanitaire, breakthrough and electoral peak (1991–2004)

At the end of the 1980s, Dillen started a project to “rejuvenate” the party, promoting several young VB members within the party. As a result, a youth organization called Vlaams Blok Jongeren (VBJ) was established by, among others, Dewinter and Frank Vanhecke. However, these changes provoked internal tensions as a group of committed VB members accused the VBJ group of sidelining the Flemish cause in favour of the anti-immigrant issue in 1988. Dillen supported the VBJ, leading to the exit of the dissatisfied VB members and strengthening Dewinter’s position (Mudde, 2000). As a result, the VB gradually started to evolve into a modern populist Radical Right party.

The ideological and organizational changes started to pay off at the end of the 1980s. At local elections in 1987, the VB showed its electoral potential by gaining 17.7% of the vote in the city of Antwerp. The party’s national breakthrough came in 1991 when it secured 10.3% of the Flemish vote in the general election (corresponding to 6.6% of the national vote) (see Figure 1). “Black Sunday”, as the election came to be known, alarmed all the other Belgian parties, who agreed to construct a *cordon sanitaire* around the VB by pledging not to cooperate with it under any circumstances and on any political level. In 1996, Vanhecke — widely considered a consensus figure between the Flemish nationalist wing (symbolized by Gerolf Annemans) and the anti-immigrant wing (represented by Dewinter) — replaced Dillen as VB leader.

In 2004, the Court of Appeal in Ghent condemned several VB organizations for violating Belgium’s Anti-Racism Law, passed in 1981. Consequently, the party changed its name from Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang. The party also moderated its discourse somewhat, indicated by Dewinter’s admission that his infamous seventy-point plan was no longer realistic. Still, the changes were acknowledged as more about tone than substance. At the 2004 party conference, Vanhecke confirmed that the VB changed its name but not its identity. Still, the court’s ruling significantly increased the party’s visibility in the media and enabled the VB to present itself as the “victim” of the established parties. A few months after the 2004 conference, the VB polled its best result ever, taking 24% of the vote at regional and European elections in June (Pauwels, 2014).



Phase III: new competitors causing electoral decline (2005–2014)

The party faced its first electoral setbacks in the elections of 2007 and 2009. This setback cannot be explained by demand-side theories such as shifting public opinion on immigration or political trust, which remained static. Instead, the VB's declining fortunes reflected a shrinking ideological niche for the populist Radical Right (Pauwels, 2011). On the one hand, the party faced competition from the newly established Lijst Dedecker (LDD), a neoliberal populist party that campaigned on a platform of defending hard-working people against corrupt elites and big government. On the other hand, a new party, the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (Flemish Nationalist Alliance or N-VA), gained momentum. The party was formed in 2001 as the successor of the VU, which had split because of internal tensions.

After the VU's implosion, the N-VA had a hard time proving its relevance to Belgian voters. Therefore, the party chose an electoral alliance with the Christian Democratic and Flemish party (Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams, CD&V) in 2004. Following the 2007 elections, the CD&V–N-VA alliance promised meaningful state reform but failed to achieve much due to the formidable resistance of most francophone parties. Consequently, the N-VA left the coalition, claiming the Christian Democrats were insufficiently bold in defending Flemish autonomy. As a result, in 2009, the N-VA reprised its traditional role as the anti-establishment party in Belgium. Due to a broadening of its ideological profile and the emergence of Bart De Wever, a wildly popular party member, the N-VA was able to revive its Flemish nationalist credentials among voters at the expense of the VB.

A post-electoral analysis in 2009 showed that the LDD and the N-VA had siphoned off 8 and 15% of VB voters, respectively (Pauwels, 2011: 72). Plagued by internal tensions, the LDD disintegrated rapidly. In contrast, as of 2010, the N-VA had become the largest Flemish party and continued to be successful afterwards. Post-electoral research suggested that at the national elections of 2010, the N-VA picked up 32% of those who had voted for the VB in 2007 (Swyngedouw et al., 2012: 13). At the elections of May 2014, the VB achieved its worst result since 1987. Five months later, the 28-year-old Tom Van Grieken, was elected as party president.

Phase IV: renewal and electoral comeback (2015-current)

After 2015, the VB sought to pursue two opposing strategies. The first was party *mainstreaming*, as advocated by the new party leadership; the second was *radicalization* pushed by a faction led by Dewinter (Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016). The mainstreaming strategy aims to polish the sharp edges of the party programme

in an attempt to get closer to power and overcome the *cordon sanitaire*. On the other hand, Dewinter's strategy to restore the VB's electoral relevance differs as he believes breaking the *cordon* is unrealistic. Instead, for Dewinter, the VB should acquire policy influence by putting pressure on the mainstream parties (the so-called "whip party" doctrine). A good illustration of the tensions inherent in this dual strategy occurred in 2016 when Dewinter and Anke Vandermeersch held a speech for the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn after which party president Van Grieken openly criticized and sanctioned them (Pauwels and van Haute, 2017).

Despite internal tensions, the VB performed well in the 2019 elections. And according to an opinion poll conducted in November 2022, the VB could secure 26% of the votes making it potentially the largest Flemish party (Knack, 2022). While it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about why the VB gained momentum, two elements might play a role. First, the issues of immigration and terrorism have become more salient. The ongoing refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks in Brussels in 2016 sparked extensive debate on immigration and multiculturalism. Eurobarometer data from 2019 suggest these issues are salient all over Europe; indeed, immigration is the most important concern at the EU level, as mentioned by more than a third of Europeans (European Union, 2019). Second, the N-VA has been part of the governing coalition at the regional (Flemish) level for almost two decades while the VB remained in permanent opposition. It is possible that voters who hold more (radical) right-wing ideas think the N-VA has become too moderate and consensus-seeking and have thus given thought to again voting for the VB.

Ties between the VB and the Putin regime and the impact of the war in Ukraine

Foreign policy has not been a salient part of the VB's ideology. For instance, the party manifestos of 2007 and 2019 devoted just 3.5% and 6.3% of space to the issue, respectively. However, within the foreign policy debate, the EU has become an issue of growing importance. On the one hand, the EU has been recognized as a virtue, creating welfare and peace while providing an opportunity for a "Flemish nation" within a confederal "Europe of fatherlands". At the same time, the VB has a Eurosceptic side that denounces the current European "superstate" for undermining national sovereignty, particularly concerning immigration policy. The bureaucratic nature of the EU and financial transfers within Europe are other targets of party criticism (Abts et al., 2015).



Regarding defence policy, the VB's position could be summarized as "pragmatic" and "neutral", in order to guarantee national security. This pragmatism is illustrated by its stance concerning NATO. Given the lack of a European alternative, the VB supports Belgium's NATO membership at a time of increasing security threats. At the same time, the party is sceptical towards NATO because it makes Europe overly dependent on the United States. The VB, therefore, calls for more military investments and cooperation with Belgium's European allies to create a credible alternative to NATO and gain leverage in the international community. The recent invasion of Ukraine is explicitly mentioned as an illustration of the powerlessness of Europe in this respect (De Wachter, 2022).

While Russia has hardly been an issue in the VB's official party literature, some VB members such as Frank Creyelman, Jan Penris, and Dewinter have been increasingly vocal in their support for the Putin regime, at least before the war in Ukraine. These more radical thinkers inside the party see Russia as an ally against globalization and Islam. For example, Dewinter has applauded Putin for promoting national sovereignty while defending Russia's identity and conservative Christian values. He furthermore stated that "the only good thing about the Iron Curtain is that it has saved Eastern Europe from political correctness, multiculturalism and 'wokeness'", while embracing the dream of an "independent Europe from Vladivostok to the North Sea, separate from America, China and certainly the Arab world" (Verbergt, 2022).

In 2014, three VB members (Creyelmans, Penris and Christian Verougstraete) travelled to Crimea as "observers" of the referendum on Russia's annexation of the region. It should be added that the party president at that time (Annemans) distanced himself from this action and stated that the VB "has no business in Ukraine" (Van Thillo, 2014). For his part, Dewinter has had meetings with, among others, Russia's deputy prime minister and the president of the Russian parliament. He has also appeared several times in Russian media. Nevertheless, whether there are financial links between the VB and Russia has never been substantiated. However, this question has become increasingly relevant, as shown by the liberal Flemish Open VLD party's recent call for an investigation into potential foreign influence and undermining of democracy. In doing so, the liberals focus, among other things, on the foreign financing of political parties and individual politicians (De Boeck, 2022).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the VB was forced to shift its position on Putin's regime. Tom Van Grieken has claimed that the party initially considered Russia an ally against multiculturalism but admitted he was seriously mistaken about Putin. Even Dewinter strongly condemned Putin as a dictator who had "totally lost it". Political opponents have used Russia's invasion to attack the VB. In April 2022, Russian consul general Georgy Kuznetsov was reportedly asked to leave Belgium on suspicion of espionage. Dewinter has been publicly seen with Kuznetsov several times and even invited him to the Flemish parliament. When it became known that Kuznetsov was potentially involved in espionage, the socialist party Vooruit (Forward) called on Dewinter to resign as first vice president of the Flemish parliament (which did not happen).

Since February 2022, the VB has distanced itself from Putin, noting that Russia's invasion is a flagrant violation of international law. At the same time, the party remains sceptical about the harsh and "poorly thought out" sanctions against Russia. This scepticism toward sanctions is informed, for the most part, by pragmatic economic arguments. There is the fear that "the Russian bear" might "claw back" in response to the sanctions with severely adverse consequences for already "exploding energy costs" (De Wachter, 2022). This might be surprising given the relatively high support for the current actions taken to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Belgium as well as in most other European countries (European Union, 2022). In November 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism. While this resolution was adopted by an overwhelming majority of MEPs, the three from the VB chose to abstain.



Conclusion

Despite its ups and downs, the VB has been consistently successful in Belgian politics for over four decades. Foreign policy has not been a significant concern for the party, and when addressing international issues, it has called for a pragmatic or neutral approach to secure national interests. Yet some prominent VB members have developed ties with the Putin regime over time. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the party leadership and pro-Russian voices inside the party clearly condemned Putin. At the same time, the VB remains sceptical about "poorly thought out" sanctions against Russia because of the potential (economic) backfiring.

As explained earlier, the VB is doing very well in the polls, and it appears the party's "position switch" on Russia has not harmed it in electoral terms. This is probably because the VB has never been focusing on foreign policy much and is also not associated with this issue by the voters. Instead, the VB remains the issue owner on topics like immigration, which remains a highly visible and contested subject. Combined with a very long governing period at the regional level of its rival N-VA, it seems that the populist Radical Right remains an attractive electoral alternative in the Flemish part of Belgium.

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