

## **The Vlaams Blok and the heritage of extreme-right flemish-nationalism**

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Paper prepared for presentation at the the seminar *The extreme right in Europe, a many faceted reality*, co-ordinated by Dr. Xavier Casals, July 5-6, 2004 at the Sabadell Universitat.

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### **I. Introduction**

The Vlaams Blok has up until now been analysed in case studies<sup>1</sup> and comparative research primarily as an extreme-right or neo-populist wing party. But the Blok is also a peripheral autonomist party, aiming since the beginning for Flemish independence. Most of its founding fathers had been active militants within the *Volksunie* (VU, People's Union). The party was actually created in 1978 by a split-off of nationalist hardliners that rejected the VU's participation in the 1977 coalition five-party government launching an ambitious devolution project. The party made a rather slow take-off, but since 1988 its scores soared, to the extent that the VB since then never has lost an election. At the 2000 local elections, in Antwerp, Flanders' largest city, more than one out of three (35%) voted Blok. At the latest June 2004 regional elections the Blok became the first party in the Flemish parliament (in terms of seats). This never ending electoral success story increasingly poses the question about the Blok's *Regierungsfähigkeit*. Also opponents start to consider government participation as the only way to lure, soften and weaken the Blok, as no other strategy seemed to have worked.

The success of the VB is due to the politisation of a variety of issues: starting with radical nationalist resistance towards VU-compromising on the Flemish autonomy issue, then focusing on immigration and security, followed by the exploitation of corruption and other scandals, and finally the defense of traditional values.

No doubt the defence of Flemish interests serves as their main source of this extreme-right party's legitimation. Most of the party's programmatic and ideological production focuses on this theme, although voters are mainly motivated by anti-immigration and anti-establishment protest. Hence, depending which aspects of the Vlaams Blok you focus on, it will be more or less fit in the family of peripheral autonomist parties or that of the extreme-right. Hence, in order to understand the genesis and part of the party's ideology as well as its structure of opportunities, one has to understand the complex history of changing centre-periphery relations in Belgium.

Finally, Belgian researchers, especially those that use the case study approach, rarely make the link with Flemish nationalism and the success of the VB. The question

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<sup>1</sup> Most research on the Vlaams Blok is done in the form of case studies, mostly conducted by Flemish authors usually situated left of centre. One finds a few binary comparisons, especially with the French Front National, and to a lesser extent with the Lega Nord and the Belgian FN. Systematic comparisons are usually made only by foreign authors (Ignazi, 1992, 2003; Van Donselaar, 1995; Kitchelt, 1995; Mudde, 2000; Schain, Zollberg & Hossay, 2002).

of the VB as repugnant side-product or spill-over of democratic Flemish-nationalism seems to be taboo, as Flemish-nationalism generally still enjoys a high degree of legitimacy in the Flemish media and amongst Flemish political elites.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Historical background of the Flemish nationalist movement

For the theories on the emergence and success of autonomist parties (Hooghe 1992), the Belgian case is particularly interesting. In contrast to most other 'classical' cases or regionalism, the Flemish nationalist movement has managed to reverse the initial centre and periphery positions of regions and ethnic groups.

From its creation in 1830, the Belgian state was ethnically mixed, with a Flemish community in the North and a French-speaking Walloon community in the South. Until the 17th century, Flanders was a prosperous region when it started to decline economically and culturally. By 1830, it practically had no elites that were integrated culturally with the Flemish people and identified with the Flemish community. In fact, the Belgian independence movement resulted from an alliance between different groups of the French-speaking elites: aristocracy, gentry, provincial bourgeoisie and an emergent industrial bourgeoisie in the growing urban centres (Mabille, 1992; Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen, 2000).

The new state was governed by French-speaking elite. As Flanders was a poor, agricultural region, while Wallonia became the first industrialised region of the Continent, the hegemony of the French culture was overwhelming. In spite of Flemish demographic majority (60 per cent), the official language (used in administration, military affairs, politics, the legal system, education and the media) was French. Brussels, chosen as the administrative and political capital, soon also became its financial centre. Through this French hegemony, Brussels -- a former Flemish city situated in Flemish territory -- became slowly a predominantly French-speaking city, and the 'centre' of the new state. Wallonia was associated to this centre through its industrial development and language, while Flanders was in all respects peripheral.

Yet, this centre--periphery definition slowly changed, and by now has been almost entirely reversed, due to socio-economic structural changes and the reaction of the Flemish nationalist movement. Opposition grew against the Francophone nature of the Belgian state and society. First, recognition of Dutch as an official language was demanded and received. Eventually, Dutch became the only official language in Flanders. Hence the Frenchification of the region was halted (with the exception of Brussels).<sup>3</sup> Other measures guaranteeing a fair(-er) representation of Flemings in the

<sup>2</sup> Whether this legitimacy also holds for the Flemish public, is more difficult to answer. At the one hand, at the 2004 regional elections, more than half of the Flemish voted for parties that challenge the Belgian federal system, even more enhanced versions of it. On the other hand, all surveys indicate that regional/linguistic issues are extremely low of the public's agenda of policy priorities, that Flemish feelings of identity are increasingly cohabitating well with Belgian ones, that most Flemish tend to prefer a re-unitarisation of policy competencies, that Flemish citizens do not trust significantly more Flemish than Belgian institutions, etc. (De Winter and Frogner 2001; De Winter, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> In the interbellum, Dutch was recognised as an official language in Belgium, and education in Flanders was now given in Dutch. The 'linguistic laws' of 1963 constitute the final step in this process. The gallicization has even been reversed as the elites in Flanders gradually became Dutch speaking. Yet, Brussels became more and more a Francophone city, a Francophone 'island' in Flanders, gradually

state apparatus were taken. Finally demands for cultural and political 'autonomy' were voiced.

Conversely, Wallonia declined in economic terms after World War II. While the post-war industrialisation of Flanders was based on small and medium sized enterprises and multinationals, Wallonia's economy was based on heavy industry, and slowly started to de-industrialise. The Flemish elites that were slowly integrated into the Belgian state, also tried to direct economic policy towards an even greater expansion of Flanders. This political and economic emancipation of Flanders forced the Walloons to react against eventual political and economic subordination, and, to voice demands for more autonomy in determining socio-economic policy.

By the 1960s the centre--periphery situation had changed strongly. Linguistically, Dutch had acquired equal footing with French. Politically, due to their growing demographic importance and a fairer electoral system, the Flemish voters and their representatives in parliament constituted also a large political majority.<sup>4</sup> Economically, Flanders was in full expansion, while the Walloon economy declined.

### III. Electoral expression of the right-wing Flemish nationalism

The political expression of the right-wing Flemish nationalism, separatism and irredentism is triggered by World War One and the introduction of universal suffrage with proportional representation. In 1919, the *Frontpartij* won five seats in parliament with 2.6 per cent of the national vote. The *Frontpartij* was founded by Flemish soldiers and sympathizers that survived the trench war fare in "Flanders Fields", and contested that their officers were mostly frenchspeaking and could not communicate with their troops. It was also vehemently pacifist. Its programme became more radical independist during the 1920s and 1930s. This caused the more moderate nationalists to leave the party and strive -- with some success -- for the Flemish cause within the traditional parties.

In the 1930s, the main Flemish nationalist party was the VNV (*Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* - Flemish National Union), a radical separatist, explicitly Catholic party, sympathising with national-socialism. At the 1936 general elections, it captured 10 per cent of the Flemish vote, but already at the elections in 1939 suffered a decline. Eventually, the VNV collaborated with the Nazis, who recognised it as the only representative of the Flemish people. The VNV served as recruiting bureau for sending Flemish soldiers to fight under German order at the Eastern front. Even a Flemish SS batallion was formed.<sup>5</sup> This open collaboration of a faction of the Flemish nationalist

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expanding into the Flemish countryside. Therefore this issue remains on the agenda of the Flemish nationalist movement.

<sup>4</sup> In 1890, Flemings represented 50 per cent of the Belgian population, Walloons 42 per cent and Bruxellois 8 per cent. In 1970, the figures were 65 per cent, 33 per cent and 11 per cent respectively (Frogner, Quevit and Steinbock 1982). For some time, this demographic predominance was blocked by the non-adaptation of the allocation of parliamentary seats to constituencies in function of the number of inhabitants.

<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it managed to have the Flemish prisoners of war to return home after a few months, while their francophone comrades rotted away a few more years in German POW camps.

movement with the German occupants would seriously compromise the political re-emergence of Flemish nationalism in the post-war period.

In fact, once Belgium was liberated, a huge repression wave was launched punishing Nazi-collaborators. While only a few hundred were executed, hundreds of thousands of court cases were opened against (Huyse et al., 1993). Many Flemish-nationalist collaborators were imprisoned for several years, lost their civil rights, job, pension, etc. From this experience the myth has grown that the Belgicist establishment had used the epuration of the collaboration as an instrument to eradicate Flemish nationalism *tout court*.

Hence, one of the first claims of the postwar Flemish movement was amnesty for war collaboration.<sup>6</sup> At the 1949 general elections, the *Vlaamse Concentratie* (Flemish Concentration) presented electoral lists but did not obtain any seat. It was predominantly an 'anti-repression' party, without a genuine Flemish nationalist programme. In 1954, the *Christelijke Vlaamse Volksunie* (Christian Flemish People's Union) was founded. While this party carefully chose its leaders from nationalist circles that had not collaborated with the Nazis, at the lower levels it soon became the party of the "blacks". It was also perceived like this by the other parties and actively fought. The VU created a uniformed militia (VMO, *Vlaams Militanten Orde*), that first served as a security service to the first public party meetings of the VU, but later acted as storm troops against the extreme-left in the 1960s and 1970s. Around this right wing faction within the Volksunie, a wide variety of extreme right groups flourished, like *Were Di, Voorpost, Nationalistische Studentenvereniging, Vlaams Nationale Jeugdverbond, Sint-Maartensfonds, Broederband, Hertog Jan van Brabant*, etc. Most of the older generation of leaders of the Vlaams Blok held some position inside the VU. They, as well as the current young garde, were active also in one of these extreme right fringe organisations.<sup>7</sup>

The VU got one MP elected at the 1954 and 1958 elections. In the 1960s, the party -- now called just *Volksunie* -- grew considerably, and reached its peak in 1971, with 11 per cent of the national vote, i.e. 18 per cent of the Flemish vote, its target electorate (see tables 1, 2 and 3). After this rather sudden success, the party stalled, and even declined slightly at the following elections of 1974 and 1977. Its first experience with governmental participation cost the party about one third of its voters in 1978. Part of them defected to the newly created *Vlaams Blok*, which was an electoral alliance of two dissident VU groups, one led by Karel Dillen (VNP, *Vlaams Nationale Partij*), and the other by VU-senator Lode Claes (VVP, *Vlaamse Volkspartij*). The electoral cartel won 1.3% of the national vote, and through the unpredictable effects of the Belgian seat allocation process (De Winter, 2004a), the seat went to the Antwerp constituency and the head of VB's, Dillen, while it could have as easily been allocated Claes' Brussels constituency.

Hence, it is essential to understand that the Blok was born out of the hardliners' resistance towards the compromises the participationists in the Volksunie were willing

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<sup>6</sup> This issue until last decade popped up regularly on the political agenda of Flemish nationalist parties and movements (even in spite of the fact that few directly concerned are still alive). Neither camp has been willing to reconcile: the Flemish nationalists want the Belgian state to admit the excesses of the epuration, while the Belgian state and resistance fighters ("the whites") want the "blacks" first to admit guilt. In the meanwhile, the socio-economic sanctions against collaborators and their family have been mostly erased through informal or low profile practical solutions.

<sup>7</sup> Hence, the early discourses of the Vlaams Blok often praised prewar right-wing leaders, presented as Flemish "idealists" who went to fight communism, and fell victim to Belgicist postwar repression.

to make in order to pass a major package of federalist reforms (the so-called Egmont pact). At that moment, the Blok cannot be (and was not by others) labelled as an extreme-right wing party, but rather as a conservative separatist party.

Surprisingly the VU managed to recuperate most of its losses in the following elections in 1981, while the Blok stagnated around 2% of the national vote at subsequent elections, until its breakthrough at the local elections in Antwerp in 1988 (where it rose from 5.5% to 17,7%). Since then, the trend is systematically upwards. At the last general elections of 2003, the VB captured 11.6% of the votes for the Chamber, and 18.8% within the Flemish electorate. At the June 13, 2004 elections for the Flemish parliament it reached a new peak with 24,2% of the votes cast. In the Brussels regional parliament, it became the first Flemish party (34.3%, gaining 6 of the 17 seats reserved for the Flemish minority in the 89 seat 2004 Brussels regional assembly).

As the VB does not present lists in the unilingual French-speaking constituencies, its share of the Flemish target electorate represents a more exact image of its electoral performance within its target electorate, i.e. the Flemish people. Measured in this way, at its current peak of success (2004) the VB is supported by nearly one out of four Flemish voters. If we compare the VB regional scores in relative terms, with the strength of the major parties, table 3 shows that since 1999, the VB would have been Flanders electoral leader, if the christian-democrats (CD&V) and democratic independists (NVA) would not have concluded on electoral cartel in 2004. In terms of seats in the Flemish parliament, the VB is already the first party.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thus in theory the VB could have claimed the right to initiate government formation negotiations, but as no other party would have accepted an invitation from the Blok, it declined and left the initiative to the CD&V-NVA cartel leader, Leterme.

**Table 1** Results of Belgian parties in the post-war period for the elections of the House of Representatives (in percentages of national vote)

<i>Year</i>	CVP	PSC	BSP	PSB	PVV	PRL	FDf/RW	PCB	VU	AGALEV	ECOLO	VB	UDRT	FN	ROSSEM	OTHER
1946		42.5		31.6		8.9	---	12.3	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	4.3
1949		43.6		29.8		15.3	---	7.5	2.1	---	---	---	---	---	---	1.9
1950		47.7		34.5		11.2	---	4.8	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	1.8
1954		41.1		37.3		12.1	---	3.6	2.2	---	---	---	---	---	---	3.5
1958		46.5		35.8		11	---	1.9	2	---	---	---	---	---	---	2.8
1961		41.5		36.7		12.3	---	3.1	3.5	---	---	---	---	---	---	2.9
1965		34.5		28.3		21.6	2.2	4.6	6.7	---	---	---	---	---	---	2.1
1968	22.3	9.4		28		20.9	5.9	3.3	9.8	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.1
1971	21.9	8.2		27.2	9.5	7.2	11.4	3	11.1	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.7
1974	23.3	9.1		26.7	10.4	6	10.9	3.2	10.2	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.2
1977	26.2	9.8		27	8.5	7.8	7.1	2.1	10	---	---	---	---	---	---	2.3
1978	26.1	10.1	12.4	13	10.4	6	7.3	3.3	7	---	---	1.4	0.9	---	---	3
1981	19.3	7.1	12.4	12.7	12.9	8.6	4.2	2.3	9.8	2.3	2.2	1.1	2.7	---	---	2.4
1985	21.3	8	14.6	13.8	10.7	10.2	1.2	1.2	7.9	3.7	2.5	1.4	1.2	---	---	2.3
1987	19.5	8	14.9	15.7	11.5	9.4	1.2	0.8	8	4.5	2.6	1.9	0.1	---	---	0.9
1991	16.8	7.7	12	13.5	12	8.1	1.1	0.1	5.9	4.9	5.1	6.6	---	1	3.2	2
1995	17.2	7.7	12.6	11.9	13.1		10.3*		4.7	4.4	4	7.8	---	2.3	---	3.4
1999	14,1	5,9	9,5	10,2	14,3		10,1		7	7	7,4	9,9	---	1,5		
2003	13.3	5.5	14.9**	13.0	15.4		11.4		3.1	2.5	3.1	11.6	---	2.0		

Note: \* since the 1995 elections, the FDF has joined the PRL in a federation.

\*\*In 2003 the Flemish socialists SP.A formed an electoral cartel with Spirit, one of the two successor parties of the Volksunie, the other one running alone as Nieuwe Vlaamse Alliantie

Source: Dumont & De Winter (1999) updated by author

Table 2 Distribution of seats in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives: 1946—2003 period by party

<u>Year</u>	<u>CVP</u>	<u>PSC</u>	<u>PSB</u>	<u>BSP</u>	<u>PVV</u>	<u>PRL</u>	<u>PCB</u>	<u>VU</u>	<u>RW</u>	<u>FDF</u>	<u>AGA</u>	<u>ECO</u>	<u>VB</u>	<u>OTHER</u>
1946	92		69		17		23							1
1949	105		66		29		12							
1950	108		77		20		7							
1954	95		86		25		4	1						1
1958	104		84		21		2	1						
1961	96		84		20		5	5						2
1965	77		64		48		6	12	2	3				
1968	50	19	59		47		5	20	5	7				
1971	47	20	61		20	14	5	21	14	10				
1974	50	22	59		21	12	4	22	13	9				
1977	56	24	62		17	16	2	20	5	10				
1978	57	25	32	26	22	15	4	14	4	11			1	1
1981	43	18	34	26	28	24	2	20	2	6	2	2	1	3
1985	49	20	35	32	22	24	0	16	0	3	4	5	1	1
1987	43	18	40	32	25	23		16		3	6	3	2	0
1991	39	18	35	28	26	20		10		3	7	10	12	4
1995	29	12	21	20	21	18*		5		*	5	6	11	2
1999	22	10	19	14	23	18*		8		*	9	11	15	0
2003	21	8	25	23	25	24		1**		*	0	4	18	0

Note:

\* since the 1995 elections, the FDF has joined the PRL in a federation.

\*\*The Volksunie split in 2000, and part (Spirit) made an electoral cartel with the Flemish Socialists, the other continued to run as an independent party

Source: Dumont & De Winter (1999), updated by author

**Table 3** Regional results of Flemish parties in the 1958—2003 period for the elections to the federal Chamber of Representatives (in percentages of regional vote)<sup>a</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>CVP-CD&amp;C</u>	<u>SP-A</u>	<u>PVV/VLD</u>	<u>VU/NV-A</u>	<u>AGALEV</u>	<u>VB</u>	<u>Other<sup>b</sup></u>
1958	56.6	29.1	10.7	3.4	---	---	
1961	51.0	29.7	11.6	6.0	---	---	
1965	44.3	25.2	16.5	12.0	---	---	
1968	39.0	26.4	16.1	17.0	---	---	
1971	37.8	24.5	16.3	18.8	---	---	
1971	37.9	24.3	16.1	19.4	---	---	
1974	40.1	21.8	17.2	17.4	---	---	
1977	43.9	21.9	14.3	16.8	---	---	
1978	43.7	20.7	17.3	11.7	0.3	2.3	
1981	32.0	20.5	21.3	16.2	3.9	1.8	
1985	34.7	23.7	17.5	12.8	6.1	2.3	
1987	31.4	24.0	18.6	13.0	7.3	3.1	
1991	26.7	19.0	19.2	9.4	8.5	10.4	5.1
1995	28.7	21.0	22.0	7.8	7.4	13.1	---
1999	22.7	15.4	23.0	8.9*	11.2	15.9	
2003	21.3	24.0	24.7	4.9	4.0	18.8	

\* In electoral alliance with ID21

Source: Van Den Daele (1968), Billiet and Matthijs (1990), and author's calculations.

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Figures before 1971 only include the sixteen Flemish constituencies, and not the large semi-bilingual constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. Since 1971, most major parties present in the latter constituency separate lists. Since then, votes cast in the entire country can be divided accurately between those cast for Flemish lists, and those for Francophone lists, and serve to calculate the regional strength of each party.

<sup>b</sup> 'Other' include only the percentage score of parties that gained at least one seat in the Chamber. This only occurred with the list ROSSEM (three seats in 1991).

The performance of the VB at the level of the Flemish regional elections is similar to its' national electoral performance. Since 1995, the regional assemblies are directly elected, and their election date coincided with the general elections of 1995 and 1999. One could expect that the party that fought most for autonomous Flemish institutions would perform better at that level, that split ticket voting would occur in favour of parties with the most outspoken Flemish profile.<sup>1</sup> But at inspection of electoral performance and voters motivations (De Winter, 2004b) indicates that at the 1995 elections and 1999 elections, there were hardly any differences between the score of the Vlaams Blok in the federal chambers and the Flemish parliament, nor were they substantial differences in voters' motivations for split ticket voters that voted VB at the Flemish elections, and for another party at national elections (or vice versa).<sup>2</sup> To conclude, also for the VB split ticket voting is rarely an expression of "dual voting". It is rather triggered by multiple party preferences and personal voting across party lines.

Given the fact that the regional elections in 2004 for the first time did not coincide with the federal elections, the differences with the general elections of 2003 are more pronounced. In fact, the VB obtained 24.15% of the votes against 18.8% at the general elections of 2003. In 1999 the results federal/Flemish parliament were 15.9% vs. 15.4%, in 1995 13.1% vs. 12.33%).

Regarding the European elections, like most autonomist parties participating in European elections (De Winter, 2000), the VB usually obtained at this level a better result than at the preceding general elections (table 4). This tendency is probably due to the constant increase of the VB support since the 1980s, and thus results at previous elections tend to be automatically worse. However, in comparison with its performance at the regional elections, when held simultaneously with the EP elections (in 1999 and 2004), the VB's results were slightly weaker. This is probably due to the fact that the traditional parties can run candidates with a high European profile and merits (Tindemans, Martens, Dehaene, Van Miert, Declercq, Verhofstadt) while the Blok does not have "great Europeans" in stock.

Table 4: European Elections results of the VB in the Flemish Electoral college

Year	European elections
1979	1,0
1984	2,2
1989	6,8
1994	12,6
1999	15,1
2004	23,2

<sup>1</sup> Split ticket voting refers to the practice of voting for different parties for different types of elections. The concept of dual vote refers to split ticket voting for reasons of perceived differences in attractiveness of parties for different institutional levels (Montero & Font, 1991; Pérez-Nievas & Fraile, 2000). This attractiveness may depend on a variety of reasons: programmatic differentiation, competence of party and candidates, strategic voting, etc. The degree of dual vote or split ticket voting can be inspected at first glance by comparing the percentage of votes different parties obtained at different electoral levels.

<sup>2</sup> For those that voted Vlaams Blok for the Flemish parliament but not for the House (n=38), only 12.4% referred specifically to Flemish/francophones relationships, 40.5% to the migration issue, (3.3% to the VB's programme in more general terms), and only 9.1% refers to candidate characteristics (5.3% as a protest against other parties). Only one of these 38 voters motivated their vote for another party than the VB in the House for communitarian reasons (and voted VU).

The VB has also made a massive leap forward in local elections, starting from only 0.7% (in the communes in which it presented list in 1984) to the current 13,4% in 2000 (on a total of 181 communes, or about 60% of all Flemish communes) (Ackaert 1995; Table 5). This indicates that the local implantation of the VB has progressed steadily. Before, the VB presented much less candidate lists than the traditional parties. In some communes it did not manage to put up a local apparatus sufficiently strong to attract candidates and run a campaign. The progress at the local elections corresponds to its geographical expansion: the Blok started as an Antwerp slum phenomenon, then spread to the surrounding provincial cities in the Antwerp province, than to the main other provincial capitals, and from these urbans centres into suburbia and even remote villages. In the rich communes around Antwerp, the VB pulls more than 10%, while due to high housing prices hardly any poor foreigners reside there. In the main Flemish city, Antwerp, the Vlaams Blok grew from 5.5% in 1982, to 17.7% in 1988, 28,5% in 1994 and 33% in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

Table 5: Local elections in Flanders 1976-2000 (Communes in with parties presented identifiable lists)

	<b>1976</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>N in 2000</b>
<b>VU-ID</b>	14,7	14,4	11,6	9,1	8,8	128
<b>AGALEV</b>		6,2	6,9	8,2	8,4	191
<b>VL BLOK</b>		0,7	2,5	6,6	13,4	181
<b>SP</b>	21,3	21,8	21,1	19,6	18,5	220
<b>VLD</b>	16,4	16,2	17,7	20,3	24,3	250
<b>CVP</b>	42,8	37,5	37	36,4	30,6	279
<b>LOKAAL/KARTEL</b>	20,5	18,6	17,4	21	17,1	197

Source: data of J. Ackaert

To conclude, since 1981, the Vlaams Blok never lost an election! At every election, it increased its score vis-à-vis the preceding elections, independent at what level those were held. This certainly makes the Vlaams Blok the electoral best performing right-extremist party in Western Europe.

## IV. Electorates' features

Post-electoral surveys of the 1990s (ISPO 1991, 1995 & 1999) indicate that in terms of structural background variables, the VB electorate tends to be overrepresented in the youngest (less than 35 years) and oldest (55+) age categories (Billiet, Swyngedouw, Depickere, Meersseman, 2001; Van Craen & Swyngedouw, 2002). It is overrepresented amongst the voters with the lowest degree of educational attainment, skilled and unskilled workers,<sup>4</sup> non-believers, and men. VB voters tend to have less social capital in terms of associational membership and participation.

In terms of attitudes, the VB electorate is significantly different in terms of ethnocentrism and feeling menaced, interpersonal distrust, social disorientation, individualism, authoritarianism, repressive attitudes towards criminals, lack of environmental

<sup>3</sup> In terms of constituency, it scores best in Antwerp (24.7%) and the worst in Ostend-Veurne-Ieper-Diksmuide, the coastal area (also physically the most distant from the Antwerp hard core).

<sup>4</sup> The VB is by now the first "workers' party" in terms of the proportional weight of this category in each party electorate!

awareness, materialism, and to a lesser extent political alienation. On all these attitudes the Blok voters have the highest scores. They come as second highest for support for traditional gender roles (after the Christian-democrats) and Flemish autonomy (after the VU). They have moderate attitudes regarding ethical conservatism. And, after the socialists, they are the least conservative on socio-economic issues! In terms of left-right self-placement however, the 1999 ISPO survey indicates that the average VB voter generally places him/herself centre-right, and more to the right than any other party.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to self-declared vote motivations, the 1995 exit poll indicates that about a third of VB electorate declared to vote for the party for reasons of immigration and illegal asylum seekers, in 1999 only 27%, a motivation almost absent in the case of all other Flemish parties (Billiet, Swyngedouw and Carton 1992; Swyngedouw, Meerseman, Billiet, 2001). Only the VB manages to attract voters with politicising issues of criminality, police, law and order, and does increasingly so. Blockers rarely vote in function of candidate characteristics, they vote for the party and hardly know its candidates. The Blok manages to convince a considerable number of voters that are looking for political renewal and democratic reform, and that harbour anti-political feelings or feel disempowered. In terms of relative weight, the self-declared voting motivations are (in decreasing order of importance): migrants and illegal asylumseekers (27%), protest and anti-politics (17%), criminality (11%), self-interest (“*eigen volk eerst*”), and Flemish-nationalism and communautarian conflicts (8%).

Generally, attitudinal factors explain the Blok vote better than socio-demographic background characteristics. In terms of attitudinal factors, the VB is the perfect mirror image of the Greens, and thus a good illustration of the silent counter revolution thesis (Ignazi, 1992, 2003). Finally, the Vlaams Blok has the most loyal electorate in Flanders, in terms of proportion (around 80%) of voters that voted for the same party in two consecutive elections (Swyngedouw, Billiet & Goeminne, 2004).

## V. Ideology

We will present the main dimensions of the VB ideology in chronological order of appearance, as the party gradually integrated more and more issues and cleavages to its ideological corpus and political communication.

### A. Flemish-nationalism

The core message of the VB is Flemish independence. Even when other issues have been added and even became predominant in certain campaigns and publications, always the link between these new themes and the core business of Flemish independence is made.<sup>6</sup> An independent Flanders territorially comprises the Flemish region, as well as Brussels and some communes in Wallonia along the 1963 language border that have been allocated to the francophone part.

For a long time, and in tune with the prewar tradition (the concept of *Groot-Dietsland*), the party explicitly promoted the idea that such a new Flemish state should seek

<sup>5</sup> Note however that the standard deviation is the largest of all electorates. The VB national MPs however put themselves on average on a 1 to 10 left-right scale at 9.5 (European parliamentary survey, 1996)!

<sup>6</sup> Also in numerical terms (number of publications and pages within publications devoted to it), Flemish independence is the main theme (Spruyt, 1995).

integration with the Netherlands, in order to create a dutchspeaking federation. However, since the early 1990s, the party has downplayed this theme (Spruyt, 1995, 2000), given the evolution of Dutch society to a permissive, multicultural and social-democratic state.<sup>7</sup>

In line with traditional Flemish-nationalism, the nationalism of the VB is based on culture and language, thus on an ethnically defined identity (“*volksnationalisme*”).

### **B. Immigration**

The party’s electoral success only took off (after weak results in the general elections of 1978, 1981 and 1985) when the younger generation shifted the emphasis from Flemish-nationalism to the immigration issue. As the Blok’s nationalism is based on culture and language, immigrants are considered to be a threat to the Flemish ethnic community (*Vlaamse Volk*). The main positions of the VB regarding immigration are included in its “70-points” programme (1992), pleading for the radical application of the principle of “*Eigen volk eerst*” (Our own people first) in all policy sectors. This plan, heavily inspired by Le Pen’s programme, included typical measures like stopping all immigration, the forced return of most categories of migrants, the legal discrimination of residing migrants on the labour, housing and educational market, etc.

At the same time, the immigration issue was directly linked with the growing concerns about criminality and security, blaming Marocans and Turks (and more recently East-Europeans) for street criminality, petty theft, prostitution, drugs trade, carjacking etc. Solutions are sought in law-and-order “zero tolerance” approach, not in preventive measures.

The Blok’s migration programme has been considered by its opponents as the clearest proof of the racist nature of the VB, thus making it *infréquentable* and uncoalitionable. It also made it a potential subject to condemnation under the new antiracism and antirevisionism laws. Hence, more recently, the party has softened their (written) anti-migrant positions, and pretend that the 70-points programme has become irrelevant.

### **C. Denominational divide and traditional values**

A third expansion of the ideology of the VB focused on traditional Catholic values. With the growing secularisation, Flemish christian-democracy gradually became more permissive in terms of family values. When at the end of the 1980s, the CVP was not able (and willing?) anymore to block the liberalisation of abortion, the VB started to present itself more and more as a party of “traditional values”, including the “right to life”, the rejection of homosexuality, promoting financial compensation for a parent (read mother) for staying at home childcaring, more authoritarian schools, zero-tolerance to soft drugs, etc.

### **D. Anti-establishment political protest**

A fourth expansion of the ideology of the VB was populism, focusing on the fight against the “establishment” and the excesses of the Belgian partitocracy, such as clientelism, patronage, political corruption, scandals, etc. (De Winter, 1996). Belgium in the 1990s was certainly a fertile ground to plant this seed, with its corruption, food and paedophile scandals (De Winter, 2002). The usual suspects are the three traditional political families, and especially the francophone parties.<sup>8</sup> Hence, in 1995, the party’s main slogan was *Grote Kuis* (Spring Cleaning), presenting a big brush to sweep the corrupt political elite out of office. But apart from some lipservice to the principle of referendum, very few serious constructive proposals for democratic reform were formulated.

<sup>7</sup> Until this image was recently shattered by the success of Pim Fortuyn.

<sup>8</sup> Like for most other Flemish parties, the predominant Walloon Parti Socialiste is the culprit par excellence.

### ***E. Socio-economic left-right cleavage***

Regarding the left-right cleavage, the VB displays a rather low and mixed profile. On the one hand it defends liberal measures, like privatisation, reduction of taxes for small and medium enterprises, etc. On the other hand, it does plead for a socially corrected free market economy, and even protectionism if this serves the interests of the Flemish people. It does defend the merits of the welfare state, at least if these are allocated to autochtones.

The party rapidly became aware that its main support is amongst blue collar workers. Hence it started to present itself as THE party of the workers, and to combat the socialist workers movement by infiltration its trade union and organising May 1<sup>st</sup> manifestations, including workers parades. The existing trade unions are considered as part of the political establishment. More generally, one finds references to old corporatist, or solidaristic notions of relations between labour and capital (Spruyt, 2000).

### ***F. European integration***

The Vlaams Blok is the only real outlier vis-à-vis the traditional and solid pro-integrationist consensus amongst Belgian parties (Beyers & Kerremans, 2001). Not only because it rejects the maintenance of the Belgian state within a federal Europe, but of the idea of a federal Europe itself (Spruyt, 1995, 2000). It sees Flanders (including Brussels) and Wallonia as two separate EU member states, but defends a Europe of a confederal nature based on sovereign culturally homogenous nation-states.

It rejects the ideas of a social Europe, of European redistributive policies, and EU competencies in the field of culture and education. It pleads for the reduction of role of the Commission and Parliament, and empowerment of the Council. It favours enlargement to a limited number of genuine European countries, the dilution of current supranational policies, the restriction of EU-citizenship, protectionism against social dumping and de-localisation, and therefore also opposes the euro. On the other hand, it is in favour of a common security and foreign policy.

Although at the level of the electorate the permissive consensus is less wide spread and gradually declining (De Winter & Tursan, 2001), it comes as a surprise that the Blok – contrary to its allies abroad -- has never really exploited the reservoir of euroscepticism in Flemish public opinion. Nor has it exploited efficiently the opportunities for forming a European party family offered by the European parliamentary arena. Bilateral contacts with other extreme-right parties are explored and developed through the party's youth organisation (*Vlaams Blok Jongeren*) (Solimando, 2004).

## **VI. Party organisation**

The scientific study of the VB as party organisation only started twenty years after its foundation (Biondi, 1997) and apart from the work of Buelens and Deschouwer (2002), this crucial aspect of the party's success (Coffé, 2004) largely remains an underexplored field of study.

### ***A. Organisational model***

Most of the founding fathers of the VB had been active militants within the Volksunie, as well as extreme-right fringe and/or Flemish-nationalist organisations (Moyaert, 1986).

Hence, when founding their party, they could fall back on a large reservoir of organisational skills and resources. It comes as no surprise that several of the organisational arrangements of the VB are similar to those of the VU, that in several aspects differed from the typical mass party model adopted by the Belgian traditional parties. However, also in many other organisational aspects the VB is a unique party.

## ***B. Party horizontal and vertical structure***

The basic organisational model of the VB has not changed since 1983,<sup>9</sup> but it gradually did become more formalised, finetuned and sophisticated (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002). At first glance, the organigram of the VB does not differ dramatically from the model adopted by the main Flemish parties. One finds at the “national” (read Flemish) level a national congress, a national council, a national executive and a national party leader. However, the composition and power of these bodies is very particular.

Regarding the party leader, founding father Karel Dillen<sup>10</sup> was nominated for life, and when he decided to step down in 1996, he had the statutory right to personally pick his successor, Frank Vanhecke. The party president chairs the Party Executive and is the party’s main spokesman. In case of lack of consensus in the Executive, his opinion is decisive!

As in most parties, the Party Executive is the central day-to-day decision making body (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002). The executive is appointed (not elected!) by the Party Council (Deschouwer, 2001). Formally, it includes 14 persons formally fulfilling different functions (party president and vice-president, honorary president Dillen, the general secretary, the editor of the party’s periodical, the treasurer, the head of the research centre, the person in charge of propaganda, the leaders of the parliamentary groups, a representative of the Blok’s public office holders organisation and of the youth organisation, etc.). In practice one finds since nearly 20 years the same exclusive club of a small dozen of people that founded the party and assured its breakthrough in the 1980s.

As in the Volksunie,<sup>11</sup> the Party Council is the supreme party decision making body and takes the fundamental decisions. It is composed in a particular way. Apart from the statutory membership of all members of the Executive, all Senators, Representatives and group leaders in the provincial councils, the Party Council is composed of constituency chairmen upon proposal of the party executive. It counts about 80 members. Hence, the Party Executive selects the members of the Council, that is supposed to nominate the members of the Executive. The Executive has all residual powers over the Party Council. Hence, in practice, the Party Executive is clearly predominant in the internal decision making, as it brings together all the heads of the different specialised party functional organs.

The Party Congress, in which all members can participate, only serves as a rally opportunity, and is usually organised in order to promote the party’s programme on a new hot issue. Hence, contrary to other parties, ordinary members and lower party echelons have no opportunity in the party’s decision making process regarding the party’s programme, the composition of leading bodies, candidate selection, and the election of the leader (Jagers, 2002).

At the subnational level, we find the constituency and comunal party organisations. The VB has a secretariate in each of the 13 constituencies, and claims to have a party section

<sup>9</sup> The party has announced that at the end of 2004, its party wants to radically review its party statutes, introducing more internal democracy.

<sup>10</sup> Note that many of Dillen’s children and in-laws have gotten mid-level positions in the party (including elected offices), but not at the top (party executive).

<sup>11</sup> In all other parties, the Party Conference is sovereign.

in nearly two out of three Flemish and Brussels communes (198/327). The local sections are amongst others responsible for post the party three-monthly newsletter in all mailboxes in the commune.

To conclude, in terms of the horizontal and vertical dispersion of power within the party, the VB is certainly the most centralised party in Flanders, ran by a stable oligarchy of a dozen persons, in which midlevel elites, activists, and rank-and-file members have very little to say. In its internal documents, the party denounces “democratism” and considers democracy as a way of organising a political system, not a political party.<sup>12</sup>

There is also a strong centralisation of political communication to the outside world. All publications produced by lower levels have to get approval of central headquarters. In fact, one of the reasons the authoritarian structure is to prevent lower level radicals to voice extreme opinions that would jeopardise the party’s attempts to appear less extremist.<sup>13</sup>

### **C. Factionalism**

Contrary to many other extreme right and ethnoregionalist parties, factionalism hardly exists within the VB, or, at least, it is very well contained. One should rather speak of groups (and specific spokespersons) that stress more than others specific sectors of the party’s ideology. Hence, there are the “pure” flemish-nationalists anti-participationists (Dillen), the anti-migrants (Dewinter), the anti-establishment populists, the catholic conservatives (Colen), the nouvelle droite paganist (Raes, Van Hecke) and the participationists (De Winter, Annemans), etc. Opponents of the VB have tried to exploit divergence between these tendencies, but up until now, with little success.

### **D. Membership**

While party leaders have always stressed the need to solidify its membership basis, the VB always had serious difficulties to recruit new members, and make existing members to renew their membership fee. Currently, the party claims to count 18.000 members.<sup>14</sup> In spite of this respectable and growing number (Table 6 and 7), the VB has after the Greens the lowest degree degree of encadrement of its voters, and the ratio members/voters is still declining. In the traditional parties more than one out of ten voters is party member. The much lower score of the VB (less than 2%) is typical for parties (like the Greens and the VU) that do not can or want recruit members on the basis of selective incentives (clientelism), or only seek active members (militants) rather than “paper” members. The party also complains that some social organisations, like the socialist and christian-democrate trade unions, tend to exclude explicit members and activists of extreme right parties. Finally, as mentioned above, the opportunities for participation in internal decision making are very low.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dewinter (1997) describes the principles of the Blok’s organisation as top-down, based on consensus (in which the president has the final word), and the supremacy of higher party bodies over lower.

<sup>13</sup> Still, the lack of internal democracy seems to be one of the main reasons for activists and midlevel cadres to quit the party.

<sup>14</sup> The same figure is claimend since 2000, in spite of its further electoral growth since then.

<sup>15</sup> The VB also has a continous problem to recruit women. Currently, four out of five members are men. About a quarter of the members are younger than 35 (although the party admits that it lacks date of birth of about half of its members).

Tabel 6: Evolution of the ratio members/voters of the Vlaams Blok

	Party members	Party voters	Ratio members / voters
<b>1991</b>	4069	405247	1,00
<b>1995</b>	8446	475677	1,78
<b>1999</b>	12427	613399	2,03
<b>2003</b>	18000	761407	2,36
<b>(2004)</b>	18000	981.587	1,83

Source: Buelens and Deschouwer (2002)

Table 7: Evolution of the ratio members/voters of Flemish parties in 1999

	CVP	SP	VLD	Vlaams Blok	Agalev	VU
<b>Members</b>	105939	78616	75780	12427	4281	15500
<b>Voters</b>	875455	593372	888861	613399	434449	345576
<b>Ratio members / voters</b>	12,10	13,25	8,53	2,03	0,99	4,49

Source: Res Publica

### ***E. Party finance and campaigning***

The low degree of encadrement does not pose a problem anymore for the party's finances. Since the introduction of public financing of political parties in 1989, the VB has been treated like the other parties and received financial aid basically in proportion to its electoral and parliamentary strength.<sup>16</sup> Hence, like other parties, the VB has sufficient resources to run its party organisation, offer (intellectual) support to its MPs, and run professional campaigns. In terms of direct financial aid, the party heavily invests its public resources in propaganda and electoral campaigns (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002). During election campaigns, the VB is a disproportional big spender. But also in between campaign, the VB spends more on propaganda than all other Flemish parties taken together! For the Blok, an electoral campaign does start the day after the previous election. The aim is that every Flemish home receives four times a year a VB leaflet. In addition, local sections are in charge of distributing focused propaganda, for instance canvassing or posting a leaflet on security in a neighbourhood where just a crime has been committed. But not only in quantitative terms the Blok's political communication is impressive, also in qualitative terms. Antiracist organisations are financially weakened by asking loads of antiracist propaganda that the VB then dumps. There is a sophisticated network for launching a campaign of "letters to the editor" of newspapers. All these activities are coordinated by the Media- and Propaganda Cells. Since the end of the 1980s, the campaigns are designed by professional communicators, who offer their skills for free to the VB.

<sup>16</sup> Since 1989, the VB, receives state subsidies according to the size of its parliamentary group, and since 1993 also according to the number of votes obtained at the last elections. Firm restrictions have been introduced regarding private party funding and campaign expenditures. Hence, since then, the VB receives most of its income from the federal and regional parliaments, in proportion to its electoral and size of its parliamentary group.

Parliamentary parties and MPs also receive personnel resources for assisting them in their parliamentary work. The VB has transferred about half<sup>17</sup> of these “parliamentary collaborators” to its constituency party organisations for support local and constituency party<sup>18</sup> activity and promotion (De Winter & Dumont, 2000), while the others are working for central party headquarters (but few for the party research and training centres). In fact, about all the VB personnel is put on the pay-roll of different parliamentary assemblies. Of these, only a few do genuine parliamentary preparatory work. VB MPs themselves also tend to be quite inactive in parliament (in comparison with other opposition parties), and most of the activities are displayed by one or two MPs. The party’s neglect of the parliamentary arena is probably the result of the combination of the boycott by MPs of other parties, the low intellectual skills of VB MPs, and their low esteem for parliamentary democracy, especially in the shape of the Belgian parliament. Hence, usually only the leader of the parliamentary party plays a visible role in the respective assemblies.

## VII. Relationship with Flemish civil society

Apart from the Flemish cultural organisations affiliated with the three pillars,<sup>19</sup> a large number of huge and non-pillarised organisations operate as militant defenders and guardians of the 'Flemish cause'.<sup>20</sup> The relatively high degree of organisation of the Flemish people into social clubs, social movements, pressure groups and institutions that act as agencies of cultural reproduction of regionalist feelings undoubtedly had a strong impact on the creation of this Flemish identity.

Still, until the beginning of the 1970s, most non-pillarised Flemish nationalist organisations considered the VU as its sole or major representative on the political scene, and felt that the positions defended by the VU closely corresponded to their own. This 'honeymoon period' between the VU and the Flemish Movement came to an end in the mid-1970s, when the Christian-democrat party split, and the Flemish Christian-democrats (CVP) started to take a more radical position on Flemish issues. In the 1977--1978 period, the VU and the Flemish Movement nearly came to an open war, as most Flemish nationalist organisations rejected the *Egmont pact*, the governmental programme supported and actively defended by the VU in office. In the 1980s, the relationship was lukewarm, and undoubtedly the VU had by then lost the monopoly of Movement's political representation.<sup>21</sup> In the 1990s,

<sup>17</sup> Given the current strength of the party in the federal and regional parliaments, it can count on over a hundred parliamentary collaborators.

<sup>18</sup> The targeted allocation of its public resources into predominantly (local) party organisational and propaganda activities certainly helps to explain the territorial expansion of the VB into communes and constituencies far beyond Antwerp and other provincial cities.

<sup>19</sup> The Catholic Davidsfonds (founded in 1875, around 71,000 members and 670 local sections), the Socialist Vermeylenfonds (founded in 1945, 6,000 members), and the Liberal Willemsfonds (founded in 1851, over 6,000 members)(membership figures refer to the beginning of the 1970s and are drawn from Deleu, et al. 1975).

<sup>20</sup> Like the IJzerbedevaartkomitee (pacifist--nationalist pilgrimage organisation founded in 1920, around 35,000 'pilgrims' each year), the Algemeen Nationaal Zangfeest (founded in 1948, organises Flemish songs festival drawing about 15,000 participants yearly), the Vlaamse Toeristenbond - Vlaamse Automobilistenbond (main tourist and automobile organisation founded respectively in 1922 and 1924, 192,813 members in 1974), the Verbond van Vlaamse Oudstrijders (veterans organisation founded in 1917), the Vlaamse Volksbeweging (founded in 1956, pluralist political co-ordinating organisation, around 9,000 members in 1963), the Taal Aktie Komitee (linguistic action group, founded in 1972), and educational organisations like Stichting Lodewijk De Raet and the Dosfelinstituut (Deleu, et al. 1975).

<sup>21</sup> Still, contrary to the Egmont debacle, the VU's entry into the government in 1988 was not challenged by the Flemish movement, as the VU kept in close contact with the leaders of the movement during the formation process that lasted 148 days (Merckx, 2001).

the relationship has become rather unclear, especially because the Flemish Movement itself has lost impact on the political agenda-setting, partially due to the progress made towards a federal state but also due to the current lack of consensus between these organisations.<sup>22</sup> In most Flemish-nationalist organisations, an open conflict has grown between moderates and *Vlaams Blok* supporters. The infiltration by *Vlaams Blok* supporters in several of the more militant movements (like the *Vlaamse Volksbeweging*, the *Nationaal Zangfeest* and the *IJzerbedevaartcomité* has undermined their credibility to the democratic parties, and in the latter case, also of the split of the organisation in a moderate and *Blok*-wing.

## VIII. The dilemma between policy, office and vote seeking

Regarding the common dilemma between the objectives of vote, policy and office seeking (Müller & Strom, 1999), the VB underwent quite an evolution (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002).

In the first decade of their existence, programmatic purity was the only aim, whether electorally beneficial or not. The discussion about ideological purity arose at the end of the 1980s, given the electoral success of the recent expansion of the nationalist programme into the anti-immigration discourses. The solution was found in endorsing the anti-migrant discourses, but embedding it better into the *Blok*'s nationalist mainstream original mission. Office seeking remained taboo.<sup>23</sup>

The *Blok* did start considering participating in power during the running up of the local elections of 1994. But as the other parties maintained the *cordon sanitaire*<sup>24</sup> around the *Blok*, the party moved back to its position of "whip party"<sup>25</sup>, trying to implement its policy from the opposition benches by forcing governing parties to adopt VB policies. In the meanwhile it continued to broaden its electoral basis by embracing new issues.

In the running up of the 1999 general and regional elections and 2000 local elections, the party was once again willing to give up its "eternal" protest and opposition role. It also softened its image and campaign to further boost its electoral success. But once again, the *cordon sanitaire* held, and up until today still does.

Although the *cordon sanitaire* has effectively kept the VB from participation in executive power, many believe that it has contributed to the party's continuous electoral expansion. It pushes the VB into a role of victim, and underlines its status as only real opposition and anti-establishment party. By not allowing the VB to participate in power, it can maintain its clean, uncompromising image. It does not have to carry responsibility for

<sup>22</sup> Also, by now, the 'Flemish political agenda' is predominantly set by the Flemish political parties and their leaders, and in particular by the Flemish executive, rather than by the Flemish nationalist organisations.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, when, due to the constitutional reforms the first autonomous Flemish executive is supposed to be composed in a proportional way (1988), allowing the VB one ministerial seat, the party declines after some hesitation. It said that it would only participate in the new consensual Flemish executive if this were to adopt the VB's main policy proposals, an idle hope...

<sup>24</sup> The *cordon sanitaire* was an agreement signed in 1989 between the presidents of the socialists, liberal, christian-democrat, greens and Volksunie to never conclude political agreements with the *Blok*.

<sup>25</sup> Also here the VB follow the footsteps of the VU. The remarkable policy success of the VU, i.e. the federalisation of Belgium, is due to its role as 'whip party'. The VU managed as a small party, through menacing the electoral power of a large party, i.e. the CVP (in which a substantial faction is sympathetic to the ideas of the whip party), to force the latter to take the VU's policy proposals into account. The realisation of these proposals as accomplished by the CVP, since the VU did not want or was not invited to take up governmental responsibility. In addition, the VU enhanced its power as opposition party by strongly engaging in to extraparliamentary actions, therefore forcing public policy-makers to respond to the demands of 'the street'.

unpopular but necessary measures, can focus its propaganda and communication on issues on which it is easy to score. It does not have to worry about the feasibility of its programmatic proposals, only about their electoral effectiveness.

Defenders of the *cordon sanitaire* do not only use ethical arguments, but also the fact that the maintenance of the cordon turns any vote for the VB into a waste. In addition, the cordon clearly annoys most VB leaders,<sup>26</sup> who by the end of the 1990s were getting more and more eager to govern, starting at the local level. Currently backed with on the average a quarter of the Flemish voters, it becomes very unlikely that the democratic parties will be able (or even willing) to keep enforcing the cordon sanitaire to their local branches, certainly if this principle would mean the loss of local executive office.<sup>27</sup> Within most parties, minorities have since the end of the 1990s voiced opposition against the cordon sanitaire policy of their leadership.

As the current liberal-socialist federal coalition still clings to its plan of direct elections of the mayors, and already more than one out of three Sinjoren (35%) votes for the Blok, Antwerp may be the party's first and biggest victory in 2006. It may even give the Blok the chance to run Flanders' largest city by itself, and thus overcome its dilemma between policy, office and vote seeking.

Regarding policy seeking, as a whip party the Blok has certainly been as effective as the VU regarding the federalisation process. Although no systematic policy studies have been conducted in order to measure the VB indirect policy success, the impression is that the Blok made a serious difference in many policy cases. In terms of policy towards asylum seekers, all parties except the greens have adopted a hardliners' position, sometimes with dramatic consequences.<sup>28</sup> Regarding law and order, many of the recommendations made by the "Dutroux" parliamentary committee of investigation were in line with the VB proposals voice by committee member Annemans. Zero-tolerance has become a policy objective of many mayors, and not only of the right. The struggle for more Flemish autonomy has infected all Flemish parties, even and especially after the major breakthrough to federalism made in 1993. However, this radicalisation of the Flemish political elites should be put more on the account of the VU and the traditional Flemish parties than of the VB (infra).

The Blok has also lost many policy battles. In terms of migration, the governments of the 1990s have tried to enhance integration, amongst others by facilitating the acquisition of the Belgian nationality to second and third generation immigrants and establishing a dialogue between migrant communities and public authorities. In 2004, the Belgian parliament finally voted the suffrage of migrants at the local elections.<sup>29</sup> Regarding traditional values, the party clearly did not make a difference. Abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage were legalised, the judiciary were ordered to give the fight against soft drugs consumption the "lowest priority".

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<sup>26</sup> Apart from Dillen who calls it the VB's best insurance policy for Flemish-nationalist correctness and against compromising.

<sup>27</sup> In many communes, the VB has become a party with "blackmail potential" (Sartori, 1976). For instance, in the city council of Antwerp, all democratic parties have to coalesce in order to keep the VB out of power. These anti-Blok coalition span an ideological range from the extreme-left to the xenophobe wings of the liberals. Also in current Brussels regional government, the exclusion of the VB from the Flemish part of the executive can only be reached by a coalition containing all other Flemish parties. Such "Antwerp" impasses are bound to occur frequently after the 2006 local elections.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. the killing of a refugee during a forced repatriation, that led to the resignation of the socialist minister of Interior.

<sup>29</sup> This measure was already contained in the government agreements of the coalitions of the early 1980s! Whether this measure should be considered as a real defeat is less clear. In terms of policy certainly yes, but in terms of votes, many observers blame the granting of suffrage to migrants (against the opinion of a majority of the Flemish voters) as the main cause for the progress of the Blok at the 2004 regional elections.

In the meanwhile, although the *cordon sanitaire* still holds, the VB has entered the governing bodies hundreds of Flemish public organisations, due to application of Belgian common consociationalism rules. According to the Cultural Pact (1973) and other similar *Proporzdemokratie* arrangements, the VB can nominate one or several representatives in the board of directors of the Flemish public television and radio, in half of the comunal and provincial libraries and school boards, in the advisory councils of public culture and youth centres, sport, tourism, musea, and a large number of (semi-)public enterprises.

It seems that up until now, most of the VB delegates are not very active in these bodies, and are not in number to determine decision making in a constructive way (Peuterman, 2004). This is on the one hand due to the lack of skilled personnel to fill up all these specialised positions, and on the other hand, due to the VB leadership's wish not to get involved and contaminated by Belgian concertation democracy and to thus to become co-accountable for its decisions. But given its increasing electoral success, the Blok delegations are slowly approach a critical size, allowing them to block or delay decision making, and thus exercise power in a destructive way. Especially when absenteeism of representatives of the democratic parties remains high. In any case, the legal entry of the VB into Flemish consociational public sphere has eroded the exclusion and diabolisation impact of the *cordon sanitaire*, and gradually turns the VB into a "normal" party.

In the national and Flemish parliament, proportional arrangements has not only made VB MPs full members of committees, they also chair several ones. As the largest parliamentary group in the newly elected Flemish parliament, it will probably chair five to six committees, and have enough committee members to block or at least delay decision making in each committee

## **IX. Towards an explanation for the success of the VB**

### ***A. Micro level***

Comparative research (Eurobarometer 1997) indicates that the Belgians are amongst the most racist, anti-semitic and xenophobic populations in West-Europe (together with France, Germany and Austria). This xenophobic attitudes seem to have been widespread already in the beginning of the 1980s (Eurobarometer 1971). Second, within Belgium, these attitudes seem to be more common amongst Flemish than amongst Walloons (or Bruxellois).

Longitudinal analysis (Coffé et al. 2002) indicated however that between 1991 and 1999, when the Blok increased its share of the Flemish vote from 10 to 15% of the Flemish population, did not become more intolerant towards migrants (in that period). Hence, while the high degree of xenophobia certainly provides a fertile ground for the take-off of a racist party, its expansion must be explained otherwise, for instance by widening its programmatic scope and attraction. On the other hand, open expression of antimigrant feelings and admitting voting for the VB have clearly lost their taboo character during the 1990s. Even on talk-shows of the public Flemish television, racist jokes are tolerated.<sup>30</sup>

### ***B. Meso level***

The radical right has always been an undercurrent or fringe of the wider Flemish-nationalist movement (and was even predominant in the 1930s and during WWII). Hence,

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<sup>30</sup> For instance on the show "De rechtvaardige rechters". But on the other hand, anti-Bloc attitudes were often voice as well in info-tainment programmes.

once this faction decided to form a specific party and compete with the VU, the founding fathers of the VB could fall back on a widespread set of networks and experienced flemish-nationalist and extreme-right militants. Yet, it seems that the party only became professionalised at the end of the 1980s, while before it was basically run by volunteers and amateurs.

Many observers point to the arrival of charismatic leaders, mentioning De Winter, Van Hecke and Annemans (Swyngedouw, 1988). It is certainly true that, compared with Dillen, they certainly had more charisma, or at least communication skills. Dillen was in terms of communication a BT (before television) dinosaur. Yet he was widely respected for his longlasting principled opposition to the VU gradual shift to governability and compromising (the greasy pole, *vetpotten van Egypte* syndrome). This earned him the necessary respect to finally bring under one roof (i.e. the VB) the wide variety of competing extreme right and independist associations and groupuscules.

Other observers point to the permissive attitude of the Flemish media to the VB. Since the mid-1990s, the VB is increasingly treated as a normal party by public television and radio (but even more private TV), as they entered the governing bodies of these media as the Cultural Pact prescribes. The printed and electronic media defend themselves by saying that they have tried in vain different strategies to fight the VB, ranging from blackout, denunciation of its weaknesses and menaces, to head-on confrontation and banalisation. Certainly, the Flemish media approach is radically different from the Francophone one, that combines blackout and denunciation.

### **C. Macro level**

Most comparative authors link the emergence and success clearly to flemish-nationalism, through several channels. According to Hossay (2002), the VB is embedded in a century old nationalist campaign ran by a well organised social movement. The Flemish-nationalist movement and its political exponents, nurtured like most autonomist movements, hostile feelings towards inhabitants of their region who identified with the centre or other regions. Once Flemish became the only official language in Flanders and the linguistic borders were fixed by the language laws of 1963, the VU (followed by the other Flemish parties), became increasingly intolerant towards breaches of this division, especially in the Flemish communes around Brussels<sup>31</sup> and the problematic area of the Fourons. The propaganda against the Frenchification of these parts of Flanders, as well as the general and traditional propaganda directed against the predominance of Francophones in the Belgian state and against the socio-economic transfers between the North and the South (the VU's campaign of "Flemish money in Flemish hands"), boosted the already large reservoir of anti-outgroup feelings.<sup>32</sup> The anti-francophone discourses enhanced the appeal of the Vlaams Blok, that campaigned for 'Our Own People First'.

While the level of immigration in Flanders is comparatively low, flemish-nationalism has allowed to frame the issue of immigration as more menacing than in other countries. First, the traditional fear of minorisation has created hostile feelings to any kind of outgroup, not

<sup>31</sup> Due to the depopulation of the inner cities, the Flemish communes around Brussels attracted more and more affluent people (most often Francophones) up to a point that they evolved into a demographic, cultural, economic and political majority. More recently, this problem is aggravated by the influx of wealthy EU migrants working in Brussels.

<sup>32</sup> Belgian political culture is characterised by low levels of interpersonal trust. Apart from the Flemish/francophone divide, this high degree of distrust can be explained by the high degree of localism and pillarisation.

only the Belgian Francophones, but also to newcomers allochtones, even when they come in low numbers and from EU countries. Second, immigration is considered as a threat to the fragile equilibria that have been established between linguistic communities, and especially regarding the status of the bilingual Brussels region and its Flemish hinterland. Due to the latin linguistic affinity of predominantly mediteranian migrants, their presence is viewed to reinforce the Belgian francophone camp, an evolution that could destabilise the fragile arrangements concerning the protection of the Flemish minority in Brussels, and of the Francophones in the Brussels periphery.

As Flanders gradually acquired a large degree of autonomy in cultural but also socio-economic matters, the emphasis of the nationalist struggled shifted. About all linguistic problems are by now settled, with the exception of the position of the francophones in the officially Flemish hinterland of Brussels. The Flemish language and culture is not an endangered species anymore, at least not menaced anymore by the Belgian Francophonie.

The main issues that still oppose Flemish and francophones are economic and social, especially the large transfer of public funds from Flanders to Wallonia under the current system of social security solidarity, which is based on non-ethnic grounds. The Flemish movement currently hammers more and more on cutting or reducing these transfers, increasing fiscal autonomy and the possibility to develop a policy tailored to specific Flemish needs regarding company and income taxes, unemployment benefits, health care, etc. Given the traditional majority of the centre and right in Flanders, fiscal, social and economic autonomy would be politically translated in a reduction of the current levels of social protection.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the current push for increasing Flemish autonomy is increasingly a simple matter of keeping control over Flemish resources in a globalised economy where regions face growing intra- and crossborder competition (Keating & McGarry, 2001).<sup>34</sup>

At the level of the political system, several specific features of the complex Belgian political system have been blamed to contribute to the VB emergence and success. First, there is the increasing party fragmentation, with 9.0 effective parties after the 1999 elections (Dumont & De Winter, 1999). This European record level of party fragmentation is mostly due to the division of every political family in an autonomous Flemish and Francophone wing. Hence, in order to form a majority government, four and often six parties are required. Hence, the formation of governments in Belgium is usually a long and very complex process of compromising between parties that differ on three or four basic cleavages, leading to a detailed and comprehensive coalition agreement in which each government party necessarily has to make massive policy concessions vis-à-vis the promises it made towards its voters (De Winter, Timmermans & Dumont, 2000).

Second, not only are the governing parties little responsive to their voters' demands, also their electoral accountability is very low. Parties more often enter government after electoral losses than after electoral victories! (Dumont, De Winter & Dandoy, 2001).

Third, all parties have become mainly office seekers, and apart from the VB, all have participated in the federal and regional executives in the past 5 years! In order to assure their

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<sup>33</sup> Cutting the transfers between Flanders and Wallonia would also mean the increase of the poverty level in Wallonia from 8 to 25%!

<sup>34</sup> Therefore it comes as no surprise that by now half of the Flemish entrepreneurs favour the participation of the VB government in the Flemish government (KDR, 2004). A majority of them calls for the splitting of the social security system, fiscal autonomy and the conclusion of collective labour agreements at the regional level.

chances of gaining office, all parties have moved to the centre in the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> The competitor of VB on the rightist side of the political spectrum, the Flemish liberals, tried to profile themselves at the new centre party, in order to substitute the hitherto pivotal centrist christian-democrats. On the left, the socialist party had been in power since 1988 (its longest period of uninterrupted government participation) and thus in terms of political practice had also moved more to the centre. Finally, during the entire 1990s the VU went through a crisis of *raison d'être*, shifting in all directions, which finally led to its split in 2000.<sup>36</sup>

The centripetal evolution of the main other parties in the 1990s, combined with the VB steady radical programme, its aggressive political style and its pariah party status, clearly distinguished the Vlaams Blok from the established parties and elites. The green AGALEV, the only other party with a distinct profile (in fact constituting the Blok's antipode), lost most of its anti-establishment profile due to its government participation since 1999.<sup>37</sup>

Other observers point to the declining linkage capacity of social-democratic (and christian-democratic) mass parties, whose professionalised political elites have abandoned their natural local habitat of the "maison du peuple" or parochial centres. Hence, personal contact between the represented and the representatives is supposed to have vanished, due to cocooning, the decline of the capacity to offer clientelist service (De Winter & Brans, 2003), the professionalisation of politics, the decline of the *cumul des mandats*, etc.

## X. Conclusion

Since 1981, the VB never lost an election! This certainly makes the Vlaams Blok the electorally best performing right-extremist party in Western Europe. In spite of the fact that its office-seeking results are nihil, its policy impact is considerable. More than in any other country, the increasing electoral success tends to make the party *incontournable* in the short term as coalition partner. At the local elections of 2006, with the direct election of the mayor, the party may even become a policy dictator in many Flemish communes. This breach of the cordon sanitaire may prepare the party for government participation at the 2007 federal elections, and 2008 regional elections.

Up until now, nobody has offered a credible and democratically legitimate solution to prevent the Blok's access to power. Most anti-Blok forces have resigned to the fact that the Blok will gradually become *regierungsfähig*, and put their hopes on the hypothesis that this would weaken the party. But here the comparative lessons are unclear. There are the participation debâbles of the Lijst Pim Fortyyn, the FPÖ and the Lega. But what price had the democratic parties paid in policy terms to reduce the electoral success of the extreme right?

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<sup>35</sup> The VLD only since 1995, due to the (unsuccessful) populist polarisation strategy of the current PM Verhofstadt (De Winter, 2000)

<sup>36</sup> In the 1990s, the poor chances of survival of the VU had an impact on most of the other Flemish parties. In order to receive a slice of the shrinking VU, the traditional parties radicalised their Flemish profile. Some second-order leaders openly outbid the VU. The main leaders, however, remained loyal to the federal model in order not to upset the 'Belgicist' part of their electorate and not disturb their Francophone partners with whom they would in any case have to arrive at compromises in the current and next governments. The Vlaams Blok launched a 'welcome home' campaign, trying to make right-wing members and nationalists defect from the VU and work within the VB around nationalist issues (De Winter, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Others (Stouthuysen, 2000) have pointed to another type of consensus, i.e. the shift of all parties towards the left-libertarian, ecologist or postmaterialist pole, due to the success of the Green parties in the 1980s, and the arrival to power of a May-68 generation of leaders in the traditional parties.

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