

Why is the Vlaams Belang so Popular?

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The Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) is the largest single party in Belgium. It has not lost a single election in twenty-five years, growing slowly but continuously from 3 per cent of the vote in 1987, to 10.3 in 1991, 12.3 in 1995, 15.8 in 1999, 18.2 in 2003 to 24.1 per cent in 2004. It is the most successful of all the so-called 'Euro-nationalist' parties.

Originally founded in 1977 as a radical Flemish secessionist splinter group which broke away from the Flemish nationalist party, its main political goal is the establishment of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern half of the federal kingdom of Belgium, as a sovereign state and an independent republic. In the late 1980s, the party managed to transform itself into a mainstream conservative party, aptly filling the gap that the free-market Liberals and the Christian Democrats created when they moved to the left. The Vlaams Belang is also the only Eurosceptic party in Belgium and the only one that rejects the official state ideology of multiculturalism. The Vlaams Belang says it is firmly established on three pillars: Flemish independence, opposition to multiculturalism, and the defence of traditional western values.

The party differs from the other Euro-nationalist parties in three ways. First, it has a collective leadership and does not depend on strong charismatic and often impulsive leaders such as Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Jörg Haider in Austria, or the late Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. The media, who by their nature want to personalize politics, often depict Filip Dewinter as the leader of the Vlaams Belang, but Dewinter is not the party president. Dewinter is the chairman of the Antwerp chapter of the party and the president of its group in the Flemish regional council, but he is not the party's national leader nor the chairman of its group in the federal Belgian House of Representatives. The Vlaams Belang is not a one-man-show.

Secondly, though generally depicted as an Islamophobic anti-immigration party, the Vlaams Belang is not a one-issue party but rather a coalition of people who for various reasons oppose Belgium's traditional parties and their policies.

Third, the party is seen by the Belgian establishment as a mortal enemy of the state, not only because it rejects the multiculturalist state ideology but primarily because it wants to dismantle the state itself. Imagine a Front National in France, with a young, collective leadership, with a broad electoral base enabling it to attract a broad range of conservative voters which other parties no longer cater for, and a party programme that states as its primary goal that it wants to abolish France.

The Vlaams Belang is a unique phenomenon unlikely to occur elsewhere, except perhaps if the European Union should ever develop into a fully fledged federal superstate. Then one could easily imagine a kind of pan-European Vlaams Belang which would oppose multiculturalism and Islamization while at the same time aiming for the abolishment of the European superstate and the re-establishment of the old, former nation-states.

The Vlaams Belang's opposition to Belgium and the European Union are motivated by the same considerations. It considers multinational Belgium, an artificial state constructed by the European powers in 1831, to be the prototype of the federal European state that Eurofederalists want to establish. The Vlaams Belang opposes Brussels and does not really differentiate between Brussels as the capital of Belgium and Brussels as the capital of Europe. It sees both Belgium and Europe – in other words Brussels and Brussels – as enemies of Flanders and of the Flemish people, whose national identity these enemies want to subvert and destroy.

According to the Vlaams Belang – and its success in conveying this message explains its continuous electoral successes – immigrants are being used by the Belgian establishment as a weapon against the Flemings. In other words, immigration has been deliberately promoted with the goal of undermining national loyalties which people adhere to because it gives meaning to fundamental existential questions such as 'Who are we?' and 'What is our identity?'.

Belgium is a country consisting of different peoples: Dutch-speaking Flemings, French-speaking Walloons, and a small number of Germans. Islamic immigrants who settled in Belgium and have acquired (or rather been given) Belgian nationality, tend to be the only group of Belgians whose loyalty is to Belgium, rather than to Flanders or Wallonia. Similarly it is imaginable, and even probable, that if Europe ever becomes an artificial superstate, non-European immigrants would be the only group to identify with this European state and new nationality rather than with that of the old former national entities.

The Belgian authorities have always seen Flemish nationalism as endangering the existence of the multinational Belgian state. They have also explicitly stated that immigrants are to be used by the ruling establishment as a weapon against the Vlaams Belang.

Until 2004, the Vlaams Belang was called the Vlaams Blok. Its party slogan was 'Our own people first'. After the Vlaams Blok had become the largest party in the local elections in Antwerp in 2000, the Belgian establishment decided to extend the right to vote in local elections to non-Belgian residents. It also decided to make it easier for non-Belgians to acquire Belgian nationality, with the intention of creating so-called 'new Belgians' entitled to vote in the general elections. In September 2000, Leona Detiège, the then Socialist mayor of Antwerp, told the press (*Knack Magazine*, 13 September 2000): 'The Vlaams Blok is currently over-represented because the immigrants are not allowed to vote', while Johan Leman, the then director of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (CEOOR), a government agency working for the Belgian prime minister, announced (*De Standaard*, 15 January 2000): 'What will "our own people" still mean fifteen years from now? We will get so many new Belgians that this slogan becomes meaningless. The Vlaams Blok is a thing of the past.'

In the Belgian local elections of October 2006 the immigrant vote tipped the balance in favour of the ruling establishment. In Brussels more than one-fifth (21.8 per cent) of the municipal councillors are now immigrants of non-European origin. Most of them are Muslims, and most of them have been elected as Socialists. The non-European immigrants' vote is overwhelmingly socialist, owing to the fact that many of them migrated to western Europe attracted by the subsidies of its generous welfare states. The immigrants have become the electoral life insurance of European socialism.

In the Brussels borough of Sint-Joost-ten-Node (where the Vlaams Belang party headquarters is located), eleven of the sixteen Socialist municipal councillors are non-European immigrants, as are four of the five Christian Democrats, two of the three Greens and two of the three Liberals. In Antwerp, almost one-third of the Socialist councillors (seven of twenty-two) are Muslims, as are one-third of the Christian Democrat councillors (two of six). In Ghent, one-quarter of the Socialist councillors are Muslims. In Vilvoorde, a Flemish town 20 km north of Brussels, half the Socialist representatives are Muslims. Many of these Muslims have radical Islamist sympathies. It bothers many traditional indigenous Socialists that their party has sold out to radical Islamism. After the elections one of them told the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir* (11 October 2006): 'Whenever one of the Belgo-Belgians [the indigenous Belgians] complained about this, he was considered to be a racist' (*quand l'un des candidats belgo-belges avait le malheur de parler de ça, il était perçu comme raciste*) No wonder that even many French-speaking indigenous former Socialists have begun to vote for the Vlaams Belang.

The Belgian establishment's harassment of the party has only brought it more sympathy from the public. On 9 November 2004, the Supreme Court in Brussels declared the Vlaams Blok, then already the country's largest party,

a criminal organization. In the 1990s, in an effort to destroy the party the Belgian Parliament changed the Constitution and voted a series of new laws, including an Anti-Racism Act and an Anti-Discrimination Act, which define 'discrimination' so broadly that anyone and everyone is vulnerable to hate-crime prosecutions. These new laws were used against the Vlaams Blok.

The party was convicted on the basis of an anthology of sixteen articles published by various local Vlaams Blok chapters between 1996 and 2000. Though many of these articles simply quoted official statistics on crime rates and social welfare expenditure, the court posited that they had been published with 'an intention to contribute to a campaign of hatred'. One article, which dealt with the position of women in fundamentalist Muslim societies, was written by Belkiz Sögütlü, a female Turkish-born Vlaams Blok member who had herself been raised in such an environment.

Following the verdict, the Vlaams Blok was forced to disband. Its leaders, however, promptly founded another party, the Vlaams Belang (which means 'Flemish Interest'). It went on to win the next elections. At the time of writing, the Vlaams Belang is again in court. The Council of State, a Belgian administrative court, will rule some time in 2007 whether or not to cut off the party's state funding. This is an attempt to eliminate the party by depriving it of all its sources of income. Ten years ago, the Belgian authorities decided to make it illegal for political parties to accept private donations. Instead they have since been subsidized by the state in accordance with the number of votes gained in the last elections. Parties that are considered to be 'enemies of the state' can, however, be deprived of funding on the grounds that it is illogical for the state to fund its own enemies.

There is little doubt that the party will, indeed, be stripped of funding. The party leadership says that they have set aside funds in a so-called 'war chest' to allow it to participate in the June 2007 general elections. There is little doubt that the Vlaams Belang will also win these elections. If the Belgian authorities take the party's money away, this will cause an outrage and even more indigenous voters will flock to the Vlaams Belang.

The party does realize, however, that its ability to keep winning elections depends on demographics. Its electoral potential will decline when the number of indigenous voters goes down. The Vlaams Belang was the only party in the October 2006 local elections that did not put forward Muslim candidates.

In Antwerp, Flanders' largest city, it won 33.5 per cent of the vote, compared to 33.0 in 2000. This may look like a small gain, but it is significant since the demographic makeup of Belgium's cities is rapidly and dramatically changing. The municipality of Antwerp has half a million inhabitants. Every year on average 4,000 indigenous Flemings move out of Antwerp, while 5,000 immigrants settle there. Most immigrants are

Muslims. These people do not vote for a party that has no Muslims on its list, that opposes multiculturalism and demands that immigrants assimilate and respect the values of their host country.

According to the Marxist sociologist Jan Hertogen, 'The immigrants saved democracy in Belgium' (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, 9 October 2006). Hertogen calculated that if the franchise had not been extended to immigrants the Vlaams Belang would have polled 40.4 per cent in Antwerp instead of 33.5 per cent.

Before the elections, Filip Dewinter, the party's leader in Antwerp, told the Brussels newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* (9 September 2006) that his party could not continue to win. 'I am a realist,' he said:

The number of potential voters for our party is declining year by year ... In ten years' time the number of new Belgians in Antwerp – half of whom are Moroccans – has doubled ... If the number of foreigners in Antwerp continues to grow by 1.5 per cent a year, as it currently does, then in twenty years from now there will be more people of foreign than of indigenous extraction in this city ... Our party has foreign members, but I do not want to be a hypocrite. At present we do not put forward 'alibi Ali' candidates. But I know that it is bound to happen some day. We extend our hands to welcome every foreign-born person who wants to become a Fleming among the Flemings.

It is doubtful, however, that many rent-seeking immigrants, attracted by welfare benefits, would want to join a conservative party that is generally perceived as being opposed to the European welfare system.

This is why I think that the shift to the right in Belgium, but also in western European politics in general, will be over by the end of the decade, when the impact of the immigrant vote will shift politics dramatically to the left. The Belgian and European Social Democrat establishments are slowly but gradually succeeding in what Bertold Brecht advised totalitarian regimes to do: 'dissolve the people and elect another.'

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