

## **Not in Power, but Shaping It: The Ascent of Vlaams Belang**

**Article by Laura Jacobs**

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In recent decades, the Flemish far right has gone from a movement stigmatised for its racist policies to a major political force. Even though Vlaams Belang has been largely locked out of power until now, its rhetoric has significantly influenced Belgium's political agenda and public opinion. What is behind the party's electoral success story?

June 9 2024 was a victorious day for Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB). As Belgians went to the polls for European, federal, and regional elections, the Flemish far-right party managed to clinch the second-largest electoral victory in its history. The numbers were striking: VB became the largest party in three out of five Flemish provinces, finished first in 143 out of 300 communes, obtained almost 1 million votes, and won three seats in the EU Parliament.

Four months later, VB was once again triumphant – this time in the municipal elections. While the party could not significantly improve its score locally compared to 2018, it reached an important milestone: it obtained an absolute majority in Ninove, a town of about 40,000 inhabitants located between Brussels and Ghent, and was able to join a local coalition in Ranst, in the province of Antwerp. For the first time, the party managed to win a mayorship and participate directly in governance, making a historic and symbolic breakthrough.

Vlaams Belang's recent success is set against the backdrop of steady gains in electoral power over the last few decades. A look at the history and development of the far right in Flanders confirms the mainstreaming and consolidation of VB in the region's party landscape.

### **Creation, conviction, and rebranding**

Vlaams Belang's ideological roots go back to Flemish nationalist movements in the interbellum that included figures who had collaborated with Nazi Germany. After World War II, there was widespread dissatisfaction in Flanders with Belgium's linguistic and political division, as well as longstanding disillusionment with Francophone elites' perceived marginalisation of the Flemish people. It was in this context that firebrand politician Karel Dillen founded Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block, Vlaams Belang's predecessor) in 1979, which quickly rose to prominence and became the foremost Flemish far-right party.

From its outset, Vlaams Blok championed nationalist and secessionist values, calling for an independent and autonomous Flanders. The party achieved a major political breakthrough in the 1991 general election, which went down in history as "Black Sunday". Thanks to its hardline stance on immigration and strong appeal to Flemish nationalist sentiments – particularly in urban areas like Antwerp – Vlaams Blok won 12 seats in the Chamber of Representatives. This victory helped the party assert itself as a significant "anti-establishment" force and a challenger to the three traditional party families (Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals) and the Greens.

"Black Sunday" sent shockwaves through Belgium. In the wake of it, all traditional Flemish parties and

the Greens agreed to refrain from entering into any coalition or formal political agreement with Vlaams Blok, thus installing a *cordon sanitaire* around the far-right party. The cordon was later institutionalised through agreements among the other parties (including Francophone parties), effectively banning Vlaams Blok – and later its successor, Vlaams Belang – from participating in government. At the national level, the cordon sanitaire remains virtually intact, although VB's growing popularity and influence over political discourse now challenges its effectiveness, necessity, and normative underpinnings.

Following its electoral breakthrough in 1991, Vlaams Blok steadily grew in strength, but its fortunes took a significant turn in 2004 when it was convicted of racism by Belgian courts. This ruling stemmed in part from the far-right party's controversial "70-point" plan that outlined its vision on migration. The programme contained proposals such as limiting nationality criteria to kinship or descent, excluding migrants from social security benefits, and restricting the property rights of non-European foreigners.

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In response to the ruling, Vlaams Blok disbanded and rebranded itself as Vlaams Belang. As asserted by one of its leaders, Filip Dewinter, this strategy was "not a cosmetic operation, but a manicure". The party's leaders did not distance themselves from the convicted Vlaams Blok: "We sharpen our claws and teeth to throw ourselves into the fray, improving and gaining in power and efficiency," Dewinter famously said.

Vlaams Belang suffered a relative decline over the following years but experienced a resurgence in the 2018 local and 2019 federal elections. Capitalising on and fuelling feelings of threat among citizens in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee "crisis", the party was able to make important gains. The fact that VB had never been in government worked in its favour, as the party was unscathed by criticism of the authorities over their handling of immigration (which has become one of the most prominent election issues in Belgium).

Over time, with its Eurosceptic and hardline anti-immigration policies, VB managed to project itself as the leading opposition voice in Flanders. As such, many in Belgium expected the party to become the biggest political force in the region in the June 2024 elections, but this result did not materialise. Instead, the more moderate right-wing Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (New Flemish Alliance, N-VA) came out on top, dashing VB's aspirations to break the cordon sanitaire and follow in the footsteps of other European far-right parties such as Italy's Lega, Austria's FPÖ, and the Dutch PVV, who have entered into government.

## **From pariah to power player**

The most striking thing about Vlaams Belang's rise is how successfully it evolved – much like far-right parties in other European countries – from a marginalised group into a party whose ideas are increasingly mainstream, gaining significant traction in the public sphere. This normalisation results from a process whereby VB has somewhat moderated its positions (mostly on the rhetorical level), while at the same time other actors, such as traditional parties and the media, have accommodated the far right and adopted some of its ideas. Hence, both VB and Flemish society have evolved and transformed, facilitating the normalisation of the party.

In recent decades, Vlaams Belang has gradually adopted a "softer" approach in order to diversify its

electoral base and broaden its reach. Vlaams Blok's giant posters displaying boxing gloves with the caption "*Eigen volk eerst!*" ("Own people first") have been replaced with images of white families with blond children – even though the slogan has been maintained. While in the 1990s and early 2000s Vlaams Blok routinely targeted ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities with strong language, Vlaams Belang's communication style has been polished up under the leadership of Tom Van Grieken, who became party leader in 2014.

For Vlaams Belang, this strategic shift aligns with explicit efforts to attract a broader electorate. A similar trend is visible in other European countries (such as France), with far-right parties striving to present themselves as more "*salonfähig*" ("presentable, socially acceptable") by attenuating their tone. In other words, these parties have resorted to dog whistles and more subtle language.

However, Vlaams Belang employs a more complex, two-fold strategy: within the party's folds, there remain figures (such as Filip Dewinter or Sam van Rooy, and previously Dries Van Langenhove) who openly talk about conspiracy theories like the "Great Replacement" and push a hardline agenda in order to appeal to the more extremist electorate. At the same time, the majority of the party consists of more "moderate" politicians who help broaden the VB's electoral appeal. The difference between the two camps lies mostly in the style and rhetoric, not the substance of their messaging. As Gerolf Annemans, a VB member of the European Parliament put it: "We need to stay sufficiently dirty."

Another factor driving VB's rise is its status as an opposition party. This has allowed it to engage primarily in negative campaigning, portraying itself as an anti-establishment force. Moreover, Vlaams Belang's lack of ruling experience allows it to maintain a "clean sheet", lending credibility when criticising the policies of other parties.

Vlaams Belang has also benefitted from Belgium's generous financing for political parties (all parties together receive about 75 million euros), investing heavily in its political communication and social media presence. For instance, the party was the first in Flanders to launch its own app.

Moreover, as Vlaams Belang politicians are invited less often by traditional media than the representatives of other parties, their social media strategy aims to circumvent the gatekeeping role of journalists, allowing party figures to communicate tailored messages directly to their electorate. VB was the biggest spender on social media among all Belgian parties in the four months preceding the 9 June elections. This investment paid off, as Vlaams Belang is one of the most popular parties in Belgium on online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

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from the perspective of immigration.*

As Vlaams Belang's influence has grown over the past decades, other societal actors, such as journalists and political competitors, have contributed to the party's successful rebranding and normalisation by adopting an "accommodative approach" towards it. Unlike Wallonia, Flanders has never enforced a strict media cordon sanitaire against the far right, and Flemish journalists have become more open to covering Vlaams Belang over the years – a trend they justify by invoking the party's rising popularity. In fact, news media often provide disproportionate coverage to the far right and its key issues, such as immigration.

Finally, other political parties have adopted issue-based strategies by shifting their position on

immigration and moving to the (far) right. As a result, the social stigma around Vlaams Belang has been gradually disappearing, and citizens have become more critical of the cordon sanitaire, echoing the far right's claim that it is undemocratic.

## **Electoral appeal**

Voting behaviour is complex and can be influenced by many factors. In the case of Flanders, while some classical predictors (like belonging to specific social groups) still play a role, research generally points to two main reasons for Vlaams Belang's electoral success: the party's positioning and success as a protest or anti-establishment force, which attracts angry voters, and its appeal to issue voters as a result of VB's ownership of the discourse on immigration, Flemish autonomy and crime. Both factors create a convincing narrative that resonates with a significant segment of the electorate in Flanders.

First, Vlaams Belang has been thriving on anti-establishment sentiments, populist attitudes, and political dissatisfaction. Many VB voters are disillusioned with politics and perceive traditional parties as ineffective or even corrupt. This is at least partly what drives many Flemish citizens to the far right, as VB promises radical change. The party's rhetoric incorporates populist elements by framing itself as the voice of the "ordinary people", claiming to represent voters who feel ignored, unrepresented, or marginalised by the political elite. The Vlaams Belang leadership opposes what it calls the "political system" and "system parties", which it blames for the problems in society.

Second, Vlaams Belang is successful in setting the political agenda and attracting voters who are motivated by specific areas on which VB has come to be perceived as the main "issue owner". For instance, many far-right voters' primary electoral concern is immigration, which they perceive as a threat to their cultural identity and national sovereignty. Vlaams Belang's nativist ideology, its opposition to globalisation, its support for far-reaching assimilationist policies, and its promise to stop the flow of migrants have helped establish the party as the key owner of this issue. In fact, migration has been the central issue around which the far-right group has mobilised its voters since its beginning, opposing the arrival of guest workers from Mediterranean countries such as Morocco, Greece, and Turkey.

Similarly, Vlaams Belang has long strongly opposed what it calls the "Frenchification" of Belgium, calling on Walloon citizens to learn Dutch and "respect" Flemish culture. But nowadays – especially since 9/11 – the party's anti-migration rhetoric is increasingly directed at non-European immigrants and minorities, and particularly those with a Muslim background. VB occasionally claims that Islam is "incompatible" with the core values of Flemish society, adopting a "clash of civilisations" rhetoric.

Issue voting has become increasingly important in Belgium in recent years, and VB has managed to become a strong brand that citizens have come to associate with strict policies on crime, law and order, and, especially, immigration (by framing or rather "performing" it as a crisis).

*The Flemish Greens have become the central political adversary of the far right.*

Nowadays, Vlaams Belang frames and interprets all other issues – from housing and taxes to jobs and social security – using the perspective of immigration. The party attracts citizens with high levels of anti-immigration sentiment, while its emphasis on law and order resonates with citizens who are concerned with social order and hierarchy and who favour authoritarian values. Most citizens supporting VB clearly identify as right wing, prefer conservative policies, and value traditional norms. As such, despite electoral

volatility being on the rise in Flanders, voters of Vlaams Belang seem to be rather loyal.

## **Influential but not in power**

Although the cordon sanitaire remains intact at the federal and regional level, this by no means implies that the far right has not been influential in Flanders. Vlaams Belang's influence comes from being a "whip party", setting the public, media, and political agenda. In fact, the analysis of party positions collected through a voting advice app in 2014, 2019, and 2024 shows that other parties have increasingly adopted the stances of Vlaams Belang on migration and integration. Due to VB's influence, many of the proposals in the controversial "70-point" plan of Vlaams Blok have been adopted and implemented (e.g. on welfare chauvinism), and asylum and migration policies are becoming stricter every year.

Strikingly, the normalisation of VB's talking points is not restricted to the mainstream right, with the Socialist and Christian-Democratic parties also moving in the direction of the far right. The only party family that has not allowed itself to do Vlaams Belang's electoral bidding is the Flemish Green party, Groen. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, Groen repeatedly denounced and called out the far-right for its views on migration, diversity, and minority rights. In fact, based on the voting advice app, Groen was the only party that did not agree with Vlaams Belang on any of its policies on migration and integration. Hence, the Flemish Greens have become the central political adversary of the far right as they ideologically are the furthest away from VB on various policy levels – but this has also made them the far right's favourite target.

Meanwhile, the existence of the cordon sanitaire at the regional and national level means that VB can continue, from a comfortable position in the opposition, to criticise the "elites". This allows the far right to gain credibility and claim to be the only alternative political force truly representing the "ordinary" Flemish people. Tom Van Grieken has outspoken aspirations to rule – dreaming of following in the footsteps of his Dutch friend and ally Geert Wilders, who heads the PVV – as he spelt out in his book *En nu is het aan ons* ("And now it is our turn"): "We are putting an end to our perpetual image as an opposition party."

Until recently, there was fierce speculation over whether N-VA and Vlaams Belang could together form a majority in the Flemish parliament, but the 9 June election result has made this impossible. At the local level, however, the situation has changed. Vlaams Belang achieved an absolute majority in Ninove, paving the way for the first-ever VB mayor. What is perhaps more important, however, is that the cordon sanitaire was broken in Ranst, a prosperous municipality of around 20,000 residents near Antwerp, with local parties forming a coalition with Vlaams Belang. Even though the figures who agreed to govern with VB were sanctioned by their national parties, the episode has raised the possibility that other communes might follow suit.

For Jos Geysels, a former leader of the Flemish Green party Agalev, who was the architect of the cordon sanitaire against VB, the recent developments in Ranst are symbolic. He fears repercussions for democracy and minority rights but also says there is no reason to expect a crack in the cordon at other, more important levels. Still, local consolidation may be another stepping stone for the far right in Flanders to grow and gain more power and influence in society and politics. Normalisation always occurs gradually rather than suddenly.

## **A wider wave**

Flanders is by no means the exception when it comes to the widening influence of far-right parties in Europe. Seven EU countries – including Belgium’s neighbour, the Netherlands – are run by far-right governments. In France and Germany, support for populist far-right parties is at an all-time high. In fact, in Western Europe, far-right parties have joined a government or supported a minority coalition more often than Greens have.

The breaking of the cordon sanitaire marks an important moment for Vlaams Belang as it seeks to replicate the success of its counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Even though Belgium has always had a unique political landscape, it is witnessing a similar trend in the direction of greater normalisation and durability of the far right. This shift presents important challenges, raising fundamental questions about how societies and key actors – like the media and other political parties – should address the far right’s ascent.

For now, it seems that Belgian Green parties are determined to combat the far right’s political ideas. Even though the Greens lost ground in the recent elections and are the target of repeated political attacks, they should continue their fight and refuse to normalise the far right’s talking points.

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