Comparing the extreme right in Belgium and France

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Party ideology, electoral success and party system change

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to contrast the situation of the Flemish *Vlaams Blok* and the French *Front national* on a number of key elements of party ideology, political competition and party system change since the mid 1980s. In deconstructing the 'new society' utopia of the VB and FN, the analysis shows important similarities in the doctrine and, in spite of those parties' alleged commitment to representative democracy, illustrates a common and developed set of ethnocentrist, authoritarian, and anti-egalitarian values underpinning an essentially non-democratic ideology. The analysis draws on the electoral success, organisational development and institutionalisation of the far right in both countries and points to the comparable systemic isolation of those parties despite the growth and stabilisation of their electorates.

Introduction

The revival of extreme right wing parties in Western Europe has attracted considerable attention from academic research. Broad comparative studies of far right politics across the nations of Europe have provided landmark contributions in the field and led into the construction of explanatory models (see for instance Kitschelt, 1995; see also more recent work by Betz & Immerfall, 1998; Hainsworth, 2000; Schain et al, 2002; Gibson, 2002; Eatwell & Mudde, 2004).

Research has emphasised the heterogeneity of this specific group of parties in relation to their varying historical roots and different mechanisms of party system integration. A number of classificatory attempts by scholars have underlined the similarities between the *Vlaams Blok* (VB) in Flanders and the French *Front national* (FN) as members of a same class of 'racist', populist and anti-system parties on the extreme right fringe of the political spectrum, which differs significantly from other types of 'neo-populist' parties (e.g. the Progress parties in Scandinavia, the Austrian FPÖ, the *Lijst Fortuyn* in the Netherlands or the Northern League in Italy) or more traditional neo-fascist actors such as the Italian MSI/AN and the German radical right (see the criteria for classification suggested by Taggart, 1995; Mudde, 2000). What is of particular relevance to the present analysis is the concept of 'extreme right ideology' in reference to a persistent and structured set of beliefs –in short the opposition to liberal democratic institutions, inequality as a core value, the notion of decline, clear-cut moral differentiation, subordination of the individuals to their community and the search for a third

way between capitalism and communism–, as opposed, for instance, to more context-dependant and 'elastic' concepts such as populism or neo-populism (Abts, 2004) whose fundamental notions such as the people, democracy or national sovereignty, and their combination, lack substantial content. Whichever definitional terms used, populism remains essentially a vehicle for mass-mobilisation of existing anti-Establishment and anti-party resentment whose identity is mostly one opposing the ordinary people to the political elite (Swyngedouw 2005b).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the situation of the Flemish VB and the French FN on a number of key elements of party ideology, political competition and party system change since the mid 1980s. The in-depth and cross-national analysis of the views and core ideological beliefs forming part of the FN and VB 'new society' utopia points to important similarities in the system of ideas developed by those parties, with a strong emphasis on the ethnocentrist authoritarian and anti-egalitarian components expressed in what appears to be an essentially non-democratic ideological corpus [1].

Whilst electorally irrelevant throughout the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the Flemish and French far right parties have since enjoyed increasing levels of electoral support and gradually managed to establish themselves as serious competitors against mainstream parties of the moderate right. This indisputable success in the polls has largely contributed to altering the balance of forces within their respective party system and posed unprecedented challenges to the traditional format of national politics in Flanders and France. Despite however the growth and stabilisation of their electoral support over time, both parties remain clearly identified with the far right by the vast majority of voters. They suffer from isolation on the margins of mainstream politics with very limited coalition potential and as of yet have failed, unlike their populist counterparts in Austria, Italy or the Netherlands, to enter the sphere of national government.

1. The far right utopia in Belgium and France

The ideology of the VB and the FN has significantly expanded over the years. Previous research has highlighted the role of political entrepreneurship and charismatic leadership amongst those parties. They often present versatile programmes and their highly centralised organisation allows them to respond quickly to emerging issues and exploit all critical political opportunities by dint of much ideological inconsistency (e.g. the ideological shift from free market to protectionism) (Betz & Immerfall, 1998). This probably partly explains why there is still much 'definitional' debate over the ideological nature of extreme right parties in Western Europe (Taggart, 1995; Griffin, 1996; Skenderovic, 2001; Ignazi, 2003).

In order to express the essential nature of the Belgian and French far right *weltanschauung*, we prefer to draw on the conventional ideology analysis, in which concrete items are deduced from both implicit and explicit assumptions in party literature and party leaders' speeches in the media. For the purposes of this analysis we have consulted party documents as well as

[1] With regard to the ideology of the *Vlaams Blok* and *Front national*, the first section of this chapter is an updated and amended version of Marc Swyngedouw & Gilles Ivaldi, 2001, "The extreme-right Utopia in Belgium and France. The ideology of the Flemish *Vlaams Blok*, the French *Front National* and the Belgian *Front National*", *West European Politics*, Vol. (24), n°3, July, p.1-22.

interviews given to the press by key party figures. In the Belgian case the features of the VB ideological framework have been derived from documents such as '*Principles of VB*' and the '*70 point programme for resolving the aliens problem*', the electoral propaganda used for the national elections in 1991 and 1995, and for the European and local elections of 1994. Further information about the 'solidaristic people's community' favoured by the VB has also been drawn from previous analyses made by Gijsels et al (1989), Gijsels (1992 and 1994) and Spruyt (1995). For the French case: *The FN's activist textbook*, 1991; *50 proposals on immigration*, 1991; *51 point programme for social policy*, 1992; *300 proposals on social and economic policy*, 1993; *Contract with the French for the sake of France*, 1995; *For a French future*, 2002). Similar themes are developed in Mégret's MNR manifestos: *The Charter of MNR's values*, 1999; *50 proposals for restoring security*, 1999; *The national alternative: MNR's priorities*, 2002). It should also be remembered that the views and ideas to be explored are mainly those of hard-core party members and the leadership. The VB and FN voters are only familiar with a few of the most striking themes of those parties' propaganda: notably anti-immigration and opposition to the traditional parties and their 'corruption' (Swyngedouw, 2001; Perrineau, 2003).

Here the emphasis is on those parties' views of humanity, the world and the relationship between the individual and society. Using the definition suggested by Mannheim in *Ideology and Utopia* (1960), the extreme right ideology can be regarded as a developed system of ideas, whose utopian component is comprised in the refusal of the existing status quo. According to the utopian far right programme, the ultimate goal is to change the established power relations and governing rules in contemporary society. More specifically, the desire for a radical transformation of the socio-political system and the attack on the social-democratic consensus lie at the heart of the extreme right's electoral appeal to 'ordinary' people (Swyngedouw, 1992 & 2000; Hunter, 1997). The extreme right postulates a social order that never really existed and, in frustration over the alleged imperfections of real society, threatens to impose its utopia by force (Merkl and Weinberg, 1997).

As shall be discussed in the second section of this chapter, such a structured system of beliefs and representations is a key element in understanding the rise and electoral stabilisation of the VB or the FN. Despite significant changes in patterns of party competition and/or co-operation, the core ideological corpus of both organisations has proved very consistent over the years. In most cases, tactical adjustments have been restricted to polishing up the party's political style and smoothing out the most radical elements of party ideology in order to increase its coalition potential.

Thus, the change of name from *Vlaams Blok* to *Vlaams Belang* following the condemnation of the *Vlaams Blok* for 'racism' by Belgium's High Appeal Court in November 2004 was nothing but an attempt to break the so-called *cordon sanitaire* built by mainstream parties as a rampart against the extreme right. In ideological terms, however, the programme of the newly formed *Vlaams Belang* was clearly the continuation of the corpus of the former VB in an updated and softened format aimed at preventing future legal convictions on grounds for 'racism'. Such a surface ideological 'aggiornamento' would help increase the party's

acceptability as coalition partner for centre-right CD&V Christian Democrats or VLD Liberals in Flanders [2].

Similarly, the 1999 split in the French FN –which led to the departure of Bruno Mégret and his allies, and to the creation of a new *Mouvement national Républicain* (MNR)– had no clear implications for the ideological direction of the two resultant parties. Indeed the comparative analysis of party ideology shows a high degree of convergence between the political manifestos presented by the FN and rival MNR. The similarities in the programmes by the FN and MNR can hardly be considered a surprise given the major contribution by Mégret as then FN General Delegate (1988-1999) and former members of the *Club de l'Horloge* in defining the broad lines of the FN's ideology around some of the classic national-populist themes. The dispute between Le Pen and Mégret was not a fight over the ideological stance of the movement but rather the climax of a longstanding power-struggle which opposed some of the pragmatic and issue-oriented cadre elements of the party to the old orthodox radical guard (Ivaldi, 1999).

a) Portrayal of Humanity

The portrayal of humanity is the expression of the nature of humanity and its essential characteristics within a given ideology.

The cultural and racial community

In the VB and FN's ideology, humanity is often regarded as consisting of groups, or more precisely, of in-and-outgroups. In this *ethnocentrist* view, the former refer to groups to which the individual supposedly belongs whereas the latter include all the people who are perceived as intrinsically different because of their ethnic origin, religion or culture. Essentially, argue both parties, people are not the same and shouldn't be considered equivalent. The most usual distinction between people is made on the basis of their cultural background or ethnicity. Given the anti-racist and anti-fascist taboo which was established in the aftermath of WWII, and because of existing anti-racist laws in both countries, overt racist statements based on pure biological (racial) or genetic criteria of differentiation were relinquished from the ideological corpus of the far right, although such arguments are plainly suggested in both parties' approach to immigration and integration issues.

The theoretical framework for cultural racism in the FN was originally set up by the French New Right in the late 1970s. The 'egalitarian neo-racism' was first conceived as an attempt to put the emphasis on cultural differences and incompatibility of mores between Europeans and non-European foreigners. The use of the egalitarian repertoire of the left was considered a means of avoiding being sued under an accusation of racism. In the 1990s, however, overt

[2] On November 9, 2004 the *Vlaams Blok* was condemned for racism by the Belgium's High Appeal Court (*Hof van Cassatie*) which followed the argumentation by the 'Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism' stating that the party was guilty of voicing regular and systematic racist opinions. The conviction came as the end of about 10 years of juridical battle. Soon after the verdict, the VB national leadership held a congress to create a 'new' party under the banner of *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) which was presented as the simple continuation of the *Vlaams Blok*, mainly in order to secure public funding. Despite claims by party leader Van Hecke that the original party *Principles* would still be a valid reference, a new shorter and updated version of the programme was issued on the basis of the *Principles*, which took great care in leaving aside some of the most controversial statements such as, for instance, previous overt support by the VB to the Apartheid regime in South-Africa and some blatant breaches of the ECHR.

racist and biologically-based statements resurfaced, mainly as a consequence of the tough stance on immigration taken by the traditional parties of the right (Ivaldi, 2003). According to Bernard Antony, leader of the traditionalist Catholics, 'our country is losing its intellectual, moral and biological substance. France is diminished, invaded, occupied and degraded' (*Le Monde*, 18-19 February 1996). The distinction that the FN makes between the French and the non-European foreigners implies a hierarchical dichotomy, not only in terms of the traditional opposition between 'civilisation' and 'barbarity' (Le Pen *in Le Monde*, 4 September 1993), but also with regard to the 'capacities' or 'performances' of 'Whites' and 'Blacks' comparatively (Le Pen *in Libération*, 31 August- 1st September 1996).

In Belgium, the VB leadership rarely ventures to make such a distinction on a purely biological basis. Nevertheless, the concept of 'fundamental natural inequality between communities' expressed in the *Principles* [3] implies an ethnic hierarchy in which the Fleming stands at the top, with Dutchmen and Afrikaners (South Africa) immediately below them, as members of the same 'people', sharing a similar language and, according to VB, also sharing a common culture. Next down the hierarchy, and still more or less equal, are the assimilated (French speaking) Flemings of Brussels, the Walloon area and French Flanders (an area in the North of France). These people live, according to the VB, in 'occupied territory'. These groups are followed by the European foreigners which are said to have the same racial origins (white), but are culturally divergent, although they share a common European heritage and civilisation. At the bottom of this community scale come the non-European foreigners, who share neither the language, culture and territory, nor the ethnic background of the Flemings.

The 'ethnically committed' vanguard

The building of social categories within the ethnocentrist ideological framework does not restrict itself to creating in-and-outgroups on a cultural basis. In cognitive terms, ideology can be conceived as a mean of organising and selecting information from the social environment and thus easing the task of dealing with the complexity of the world. This is particularly true in the case of the far right parties regarding the way in which they aim to provide their supporters with a simplified grid for the analysis of society. Even within ingroups, the far right makes clear distinctions between individuals. In particular, there are the so-called 'ethnically committed' and 'not-ethnically committed' people (VB), or the 'national' versus the 'anti-national' and 'cosmopolitan' individuals (FN). Unlike the latter, the nationally committed possess higher moral values 'necessary for creating a counterweight to human egoism', such as a perception of responsibility, self-sacrifice, social justice, solidarity, tolerance and brotherly love. Their attitude towards life arises from the perception of the 'necessary solidarity of all with all in the community' (VB *Principles*).

The nationally committed individuals are part of an elite, which is capable of abnegation and for this reason has a say in society. According to Gollnisch, Delegate General of the FN, "the worst is coming. This might lead to the sacrifice of our belongings, our freedom, even perhaps of our own lives. Together with Jean-Marie Le Pen, we are the leaders of the heroic and fanatic phalanx, we are the passionate, the determined, the inflexible ones. We must be the

[3] Here we still purposely refer to the earlier version(s) of the documents published by the *Vlaams Blok* prior to the change over to *Vlaams Belang*. As stated above, there was very little change to the party's actual ideological corpus and the new programme was mostly a fashioning up of previous party literature in order to open a breach in the general agreement among mainstream parties not to enter into coalition with the extreme right.

leaders that the people are waiting for" (*Libération*, 1st September 1996). In contrast to the nationally committed vanguard are the masses, which must be shown the right path and protected against evil influences and the general blurring of moral standards (VB *Principles*; Taguieff, 1989 on the FN). The masses must be taught self-discipline from childhood onward. The distinction between the nationally committed elite and the masses who must be protected against the temptation of degenerated modern society, assumes that, with the exception of the former group, humanity is essentially weak, although 'capable of sensing the mortal threat which weighs on its future'. The enlightened vanguard, i.e. the far right party, must therefore 'lead the popular uprising which will free the country from decadence' (Le Pen *in Libération*, 15 July 1996).

Fundamental inequality

Not only is the principle of natural inequality inherent in the existing differences between social groups, but also it refers to fundamental differences between the individuals within a particular group. According to the 'aristocratic idea' of the far-right, it is after all 'impossible to ignore the natural inequality and (individual) variety of the individual' (VB *Principles*). Egalitarianism is intrinsically wrong in that it goes against the rule of nature: 'the principle of equality is fundamentally unfair to the most capable ones' (Le Pen, quoted by Taguieff, 1989:179). The task of the 'spiritual elite' is to ensure that 'levelling is countered in order to prevent the decline of the community among the masses' (VB *Principles*). To quote Maurras, leader of the French *Action Française*, people have to choose 'between inequality and decay, between inequality and anarchy, between inequality and death' (Maurras, 1924:119).

Equally important to the VB and FN portrayal of humanity is the notion of 'working humanity'. This relates closely to the above principle of basic inequality between individuals within the same society. For the far-right there is no right to laziness and no *homo ludens*. Service is a duty which is determined by each individual's position or role within the natural community. Rights can only be acquired through productive work and individuals must be primarily fed with a feeling of responsibility to the community. This duty to work can also be performed in non-economic spheres. Women, for example, should for preference work in the family, where they should play their role as mothers by providing children with necessary care, education and homely warmth. This concept implies an inequality between men and women, by assigning the personal fulfilment of men and women to production and reproduction respectively.

b) World View

The world view or social vision implies a more or less coherent set of views relating to the principles by which the cohabitation of individuals and groups is ordered and develops.

The Gemeinschaft utopia

The utopian picture offered by the FN and the VB is predominantly one of an organic community whose pillars are to be found in the long-standing traditional values that are said to have shaped the whole society throughout its formation. Such an utopia fits into a category of 'conservatism' or 'traditio-communitarianism' (Taguieff, 1989:175). The concept of

'nature', as defined historically by the counter-revolutionary intellectuals of the nineteenth century, lies in a set of holistic values –family, religion, homeland, work, duty– all of which subordinate the individual to the group.

The VB solidarism aims to build a hierarchically structured community of ethnically committed people. The utopian society sketched by the *Principles* and other official texts of the VB, can be directly traced to what Tönnies, writing in 1887, described as the *Gemeinschaft* (Swyngedouw, 1995a). Admittedly the VB utopia is based on the modern economic and social structures of the 1950s and 1960s, but nonetheless draws on the natural community that Tönnies linked to traditional household economy. It is a society in which no strife exists and with a fixed distinction between good and evil. Within the FN ideological corpus, the *Gemeinschaft* utopia is defined in terms of a 'conservative revolution'. The concept was brought to the party in the mid 1980s when the FN was seeking new alliances among the various components of the French extreme right-wing and found partners among the traditionalist Catholics and some members of the *Club de l'Horloge* (Ivaldi, 1998b). The FN ideal-type of society is also deeply rooted in the experience of decolonization in Algeria or the longstanding fascination for the Conservative Revolution implemented by the Vichy regime in 1940-44. When commanding to obey the immutable law of nature, the FN model of conservative revolution places the emphasis on organic and hierarchical values which are very similar to those propagated by the VB solidarism.

For the VB and FN the family is the basic unit of this harmonious and organically structured community. According to Le Pen, 'family is the supreme truth and a biological reality' (quoted by Taguieff, 1989:215). Families can only consist of married heterosexual couples whose duty is to have children in order to maintain and strengthen the community. For the VB, an average of two-point-one children is considered an absolute minimum in order to keep the population up. Part of the educational task of the family is to instil national commitment in the children. In a very similar vein, the FN calls for the implementation of an effective family policy which is seen as the only means of increasing the birth-rate nationwide in the face of what the party propaganda describes as the 'winter of demography' caused by contraception and abortion. The FN political agenda includes therefore measures in favour of large families, such as the introduction of social benefits for couples with three children or more, as well as a basic wage and pension income for housewives (*For a French future*, 2002).

Undoubtedly, the state has a role to play in the defence of traditional values. As conceived by the far right, the state must protect the cultural and spiritual interests of the ethnic community from loose morals and degeneration. Soft-drug use, homosexuality, miscegenation, abortion, the use of the morning after pill, IUDs, sex outside marriage, the use of condoms to prevent infection by AIDS: all are harmful to the moral, cultural and spiritual standards of the ethnic community. To quote a former member of the FN political bureau, 'we are now witnessing the implosion of the White world caused by the growth of delinquency and crime (that is barbarity). Agents of death are drugs, AIDS and abortion, all encouraged by permissive laws' (*Présent*, 7-8 November 1992). The VB and FN reject any liberalisation of the law on marriage and abortion. The FN has also established working parties such as the CNFE or *Fraternité française*. These campaigning groups, with their value goals like family, abortion, religion or poverty, are active over the whole range of FN policy. They organise single-issue campaigns within their own field of social concern. With a claimed membership of 5,000, the *Cercle national femmes d'Europe* (CNFE), led by Martine Lehideux, is a women's

organisation involved in the promotion of traditional family values. The FN is also linked to various anti-abortion and so-called 'rights of the child' groups such as *Laissez-les vivre* or *SOS-Tout-Petits*, which in the past resorted to illegal methods and were involved in violent action against hospitals and physicians who legally carry out abortions. Direct action groups have thus emerged alongside moderate anti-abortion associations; one example being the FN-affiliated *Cercle Renaissance*.

According to Le Pen, the decrease in the birth-rate is 'a consequence of stress, alcohol and tobacco, which reduce the vitality of men's spermatozoids. It is also a consequence of the so-called women liberation (...) The generalised use of contraceptive pills and the French law on abortion are far more efficient than any nuclear bomb in eradicating our people from the surface of planet earth' (*Contract with the French for the sake of France*, 1995). 'Divorce should be made more difficult', wrote a VB parliamentarian in the newspaper (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, 29 November 1995). 'As divorce becomes easier, the number of homosexuals in our society increases'. The 'loosening of morals' in our society is largely the fault of the media, specifically through the 'abuse of mass communication media, through which such moral decay is propagated' (*Principles*). The 2002 FN manifesto similarly called for a better recognition of marriage and the abrogation of the Civil Wedding Contract (PACS) voted in October 1999 under the Socialist Government of Lionel Jospin.

In many respect, the ordered community is only possible where public authority is effectively endorsed with power through the classic model of *Etat-gendarme* and a significant increase in strength and resources for law-enforcement authorities. For the VB, individuals 'with an exaggerated social conscience must be weeded out of the police forces and the judiciary'. Citizens must also watch over social order and discipline. The FN project for a Sixth Republic calls for a more repressive penal system whose central element would be the reintroduction of death penalty and the general principle of "swift and certain prison sentences without any possibility of remittance whatsoever" (*For a French future*, 2002). According to the VB, neighbourhood watch committees should pass information onto the police about suspicious individuals' behaviour in their local area. Vigilante committees should be given the right to patrol around their own districts –albeit unarmed. Moreover, every person suspected of an offence, even if under the age of 18, such as shoplifting or petty vandalism, should be remanded on bail. Illegally gathered evidence must, according to the VB, be admissible in criminal cases hearing in Courts. Jail sentences must be served in full, without probation or remittance in return for good behaviour. Hardened criminals must be 'permanently removed' from society.

Solidarism, social conflict and the Third Way

The world view of the FN and the VB aims to deal with the organisation of society and the cohabitation of groups within the idealised community. We shall examine in the last section how the far right conceives social justice when it comes to defining principles of coexistence between the ethnically homogeneous ingroup and the various outgroups. Of equal relevance to the present analysis is the way in which the FN and VB claim to regulate conflict between social groups, classes or individuals.

The social views of VB are drawn directly from the authoritarian theories of the 1930s and are referred to as 'Solidarism'. From an historical perspective, contemporary solidarism is linked to Mussolini's corporatism which aimed to bring a sense of solidarity between capitalists and workers in order to pursue the joint interests of the people and the state. The Flemish variant of solidarism was developed in the 1930s by Verdinaso (*het Verbond van Dietse NAtionaal-SOlidaristen*) and the VNV (*Vlaams-Nationalistisch Verbond*), which both collaborated with the Nazis during WWII. Verdinaso was a paramilitary, anti-Semitic and anti-democratic movement which stood for a corporatist solidarity and strongly rejected multipartism and the parliamentary system. The VNV, founded in 1933, and at that time the main Flemish Nationalist party, similarly opted for a variant of authoritarian solidarism (De Wever, 1992), opposing economic liberalism and marxism in order to 'restore the feeling of community amongst all social classes within the nation' (Gijsels, 1992:25). In the 2004 version of the *Vlaams Belang Principles*, no reference was made anymore to Solidarism. However, the preparatory texts for the *Vlaams Belang* party congress on economics (June 2005) was clearly inspired by the basic ideas of Solidarism (see for example the role of trade unions in society according to *Vlaams Belang*, which is very similar to that described in the previous *Vlaams Blok* Solidarist programme).

The ideological inheritance from Verdinaso and the VNV has nourished the claim by the VB that everyone who 'truly experiences the natural ethnic commitment' will reject the class system and the class struggle in favour of solidarity between employers and employees of all occupations (*Principles*). The VB defines solidarism as a third way between exploitative and alienating capitalism in free-market liberal economics and the coercive communist systems. According to Dewinter, 'the VB owes its victory to the fact that it puts forward a few new problems that do not fit the ideological canvas of the traditional parties (...) The old axis 'capital versus labour' is slowly but definitely replaced by a new 'multicultural versus national [*volkse*] identity' axis (quoted by Mudde, 1996:243).

Turning to the FN, it is interesting to note that the *Solidariste* movement quickly constituted itself a major component of the national leadership through Stirbois's *Union Solidariste* which joined the party in the late 1970s. In the mid 1980s, the FN accompanied its strategy of internal moderation with the promotion of neo-liberal economic views and free-market principles against the 'third way' option which was supported by Stirbois. In 1993, the *300 proposals on social and economic policy* included the traditional corporatist theme of solidarity. According to the FN programme, 'a company should not be the locus of a struggle between employers and workers (...) but an authentic working community in which everybody would have their own role according to their situation within the hierarchical structure'. Following the presidential election of 1995, the FN opted unambiguously for the traditional 'neither left, nor right' formula suggested by the young activists of the FNJ (*Le Monde*, 26 September 1995). 'Our movement now wants to overcome the old cleavage between the so-called right and the archaic left in order to unify the whole people of France', said Le Pen (*Le Monde*, 12 February 1996). It was clearly stated that the aim of the party was to integrate the proletariat and, more generally, all the socially deprived groups to the national community by promoting new forms of solidarity which would not be based on social class anymore, but rather on a 'pro/anti-national cleavage' (*Le Monde*, 18-19 February 1996).

In economics, the VB and FN traditionally stood for a sort of neo-liberalism which wouldn't harm the interests of the people's community. The adherence to free-market and *laissez-faire*

principles, along with a set of populist themes regarding the distribution of services by the welfare state, enabled the far right parties to gain electoral support from both the working class and the petty-bourgeoisie (Betz & Immerfall, 1998; Evans, 2003). Interestingly, the political programme of the far right can be regarded as 'a mix, often magnificent and fallacious, of private initiative and social protection (but limited to the native)' (Ignazi, 1996:560).

Throughout the 1980s, the economic project of the FN was one of 'popular capitalism based on property, responsibility and entrenchment' (*Militer au Front*, 1991) directed at the predominant petty-bourgeois component of its electorate, with values such as private initiative, freedom, individual merit and sense of effort lying at the heart of the FN's refusal of any intervention by the state that might be an obstacle to 'natural' market laws. A significant shift occurred in party ideology in the mid-1990s, mainly as a consequence of the strengthening of the solidarist current within the top-level party leadership and the substantial increase in the FN's electoral support among working-class and former leftist voters. This led to a mixed economic platform, combining anti-tax liberalism and national protectionism against globalisation, the United States, the European Union and free trade. The 1995 electoral platform thus added new themes of social protection, in particular regarding the RMI (minimum wage for the most socially deprived individuals) whose benefit should be restricted to the French citizens, with the FN putting more emphasis on the defence of the social rights of 'workers' and socially deprived individuals and violently condemning the 'anonymous and vagabond capitalism of the multinational Masonic companies which want to rule the world' (Le Pen *in Le Monde*, 3 May 1996).

This socio-economic 'synthesis' was well publicised by Le Pen in the 2002 presidential election campaign where the FN's leader would at every possible opportunity define himself as "socially left-wing, economically right-wing and nationally French". Simultaneously, the 2002 party manifesto included a wide range of heterogeneous and unrealistic proposals from tax cuts to national social protectionism and fierce hostility to free trade and globalisation along with the out of hand rejection of the European Union, the EMU and all constraints imposed by the so-called Brussels' '*Eurocracy*'. In April 2000, the FN national party congress voted a motion for opting out of both the EU and EMU. In 2005, the FN strongly opposed the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and called for a No vote in the May referendum. To quote Le Pen, the EU "is not a power but rather a US protectorate and a big soft jellyfish incapable of self-defence" (*Europe-1*, 10 May 2005). Together with the anti-EU component, anti-US stances and the FN rejection of the "new world order imposed by America" became evident in the early 1990s with the FN opposing the first war in Irak and Le Pen publicly supporting Saddam Hussein on location in Baghdad after the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi troops. In 2003, the far right leader condemned the US intervention in Iraq as a "war of arrogance and predation" (February 2003).

As far as the VB is concerned, the socio-economic model chosen was clearly one of harmony within a homogenous ethnic group, in which there are no conflicting interests between component groups. That 'the individual's duty is to take the initiative' has certain logical implications for the VB's view of society. While the party largely acknowledges the virtues of free-market economy, concerns are expressed about the 'weaker, those disadvantaged by nature or misfortune, or the handicapped' who should not be made 'the victims of lesser chances and opportunities' (*Principles*). The unemployed should receive public benefits only

if they perform a (compulsory) service. The *Vlaams Blok* has a somewhat contradictory argument for a strong Europe of 'European peoples'. On the one hand, the party wants a strong and powerful Europe to act on the international stage, capable of speaking and acting as one. Characteristic of this thinking is the call for a fully developed European defence system (an European army being considered a necessity for the future to face the threat embodied by Islamic countries), as well as uniform and stringent policies towards immigration and asylum seekers. On the other hand, however, the party loudly objects to the asphyxiating centralism of Europe, where the European structure is viewed as a breach of the inalienable right of a people to determine its own fate. As a result the attitude to the European Union is in general highly ambivalent: greater integration of free market economy, foreign policy, defence, immigration, crime fighting, and environmental policies, combined with a powerful plea for less or even no intervention in national matters such as the arts, education, law and order and social security (Swyngedouw, Abts & Van Craen, 2005a). Although economically liberal in the internal market, the EU should implement protectionist measures to protect all member states from imports from non-EU countries. Like its French counterpart, the VB strongly attacks the European administration and the so-called Brussels' '*Eurocrats*'.

The role of the existing unions of workers is questioned by the far right. According to the VB, workers should identify themselves with the companies, so that the distinction between management and workers would progressively blur and eventually disappear. Unions should be replaced by joint committees in the workplace, which would pursue the company's best interests. Workers would have some say in company management, but only on matters in which they might have knowledge and expertise. Apart from the minimum legal wage guaranteed by the state, wages and salaries would be dependent on the actual company's performances and results. Another task for the unions (referred to as 'professional associations' by the VB's literature) would consist of helping to develop vocational training in their members. In spite of this, the suppression of trade unions would undoubtedly better fulfil the VB's desire to get rid of unnecessary intermediate social organisation such as unions and mutual health insurance bodies which stand between the people and the state and are criticised for pursuing solely their own interests. A similar view emerges from the FN proposals regarding the regulation of social conflict within companies, although the party conception of the role of the existing unions, and the need for suppressing their rights, is far from unambiguous. Primarily denounced by Le Pen's party is the 'unacceptable privilege' from which both the unions and the civil servants benefit within French society, the former also being accused of political involvement with the parties of the left. The FN asks for more 'efficiency' and 'commitment' on the part of civil servants and proposes to decrease the total number of people employed by the state. Turning to the unions, the existing organisations of workers and employees are rejected because of their 'inefficiency to ensure that the people's rights are truly respected' (*For a French future*, 2002).

Both parties consider that current national laws on strikes should be amended. According to the VB, strikes without preliminary notice should be prohibited and those willing to work should retain the right to do so during strikes. More importantly, the unions would be liable for financial loss caused to third parties. It could be argued from these policies that the VB does not recognise the right to organise. The party's proposals would totally undermine workers' basic rights and thus spell the end of the European industrial consultative model long established in Belgium. Arguably, the FN stance on strikes is fairly similar: the 2002

manifesto states for instance that “freedom of work will be re-established by legally banning strike pickets”.

Anti-partyism and political action

In examining the FN and VB world views, one needs to consider how political actors outside the mainstream develop structured representations of the political groups they oppose within civil democracy. As outlined by many scholars, a key feature of the far right strategy lies with the building of the concept of ‘political class’ or ‘political establishment’, which embraces all the other parties and tends to undermine differences between them (Swyngeouw, 1992; Schedler, 1996). Anti-partyism thus provides a cognitive map of the whole political universe as a dichotomy, along with a populist appeal to the ‘man on the street’ against political elites. The far right propaganda refers constantly to what it describes as the corruption and unreliability of all existing political parties. Politicians are said to be interested solely in ‘filling their own pockets’ and favouring their supporters at the expenses of the ordinary man.

In the case of the FN, the above process of “de-differentiation” was more than evident from the past recurrent attacks on the ‘*bande des quatre*’ (referring to the PC, PS, UDF and RPR) and the constant attempts at blurring differences between the main parties of the left and the right. In 2002, the far right campaign was based on denouncing the joint failure and collusive strategies of the parties of the mainstream during the five years of cohabitation, with repeated attacks on ‘Josrac and Chipin’ (referring to Prime Minister Jospin and President Chirac, and mixing purposely their names). The FN’s picture of French politics is predominantly one of corruption, decay and increased party privilege. Although the FN leadership never questions overtly the legitimacy of representative democracy, it would be fair to say that anti-system attitudes promoted by the far right go far beyond simple attacks on corruption and undoubtedly contain some elements of a real anti-democratic programme. To quote Le Pen, ‘the Fifth Republic is a mad cow with AIDS. French politics stink; there is impotency and corruption everywhere (...) We are faced with this massive epidemic [corruption], which commands that we eliminate the whole herd’ (*Libération*, 15 July 1996). According to Gollnisch: “when the political regime is rotten, a crisis is salutary. Politicians get lost! Push off!” (FN national committee, 7 April 2005).

In the FN, anti-partyism goes alongside with political anti-Semitism and the traditional far right theory of plots and manipulation. In the FN’s view of politics, the established parties, in particular those of the right, are depicted as subordinate to the influence of highly manipulative organisations, either Jewish or Masonic. For instance, the RPR’s refusal to ally with the FN in 1995 was seen as the evidence that the ‘Masonic’ leaders of the gaullist movement ‘were constrained by all those obscure forces which aim to rule our country against the interests of its people’ (Le Pen *in Le Monde*, 7 June 1995). Over the years, anti-Semitism and revisionism have become recurrent features of the FN’s political discourse: as early as 1987, Le Pen had paved the way to the many attempts at questioning overtly the reality of the Holocaust by regarding the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the existence of gas chambers as mere ‘details’ in the whole history of WWII (RTL, 13 September 1987). More recently, Gollnisch was expelled from the University of Lyon after his public statement that “concentration camps did exist but historians could further discuss the number of those who were killed”. “As for the existence of gas chambers, it is up to historians to decide” added Le Pen’s first lieutenant (*Libération*, 12 October 2004).

Similar features of anti-partyism and anti-political establishment attitudes can be drawn from the ideological corpus of the Belgian far right and the way in which party politics is described as 'political gangsterism'. The VB *Principles* do not reject the multiparty system, free expression, and parliamentary democracy but the message is clear. 'The VB is not a 'colour' party (like the Social Democrats (SP), the liberals (VLD) and the democratic Flemish Nationalists (VU)) or an 'established' party (like the Christian Democrats (CD&V)) prepared to compromise and bargain, always driven by the perspective of the next election'. Both 'colour' and 'established' parties squander the real interests of the people and the VB claims to be 'essentially different from those communities of interests embodied by the colour parties'. The VB demands 'effective measures to upgrade political life and parliamentary activity, and fights against the mixing of politics and financial interests'. As explained in the *Principles*, 'politics must be withdrawn from the atmosphere of small-mindedness, cliques, and calculation in which it has currently been marooned by democracy and the malady of parliamentarism'. In other words, the world view of the VB leaves very little room for political parties which propagate misleading theories and politics should be rescued by suppressing democracy and closing parliament. Interestingly, the new version of the *Vlaams Belang Principles* contains a paragraph on the acceptance of democracy and recognition of the fundamental rights referred to in the ECHR. The reason for this is to be found in the new Belgian law on party financing which requires such explicit quotes and references in order for a particular party to be able to get subsidies from the Federal state. In the case of the VB, these were introduced just after the new law was implemented some years ago.

Overall, modern society is in decline because of crime, moral decay and narrow self-interest. Action needs therefore to be undertaken in order to prevent society from falling into pieces. The VB considers three ways in which this decline can be reversed. First of all there is the parliamentary route. In Parliament the VB can act as a pressure party, which by its presence and influence on public opinion can force other parties to tighten their position (e.g. on immigration or law-and-order). Secondly, the VB is expecting the new Flemish political elite to push for the independence of Flanders, even against the will of the majority of Flemish voters. Finally the party must work to overcome the current ideological and cultural hegemony in education, journalism and culture, which according to the VB is in the hands of left-wing '*soixante-huitards*' (*Knack,* 14 June 1995). As explained by Dewinter: 'no political change is possible if not preceded by cultural and social change' (quoted by Spruyt, 1995:166).

Menace to the community: immigration issues in the far right world view

Not only is the urge for action a consequence of the decay of traditional politics, but also it is justified by the danger represented by foreign populations and their deleterious impact on the life and essence of the community. The rise of the far right movements in the mid 1980s was closely related to the emergence of immigrants and asylum-seekers issues in Western Europe. Part of the explanation for the electoral success of parties such as the VB and the FN lies with the politicisation of the immigration issue, but also with those parties' ability to redraw the social environment, constructing –by reducing immigrants' symbolic, cultural and economic capital– the non-European foreigners as threatening groups (Swyngedouw, 1995b).

The ideological construction of the immigrants as an homogenous and threatening social actor is obvious in the FN propaganda, particularly regarding North-African people. For instance,

Le Pen denounces the 'undesirable immigrants who lead the French Social Security to bankruptcy, who colonise our cities and villages, who overcrowd our prisons, who rape and kill' (*Le Monde*, 23-24 June 1996). For the FN leader, "immigration creates all conditions for social disintegration" (*RMC-Info*, 25 April 2002). One key argument of the FN is that the culture and religion of the immigrants is irreconcilable with the European culture of which the French tradition forms part. In particular, Islam is considered a major threat to the French civilisation and described "not only as a simple set of beliefs but also a religious and political theocracy" (*For a French future*, 2002). Fitting into a very similar scheme, the 'massive' presence of foreigners in Flanders is identified by the VB propaganda as the root cause of moral decay. 'The presence of numerous immigrants is slowly but definitively changing our world. Their presence changes the appearance of the streets, leads to an increase in criminality and the growth of unemployment' (*70 point programme*). According to the VB, Islam is diametrically opposed to established western rights such as freedom of expression, democracy, woman emancipation, and the separation between the Church and the State.

Not surprisingly, both far right parties reject the integration of non-European foreigners, and pledge for a phased return to their countries of origin. In the context of post-industrial societies faced with increasing rates of unemployment, housing problems and the crisis of the welfare state, the exclusion of immigrants is justified not only by cultural arguments but also by economic reasons (Hargreaves & Leaman, 1995; Swyngedouw, 1995b). In both cases, 'the xenophobic discourse (...) is an element in a political struggle about who deserves the right to be cared for by the state and society : a fight for the collective goods of the state' (Wimmer, 1997:32).

The VB *70 point programme* states a number of policy aims with regard to immigration issues. Interestingly enough, the above programme was largely adopted by the French *Front National* in its *50 proposals on immigration* (1991) and subsequently formed part of the 1995 and 2002 party manifestos. One striking aspect of these documents concerns the numerous breaches of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) that they contain. As noted earlier, the most extreme features have been since removed from the newly created *Vlaams Belang*'s party programme under the threat of possible conviction for racism. The playing down on immigration issues actually started in 2001 with some of the controversial and potentially ECHR incompatible proposals being left aside or re-formulated in an attempt to appear as more moderate and, therefore, more acceptable for coalition. Overall, the basic principle is now one opposing full assimilation to departure from the host country (*aanpassen of opkrassen*). According to Philip Dewinter, however, the fact is that the core VB perception of immigration hasn't changed beyond surface moderation. "Multiculturalism has lead to multicriminality (…) Islamite organisations must be watched closely. The minor sing of unsuited or deviant behaviour must lead to their withdrawal (…) Who are those moderated Muslims? I do not know them. I do not believe in them", said recently the VB leader to the Dutch newspaper *Metro* (14 May 2005).

Both parties threaten extreme measures against immigrants and question some of the fundamental rights of foreigners. According to the VB, freedom of association would be restricted for immigrants, as would the basic right of families to be united through legislation on family entry and settlement. The right to hold property would be limited for foreigners within a probationary period of ten years. Also contrary to some of the fundamental principles contained in the ECHR, the VB proposals call for the collective deportation of foreigners and

would allow for ethnic discrimination through separate educational and social security systems, limitation on child allowances for foreign couples with a maximum of three children (Belgians having an unlimited right to child allowance regardless of the number of children), limitations on unemployment benefits compared to that received by the Belgians, and the introduction of a tax on companies resorting to foreign workers. All these proposals are subordinate to the principle of 'Our People First', the VB slogan which is the concise but effective expression of both the VB and the FN policies.

Indeed, the very similar concept of 'priority to the French citizens' (*Préférence nationale*), keystone to the FN's immigration policy, states that the French should always benefit first from all subsidies of the national Welfare State. The 2002 party manifesto included a series of measures that would give priority to French citizens in getting jobs and being protected from redundancy, as well as priority in access to public housing or securing property loans. All state benefits such as family allowances, unemployment benefits or the minimum social wage (RMI) would be exclusively intended for the French. The programme claims that the FN would put an end to legal immigration and abrogate existing legislation on family entry and settlement while deporting all illegal immigrants to their country of origin, suppressing renewable resident's permits and expelling every foreigner subjected to a conviction by French Courts. The very few who would be granted asylum 'will be invited to abstain from all political activism'. To obtain French citizenship, candidates would have to demonstrate that they are fully 'assimilated' into and 'committed' to the national community. Citizenship would only be granted after a 'long period of probation' during which candidates would have to abstain from all political activities. All 'ethnic ghettos' in suburban areas would be 'dismantled and the existing housing facilities renovated for priority attribution to French citizens'. Foreign associations would be put under strict scrutiny by the French administration (*For a French future*, 2002). The VB would also impose strict conditions on naturalisation and applications for citizenship (*70 point programme*): applicants would have to be at least 20, have had their main place of residence in the country for at least 10 years, speak the language of the community, be of 'good moral conduct' (i.e. not have been subjected to any conviction) and offer special services or skills to the host country. Such criteria would substantially reduce the list of eligible people, certainly excluding Moroccan or Turkish immigrants in Flanders. In the 1990s, both the FN and the VB programmes included a very controversial proposal to 'review' all naturalisations that took place since 1974, the year in which restrictions on immigration were introduced in Belgium and France. In the new version of its programme, the *Vlaams Belang* claims to restrict the right to citizenship exclusively to immigrants who can be seen as 'fully assimilated' (*Vlaams Belang*, 2004 programme). Similarly, whilst a key measure in the 1991 FN document on immigration policy, that specific measure was taken out of the 2002 party programme.

c) Nation, lineage: the relationship between the individual and society

The relationship between the individual and society is the keystone to every ideology. Central to this question is whether the individual is subject or otherwise to the collective interests of society? As mentioned previously, the portrayal of humanity depicted by the FN and the VB goes together with a holistic conception of society. With respect to the relationship between the individual and the group, it is clear from the ideological corpus of both parties that the ethnic community takes absolute precedence over individuals, as people are essentially

regarded as ‘social animals’. Individuals have no existence of their own, from which they could draw universal rights; on the contrary they are intrinsically and inseparably associated with their particular community through the basic family social unit. Ethnic commitment is not a voluntary engagement, but rather a natural innate link. Essentially, says the FN, men and women are heirs to the tradition, the culture and values of the nation to which they belong. Their duty is to preserve and transmit such inheritance. In contrast, individualistic principles are considered pure theoretical abstractions in opposition to the reality that bounds individuals to their lineage: as quoted in the 2002 manifesto “the nation is not built on social contract but is the fruit of an order”. Individual rights therefore exist only insofar as deriving from the performance of duty within the ethnic community. For the VB, such a sense of duty and commitment includes also language consciousness and, consequently, the rejection of the use of French and English in Flanders.

The far right is in general extremely vague about individual rights. The VB programme refers essentially to allowances and social benefits in negative terms (i.e. by targeting those who shouldn’t be given the right to be cared for by the state) but hardly mentions other fundamental human rights. Moreover, the party sets up a long list of ‘offences’ which should lead into somebody being deprived of their basic rights or nationality: ‘making oneself guilty of a major crime or repeatedly committing minor offences; undermining in words and in writing or otherwise Western cultural, political, religious and philosophical traditions and customs; being a member of a group, association, political or religious movement whose purpose would be to achieve the above undermining; and, more generally, every serious attack on public order and the moral standards of society’ (Dewinter quoted by Spruyt, 1995:100).

Ethnic/cultural nationalism provides the necessary ideological and theoretical background to the specification of the links between the individual and the community. In defining the latter, the FN and the VB refer essentially to the generic concept of ‘nation’ seen as a unit of individuals who share the same culture and ethnic origins and a clearly defined territory. This narrow conception is of great importance to the understanding of the far right model of ‘particularistic’ and ‘closed’ society (Swyngedouw, 1995a). As a consequence, individuals or groups which do not possess a similar ethnic or cultural background can hardly claim to become members of the existing community. According to the FN, ‘the nation is a community of language, interest, race, memories and culture, in which men blossom. The individual’s links with the nation include the historical roots, the memory of dead people, the past, heredity and heritage’ (*For a French future*, 2002). From these common elements of history and tradition grows the inherited national community. ‘Tradition is the mirror of the true nature of the nation’, to quote the VB *Principles*. It is not just language but also 'origin' which defines who forms part of the national community. As explained by Dewinter referring to the case of Brussels: ‘speakers of other languages can also be Flemings’ (quoted by Spruyt, 1995:88).

The concept of ‘identity’, as conceived by the VB, remains largely contingent to the German notion of ‘people-nationalism’ (*volksnationalismus*) based on language and culture whereas the FN's ideology is directly linked to the traditional model of French state-nationalism. For the VB, the nation must coincide with the state, or, more precisely, state borders should be drawn from existing ethnic and cultural boundaries. For this reason, the modern Belgian federal state poses an insoluble problem which can only be solved by the creation of an independent Flemish state whose frontiers would be defined on the grounds of ethnicity. In this view, the actual language criterion, on the basis of which Belgium has been legally

divided into a French-speaking and Flemish-speaking part since 1961, should be abandoned so that Flanders could recover the 'occupied' territories. Brussels should relinquish the actual bilingual status to become Flemish again. The existing border with France is accepted, provided that the Flemish state take 'all necessary steps to ensure that they [the 'Flemings' in French Flanders] can live in accordance with their nature' (*Principles*). Similarly, the border with the Netherlands must be respected, although a federal state embracing the Netherlands and Flanders would be desirable in the future.

From the above conception of the linkage between individuals and society emerges an exclusive view of nationhood and citizenship, which largely restricts the opportunity for potential newcomers. The acquisition of nationality takes place within the model of particularistic and culturally closed society which rejects immigration and the integration of 'undesirable' foreigners. For Le Pen, 'the French nation is essentially based upon blood, territory and memory (...) One should be aware of the contemporary menace on France and its biological substance' (*Libération*, 14 October 1996). Le Pen's party joins with the VB in promoting a restrictive regime of nationality which would base access to citizenship exclusively on the requirements of blood (*jus sanguini*) and reject consequently all naturalisations on the basis of birth on the territory or marriage to a native.

2. Electoral support and patterns of party system integration

One important lesson to be drawn from the above analysis is that of the role of a coherent set of beliefs with strong utopian and populist components in the emergence and durable installation of the far right in France and Belgium. The 'new society' utopia to which far right leaders refer can be considered a major element of the overall electoral appeal to mass electorate by parties such as the VB or the FN. This probably highlights in return the failure of the Belgian *Front national* to establish itself as a permanent actor of the political scene in French-speaking Belgium in spite of a number of electoral performances at the local level [4]. Not only can the electoral achievements of parties such as the VB or the FN be accounted for by the ability of those movements to mobilise resentment, protest and hostility against the 'political class' (Betz & Immerfall, 1998), but also their success can be seen as the result of those parties' capacity to offer - apparently - tangible, concrete and alternative policies to those of the established parties which no longer seem to be in a position to solve major social problems.

[4] The Belgian FN has not yet developed a coherent ideology, but rather seems to have copied some key elements from both the VB and FN party platforms. The party has remained marginal to national politics, representing just one of the numerous extreme right 'groupuscules' in French speaking Belgium. Throughout its existence, Féret's movement has been riven with internal fights and party factionalism, multiple splits and endemic organisational failures. Until 1995, the Belgian FN had never won enough votes to achieve political relevance. In 1995, the party obtained 7.5 per cent of the votes in the Brussels Capital Region and 5.2 per cent in the Walloon Region. In 1994, it captured one seat in the European Parliament as well as 47 and 26 municipal council seats in the Brussels and Walloon Regions respectively. Most surprising was the result in Charleroi, where five unknown members of the party were elected without any program or campaign, totalling 11 per cent of the votes. In the 2004 regional elections, the FN polled 5.4 per cent of the votes in the Brussels Capital Region (+ 2.4 points compared to 1999) and 8.1 per cent in the Walloon Regional council (+ 4.2). In the 2003 general election, the party received 3.5 per cent of the vote for the Chamber in the Brussels Region and 5.6 per cent in the Walloon Region.

a) Mass mobilisation and party organisation development

In Belgium, the VB made its first impressive breakthrough in the 1989 European and 1991 general elections (Ackaert, De Winter, Swyngedouw, 1996). In 1995, Dillen's party secured 12.5 per cent of the votes in Flanders following the party's outstanding performance in the 1994 municipal election in Antwerp, in which the FN received 28.5 per cent of the polls. In the 2000 municipal elections in Antwerp, the *Vlaams Blok*'s score rose to a further 33 per cent which brought the party 20 of the 55 seats in the city council. In the 1999 and 2003 national elections, the *Vlaams Blok* won 15.4 and 17.9 per cent of the vote respectively in Flanders. In the 2004 regional elections, it received 24.2 per cent, becoming one of the largest parties in Flemish parliament.

In France, the results of the presidential election in April 2002 showed a significant increase in the support for the two leaders of the far right with a total of 19.2 per cent of the vote cast in the first round and 17.8 per cent (around 5.5 million votes) in the first ever second round featuring a far right candidate in France (Cautrès & Mayer, 2004). Despite a relative drop for FN candidates in the subsequent legislative ballots in June 2002, with 11.1 per cent of the votes, and the inability of the far right to weigh significantly on the electoral outcome, the 2002 legislative and presidential elections bore testimony to the consolidation of the position of the extreme right in the French political landscape. The 2004 regional and cantonal elections provided further confirmation of the strong implantation of the far right at the local level and the hegemony of the *Front national* over the splinter group led by Bruno Mégret under the banner of the MNR.

Together with more than half of the top-level party elites and a sizeable segment of grassroots members, Bruno Mégret, General Delegate of the party, left the FN in January 1999 to form a rival group, the *Mouvement National* (MN) subsequently renamed *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR). In attracting 2.3 per cent of the votes in the first round of the 2002 presidential ballot and 1.1 per cent in the subsequent legislative election, the *mégrétiste* faction demonstrated the blatant failure by its leader to build a political bridge between the mainstream and extreme right poles, and the incapacity of the MNR to resolve the fundamental contradiction between Le Pen's anti-system populism and any sort of technocratic credibility [5].

The amplitude and recurrence of these electoral performances clearly raises the vote for the VB and FN above the status of a simple protest vote which has often been regarded as a key feature of mass mobilisation by these parties. Over the years, both of them have enjoyed a growing loyalty of a group of 'stable' supporters. In France, the FN has managed increasingly to stop relying upon very volatile one-time voters and instead stabilise a pool of voters accounting for around 85 per cent of his electorate between elections (Swyngedouw, Boy, Mayer, 2000; Evans & Ivaldi, 2005). In the first round of the 2002 presidential election, the

[5] The electoral setback has been joined by severe financial and legal difficulties. In March 2000, the Appeal Court of Paris confirmed the decision to grant legal ownership of the FN name and logo to Le Pen and deprive the mégretiste organisation of any share of the FN's financial assets. In the summer of 2002, the MNR leader saw the collapse of his citadel in Vitrolles and the forced departure of his wife from the town hall after the annulment of the municipal election result of 2001. All this against the context of revelations of close links with certain radical Right-wing groups and a failed attempt on the life of Jacques Chirac by Maxime Brunerie, a former MNR candidate in Paris, in July 2002. In October 2002, Catherine Mégret lost the municipal by-election in Vitrolles against the socialist candidate. In January 2004, Bruno Mégret was condemned to a one-year ineligibility sentence and 10,000 Euros penalty after the court ascertained irregularities in the MNR party finances during the 2002 electoral campaigns.

two extreme right candidates attracted about 90 per cent of Le Pen's 1995 voters and 86 per cent of those who had chosen a FN candidate in the 1997 ballot, a level of voting loyalty comparable to those observed in the precedent elections of 1995 (presidential), 1997 (legislative) and 1998 (regional). In the 2003 general election and the 2004 regional contest, the *Vlaams Blok* enjoyed the highest level of electoral loyalty in Flanders, with 85 and 95 per cent respectively of its previous voters casting their votes for the extreme right. Similar figures were noticeable in the 1995 and 1999 ballots [6].

The stability of the electoral support for the far right in post-election surveys is echoed by that of the geographical spread of the vote and the existence of local electoral strongholds. Founded in Antwerp on the ruins of extreme right and radical Flemish nationalist 'groupuscules', the *Vlaams Blok* won momentum from the moment it started to stress its anti-immigrant agenda in the mid 1980s. Between 1985 and 1991, the party's electoral influence mostly spread around its bastion city. Since 1991, the party has maintained its appeal to voters in Antwerp while managing to secure electoral support in other areas, mainly Oostende and the municipalities surrounding it, the area around Kortrijk (West-Flanders), Gent (East-Flanders) and its surroundings and the area around Beringen (Limburg) (Van Craen, Swyngedouw 2002). Since the mid 1980s, the French FN has enjoyed its highest levels of support in the Paris region, Nord Pas-de-Calais, Alsace, Rhône-Alpes and the Southern Mediterranean sea-board (Perrineau, 2003). The 2002 national and 2004 local elections showed a very similar spread with the FN achieving its best scores in the constituencies of urban France faced with deindustrialisation, unemployment, an immigrant population and low law-and-order.

With regard to party organisation, the strengths of the two parties are well in evidence. In Belgium, success in the polls and the new party finance laws adopted in 1989 gave the VB a considerable financial boost to establish a broadly based propaganda machine, and to organise congresses and one-day seminars at which party activists expound their vision of society (Spruyt, 1995). Over the years, public funding of the *Vlaams Blok* by national and local authorities has increased in proportion to the total number of votes received by the party in elections. In 1989 the *Vlaams Blok* received nearly 75,000 Euros from the national Government; by 2000, public funding amounted to over 1,685,000 Euros. In addition, from 2001 onwards, the Flemish Government granted public subsidies for all political parties represented in the Flemish parliament which brought the *Vlaams Blok* an additional 62,000 Euros. As early as 1991, the party managed to establish local branches at the arrondissement level: by 1999, the *Vlaams Blok* claimed a total of 165 of those local organisations which, given the high level of party centralism, retain limited autonomy. It must be noted that, with regards to party organisation, the 2004 transformation into *Vlaams Belang* did only result in a number of 'cosmetic' changes: for instance, the new procedure to appoint the party leader was in fact already effective under the former *Vlaams Blok*'s set of rules (Verstraete, 2005). In theory, candidates to party presidency are put forward by the party Council at national party congress. However, it must be borne in mind that all members of the Council are actually appointed directly by the incumbent president himself.

[6] Exit-polls surveys by ISPO-K.U.Leuven on behalf of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT conducted in the national elections of 1995 and 1999 showed that once voters had switched to the *Vlaams Blok*, they became rather loyal to it. Between 1991 and 1995, about 75 per cent of previous 1991-voters were loyal to the extreme right, compared to 68 per cent of all voters who were loyal to their 1991 choice. Between 1995 and 1999, the comparable figure rose to 79 per cent (as compared with 66 per cent in all voters) (Swyngedouw, Beerten et al, 1995, 1999).

Membership figures of the *Vlaams Blok* are still subject to discussion as no external control over the actual number of members is possible. The party claimed over 1,200 members in 1981 and 17,170 in 2000. Looking patterns of electoral entrenchment in local elections shows that the party is best implanted in the Antwerp Province and the Brussels Capital Region (Van Craen, Swyngedouw, 2002). Like its French counterpart, the *Vlaams Blok* has maintained links with a number of flanking organisations on the extreme right fringe of the system, which for most of them originated in the collaborationist groups during WWII and/or the radical Flemish nationalism nebula, and which have accompanied the party since its inception. Founded in 1986, the *Vlaams Blok* Youth organisation became a powerful tool for political recruitment and mobilisation. In addition, party leader Dewinter tried to establish a number of peripheral – the so-called 'circle'– organisations as did Le Pen did in France. However, beside a few neighbourhood organisations, mostly based in Antwerp, and some clear-cut follow-travellers organisations (e.g. *Hart voor Antwerpen* – a Heart for Antwerp), such a strategy did not prove very successful so far.

In France, FN individual membership rose from an estimated 15,000 in the mid-1980s to about 40,000 in 2002; in 2004, Le Pen's party claimed a total of 60,000 registered members. The 1990s also witnessed the development of the basic structures and reinforcement of the entire party apparatus at both local and national levels, with branches in all the 96 departments of metropolitan France and most of the urban areas. This internal development of highly centralised autocratic party organisations was associated with the founding of a large number of flanking groups, associated newspapers, youth organisations (the *Front national de la Jeunesse* (FNJ) was created in 1974), think-tanks and clubs, whose main purpose is political lobbying within specific fields of concern or particular social and occupational sectors. The FN's peripheral organisations include a variety of small scale issue-oriented groups [7] which, for most of them, are nothing but empty shells relying upon a very small number of dedicated activists (Ivaldi, 2005). The 1988 bill and subsequent legislation on public funding for political parties in France led to the FN availing of increasing financial resources: in 2004, Le Pen's party was granted a total of 4,580,000 Euros proportionally to the total number of votes obtained in the 2002 legislative elections.

b) Political isolation and policy-making impact

The above glance at the results of elections over the past fifteen years reveals the amplitude of changes which have taken place in the balance of power between the main competitors in the French and Flemish polity. Despite their electoral performances however, both the FN and the VB remain isolated on the rejected margins of mainstream politics with very little opportunity to play a decisive role in governmental formation.

[7] National Club for Hunting, Fishing and the Environment, General Alliance against Racism and for the Respect of French Identity, Le Pen Generations, France-Ecology-Environment, SOS Children in Irak, Anti-unemployment Front, National Banking Club, National Club of French Jews, National Federation of Modern Company and Freedom, National Club for the Disabled, National Club for French repatriated from North Africa, Association for the Abolition of Income Tax and Tax Reform, Club of the French living abroad, National Club of French Farmers, National Club of Veterans, National Coordination of Health Professionals, National Club of European Women, National Club of Pensioners, National Club of Taxi Drivers, The League for Life, National Union of Corsicans. The MNR has created very similar clubs and organisations.

Patterns of party co-operation and competition: diverging strategies?

As mentioned earlier, the change over from *Vlaams Blok* to *Vlaams Belang* was mainly a matter of changing the party's image in the general public and increase its coalition potential to break from the political isolation imposed by mainstream parties through the *cordon sanitaire*. It must be noted that the actual interpretation of the latter ranges from strict refusal of any contact whatsoever with the extreme right (i.e. the Green party's stance) to the rejection of all coalitions at both the local and national levels (that is the position of all other Flemish parties). For its part, the VB tried to broaden its appeal to public figures and potential defectors from other parties: the party managed to do so on a couple of occasions in the 2003 national and 2004 regional elections. In return for their new allegiance, the new comers were instantly given prominent positions within the party. Despite however the ever growing electoral impact of the far right and the many attempts by *Vlaams Belang* leaders to build links with potential coalition partners, there still should be no formal collaboration between mainstream parties and the extreme right in the forthcoming 2006 municipal elections. One important reason for that is the warning by a number of French-speaking parties (in particular the *Parti socialiste*) at the Federal level that they would refuse to enter into national government coalition with Flemish parties compromised with the Flemish extreme right at the local level.

In France, the early 1990s witnessed a significant change in patterns of party cooperation and competition with the end of the 'conciliatory' phase which had seen the development of formal and informal links between the mainstream right and the FN since the electoral breakthrough of the far right in the 1983 local by-election in Dreux. Collusion and tactical manoeuvring, which had been developed as a response to the alteration in the balance of power between the moderate right and their new challenger, became much less likely, as it was evident from electoral outcomes that Le Pen' party was the only beneficiary of such a strategy. Although contacts between the mainstream right and the FN did take place subsequently [8], the RPR-UDF alliance clearly rejected the construction of a right-wing pole that would embrace the extreme right, and agreed to join with parties of the left in systematically setting up an electoral 'republican front' against the FN wherever the far right candidate would be in a position to move forward to the second round of electoral contests. This political isolation and lack of coalition potential were reinforced by the impact of the institutional setting on the dynamics of national politics and the specific bipolar constraints inherent in the two-ballot system. In France, pressures for change coming from parties outside the mainstream such as the FN have traditionally met with strong resistance from the majoritarian logics of the electoral system and the influence of the mechanical process of translating votes into parliamentary seats (Ivaldi, 2003).

In the face of the strong commitment from the ruling parties of the right, the FN shifted its own position during the mid-1990s from one which favoured a broader right-wing alternative to the existing RPR-UDF coalition to one of hostility towards the mainstream parties of the right and President Chirac in particular [9]. In 2002, Le Pen continued to oppose fiercely both Chirac and Jospin as 'collusive members' of the ruling 'establishment', and to build upon the

[8] In the aftermath of the 1998 regional elections, a number of RPR-UDF candidates were elected as Presidents of the regional councils with the public support from FN councillors: Jean-Pierre Soisson in Bourgogne, Charles Baur in Picardie, Jacques Blanc in Languedoc-Roussillon and Charles Millon in Rhône-Alpes.

[9] This strategic U-turn was well evidenced in the 1997 legislative election with 132 FN candidates being purposely put forward to the second round (76 confronting both the left and the moderate right in three-way elections).

'neither right nor left' strategic line initiated by the FN in the mid-1990s to strengthen its electoral appeal to disillusioned voters on both sides of the political spectrum [10].

Public perception and policy-making impact

In France, the general perception of the FN is one of an extreme and anti-democratic organisation: in the second round of the 2002 presidential election, the spectacular demonstrations against Le Pen's party by all political parties of the left, associations, Churches and trade unions were clear indications of the strong rejection of the far right by the vast majority of voters. Opinion polls surveys regularly point to the high level of rejection of the FN by the public: 85 per cent have a negative opinion of the party and over two thirds (68 per cent) of the French still regard Le Pen's party as a 'threat to democracy in France' (SOFRES-*Figaro Magazine* survey, 23-24 March 2005; SOFRES-*L'Express* survey, 9-10 April 2003)

Yet, the ideas of the FN have entered the realm of public debate and are shared by a proportion of the electorate which goes beyond the actual electoral strength of the far right. A trend analysis of opinion polls over the 1984-2003 period of time shows a fairly stable public support for the FN's themes and ideas, between 20 to 25 per cent of the whole population (SOFRES-*Le Monde*-RTL, November 2003). Not only has Le Pen's ideology managed to infiltrate the beliefs of a significant section of French voters but the controversial issues publicised by the far right have also been partly absorbed by mainstream parties of the right thereby significantly influencing policy-making and the re-orientation of party manifestos. This was well evidenced by the Pasqua (1993) and Debré (1997) restrictive laws on immigration or the tough conservative-authoritarian stance on crime taken by the UMP in 2002, at least partly in an attempt to steal the FN's thunder on law-and-order (Ivaldi, 2002). More recently, the restrictive Plan on immigration introduced by Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin in May 2005 was part and parcel of the Government's desire to tackle the issue of illegal immigration to occupy the potential political space for the extreme right. This was further evidenced by Nicolas Sarkozy's proposals after his re-appointment to the Ministry of Interior in June 2005, which included a disguised call for immigration quotas and a reinforcement of police and custom controls at France's borders in order to increase by 50 per cent the total number of illegal immigrants sent back to their country of origin before the end of 2005. "I want to put and end to all forms of misappropriation, marriages in name or medical benefits (…) I also intend to be stricter with regard to the wages, housing and integration conditions of those applying for family reunification", said Nicolas Sarkozy (9 June 2005). The Prime Minister's additional comment that "priority should be given to the French for jobs" went curiously unnoticed albeit a clear reference to one of the key themes of the far right's ideology.

Whilst the overwhelming majority of Flemish voters claim that they would never vote for the *Vlaams Blok*, the influence of the extreme right on other parties' electoral platforms and ideological orientations is blatant from the changes in mainstream politicise with regards to

[10] The party's failure to gain parliamentary representation and counter the UMP's successful incorporative strategy in the legislative ballot led to increasing intra-party factionalism and the re-opening of the longstanding opposition among FN top-level elites between the old guard embodied by Bruno Gollnisch, Marie-France Stirbois or Jacques Bompard, and the so-called 'modernists' who advocate for an ideological tone down and favour a more conciliatory approach to building links with parties of the moderate right.

proprietary issues of the far right such as immigration, asylum-seekers, integration of ethnic minorities or law-and-order. As evidenced in the French case, there has also been a clear trend towards a stricter approach to these issues by incumbent and opposition parties alike. For instance, the opening of temporary detention centres for asylum-seekers whose application was turned down and the launch of new deportation programmes for illegal immigrants to be sent back to their country of origin were highly publicised by the Government in the press and the media. Additional legislation commands that new comers must now get on a training integration course including Dutch language tuition under the threat of loosing eligibility for social benefits otherwise. Of all Flemish parties, the liberal VLD certainly took the hardest stance on immigration and criminality. Despite controversy, the former VLD Minister of Justice in the Federal Government requested for instance that scientific research be conducted on the relationship between criminality and ethnicity. Instead of 'integration', the new Flemish Government prefers to use the word '*inburgering*' which doesn't translate well into English but points to the fact that ethnic minorities and immigrants have to become members of the national community like any other Flemish citizen. For this, the 2004 government declaration foresaw the implementation of the individual 'Becoming Citizen' Contract (containing the obligation for new immigrants to run a so-called 'integration course' including the aforementioned obligation to learn Dutch). Recently, the Flemish Government was planning to try ban immigrants and ethnic minorities with a low command of the Dutch language from social housing, pointing to the fact that the knowledge of a common language is essential to living together.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding contextual, cultural and historical specificities, the comparative analysis of the Flemish VB and French FN reveals a number of converging elements with regards to the electoral growth, organisational development and institutionalisation of both far right parties in their respective country since the mid 1980s. The gradual increase in the electoral support for the far right has largely altered the existing balance of forces and posed unprecedented challenges to the traditional format of national politics in Flanders and France. Though they are faced with systemic isolation, lack of coalition potential and strong rejection by a majority of voters at the margin of the political system, the FN and VB insidiously continue to exert their influence on many spheres of public debate, party ideology and policy-making at both national and local levels.

The in-depth and cross-national analysis of the FN and VB utopia points to important similarities in the views and ideological beliefs of their non-democratic ideological corpus based upon ethnocentrist authoritarian and anti-egalitarian values. The two far right parties considered for the analysis share common views with regards to immigrants, women, institutions, political parties, unions, social and economic issues, or the EU. Overall, the development of a core ideology seems to be more dependent on the anti-system, populist and ethnocentrist views of the parties than on the nation-state wherein those parties emerged and developed. Interestingly, diverging views on how the very concept of nation-state did not prevent for instance collaboration between the Belgian and the French far right in the European Parliament (Abramowicz, 1996).

As hypothesised in this chapter, the presence of a structured ideological system of beliefs and representations of social reality can be considered a crucial factor in the rise and electoral stabilisation of peripheral actors such as the FN and the VB, which contributes to differentiate those from simple protest or single-issue parties. Despite significant changes in patterns of party competition and co-operation and a number of tactical adjustments, the ideological corpus and *weltanschauung* of both organisations –as deduced not only from official party literature but also from the political behaviour of party leaders– has proved very consistent over the years. There is also some evidence of a broader West-European far right ideological space in development and the present analysis ought to be complemented by further insight of comparable parties' ideology in other countries.

Lastly, in relation to current debate over the ideological nature of the specific type of extreme right or neo-populist parties, and the many classificatory attempts by scholars, it is clear from our analysis that the VB and FN ideological corpus is non-democratic by nature. Although these parties stress their commitment to the basic principles of representative democracy and claim to have abandoned their fascist legacy, they pose a significant threat to fundamental individual rights and freedom of organisation. Their policy proposals rely on blatant discriminating measures on the ground of cultural differentialism or neo-racism (Taguieff, 1986). In many respects, the FN and VB political objectives aim to challenge the established post-war social-democratic consensus: in that, their ultimate political goals do not differ significantly from the essential revolutionary attempt by fascism at creating a new order on the ruins of the old society.

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