





## RIISING FROM THE ASHES OF ELECTORAL DEFEAT: REVERSAL OF VLAAMS BELANG'S ELECTORAL FORTUNE IN THE LIGHT OF SUPPLY-SIDE EXPLANATION\*

ODRODZENIE Z POPIOŁÓW PORAŻKI WYBORCZEJ:  
ZWROT W WYBORCZYCH LOSACH VLAAMS BELANG  
W ŚWIEITLE WYJAŚNIEŃ PODAŻOWYCH

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### — ABSTRACT —

Within the last few years, radical right-wing parties gained relevance in some European countries, shifting the position of marginal political rebel to being a serious competitor of the mainstream parties. To explain the emergence and volatile fortune of this party family, we resort to supply-side explanation, and we analyse the case of the Flemish Vlaams Belang (VB) which suffered severe electoral defeat in 2014, to be reborn five years later. The analysis is based on the existing data concerning party platform, shift in electoral support, campaign spending, and the findings from individual in-depth interviews conducted with people from party headquarter

### — ABSTRAKT —

W ciągu ostatnich kilku lat w niektórych krajach europejskich na znaczeniu zyskują radykalne partie prawicowe, przesuując się z pozycji marginalnych w stronę poważnych konkurentów partii tzw. głównego nurtu. Aby wyjaśnić fenomen radykalnej prawicy, odwołujemy się do podejścia podaźowego, analizując przypadek flamandzkiej partii Vlaams Belang (VB), która w 2014 r. poniosła dotkliwą porażkę wyborczą, by odrodzić się pięć lat później. Przeprowadzone analizy opierają się na danych pierwotnych pochodzących z indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych z przedstawicielami sztabu i kierownictwa partii oraz danych wtórnych

\* The article is part of the project “Electoral Defeat as the Catalyst for Change in the European Political Parties” funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (No. 2017/27/B/HS5/00537).

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and party leadership. On this base we conclude that external-supply factors created an opportunity the VB could take advantage of, thanks to deliberate changes introduced in internal-supply variables after 2014 defeat.

**Keywords:** radical right-wing parties; electoral defeat; electoral success; Belgium; Flemish

dotyczących partyjnej platformy programowej, zmian poparcia wyborczego i wydatków na kampanię wyborczą. Na tej podstawie dochodzimy do wniosku, że zewnętrzne czynniki podażowe stworzyły szansę, którą partia VB była w stanie wykorzystać dzięki celowym zmianom wewnątrzpartyjnym wprowadzonym po porażce wyborczej w 2014 r.

**Słowa kluczowe:** partie skrajnie prawicowe; porażka wyborcza; sukces wyborczy; Belgia; flamandzki

## INTRODUCTION

Within the last decade, one of the concerns in politics of many European countries was rising support for extremist right-wing populist parties. The phenomenon could be observed across the whole of Europe, affecting both well-established democracies, as well as younger democracies from post-communist Europe. These parties are not completely new, some of them have been present on political scene since the 1980s. However, nowadays, they are no longer political curiosities on the fringes of political life but became important players. Not surprisingly, it has attracted attention of researchers attempting to explain the phenomenon of their electoral success. This very article subscribes to this effort. We pose the research question of whether it is about environment in which a party operates, a matter of intra-party processes or interaction between the two. By analysing the case of Flemish *Vlaams Belang*, we intend to test whether supply-demand approach (Eatwell, 2003; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2007), usually applied as a theoretical tool in explaining the emergence of right-wing extremist parties and their electoral breakthroughs (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, pp. 911–912; Pauwels, 2011, pp. 63–64), has a potential also to account for the puzzling change in VB's electoral fortune. Demand-supply approach considers several factors and variables which facilitate success of radical right-wing parties (RRP) and divides them into two groups: demand and supply variables. However, there are reasons to believe that in the case of VB the demand-side explanations poorly apply. In the first decade of 2000s, this party has already been an established element of Flemish and Belgian political scene, whereas demand-type explanations point on condition which facilitate appearance of right-wing populist parties (Mudde,

2007, pp. 202–231). Moreover, demand-side factors, which result in a durable change of beliefs, preferences and attitudes among voters, refer to phenomena emerging from long-term socio-political, economic and demographic processes, like, e.g., modernisation trends (Rydgren, 2007, pp. 247–252). Considering relatively short period of five years between the two elections of 2014 and 2019 analysed in this article, this kind of influence could be barely observable. Steady economic growth, in terms of GDP per capita and household disposable income (OECD, 2020), makes relative deprivation thesis also not a plausible explanation. Considering that Flemish-Walloon relations and issue of Flemish independence have been shaping Belgian politics for decades and – like immigration – the topic did not appear recently, the ethnic competition thesis does not look like appealing and convincing answer either. Last but not least, “a demand for populist radical right-wing parties does not necessarily result in its emergence and success at the party system level. The supply-side translates demand into practical party politics” (Mudde, 2007, p. 202). In other words, demand-side factors at most open a window of opportunity which needs to be sized and managed to be turned into electoral success.

Minding above, we conclude that demand-side variables will not provide a convincing explanation for relatively short-term phenomena of oscillation in VB’s electoral support between 2014 and 2019. Therefore we turned towards supply-side explanations, which exploit diverse political constraints and opportunities facilitating success of radical right-wing parties. Supply-side variables can be divided further into two groups:

- external supply-side variables, not inherent to the party, are formal and informal circumstances and resources which constitute political opportunity structure which include (1) the institutional and political context; (2) the cultural background; (3) the media environment;
- internal supply-side variables encompass party characteristics such as (1) party ideology; (2) communication strategy of political party; (3) party leadership.

The inspiration for this analysis were interviews with VB’s present and former leadership on party transformation after electoral defeat in 2014, which became the primary source for this study. Our respondents expressed belief that well-thought-out changes implemented in a planned manner were the decisive factor in 2019 success, thus attributed electoral gain to internal-supply variables. By contrasting their comments with secondary sources (Manifesto Data Project and data on electoral results and campaign spending in 2014 and 2019), we

analyse to what extent those claims are valid and if other supply-side variables played a role.

The applied theoretical context suggests two possible hypotheses:

H1: Vlaams Belang electoral success in 2019 federal election was possible due to changes in external supply-side factors.

H2: Vlaams Belang electoral success in 2019 federal election was possible due to changes in internal supply-side factors.

In the following sections, changes in supply-side variables will be analysed in search for plausible explanation for reversal of the trend in electoral support between 2014 and 2019. Beginning with factors external to the party, we analyse electoral results, voters flows and their concerns which could affect VB opportunity to increase electoral gains. Furthermore, media attitude and elements of cultural context relevant to the case are presented. Then, we move to internal-supply variables, factors imminent to the party, with a focus on party platform, communication strategy and leadership. In the concluding section, we summarise our findings and discuss what can be learnt about electoral chances of RRP from the analysis of Vlaams Belang case.

## EXTERNAL SUPPLY-SIDE: POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE FOR VLAAMS BELANG

### Institutional and political context

The institutional context of each political party involves an electoral system with its entry threshold, as well as a partisan alternative (Mudde, 2007, pp. 233–235), which may be operationalised as a number of relevant political parties in a party system. In this area no changes have been observed in Belgium between general elections in 2014 and 2019. Belgium remains a country with a proportional electoral system, 5% threshold, d'Hondt formula, and a high number of parties represented in federal parliament.

Regarding the political context of VB, three aspects are important: 1) dealignment processes accompanied by electoral volatility; 2) convergence between established parties, and 3) electoral niche (Rydgren, 2007, 2008). VB's ability to increase electoral gain (in terms of vote share) in result of 2019 election means that the party was able either to mobilise new voters who were absent in previous

elections or to take over a large quantity of voters from other parties, or both. Considering the fact that in Belgium voting is compulsory, and voter turnout was even lower in 2019 than in 2014 (88,38% compared to 89,45% in 2014), the mobilisation of no-voters was not the case. It suggests rather that the level of voters' loyalty to other parties was low or in decline and a considerable number of them might switch their support.

The numbers in Table 1 prove that traditional party families in Flanders receive less and less electoral support. The trend is even more perceptible in regional than in federal election. Christian democrats (CD&V), liberals (Open VLD) and social democrats (sp.a) together received in 2019 less than a quarter of votes in federal and less than 40% in regional election, while Flemish ethnic parties (N-VA and VB) experienced the opposite.

**Table 1.** Percentage of Vote Share for Traditional and Ethnic Flemish Parties in Federal and Regional Election in Flanders

		CD&V	sp.a	Open VLD	N-VA	VB	tradi- tional parties	ethnic parties
federal election	2010	10,85	9,24	11,83	17,40	7,76	31,92	25,16
	2014	11,61	8,83	9,78	20,26	3,67	30,22	23,93
	2019	8,89	6,71	8,54	16,03	11,95	24,14	27,98
regio- nal election	2009	22,86	15,27	14,99	13,06	15,28	53,12	28,34
	2014	20,48	13,99	14,15	31,88	5,92	48,62	37,80
	2019	15,40	10,14	13,13	24,83	18,50	38,67	43,33

Source: Authors' own elaboration on based on data from *Direction Générale...* (n.d.).

The tendency may suggest that traditional socio-economic cleavage, managed by traditional party families of left and right, has been losing relevance in favour of identity issues (Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002). That would be one of the explanations of growing support for both parties of Flemish nationalism and voters flow between them.

Inflow in electoral support in 2019, VB owes mostly to former N-VA voters, who constituted almost 1/3 (32,4%) of VB voters in 2019. However, Flemish nationalists were able to attract also supporters of other government parties (4,3% from CD&V and 4% from Open VLD). At the same time the party kept 89% of its voters from 2014 (van Erkel et al., 2020, pp. 35–38).

Such sizable vote transfers between VB and N-VA suggest that the latter did not meet the voters' hopes for issues the two parties have been competing on. N-VA won its position in parliament and government, formed in result of 2014 federal election, by takeover of VB's partisans, concerned in the first place about the Flemish independence and the immigration issue. As a co-governing, the party could not deliver promised independence and at the same time was endorsing much more liberal immigration policy than former VB voters would approve. Though it left federal government in December 2018 in protest against the government proposal of immigration' regulations, this move did not restore its credibility among voters opposing the liberalisation of this policy. For voters reluctant to support old parties, demanding radical anti-immigrant policy and concerned about Flemish independence, N-VA may have looked like another mainstream party. This leads us to another relevant aspect of political context: the convergence between parties. Populist right-wing parties, including VB, exploit the belief that other parties "are all the same", presenting itself as the only true alternative to the mainstream. In this context, participating in federal government eroded the image of N-VA as a Flemish nationalist alternative to the mainstream parties.

The last factor within the political context, which theoretically could facilitate VB's triumph, is a matter of electoral niche, in terms of a new political, economic or cultural issue which appeared between 2014 and 2019 and remained neglected by VB's competitors. The data show that among the most important issues in 2019, Flemish voters most often indicated immigration (36%) and social security (32,4%) (RepResent, 2019). Immigration remains one of the key issues in VB agenda. The party gave it even more attention in 2019 than in 2014, referring to it in unequivocally negative way. Furthermore, in 2019, VB expressed a more positive attitude toward expansion of welfare state than in 2014, whereas N-VA, the major competitor, was noticeably less concerned with the topic in general (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Percentage of Mentions on Immigration and Welfare State in VB and Its Main Competitor' Platforms

		Welfare state expansion	Welfare state limitation	Welfare state in total	Immigration negatively	Immigration positively	Immigration in total
2014	VB	5,636	1,311	<b>6,947</b>	4,194	0,000	<b>4,194</b>
	N-VA	4,236	3,084	<b>7,320</b>	2,081	0,149	<b>2,230</b>
2019	VB	6,089	0,444	<b>6,533</b>	6,371	0,000	<b>6,371</b>
	N-VA	2,833	1,948	<b>4,781</b>	2,089	0,425	<b>2,514</b>

**Source:** Authors' own elaboration based on The Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2020).

However, immigration and welfare state/social security problems are not a novelty but rather traditional topics of Belgian politics. Therefore, it would be unjustified to claim that in 2019 VB exploited any new issues which had been unnoticed by other parties. The more adequate is to point that the party took advantage of worries, which have been fuelling Belgian politics for some time, by putting more emphasis on them compared to their competitors.

### Cultural context

The importance of cultural context leans on the fact that some cultures may provide better ground for rise and development of the populist radical right. An example of such cultural feature in Belgian case is Flemish nativist subculture (Ignazi, 2003, p. 127; Mudde, 2007, pp. 245–248), a form of ethnic nationalism of the colonised or in other way dominated minority, combined with xenophobia and exclusionism fostered by historical experience of being overwhelmed by French-Walloon minority. But this did not appear in Belgian politics suddenly, in the last years. In fact, the sentiment for national/state autonomy of Flanders, and political attention it had been given to, significantly transformed Belgium after WWII turning it into a federal state. In this terms, nativist subculture that the Flemish nationalistic parties could profit from, has long been a fixed element of Belgian political life. VB, from the very beginning advocating for independence of Flanders and presenting itself as a defender against foreign cultural influence, cannot owe the 2019 electoral gain exclusively to this topic.

### Media environment

The media may also play a facilitating role in the rise of support for right-wing extremists. Growing pluralisation and competitiveness on media market, struggle for audience attention, tendency to present news in sensational manner, focusing on emotionally resonating issues, like immigration or crime and scandalous aspect of politics, or presenting the ‘Other’ in a negative way, may favour extremists message to come forth (Rydgren, 2007, pp. 254–255).

In these terms, the digital revolution and social media invention have also contributed to the rise of competitive, high-choice media environment, favourable to the populist organisations. Political parties in general and extreme parties in particular are more likely to use populist style of communication in social media (Ernst et al., 2019), which results in increased exposure of the audi-

ence to populist appeal and its gradual legitimisation. However, the time-span between the two elections is too short to observe significant transformation in media market, journalism style and technology or media audience attitudes and expectations towards news. Moreover, facilitating media influence may be weakened by the fact that political movements, deviant to political mainstream, are presented in media in unfavourable way, as an illegitimate and controversial political contender (Schafraad et al., 2012, pp. 358–360). In case of VB, it took the form of *cordon sanitaire médiatique*, which has been experienced by the party as constantly unfriendly and disapproving media attitude, though the media attention became more accommodative towards VB over the last years (de Jonge, 2019; Schafraad et al., 2012).

To sum up, among the external supply-side factors, which might contribute to VB electoral outcome in 2019, the changes within the political context seem to be the most plausible explanation. Increasing partisan dealignment, convergence between N-VA and other Flemish parties, and voters' major concerns created a favourable environment for vote transfers toward VB. Therefore, the first hypothesis has been confirmed. The circumstances created an opportunity, but the opportunity itself does not explain why VB profited from it. Was it a matter of pure luck, unintentional and accidental crossing between situation on political scene, voters' concerns and VB agenda, or rather the party seized the opportunity in planned manner? To answer the question it is necessary to look into the party, to analyse also the internal supply-side variables, i.e., features inherent to the party.

## INTERNAL SUPPLY-SIDE: ORGANIZATIONAL INPUT

### Ideology

From its origin, VB has been primarily the party of Flemish nationalism advocating for state autonomy. Over the years, the party became modern populist radical-right party, adopting a strong anti-immigrant position with clear xenophobic stance (van Haute & Pauwels, 2016), populist anti-partyism, and anti-establishment rhetoric, to legitimate its demands as “the will of the people” (de Cleen, 2016). Though combining these elements explains initial VB electoral breakthrough, in the phase of electoral persistence effective party propaganda is more important than ideology itself (Mudde, 2007, pp. 257–260). Drawing on



this insight, we have decided to primarily investigate changes in VB communication strategy, however, some remarks about platform change were also presented.

Compared to 2014, VB's party platform moved in 2019 toward centre on left-right axis, scoring 8,387 compared to previous 17,3 (Volkens et al., 2020). However, the issues key to Flemish nationalist identity received even more attention than five years earlier, which means that party's ideological core became even more important element of its appeal (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Percentage of Mentions on Identity Issues in 2014 and 2019 VB Manifestos

	Negatively about immigration	Negatively about multiculturalism	Positively about national way of life	Positively about traditional morality
2014	4,194	5,636	3,277	0,393
2019	6,371	7,823	4,133	0,726

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on The Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2020).

Furthermore, in 2019 the party gave more attention to issues other than identity, trying to change the image of single-issue party focusing on immigration or Flemish nationalism only (see Table 4). Creating a more complex and varied agenda was a deliberate manoeuvre aimed at presenting party as having an opinion on current issues as democracy, environmental protection, economic growth, etc.

**Table 4.** Percentage of Mentions on Other Issues in 2014 and 2019 VB Manifestos

	Democracy	Environmental protection	Culture	Technology and infrastructure	Economic growth
2014	0,000	1,311	1,966	7,995	0,000
2019	3,024	2,500	2,419	9,435	0,484

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on The Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2020).

## Communication strategy

In terms of party propaganda, the campaign of 2019 unveiled a substantial change in VB's communication strategy. Compared to 2014, all Flemish parties in general put more emphasis on social media advertising at the expense of

traditional media, but with VB the change was the most significant. Such strategy helped the party to deal with two difficulties: tight resources and blockade from mainstream mass media, and deliver a message of controlled content directly to potential voters, targeting mostly people between 18–24 and 25–34 (Lefevere, Van Aelst, & Peeters, 2020). The important thing was that the digital shift in communication strategy, based on rules of gamification and datafication, though to some extent forced by the circumstances, seemed also well planned and deliberately implemented by the new leadership (Maly, 2020).

The numbers demonstrate the difference between VB and other Flemish parties. Almost one third (30,8%) of all digital campaign publications were authored by VB. It was the most expensive campaign in VB history, despite significantly reduced resources in result of 2014 electoral defeat. The expenditure of digital campaign took a half of the total campaign budget (51,2%) and most of these resources (99,5%) were invested in social media. No other party achieved such proportions and in absolute numbers VB invested the highest amount of money in digital campaign (Put et al., 2019). Furthermore, VB campaign was strongly presidentialised and personalized, which means that the leader and the candidates were put in front in the campaign instead of the party.

### Leadership

In the context of supply-demand explanations of radical right-wing parties' success, the role of leadership is usually approached from the angle of leader's charisma (Eatwell, 2003, pp. 62–63). Our attention in this article shifts rather towards intra-party leadership focused on building party infrastructure and stabilizing organization and electoral success (Mudde, 2007, pp. 263–264).

Effective improvements in party performance would not be possible if the leadership did not see the necessity of change, were wrong about why defeat occurred, or did not have the will and determination to implement changes. Elsewhere we claim that party elites' subjective interpretation of the explanations of electoral defeat is one of the crucial factors which determines successful party change (Paczeński & Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, 2019). This line of reasoning, based on interpretive approach, relay on assertion that “‘perception’ is the intermediate variable that has to be placed between objective facts and the reactions of the parties” (Deschouwer, 1992, p. 16). It implies that the party change is not a direct response to external incentive, in this case – poor electoral outcome, but it depends on how the incentive is interpreted (Bell, 2011, p. 888). Therefore,

effective actions, aimed at improving electoral performance, require an adequate diagnosis of the current problems and then designing measures to address them. Leadership unable to do such adequate assessment will fail in their efforts to improve party's electoral result. The link between how leaders picture the reasons for electoral defeat and the actual changes introduced in the aftermaths would suggest that party transformation is not a random process but a result of leaders' decisions. Comments given by notable members of VB, collected in a series of our interviews, as well as in the media in the aftermaths of 2014 defeat, allow us to say that this was the case of VB.

Soon after the results of 2014 election were announced, VB's then leaders commented on them in the media, trying to give an explanation for party's failure. It was attributed to both internal and external factors to the party. On the one hand, they acknowledged leadership's responsibility, pronouncing urgent need for party's rejuvenation and refreshment (VRT NWS, 2014a). On the other hand, they were aware that the party owed the electoral loss also to N-VA, the major competitor, which performed well and won support of VB's voters (Delvaux, 2014). This initial diagnosis has also been confirmed in our interviews, where the following topics recurred:

- 1) Leadership failure: *it was bad management [...] the internal troubles and fights at the top of the party [...] the leadership of the party was in chaos at the end* (VB\_2019\_01);
- 2) Need for renewal and rejuvenation: *we had a leadership that had been standing for 20 years, so people [...] just wanted something else* (VB\_2019\_02);
- 3) Competition from N-VA: *we were not used to have a competition* (VB\_2019\_03); *N-VA basically took the story of Vlaams Belang and sold it as their own story* (VB\_2019\_04);
- 4) Unfriendly media and *cordon sanitaire*: *that's the biggest problem we faced* (VB\_2019\_03); *every piece about us was negative* (VB\_2019\_04).

In accordance with such critical leadership and party assessment, the newly elected young leader, Tom van Grieken, announced he would break with party's far-right single-issue image (VRT NWS, 2014b). In the IDIs, our respondents from party headquarter and party leadership pointed on three conditions needed to be met in order to achieve this goal and overturn VB's electoral trend, and they were actually introduced:

- 1) Generational change in leadership: *we cannot transfer ourselves into the new times* (VB\_2019\_01); *we need new people* (VB\_2019\_03);
- 2) Expanding party message while remaining attached to the traditional issue

- of Flemish independence: *we had to refresh our story* (VB\_2019\_04); *we're still focusing on Flemish independence [...] but we're also focusing more on social and economic aspects* (VB\_2019\_02); *the message isn't really softened but the discourse has become more on the intellectual level* (VB\_2019\_05);
- 3) Change in style and technique of communication: *we needed different style, the way we communicated* (VB\_2019\_03); *we used social media and with social media we talked about all these different subjects* (VB\_2019\_04).

In opinion of the respondents, inefficient and divided leadership, outdated technique of party propaganda, image of extremist single-issue party, unfriendly media and competition from N-VA, that is, several coinciding factors contributed to VB electoral defeat. The changes introduced within the party in the aftermaths correspond with this diagnosis. It suggests that electoral outcome in 2019 was not a matter of luck but should be rather owed to party's agency and deliberate actions undertaken by party leadership. Changes in these aspects of party functioning appear to be deliberately selected measures to address what had been previously identified as causes of defeat. To summarize, the data presented above proves that after electoral defeat the party underwent a considerable transformation in terms of leadership, communication and party platform. In other words, the second hypothesis has also been confirmed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis proves that demand-supply approach is a useful theoretical tool not only to explain the emergence of RRP but also to account for volatility of its electoral support in a short period. The case of VB shows that in a relatively stable social environment, which do not experience socio-political upheavals, RRP can increase its electoral gains. Ongoing processes of dealignment and N-VA (the prime contender of VB) convergence to mainstream parties created a window of opportunity, i.e., a group of unattached voters to be attracted and managed by Vlaams Belang. This change in political opportunity structure concurred with shifts in party platform and communication, carried out in a deliberate and planned manner by a new generation of leadership. Nuanced and expanded but unchanged at its core party platform, promoted mostly through direct, digital channels, helped to reduce deficiencies party suffered from in 2014. However, the triggering factor should be located in party elites. Former leadership, acknowledging own flaws, passed chiefdom to a younger generation of

activists. The changes proposed and implemented by the new leadership turned out to be effective in mobilizing electoral support.

Since both hypotheses have been confirmed we could attempt to hypothesize that the key determinant in reversal of electoral fortune of VB was not exclusively internal or external supply-side factors but interaction between them. Taking advantage of changing structure of political opportunities, by implementing deliberate and bold changes within a party, may significantly improve electoral performance. The supply-demand approach, applied to the case of VB, proves that RRP's sudden leap in electoral results does not require drastic changes in voters' concerns or abrupt social change. Internal-supply factors composing party agency may be the crucial components shaping party's electoral fate.

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#### **List of individual in-depth interviews (IDI)**

- VB\_2019\_01: IDI with MEP, and member of former party board, held on September 24, 2019
- VB\_2019\_02: IDI with MP, held on September 24, 2019
- VB\_2019\_03: IDI with member of party leadership, held on September 24, 2019
- VB\_2019\_04: IDI with member of party leadership, held on September 25, 2019
- VB\_2019\_05: IDI with MP, held on September 26, 2019