

The adaptation of the extreme right's discourse: the case of the Vlaams Blok

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ABSTRACT. The Vlaams Blok is one of the most successful of the extreme right-wing parties in Europe. The growth of the party was partly due to its populist rhetoric on race and security, and its anti-establishment rhetoric. Indeed, over the years, the party has prioritized the immigration issue, which has yielded electoral rewards, and sidelined the Flemish question. Further, the Vlaams Blok has filtered, softened and rewritten strongly-worded ideological texts in order to broaden its electoral appeal, and consolidate its gains. The recent transformation of the Vlaams Blok into Vlaams Belang may be seen as a further step in the party's attempt to become a right-conservative people's party. It is another indication of an attempt to get away from the party's image as being on the extreme of the right wing and the historical legacy of collaboration, and radical Flemish nationalism.

However, the moderation of the Vlaams Blok's language over the years is not only the result of electoral strategy. While enjoying steady growing electoral support, the party has remained isolated on the Belgian political scene. The traditional parties reacted to the extreme right's success with a total exclusion of the party. This situation led far-right leaders to modify their strategies, positions and rhetoric, and to try to demonstrate that the Vlaams Blok is capable of assuming power responsibly.

Similar trends in the moderation and adaptation of the party's rhetoric can be seen in other successful extreme right-wing parties. In France, the Front National (FN) has of late presented itself as a party of good governance. In Austria, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) significantly moderated its program and, as a consequence, dovetailed with the mainstream of Austrian politics in 1999. Ascension to government forced the party to review further its themes, tone and style. And in Italy, the Alleanza Nazionale (AN) developed a program in line with those of moderate European right-wing parties after it entered Berlusconi's 1994 government.

KEYWORDS. Vlaams Blok, extreme right, party rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

Far-right parties have in recent years gained a strong foot-hold in Western Europe, and became especially popular during the 1980s and the early 1990s. Some of these parties may now be considered major players in the political arena. This is particularly true in Belgium (Flanders), and in France, Austria and Italy. In Austria and Italy, they have been coalition partners with conservative parties in national government and even though they are excluded from coalition government in Belgium and France, their presence in the political arena cannot be ignored, as ever more voters contemplate supporting far right as an acceptable and ‘normal’ choice. The far-right parties in these countries have also reacted and adapted to their political and social environments. Projecting a populist image, they present themselves as serious candidates for government, rather than as far-right radicals. This choice has forced them to undergo changes, and to experiment constantly with various strategies and styles.

This has particularly been the case for the Vlaams Blok, one of the most successful extreme right-wing parties in Europe, but one which has remained, despite its successes, isolated on the Belgian political scene. Indeed, the traditional Belgian parties decided to exclude the Vlaams Blok from coalition brokering. The hurdle of obtaining 50 percent to secure parliamentary control means that the far-right had to make an extra effort to be accepted by its political opponents to the end of attaining office. It did so by adapting its message. Strongly ideological texts were sifted and rewritten (see Van Craen & Swyngedouw, 2002). While the far-right party had cut a radical profile in its first years, throughout the 1990s its appeal was populist, as it presented itself ever more as a right-conservative people’s party. Accordingly, the party began to react to the positions of its political opponents, and likewise set out to broaden its electoral base.

In this article, we will describe the Vlaams Blok’s rhetoric and discourse, and we will situate the evolution of this discourse within the political

context of the party. Political parties are always ‘dependent variables’ of the system to which they belong, and they react accordingly to their environment (Dézé, 2004). The political and social environs of the Vlaams Blok, including the existence of the *cordon sanitaire* (hygienic barrier) and rulings against the party on charges of racism, have led the Blok to tone down its message, and to re-form as the Vlaams Belang. This new party name will crop up in the third section of this article. Freed from a racist past, the Vlaams Belang wants to make the party more fashionable, and to soften further its language. Finally, we will compare the evolution of the Vlaams Blok’s message with the evolution of the profile of three other successful far-right conglomerates: the Front National (FN), the Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ). We will describe how these parties, like the Vlaams Blok, each adapted their tone to their own proper political and public environments.

THE BROADENING AND SOFTENING OF THE VLAAMS BLOK’S RHETORIC

The Vlaams Blok saw the parliamentary elections of 1978 as the chance for a break with the Volksunie (VU), and aimed to serve as a kind of ‘whip party’ to the VU. The Volksunie was at that time the dominant Flemish nationalist party and the Vlaams Blok believed that the VU had made too many concessions to the Francophone parties in the government. The Vlaams Blok’s founder and chairman Karel Dillen indicated that by his own reasoning, the Vlaams Blok was a radical party: “[...] hard, uncompromising, always zoning in on the other parties’ shortcomings, but not itself tempted by the fleshpots of Egypt. In view of our program, we are not cut out to be a leading party, in any sense whereby we would be expected to share power with another party” (Verstraete, 1992, p. 128). The party strove for an independent Flanders, indeed a Flemish republic. In its formative years, the theme of immigration was not as yet the dominant issue. In 1980, publishing its *Fundamental Principles*, the party

included a paragraph about immigration. Therein, alongside a ban on immigration, was a proposal for the gradual outflow of the contingent of guest workers. But the central theme by which the party made itself known to the general public was the demand for a fully independent Flanders, with Brussels as its capital.

In 1983, the Vlaams Blok changed course. The party began actively to reach out to the youth and decided to devote one of its conferences to the theme of immigration. In Brussels, on March 25, 1984, the international day against racism, for the first time, the party held an ideologically-g geared congress dedicated to the “foreigner problem”. Karel Dillen submitted his first bill proposal to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, including the offer of a cash incentive for immigrants to return to their homelands. Also in 1984, during the campaign for the European Parliament, the Vlaams Blok ran on the slogan, “We say what you are thinking”. With the combined pressures of immigration and a high unemployment rate, the Vlaams Blok hoped to make deep inroads with the sectors of the population hit hardest by the concessionary politics of the government then in power.

The successes of the Dutch Centruumpartij and the French Front National (FN) in mobilising voters around the single theme of immigration, was another prompt for the Vlaams Blok to focus on the issue (Husbands, 1992). The same theme was also dominant in the propaganda of other extreme right parties in the 1980s and into the early 1990s (Mudde, 1999). Generally, immigration was at the time an important point in the public and political agendas in many Western-European countries. Furthermore, there is little strange or surprising in a wedding of Flemish-Nationalist separatism and a strong position on immigrants. The premise of Flemish Nationalism is that a people or cultural group should be able to exercise, as much as is possible, sovereignty within the territory to which they have historically been tied. The abiding presence or unchecked influx of other groups triggers negative feelings, as the concern arises that this other group will also have cultural and political ambitions (Jaspers, 2003).

An aggressive campaign in 1987 under the slogan “One’s own people first”, based on the FN’s motto “The French First” was rather successful: the Blok went from having zero seats in the Senate and one in the Chamber, to holding one seat in the Senate and two in the Chamber. At the same time, a tension emerged between the emphasis on the theme of immigration and Flemish nationalist thinking. This was a tension between what paid electoral dividends, and the party’s original ideology. Those who wanted to place the emphasis on Flemish Nationalism called Filip Dewinter and others *Lepenists* (sympathisers of the leader of the FN, Jean-Marie Le Pen) saying Dewinters group had abandoned the Flemish question in favour of the theme of immigration (Mudde, 1995). Eventually, the party made a clear choice in favour of the more electorally-rewarding platform, but folded in some of the old nationalism (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002). Unhappy with the populist party line, a number of key members, including the party secretary and the chairman of the party council, nonetheless left the Blok (Deweerd, 1989).

After the party’s national breakthrough on November 24, 1991, Dewinter and Dillen together put out a policy pamphlet on foreigners, the so-called “70-point program”, a name strongly redolent of Le Pen’s *Fifty Measures to Help Manage the Problem of Immigrants*. The plan was the Vlaams Blok’s manual for solving the foreigner problem, calling *inter alia* for the complete closure of the borders to non-European immigrants, and the application of the “own people first” principle in all areas of policy. Moreover, it included a feasible, operational plan for the gradual repatriation of non-European foreigners to their countries of origin. Those who were without work, had large families to maintain, or who lived in social housing would be the first affected (Spruyt, 2000). Dewinter argued that for the protection of the Flemish identity, and the application of the principle of serving one’s own people first, a halt to immigration an accelerated repatriation of foreigners, and stiffer regulations against criminals and illegal immigrants were needed. In 1996, the 70-point plan was revised, and the new version softened the party’s radical stance by raising the possibility of assimilating non-European immigrants (Mudde, 2000).

In 2000, the Vlaams Blok discarded its 70-point plan (Deweerd, 2001). Although the party made no proposals which distanced it as such from the content of the plan, it was quite aware that the document had borted it into a comer. Furthermore, the Blok saw disavowing the plan as a means to soften its image, so as to lower the threshold between itself, and supporters of the VLD (the Flemish Liberals) and the CD&V (the Christian Democrats) (Deweerd, 2002). Nothing essential in the party's outlook, which was summarised by the slogan "adapt, or turn back" was changed, however. The accent though was now more on the assimilation of foreigners "who wish to tie their lot to that of our own people's community".

In an interview with *De Standaard* (October 25, 2003) Dewinter said of the jettisoning of the old plan: "the 70-point plan suited our strategy at the time, a hit and run strategy of creating tension. We were a young party which needed to break through and which had to make limpid proposals. We're now a few years down the road, and society has evolved. We too have evolved". In the same interview, Dewinter indicated that he wanted to smooth out the bumps in the road: "The Vlaams Blok is a tanker changing course. That happens slowly, steadily and cautiously. [...] We will round off any sharp edges, and slide somewhat to the centre-right. But not too much, since our unique selling proposition remains a clear position on immigration, security and Flemish independence". Dewinter acknowledged therefore that the appeal and message of the party were changed and made more mild. Thus were the election gimmicks replaced with a family portrait. The campaigns featuring brushes and boxing gloves gave the party too hard an image, as Dewinter saw it.

Hence, the moderation of the message of the Vlaams Blok may be seen as a vote-maximising strategy. This is the primary goal for what are referred to as *vote-seeking parties* (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Moreover, the Vlaams Blok evolved over the years towards becoming an *office-seeking party*, with ambitions of participation in policy-making and government. The term *platform party* would also be used with ever greater frequency,

meaning that the Vlaams Blok presented itself as more than a one-issue party, or a whip party (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2001). The electoral success of 1999 came to be analysed in this context: “the Vlaams Blok has succeeded in profiling itself as a party with a full platform, ready to offer a real alternative to the fussing and fiddling of the traditional parties”.¹

In the past, the party made no pretext about its potential to assume the mantle of power. After the elections of 1991, the party was entitled to a ministerial portfolio within the combined proportional Flemish government. However, the Blok firmly but politely refused, although there was talk of internal dissent over the matter. So, it was proposed in the party’s council that they express a willingness to participate in the Flemish government, but only on the condition that the coalition agreement included their key agenda points. However, not everyone was in agreement with this idea.

The strategy followed thereafter was one a whip party would use. New party chair Frank Vanhecke adduced two preconditions in 1996 for his success in chairing the party: “My chairmanship will only be a success if not one iota of the program, style and character of the Vlaams Blok are been watered down. Further and more importantly, my chairmanship will have succeeded if in 1999 the Vlaams Blok scores the kind of electoral coup a whip party needs nowadays to push through key points on their agenda”.²

As the party in the following years presented itself as more of a platform party, there was ever more talk of the possibility of sharing power. The figureheads of the Vlaams Blok saw their party evolve from an opposition party to a leading party. As they viewed the matter, it was the Blok’s task to follow this course without agoraphobic inhibition. To that end, they resolutely left the path charted by Karel Dillen, their founder and now honorary chairman. Dillen saw the greatest danger to the Blok in the aforementioned temptation by the fleshpots of political power.

In the run-up to the council elections of 2000, Dewinter persuaded his supporters of the fact that the Blok had evolved into a platform party with the statement that “the Vlaams Blok is ready to assume the reins of power, if the voter wishes it. The Vlaams Blok is not the perpetual opposition party the media and the traditional parties take us for. No, the Vlaams Blok is prepared to tackle in earnest the problems which face us: we are ready!”³ Also in their brochure *10 preconceptions about the Vlaams Blok* (Ceder, 1998) put out to combat prejudices against the Blok, there is a chapter on the theme of assuming political responsibility. In that chapter it is made clear that the party is, under certain conditions, though not at any price, prepared to enter into a coalition, but that other parties had refused because of the *cordon sanitaire*.

The drive to seek office was for a time primarily expressed in the exertions on the local level in Antwerp, and Dewinter’s campaign to become mayor of the city. When the Vlaams Blok became the largest faction in the Flemish Parliament in the elections of June 13, 2004, they in fact proposed to the *formateur* (the person charged with forming a new government) that they might support the government from the opposition. As a precondition, the party distilled ten non-negotiable points a minority government must carry out. These had to do with such things as partitioning social security, beginning with child/family allowances and health care, mandatory assimilation and a test of naturalisation, the establishment of a Flemish security force, and more direct democracy (*viz.*, referenda, direct mayoral elections). The formateur invited the Vlaams Blok for discussions, but these bore no fruit. The Blok wound up in opposition and the three traditional parties and their cartel partners formed a majority government. The Blok’s differences with the other parties appeared to be unbridgeable, and so the *cordon sanitaire* held. To this the Vlaams Blok reacted with a classic underdog attitude: we were willing, but the other parties refused to work with us, and so left hundreds of thousands of voters out in the cold.

THE VLAAMS BLOK'S PUBLIC AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The initiative for a *cordon sanitaire* to exclude the Vlaams Blok was launched in the late 1980s at the instigation of then-Agalev Chamber member Jos Geysels. The stimulus was the local breakthrough of the Blok in Antwerp in the council elections of 1988. On May 10, 1989, the chairs of five parties (CVP, SP, PVV, VU and Agalev) committed their parties to refuse, as the text of the protocol put it, any “political agreement or negotiations with the Vlaams Blok, be it in the context of democratically elected bodies on the local, provincial, regional, national and European levels, or in the context of elections for these bodies”. The repudiation of fundamental democratic principles and of human rights by the Vlaams Blok was the basis of the agreement, according to the signatories. The most recent version of the *cordon* dates from just before the council elections of 2000. At that time, all party chairs again signed on to a document precluding co-operation of coalition-formation with the Vlaams Blok (Damen, 2001).

From the beginning, there were differences of opinion about the precise meaning and strategy behind the *cordon sanitaire*, in and of itself an informal arrangement. Everyone agreed on the objective of preventing the Vlaams Blok from coming to power. But as to whether it was acceptable to ask for the Blok's support on one or another initiative, or going along with individual proposals made by the Blok, sentiment was divided. Further to that, the usefulness of the *cordon sanitaire* was sometimes questioned in Flanders by politicians who wondered if it was not better to remove the buffer around the Blok so as to move in and smother the party. Above all, the disastrous electoral consequences participation in government had for the List Pim Fortuyn party in Holland led some politicians to think that the Vlaams Blok should be allowed to jump in at the deep end, and drown. The reasoning was that only by drawing the Blok into the circle could one defeat it. Opponents of the *cordon sanitaire* argued that it gave the far-right party a monopoly on the protest vote and by the same token assured the Blok the lustre of an eternal political chastity.

Karel Dillen was wont to call the *cordon sanitaire* the insurance policy of his party: “I was basically very happy with its existence. There was something a bit too much about it: everybody against us. If the sense is that there is a hunt out for us, then this will only drive people to take the side of the outlaw”.⁴

Now that the party is on another course, and seems to be striving for a share of power, the *cordon sanitaire* represents a serious hurdle to their goals. With the *cordon* in place, the bar for electoral success is raised to an unreachable 50 percent of the vote, since the Vlaams Blok cannot come to power by forming a coalition. Therefore the Blok was faced with a choice: either react to the existence of the *cordon sanitaire* and their hostile political environment by watering down their message, and standing as acceptable right-conservative coalition partners, or stick with their own message and remain on the sidelines. As is evident in their softened rhetoric, the party chose the first option. And so, Frank Vanhecke corrected a news anchor, who referred to him as the chairman of a far-right party during the campaign for the 2003 election. This does not prevent the party from profiting from the existence of the *cordon sanitaire*. The *cordon* is held up as the ultimate proof that the Vlaams Blok is the one and only real opposition party. As such, the party again asks, who are the real anti-democrats and intolerant ones, when the Blok’s hundreds of thousands of supporters are left without effective representation by the *cordon sanitaire*?

The *cordon sanitaire* was not the only component of the political and social environment prompting the Blok to adjust its message. In 2001, the party program was altered because according to the laws for party financing, the Blok’s platform was not compatible with the European Treaty on Human Rights. And the Blok also tailored some of its radical positions in response to the legal actions pending against the party. In October of 2000, the Center for Equal Opportunity and Combating Racism, together with the League of Human Rights registered a complaint with Correctional Court against three non-profit organisations

related to the Vlaams Blok, claiming that these had violated the anti-racism laws of 1981: the association which received the annual government allocation, the education and research office of the party, and the Nationalist Broadcasting Foundation. The plaintiffs referred to the Blok's publications, such as the election agenda from 1999, and the party platform from 1997. From these, it seemed as if the Blok was endorsing discrimination. The challenged passages were those in which the party called for a separate educational system for foreign children, a tax on employers who employed non-European foreigners and a restriction of the unemployment benefits and child allowances for such foreigners. Thereafter, the Correctional Court of Brussels declared itself in June, 2001 to be incompetent to hear the case, as it pertained to political misconduct, and the Appellate Court of Brussels did likewise in February 2003. The Center and the League lodged an appeal, on the grounds that this interpretation was at odds with 150 years of jurisprudence from the Court of Cassation. There, the decision of the Appellate Court in Brussels was quashed, and the case was sent to the Court of Appeals in Ghent. That court affirmed its competence to hear the case in April 2004 and upheld the complaint. It imposed fines on the Vlaams Blok's non-profit bodies for infractions against the anti-racism law. According to the court, the Vlaams Blok was a group which sanctioned discrimination. The appeal lodged by the Blok was rejected, and in November, 2004, the Court of Cassation upheld the ruling of the court in Ghent, making it definitive.

In this hostile environment, the Vlaams Blok has become still more attentive to its communications. The party was and remains an abiding target, and needs therefore to proceed cautiously. Its representatives must heed what they say, and publications are carefully monitored. In television debates Blok leaders mind their words and tone down or disavow radical stances before the cameras (Spruyt, 2000). The party makes every effort not to get caught out on a mistake. The result of this approach is a thor-

oughly disciplined organisation which is able to speak out with a unified voice. The triumvirate of the party, Frank Vanhecke, Gerolf Annemans en Filip Dewinter go so far as to try to limit the public exposure of other Vlaams Blok representatives in the media.

A NEW PARTY IS BORN?

One week after the ruling by the Court of Cassation, the Vlaams Blok rechristened itself as the Vlaams Belang. After all, the decisive judgement against the Vlaams Blok left the way open for the prosecution of individual Blok candidates. This could have led to the withdrawing of political rights, and so to the Blok vanishing from Parliament. Moreover, the judgement could have served as a crowbar to pry away any form of governmental subsidy to the party. The Vlaams Blok as a result felt obliged to change its name. This change was in effect a reaction to an external stimulus, and not so much the consequence of an internal party strategy. However, the change also fits nicely with the strategy of the party to evolve into a right-conservative people's party. With their new handle, it would be easier to make the party fashionable, and to tweak its positions. The handling of the question on non-European immigrants springs to mind. In the early 1990s, the party was crystal clear on the matter: "The guest workers will not integrate on their own. [...] The Vlaams Blok calls for a humane but firm policy of return to the countries of origin for the vast majority of non-European foreigners residing here.⁵ Henceforth however, the position was that foreigners would be expected to "respect the laws" and "conform to our culture, our norms and values, our way of life and to principles such as the separation of church and state, democracy, freedom of expression, and the equality of men and women". Only for those "foreigners who refuse, deny or oppose this must a policy of return be developed".⁶ In more recent party literature, the possibility of assimilation has been accentuated, and the more racist and far-right

aspects have been watered down, although the party still characterises the presence of foreigners in a problematic context. In this way, the part of foreign youth and gangs is emphasised by way of a discussion of crime rates, burglaries and car theft. Further, the principle of a *leitkultur* has remained a starting-point for the party. The Vlaams Belang is uninterested in the multicultural model. Cultures are not all of the same worth, and therefore immigrants must assimilate.

With its new statement of principles and platform, the Vlaams Belang – at least on paper – has cut the ties with its unsavoury past. What remains is a solidly right-wing, nationalist party which still has immigration, security and anti-establishment feelings as its driving points, but which at the same time leaves the door open to a possible participation in government. The name-change also gave the traditional Flemish parties an incentive to discuss anew the usefulness of the *cordon sanitaire*. This discussion was even a factor in the leadership struggle of the Flemish liberals (the VLD). One of the candidates mooted the idea of a VLD-membership referendum on the *cordon sanitaire*, leaving the door open for possible co-operation with the rechristened party.

The Vlaams Belang will eventually have to prove by word and deed that it has really changed. Still, to absorb the internal tensions which could result from this, they will also have to show convincingly that the essence of their message and the spirit of their founding principles will not be lost in the reforms. Gerolf Annemans averred in an interview with *De Standaard* that people will still find the platform “dirty enough” (November 6, 2004). Filip Dewinter illustrated the party’s “love it or leave it” position when he said “any muslim woman wearing the chadoor or burka will sign thereby the warrant for her repatriation”. Vanhecke made it clear at the close of the conference on November 14, 2004, when the Vlaams Blok changed its name to Vlaams Belang, that nothing would really be lost: “we are changing our name, but not our stripes”. These exam-

ples from the oratory of the party heads demonstrate the question in dispute about the Vlaams Belang today: has the party really changed or has it just burnished its image? The militant hard core of the party takes a radical approach. When dealing with them, the party leadership uses muscular language and tried to make it clear that the Vlaams Belang is the same party as the Vlaams Blok was. At the same time, the party leadership wishes to hone and advance its positions with a less aggressive profile, using such means as a large media campaign with more dulcid imagery featuring recognisable party candidates.

The tension between the presentation of the Vlaams Belang as at once a new party and at the same time a perpetuation *mutatis mutandis* of the Vlaams Blok, came to the fore in the party-finance debate in the Flemish Parliament after the court ruling and the party's name change. To recognise the Vlaams Belang as a new party would mean that they were not entitled to any governmental subsidy, as they had not yet participated in any elections. Although the party website announced that "on November 14, the Vlaams Blok ceased to exist and the Vlaams Belang was established", party heavyweight Dewinter declared in the Parliament that in the 'juridical-technical sense' nothing had changed, and that the Vlaams Belang was not a new party, but the transformation and reform of the old one. This meant that the Vlaams Belang continued to receive the subsidies allotted to the Blok, unless the Parliament had decided to revoke these on account of the ruling.⁷ This latter scenario was, according to the Parliament's regulations entirely possible, but the various factions were, with the exception of the Greens, against imposing financial sanctions on the Vlaams Belang. They feared that this would confirm the party's underdog status, and net it still more votes.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The political and juridical context in which the Vlaams Blok finds itself had led it over the years to make efforts at winning respect from its

political opponents, especially as it sought increasingly to win some share in government. Along with the undertaking by the Vlaams Blok to broaden its support with more measured rhetoric, this context helps to explain the party's evolving message. As Harmel and Janda suggest (1994), party changes do not 'just happen', but are normally a result of leadership change, a change in the dominant faction within the party and/or an external stimulus for change. Hence, the existence of the *cordon sanitaire* and the juridical process against the party, were important environmental stimuli which acted as important catalysts for the change of the party's language. After all, the Vlaams Blok adapts its strategies and rhetoric in a competitive game for power and thus adapts its strategies to this game, particularly since it shows interests in becoming a governing party.

The political and public situation of the Vlaams Blok is unique for a far-right party. Far-right parties in different countries have indeed been approached differently. In some cases, extreme right parties have become coalition partners with conservative parties in national government. The first country to have integrated the extreme right at the national level was Italy in 1994, followed by Austria in 2000. But although far-right parties have in some countries been considered as potential coalition partners, in other countries, their political opponents have been entirely unwilling to co-operate with the far right. Hence, there is a differentiated integration of the extreme right parties within the diverse national political markets. Given that far-right parties find themselves in this situation, it is important to study them from that perspective. With that in mind, we will look now briefly at three far-right parties which enjoyed success in the last decade: the French Front National, The Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs and the Italian Alleanza Nazionale. Dézé (2004) gives a more elaborate description of these parties and their relationship with their respective political systems.

Front National

As in Flanders, the political opponents of the FN operate a containment policy aimed at keeping it as far as possible from political bargaining. In contrast with the Vlaams Blok, the FN has not got any representatives at all in Parliament at the national level (Coffé, 2004). The parliamentary elections in France are held in two rounds, the second round including only those parties which net more than 12.5 percent of the vote. The eventual winner (one seat per district) is the party which obtains the most votes in the second round, or which obtains more than 50 percent in the first round. Since the traditional parties form alliances in the second round, but exclude the FN, it is difficult for the party to win a district seat. The regional elections however, which one may regard as second order elections, are organised on the model of proportional representation (PR). This system allows the smaller parties, which are not part of an alliance system, to reward their political personnel. Under the PR system, the FN won 16.6 percent of the votes in 2004 and elected 156 of its candidates. By comparison, with just 11.1 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections of 2002, the FN was shut out of the Parliament.

The first electoral success of the FN was in the European elections of 1984 (the party won 11 percent of the votes). This success corresponded to a change in the image, style and rhetoric of the party and with the appearance of a double discourse: a traditional radical one for loyal militants, and a softer and more respectable one for the electorate in general. This double discourse highlighted the constraints emerging from the party's more active participation in political competition as well as the necessity for the FN to adapt to the system without giving up its political identity (Dézé, 2004). From that moment onwards, different strategies of adaptation can be seen: the 'Presidentialization' of Le Pen's image; the creation by Bruno Mégret of a set of new party instruments in order to implement the strategy of attaining power: where possible, forming local coalitions

with the moderate right; the emergence of new themes in FN platforms, such as ecology, agriculture or social questions. At the same time however, there was the radicalization of the immigration theme, as well as the issues of insecurity and unemployment; the comments on the inequality of races; statements about gas chambers as ‘a detail’ of the Second World War. These divergent strategies caused tensions between the two main wings of the party: on the one hand, the General Delegation of the movement ran by Mégret, a supporter of an electoral strategy based on alliance with fringe members of the moderate right; on the other hand the Lepenist wing (Dézé, 2004). This conflict between the two wings explains the major split in the FN during 1998-1999.

Dézé (2004) describes 1997 as the real turning point. The Mégretist conquest of the municipality of Vitrolles in 1997 enabled the Delegate General to strengthen his position within the leadership of the party. In addition, the defeat of the moderate right at the 1997 parliamentary elections, together with the isolation of the FN in Parliament lent credibility to the electoral project of the Delegate General. The explicit policy of seeking an opening to disillusioned mainstream right-wing electors was a sign of this new strategic reversal, which can be seen as the result of a change of the dominant faction within the party. This corresponds with Harmel and Janda’s 1994 hypothesis that party changes are often due to changes in the organisation’s internal distribution of power. The results of the March 1998 elections as well as local alliances with the right on the basis of a ‘minimum common program’ confirmed the Mégretist strategy. In spite of profound contextual differences between the two countries, the hypothesis of an ‘Italian-style’ evolution emerged, helped by the apparition, at the right of the political scene, of a political space favoring the bringing together of a fringe of the classic right and the FN (Dézé, 2004). However, aggravated internal tensions between the two wings of the movement, mirrored by the confrontation between Le Pen and Mégret made this prospect unlikely and led the FN to split. On the one

side, Le Pen and his people, obsessed by the conservation of the ideological ‘purity’ of the movement and rejecting the slightest compromise with the parties of ‘the establishment’. On the other side Mégret and his clan, concerned with ‘the conquest of responsibilities’, and convinced that they would need to make alliances in order to succeed. Mégret argued that the FN had to make inroads into the traditional right, abandoning its confrontational attitude and following the path & the AN in Italy instead (Ignazi, 2003). The conflict exploded and Mégret created the National Movement in January 1999, which was later renamed the National Republican Movement (MNR).

Most importantly within the scope of this article is the reversed relationship of the two parties with the political system. Hesitating over their strategic and programmatic choices, and eventually unable to seduce the right-wing electorate as well as the working-class electorate of the FN, the MNR quickly renounced their alliance politics, and reverted to an orthodox National Frontist doctrine, thus becoming a ‘gathering’ place for the most radical members of the ‘national camp’ (Camus, 2001). Compared to Mégret, Le Pen began to appear a moderate candidate. The FN president tried to appear responsible and trustworthy, without seeming to exploit an already favourable societal context (Dézé, 2004). Coupled with classic populist rhetoric, this strategy largely explains the success in the presidential election, which for the first time saw an extreme right candidate advancing to the second ballot. Strengthened by its Presidential results, the FN seems determined to maintain the orientation of moderate integration. During the 2002 Parliamentary campaign, the Secretary General clearly came down in favour of a strategy offering an “out-stretched hand” to right-wing representatives, as well a strategy of electoral agreements (Dézé, 2004). Hence, Le Pen seems committed to continuing the strategy of presenting the FN as a party of government; a strategy which he must follow given the party’s exclusion from the central coalitional market, although, as is the case in Flanders, parties of

the parliamentary right have already been divided by fighting over alliances with the FN (Kestel & Godmer, 2004).

Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs

From the early 1990s on, the FPÖ entered a phase of political radicalization, adopting a program and a message similar to the other European extreme right parties: making law and order and immigration its principal political issues and making repeated provocative statements that borrowed explicitly from Nazism (Riedlsperger, 1998). The FPÖ's strategy of radicalization worked (Dézé, 2004). In a context of economic crisis, social fragmentation and the increasing flow of Eastern immigration, the authoritarian and xenophobic language of the FPÖ leader at the time, Jörg Haider seduced a large portion of the Austrian electorate. With its option for an aggressive campaigning style and the use of rhetoric that often bordered on the unbridled, the FPÖ won over both politically frustrated voters and voters usually characterised as (potential) losers in modernisation (Luther, 2001). The fact that during this period the FPÖ had no political responsibility whatsoever in national politics and was dismissed by its competitors as qualitatively unsuitable for government (not least precisely because of its unchecked campaigning style), only made it all the easier for the party constantly to engage in heedless electoral out-bidding of the then-governing parties.

Despite the electoral rewards for the party's strategy, the FPÖ changed its approach again in the middle of the 1990s (Dézé, 2004). Haider, who aimed at conquering the Chancellery in 1999 modified the party's position towards the political system in order to present the FPÖ as a respectable formation. Beginning in 1995, Haider showed his intention of putting an end to German-nationalist chauvinism, calling for Austrian patriotism instead. The Austrian nation was now celebrated for its values and traditions (Riedlsperger, 1998). In the 1997 program, the term 'Volksgemeinschaft', which had been historically defined as a key

Nazi concept, was abandoned. Now, the German people together with the Croatian, Roma, Slovakian, Slovenian, Czech and Hungarian peoples were considered as ‘historically domiciled’ groups in Austria. The same program marked another major change for the party: the abandonment of their anticlerical positions, the recognition of Christianity as a foundation for Europe and the will to become a ‘partner of the Christian Churches’. Seeking to gain a wider electorate (most notably the Catholic electorate of the ÖVP), these new pragmatic measures slammed the pan-German, anticlerical and radical wing of the party. At the start of 1998, internal criticism increased to such an extent that Haider threatened to take disciplinary measures against party members and to resign (Dézé, 2004).

By moderating its program, the FPÖ could close ranks with the mainstream of Austrian politics in 1999 (Betz, 2002). As governmental party, the FPÖ sought to distance itself from its earlier radical populist stance adopting instead the image of a future-oriented, post-ideological, pragmatic party à la Tony Blair. Indeed, the party’s entry into government came immediately after a period of populist protest, which necessarily required a fundamental rethinking and restructuring of its position in Austria’s electoral market, and of its policy preferences (Luther, 2001). The party’s entry into government forced it to review further the themes, tone, style and targets of its behaviour in Austria’s electoral market. Besides, it was faced with the need to make hard choices between policy, and winning office and votes (Müller & Strom, 1999). Indeed, the transition from opposition party to governmental responsibility is difficult for a party like the FPÖ, which for many years so successfully pursued a strategy of populist agitation (Luther, 2001). Hence, the FPÖ’s participation in the government has seriously challenged the party, emphasizing the contradictions that underlie the institutional integration of a protest and anti-system movement, once it is faced with ministerial duties. Haider’s resolve to maintain from a distance the protest and anti-system vocation of the party illustrates this trade-off between protest and governmental responsibility. However, the party suffered considerable losses in

the 2002 elections, which relaunched the ongoing debate within the FPÖ: to protest or to govern (Dézé, 2004). This debate finally led to split of the party. The former leader Jörg Haider wanted to break with FPÖ members who wanted the party out of government, and formed a new party: Bündnis Für die Zukunft Österreichs (BZÖ). According to Haider, this new party will take a less (radically) right tack.

Alleanza Nazionale

At the dawn of the nineties, everything seemed to indicate that the neo-fascist movement MSI was doomed to remain a marginal force in the Italian political system (Dézé, 2004). However, the constitution of the 'List of Agreements for Good Government' linking it to the Forza Italia and the Northern League, contributed to the progressive rehabilitation of the MSI. Dézé (2004) describes how the political pariah became one of the main actors in the 'Pole of Liberty'. It was at the moment of the formation of The Pole that the neo-fascist movement adopted the label National Alliance-Italian Social Movement (AN-MSI), thereby stressing its desire to change and renew the party. The ensuing 1994 legislative elections were a triumphant success, and as a member of Berlusconi's newly-formed government, the MSI went much further than simply changing labels: it also stopped referring to corporatism and accepted the market economy as well as the fundamental principles of democracy. Finally, the party clearly distanced itself from fascism. The 1995 Fiuggi Congress made the party transformation official. In protest, Rauti (a former leader of the MSI) left the party, together with a militant radical group, and subsequently created the Movimento Sociale Fiamma-Tricolore.

Returning to opposition after the fall of Berlusconi's government, the AN-MSI did not also return to the fringes. The party recognized the fundamental principles of democracy, and officially rejected the 1938 racial laws, together with anti-Semitism and racism. It developed a program in line with those of moderate European right-wing parties. As

such, Tarchi (2003), who analyses the official programmatic documents, concludes that the AN is no longer a neo-fascist, extreme-right or populist radical-right party, but that its values and beliefs have not yet found a stable form. Ter Wal (2000) likewise concludes that the moderation of the party's language makes it difficult to classify. The AN's rhetoric does not express blatant forms of ethnic prejudice in the form of stereotypical beliefs and negative representations of immigrants' personal characteristics, nor does it blame immigrants, who are rather represented, and sympathized with, as victims. As such, the AN did not just move away from the neo-fascist tradition, but also from right-wing extremism (Ignazi, 2003). The refusal to create a common Euro-parliamentary group with Jörg Haider's FPÖ in early 1999 and the lack of any relationship with Le Pen's FN and other extreme right parties also shows that the party is moving away from extremism.

The previous examples show how different successful far-right parties steadily softened their message over the years. In this way, they have been able to speak to a broader public, and see their electoral results improve. Hence, the Alleanza Nazionale, the FN, the FPÖ and the Vlaams Blok have taken a pivotal position in their respective party systems, and have become normal parties in the eyes of voters. These parties have also chosen to adapt to the system. This choice forces them to tweak their style constantly for strategic reasons. Hence, the moderation of the party discourse is not only the result of an electoral strategy of broadening its electoral base, but equally of the aim of being accepted by its political opponents.

In Italy, it was the opening, on the right wing of the political scene of a political space favouring the union of a fringe of the classic right and the extreme right that led to the adaptation of the extreme right's rhetoric. Prior to the ideological revision, the party benefited from a devastating party system crisis (Ignazi, 2003). However, the exploitation of those conditions still required a change in the party. There were two alternatives: emphasising the themes of the new successful European extreme

right parties, or distancing itself from the family of extreme-right parties. The AN-MSI chose the latter. Because of its radical message, the FPÖ was dismissed by its competitors as unsuitable for government. Given Haider's aim of conquering the Chancellery in 1999, the party had to change its strategy. Haider modified the party's position towards the political system in order to present the FPÖ as a respectable outfit. As a result of its modified message, and its standing after the elections of 1999, the FPÖ was able to close ranks with its political competitors.

As Harmel and Janda (1994) state, for parties that are *office maximizers*, the shocks that most dramatically shake up these parties are those directly related to participation in government. In systems where other parties declare their unwillingness to join you or to allow you to join them is critical and thus an important external stimulus for *office-seeking parties* to change themselves. The Vlaams Blok and the Front National are still excluded from their national coalition governments. Willing to take governmental responsibility (Dewinter's aim to become mayor of Antwerp and Le Pen's aim to become president of France), both parties are forced to soften further their tone in the hopes of being accepted by their political competitors as viable coalition candidates.

The adaptation to the system however implies making conflicting choices and consequently internal conflicts for all the parties we have discussed. While growing and adapting their language, each of the parties had to deal with internal conflicts between different wings. There was a split within the FN and members leaving the AN, the FPÖ and the Vlaams Blok when they took more populist positions. Torn between the aims of coming to power and of maintaining its identity, the Vlaams Blok generally seems to have reached a sort of balance, thanks to the triumvirate currently leading the party: Vanhecke, as a sort of neutral midpoint, and Annemans and Dewinter on either side. The latter represents the anti-immigration and law-and-order wing of the party, while the former is the representative of the nationalist wing. This has – until now – allowed the Vlaams Blok to pursue multifarious strategies and to target different electoral clienteles.

CONCLUSION

By tailoring its message, the Vlaams Blok sought further to broaden its base. The party has analysed its own electoral successes in this light (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002). Voters who at the start might have been frightened away by the radical message of the Vlaams Blok, seem to have come gradually to identify more with the party's tempered positions. The transformation from the Vlaams Blok into the Vlaams Belang after the court ruling is a new component in the party's strategy to expand as a right-wing people's party. It is a new signal in its attempt to get away from the party's image as a far-right party, and its historical legacy of collaboration and radical Flemish nationalism. The transformation of the MSI into the Alleanza Nazionale in January, 1995 was part of a comparable evolution. Indeed, even though the AN promotes a 'law and order' approach to the fight against illegal immigration, it avoids stereotyping, generalizations and the blaming of immigrants (Ter Wal, 2000).

The softening of its message over the last years, was however not only the result of the Vlaams Blok's political strategy of vote maximisation. Given that the other parties perceive an unacceptable distance between themselves and the Vlaams Blok, while the extreme right party has recently put more and more focus on the office-seeking goal, the party has to become considered as a normal political partner. The party is indeed trying to become more respectable. Evidence of this is found in the evolution of the party literature, which has become more populist and moderate.

Similar trends can be seen within other electorally successful extreme right parties, although they operate in different political contexts. Helped by a particularly favourable context, the AN (previously MSI) succeeded in becoming successful by giving up its radical discourse and its original identity. In the hope of gaining acceptance from its competitors, the FPÖ put an end to its radical rhetoric and used a softer discourse. It led to the FPÖ's participation in the government. Le Pen's aim to become president

of France commits the leader of the FN to present himself as a moderate candidate, and his party as a party of government.

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NOTES

1. Dewinter, F. (1999). *Kaderblad Vlaams Blok*, 74 (July/August).
2. Vanhecke, F. (1996). De beleidsintenties van het Vlaams Blok. *Kaderblad Vlaams Blok*, 58 (June/July).
3. Dewinter, F. (1999). *Kaderblad Vlaams Blok*, 76 (November/December).
4. Verstraete, P.J. (1992). *Karel Dillen. Portret van een rebel*. Bornem: Aksent, p.151.
5. Vlaams Blok (1991). *Uit zelfverdediging. Verkiezingsprogramma 1991*, p. 45.
6. Vlaams Belang (2004). *Waarom Vlaams Belang? Beginselverklaring*, p. 2.
7. The regulations of the Flemish Parliament state that if a faction or parliamentary member is found guilty of racism, the bureau may decide to withdraw funding for the party as a whole, or in part. On the federal level there is at the moment no comparable regulation. The bill proposed by Claude Eerdekens (Parti Socialiste) that would serve to deny allocations to parties denigrating the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, was approved by the federal Chamber in early 2004, but has not yet passed the Senate.