

Caught between mainstreaming and radicalisation: Tensions inside the populist Vlaams Belang in Belgium

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*The Flemish party Vlaams Belang is often regarded as one of the most successful radical-right parties in Europe, but it has experienced a drop in support in recent years. **Teun Pauwels** and **Emilie van Haute** write on tensions between the party's current leadership and a faction led by Filip Dewinter, which supports taking a more radical line on issues like immigration.*



Filip Dewinter of Vlaams Belang. Credits: Novopress.info (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Twenty-five years after 'black Sunday' in which the populist radical right *Vlaams Blok* made its national breakthrough polling 10 per cent of the vote in Flanders (Belgium), the party (currently called *Vlaams Belang*, VB) is going through difficult times. A recent dispute in the VB about a visit of some of its members to Greece's Golden Dawn illustrates deeper tensions between two opposing strategies within the party to regain electoral relevance: mainstreaming and radicalisation. These tensions have been present since the start of the electoral decline of the party, putting at risk a tight party organisation that could rely on strong local roots and the grip of its central party office.

The context

The VB has been one of the most electorally successful populist radical right parties in Europe, gaining up to 24 per cent of the votes in Flanders in 2004. However, because of its isolation in the Flemish party system combined with strong competition from the Flemish nationalist New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA), the party has been [in decline](#) for almost 10 years now. In turn, this decline has produced serious tensions between two main factions within the party. As we have illustrated [elsewhere](#), the party has been divided between two opposing strategies: a strategy of mainstreaming advocated by the new party leadership, and a strategy of radicalisation pushed by a faction led by Filip Dewinter.

The strategy of mainstreaming follows the logic of Marine Le Pen's *dédiabolisation*. The aim is to polish the sharp edges of the party programme of the VB in an attempt to get closer to power and overcome the *cordon sanitaire* it currently suffers from. The *cordon sanitaire* is an agreement between other parties in the system not to cooperate with the VB under any circumstances at any political level. With an increasing number of European populist radical right parties coming closer to power, a shifting discourse emerging on immigration among Flemish mainstream parties, and open questioning of the *cordon sanitaire* by some prominent ([N-VA](#)) politicians, some VB politicians think that the context may be favourable to push for a mainstreaming strategy that might make the VB more acceptable (*salonfähig*) in the future.

Dewinter's strategy to regain electoral relevance is radically different. Dewinter fears the tough competition of the N-VA, a Flemish nationalist and conservative party that in 2014 managed to attract a staggering [44% of the VB's voters from 2010](#). Dewinter therefore proposes a radical strategy to distinguish the VB from the mainstream. [In his own words](#): "Vlaams Belang is a 'whip party', we have to organise opposition. It is an illusion that we, as some sort of N-VA plus, will ever be able to break the *cordon*. In the meantime, the N-VA shifts to the right, at least in words – not in deeds. They push the pedal, which means we cannot leave behind. We have to speak the language of the people, we have to be bold."

The dispute

In mid-November, Filip Dewinter and three VB colleagues (Anke Vandermeersch, Jan Penris, Frank Creyelman) went to Greece to assess the refugee crisis. They also had several meetings with Golden Dawn members and on 18 November both Dewinter and Vandermeersch held a speech for the Greek neo-Nazi party which has been accused of violent attacks and hate crimes against immigrants. Following a mainstreaming strategy, the relatively young party president Tom Van Grieken wants to dissociate the VB from Golden Dawn: he stated the VB's partners are "the winners within Europe such as Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, not Golden Dawn."

The speech for Golden Dawn came off the back of a number of other incidents involving Dewinter. In May 2014, he launched a videogame called 'Less-Less-Less' in which players could slap 'Muslim terrorists' as well as the then Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo (a French-speaking Socialist) who were all caricaturised as flies. After citizens asked for Dewinter to be prosecuted, it was acknowledged in February 2015 that the videogame was racist and had to be removed from the internet. Yet no further legal action against Dewinter was taken. In January 2015 he denounced Islam while holding the Quran in his hand in Parliament.

While previous stunts by Dewinter have been largely ignored, the new party president Van Grieken reacted decisively on the Golden Dawn incident. In his own words: "Politics is a team game. You cannot score if someone continually makes own-goals." Vandermeersch was asked to give up her seat in the Senate and to leave the party executive. Dewinter and Penris (who are not part of the party executive) were banned from making international contacts without the consent of the party leader or executive. Vandermeersch and Dewinter did not accept the punishment in silence, with the first being unwilling to leave the Senate and the latter denouncing the process on the basis that he was not allowed to put forward a defence of his actions. At the same time, Dewinter has apologised for the potential 'perception problem' around his visit, but he has not explicitly distanced himself from Golden Dawn.

The consequences

Commentators were quick to compare the VB case with the fight between Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen over the Front National. However, the sanctions have certainly not resolved intra-party tensions. The game is not over for Dewinter, and the consequences will probably remain relatively limited both for him and for his faction. In contrast to Jean-Marie Le Pen who had faced personal electoral failure at the 2007 French presidential election, Dewinter is still the party's most popular figure in the media and at the polls, much more so than the current party leader.

In the most recent elections of 2014 he got the highest personal score in the party with more than 43,000 votes in his constituency of Antwerp, where more than half of the VB voters voted for him (54%). He also remains highly visible in the media, for instance praising Donald Trump in a television show after he was elected as the US president. With such a high profile, the current party leader can only afford to administer a slap on the wrist.

As for the wider impact of the VB's tensions, Dewinter's controversies provide ammunition for mainstream parties, especially the N-VA, to justify maintaining the *cordon sanitaire*. On the other hand, however, the VB is not likely to let go of one of its central figures. Consequently, there is no real solution at hand and we may well see more of these factional disputes in the future, certainly as long as the N-VA remains an obstacle in the road of the party's electoral recovery. In the meantime, Dewinter can continue to do what he does best: putting the issue of immigration on top of the agenda by means of provocations and thereby encouraging other parties (most notably the N-VA) to push through restrictive immigration policies to prevent part of their electorate going back to the VB.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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