

Belgium's Flemish fascists, the Vlaams Blok, seek gains in Euro elections

Richard Tyler
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“On June 13 we will shake Belgium to its foundations.” This was the promise that the leader of the Flemish fascists made to a rally of Vlaams Blok supporters. Franck Verhecke told the rally that, “We will ensure that in the new century our people are finally the ‘boss in our own land’”. This is the election slogan that adorned buttons and t-shirts at the meeting, and which greets the visitor to their website.

The Vlaams Blok (VB—Flemish Bloc) is a virulently xenophobic, right-wing party that is seeking the dissolution of Belgium and the establishment of an independent ethnically-pure Flanders.

June 13 is the day on which four elections are being held that could provide the most serious political crisis yet in post-war Belgium. As well as elections to the European parliament, Belgians can vote in ballots at federal, state, and local level. Opinion polls currently show that the VB could win up to 20 percent of the vote in Flanders and could win sufficient seats in the Brussels city legislature to paralyse the administration.

The Vlaams Blok was founded in 1978 as a breakaway from the more moderate Flemish nationalist *Volksunie* (United People). From the start, VB called for an independent Flanders. Starting in the late 1980s, with the slogan “our own people first”, the VB steadily increased its share of the vote in Flanders from 2 to 10 percent. In November 1991 the party won its first representation to the federal parliament.

In Antwerp, previously a social democratic stronghold, the VB was able to increase their vote to 28 percent at the last local elections. Above all, their successes were recorded in the larger urban centres of Flanders that have been badly hit by industrial downsizing, creating regions of high unemployment, social tension and decay.

In 15 years, the VB has risen to be the fourth strongest party in Flanders, receiving 476,000 (12.3 percent) votes in the 1995 general election.

On their website, the Vlaams Blok complain about “an unprecedented campaign of misinformation” about the party in the international media. To counter this, they present a

potted history of Flanders and Flemish nationalism since the time of Julius Caesar.

But the charge that VB are a neo-Nazi outfit is not an invention of foreign journalists. There are two very positive references to the fate of the Flemish people under German occupation during the First and Second World Wars. “In occupied Flanders [the Flemish] obtained from the Germans what they had always been denied by Belgium. In 1917, [they] even went as far to declare Flemish independence. Of course this was undone after the eventual German defeat...

“After a brief hesitation, the VNV [Flemish National Union] initiated the ‘Second Activism’: collaboration with the German occupation. Under the Germans, for the first time, the linguistic laws were properly applied and the process of frenchification was halted... After the German retreat, the returning Belgian authorities unleashed an implacable repression against the collaborators”.

Here are just a few examples of VB policies culled from their website:

- “Everything that gives the impression of bi-lingualism” should be suppressed.

- “Strike calls are criminal. Strikes can never serve the country.” Any union support for “political” demonstrations, such as those against fascism or racism, should be banned.

- “Abortion is a crime and should be re-entered in the penal code.”

- They propose an “air-tight immigration stop” and a policy of repatriation of “non-Europeans” in three phases: “the immediate return of illegal immigrants, unemployed foreigners and criminals; return for first generation foreigners; then for second and third generation immigrants. They also call ominously for “the reorganisation of the status of political refugees.”

Even those foreigners who are naturalised Belgians would not escape their efforts to produce an ethnically pure Flanders. The VB definition of nationality rests on the *loi du*

sang (blood law). Belgians and Flemings are only those who have Belgian blood. Those foreigners who are naturalised are nothing but “paper Belgians”.

The VB support “free enterprise” and the privatisation of much of the public sector. Employment in the public service would be restricted to Flemish nationals, and foreign workers would be subjected to higher taxation. Like fascist movements everywhere, the VB scapegoat foreigners for unemployment, social misery and crime.

Belgium has a very small immigrant community. Of the 903,000 non-Belgians, over 60 percent come from other European countries. Only very small numbers come from outside the European Union—for example just 1.3 percent of all foreigners come from Morocco, and only 0.7 percent from Turkey.

The growth of unemployment in Belgium is due to the decline in traditional heavy industries such as steel and textiles. Downsizing has hit most Belgian manufacturing, removing opportunities for semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, traditionally filled by immigrant labour. Unemployment this year is running at over 9 percent, but affects the immigrant community proportionately much higher.

The elections in bi-lingual Brussels, the capital and home to the European Parliament, is also where the VB could start to undermine the present federal structure of Belgium. Electoral analysts calculate that just 15,000 to 20,000 extra votes for VB would give them the ability to paralyse the Brussels city legislature. As Belgian daily *le Soir* noted, “block Brussels to block the country”.

The VB's lead candidate there is Johan Demol. A former police commissioner in the Schaarbeek district, Demol was suspended when his right-wing extremist past was uncovered.

“We will conquer Brussels from within—and then let Belgium fall apart,” announced Demol at the end of last year. The bi-lingual Demol is appealing to both Dutch and French-speaking voters in Brussels on a right wing law-and-order ticket, promising “hard measures” against immigrants.

The VB are seeking to become the largest single Flemish party in the city legislature. Although Flemish parties in largely francophone Brussels only command about 10 percent of the seats, the law dictates that the majority Flemish party must also be represented in the city government. All measures passed by the city's government have to receive a majority of both linguistic groups, so VB could effectively have a veto.

In an “independent Flanders with Brussels as its capital”, even French-speaking *Bruxellois* would be second class citizens unless they could show a parent of Flemish origin. “The Vlaams Blok considers the frenchification of Brussels a temporary phenomenon. As the capital of an independent

Flanders, Brussels will, in the long run, regain its Flemish identity.”

How this will be achieved is indicated by Franck Verhecke's statement, “For now we are wearing silk gloves, but our fists are hard as iron.”

In 1989, the mainstream parties established what they dubbed a *cordon sanitaire*, and agreed not to allow the VB to enter government at any level. However, party leader Verhecke boasts that “behind the scenes, the other parties have been talking to us for a long time, the *cordon sanitaire* is crumbling.”

Elements of the VB's policies have been adopted by most of the mainstream parties. Advocating harsher asylum and immigration laws is no longer the sole preserve of the fascists.

Mark Michels, who coordinates the anti-fascist group “Extreme right—no thanks”, blamed the 11-year federal coalition government of Christian and Social Democrats for the rise in support for the fascists. “The politicians have left too many problems to fester”.

In ensuring that Belgium met the criteria for adopting the euro, the coalition government headed by Christian Democrat Jean-Luc Dhaene has pushed through massive cuts to ensure that the Belgian budget met the prescribed level of state debt and expenditure. Coupled with the destruction of sections of traditional industry, this has fostered social misery.

Unable to offer any progressive solution to the pressing social problems gripping sections of workers and the middle class, the ruling parties—social and Christian democratic alike—have created the soil in which the Vlaams Blok sows its politics of hate.



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