

Belgium: Teenager's murder exploited for right-wing agenda

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8 May 2006

The brutal murder of a Brussels teenager three weeks ago continues to reverberate through Belgian politics. It has prompted the largest demonstration in Belgium in the last 10 years while this week a petition demanding greater public safety, signed by 255,000 people, was handed to Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt by friends of the dead youth. A row has also broken out between the judiciary and the Ministry of Justice over public criticisms made by the minister.

The murder has also highlighted a political crisis over the attitude towards migrant workers, with sections of the media stoking racial tensions and the Liberal government using the crime to justify a more aggressive law-and-order programme.

Seventeen-year old Joe van Holsbeeck was stopped by two youths at Brussels Central station at 4 p.m. on Wednesday, April 12. The station was already busy with commuters returning home. Having asked directions, the youths then demanded his mp3 player. When he refused, they stabbed him five times before running off. No one on the station came to the aid of the dying man.

The attack was captured on closed circuit TV, images from which were released by police one week after the killing. The youths who committed the crime had dark skin and hair, prompting the judiciary to declare that the culprits were North Africans.

For two weeks this was reported as fact in the Belgian press, with sections of the media portraying the killing as part of a Moroccan and Turkish crime wave across the capital. One journalist wrote of "the dominance of murdering, thieving and raping Vikings from North Africa." When a cardinal blamed the murder on materialism and "indifference in Belgian society" another journalist disagreed, saying it had "everything [to do] with a group of North African youths terrorizing

Brussels and the 'indifference' of the authorities to eradicate this scourge."

In fact, the main suspects were not North Africans but two Polish youths. The Brussels Federal Police formally apologised for having made the misleading suggestion that the murderers were Africans. Laurette Onkelinx, the minister of justice, demanded that the Brussels judiciary also apologise for having stigmatised "an entire section of the population." Investigating magistrates have refused, however, on the grounds that their initial statements to the press were based on witness statements. In protest the Brussels magistrates said that they would no longer be issuing public statements.

This did not emerge until after Joe van Holsbeeck's funeral, and after a demonstration against "senseless violence" called by Brussels MP Fouad Ahidar. The Silent March was attended by some 80,000 people. The Belgian rail service NMBS-SNCB offered discounted tickets to the demonstration from anywhere in the country.

Verhofstadt had called on politicians not to make political capital out of the murder and requested MPs not to attend Joe van Holsbeeck's funeral or make public statements about it. The government appealed for "calm and serenity."

Whilst objecting to the scapegoating of Muslims, Imams in Brussels called on their congregations to turn over any information they might have to the police. A week after the murder, Said Dakkar of the Brussels Association of Mosques announced, "Those who know [the killers] must ... make public their identity." The Imams' public declaration against violence was intended to appease right-wing critics, but amounted to an admission of collective guilt.

Similarly, Ahidar had called his demonstration

against violence, but said that van Holsbeeck's murder "stinks of racism." He accused a "growing group of criminal Moroccan and Turkish youths" of going after "victims who look like infidels."

Ahidar was not alone in promoting this line. Senator Jean-Marie Dedecker, from Verhofstadt's own Flemish Liberal Party (VLD), was censured by the government because of his comments in the Flemish daily *De Standaard*. In an op-ed piece, Dedecker wrote that the police "look the other way in order to avoid being accused of racism" but that they "behave in exactly the opposite way when they suspect decent citizens of some misdemeanour."

When Verhofstadt accused him of "inciting hostilities," Dedecker explained that he felt that this position was the only way of opposing Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest—VB), a right-wing party calling for the secession of the economically dominant Dutch-speaking north of the country. VB was previously Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc), until judges ruled that that was an openly racist party. (Vlaams Blok's programme included ending new immigration, and repatriating north Africans). To avoid further legal penalties, the party changed its name.

The VB has been able to secure over a quarter of the vote in the Dutch-speaking region. It is stridently demagogic on questions of law and order, playing up social anxieties to promote its economic programme. Barely a week after the death of Joe van Holsbeeck, Marc Joris, a VB councillor in East Flanders, declared, "There is no proof that societies are safer when citizens are not allowed to carry arms." He said that Belgians arm themselves because they do not feel protected by the police.

In essence, Dedecker's position is that the only way to combat VB is by adopting its politics. Although Verhofstadt was quick to move against the senator on this occasion, he has himself previously called for dialogue with VB in order to expose their "simplistic weakness." In practice, this means taking up a cross-party position on law and order dictated by extreme right-wing elements.

In the aftermath of the Silent March a cabinet meeting discussed measures to tackle youth crime. These involve ensuring that street crime should always result in legal action, recruiting 250 additional neighbourhood "wardens" and increasing police presence in Belgian

cities. Government ministers have also finally approved plans for a new youth detention centre for 200 offenders. This had been much debated over the last few years.

Joe van Holsbeeck's friends and family have tried to prevent his murder being portrayed in racial terms. Van Holsbeeck was described as an anti-racist. When Polish Catholics in Brussels held a special mass, Joe's father said, "They don't have to apologise. Those two young men are guilty, not the Polish people." One friend said Joe would have been "horrified if his death were to be exploited by a political party." However the petition launched by his friends, whilst motivated by a desire for public safety, will undoubtedly be used to justify greater police powers.

When it was finally revealed that the arrested youth were Polish, the racist backlash changed direction. Journalists suggested that the suspects should have been deported in a clampdown on migrant workers. One of the youth, awaiting extradition from Poland, had worked renovating houses in Brussels with members of his family before being drawn into drugs and crime. Working away from home, often separated from their families, young workers face huge pressures. As one Polish woman, quoted in *De Standaard*, put it: "Youth are the main victim of migration."

Belgium has a large number of migrant workers, many of whom are unable to get papers and live a marginalised existence. May 1 in Brussels saw a demonstration of about 300 migrant workers chanting, "We are workers, give us papers." In many cases they would face desperate conditions if they were deported, but without papers their existence is equally hazardous.



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