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**The Party of the People versus the Cultural Elite:
populism and nationalism
in Flemish radical right rhetoric about artists**

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Abstract

This article discusses the interplay between nationalism and populism in the Flemish (North-Belgian), Vlaams Bloc/Vlaams Belang's (VB), populist radical right rhetoric about expressive culture. Building on a discourse theoretical analysis of three extensive case studies (concerts against the VB, the opposition between the VB and the Flemish theatres, and the VB's criticism of the Flemish National Songfest), and a number of other controversial moments the article shows that nationalist and populist discourse play different roles in VB rhetoric about expressive culture. Radical and exclusionary nationalism is the ideological core of the VB's views on culture and of its relationships with artists. Populism is a strategy the party uses to position itself as the political representative of the people, to present its nationalist demands as the will of the people, and to dismiss opposition to the party and its radical and exclusionary nationalist ideology as elitist.

The VB's 'positive' populist strategy of associating with popular Flemish artists and genres, the article shows, has only had limited success. By contrast, the party's 'negative' populist strategy of criticising artists as an elite has been instrumental in delegitimising the strong, mainly anti-racist, resistance from the part of artists against the VB. It has reduced artistic resistance to the VB and its ideology to support of the political elite. And it has presented artists themselves as an elite that is completely out of touch with the ordinary people who suffer from multicultural society. The VB's nationalist-populist rhetoric about expressive culture has thus contributed to the construction of the antagonism that is central to its populist radical right politics: the antagonism between on the one hand the anti-Flemish and multiculturalist political, cultural, media, and intellectual elite and on the other hand the people and the radical and exclusionary Flemish nationalist VB as the party of the people.

Contributor Note

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Introduction

The radical right has been a major political player in Belgian politics for almost three decades now. Flanders, the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, was confronted with the electoral breakthrough of the radical right party VB¹ in the late 1980s, and saw the party enjoy continuous electoral gains until the mid 2000s.² Expressive culture has been one of the arenas in which the discursive struggle between the VB and its opponents has been fought out, with recurring controversies about cultural policy and artistic freedom, and with artists and media celebrities taking a stand against and, very occasionally, in favour of the VB. Artists have been among the most vocal critics of the VB and its ideology. Belgium has seen concerts against the VB; songs denouncing racism and defending ethnic-cultural diversity; theatre plays reflecting on Flemish radical right collaboration with Nazi Germany; and artists and media celebrities speaking out against the VB on numerous occasions. The VB, for its part, has vehemently criticised artists – especially those artists that spoke out against the VB or were explicitly critical of its radical and exclusionary nationalism. Party militants disrupted Willem Vermandere's performance of his 'Bange blanke man' (Scared white man), at the 1992 Flemish national holiday celebrations; the party

continuously denounced the Flemish theatres for their multiculturalist, anti-Flemish and elitist programme; and 'reminded' popular artists performing at pro-tolerance and pro-Belgian concerts in open letters that many of their fans were VB voters and would not appreciate being told off. The VB has also attempted to forge ties with artists and had some successes, but largely failed. All things considered, the VB's relation to artists has been markedly negative and antagonistic.

Academic analyses of the VB have paid very little attention to culture in the sense of *expressive* culture, 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams 1983: 90), (I will henceforth simply speak of culture to refer to expressive culture). There are some references to the VB's views on cultural policy and to the party's relation with artists in investigative journalistic or semi-academic works about the VB (e.g. Gijssels 1992; Spruyt 1995, 2000, 2006), and in broader analyses of cultural policy in Flanders (De Pauw 2007). Next to this, artists and cultural critics have reflected on the VB, and on the role of art in resisting radical right politics. But little has been said about for example the VB's use of music, at its party meetings or the party's (complex), connections to radical right subcultures, nor have there been true systematic analyses of VB rhetoric about culture.

This article focuses on a crucial dimension of VB rhetoric about culture: the use of a populist strategy to legitimise its radical and exclusionary nationalist demands as representing the will of the ordinary people, and to simultaneously discredit as elitist artistic criticism of the VB and cultural productions that deviate from the VB's

¹ Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc), renamed Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), in 2004 after a conviction for racism.

² In the mid 2000s, an electoral downfall set in that reduced the party to around 5 per cent of the vote in the 2014 regional, federal and European election. This demise had various causes, but the main cause was the ascendancy of another, more moderate right-wing and Flemish nationalist party.

nationalist ideas. The article builds on a discourse theoretical analysis of three extensive case studies (concerts against the VB, the opposition between the VB and the Flemish theatres, and the VB's criticism of the Flemish National Songfest), and a number of other controversial moments to show how nationalism and populism have been combined in VB rhetoric about culture. After brief sections on the basic assumptions of discourse theory and the principles of discourse theoretical analysis, the next two sections define populism and nationalism as distinctive discourses. Using this distinction between populism and nationalism, the following sections then go on to discuss the VB's nationalist views on culture and its connections to Flemish nationalist (sub)cultural strategies, and the different ways in which the party has combined its nationalist ideological core with a populist strategy in the context of culture.

Discourse theoretical analysis as the study of articulation

The current discourse theoretical analysis (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007), of how VB rhetoric about artists and culture combines populism and nationalism hinges on the notion of *articulation*. Articulation takes up a central position in the poststructuralist and post-Marxist discourse theory formulated by Laclau and Mouffe (2001/1985), and further developed by the so-called Essex school (see Glynn and Howarth 2007). Discourse theory sees politics as a discursive struggle for hegemony, whereby hegemony is seen as the (always partial and temporary), fixation of meaning (Torfing 1999: 36-38). In studying political projects' attempts to fix meaning, discourse theory studies

how political practices produce a structure of meaning through the articulation of discursive elements (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 3).

In discourse theory, with its focus on how meaning comes about through meaning relations, articulation refers to bringing together discursive elements in a particular way to construct a more or less original structure of meaning. Any discourse builds on (elements of), existing discourses. In this fashion, political projects are always connected to political history and to the broader political context within which they operate. Each politics is necessarily tied in to the existing and more encompassing structures of meaning it draws on, reproduces, alters, and contests. The agency of political actors lies in the fact that articulations are contingent relations of 'no necessary correspondence' (Laclau 1990: 35), – which discursive elements are combined is a matter of political strategy and choice. Moreover, the process of articulation changes the meaning of the elements it articulates (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105, 113-114). For example, the notion of 'national pride' acquires a very different meaning when articulated in the rhetoric of a left-wing rhetoric opposed to supranational economic policies than when articulated in a radical right-wing rhetoric opposed to immigration.

It is useful to introduce an analytical distinction between the terms rhetoric and discourse here, in order to avoid the common confusion that comes with using the term discourse on different levels of abstraction. I will use the terms rhetoric and discourse, respectively, for the discursive practices under study and the more encompassing and more stable structures of meaning those

discursive practices draw on, contest, and reproduce (see Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 140). This article studies how VB *rhetoric* about artists and culture articulates populist and nationalist discourses. In line with discourse theoretical analysis' more macro approach to the study of discourse compared to other discourse studies approaches (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007), it takes into account the discursive dimension of a wide range of VB practices related to culture. This includes written and spoken language but also cultural performances. To empirically identify the central elements of VB rhetoric about culture and study their articulations, the discourse-theoretical framework is combined with critical discourse analytical strategies (Fairclough 2003; Wodak et al. 2009), and with the procedures of qualitative content analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Wester 1995).

Nationalism as a discourse

In order to analyse how the VB articulates populism and nationalism in its rhetoric about culture and in its relations with artists, let me start by theoretically disentangling nationalism and populism as distinctive discourses (see De Cleen 2016 for a more extensive discussion).³ Because the theoretical overlap between populism and nationalism is chiefly found in definitions of populism, I first define nationalism and then move on to define populism in a way that clearly distinguishes it from nationalism.

³ For clarity of argument I start with the conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism, but this distinction is actually the result of an iterative process that included theory and the empirical analysis of VB rhetoric about culture.

Nationalism is *a discourse structured around the nodal point⁴ nation, envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through an in/out (member/non-member), opposition between the nation and its outgroups.*

Nationalism is a discourse that constructs the nation (see Bhabha 1990; Day and Thompson 2004: 13-17; Jenkins and Sofos 1996: 11; Sutherland 2005: 186). This approach moves away from the more traditional search for the essence of the nation (what defines national belonging?), towards the identification of the particularities of the discursive construction of the nation by nationalism.

The starting point for a definition of nationalism as a discourse is the signifier the nation (e.g. Freedon 1998; Sutherland 2005). The centrality of 'the nation' does not mean that nationalists necessarily (exclusively), use the word 'nation' to refer to the national group. Nationalists also often refer to 'the people' (das Volk, el pueblo), for example.⁵ What matters is that nationalist politics are structured around the claim to represent a group constructed in a particular nationalist way. The nation is the 'organising

⁴ Nodal points are the 'privileged discursive points that partially fix meaning within signifying chains' (Torfing 1999: 98), and around which other signifiers within the discourse acquire their meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112).

⁵ Although the terms nation and people are not neatly connected to different traditions of nationalist thought, and both have an ethnic-cultural and civic meaning, nation and people have come to acquire a more political and a more ethnic-cultural meaning respectively (Rémi-Giraud 1996).

principle' (Greenfeld 1992: 7), that makes all different nationalisms nationalist; or in discourse-theoretical terms, the nodal point around which nationalist discourse is structured (see Sutherland 2005: 186). In nationalist discourse, other signifiers – the presence of which is not a necessary for a discourse to be nationalist – such as for example state, land, freedom, and democracy acquire meaning in relation to the signifier nation (see Freedon 1998: 755).

Nationalism is structured around an in/out relation (Dyrberg 2003), with the 'in' consisting of the members of the nation and the 'out' of different types of non-members. As the in/out construction of group identity is not exclusive to nationalism, we need to identify the particular manner in which nationalism constructs 'in' and 'out' (see Day and Thompson 2004: 102-103). Here we can turn to Anderson's (2006), idea of the nation as a 'imagined community'. Although Anderson was concerned 'in an anthropological spirit' (2006: 6), with how the members of a nation imagine themselves as a community, his analysis is very helpful to understand how the nation is discursively constructed through nationalist discourse.

Firstly, the nation is constructed as *limited*: nationalism is first and foremost a representation of the world as made up of *distinct* nations (Anderson 2006: 7). Indeed, 'the nation' can only be constructed through the distinction between one nation and other nations, and between members of the nation and non-members. Secondly, the nation is constructed as a *community*. Whereas to Anderson, community means that the members of the nation actually feel as if they belong together, what matters from a discursive perspective is the discursive construction of the nation as an organic

community that all members of the nation are considered to be part of. Thirdly, the nation is constructed as *sovereign*: it has the rights to take decisions independently and without interference. This becomes most evident in demands for an independent state or sub-state. In nationalism the state's legitimacy depends on its representation of the sovereign nation (see Jenkins and Sofos 1996). Shared time (a shared past, present, and future), and space (a shared territory with borders and certain characteristics), – and the shared language, customs, etc. that follow from this – serve to differentiate ingroup from outgroup, to obscure the (historical), contingency of the nation, and to provide legitimacy for the nation's sovereignty over a territory (Freedon 1998: 752; Wodak et al. 2009: 26).

Populism as a discourse

As a populist party, the VB's rhetoric about culture and its relations to artists are also characterised by a strong populist dimension. Populism is a *discourse structured around the nodal points 'the people' and 'the elite', in which the meaning of 'the people' and 'the elite' is constructed through a down/up antagonism between 'the people' as a large powerless group and 'the elite' as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populists claim to represent 'the people' against a (some), illegitimate 'elite', and construct their political demands as representing the will of 'the people'* (see Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

The definition proposed here focuses on how populism interpellates and mobilises subjects and how it formulates its demands. By looking at populism in

this way, our understanding of populism is formalised: the focus moves away from the precise contents of populism, to *how* it formulates 'those contents – whatever those contents are' (Laclau 2005b: 33). Populism revolves around the antagonistic relation between 'the people' and 'the elite'. Populists bring together different demands and identities in what Laclau and Mouffe (2001), call a 'chain of equivalence' that is symbolised by the signifier 'the people'. What groups different demands and identities together in such a chain – what makes them equivalent – is not something positive they have in common, but that they are all frustrated and endangered by the elite (see Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Across the wide diversity of populist politics, populists mobilise and simultaneously stimulate or reinforce dissatisfaction with 'the elite' for its (real and/or perceived), frustrating or endangering of a number of demands, interests or identities (see Stanley 2008: 98). Who is part of this illegitimate elite and why depends on the political programme of the populist political actor in question. 'The elite' is a flexible notion that has usually included national and international politicians, parties and institutions, but also business people, judges, academics, intellectuals, and – most relevant to our purposes in this article – artists and media professionals.

Through its focus on how populism discursively constructs 'the people' in opposition to 'the elite', this definition goes against the tendency to take for granted (to a more or lesser extent), the existence of the category 'the people' in definitions of populism as a style of political communication or performance that speaks about 'the people' and/or appeals to 'the people' (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Kazin 1995). It also

highlights more explicitly the construction of 'the people' than conceptualisations of populism as a set of ideas (a (thin), ideology), about what the role of the people and the elite in politics should be (e.g. Canovan 2008; Mudde 2007; Stanley 2008). By moving away from the notion of ideology to a focus on how populists discursively construct and claim to represent 'the people', a discourse-theoretical conceptualization also takes into account more thoroughly the crucial *strategic* dimensions of populism. Parties and movements can turn to populism as a strategy to acquire power, even when they were originally not populist. And they do not necessarily remain populist once they are in power. Finally, populism is not necessarily opposed to the existence of the elite per se, but against a current and illegitimate elite. Indeed, populists strive to replace this elite as power holders using the claim that they *would* represent the people-as-underdog.

In spatial terms, populism is structured around a vertical, down/up axis that refers to power, status and hierarchical position (Dyrberg 2003; Laclau 1977). Populist rhetoric often refers to these down/up identities with the words 'the people' and 'the elite' but also uses a range of other labels. What is crucial is that populists claim to speak for 'the ordinary people', 'the little man', 'the common man', 'the man in the street' as a down-group, and reject 'the establishment', 'the political caste', 'the ruling' as an up-group for not representing 'the people' and for endangering its interests.

This spatial perspective makes the conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism more tangible. Nationalism is a claim to represent the

nation, envisaged as a limited community and constructed through the in/out distinction between the nation (that can also be called people), and its outgroups. Populism is a claim to represent the people as a large and powerless group discursively constructed through the down/up opposition between the people and an illegitimate elite.

Populism, nationalism and the VB as a populist radical right party

Before turning to the VB's rhetoric about culture, let me say a few words about nationalism and populism in VB politics in general. The VB is one of the prime and core members of the populist radical right 'party family', alongside parties such as the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs and the French Front National. Following Mudde, I speak of populist radical right parties to make clear that we are dealing with a historically specific manifestation of an older and more encompassing radical right tradition (Mudde 2007: 24; Mény and Surel 2000: 12). Indeed, some of the radical right parties that are populist today (including the VB), started out as explicitly elitist parties (and retain some of that quality). Radical right politics are characterised by exclusionary nationalism (Betz and Johnson 2004; Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007), authoritarianism (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007), and conservatism (Betz and Johnson 2004). From the 1980s, many radical right parties increasingly turned to a populist strategy (Rydgren 2005).

Nationalism – in its radical, ethnic and exclusionary variant, sometimes called 'nativism' (Mudde 2007), or 'ethno-nationalism' (Rydgren 2007), – is the core of radical right ideology. This certainly

holds true for the VB, which is one of the heirs of the radical right wing of a long Flemish nationalist tradition and remains first and foremost a nationalist party. The VB originated as a cartel for the 1978 elections of two radical right Flemish nationalist splinter parties that broke away from the Volksunie (People's Union), and became a party in its own right in 1979. Some degree of nationalism is present in most Flemish political parties, including those that are not considered 'nationalist'. Compared to other parties, however, the VB uses a more closed and ethnic definition of the Flemish people – as an ethnic nationalist party the VB uses the term 'volk' ('people'), rather than nation (see Rémi-Giraud and Rézat 1996). It also has more radical nationalist demands than other nationalist voices in Flanders. The VB discursively constructs a 'Flemish people' through opposition to two main outgroups: Francophone Belgians and people of immigrant descent, especially Muslims. Based on an ethnic-cultural definition of the Flemish people, it urges for an independent Flemish state and for a very strict immigration policy that is based on an outright rejection of ethnic-cultural diversity.

The VB has not always been a populist party. The party's criticism of the political party system was originally much closer to an elitist radical right criticism of parliamentary democracy (Mudde 2000: 112-113). Moreover, the party saw and to some extent still sees itself as an 'ethnically committed vanguard' (Swyngedouw and Ivaldi 2001: 6), that should lead the Flemish people to an independent Flemish state. In its original programme, the VB also stated to have as a goal 'to build up a hierarchically structured community connected to nature and people' (VB 1979). To the VB, 'the Flemish people' is an ethnic group

with an essential identity that is insufficiently aware of its own identity and needs to be made conscious of its identity by a nationalist vanguard and elite in order to become a politically conscious actor, to become a *nation*.

Starting in the mid-1980s and especially in the 1990s the explicitly elitist and anti-parliamentarian character of the party increasingly gave way to a populist strategy. The party increasingly defined its political opponents as an elite and started speaking of itself as 'the party of the people' ('Partij van het volk'), and 'the voice of the people' ('De stem van het volk'), (see Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2000).

The VB's populism is not limited to criticism of its political opponents. The party also criticises academics, journalists, and artists as an illegitimate elite. By lumping all kinds of opponents together under the label the elite, the VB constructs an antagonism between itself as the representative of the people and all its political opponents (in whatever societal field they are situated), as an illegitimate elite. It is to the analysis of this populist rhetoric about artists and particularly to the way it combines nationalism and populism that I now turn.

Empirical material

The current analysis draws its empirical material mainly from three large case studies. Each case study focused on cultural performances that became the site for strong discursive struggle between the VB and other political actors. These included artists, but also other political parties, journalists and civil society organisations. For each case all relevant empirical material was

collected for specific periods of major discursive struggle, and a less broad range of material was collected for a much broader period. The first case study focused on the Flemish National Songfest (with a focus on 1978-1978 and 1991-1995), an annual nationalist mass singing event where the VB and other nationalist parties and organizations meet (see De Cleen 2015). The second case study looked at discussions about the subsidised Flemish theatres in Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent (with a focus on 1998 and 2005-2006), (see De Cleen 2013). The third case study dealt with the 2006 '0110 concerts for tolerance, against racism, extremism, and gratuitous violence' (with a focus on artists' role in antiracist mobilisation in 1991-1992 and in 2005-2006), (see De Cleen 2009; De Cleen and Carpentier 2010). Beyond these three cases, the current analysis also draws on less in-depth analyses of VB external communication and parliamentary and city council interventions. This amounts to a total of 3584 texts. Table 1 (below) indicates the total number of texts per case for the five main kinds of material that were used in the analysis.⁶

Culture as national and nationalist

Nationalism and populism play different roles in the VB's rhetoric about culture and in the party's relations with artists. In this first analytical section I briefly discuss how culture acquires meaning in the VB's radical and exclusionary nationalism and how the party has been connected to the cultural practices and

⁶ For each case study, empirical material also included a large number of texts produced by the VB's opponents, but as these opponents are less central to the present article these texts are not included in this table.

strategies of the Flemish nationalist subculture. This nationalist rhetoric about culture and these nationalist (sub)cultural strategies, I argue in a second section, have often had very little to do with populism and have even been opposed to the culture of the ordinary people. As the VB developed its populist strategy, however, its relation to culture

also acquired a populist dimension. Usually, the party uses populism to legitimise its nationalist demands and to fend off critique of its exclusionary nationalism. Sections three to eight discuss the different facets of this intricate articulation between nationalism and populism.

	VB external communication (party magazine, brochures, website texts, books, press releases)	Flemish parliament, national parliament and senate, and Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels city council debates, questions, and interpellations	Mainstream newspaper and magazine articles	Television programmes with VB interviewees	Articles in the right-wing Flemish nationalist weekly <i>'t Pallieterke'</i> ⁷
Flemish National Songfest	126	10	540	0	193
Theatres	33	58	399	2	12
0110 concerts	93	0	570	4	10
Non-case material	325	1209	0	0	0
Total	577	1277	1509	6	215

Table 1

⁷ *'t Pallieterke* was founded in 1945 for a readership of Flemish nationalists that had been involved in the collaboration with Nazi Germany during WWII. Whilst independent of the VB and sometimes critical of the party, it has traditionally been close to the VB.

The VB being at its very heart a radical Flemish nationalist party, the party mainly sees culture in nationalist terms. To the VB, (expressive) culture is an expression of Flemish national identity – of Flemish culture in the sense of ‘a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general’ (Williams 1983: 90). And expressive culture is also a nationalist tool to strengthen and protect that identity against the culture of outgroups of the nation (see Leerssen 1999).

This becomes visible, first of all, in the party's views on cultural policy. As linguistic homogeneity is central to the VB's Flemish nationalism (and Flemish nationalism in general), the VB's interventions about culture have often been about promoting the Dutch-speaking character of culture in Flanders and resisting culture in other languages. As a party for which the resistance against the bilingual Belgian state is central, the VB opposes the presence of the French language in the Flemish cultural field. Its resistance to French goes as far as opposing the subtitling of Flemish theatre productions or bilingual programme brochures for cultural institutions. The party has also resisted the dominance of Anglophone popular culture – for example when demanding quota for Dutch-spoken music and a focus on Dutch-spoken television programmes on the Flemish public broadcaster – but this resistance to English became less outspoken throughout the party's development. The VB's opposition to ethnic-cultural diversity also has a linguistic component – the party is opposed to culture in the languages of ethnic-cultural minorities – but there is a strong ethnic component to it as well. The party has opposed government subsidies for culture made by, for, or in collaboration with ethnic-

cultural minorities, even if this is in Dutch.

The VB's associations with artists have primarily been a matter of Flemish nationalism as well. In contrast to some other European radical right parties, the VB has relatively less sustained and clear ties to radical right youth subcultures such as skinheads. Of major importance, by contrast, is the much more traditional Flemish nationalist subculture (with a much older membership). As the heir of the radical right wing of the so-called Flemish Movement, the party remains connected to this network of Flemish nationalist extra-parliamentary organisations and pressure groups. The Flemish Movement played a crucial role in the foundation of the VB in the late 1970s as an ideological breeding ground and as the basis from which to draw political personnel, militants, and voters. The Flemish Movement became less important to the party as its electorate widened far beyond this nationalist core, its financial basis was secured through electoral successes⁸, and the Movement lost much of its political significance. Nevertheless, the Flemish Movement was and remains a central cultural reference point for the VB. The party values the role artists play and played in the history of Flemish nationalism. Its party magazine regularly pays homage to (mainly historical), Flemish nationalist composers, singers, and writers, and its parliamentarians and other elected politicians express their support for subsidies for Flemish nationalist culture and commemorations of Flemish nationalist artists. The party has also had a strong presence at the two large

⁸ In Belgium, political parties are mainly financed by the state on the basis of their number of seats.

annual Flemish Movement events (and a long list of smaller events): the Flemish National Songfest and the Yser Pilgrimage. The Songfest is an annual nationalist meeting structured around mass singing, dance and marching band performances, mass singing, and Flemish nationalist political speeches (see De Cleen 2015). Whilst less of a cultural event, the Yser Pilgrimage (an annual commemoration of the Flemish soldiers dead during WWI at the river Yser), also includes singing and marching.

Nationalism against popular culture

Nationalism and populism have often been closely connected in the VB's rhetoric about culture, but we need to consider carefully what that means. Because nationalism is the ideological core of VB politics and populism is a matter of strategy, the VB's populist rhetoric is almost always also nationalist. Its nationalist goals, however, have certainly not always been pursued through a populist strategy. The VB's nationalist rhetoric about cultural policy has often been rooted exclusively in a nationalist claim to speak for the Flemish nation and has had very little to do with the populist strategy of speaking in the name of the ordinary people. There is a degree of populism in the way the VB and other Flemish nationalists have opposed Flemish culture to the dominant culture of the Francophone Belgian elite. The opposition between (the expressive cultures of), two ethnic-culturally defined national peoples is articulated in those cases with a populist down/up antagonism. But most of the culture defended by the VB for its national and nationalist importance is far removed from the taste of the 'ordinary people'. The party has also supported subsidies for high culture it considers

Flemish. This has included the Flemish opera, Flemish literature and poetry, and other cultural forms that have little to do with popular culture. And it has opposed certain forms of popular culture. Like others connected to the Flemish Movement, the VB has attached importance to what it considers the cultural emancipation of the Flemish nation; not only by developing 'Flemish' culture and opposing Francophone and Anglophone culture, but also by promoting 'good' and 'decent' culture and opposing 'vulgar' popular culture.

The VB's involvement in the Flemish Movement and its (sub)cultural scene has been part and parcel of its nationalist vanguard strategy. The militant nationalist movement strategies that were crucial to the party's foundation have always remained rather disconnected from the populist strategies it developed later. This also becomes visible on the level of culture. Only few of the artists involved in Flemish nationalist events can be considered popular, in the sense of appealing to the ordinary people. Folk culture is rather more prominent at these events and has more obvious ties to nationalist ideology. The typical 'folk' values of tradition, authenticity and community are central to understanding the political mass singing event that is the Flemish National Songfest (Redhead and Street 1989; Leerssen 1999: 49-54). The VB and other radical Flemish nationalists have also criticised the presence of popular artists and popular genres at Flemish Movement events with the argument that this would divert the movement from its militant nationalist role. For example, the VB rejected the Songfest's attempts to open up to new audiences beyond the traditional Flemish Movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The VB saw the evolution towards a more contemporary

programme that went beyond the nationalist songs, marching and flag-waving characteristic of the (radical), Flemish nationalist subculture as a move away from what it considers the 'vocation' of a nationalist Songfest, as a leading article in the VB Magazine about the 1991 Songfest entitled 'Flemish(?), National(?), Songfest(?)'⁹ exemplifies (see De Cleen 2015).¹⁰

The populism of VB rhetoric about culture

As populism became increasingly central to VB politics, its populist strategy did also extend to the field of culture. For the VB's populist strategy regarding culture, we need to look beyond the party's connections to the Flemish nationalist subculture. Studies on the radical right and culture have tended to focus on radical right subcultures that revolve around radical nationalism and are situated outside of the mainstream. If we turn our attention to the VB as a professionally run populist party, however, populist rhetoric about culture becomes crucial because it contributes to the party's identity as the party of the people and to its electoral appeal.

The 'popular' character of popular culture holds a political potential for populists. The multifaceted meaning of the 'popular' in 'popular culture' is

⁹ Van Hauthem, Joris. 'Vlaams(?), Nationaal(?), Zangfeest(?)'. *Vlaams Blok Magazine* 15, 4 (April 1991), 1.

¹⁰ The VB was also at the heart of a long backstage and sometimes frontstage struggle between more moderate nationalists and separatists at the Yser Pilgrimage, and was the driving force behind the foundation of the Yser Vigil as an separatist and right-wing alternative to the Yser Pilgrimage in 2003.

important here (see Storey 2003). The potential of popular culture for populist politics goes beyond the fact that politicians often associate themselves with artists (and other celebrities), that have a broad appeal in order to feed on their *popularity*. As Street (2000: 77), argues, which artists political actors link up with is connected to their political strategies and to the kind of people they claim to speak for. From this perspective the question whether political actors associate themselves with, say, an opera singer, a rock band, a rapper or a schlager singer becomes politically relevant, for these genres all have their audiences and connotations. For the same reasons, it becomes relevant what kind of artists a political actor criticises. For populists, associating themselves with popular culture – in the sense of the 'low' culture of the ordinary people, rather than merely culture that has a broad appeal – and opposing elite (high), culture can be a way to stress their proximity to ordinary people and distance themselves from the elite.

The VB's populism was never merely a matter of associating with popular culture and criticising elite culture *per se*. The distinction between popular and elite culture offers potential for populist politics, but there is nothing mechanical about the relation between populist parties and popular and high culture. We have already seen that the VB does not dismiss just any form of high culture (it is positive towards high culture it considers relevant to the Flemish nation), and that the party does not celebrate just any kind of popular culture (it has been quite critical of Anglophone popular culture). Populism is a *political* logic used by very different political parties to voice very different demands. Which popular artists they associate with or which artists they criticise as an illegitimate elite depends

on their political ideology. The populism of the VB's rhetoric about culture can only be understood if we consider how it is mainly used to legitimise nationalist demands and to delegitimise opposition to the party and its radical and exclusionary nationalism. The remainder of this article will consider this interplay between nationalism and populism in more detail.

The VB's failure to forge ties with popular Flemish artists (and its populist explanation)

The VB's populist strategy with respect to culture has had a 'positive' and a 'negative' dimension. The 'positive' strategy has consisted of forging ties with popular artists and linking up with popular genres of culture. As the party's populism developed, the VB has in some cases presented itself as the defender of the cultural needs of ordinary people against an elitist cultural policy. The ordinary people whose cultural needs the VB has claimed to represent are exclusively Flemish ordinary people, and the popular culture the VB has defended has been a sub-category of national culture. For example, the party has demanded that more subsidies go to 'accessible' Dutch-speaking theatre. Subsidised culture, the party has argued, should reflect the cultural preferences of the taxpayer (a concern the VB does not have when it comes to national(ist), culture). Defending the place of Flemish popular culture in cultural policy, however, has never been a central concern of the party.

The VB has also invited Flemish popular artists to its party meetings, interviewed them in its party magazine, and has otherwise attempted to associate with them. But all this has only had limited

success, and the VB's connections to artists have largely remained restricted to the Flemish nationalist (sub)cultural scene discussed above. Nevertheless, a limited number of popular artists has publicly spoken out in favour of the VB or has performed at the party's meetings. This has included a number of schlager singers. The Dutch-spoken character of the genre of schlager fits well with the VB's nationalism. And schlager's outspoken lowbrow image and its association with fairs, countryside festivities, and (older), lower class audiences (see Simon 2000: 89), fits well with its populist strategy.

Several of the artists that performed at VB party meetings and were criticised for it denied that they actually supported the VB politically by claiming that they 'would perform for any political party that paid them' (and they usually did not speak out explicitly about any political issues). Apart from a more general reluctance on the part of artists to engage with party politics, it can safely be assumed that the societal criticism of the VB also goes some way in explaining the reluctance of artists to perform for the VB, let alone explicitly speak out in favour of the party.

The case of De Strangers is telling here. On 22 November 1992 the Antwerp band performed at the party's Nationalist Convention in Antwerp.¹¹ To perform for the VB at a meeting celebrating the anniversary of its 1991 election victory in a context of broad and strongly mediated resistance against the party, was quite a statement, and the VB stressed this: 'The popular band does not

¹¹ VB (1997), *Vlaams Blok: 20 jaar rebel*. [20 years a rebel] Brussel: Vlaams Blok, 103; N.N. 'Nationalistische conventie: groot succes' [Nationalist convention: a big success]. *VBM* 16, 12 (December 1992), 12.

take part in the boycott and witch hunt against the Vlaams Blok'.¹²

De Strangers could be said to culturally represent ordinary people in Antwerp. The band was known for its songs with humorous and political lyrics in Antwerp dialect sung over the melodies of popular international hits.¹³ Amongst other songs, at the VB's Nationalist Convention the band performed its version of the Flemish children's song 'Jantje zag eens pruimen hangen' (Little Jan once saw prunes hanging). In this song De Strangers sing a number of mock foreign language versions of the lyrics to the children's song. One of the verses went like this: 'We are not racist at all, because we think it is normal that we also perform it [the song] in our national third language'.¹⁴ This was followed by a

¹² N.N. 'Nationalistische conventie: groot succes'. *Vlaams Blok Magazine* 16, 12 (December 1992), 12.

¹³ Before its performance for the VB, the band had already repeatedly shown its sympathy for Flemish autonomy and had been critical of immigration. The band recorded songs such as 'Egmont Disco' (referring to the Egmont Treaty that was the cause for a radical right split from the Volksunie), and A Mr. Brel (a reaction against Jacques Brel's 'Les Flamengants', a song critical of Flemish nationalism). De Strangers were also close to the Flemish Movement in their criticism of Western opposition to Apartheid South Africa ('Zuid Afrika'). As immigration became a societal issue, De Strangers also released songs about the presence of Moroccan immigrant in the Antwerp district of Borgerhout ('Borgeri - Borgerhout - Borgerocco'), and about the 'abuse' of Belgian welfare by immigrants ('Ziekekass' (health insurance provider)), but also songs about the hardship of being a guest worker in Belgium ('De gastarbeider' (The guest worker)), and of growing up between two cultures ('Ik ben de zoon van ne migrant' (I am the son of a migrant)).

¹⁴ 'Wij zèn hielemol gin rassisten, want we vinden het normaal da we't het ook is brengen in ons nationale darde taal'

mock Arabic chant including 'Achmal ach couscous Arab'. The band member singing this part impersonated an Arab with a white cloth over his head. As he starts singing the audience at the VB meeting bood, jeered and whistled.¹⁵

The performance sparked considerable controversy. In a book published by the VB six years later, we can read that:

After their performance, it turns out that De Strangers are not welcome anywhere anymore and their very successful records are not played on any radio station anymore. Speaking of taking the bread out of someone's mouth.¹⁶

The 'media boycott' against De Strangers became a point of reference for the VB to show the disrespect its political opponents of the media elite have for freedom of speech; to explain why so few artists associate themselves with the VB; and even to argue that many artists 'feel obliged' to speak out against the VB out of fear. In an open letter denouncing the participation of artists in the 0110 (1st of October), anti-VB concerts in 2006, VB MP Filip Dewinter stated that:

Evidently I realise very well that the cordon sanitaire¹⁷ does not count only for the Vlaams Belang. Singers, artists, writers, journalists and even

¹⁵ See this part of the performance of De Strangers at the VB's nationalist convention in 1991 at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2i4J73HoXs>

¹⁶ Vlaams Blok (1997), *Vlaams Blok: 20 jaar rebel*. Brussel: Vlaams Blok, 103.

¹⁷ Literally hygienic barrier, an agreement between the other Flemish political parties to not enter into coalitions with the VB.

sportsmen are the victim of it as well. May I give the example of the popular Antwerp band De Strangers who many years ago dared to perform at a Vlaams Belang manifestation. For years, they were boycotted by the public broadcaster, by all sorts of radio stations and by some concert organisers. It is indeed easier to cry with the wolves in the forest and point the finger at the Vlaams Belang than to withstand the pressure of a small group of politically correct artists like Tom Barman, Sioen and Arno [the artists behind the 0110 concerts] who have declared themselves the conscience of Flanders.¹⁸

What we see here is how the party turns the failure of its 'positive' populist cultural strategy into an argument to support its 'negative' populist strategy. The fact that artists are unwilling to support the VB is only further proof of a small elite's battle against the party of the people.

Delegitimising artists' anti-Flemish politics through populism

The VB's 'negative' populist criticism of artists as an elite has been more outspoken and rather more successful than its attempts to associate with popular artists. This has not only been one of the ways for the VB to identify itself as the 'party of the people', but has also been *the* central strategy to counter and delegitimise criticism from the part of artists and media celebrities. It has been a very effective way of undermining

the criticism voiced by artists. And in that way it is a clear example of how the VB has used a populist strategy to turn strong criticism of the party to its advantage.

The VB has aimed its populist criticism mainly at artists that went against the VB or its radical and exclusionary ideology. Nationalism has been at the heart of the VB's frequently antagonistic relation with artists and cultural institutions. Whereas the VB values highly the Flemish nationalist artists that put their art to use in the struggle for an independent Flanders, it formulates vehement populist-nationalist criticisms of the Flemish artists that are critical of (radical), Flemish nationalism or refuse to play what the VB considers their national role – to express Flemish national identity and to use culture as a tool to strengthen that identity.

Some of this populist-nationalist criticism has been aimed at artists' defence of the Belgian state. For example, the VB lamented the 'cultural elite's' support for 'the regime' at the 2009 and 2010 Belgavox concerts 'for more solidarity and dialogue in Belgium' (organised in a context of increasing political tensions between Francophone and Dutch-speaking political parties). The party's articulation of nationalism and populism has been even stronger in its opposition to artists' support for ethnic-cultural diversity and their rejection of the VB's racism – which has also structured broader societal resistance to the VB (see Blommaert and Verschueren 1994; Detant 2005, Van Aelst 2000). For example, the 2006 0110 concerts 'for tolerance' one week before the municipal elections were dismissed as an elitist attack on the party of the people. The VB has also opposed all kinds of culture that it considers

¹⁸ Dewinter, Filip. 'Dewinter schrijft open brief aan artiesten' [Dewinter writes an open letter to artists]. 6 July 2006. Downloaded from filipdewinter.be.

multiculturalist, even when this did not go against the VB explicitly. This kind of critique has prominently been aimed at the Flemish theatres. The three largest subsidised Flemish theatres (in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent), have produced quite some plays reflecting on ethnic-cultural diversity and/or made by people with a migration background. The VB has particularly targeted the Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (Royal Flemish Theatre), in multilingual Brussels, for how it positioned itself as a Flemish theatre that is open to the entire city and its diverse populations. In this critique the VB combined its anti-Belgian resistance against openness towards French-speakers with its anti-multicultural rejection of openness towards people of foreign descent.

Artists in support of the Belgian and multiculturalist regime

A central element of the party's populist strategy to delegitimize explicit artistic resistance to the VB is to present these as political propaganda tools used by the traditional political parties in their struggle against the VB. By describing them as nothing more than camouflaged election propaganda, the VB has fit the 0110 concerts and other large-scale anti-VB mobilizations into the populist antagonism between the VB as the party of the people and the political elite. For example, in an open letter to the artists participating in the 0110 concerts, Filip Dewinter called the concerts 'a covert political meeting'. He wrote that:

It is well known that really all means are suited to halt the rise of the Vlaams Belang. To that end the traditional parties are preparing all weapons to attack our party. On October 1st, one week before the

local elections, a number of Flemish artists are organizing a real concert against the Vlaams Belang in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels.¹⁹

The party continuously stresses the ties that exist between artists and 'the regime'. It describes cultural institutions (and media), as instruments in the hands of the political elite. In some cases, the party refers to political representation on the boards of cultural institutions such as the Flemish city theatres, or to the more general dependence of cultural institutions on political parties for subsidies. But the VB's populist criticism of artists as supporters of the political elite does not depend on such indications of direct political influence. In the VB's populist rhetoric, any artist that speaks out against the VB is automatically supporting the regime. VB senator Gerolf Annemans reacted to a number of artistic initiatives against the VB (including theatre plays and the 0110 concerts), in the run-up to the 2006 local elections in the following way:

What more can I do than formulate the restrained complaint that the art world in Flanders one-sidedly and unanimously condemns the VB as heretic, with that in practice strengthening the cordon sanitaire²⁰ (that intellectual and democratic monstrosity), and de facto per definition and without nuance siding with the governing parties, so with the establishment. The Flemish art world is establishment. It

¹⁹ N.N. 'Concerten voor "verdraagzaamheid"' [Concerts for "tolerance"]. *Actualiteit*, downloaded from vlaamsbelang.be, 4 July 2006, emphasis added.

²⁰ See footnote 17.

marches out against the opposition and serves the powerful.²¹

The logic is as follows: because the VB opposes the political elite made up of the traditional parties, anyone who criticises the VB supports the traditional parties and is therefore part of the elite as well. It makes all criticism of the VB from the part of artists suspicious. Moreover, the VB uses a populist strategy to delegitimize criticism of the VB as undemocratic. Through its populist identification as the party of the people the VB claims the signifier democracy (the party of the people is the democratic party par excellence), and labels opposition to the VB as undemocratic.

A privileged elite against the party of the people

The VB has also denounced artists themselves as an elite. Artists that are opposed to the VB or its nationalism, the VB argues, are elitist because they look down on the ordinary people and are paternalistic in their aims to educate ordinary people. To the kind of knowledge produced by intellectuals (journalists, academics, 'high' artists), and political elites, the VB opposes the 'common sense' truths that can be found with ordinary people. Referring to the intellectual analyses of the VB's electoral breakthrough in 1991, the VB spoke of:

A near endless mob of intellectuals, sociologists, political scientists and others elevated above the people [...] after 24 November felt the need to

raise their un-asked-for voice and finger to give their know-it-all perspective on the political 'earthquake'.²²

In this fashion, the VB reduced the broad alliance against the VB in that period to a limited group of 'radical leftists' that, through their societal positions, have privileged access to media outlets.

Is our country stuck with 90% idiots and 10% good Flemish people of the people [volksmensen]? I do not believe so... According to me we are 99,9 % well-meaning Flemings [...] The other 0,1% is a different matter all together. It would have been no problem of those 0,1% had jobs that have no influence whatsoever in our lives. The truth is that those individuals work for the newspaper, for radio and television, that they write big dossiers for politicians, that they are professors in de humanities, that they play Rock 'n Roll... In short, they are people that live a public life and are offered a platform on every possible occasion to ventilate their old-fashioned nonsense.²³

Moreover, it is artists' (and others'), privileged societal positions that explain their stance towards multicultural society and to the Belgian state, and their resistance to the VB's nationalism. The nationalist-populist claim that its anti-migration stance represents 'what ordinary people think' has been absolutely crucial to VB politics. The

²² Stalmans, Jan [alias for Luk Dieudonné] 'Vaderlandertjes gevraagd'. [Little patriots needed] *Vlaams Blok Magazine* 16, 1 (January 1992), emphasis added.

²¹ Annemans, Gerolf, 'Over kunst en politiek...' [On arts and politics] In *Vlaams Belang Magazine* 3, 12 (December 2006), 3.

²³ Staveaux, Rein. 'Een dam tegen 't multikultureel gezwam'. [A dam against multicultural bullshit] *Vlaams Blok Magazine* 16, 4 (April 1992).

sociological differences between the ordinary people and the elites have been a central element of this argument. The VB has insisted that it is the 'ordinary' Flemish people that suffer the most from multicultural society. They are the ones that live in neighbourhoods that suffer from 'foreigner crime', the VB argues, that have seen mosques constructed in their streets, that have lost their jobs because they were taken by migrants. Simultaneously, the cultural elite's privileged socio-economic status serves to explain why they are so far removed from ordinary people's concerns and fears. For example, the VB has argued that the Flemish theatres' pro-diversity stance as well as their resistance to the VB is due to the privileged societal position of theatre makers as well as theatre audiences. The theatres and their audiences, according to the VB, accept the dominance of French (and other languages), in Brussels and the multicultural reality in the city because of 'a certain form of urban snobbism that has and creates an overly exaggerated idealistic image of city life'.²⁴ They are a 'clique of snobs', 'people who do not have problems in Brussels and live in a protected cultural milieu'.²⁵ The VB opposes this elite's purported idealistic

view on living in the city to the reality of living in a multicultural city for ordinary Flemings, for 'the large majority'. The populist distinction between people and elite allows the VB to locate its radical nationalist truths in the ordinary (Flemish), people, and to dismiss the multicultural and intercultural views of the theatre and its audience as illusions of the privileged few. This protects the VB from the criticism voiced by the theatres and strengthens its identity as party of the people.

The VB has aimed its populist arrows predominantly at theatre makers, alternative rock bands, literary writers, painters, and other artists associated with (high), art or alternative cultural genres. But more 'popular' artists have also been criticised in a populist manner. These popular artists' position on the 'low' end of the field of culture does make integration in populist rhetoric more difficult. Whilst populism is a political logic, the position of artists and genres in the cultural field remains crucial because the cultural low/high position determines how easily and obviously an artist or genre can be fit into the populist logic. It is much easier to dismiss an experimental filmmaker as far removed from the people than a soap actor; and it is far less obvious to denounce a schlager singer as a member of the elite than an opera singer. This became most clear in the 2006 0110 concerts, when a broad range of artists performed against the VB and for tolerance. This also included mainstream pop bands and even schlager singers. These artists were considered the cultural representatives of the ordinary people the VB claims to represent, and it was assumed that among their fans there would be many (potential), VB voters. The party first attempted to distinguish between the

²⁴ Arckens, Erik. Interpellatie tot de heer Bert Anciaux, Vlaams Minister van Cultuur, Jeugd, Sport en Brussel, over het problematisch karakter van het gentrificatieproces in Brussel op sociaal-cultureel vlak [interpellation on the problematic character of the gentrification process in Brussels on a socio-cultural level] *Handelingen Commissie voor Brussel en de Vlaamse Rand*, 29 June 2006.

²⁵ Francis Van den Eynde cited in Hillaert, Wouter, "Ik zou eens Shakespeare willen zien door Shakespeare". De theaterdrang van het Vlaams Belang' [I would like to see Shakespeare by Shakespeare once. The theatre urge of the Vlaams Belang], *Rekto:verso* 19, July-August 2006.

'elitist' alternative artists organising the concerts (Tom Barman of rock band dEUS, chanson singer Arno, and pop-rock singer Sioen), and the popular artists that were 'misled' into performing against the VB. However, as this did not have the desired effect and popular artists did not withdraw, the VB went a step further. In an open letter to the popular artists participating in the concerts, Filip Dewinter stated that:

I am convinced that you as a popular artist want to stand in between and with the people instead of going against the people. I therefore do not doubt your honest and good intentions and am convinced that you will draw appropriate conclusions from my writings.²⁶

When it turned out that these popular artists were not willing to reconsider their involvement in the 0110 concerts, the VB stressed the populist distinction between ordinary people and artists and celebrities. In a speech at a party meeting one day before the 0110 concerts of 1 October 2006, Filip Dewinter attempted to reconfirm the VB's status as party of the people: 'The Vlaams Belang is the party of the Ordinary Flemings and not of the Famous Flemings [Bekende Vlamingen, Flemish celebrities] and we are proud of that'.²⁷ However, the VB remained reluctant to call the popular artists performing at 0110 part of the elite, and

ended up keeping relatively mum about the 0110 concerts. The strength of the discursive connection between certain popular artists and the signifier the people makes the VB more ambiguous and cautious in labelling these popular artists as an elite.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to shed light on the interplay between nationalism and populism in VB rhetoric about culture. The article has shown that nationalist and populist discourse play different roles in VB rhetoric about culture. Nationalism is the ideological core of much VB rhetoric about culture and has been at the heart of the often hostile relations between the VB and artists. Populism is a strategy the party uses to position itself as the party of the people, to legitimate its radical nationalist demands as representing the will of the people, and to delegitimise artists that go against the VB or its nationalist ideology as an illegitimate elite. The intricate articulation of populism and nationalism is absolutely crucial to understanding the VB's politics and the party's success. This articulation has allowed to VB to present its demands for for its Flemish independence and especially its rejection of multicultural society as representing the will of the people, and to delegitimise all kinds of criticism and opposition.

The VB's 'positive' populist strategies towards artists have only half worked. The party has only rarely managed to associate itself successfully with popular artists or popular cultural genres. Its 'negative' populist strategy has been remarkably effective, however, as a reaction to the vehement, mainly anti-racist, resistance from the part of artists

²⁶ Dewinter, Filip. 'Dewinter schrijft open brief aan artiesten'. 6 July 2006. Downloaded from filipdewinter.be

²⁷ Dewinter, Filip. 'Toespraak op de "24 uur van het Vlaams Belang"' [Speech at the 24 Hours of the Vlaams Belang]. 10 October 2006, downloaded from filipdewinter.be.

against the VB. It reduced artistic resistance to the VB and its ideology to support of the political elite. And it has presented artists themselves as an elite that is completely out of touch with the day-to-day concerns of ordinary people who suffer from multicultural society. The VB's nationalist-populist rhetoric about

expressive culture has thus contributed to the construction of the antagonism that is central to its politics: the anti-Flemish and multiculturalist political, cultural, media, and intellectual elite versus the people and the radical and exclusionary Flemish nationalist VB as the party of the people.

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