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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sub-state nationalism and populism: the cases of Vlaams Belang, New Flemish Alliance and DéFI in Belgium

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Abstract This contribution assesses whether populism is inherently embedded in and combined with the ideology of sub-state nationalist parties, using Belgium as a case study. We argue that sub-state nationalist parties tend to emphasize the opposition between a territorial community ('us') versus a dominant center ('them'), a dichotomous view that could overlap with the populist ideology focusing on the opposition between the homogeneous people and the 'corrupt' elite. We compare the policy positions of the three major sub-state nationalist parties that operate in Belgium: the Vlaams Belang, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Democrat Federalist Independent, using their manifestos and membership magazines between 2010 and 2015. We show that the manner in which sub-state nationalist parties combine their stances on territoriality to a populist rationale depends on their relationship to power (government vs. opposition). In doing so, this contribution uniquely relates populism to the territorial dimension of Belgian politics.

Keywords Populism · Sub-state nationalism · Belgium · Political parties

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the territorial dimension of populism, or the populist dimension of sub-state nationalism. More specifically, it analyses whether populism is inherently embedded or not in the discourse and ideology of sub-state nationalist parties and how, using Belgium as a case study.

The literatures on populism and sub-state nationalism largely ignore each other. On the one hand, the literature on populism mainly focuses on criticisms against the national political elite (Mudde 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). In doing so, it is blinded by 'methodological nationalism' (Jeffery and Schakel 2013) and does not take into account multilevel governance and territoriality. On the other hand, the literature on sub-state nationalism, contrary to the radical right or left, tends to ignore insights from populism scholars (Massetti and Schakel 2016; Mazzoleni and Mueller 2017).

This paper theoretically explores the concepts of sub-state nationalism and populism and to what extent they are compatible. Both sub-state nationalism and populism oppose a 'us' to a 'them.' We expect that the manner in which sub-state nationalist parties combine their stances on territoriality to a populist rationale depends on their relationship to power (government vs. opposition).

We compare the policy positions of the three major sub-state nationalist parties that operate in Belgium: the Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*—VB), the New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*—N-VA) and Democrat Federalist Independent (*Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant*—DéFI). We use their manifestos and membership magazines between 2010 and 2015, which provide a more detailed picture of party ideologies and positions. In doing so, this contribution uniquely relates populism to the territorial dimension of Belgian politics.

(Sub-state) nationalism, populism and party politics

(Sub-state) nationalism and populism are complex concepts. However, they can partly overlap and be combined by political parties. Among the many definitions of nationalism, Ernest Gellner's is still one of the most clear and useful: 'Nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983). This definition regards nationalism as a political doctrine or ideology. In the same vein, Hermet regards it as a doctrine developed by political elites to mobilize political support, as a 'tool for a civic-territorial persuasion' (Hermet 1996: 85). It is a tool to create a sense of identity. According to Breuilly (1994), nationalism rests on three basic arguments. First, the nation has an explicit and unique character. This follows a logic of inclusion and exclusion opposing the uniqueness of the nation ('us') to an 'other' to be defined and against which the nation is built (see also Brubaker 1996; Wodak 2009). Second, the interests and values of that nation take priority over the rest. Finally, the nation must be as independent as possible (Breuilly 1994: 2). Consequently, nationalists tend to strive for independent sovereign nation-states (Hobsbawm 1990). When the entities that

are defined by some as nations are not congruent with the state structures, there is ground for conflict. Such nationalism that attacks the political legitimacy of the state in which it operates, and that represents the state as illegitimate and not 'representative' of the nation (Conversi 2002) can be defined as sub-state nationalism.

The concept of populism also generates debates and confusion (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Some use it to refer to the mobilization of heterogeneous social groups by a charismatic leader. According to others, populism can be conceptualized as a thin centered ideology that draws on the image of a redemptive democracy. In this view, populists consider 'the people' as a virtuous and homogeneous group, lacking internal divisions. This conceptualization of the people as one is facilitated as outsiders such as immigrants, other ethnic groups or intellectuals are generally not considered to be part of the people. Neglecting horizontal cleavages within the people makes it easier to create a vertical cleavage between the people and the elite. The elite is also depicted as homogeneous and out of touch with the people's interests. Mudde (2004: 543) for instance defines populism as an 'ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.' As the populist ideology is thin centered, meaning that it is not as comprehensive as for instance liberalism, it can be easily attached to other ideologies. Therefore, other scholars argue that 'referring to the people can hardly be considered as a (new) ideology' (Jagers and Walgrave 2007: 322) and consider populism as a communication style of political actors and as a mobilization strategy, rather than an ideology. We argue that the two are not necessarily incompatible.

In their translation into party politics, both (sub-state) nationalism and populism present similarities. Their substance has been characterized as limited (Freeden 1998; Mudde 2004). While the core concepts remain constant ('the people' vs. 'the elite'; 'us' vs. 'them'—which has led some to argue that they are indeed ideologies), political actors have some leeway as to how they define the contours of these concepts using inputs from other ideologies (which has led others to argue that it is a strategy or communication style). In their discourse, political actors can strategically adapt their content to mobilize their supporters. This has been shown in multiple studies on nationalism (e.g., Danero Iglesias 2015): both nationalism and populism can have an ad hoc content that fluctuates depending on the actors' strategic needs.

Both populism and (sub-state) nationalism can be combined with left- or right-wing stances on the economic dimension. There are notable left-wing (sub-state) nationalist parties, such as the Scottish National Party or Plaid Cymru in the UK, but also the Canadian *Bloc Québécois*. However, most successful nationalist parties in Western Europe are of the radical right, focusing mainly on (ethnic) nationalism, xenophobia and authoritarianism. Some of these, such as the Northern League in Italy (*Lega Nord*—LN) and the VB in Dutch-speaking Belgium, have also been labeled as sub-state nationalist parties (SSNPs) as they strive for an autonomous sub-state. Sub-state nationalist parties (SSNPs), also referred to as (ethno)-regionalist parties, are an integral part of West-European politics (Jeffery 2009: 693; Mazzoleni and Mueller 2017). Through territorial demands and mobilization of ethno-territorial groups in a given state, they can have a profound impact on the state structure

and even the possible survival of states. This dynamic has been visible in an increasing number of Western countries in the past decades, with parties active in Catalonia—Spain (Moreno 2001), Québec—Canada (Simeon and Conway 2001), Flanders—Belgium (Sinardet 2012) and Scotland—UK (McEwen and Petersohn, 2015). SSNPs advocate self-government for a territorially located and ethnically different (language, religion, culture) people (De Winter and Tursan 1998). Populism too can be combined with left- or right-wing stances. In Latin America, most populists are left-wing and also in Europe, populism can be found among radical left-wing parties such as the Greek communist party KKE or the French *Lutte Ouvrière* (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). However, most successful populist parties in Western Europe are of the radical right.

But populism and (sub-state) nationalism can also be combined together (Heinisch et al. 2018 in this special issue). For instance, one often refers to combined radical right nationalism and populism with the label 'populist radical right parties' (PRRPs) (Mudde 2007). Particularly when one looks at sub-state nationalism in terms of political legitimacy, the link becomes clear. To argue for more autonomy, SSNPs can use a nationalist frame (arguing the nation needs to be congruent with the state), an efficiency frame (arguing the sub-state entity is more efficient) or a democratic frame (arguing the sub-state entity is closer to the people) (Sinardet and Morsink 2011). The use of different frames is shown to have an impact on the outcome of the political debate (Dardis et al. 2008). A populist frame is also one that can be used, when the contours of 'us' vs. 'them' overlap: the 'us' referring at the same time to the people (for the populists) and the nation (for the nationalists), and 'them' referring to the elite (for the populists) and the outsiders, the representatives of another ethnic/language group (for the nationalists).

Given the proximity and potential overlap in the dual oppositions, we expect that sub-state nationalist parties to mobilize a populist frame. We also expect that the manner in which sub-state nationalist parties combine their stances on territoriality to a populist rationale will strategically depend on their relationship to power (government vs. opposition) (Table 1).

The populist critique is easier to make for parties in the opposition as they can portray themselves as outsiders more credibly, but this does not mean that parties in power can no longer be populist (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2016). The sub-nationalist message is also easier to convey when in the opposition, as the parties then are not faced with the practical difficulties of the implementation of the sub-nationalist project. When in power at the sub-state level, one should see a reduced level of populism as the party becomes part of the (sub-state) ruling elite, but populism could

Table 1 Overview of the hypotheses

Relation to power	Populism	Sub-state nationalism
In the opposition	+	+
In government at the sub-state level	–	+
In government at the national level	–	–

still be used toward the national elite. As sub-state nationalists consider that their nation is unduly part of a state that is not congruent with the nation, they will almost automatically consider (part of) the state elite as illegitimate to govern the people of the nation. The state elite is considered as illegitimate as it does not represent the people/nation. However, this populism should generally be limited to that part of the political elite that governs at the state level. Political elites present at sub-state level would normally not be considered illegitimate or opposed to the 'people.' The populist discourse of SSNPs can therefore be expected to be limited to the state level. When in power at the national level, sub-state nationalists would face greater barriers to maintain this discourse, due to their commitment and loyalty to their governing partners.

In the empirical part of this paper, we explore to what extent populism and sub-state nationalism are combined among regionalist parties in Belgium. We then analyze whether the relationship to power at the sub-state and the national levels affects this combination.

Data and methods

Following our theoretical conception of sub-state nationalism and populism, our study relies on an analysis of the policy positions of three parties: the Flemish Interests (*Vlaams Belang*—VB), the New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*—N-VA) and Democrat Federalist Independent (*Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant*—DéFI).

Belgium offers a unique setting to analyze the relationship between sub-state nationalism and populism: three sub-state nationalist parties operate in two separate party systems (Deschouwer 2009). There are no state-wide parties in Belgium except for the Radical Left Workers' Party (*Parti du Travail de Belgique/Partij van de Arbeid van België*—PTB-PVDA), as all parties limit their activities to either the Dutch-speaking or the French-speaking electorate. While all parties in Belgium may, to a certain extent, be considered sub-state nationalist parties as they represent and defend the interest of part of the electorate, we focus on these three parties since they clearly emerged on the center-periphery cleavage.

The Flemish Bloc (*Vlaams Blok*—VB) emerged in 1978 out of dissatisfaction with the (now disappeared) Flemish sub-state nationalist People's Union (*Volksunie*—VU). The VU originated after World War II (WWII) on the center-periphery cleavage to defend the interests of Flanders and Flemish as a language and culture. It was not the first party to embody the center-periphery cleavage in a country long dominated by a French-speaking elite (van Haute and Pilet 2006). The interwar period had seen former attempts to convert the Flemish cultural movement into a political force. After WWII, the center-periphery cleavage became again more salient as it intertwined with a shift of the economic balance of power from Wallonia, the former center of industrial revolution in Belgium, to Flanders. The Volksunie entered parliament in 1954 and reached its electoral peak and government participation in the 1970s. The VB originated from the merger of two parties that had split from the VU, criticizing its position considered as too moderate on center-periphery

issues, especially around the negotiation of the Egmont pact, an agreement on a further reform of the Belgian state. From the start, the VB advocated independence for Flanders (De Witte and Scheepers 1997) although it evolved into a modern populist radical right party in the 1980s (Mudde 2000). This evolution lead to an electoral breakthrough in 1991 when the party polled 10.3 per cent in the national elections (van Haute and Pauwels 2016). The party sustained strong electoral support until the mid-2000s. It was sentenced in 2004 by the Court of Appeal of Ghent for violating the anti-racism law, which lead the party to change its name into Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*—still VB). Since then, the party has faced electoral difficulties due to a combination of factors, among which a generational change within the party concomitant with a voters' fatigue from the cordon sanitaire and an increased electoral competition, especially from the N-VA, a party that did not face the same cordon sanitaire strategy (Pauwels 2011; Deschouwer et al. 2015).

The N-VA is also a spin-off of the VU, which disappeared as a party in 2001 because of irreconcilable differences between a more moderate and progressive wing on the one hand and a more radical nationalist and conservative wing on the other. After this, the latter went on to form N-VA (van Haute and Pilet 2006). The actual reason for the split was a renewed disagreement on a state reform agreement, the so-called Lambermont reform. From its creation in 2002, the first article of the N-VA statutes stipulates that the party strives toward an 'independent republic of Flanders, member state of a democratic European Union.' Contrary to the VB, it has not pleaded for immediate unilateral secession, but rather for a gradual process of disappearance of the Belgian state. The 'new' party initially struggled at the polls, jeopardizing its survival (Beyens et al. 2017). The N-VA therefore decided to form an electoral alliance with the Christian Democrats (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams*—CD&V). The alliance performed well but faced irreconcilable tensions on state reform issues when negotiating to form a federal government in 2007, leading up to the end of the cartel. However, the N-VA continued its electoral progress and became the largest party in Flanders in 2014.

DéFI is the successor of the Brussels regionalist party (*Front démocratique des francophones*, or *Fédéralistes démocrates francophones* since 2010—FDF), a Francophone reaction to language laws in 1962–1963. Its program defends a protectionist project, later embedded in a federalist project (van Haute and Pilet 2006). The party was electorally successful in and around Brussels in the 1960s and 1970s, but then faced a marked decline that lead them to conclude an electoral alliance with the French-speaking Liberals (PRL, later MR—Delwit 2017). This alliance sustained the party in Brussels where they enjoyed large successes at the local level. Comparably to what happened with the CD&V/N-VA alliance, the alliance faced tensions on state reform issues when negotiating to form a federal government in 2010–2011, leading up to the party taking back its independence in 2011. Since then, it has solidified its place in the Brussels region but struggles to expand, despite its program calling for a unified French-speaking community in Belgium between the Francophones in Brussels and Wallonia (Pilet and Dandoy 2014).

Our analysis focuses on the policy positions of these three parties between 2010 and 2015. This allows taking into account a variation over time and across the three parties in their relation to power (Table 2) for a maximal test of our

Table 2 Case selection. Variation over time and across parties in their relation to power

Relation to power	Populism	Sub-state national-ism	VB		N-VA		DéFI	
			2010	2014	2010	2014	2010	2014
In government at the sub-state level	–	+	0	0	1	1	0	1
In government at the national level	–	–	0	0	0	1	0	0

hypotheses on the Belgian case. Whereas the VB has been in the opposition at all levels during the entire period, the N-VA has been in government at the sub-state level for the entire period and went from opposition to power at the national level (October 11, 2014), and DéFI went from opposition to power at the sub-state level (July 20, 2014) and has been sitting in the opposition at the national level for the entire period.

Our analysis of the policy positions of these parties relies on a corpus that includes two types of party documents: party manifestos and party magazines. The manifestos were all published for the 2010 federal elections and the 2014 federal, regional and European elections, and their size differs across parties. In 2010, the VB published a 32-page manifesto, the N-VA 70 pages and DéFI (at the time, still in cartel with the French-speaking Liberals) 337 pages (not included in the analysis). For the triple election in 2014, the N-VA and the VB published one singleparty manifesto (respectively, 96 and 40 pages), whereas DéFI published four separate manifestos (Federal: 151 pages, European: 97 pages; Brussels region: 104 pages and Walloon region: 104 pages—total: 456 pages). We also include party magazines for 2014 and 2015. DéFI's magazine is published three times a year, whereas the N-VA produces 10 issues per year and the VB, 12. These two types of documents reflect the positions and discourse of parties toward their two main audiences: their electorate—as the manifesto is published ahead of elections to inform voters about party positions and is a public document—and their supporters—as magazines are sent out to members and affiliates and are internal documents. This large conception of party positions prevents from focusing only on a public discourse that may be 'tamed' to appeal to a larger electorate.

We use a classic content analysis where texts were analyzed by means of a codebook built using an adductive strategy: first, a list of words that refers to populism and nationalism was elaborated by the researchers based on existing research. The codebook for populism was elaborated using Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011). The codebook for sub-state nationalism was elaborated using Danero Iglesias (2013, 2015). These codebooks were then amended by the researchers based on their reading of the corpus: some words were added, while others were suppressed. (The list of suppressed words is available in Tables 3, 4.) Finally, the consolidated list of words was used by the researchers to analyze the entire corpus. The final list of words included in the codebook is presented in Tables 3 and 4. We opted for two separate codebooks as our goal is to investigate to what extent populism and sub-state nationalism are used separately or in combination

Table 3 Codebook populism

English	Dutch (VB—NVA)	French (DéFI)
Anti-democratic	Antidemocratisch, anti-democratisch, ondemocratisch	Antidémocratique, anti-démocratique, non démocratique
Aristocra*	Aristocra*	Aristocra*
Autocra*	Autocra*, Totalitaire	Autocra*
Buddies	Vriend*	(petits) ami*
Capitalis*	Kapitali*	Capitalis*
Cartel*, connection*	Connecti*, cartel*	Réseau*, cartel*, mainmise
Common sense	Gezond verstand	Bon sens
Coopted	*Coöpt*	Coopt*
Corrupt*	Corrupt*, zelfverdienend, postjescultuur	Corrompu, Corruption
Elit*	Elit*	Elit*
Enslave, slave*	Tot slaaf maken, voetvolk	Esclav*
Establishment	Establishment	Establishment, établissement
Eurocra*	Eurocrat*	Eurocrat*
Exploit*	Uitbuit*	Exploit*
Fed up with	Het beu zijn	En avoir marre
Greed	Hebzucht, graai	Cupid*
Guardianship	voogdij	tutelle
Imperialis*	Imperialis*	Impérialis*
Impose	Opleggen	Imposer
Loot	Plunder*	Pill*
Mainstream parties, governing parties	Traditionele partijen, (alle) Vlaamse partijen, Regeringspartijen, Vlaamse politici, Vlaamse regering, Regerend	Partis traditionnels, Partis politiques, Partis du gouvernement, Partis au pouvoir, politisation
Monopoly	Monopolie	Monopole
Oligarch*	Oligarch*	Oligar*

Table 3 (continued)

English	Dutch (VB—NVA)	French (DéFI)
*Plutocra**	*Plutocrat**	*Ploutocrat**
Political class	Politieke klas*	Classe politique
Political games, electoral games	Politieke spelletjes, Electorale spelletjes	(petits) Jeux politiques, électoraliste
Power hungry, power cenacles, power grip	Machtshonger, Machtcenakels, Machtsgreep, Machtsgeile, Machtmisbruik	Soif de pouvoir, Logique de pouvoir, Certitude du pouvoir, Le pouvoir pour le pouvoir
Propaganda	Propaganda	Propagande
Sold to	Uitverkoop	Vendu*
Technocrat*	Technocrat*, bureaucrat*	Technocrat*, bureaucra*
Unelected	*Onverkozen*	*Non-élu**
Us (designating: the people)	Volk, bevolking	Peuple
Them (designating: elite, establishment, mainstream parties)	Zij, hen, hun	Eux

In italics words initially included in the corpus but that were not used in the analysis as they are not mobilized in the corpus

Table 4 Codebook (sub-state) nationalism

English	Dutch (VB–NVA)	French (DéFI)
Belgium	Belg*	Belg*
Belonging	Beho*	Apparten*
Borders (sub-state)	grenzen, grens	Frontière
Community	Gemeenschapszin, gemeenschap	Communauté
Culture	Cultuur, cultureel, culturele	Culture*
Ethnic	Etnisch, etniciteit	Ethnique, ethnicité
Glory	Glorie	Gloire
Independence	Onafhankelijk*, soeverein, separatisme	Indépendant*
Language	Taal, taalgrens, taalgebied, taalwet, taalwetgeving, Nederlands	Langue, linguistique, Français
Legacy	Erfenis, erfgoed, heritage, geschiedenis	Héritage, Histoire
National spirit, nation, nationhood (sub-state)	Nationale geest/(nationale) identiteit, natiegevoel, nationalistisch, nationaliteit, natie, vlaams-nationalisme	Identité nationale, esprit national, nationaliste
People (sub-state)	Volk, bevolking	Peuple
Pride	Trots, eer, liefde	Fierté, honneur, amour
Region	Vlaanderen, Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Vlaams, Vlaming (exc. VB), Vlaamse overheid, Vlaamse regering, Vlaamse partijen	Wallon*, Bruxell*, Communauté française, Périphéri*
Self-government	Zelfbestuur, zelfbewust, zelfbeschikking, eigen bestuur, eigen handen	Auto-gouvernement, auto-détermination, disposer d'eux-mêmes
State reform	Staatshervorming, staatsvorming, staatswording	Réforme de l'état
Territory (sub-state)	Grondgebied, gebied	Territoire
Tradition	Traditi*	Tradition
State, citizen (country)	Staat, burger, deelstaat, lidstaat, land	Etat belge, état fédéral, citoyen*
State, citizen (sub-state)	Staat, burger, deelstaat, lidstaat, land	Etat, citoyen*
Them (other country)	Vreemdelingen, migranten, allochtonen, asielzoekers, illegalen, deze mensen, zij, hen, hun	Etrangers, migrants, allochtones, demandeurs d'asile, illégaux, ces gens, eux, ils
Them (other sub-state)	Franstaligen, Wallonië, walen, waalse partijen, verfrans*, zij, hen, hun	Flamand*, Flandre, eux, ils

Table 4 (continued)

English	Dutch (VB–NVA)	French (DéFI)
Us (country)	wij, we, ons, onze	nous, notre, nos
Us (sub-state)	wij, we, ons, onze	nous, notre, nos

in Belgium. The only words that overlap the two codebooks are the 'us' vs. the 'them'. In these instances, the researchers have manually attributed the paragraph either to populism, sub-state nationalism or both.

The strategy used was to manually count the occurrences of each word from the codebook when used in their expected meaning. For the party manifestos, we also counted the number of paragraphs that contained these words, as paragraph distinguishes arguments or policy positions. The total number of paragraphs that composes each manifesto in the corpus was also counted, which allowed to calculate the percentage of populist paragraphs, (sub-state) nationalist paragraphs and paragraphs combining both or neither positions. Next to this classic content analysis, a more qualitative approach was used, using excerpts from the corpus to illustrate populist and sub-state nationalist stances, but also to show how these two thin ideologies can be combined.

Analysis

As expected, the VB is the party that mobilizes populism and (sub-state) nationalism the most in its party documents, be it in isolation or in combination.

In 2010, populist stances constituted 3.7% of the manifesto's paragraphs (VB 2010). This proportion increased in 2014 to 9.3%. However, sub-state nationalism tends to dominate more (22.9% of the party manifesto in 2010 and 33.1% in 2014). The two ideological dimensions are frequently combined, especially in 2010 where they constituted 15.6% of the paragraphs. This proportion diminishes in 2014 to 5.9%. Overall thus, about half of the party's manifestos for the 2010 and 2014 elections were coded as populist, sub-state nationalist or both. Only the distribution between these categories varies. Populism and sub-state nationalism are also dominant throughout the party magazines.

The party mobilizes populist criticisms of the 'mainstream parties,' 'the elite,' 'the establishment.' This encompasses not only the European or national elite, but also the political elite from Flanders. This criticism extends to academics and journalists. The party magazines negatively refer to the politically correct elite (VB 2014-1: 16), the academic, intellectual elite (VB 2015-6: 24), the political and media elite (VB 2015-10: 17) and the technocratic and bureaucratic elite ('*technocratische en bureaucratische elite,*' VB 2015-10: 18). In this vision, the 'other' encompasses everyone but the 'pure' (Flemish) people ('us'). This is combined with radical right positions, as foreign-born citizens are de facto excluded from this definition of the Flemish people: 'We Flemings derive for a large part our identity from our heritage' (VB 2014a, b: 31).

The party also takes clear sub-state nationalist stances rooted in the Flemish culture, language and sense of nationhood. These stances clearly advocate reform toward independence for Flanders and self-government. Its 2010 manifesto has a first section titled 'Project Flemish State' (VB 2010: 4–6), and its 2014 manifesto refers to 'state formation, rather than state reform' (VB 2014a-4: 10). Accordingly, all references to the state are always negative when it comes to the federal state (e.g., reference to the national debt) or to 'EU-super State,' the 'totalitarian

EU integration' (VB 2015-9: 10), but neutral or positive when it comes to Flanders. Interestingly, the manifestos refer to Belgium as 'this country' where nothing works, and to Flanders as 'our country.' In this vision, the 'us' is clearly Flanders and Flemish inhabitants sharing the same heritage ('our identity,' 'our culture'). The 'others' are foreign-born citizens, but also inhabitants from the other sub-state and the Belgian state as a whole.

This is where populism and sub-state nationalism combine. The populist critique of the elite and the establishment often refers to the European or the national political elite (VB 2010: 3, 19; VB 2014-9: 9) or the elite from the other sub-state, the francophone elite, the heavyweights, the imperialists (VB 2010: 5-6, 2014a, b: 5).

Overall, for the VB, the 'we' is the Flemish people, and the 'them' is everybody else, including the Flemish political elite (populism), the French speakers (sub-state nationalism), the Belgian and the francophone elite (populism and sub-state nationalism), but also the foreign-born citizens (radical right).

Contrary to the VB, populism is rarely mobilized on its own in the N-VA party manifestos (Under 1% of the paragraphs in the party manifestos are coded as populist). It is more the case in the party magazines that refer to the traditional parties or the mainstream parties in power, the Christian Democratic State, the Socialist model (N-VA 2014-10) or to 'friends' politics from authorities (N-VA 2015-7: 20).

Sub-state nationalism is the dominant ideology of the N-VA (Table 5). But the sub-state nationalist project differs from the one from the VB. While the VB refers to Flanders as a State, the N-VA refers to it as a sub-state and avoids references to independence, except in its magazines. While the VB refers to a Flemish nation opposed to French speakers, the N-VA refers to a Flemish community and to Wallonia as a region, reflecting the dual conception of federalism in Belgium. Much as the VB, the N-VA presents the federal state as a failed state (N-VA 2014: 65; N-VA 2014-3), as an old and static state with a fading glory (N-VA 2014: 73-75; N-VA 2014-3: 5) in opposition to a dynamic, entrepreneurial and modern Flanders (N-VA 2015-4: 17): 'Flanders is more advanced than the federal level' (N-VA 2014: 75), and 'Belgium is hopelessly hopping behind' (N-VA 2014: 22).

The N-VA mostly refers to all Flemish parties as part of 'us' (sub-state nationalism) rather than as part of 'them' (populism). The only exception is when referring

Table 5 Proportion of paragraph including populist and/or (sub-state) nationalist stances in party manifestos, 2010 and 2014

	VB (2010)		VB (2014a, b)		N-VA (2010)		N-VA 2014		DéFI 2013	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Populism	4	3.7	11	9.3	1	0.3	5	0.5	5	2.5
Sub-state nationalism	25	22.9	39	33.1	80	24.1	102	10.7	50	24.9
Both	17	15.6	7	5.9	10	3.0	42	4.4	3	1.5
Neither	63	57.8	61	51.7	241	72.6	803	84.3	143	71.1
Total	109	100.0	118	100.0	332	100.0	952	100.0	201	100,0

Given the redundancy of many paragraphs in the various DéFI manifestos for the 2014 elections, the calculation of the proportion of paragraphs was not performed

to Flemish parties at the national level in 2010. There, populism and sub-state nationalism are combined: 'the governing parties CD&V and OpenVLD gave all the keys of the migration policy in the hands of the PS and the cdH' (N-VA 2010: 53) (Tables 6, 7).

Populist positions are related to the idea of Belgium as a failed state: the current system is depicted as 'not logical' (N-VA 2014: 73) and the necessity of reform as 'common sense' (N-VA 2014: 73). Populism and sub-state nationalism are also used to oppose a positive portray of the hardworking Flemish people against a negative depiction of the lazy and corrupted Walloons: 'The Flemings are also tired of it. They are tired of finding that the tax authorities in Flanders are acting more severely than elsewhere, that the policeman is firing more in Flanders than in Wallonia, that the social rules in Flanders are adhered to more strictly than in the rest of the country' (N-VA 2014: 5). Interestingly, populist sub-state nationalist is also used to criticize the federal level as a whole, but only up until the end of 2014 (date of accession of the N-VA in the federal government). The federal level is characterized as oversized, whereas Flanders is equaled to efficiency: 'Politicians must give the good example and first sweep at their own door. In Flanders, this happens and it is done with fewer government jobs. At the federal level, people do the opposite' (N-VA 2010: 36). The federal level is characterized as plagued with corruption, clientelism and patronage, whereas Flanders is equaled to good governance: 'under the Di Rupo government (…) all the little positions to be distributed were recorded in a "cadastre" and then for months they were pushed, pulled, blocked, negotiated and tinkered to nicely distribute all these little positions among parties of the majority' (N-VA 2014: 78).

Yet overall, the party's sub-state nationalism is paired with an ambiguous definition of its contours. The party tends to use the 'we' to refer both to Belgium (often to criticize the current situation) and to Flanders (to refer to how 'we' are doing better). Similarly, the 'them' is equally referring to (citizens from) other countries or from other sub-states in Belgium. The party seldom uses a 'we' to exclude Flemish elites (pure populism) or foreign-born citizens (radical right).

Interestingly, the founding manifesto of DéFI (2013) refers to a clear rejection of 'all forms of conservatism (…), environmental or populist protectionism, and of nationalism' (DéFI 2013: 5). However, their party documents are not exempt of some forms of both.

When DéFI adopts populist stances, it is to reject 'growing corruption' and to present itself as the champion of transparency and good governance. The party criticizes 'mainstream parties' for their lack of political audacity and their catch-all, vote-seeking behavior: 'Too often, in order to avoid long-term decisions, even more if they are electorally risky, traditional parties refuse to engage in necessary reforms' (DéFI 2014W: 4); 'stop the inertia of traditional parties that promise a lot, election after election, but do not achieve anything' (DéFI 2015: 4).

All references to nationalism and independence are negative and associated with Flanders. The party criticizes the ambitions of Flanders to become a state (DéFI 2013: 32, 39) and refers to the Wallonia-Brussels Federation as a state as a possible outcome and reaction to Flemish independence (DéFI 2013: 37). Similarly, all references to nationalism in the DéFI magazines are negative. Its

Table 6 Occurrences of references to populism in manifestos and magazines, DéFI, N-VA, VB (2010–2014)

English	VB (2010)	VB (2014a, b)	VB Mag	N-VA (2010)	N-VA 2014	N-VA Mag	DéFI (2013)	DéFI 2014	DéFI Mag
Anti-democratic	0	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Autocra*	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Buddies	0	0	11	0	0	3	0	0	0
Capitalis*	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cartel*, connection*	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Common sense	0	2	13	0	0	2	0	2	1
Corrupt*	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	16	0
Elit*	1	0	43	0	0	3	0	1	0
Enslave, slave*	0	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	0
Establishment	2	0	18	0	0	1	0	0	0
Eurocra*	0	2	11	0	0	0	0	1	0
Exploit*	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fed up with	0	0	4	3	0	1	0	0	0
Greed	0	0	7	1	0	1	0	0	0
Guardianship	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Imperialis*	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Impose	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Mainstream parties, Governing parties	3	7	119	2	4	39	5	11	6
Oligarch*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Political class	1	1	13	0	0	1	0	0	1
Political games, electoral games	1	2	3	1	0	5	1	0	0
Power hungry, power cenacles, power grip	2	3	31	0	0	3	2	0	1
Propaganda	0	0	10	0	0	1	0	0	0
Sold to	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 6 (continued)

English	VB (2010)	VB (2014a, b)	VB Mag	N-VA (2010)	N-VA 2014	N-VA Mag	DéFI (2013)	DéFI 2014	DéFI Mag
Technocrat*	0	1	6	0	0	0	0	4	0
Us (designating: the people)	1	6	71	1	10	2	1	2	1
Them (designating: elite, establishment, mainstream parties)	5	4	32	3	1	12	2	0	0
Total occurrences	19	37	429	11	15	74	12	39	11

Table 7 Occurrences of references to (sub-state) nationalism in manifestos and magazines, DéFI, N-VA, VB (2010–2014)

English	VB (2010)	VB (2014a, b)	VB Mag	N-VA (2010)	N-VA (2014)	N-VA Mag	DéFI (2013)	DéFI (2014)	DéFI Mag
Belgium	77	52	704	57	63	306	23	329	14
Belonging	1	0	0	2	0	0	3	0	0
Borders (sub-state)	3	1	227	9	5	13	8	2	0
Community	2	2	13	14	23	65	1	0	1
Culture	12	15	189	2	42	50	12	27	7
Ethnic	3	0	21	0	0	0	0	0	0
Glory	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Independence	20	18	318	0	1	9	1	1	0
Language	8	10	391	9	35	208	49	269	3
Legacy	1	1	41	0	24	16	0	0	0
National spirit, nation, nationhood (sub-state)	13	3	281	14	3	27	17	5	5
People (sub-state)	1	6	71	1	10	2	1	2	1
Pride	0	0	13	0	0	7	4	1	0
Region	209	189	2208	146	323	1752	243	1906	306
Self-government	5	6	43	3	4	11	1	0	1
State reform	16	10	71	7	27	50	10	30	2
Territory (sub-state)	5	0	2	4	8	0	6	24	0
Tradition	0	1	5	0	5	0	0	4	0
State, citizen (country)	14	14	1	40	27	143	8	40	7
State, citizen (sub-state)	11	14	10	6	34	11	14	33	1
Them (other country)	41	19	584	40	41	107	0	16	0
Them (other sub-state)	57	38	263	59	35	182	60	152	15
Us (country)	1	2	2	20	36	12	0	48	0

Table 7 (continued)

English	VB (2010)	VB (2014a, b)	VB Mag	N-VA (2010)	N-VA (2014)	N-VA Mag	DéFI (2013)	DéFI (2014)	DéFI Mag
Us (sub-state)	3	44	36	11	60	12	1	119	3
Total occurrences	503	445	5494	444	806	2985	462	3008	369

sub-state nationalist positions mainly revolve around references to French as a language and a culture and the discussions around the linguistic border. Because its sub-state nationalism is built as a reaction to its Flemish counterpart, the 'us' is conceived as the Francophones (French-speaking elite and citizens together) and the 'them' as Flanders. While the party defends French as a language and a Francophone culture, it also portrays the 'us' as an inclusive one, characterized by multiculturalism and diversity, in opposition to a 'them' (=Flanders) that excludes. However, the party also sometimes uses the 'we' to refer to Belgium, as the N-VA.

DéFI rarely combines populism and sub-state nationalism. When it does, it is mainly targeting the federal level as a whole, including the French-speaking parties who are considered as 'traitors' of the francophone interests and poor negotiators in the state reform process: 'The sixth reform of the state, poorly prepared and therefore poorly negotiated by the French-speaking parties involved, is fully in line with the dynamics desired by the more autonomous parties in the north of the country. (…) The disarray is total and, once again, these French-speaking parties are entering the process backwards. They run without knowing where they are going' (DéFI 2013: 32).

As the previous analysis shows, each of the three parties has a specific relation to populism and sub-state nationalism. This relation corresponds to their specific status in the Belgian multilevel system of governance. The VB sits in the opposition at all levels during the entire period, and this translates into stronger sub-state nationalist and populist stances in their party documents. These positions are even more pronounced in 2014, maybe due to electoral difficulties that lead to a radicalization strategy (Pauwels and van Haute 2016).

The N-VA, sitting in power at the sub-state level during the entire period, does not develop populist stances. Rather, it adopts sub-state nationalist positions that are mitigated after its accession to the national government in 2014. Lastly, DéFI adopts 'enlightened' populist positions that criticize the 'cartel' of mainstream parties, even after its accession to power in the Brussels regional government. It adopts a similar level of sub-state nationalist positions as the N-VA during the entire period, which is facilitated by the fact that it does not hold any governmental responsibilities at the national level, contrary to the N-VA.

The three parties also differ in the way in which they combine populism and sub-state nationalism. The VB is the party that combines the two the most. This is made easier since the party sits in the opposition at all levels. The N-VA almost exclusively uses populism when in combination with sub-state nationalism. This was made more difficult after the accession to the national government at the end of 2014, and it shows in the later party magazines.

Conversely, DéFI mobilizes a form of 'enlightened' populism to portray itself as different from the mainstream parties (i.e., in the party's views, as independent and not corrupt). However, the party rarely mobilizes populist stances in combination with its sub-state nationalist positions. In a way, the N-VA and DéFI are therefore opposite mirrors.

Conclusion

This contribution analyzed party documents from three sub-state nationalist parties in Belgium (VB, N-VA, DéFI) between 2010 and 2015. More specifically, party manifestos and membership magazines were read, coded and analyzed in order to assess the populist and/or sub-nationalist positions of these parties.

Three aspects were investigated. First, the paper assessed how much these parties rely on these thin ideologies. The results showed that all three parties differ in that regards. While the VB displays the highest proportion of its party documents relying on these ideologies, the N-VA and DéFI are primarily sub-nationalist parties. The results also highlight that each party presents their positions differently to their voters or members and adopts stronger stances in their magazines than in their manifestos.

Second, the paper has assessed how these two ideologies are combined and overlap. Here too, the results show variations across parties. The VB combines populism and sub-state nationalism, although the two ideologies are also mobilized as stand alone. The N-VA mostly mobilizes populism when in combination with sub-state nationalism and rarely on its own. Conversely, DéFI mostly mobilizes populism as stand alone and seldom in combination with sub-state nationalism.

Third, the paper provided an attempt to disentangle these variations and investigated whether the manner in which sub-state nationalist parties combine their stances on territoriality to a populist rationale depends on their relationship to power (government vs. opposition). Our longitudinal analysis shows that parties such as the N-VA and to a lesser extent DéFI have adapted their combination of populism and sub-state nationalism after their change of status in 2014. These findings stress the flexibility of the two thin ideologies and their adaptability to the parties' changing context.

Overall, this study uniquely relates populism to the territorial dimension of Belgian politics and contributes to a better understanding of the contextual factors that shape the relation between the two ideologies.

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