Politics of the Low Countries

Special issue:
**Politics in the Low Countries
in COVID-19 Times**

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Politics in the Low Countries in COVID-19 Times

*Luana Russo & Min Reuchamps**

When the first wave of COVID-19 hit the world in the spring of 2020, it quickly became clear that this virus would become a major worldwide crisis. Unfortunately, as opposed to the SARS outbreak in 2002-2003, COVID-19 did not disappear over summer, forcing countries to longer-term containment strategies, some of which continue to be in place till today. This prolonged state of emergency has had heavy consequences not only on countries' health systems but also on their politics, since the governance of such a major crisis had to rely on extraordinary policies that needed to be created ad hoc. All countries had to enforce some level of limitation to freedom of movement, while, at the same time, sustaining their national economy and employment levels to shoulder the – present and future – financial burden of the pandemic. Once vaccines became available, governments had to both organise an effective, fast and fair system in terms of group prioritisation, vaccine acquisition, distribution and administration, and persuading its citizens to get vaccinated. In other words, the political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic posed political questions and challenges at multiple levels: How long is it acceptable to restrain the free movement of citizens? To what extent can vaccination be enforced? Do some containment strategies violate citizens' privacy? How to deal with citizens who refuse to be vaccinated (especially those that work in healthcare)?

All these questions and many others presented challenges to governments in office all over the world. Their answers varied, sometimes due to the political culture of the country and to the composition of the governments. In fact, the pandemic created a new area of contestation among parties, with those in favour of stricter measures on the one side, and those alarmed by the limitations these measures inflict upon citizens' freedoms on the other.

Because of the different approaches adopted in the Low Countries in response to the pandemic, these countries and their neighbours represent a very interesting case. In this Special Issue of *Politics of the Low Countries* several rele-

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vant aspects of the political implications of COVID-19 are empirically investigated. In the wake of an open call for papers and our usual peer-reviewed process, the Special Issue features four research articles, three with a focus on Belgium and one using a comparative framework, all examining the early stages of the crisis.

The Special Issue opens with a comparative paper entitled 'The Resilience of Democracy in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Democratic Compensators in Belgium, the Netherlands and France', written by an international team of authors: Tom Massart, Thijs Vos, Clara Egger, Claire Dupuy, Constance Morel-Jean, Raul Magni-Berton and Sébastian Roché. They investigate how the governments in these three different countries tried to limit the negative effects of restrictions.

The second contribution looks at the party interplay. More specifically, 'Opposition in Times of COVID-19 – To Support or Not to Support?' by Britt Vande Walle, Wouter Wolfs and Steven Van Hecke analyses the relationship between governing and opposition parties in Belgium by assessing whether the party type plays a role in deciding whether to support the government coalition (or not).

The paper by Jens Meijen, 'Performing the COVID-19 Crisis in Flemish Populist Radical-Right Discourse: A Case Study of Vlaams Belang's *Coronablunderboek*', focuses on a specific party's narrative and seeks to understand its strategies vis-à-vis the pandemic by analysing the *Coronablunderboek* published in June 2020 by the Flemish populist radical right party Vlaams Belang.

Finally, the Special Issue closes with an investigation of the role of gender in press's coverage in Belgium: 'The Praise for a 'Caretaker' Leader: Gendered Press Coverage of Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès in a COVID-19 Context. In this paper, Clémence Deswert's discourse analysis uncovers the appreciation of traits typically considered feminine (e.g. care) in Sophie Wilmès' handling of the pandemic.

With the adult population of many wealthy countries now largely vaccinated, politics, parties and politicians will still face challenging times due to strong no-vax movements, and the continuing appearance of new variations of the virus. As editors-in-chief of this journal, we strongly believe that rigorous analyses and empirical insights related to the pandemic are pivotal to the continued reflection on the complex challenges and wicked problems ahead of us. We are, therefore, proud to present this Special Issue and are confident that it will contribute to the ongoing critical, informed and evidence-based academic debate that is so tremendously important and beneficial to society.

The Editors-in-chief of *Politics of the Low Countries*
    Luana Russo and Min Reuchamps

The Resilience of Democracy in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Democratic Compensators in Belgium, the Netherlands and France

Tom Massart, Thijs Vos, Clara Egger, Claire Dupuy, Constance Morel-Jean, Raul Magni-Berton & Sébastian Roché[*]

Abstract

Since January 2020, European countries have implemented a wide range of restrictions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet governments have also implemented democratic compensators in order to offset the negative impacts of restrictions. This article aims to account for the variation of their use between Belgium, the Netherlands and France. We analyse three drivers: the strength of counterpowers, the ruling parties' ideological leanings and political support. Building on an original data set, our results distinguish between embedded and ad hoc compensators. We find that ad hoc compensators are championed mainly by counterpowers, but also by ideology of the ruling coalitions in Belgium and the Netherlands and used strategically to maintain political support in France. Evidence on the link between embedded compensators and counterpowers is more ambiguous.

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1 Introduction

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in January 2020, European countries have taken exceptional measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. Although the stringency of policy responses varies considerably from one country to the next, COVID-19 containment measures all depart from ordinary democratic governance and restrict fundamental rights and daily liberties. The scope of the measures and their duration have sparked a great deal of media and scholarly attention (see, for a comparative account, Bjørnskov, 2020; Migone, 2020), especially as they started to be contested. Yet alongside visible and impactful restrictive measures, governments have also implemented packages of democratic compensators that aim to offset the negative consequences of the restrictions on the rule of law, democratic governance, civil liberties and daily freedoms. Democratic compensators include a diverse set of decisions and practices such as the limitation of exceptional measures in time, clauses conditioning their inclusion in ordinary law to parliamentary votes, extended delays for administrative or legal acts, and online communal councils thought of as accountability mechanisms set up to justify exceptional measures.

As such measures are designed to mitigate the disruptive impacts COVID-19 containment measures have on civil liberties and democratic processes, one could expect the use of democratic compensators to be stronger and more diverse in countries implementing particularly stringent measures. During the first wave of the pandemic, Belgium seems to have followed such a course of action as compensators were gradually implemented as measures extended over time and gained in stringency. Yet a glimpse at neighbouring countries reveals more contrasting patterns, with democratic compensators used regardless of the amount and stringency of restrictive measures. Although the Netherlands implemented minimal restrictions, democratic compensators strictly limiting the duration of the measures and enabling derogatory statuses were introduced since the first restrictive measures were adopted. In contrast, France was one of the European countries implementing the toughest regime of restrictions without compensating for them over a long time (Egger, Magni Berton, Roché & Aarts, 2021; Terpstra, de Maillard, Salet & Roché, 2021); and once democratic compensators were introduced, they were limited in scope and targeted specific groups.

This article attempts to account for this variation by uncovering how democratic compensators are used in emergency situations. Our objectives are threefold. First, we conceptualise the role democratic compensators play in ensuring the resilience of democratic processes and human rights during crises. Second, we map their types and uses during the COVID-19 crisis by comparatively studying Belgium, the Netherlands and France. Third, we explore the observed variation in their uses by emphasising three drivers: the strength of counterpowers, whether subnational government or opposition parties; ruling parties' preferences regarding democratic rule and political liberalism; and the level of political support where decreasing levels of support make democratic compensators more needed.

Our article builds on an original data set that maps the exceptional measures taken and implemented daily to contain the spread of the COVID-19 in 32 Euro-

pean countries at the national and subnational levels. Our data provides a comprehensive view of exceptional decision-making in times of crisis by mapping not only restrictive measures but also compensatory decisions in various dimensions of democratic governance, the rule of law and public administration.

Our results illuminate the coexistence of two types of democratic compensators: embedded compensators, which are part of the crisis-management legal framework and predate the crisis, and ad hoc compensators, which are taken as the crisis unfolds and exceptional restrictions accumulate. We also find evidence that structural drivers, in the form of the amount and strength of counterpowers, influence the number and types of compensators used. Belgium and the Netherlands activated a wide range of embedded compensators and adopted many ad hoc compensators because their executive could not engage in crisis decision-making without including a broad range of parliamentary and subnational counterpowers. In contrast, in both countries, situational drivers play a more limited role. Specifically, the salience of issues of freedom, democracy and civil liberties in both countries and Belgian and Dutch ruling coalition parties' respective positioning about them also contributes to explaining the large number of ad hoc compensators recorded in both countries. In contrast, in the French case, we only find evidence of a strategic use of ad hoc compensators to fight the erosion of political support.

These results contribute new knowledge to the dynamics of crisis management and democratic resilience in emergency situations. So far, the literature on crisis management policies – especially in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis – has focused the analysis on restrictive measures (Bjørnskov, 2020; Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2020; Capano, Howlett, Jarvis, Ramesh & Goyal, 2020; Cheng, Barceló, Spencer, Kubinec & Messerschmidt, 2020; Egger et al., 2021; Migone, 2020). Less attention has been paid to how such measures coexist with other types of crisis-management policies, specifically measures that aim to mitigate the indirect impacts of the crisis on democratic governance, the economy or social cohesion. As a result, we know very little about the way policymakers ensure democratic resilience in crisis situations where exceptional measures are adopted that depart from ordinary governance.

Our article is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the analytical framework of the article. Section 2 details the data and research design. Sections 3 and 4 present our empirical results, while the concluding section discusses them as well as further avenues for research.

2   Analytical Framework: Democratic Compensators in Exceptional Times

Although not unprecedented, the COVID-19 pandemic caught European countries largely ill-prepared. This has led governments to react in very diverse ways on the basis of a series of factors ranging from the severity of the crisis, the level of resources available and the preparedness for crisis situations. Yet, although diverse, the policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis created a state of exceptionalism that departs from the ordinary course of democratic governance and has

been justified by the severity of the threat the pandemic poses for societies and institutions.

Exceptional decision-making implies the activation of emergency powers or the creation of an ad hoc legal order. As expected by critics of democracy, who predicted that sovereigns tend to manipulate states of exception to increase their powers (Schmitt, 1922), during the pandemic we were witnessing the implementation of policies that limit basic rights and civil liberties on the one hand, and the ability to control governments on the other. Besides sanitary measures, studies highlight what kinds of rights and freedom were taken away from the people (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2020), how discrimination progressed (Honigsbaum, 2020), and how the functioning of the political system departed from its formal ordinary codifications (Zanghellini, 2016). While the nature of the exceptions decided were at the core of the scholarly investigation, little attention has been given to efforts governments made to alleviate exceptional measures and to compensate for them.

This article intends to fill this gap by exploring how governments, when implementing emergency measures that destabilise a rights-based system, also aim at compensating the democratic loss of citizens. We define democratic compensators as decisions to grant exceptional rights to individuals, political and judicial institutions at national or subnational levels of government, as well as non-governmental actors, in an attempt to compensate for the negative impacts emergency measures have on civil liberties and the rule of law.

Such decisions can be twofold. First, compensators may be embedded in the dispositions regarding the activation of emergency measures in times of crises. In the French case, the law related to the *sanitary state of emergency* foresees that the executive can declare it for an initial period of only one month. Any prolongation needs to be decided on by parliament by means of an ordinary law. In addition, the data justifying the implementation of such an exceptional measure needs to be publicly accessible (*Journal officiel*, 2020). Second, compensators may originate from ad hoc decisions taken as the crisis unfolds. In this case, they do not originate from a predefined crisis-management legal framework. Such compensators have been largely implemented in Belgium and the Netherlands, with measures allowing official decision-making bodies to meet virtually and enabling electronic voting (see, for example, the amendments to its internal rules of procedure adopted by the Belgian House of Representatives on 26 March, *Moniteur Belge* of 02 April 2020). Our definition of democratic compensators is instrumental to a systematic study of how policymakers intend to compensate for the disruptive impacts of crisis management policies.

Our second theoretical objective is to account for the varied uses of such compensators, particularly focusing on differences in the number and type of compensators used. To explore the rationale behind such choices, we rely on the main existing rationalities of decision-making to develop three preliminary explanations. First, based on institutional accounts of decision-making, we argue that compensators emerged from a checks-and-balances process (Boin, 't Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2016; Lodge & Wegrich, 2012). This process operates at two interrelated levels. First, the activation of emergency powers by governments, be they

constitutionalised or not, nearly always implies the support of parliamentary and judicial counterpowers (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2018). We should hence expect embedded compensators to be shaped exclusively by the strength and number of counterpowers (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2018). Second, when acting out of pre-existing crisis-management mechanisms, a pre-eminent role of the government in crisis times always faces a possible veto of parliament or local government. The larger the number of veto players, the more likely it is for the government's decisions to be vetoed during an emergency (Tsebelis, 2002). To avoid such a situation, governments may strive to send reassuring signals to counterpowers by compensating for their lack of influence over crisis policymaking. In such an equilibrium, we should see the government using compensators when championed by sufficiently powerful political forces originating from the opposition, local powers or courts. As a result:

> *Hypothesis 1* – If counterpowers are strong and numerous, then a large number of compensators, especially embedded compensators, are introduced.

A second mechanism relates the use of democratic compensators with the ideological preferences of the ruling party or coalition. Parties in government that support human rights and civil liberties are likely to introduce mitigating measures with regard to exceptional situations where these rights and freedoms are undermined. Although studies on partisan positioning on COVID-19 containment measures in several countries report a strong rally-around-the flag effects blurring partisan divides (Louwerse, Sieberer, Tuttnauer & Andeweg, 2021), partisan divides have remained un-blurred in other countries like the United States. In the US, the management of the pandemic was polarised along partisan lines between Republicans, first and foremost former President Trump, who called for an end to closures and restrictions, and Democratic governors who have implemented restrictive measures (see Rozell & Wilcox, 2020). In Europe as well, there is evidence of a partisan effect. Right-wing national conservative parties – such as Fidesz in Hungary or the PiS in Poland – have implemented the toughest restrictions on democratic governance and civil liberties (Egger et al., 2021). We therefore expect parties' ideologies to shape their preference for specific uses of democratic compensators. Specifically, we expect both the salience of the issue of the protection of individual rights and liberties in party manifestos and parties' respective positioning on this issue to drive the introduction of democratic compensators.

> *Hypothesis 2* – If the ruling party or coalition has libertarian positions when it comes to law and order, and if this issue is salient in its manifesto, then a wide range of ad hoc compensators are introduced.

Thirdly, democratic compensators can serve an interest-based strategy and be used to avoid eroding public support. In that case, democratic compensators are introduced in an ad hoc manner when citizens are getting more critical about the exceptional measures. The introduction of compensators may thereby signal gov-

ernments' responsiveness. Securing support for COVID-19 measures is important for electoral purposes but also to ensure compliance with exceptional measures (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). As a result,

> *Hypothesis 3* – If governments face a decrease in political support, then ad hoc compensators are introduced.

These hypotheses are likely to complement rather than contradict each other. Also, their explanatory power with regard to both types of democratic compensators is uneven. Specifically, we expect that embedded compensators are not to be explained by the situational factors described in hypotheses 2 and 3. Our research design aims precisely to focus on such cross-national variation to better understand the roles counterpowers, ideology and political satisfaction play in the management of a pandemic and, more largely, of any exogenous crisis.

3 Research Design

To map and account for the use of democratic compensators in times of crisis, we make use of an original data set, the EXCEPTIUS data set, compiling data on the exceptional measures taken daily to contain the COVID-19 crisis in the 32 countries of the European Economic Area. In this data set, each observation corresponds to a legal act adopting a diverse range of exceptional measures on a specific day and in a specific subnational region.[1] Compared with concurrent data initiatives mapping governmental responses to the COVID-19 crisis (ACAPS, 2020; Hale et al., 2021), the originality of our data set lies at three levels.

First, we comprehensively map all metrics of exceptionalism, covering not only all forms of suspension of the rule of law, civil liberties restrictions and closures but also compensatory measures, derogations and exceptional authorisations. The codebook of the data set originally focuses on 8 types and 82 subtypes of events, focusing on democratic governance, the rule of law, fundamental rights and daily liberties and public administration.

Second, we collect data on the enforcement modalities of exceptional decisions. In some instances, the implementation of the measure is more important than the decision itself. In Denmark, for example, the state of emergency has been declared but was not implemented. We therefore collect data on the depth of control used in the enforcement of the measures, including information about jailing, fining, management of the policy and the military.

Third, our data includes subnational levels of government. This focus is relevant not only for regionalised or federal countries, where subnational governments or parliaments have emergency powers and a large scope of policy responsibilities, but also in unitary states, where implementation and enforcement may vary across subnational units.

Our dependent variable is an exceptional measure, either restricting or compensating for restrictions, hence allowing us to uncover the relationship between restrictive measures and the number and type of democratic compensators. Our

data collection strategy has followed a decentralised approach. In each country, the data collection process is organised around a national team leader (or co-team leaders) and a set of coders. Team leaders and coders have been initially provided with coding rules by the coordinating entities of the project working in collaboration with a multidisciplinary board of experts. Coders were first required to identify a corpus of sources – mostly national and subnational legal archives and press conferences by the executive (see Appendix A2 for the corpus of sources). Exceptional measures were then either coded in each national data set based on the shared codebook or summarised in a comment box allowing coders to account for national specificities that were not captured by our set of original variables. For each measure, coders indicated whether it was introduced, relaxed or strengthened. Besides the identification of the measure itself, data related to the description of the event was also collected. This includes data related to the authority adopting or implementing the measure, the type of legal instrument used, the target groups of the measure and the nature and level of sanctions used in its enforcement.

To ensure the consistency of the coding process, coders met bimonthly to share questions and strengthen common standards. The final data set used in this article covers the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that unfolded from 30 January to 30 June 2020. We analyse patterns of democratic compensation at a time when the uncertainty was at its peak as evidence of the effectiveness of exceptional measures was low and European countries were overwhelmed by the health crisis. After coding the first wave measures, we computed a Krippendorff's alpha reliability estimate based on a sample of our data set. We obtained a score of 0.73 on the Krippendorff's alpha scale, where 0 is perfect disagreement and 1 is perfect agreement. Although this is slightly below established standards of strong intercoder reliability (where alpha > 0.8), this is still a very good score given the large number of categories of our coding process. With the ambiguity of some coding rules now further clarified, we expect to reach conventional standards when coding the next waves.

Our comparative design contrasts three EU political systems – Belgium, France and the Netherlands – that display variation in the number and types of democratic compensators used and their relationship with the stringency of exceptional measures. The Belgian case is seemingly an expected case as the number of compensators and their diversity evolve with the severity of the crisis and the stringency of the measures. In contrast, its close neighbours have followed a diverse course of action. In France, where the measures were particularly stringent, democratic compensators were initially limited and mostly embedded in crisis-management policies. In the Netherlands, on the contrary, democratic compensators were introduced very early even though the Dutch government followed a rather soft approach of crisis management during the first wave.

With regard to our independent variables, the three selected countries are also characterised by a strong variation. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of each country in light of our three explanatory factors (counterpowers, ideology and political support). First, the salience and positioning of ruling coalitions and parties on freedom, human rights and democracy vary. We rely on two measures

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Table 1   *Institutional and political features of country cases*

		Belgium	The Nether-lands	France
Counterpowers (CP)	Subnational CP	High (federal state)	Low (unitary state)	Low (unitary decentralised state)
	Parliamentary CP	High (propor-tional system)	High (propor-tional system)	Low (majority system)
Ideology of rul-ing parties/coa-lition	Importance of freedom, human rights/democracy (Political Manifes-tos Project)	Moderate (1.43)	High (1.62)	Low (1.01)
	Civil liberties vs. law & order (Chapel Hill Expert Survey)	Moderate (4.8)	High (5.8)	High (6.0)
Political trust (Grote Coro-nastudie, 2020; Kantar Survey, 2020; RIVM, 2021; Torcal, 2017)	Trust in institu-tions	Low	High	Low
	Decline in sup-port for govern-ment	High (> 20%)	Low (< 5%)	High (> 20%)

based, respectively, on party manifestos (Krause et al., 2020) and experts' surveys (Bakker et al., 2020). The Party Manifestos Project codes the quasi-sentences in each manifesto during the parliamentary elections. The code measures the sali-ence of an issue, but recently party positions have also been identified. We use the data that captures both salience and party position. The Chapel Hills expert survey only measures the party positions on each issue. The measures are consis-tent in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. For instance, according to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, La République En Marche (LREM), the French ruling party, prioritises law and order over individual rights, and according to the Political Manifesto coding, individual freedom displays low salience. Second, in terms of counterpowers, Belgium scores high both in terms of subnational and parliamentary counterpowers, France scores low on both – despite constitution-ally being a regionalised state – while the Netherlands displays intermediate val-ues. Last, both Belgium and France are characterised by low levels of overall political trust, even though Belgians trust their government more than the French (Torcal, 2017). In addition, public opinion surveys during the first wave reported that public belief in their government's ability to tackle the COVID-19 crisis decreased sharply between March and June 2020 in both countries, while Belgians are ultimately more satisfied with COVID-19 measures than the French (Decker, 2020; Grote Coronastudie, 2020; Kantar Survey, 2020). In the Nether-lands, in contrast, trust is high, and the support for government's action did not significantly change over the period under study (RIVM, 2021).

Our sample size and the nature of our data only allow for a descriptive and exploratory approach. Our design, however, sheds light on a neglected aspect of crisis management policies and documents the diversity of tools policymakers use to compensate for democratic and liberties loss in times of crisis. To account for the observed variation, we relate each pattern to defining characteristics of each political system derived from our conceptual framework. We focus on variation between countries and do not study the role of policy transfers and diffusion.

4   Descriptive Analysis: Exceptional Measures and Democratic Compensators Compared

Our data shows that two types of compensators were introduced during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their key difference is conceptual and lies in their timing of adoption: whether their origin predates the crisis or whether they were adopted in an ad hoc manner during the crisis. Embedded democratic compensators are established in constitutional texts, crisis-management legal framework, as well as in emergency planning related documents. They therefore predate the occurrence of a crisis, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include the obligation to set a time limit to the delegation of emergency powers to executives, the authorisation by a parliamentary vote of executives' exceptional orders, the extension of procedural deadlines and limits of recourse in judicial and administrative proceedings.

Ad hoc democratic compensators pertain to decisions accompanying restrictions taken as the crisis unfolds. They are included in acts restricting basic and civil liberties or in independent laws adopted as supplements to restrictive measures. Compared with embedded democratic compensators, they hinge on the specific context of a given crisis. Authorisations of virtual decision-making and postponement of general assemblies, counterbalancing lockdowns and restrictions of movement, are cases of ad hoc democratic compensators. In the judiciary, the introduction of virtual court sessions as a reaction against the inability due to the pandemic to organise public hearing is another instance of ad hoc democratic compensators.

Table 2 offers an overview of the scope and types of compensators adopted during the first wave in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. Two findings stand out: first, embedded compensators are associated mainly with crisis decision-making and the operation of the judiciary. In all three countries, they mainly take the form of time limits to acts restricting civil liberties or measures challenging acts restrictive of civil liberties. Subjecting emergency measures to a parliamentary vote is another embedded democratic compensator in place in Belgium and France. Similarly, regarding the judiciary, in all three countries, the highest court was consulted to check for the legality of emergency acts. In Belgium and France, legal continuity was ensured through emergency rulings organised even as courts were closed.

In contrast, the scope of ad hoc democratic compensators and their association with general processes of decision-making and the operation of the

legislative branch are unexpected observations. In the three countries, procedural deadlines were extended, oaths were allowed to be sworn in writing or digitally and subnational governments' decision-making bodies were allowed to convene virtually. Regarding the legislative branch, electronic and distant voting procedures were allowed. In addition, ad hoc democratic compensators are also associated with participation rights of citizens, civil society as well as decision-making of associations and companies. E-tools were set at the subnational level in the three countries as well as measures guaranteeing freedom of association.

Besides this crucial difference, the introduction of democratic compensators, whether embedded or ad hoc, varies across Belgium, the Netherlands and France at two main levels. First, in terms of number and scope, Belgium and the Netherlands adopted more compensatory measures than France. Also, the democratic compensators introduced in Belgium and the Netherlands do not discriminate against any target groups, while France has introduced compensators aimed at targeted audiences, such as students. In Belgium, restrictive measures and compensators were taken in the context of the emergency framework such as the granting of special powers to executives and the obligation to set up a time limit. Additional ad hoc compensators were taken during the crisis such as amendments to parliamentary procedures (allowing online voting). The Netherlands adopted compensators during the pandemic in different areas such as in the judiciary (virtual sessions allowed), private sector and civil society (virtual decision-making, early voting, postponement of general assembly). France took fewer ad hoc compensatory measures, essentially after having decided on restrictions. Several compensators were, however, already embedded in the state of emergency legal provisions such as the right to protest that was further reaffirmed by the council of state at the end of the first wave. In contrast, the Netherlands has fewer embedded compensators.

Table 2   *The compensators per type of category (embedded or ad hoc) for Belgium, the Netherlands and France*

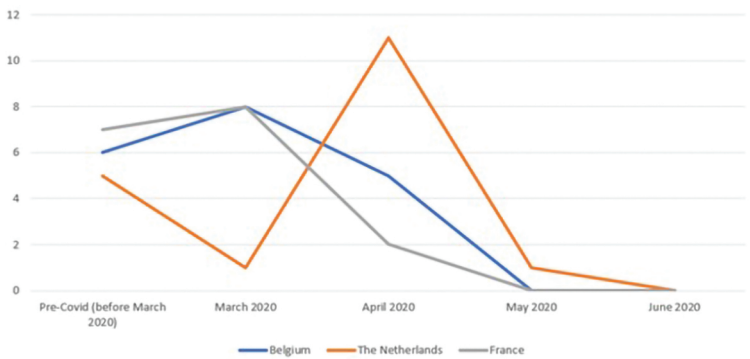|	**Belgium**	**The Netherlands**	**France**
General decision-making			
Extension of procedural deadlines	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Extension of recourse deadline/extension of prescription periods (justice)	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Extension of validity of certificates, licences (e.g. technical inspection for cars, driving licences)	Ad hoc		Ad hoc
Online consultation of documents is allowed	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc

Table 2   *(Continued)*

	Belgium	**The Netherlands**	**France**
Oaths can be sworn in writing or digitally	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Virtual sessions of official decision-making body (municipality councils, provincial councils, etc).	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Crisis decision-making			
Motivation of acts restricting civil liberties	Embedded		Embedded
Time limits in acts restricting civil liberties	Embedded	Embedded	Embedded
Legal regime of emergency measures (subject to parliamentary vote in order to become permanent)	Embedded		Embedded
The ability of challenging acts restricting civil liberties	Embedded	Embedded	Embedded
Revoking of criminal records for those who violated COVID measures		(Second wave)	
Mayoral dispensation powers introduced (TWM act)		(Second wave)	
Legislative branch			
Implementation of electronic voting procedures (national legislature and subnational assemblies)	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	
Question hour on COVID-19 in (decentralised) legislature(s)		Embedded	
Judicial branch			
Introduction of virtual court sessions (ensuring continuity and publicity)	Ad hoc	Embedded	
Consultation of higher courts for the legality of emergency acts	Embedded	Embedded	Embedded

Table 2   *(Continued)*

	Belgium	The Netherlands	France
The closure of the high courts does not prevent them from emergency rulings or minimum service	Embedded		Embedded
Other public organisations			
Virtual meeting of public organisations (ensuring continuity and publicity)	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Civil Society			
Authorisation of virtual decision-making for private legal entities (companies, not-for-profit foundations, associations)		Ad hoc	
Measures guaranteeing freedom of association (postponement of general assemblies)	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Right of information for members of associations and stakeholders of private companies		Ad hoc	Embedded
Early voting introduced for general meetings of associations and private companies		Ad hoc	
Citizens' participation			
More extensive use of 'e-tools' in citizens' participation in local government	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Other			
Suspension of (unfinished) public inquiries	Ad hoc		
Measures ensuring the continuity of health and government services (hiring of personnel: lowering of the required qualifications, police mobilisation, etc.)	Ad hoc	Ad hoc	Ad hoc

Figure 1   *Timing of democratic compensators during the first wave in Belgium, the Netherlands and France*

In terms of the timing of the adoption of ad hoc democratic compensators (see Figure 1), two patterns are visible. In the Netherlands, most of them were adopted in April, when cases peaked. In contrast, in Belgium and France, most ad hoc compensators were introduced earlier on, in March and early April. Strikingly, almost none of the countries studied introduced democratic compensators in May and June as measures were relaxed at the end of the first wave.

5   Democratic Compensators Explained: The Role of Counterpowers, Ideology and Public Support

To further account for cross-national variation in patterns of democratic compensation, we relate such patterns to three key characteristics of the countries under study: the strength and number of counterpowers, the ideology of the ruling party or coalition and the level of support for the government.

5.1 Democratic Compensators as a Tool of Counterpowers

Our first explanation argues that democratic compensators are championed by counterpowers. If this explanation holds, we should observe, first, that democratic compensators are more numerous and diverse in systems where counterpowers are strong. This is particularly the case of embedded compensators that predate the COVID-19 crisis. Second, compensators should be primarily adopted by counterpowers, be they parliamentary or subnational. Our data provides some support for this explanation, and we report a stronger use of democratic compensators, including embedded ones, in systems characterised by strong power-sharing arrangements.

First, we observe that compensators are more numerous and diverse in political systems where the executive needs to engage with a wide range of opposition parties and subnational authorities to decide on exceptional COVID-19 containment measures. The Netherlands records a large number of compensators

with a total number of seventeen, among which 28% are embedded ones. In our country selection, the Dutch executive had the lowest room for manoeuvre before the crisis broke out. Since late 2017, the Netherlands has been ruled by a coalition government consisting of the conservative-liberal VVD (the party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte), the Christian-democratic CDA, the progressive-liberal D66 and the small religiously conservative, centrist Christian Union. At the start of the Rutte cabinet, also referred to as Rutte III, the coalition had a very slim majority in both the lower house (Tweede Kamer) and the higher house/senate (Eerste Kamer) of, respectively, 76/150 and 38/75. Parliamentary minorities have limited counterpowers (i.e. no filibuster), the committee system is weak (Mickler, 2017) and coalition agreements are tight (Moury & Timmermans, 2013; ROB, 2017). Formally, then, counterpowers are relatively weak. However, during the 2019 senatorial elections,[2] the coalition lost its majority in the senate. The latter has a somewhat distinct position compared with other higher houses: the senate has full veto power on new legislation, but it is still disputed whether the government is dependent on the senate for confidence (de Vries, 2000). The Rutte III cabinet thus changed from a minimum-winning majority cabinet to a minority cabinet that requires the support of at least one 'large' opposition party or multiple of the smaller opposition parties to pass legislation, including on budgetary matters (Otjes & Louwerse, 2021). In practice, the cabinet has tried to form ad hoc legislative coalitions with different opposition parties. As the Netherlands has an extensive pre-existing crisis management structure, the government could introduce measures on the basis of existing laws (in particular, the public health act, 2010, and the security region act, 2008) by giving mandatory instructions to the security region chairmen to introduce a specific measure. Compensators, however, mostly required the passing of ad hoc laws to be introduced. Exceptional measures, whether restrictive or compensatory, are enacted and implemented by the security regions' chairmen, but the general lines of the measures are set by the government. As a result, the emergency decrees of the security regions' chairmen did not differ in a substantial sense. It should be noted, however, that the government closely cooperated and consulted with the security regions' chairmen before and during the introduction of measures either in the *Veiligheidsberaad* (which consists of the 25 security region chairmen) or by inviting the chair of the *Veiligheidsberaad* to the council of ministers. Note that the security region chairmen are affiliated with both coalition and opposition parties and are often mayors of municipalities in which opposition parties form the majority (see Figure 2). Though no formal accountability system exists at the security region level, several security region chairmen introduced informal ways to consult with and account to municipal councils (or vice versa).

The contrast with France is striking. France has been ruled since 2017 by an oversized coalition in which the party of President Macron – LREM – has the majority of seats (53%). In the lower chamber (Assemblée nationale), therefore, the other parties have little ability to oppose the government. They can do so in the higher chamber (Sénat), where the parties supporting the government are a minority.
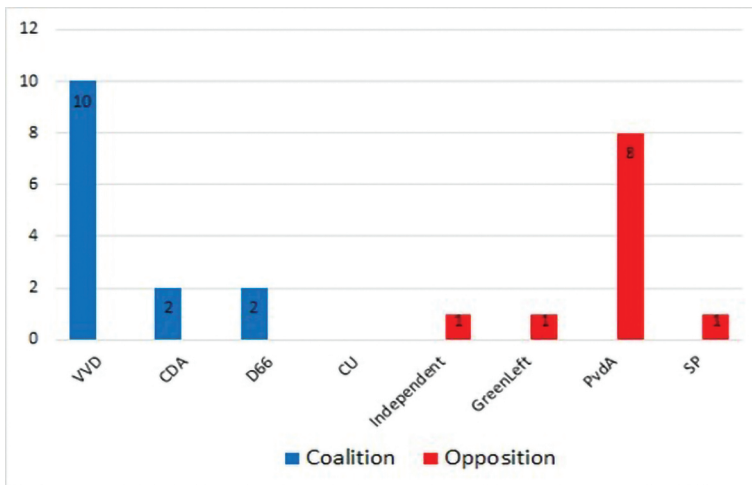
Figure 2   *Party affiliation of security regions' chairmen*

However, and contrary to the Dutch case, this counterpower is low because, on the one hand, the senate has fewer veto powers than the National Assembly and, on the other hand, the government can rule using ordinances that can be overturned only by a law, which requires a majority in both Chambers. The COVID-19 crisis has been largely managed by ordinances, leading opposition parties to be unable to oppose any decision. Beyond parliamentary ones, other counterpowers are also low, especially subnational governments. In France, the authority of subnational governments is comparatively lower than in Belgium (Hooghe et al., 2016). Almost the entire management of the pandemic, especially during the first wave, was controlled by the national government. This political set-up may explain why democratic compensators are rarer in France. In contrast, France records the largest number of embedded compensators despite having such a low number of counterpowers.

Belgium somehow appears as an intermediary case as the structure of decision-making during the first wave did not match that of the allocation of formal power. Belgium features a high level of regionalisation where subnational levels of government enjoy a large degree of self-rule (Hooghe et al., 2016). Yet crisis management policies granted the federal government a large measure of autonomy. This autonomy is, however, associated with a large number of compensators that are embedded into crisis-management provisions. Belgium records 32% of them. Yet because of the political situation in the country at the start of the pandemic, subnational governments and most opposition parties were fully involved in crisis decision-making from the inside as members of the National Security Council. They took part in the meetings of the main decision bodies, named the 'Kern', and of the National Security Council. Alongside the federal parliament, most subnational entities granted exceptional powers to their respective governments. Flanders is the exception but nonetheless adopted a state of emergency. This unique set-up is explained by the specific political situation Bel-

gium was caught in when the pandemic broke out. In March 2020, no federal government with full authority was in place. The caretaker government in place during this time had the support of 38 out of 150 seats in the House of Representatives. Facing the spread of COVID-19, a large coalition of parties voted the confidence to the sitting government to deal with the crisis. The coalition included all French- and Dutch-speaking parties with the notable exception of the conservative and the radical-right Flemish parties, the N-VA and the Vlaams Belang as well as the radical left PTB/PVDA. The coalition granted the federal government special powers at the end of March (see Bouhon, Jousten, Miny & Slautsky, 2020). Yet the agreement restricted Wilmès first cabinet's scope for action to pandemic management. Following this decision, all supporting parties in addition to the N-VA, which voted in favour of granting special powers, were included in the committee in charge of managing the pandemic (Faniel & Sägesser, 2020). The parties were represented by their presidents and, in the case of the N-VA, the group leader at the House. This specific political set-up may explain the large number of compensators (19) recorded for Belgium.

Second, the role of counterpowers in democratic compensation is also reflected by the fact that when compensators are introduced they mostly originate from counterpowers themselves, either at the subnational or at the parliamentary level. Here again, the Netherlands appears as a typical case of compensators championed by counterpowers. When the pre-existing framework did not provide for embedded compensators, ad hoc compensators were mostly introduced by parliament. Some municipalities also came up with compensators. Although they were not rooted in law, the same consensual decision-making can be found in the Belgian case, where one third of democratic compensators adopted during the first wave of COVID-19, and specifically on 13 March, were embedded in the Royal decree of January 2003. This decree was designed as a general procedure for the operational coordination at the national level in crisis settings. Similarly, most of the ad hoc democratic compensators, introduced in March and April, were decided at the federal level. Yet all the measures were discussed and decided on within the National Security Council, which included the heads of subnational governments, the regions and the communities, alongside members of the federal government.[3] Democratic compensators were thereby decided on at the federal level in close coordination with subnational governments. In France, most of the compensators were introduced by the government, and specific ministries (City and Housing, Higher Education, Solidarity and Health), through decrees activating the provisions of crisis-management provisions predating the COVID-19 crisis. Only two of them can be considered to be related to counterpowers. One ad hoc compensator was introduced following an injunction decision (référé) of the council of state, and another, free parking, was later introduced via municipal decrees in several cities.

All in all, our data suggests that democratic compensators are particularly used in systems where counterpowers are strong and diverse, for either institutional or situational reasons. Interestingly, based on their checks and balances structure, we would have expected Belgium to record a larger number of compensators and France a lower one than what was actually adopted and introduced

Table 3   *Ideology of ruling party/coalition*

	Freedom (Party Manifesto)	Human Rights (Party Manifesto)	Democracy (Party Manifesto)	Civil liberties vs. Law & Order (Chapel Hill Survey)
Belgium (average score)	1.47	1.55	*1.28*	*4.88*
France (LREM)	*0.83*	*0.28*	**1.93**	**6.0**
The Netherlands (average score)	0.94	**2.22**	1.70	5.82

Legend: percentage averages of the statements (quasi-sentences) contained in the electoral programmes of the ruling parties concerning freedom, human rights and democracy (Manifesto Project Database). Average scores of governing parties by country on their position on civil liberties (=0) versus law and order (=10) using Chapel Hill Survey data. High scores are in bold and low scores are in italic.
(Source: Manifesto Project Database, Chapel Hill Expert Survey)

during the first wave. As in France, a large number of embedded compensators are recorded, suggesting perhaps that counterpowers better explain ad hoc compensators than embedded ones. Yet it should also be noted that Belgian subnational governments introduced only a few, and mainly informal, ad hoc compensators.

5.2 Are Democratic Compensators Introduced for Ideological Reasons?

Our second explanation argues that the introduction of ad hoc democratic compensators reflects the ideological leaning of the ruling party or coalition. We rely on data from the Manifesto Project that describes the salience of a broad range of topics in party manifestos, as well as parties' policy positions based on a content analysis of parties' electoral manifestos in the last national election (Krause et al., 2020). We selected three topics that are particularly relevant for our focus on democratic compensators: 1. Freedom (Favourable mentions of the importance of personal freedom), 2. Human Rights (Favourable mentions of the importance of human and civil rights), 3. Democracy (Favourable mentions of democracy minus the statements against the idea of democracy). We expect that high scores on these dimensions result in a stronger use of ad hoc compensators in times of crisis. Since this variable concerns a single topic in a manifesto that includes many more issues, even a 0.2% difference should be regarded as significant. We also compare this score with the scores provided by the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on the positioning of political parties on the dimension 'civil liberties vs. law and order', which measures whether parties strongly favour civil liberties (0) or strongly favour strong measures to fight crime (10). The Chapel Hill Expert Survey provides information about the positions of 277 parties on various policy areas in 32 countries. The survey was administered in Winter 2020 and completed by 421 political scientists specialised in political parties and European integration (Bakker et al., 2020). Table 3 presents the score of the ruling party or the average score of the ruling coalition in our three cases.[4]

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Freedom, human rights and civil liberties are salient in the party manifestos of the ruling coalition in the Netherlands, and on average the coalition parties prioritise civil liberties almost as much as law enforcement. This is consistent with the adoption of a large number of ad hoc compensators. This is also consistent with the timing of freedom limitations, introduced the latest in the Netherlands in comparison with Belgium and France. However, there is a large variation between individual party members of the coalition. This calls for combining this ideological explanation with the structural, counterpowers-related, explanation discussed in the previous section. In the case of Belgium, these issues are not only salient for several of the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties supporting the government, but their positions also lean towards a larger support to individual freedoms. Crucially, although the then-sitting Wilmès government included mostly centre-right-wing parties that tend to favour law and order, it depended on these parties' support to stay in power. Thereby, when combining ideology and counterpowers, the Belgian data provides some support to hypothesis 2. Last, in France the ruling party prioritises law and order over individual rights, and human rights and freedoms are less salient in its manifesto. This is in line with the relatively small number of ad hoc compensators of our sample. The Manifesto Project data indicates, however, that LREM scores high on democratic values, in contrast to the low scores on freedom and human rights. This should predict specific compensators related to political rights. Yet we do not observe such compensators in France. Therefore, the case of France does not support our second hypothesis.

One could argue that political manifestos do not correctly translate real preferences because they also reflect a strategic use of messages. To further analyse the importance of ideological drivers, we also examine their connection with the timing of introduction of ad hoc compensators. Our reasoning is as follows: if compensators reflected genuine preferences regarding democratic rule and political liberalism, they should accompany the introduction of the first restrictive measures. Among the ten ad hoc compensators initiated by the French government, eight were introduced at the beginning of the crisis (respectively 2, 12 and 14 days after the first lockdown). Two other compensators appear from the middle of the first wave (mid-April) and one after the end of lockdown. In the Netherlands, compensators were introduced early and simultaneously with restrictive measures, hence reflecting a strong attachment to freedom and human rights since the early stages of the crisis. As for Belgium, during the months of March and April, 13 ad hoc compensators were introduced. Thus, contrary to the Netherlands and Belgium, France did not introduce ad hoc democratic compensators at the same time as the restrictions. However, as for Belgium and like the Netherlands, the majority of French ad hoc democratic compensators were introduced early in the first months of the first wave.

Overall, our analysis suggests that ideological drivers may explain some variation in the patterns of democratic compensation introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, once the counterpowers are taken into account. However, this explanation is not supported in the case of France.

5.3 Democratic Compensators as Mitigation Measures for Political Support Erosion

A last explanation considers that ad hoc democratic compensators are introduced as a mitigation measure for eroding political support. In this sense, they offset not only democratic and human rights loss for citizens but also political loss for decision makers. If this explanation holds, we should see ad hoc compensators to be introduced when the level of support for the government decreases. We relate patterns of ad hoc compensation with survey data on levels of political support before, during and after the crisis.

Overall, we do not see a clear pattern of association. First of all, everywhere in Europe, the level of support for the action of national governments was high, reflecting a rally around the flag effect typically observed in other types of crises (Louwerse et al., 2021). Second, in our sample, only France displays some evidence of a relationship between a decrease in political support and an activation of compensators. The level of approval for the action of the government fell dramatically between mid-March, when 61% of people approved the way the government managed the pandemic, and mid-April, when only 43% continued to do so. At the end of May, the approval level was at 41% (Kantar Survey, 2020 consistent with other surveys from IFOP, Cevipof & Harris Poll all conducted in 2020). This decrease is followed by the introduction of new ad hoc democratic compensators by the government on 15 and 23 April, which, interestingly, suggests their strategic use by decision makers. Also, in contrast to the situation in Belgium and the Netherlands, ad hoc democratic compensators in France aimed at specific target populations, as opposed to the general public, their effect was limited over time, and they focused on financial assistance. The sole democratic compensator that pertains to a universally applicable right, the right to demonstrate, was introduced by a counterpower, the council of state, in July 2020. In the French case, thereby, the introduction of ad hoc democratic compensators can be understood as mitigating measures in the face of eroding public support.

The uses of ad hoc democratic compensators in the Netherlands and Belgium do not reflect a similar pattern. In the Netherlands, the level of trust and public satisfaction with the sitting cabinet was high (around 67% are satisfied with the cabinet, according to Driessen & Heinkade, 2021), and large majorities supported the introduction of restrictive measures and limitations on liberties, according to Eurobarometer data 2020). Repeated surveys show that public support for the government's handling of the pandemic was consistently high: at the start of the pandemic (17-24 April), the level of trust was 73.3%, decreasing slightly to 68.6% in the middle of the first wave (27 May-1 June) before recovering to 72.7% after the first wave ended (8-12 July) (RIVM, 2021). These observations do not match our expectation that eroding public support would result in the introduction of more ad hoc democratic compensators.

In Belgium, at the beginning of April, almost 75% of the Belgians trusted the federal government to handle the pandemic (5 to 7 on a scale from 1 to 7). In May (26/05) and June (30/06), it fell to under 50% (De Grote Coronastudie, University of Antwerp). Also, in May 2020, an opinion poll conducted on a representative sample of Belgians indicated that one in two Belgians was satisfied with the measures taken (Decker, 2020, Survey from Kantar – Le Vif/l'Express – Knack

– LN24, May 2020); in June 2020, 68% of Belgian respondents declared that the restrictions of freedom were fully justified (Zalc, & Maillard, 2020). Interestingly, while public support decreased, no ad hoc compensators were introduced at that time. In addition, during the same period, almost half of Belgian respondents expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the structure of the Belgian state and the obstacles it raised for crisis management (Decker, 2020, Survey from Kantar – Le Vif/l'Express – Knack – LN24, May 2020). These observations could suggest that because of blurred lines of responsibility in a multilevel system of government, the Belgian federal government did not act on somewhat eroding support.

6   Discussion and Conclusion

Departing from the literature's exclusive focus on restrictive measures, this article aimed at shedding new light on patterns of democratic compensation in times of crisis. Our contribution is twofold. First, we conceptualise what democratic compensators are and how they relate to exceptional restrictions during crises. Our analytical framework allows us to identify two types of compensators, embedded and ad hoc. In our sample, the Netherlands not only exhibited the highest level of legal preparedness to crises but also embedded mechanisms aiming to ensure democratic resilience. The second type – ad hoc compensators – refers to decisions taken as the crisis unfolds to mitigate the negative impacts of exceptional decision making on democratic processes and the rule of law. Their wide use in our sample reflects that, overall, Belgium, France and the Netherlands were largely unequipped to manage the pandemic and deal not only with its direct impacts but also with its indirect impacts on social cohesion, the rule of law and democratic governance. We already see that governments have learned some lessons from this initial experience and are engaging in more diverse forms in democratic compensation in the second wave. In France, the crisis-management approach has followed a more decentralised approach, while the Dutch-amended corona act grants stronger veto powers to the lower house and creates formal accountability mechanisms at the national and local levels. Finally, the Belgian parliament is preparing a new legal framework in 2021 to deal with the crisis in the long term. Overall, our data reflects varied compensating practices, in terms of timing, scope and focus.

Second, we accounted for the observed variation in the uses of democratic compensators. Table 4 summarises our key findings.

Our analytical argument emphasises the importance of two types of drivers – structural, which link patterns of democratic compensation with the institutional characteristics of a country, and situational, which are related to the ideological leaning of the ruling party or coalition and public support. In a context where a large stream of literature on crisis governance emphasises the impact of situational factors (for a review, see Ansell, Boin & 't Hart, 2014), our results suggest that structural drivers strongly determine the ability of a political system to withstand external shocks. Systems characterised by weak and limited counterpowers are the most vulnerable to democratic and human rights loss when a crisis hits.

Table 4   ***Summary of the research findings***

	The higher the number of counterpowers, the higher the number of compensators and more prevalent embedded ones.	The stronger the emphasis of the ruling coalition/party on civil liberties, the larger the number of ad hoc compensators.	The sharper the decline in political support, the larger the use of ad hoc compensators.
Belgium	Supported for parliamentary counterpowers. Less supported for subnational counterpowers.	Supported, when counterpowers are taken into account.	Not supported.
France	Supported for ad hoc compensators. Not supported for embedded compensators.	No clear evidence in support.	Some evidence.
The Netherlands	Supported.	Supported.	Not supported.

This finding holds specifically in the case of France, which, despite being a long-established democracy, has experienced among the most stringent restrictive measures in Europe, together with Hungary and Poland (Egger et al., 2021). In contrast, the Netherlands was much less vulnerable owing to its power sharing arrangements. The Belgian case suggests that counterpowers are not only a matter of formal institutional arrangements, but also of political culture. At the start of the crisis, the fractionalisation of the country resulted in a minority government supported by a national unity coalition (with the exception of some radical parties and the Flemish nationalists), allowing parliamentary and subnational counterpowers to discuss and decide on the exceptional measures needed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the former seem to have influenced crisis-management policies more than the latter. Although our study has examined only a limited number of cases, it is consistent with findings from other studies focusing on many more countries and showing that long-term drivers (such as a country's level of political trust, power sharing arrangement and financial capacities) strongly influence the level of stringency of COVID-19 containment measures (see, for example, Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Egger et al., 2021). This suggests that our findings could be generalised to other long-established democracies. Reinforcing the ability of democracies to be resilient to crises may entail the development of structural reforms, strengthening counterpowers at the parliamentary and subnational levels.

In contrast, our two other explanations – focusing on ideological preferences and political support – receive a lower level of support. We find evidence consistent with the hypothesis of an influence of the coalition's ideology in France, Netherlands and Belgium, but for the latter two, this influence can be observed only after taking into account the impact of counterpowers. This may suggest that crisis management policies are little politicised in the initial stages of the cri-

sis. The 'rally round the flag' phenomenon tends to blur ideological divides and lead to the prevalence of other, more structural, drivers. Further confirming and generalising this result would, however, require analysing a more diverse set of countries and a closer look at the ideological justifications of COVID-19 policies.

Last, our research provides some evidence of a strategic use of ad hoc compensators to mitigate a loss of political support, especially in majoritarian countries like France. This finding is, however, likely to be shaped by the time frame of our analysis. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown high levels of political support that have sharply declined as measures were extended in time. The management of the second wave of the crisis could yield interesting insights on this aspect, especially as elections are scheduled in the Netherlands and France in 2021 and 2022. Dutch elections were scheduled to occur about a year after the first wave of the pandemic, and this timing could contribute to explaining the number of democratic compensators introduced on the issue of political rights. It may be that the large number of democratic compensators introduced during the first wave, along with only a few restrictive measures, have benefited the ruling coalition from an electoral point of view. While an electoral rally-around-the-flag is still debated, the seat share of the prime minister's party (VVD) and the coalition marginally improved (resp. 1 and 2 seats), which could be understood as a success in light of incumbents' large electoral loss in previous elections. In France, the restrictive measures were stringent, and the democratic compensators were only a few. While national elections are planned to be held later (2022), municipal elections took place during the first wave, and regional elections occurred one year later. In both cases, the party in charge lost. At this stage, therefore, the electoral impact of democratic compensators and the severity of measures are unknown, but our data will allow assessing it in the coming months.

Our results further document the proximity of the Low Countries when compared with neighbouring countries. France has followed a very distinct course of action when compared with Belgium and the Netherlands. Although our data do not allow us to trace patterns of policy diffusion, our article reports that uses of democratic compensation in the region follow similar patterns, even in countries displaying distinct institutional features.

Overall, we believe this exploratory analysis calls for more research on how policymakers compensate for the democratic loss engendered by emergency decision-making. When opting for specific policy responses to crises, policymakers face multiple trade-offs, one of which is the need not to be attacked for using the crises to strengthen authoritarian rule and their own powers. Compensators may be used to rally counterpowers and citizens around emergency measures.

Notes

1 Subnational regions are identified using the Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) level 2, which focuses on 'basic regions for the application of regional policies'. This classification has been slightly adapted in the case of the Netherlands to cover security regions.

2   The senate is elected not through a popular election but by provincial deputies (in one class) who are popularly elected two months earlier.

3   Permanent members of the National Security Council are the prime minister, the deputy prime ministers and the ministers in charge of the interior and foreign affairs and defence.

4   We relied on a simple unweighted average to estimate the average score of the Dutch and Belgian coalition on freedom, human rights and democracy. We did not consider the size of each party as this does not automatically mean their bargaining power over COVID-19 containment policies is stronger.

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Opposition in Times of COVID-19 – To Support or Not to Support?

Britt Vande Walle, Wouter Wolfs & Steven Van Hecke[*]

Abstract

COVID-19 has hit many countries all over the world, and its impact on (party) politics has been undeniable. This crisis situation functions as an opportunity structure incentivising opposition forces to support the government. Not much is known about what drives opposition parties to (not) support the government in crisis situations. This article integrates the literature on rally-around-the-flag, political opportunity structures, party types and party goals. More specifically, we focus on the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse whether and how the party type influences the position of the party vis-à-vis the governmental coalition, focusing on the case of Belgium. We categorise the seven opposition parties in Belgium as challenger or mainstream parties and explain their behaviour on the basis of policy-, office- or vote-seeking motives. Our analysis is based on party voting behaviour, elite interviews and an analysis of the main plenary debates.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has hit many countries all over the world, and its impact on (party) politics has been undeniable. In these circumstances, the government has been in the public eye and is deemed primarily responsible for tackling the public health and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. In such times of acute crisis, a country can 'rally-around-the flag' and support the government in their attempts to overcome the crisis. This rallying effect has been frequently examined in the past in a wide array of crises. It has, among others, pointed to

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the important role that opposition parties play in this process: their behaviour largely determines whether or not a rally-around-the-flag effect occurs. This article builds on the insights of these studies and sheds light on the drivers of opposition parties' attitude vis-à-vis the government in times of crisis. More specifically, we focus on the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse whether and how the party type influences the position of the party vis-à-vis the governmental coalition. Consequently, the research question we address in this article is the following: what explains the different responses of the opposition parties to the government amidst the COVID-19 crisis?

Our analysis concentrates on the Belgian case. In general, Belgium is characterised by a political system with a strong division between opposition parties and parties forming the government, owing to the strong role parties play, often referred to as 'partitocracy' (De Winter & Dumont, 2006, pp. 972-973). However, during the COVID-19 crisis, the country was ruled by a minority caretaker government. In December 2018, the cabinet lost its parliamentary majority when the Flemish nationalist party N-VA left the government coalition following a political crisis centred on the UN Global Compact for Migration. The national elections of May 2019 resulted in a political deadlock: no new government could be formed until October 2020. Consequently, when the pandemic hit Belgium, the country was still steered by a minority caretaker government (Bouckaert et al., 2020, p. 18; Louwerse et al., 2021, p. 1027; Pilet, 2020, p. 9). With Belgium's political system characterised by a strict government-opposition dichotomy, we argue that the pressure for measures to tackle the health crisis, on the one hand, and the need of the minority government for additional parliamentary support, on the other, was conducive to the decision of the opposition parties to support the government. However, our findings show that the behaviour of opposition parties differs depending on their main objective, with mainstream opposition parties much more inclined to side with the government compared with challenger parties.

In the next part of this article, we set out the conceptual framework, namely what the important role of opposition parties is in the rally-around-the-flag process, and – specifically with regard to our analysed case – how the COVID-19 crisis and the minority caretaker government in Belgium provide an opportunity structure for opposition parties and why different party types might explain different attitudes. The second part gives an overview of our methodological approach, and the third part first provides an overview of the responses of the opposition parties and then discusses why these parties' attitudes were (not) in line with our expectations. The discussion closes with a number of conclusions about Belgium and COVID-19 and a note on the broader implications for the role of opposition parties in the rally-around-the-flag process.

2   Conceptual Framework

2.1 A Rally-Around-the-Flag-Effect of the COVID-19 Crisis?

A crisis – like the COVID-19 pandemic – can significantly alter the dynamics in a political system, in regard to the attitudes of both the general public and the political elite. Such a crisis can often have a rally-around-the-flag-effect: increased support for the government (Mueller, 1970, p. 21). This patriotic reflex has been substantially documented – mainly in the context of the United States (for an overview, see Baum & Potter, 2008) – in situations of war, diplomatic crises or (terrorist) attacks (Chowanietz, 2011; Lai & Reiter, 2005; Newman & Forcehimes, 2010). More recently, scholars have also studied this rallying effect in the context of an economic crisis (Weschle, 2014), environmental disasters (Ramos & Sanz, 2020), Brexit (Costello, 2020) and also the COVID-19 pandemic (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Louwerse et al., 2021; Schraff, 2020).

On the basis of Mueller's (1970) conceptualisation we can indeed argue that the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a potential 'rally-around-the-flag' moment. He identified three main elements for an event in order to have such an effect: (1) the crisis must be international in nature; (2) it must be 'specific, dramatic and sharply focused', and (3) it must involve the government and the country directly. The COVID-19 pandemic fulfils these conditions: it was a global crisis with major consequences that increased the pressure on governments to come up with a policy response. While pandemics are not a new phenomenon, the scope of COVID-19 took many countries by surprise (Bouckaert et al., 2020, pp. 6-9; Davies, 2020, pp. 131-134; Pattyn et al., 2020). Most countries were poorly prepared for this health crisis and national governments globally have been struggling to respond appropriately to the virus. The crisis was also characterised by a high degree of visibility: the impact of the pandemic was omnipresent in media broadcasting, resulting in high public awareness of the need for governmental action to mitigate the health crisis and its economic and social fallout.

While initial research of this rally-around-the-flag effect focused on demonstrating the relationship between crisis situations and public support for the government, more recent scholarship has tried to go further and uncover the causal mechanism behind this relationship. Researchers have pointed to the important role that the political elite – and, in particular, opposition parties – play in this respect (Berinsky, 2007; Chowanietz, 2011; Groeling & Baum, 2008). Crises affect the exogenous circumstances and influence the dynamics between government and opposition parties (Della Porta & Parks, 2018, p. 92) and can lead the opposition forces to stop criticising and even start supporting the government or, in the words of Conover (1981, p. 303 as cited in Costello, 2020, p. 2), "[I]t is a well-established principle that threats from outside a system promote cohesion within the system." In other words, a crisis functions as an opportunity structure that incentivises opposition forces to support the government.

While opposition parties play an important role in the rally-around-the-flag process, not all opposition forces respond similarly. Aside from the temporal dimension (see Louwerse et al., 2021), a number of context- and party-related factors also play a role. In his analysis on the rally-around-the-flag effect follow-

ing terrorist attacks, Chowanietz (2011, p. 674) focused on mainstream opposition parties because he assumed that 'radicals and fringe elites' might not support the government in times of crisis. Building on this assumption, Costello (2020) observed that not all parties are equally susceptible to the rally-effect, with a difference between nationalist and internationalist parties. Louwerse et al. (2021) found that (larger) parties with more government experience were more likely to support the government than parties without such experience. They also put forward another reason that can explain differences between countries in regard to whether or not a rallying effect occurred: the behaviour of the government itself. A rally-effect seemed more likely when the government was open to the involvement of opposition parties in crisis decision-making. They also pointed to the possible impact of the state structure in this respect: in Germany, the cooperative behaviour of some opposition parties could be a result of the federal state structure. Some parties that were in the opposition at the national level were part of regional governments and, as such, also part of the informal coordination regime that decided on the crisis measures, making it more difficult for them to blame the national government for their crisis management (Louwerse et al., 2021, p. 1037).

2.2 The Opportunity Structure: The Belgian Partitocratic Regime, the COVID-19 Crisis and the Minority Caretaker Government

We directly build on these assumptions by analysing the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's COVID-19 response in Belgium. While cooperation between opposition parties and parties in government had recently become rare in the country, the COVID-19 crisis created a situation that was much more conducive to the opposition parties taking a supportive stance towards the government.

In general, Belgium is one of the most prominent examples of a partitocratic political system (De Winter et al., 1996, p. 215; De Winter & Dumont, 2006, p. 957; Deschouwer, 2009, p. 190). Political decision-making is strongly dominated by the leadership of those parties that form a governmental majority, at the expense of parliament, in general, and opposition parties, in particular. All policy initiatives are meticulously stipulated in an extensive coalition agreement decided by the party leaders during the interparty negotiations to form a government. This document constitutes the basis for almost all policy initiatives launched in parliament through the government (Fiers & Van Hecke, 2020, pp. 212-213). In order to ensure government stability, permanent and unconditional support of the members of parliament of the majority parties is required. If a governmental initiative fails in parliament, this would trigger a crisis among the coalition parties and possibly the downfall of the government (De Winter & Dumont, 2006, p. 958). Consequently, the political groups in parliament are characterised by a very high degree of party discipline (Depauw & Martin, 2009): Members of parliament from the majority parties have consistently supported government-initiated proposals. 'Alternative majorities' that consist of a cooperation between some (but not all) governmental parties and some opposition parties are nearly non-existent. Any legislative proposals put forward by (one of) the opposition

parties are systematically voted down by the majority parties and vice versa: initiatives from the governmental parties are almost never supported by the opposition (Fiers & Van Hecke, 2020, pp. 212-213).

Given this constraining influence of partitocracy in Belgium, we argue that the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the caretaker minority government that was in place after the 2019 elections provided a political opportunity structure (POS) that incentivised opposition parties to support the government. Although the concept of POS originates from the social movement literature (Eelbode et al., 2013, p. 452; Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Kriesi et al., 1998; McAdam, 1999), it can also be applied to party politics (see for example Fell, 2006; Spies & Franzmann, 2011). The founder of the concept, Eisinger (1973, pp. 18-25), used it to indicate the level of accessibility to power and the level of influence in the political system. Tarrow (1994, p. 85) defined POS as "consistent, but not necessarily formal or permanent, dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure". Meyer and Minkoff (2004, pp. 1461-1462) highlighted how POSs can be used to explain policy changes. Applied to political parties, the analytical framework of POS allows an assessment of the influence of structural and environmental factors on the opportunities for parties and enables researchers to focus on the exogenous conditions for party success (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006, p. 422; Tarrow, 1998, p. 18).

At the time the pandemic hit the country in the spring of 2020, Belgium was governed by a minority caretaker government at the national level. In line with Louwerse et al.'s (2021) assumptions that a rally-effect is more likely when a government is open to the involvement of opposition parties in crisis decision-making, we argue that this situation of a minority caretaker government was conducive to the decision of the Belgian opposition parties to support the government. Although minority governments are no exception in Western parliamentary democracies (Crowley & Moore, 2019, p. 3; Elklit, 1999, p. 63; Strøm, 1990, p. 59), in Belgian political history a minority cabinet is exceptional (Ceuleers, 1977, p. 173; Gerard, 2016, p. 180; IPOVO, 1974, p. 12). The fact that there was a minority government in Belgium meant that the government parties had no other option than to be open to the involvement – and support – of the opposition parties in their management of the health crisis. The conventional wisdom is indeed that minority governments are vulnerable and opposition parties must be persuaded to support the government (Norton, 2008, pp. 245-246). Since opposition parties are necessary to build a majority, the opposition is in a veto position in relation to the policies that the minority government can pass. A minority government faces a permanent risk of being brought down by the opposition because it is only with the consent of opposition parties that a minority government can adopt a policy (Falcó-Gimeno & Jurado, 2011, p. 555; Green-Pedersen, 2001, p. 56).

An additional factor is the federal state structure of Belgium, which meant that some of the opposition parties at the national level were part of a governmental coalition at the regional level and consequently participated in the multilevel crisis decision-making. We assume that this inhibits these opposition parties

from heavily criticising the national government, similarly to what Louwerse et al. (2021, p. 1037) found with regard to the response of the opposition parties at the national level in Germany during the COVID-19 crisis.

2.3 Ceci N'Est Pas une Opposition? Different Opportunities for Different Opposition Parties

Although we argue that the COVID-19 crisis and the minority caretaker government constitute a POS for opposition parties to support the government, we expect that not all opposition parties will respond similarly to this changing environment. More specifically, we expect that the parties' response depends on the objective that the party considers most important. Following the classic categorisation of Strøm and Müller (1999, pp. 5-8), we believe that parties can hold office-seeking, policy-seeking and vote-seeking objectives. Office-seeking parties want to be part of the governmental coalition and control the executive branch, while policy-seeking parties want to maximise their impact on public policy. Vote-seeking parties aim to maximise their electoral support. We concur that these party goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive but do presume that parties prioritise among these goals. We expect that office-seeking and policy-seeking parties are more inclined to support the government and try to influence crisis policy-making, while vote-seeking parties try to use the pandemic to maximise their electoral support at the expense of the government.

Since there is no clear-cut way to operationalise a priori whether a party is office, policy- or vote-seeking (Schumacher et al., 2015, p. 1044), we rely on the differentiation between mainstream and challenger parties in order to distinguish between the various opposition parties. Mainstream opposition parties routinely alternate between government and opposition. In terms of ideology, mainstream opposition parties, namely Christian democratic, conservative, liberal and social democratic parties, are often traditional parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, pp. 971-972). These parties have a centrist position on the classic left-right scale and assign importance to socio-economic issues. Their behaviour and stances show commitment to the principles of liberal democracy and to the formal and informal rules of the political games (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 7). Mainstream parties are cautious in regard to mobilising around new issues or adopting positions far from other mainstream parties, since this would make it more difficult to enter into coalition government (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 974). Mainstream parties are referred to as conventional, in contrast to radical parties (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 7; Kitschelt, 1989, p. 62): they are seen as established parties that are loyal to the political system.

By contrast, challenger parties rarely or never participate in government coalitions; they have not built a reputation for being good coalition partners, owing to uncertainty about their behaviour (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012, p. 252; van de Wardt et al., 2014, p. 987). These challenger parties often tend to focus on extreme or niche issue positions (without necessarily being single-issue or niche parties) to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012, p. 251). Compared with mainstream parties, they place greater emphasis on their core concerns (Allen et al., 2017, p. 807), making it more difficult for

them to compromise. Examples of such parties are communist, green and extreme nationalist parties (Adams et al., 2006, p. 513; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, pp. 972-973). Unlike mainstream parties, challenger parties are electorally punished when they moderate their positions (Adams et al., 2006, p. 513). These parties – unconstrained by the responsibilities of government – are characterised by an anti-establishment rhetoric, challenging the mainstream political consensus to break mainstream parties' appeal and boost their own electoral support (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). They seek to reform or overthrow the existing political system and the norms and values on which it is based (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 7).

We argue that mainstream and challenger opposition parties will respond differently to the political context of the COVID-19 crisis and the caretaker minority government. In times of crisis, we expect that mainstream opposition parties are willing to overcome their differences with parties in government in order to tackle the challenges posed by the pandemic. In multiparty systems like Belgium, these mainstream opposition parties have been in a government coalition with the ruling parties or want to build a reputation as a reliable coalition partner. In ideological terms, they are close to the other mainstream parties in government. On the other hand, we expect that challenger parties in opposition instrumentalise the crisis and distance themselves from the government. Free from any 'burden' to present themselves as potential governmental partners, challenger parties might exploit the crisis responses of the ruling mainstream parties to increase their popular support, since voters negatively affected by a crisis will punish mainstream parties and turn to challenger parties instead (Hernández, 2018, p. 458; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 972). It provides them with an opportunity to exploit their anti-establishment profile, in particular when other (mainstream) opposition parties do engage in cooperating with the parties in government. This also builds on the findings by Louwerse et al. of (2021) that (larger) opposition parties with government experience were more positive towards the government in parliamentary debates than opposition parties without such experience.

3   Methodology and Data

In order to examine whether and how the party type influences an opposition party's attitude towards the government in times of crisis, we focus on the case of Belgium in view of its specific political context and circumstances. On the one hand, the general political context of partitocracy makes the country the least likely to see opposition parties supporting and cooperating with the government. On the other hand, Belgium was one of the countries that was most severely hit by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the government had minimal policy leeway, since at the outbreak of the crisis Belgium had a minority caretaker government. These political circumstances provide a considerable incentive to opposition parties to cooperate with the government. In other words, while Belgium's general political context is least favourable, the specific political circumstances are most favourable for opposition parties to support the govern-

ment. This makes it a suitable case for an in-depth examination of the drivers behind opposition behaviour in times of crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, there were seven opposition parties represented in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. In line with our conceptual framework, we divide them into challenger and mainstream opposition parties. Authors have used two main approaches to differentiate between challenger and mainstream parties. The first approach categorises parties according to their party family: challenger parties are characterised as 'new' parties that are positioned at the extreme ends of the political spectrum (radical left and radical right parties) or parties with a focused ideological platform (green parties) (Adams et al., 2012, p. 1273; Schulte-Cloos, 2018, p. 412). The second approach categorises parties as challengers or mainstream depending on participation in government: parties that were not (recently) part of a governmental coalition are considered as challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 975).

On the basis of these two approaches, three of the seven opposition parties can be categorised as challenger parties: Flemish Interest ('Vlaams Belang'), the Workers' Party of Belgium ('Partij van de Arbeid van België/Parti du Travail de Belgique') and the Greens, which are two separate parties – the Dutch-speaking 'Groen' and the French-speaking Ecolo ('Écologistes Confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales') – but form a joint political group in the Chamber of Representatives. On the basis of the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party are, respectively, placed on the radical right and radical left end of the political spectrum (Bakker et al., 2021). Both parties have always been in opposition on the federal and regional levels and are not considered as potential coalition parties (Pilet, 2020, pp. 4-8; van Haute et al., 2018, p. 960). Moreover, both parties have been characterised as challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 4 of the Online Appendix; Schulte-Cloos, 2018, p. 3 of the Online Appendix). The categorisation of the Belgian green parties is less clear-cut. Schulte-Cloos (2018, p. 3 of the Online Appendix) categorised both Green and Ecolo as green challenger parties. Hobolt and Tilley (2016, p. 4 of Online Appendix) categorised Green as a green challenger party, but Ecolo as a mainstream party. In the last two decades, both parties have participated in a number of governments at the national and regional levels (Wavreille & Pilet, 2016, p. 46). Despite this mixed evaluation, we consider that the categorisation of these two parties tilts towards challenger parties because they still hold a focused ideological platform (Wavreille & Pilet, 2016, p. 55), with, compared to mainstream parties, limited governmental experience, during which they were always a junior coalition partner.

We categorise the additional four opposition parties as mainstream: the Dutch-speaking socialist party sp.a ('Socialistische Partij Anders'), the French-speaking socialist party PS ('Parti Socialiste'), the French-speaking Christian Democrats cdH ('centre démocrate Humaniste') and the New Flemish Alliance N-VA ('Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie'). The first three parties have alternated between government and opposition and have been characterised as mainstream (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 4 of the Online Appendix; Schulte-Cloos, 2018, pp. 2-5 of the Online Appendix). The categorisation of the New Flemish Alliance is more diffi-

cult. Schulte-Cloos (2018, pp. 2-5 of the Online Appendix) does not consider the N-VA as a challenger party, while Hobolt and Tilley (2016, p. 4 of the Online Appendix) do label it as a (right-wing) challenger party. However, we categorise the party as mainstream, because it has consistently been part of the regional government and – more recently, between 2014 and 2018 – of the federal government, even as a senior coalition partner. In addition, they hold a broad political platform, focusing on different policy issues (Abts et al., 2019, p. 849).

In line with previous studies and based on our categorisation, our central hypothesis is that the POS of the COVID-19 crisis and the minority caretaker government will incentivise the mainstream opposition parties to support the government and contribute to the government's policy because of policy- and office-seeking motives while the challenger opposition parties refrain from supporting the government because of vote-seeking motives.

Our analysis is based on party voting behaviour, semi-structured elite interviews with the seven parliamentary party leaders in the Chamber of Representatives conducted in May 2020, supplemented with an analysis of the main plenary debates on the COVID-19 crisis.[1] The interviews and debates were manually coded for references to policy-seeking, vote-seeking or office-seeking discourse on a paragraph level (See Tables 3, 4 and 5, in Annex). Policy-seeking references include statements on policy initiatives to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, references of elections or voters were labelled as vote-seeking, and statements on (potential) future government participation or on the need to form a government were coded as office-seeking (See Table 6 in Annex for examples of coded paragraphs).

4   Analysis: The Variable Attitudes of Challenger and Mainstream Opposition Parties

4.1 Different Attitudes Among the Belgian Opposition Parties

After the national elections of May 2019, negotiations on forming a new government remained deadlocked for more than a year. As a result, when the COVID-19 crisis hit Belgium in the first half of March 2020, the minority caretaker government of prime minister Sophie Wilmès was still in place, consisting of the Dutch-speaking liberal party Open Vld, the French-speaking liberal party MR and the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats CD&V. It was argued that with no breakthrough in sight to form a new government, the limited competences of the Wilmès government would constitute a serious impediment to managing the imminent health crisis. On 19 March 2020, a vote of confidence was held in the Chamber of Representatives to provide the Wilmès government with full competences. A week after the confidence vote, on 26 March 2020, the Chamber voted again to grant the Wilmès government special plenary powers for three months. The aim was to enable the government to take swift measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. The parties that supported the plenary powers participated in a new established consultative body (the 'Superkern'), which met every week on Saturday mornings to discuss the government's corona response. The governing parties and supporting opposition parties came together at these meetings.

Table 1   *Voting Behaviour of the Political Groups in the Chamber of Representatives*

Opposition Party	Abbreviation	Party Type	Support for Minority Government (19 March 2020 Vote)	Support for Plenary Powers (26 March 2020 Vote)
Socialist Party Different	sp.a[a]	Mainstream	Yes	Yes
Socialist Party	PS	Mainstream	Yes	Yes
Humanist Democratic Centre	CdH	Mainstream	Yes	Yes
New Flemish Alliance	N-VA	Mainstream	No	Yes
Green/Ecolo	Groen-Ecolo	Challenger	Yes	Yes
Workers' Party of Belgium	PTB-PVDA[b]	Challenger	No	No
Flemish Interest	Vlaams Belang	Challenger	No	No

[a] On 21 March 2021 sp.a changed its name to 'Vooruit'. At the time of the interviews and the debates the party was still called sp.a.
[b] *PTB-PVDA* is the only nation-wide party in Belgium. The Francophone *PTB* and Flemish *PVDA* form, like the Greens, a single parliamentary party group but have, contrary to the Greens, a single party headquarters and party leader (Pilet, 2020, p. 10).

This ad hoc body obviously provided an important opportunity for some of the opposition parties to contribute to the ongoing crisis management and policy-making.

Table 1 provides an overview of the voting behaviour of the opposition parties in the Chamber of Representatives in regard to the vote of confidence and the vote on the special plenary powers.

The voting behaviour of the mainstream opposition parties sp.a, PS and cdH confirms our expectations: they supported the government, both in the confidence vote and the vote on special plenary powers. Similarly, the challenger parties Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party voted against, in line with our expectations. However, the behaviour of the mainstream opposition party N-VA only partially confirms our expectations because they supported the plenary powers but not the government. Moreover, the behaviour of the green parties does not confirm our expectations because they supported the minority government as well as its plenary powers.

4.2 Explaining the Different Attitudes of the Belgian Opposition Parties

4.2.1 Mainstream Parties
The attitude of the two socialist opposition parties PS and sp.a can be described as critical though constructive; the group leaders declared that they were not very

optimistic about the political situation but that they recognised that the investiture was required to take the necessary measures to tackle COVID-19.

> We will, without hesitation, give you the confidence to take the necessary measures against the corona virus, because that is also a choice for solidarity. We must protect the vital interests of the Nation. Nevertheless, we will keep a watchful eye on the decisions of this government. (Laaouej, 19 March 2020, p. 7)

Their attitude is motivated by both office-seeking and policy-seeking motives (Tables 3, 4 and 5 in Annex). The socialist group leaders emphasised that their parties were taking the lead to form a full-fledged government that was capable of taking political responsibilities in the economic consequences of the crisis. This goal eventually materialised in October 2020, when a new (majority) government was formed, which included both the sp.a and the PS.[2]

> We have called on the chairmen to talk to each other to find common ground among the parties in order to look for a [parliamentary] majority. We are trying to take the lead to ensure that we are ready by September and have a full-fledged government because we are now in a health crisis. (Interview A)

In addition – regarding the policy dimension – the group leaders stressed that they wanted to avoid cuts on social security: "Sp.a has specifically demanded that certainly no measures can be taken that reduce purchasing power of families or can effect existing social protection" (Kitir, 26 March 2020, p. 76).

PS and sp.a wanted to avoid that the health emergencies would result in negative economic and social effects. According to the socialists, granting the special powers to the minority government was considered as an important instrument to mitigate any potential loss of income among the population: "The special powers must be social powers in the first place" (Laaouej, 19 March 2020, p. 9-10). Moreover, the group leaders emphasised the importance of socialism, as it showed the pertinence of their political project focused on solidarity (Interview B):

> The corona virus threatens our health, our economy and our security. The virus does not distinguish between rich and poor, between young and old, between country or language. Everyone can be affected, everyone is concerned, and we all have to take care of each other. (Kitir, 19 March 2020, p. 25)

The attitude of the francophone Christian Democrat cdH is motivated by policy-seeking objectives (see Tables 4, 5 and 6 in Annex). The party had a disappointing electoral result in the 2019 national elections and announced that it would not participate in a new national government. The group leader declared that their main objective was to be a catalyst for scientists and healthcare workers. During the debates, group leader Catherine Fonck – also a medical doctor – emphasised

the importance of the expertise of medical professionals and practitioners (Fonck, 26 March 2020, p. 78). She relied on her broad network in the medical sector to put pressure on the government to include their insights in the COVID-19 policy:

> I was in close contact with both scientists and the [medical] field … I tried as much as possible during this crisis to be a catalyst on bringing solutions, on putting pressure on the government to try to anticipate much more and to react faster. (Interview C)

By supporting the minority cabinet and its plenary powers, cdH had the opportunity to prove their focus on healthcare and their support for a fair healthcare policy. The group leader emphasised that her party only supported the government in the interest of tackling the COVID-19 crisis and, consequently, that this support was not unlimited (Interview C).

The mainstream opposition party that did not confirm our expectations was the New Flemish Alliance N-VA. The party supported the plenary powers but did not express its trust in the minority cabinet. This ambivalent attitude can be explained by two main factors. On the one hand, it was the N-VA that brought down the majority coalition in December 2018, resulting in the minority caretaker government. This made it possible for the party to have a hard and critical attitude towards this government. On the other hand, N-VA was the senior coalition partner in the regional Flemish government with parties that are part of this national minority government (the Flemish Liberals and Christian Democrats). In addition, the head of the Flemish government also participated in national security meetings during the COVID-19 crisis, making him part of the COVID-19 crisis management. This made it more difficult for the party to take on a hard and critical attitude towards the minority cabinet's crisis measures.

This resulted in support for the plenary powers of the federal government to enable efficient policies to tackle the COVID-19 crisis:

> Our group supports the Special Powers Act, because there should be no semblance of the impression that obstacles are being placed that could hinder a swift and effective approach to the corona crisis. Parliamentary procedures should not be obstacles with a benevolent legislature, but they could be. So we certainly see the value of the special powers in these special circumstances. (De Roover, 26 March 2020, p. 56)

Any obstacles to effective crisis measures would evidently also cast a shadow on the regional Flemish government led by the party. Group leader De Roover indeed emphasised that "tackling the crisis as good and as jointly as possible is their priority" (Interview D). At the same time, N-VA criticised the vote of confidence for the caretaker government: "While the coronavirus is around, this cabinet asks, based on vague intentions and without a program, to be promoted to a fully-fledged government" (De Roover, 19 March 2020, pp. 1-2).

The findings show that N-VA was 'torn between two lovers': being constructive and being critical. This can be illustrated by the fact that office-seeking, as well as well policy-seeking and voter-seeking motives, were prevalent in their discourse (Tables 3, 4, and 5 in Annex). A too critical attitude might jeopardise the party's chances of becoming part of the new majority government, since government negotiations took place in parallel to the debates on the COVID-19 crisis. Group leader De Roover emphasised that their priority was to install a majority government as soon as possible (Interview D). However, these office-seeking motives were quickly abandoned when the party was sidelined in the negotiations, steering the party towards more vote-seeking behaviour:

> We have shown our willingness to put the other differences aside but we were brutally and coldly rejected. Apparently, the fear of contamination by the N-VA among some parties was bigger than that for corona. The aversion to the biggest party of this country in this crisis situation stood in the way [of] taking such a widely supported solution. (De Roover, 19 March 2020, p. 2)

When its chances to participate in the new government appeared slim, the party aimed for new elections (Interview D).

4.2.2 Challenger Parties

The challenger party Flemish Interest confirmed our expectations: they supported neither the minority government nor the plenary powers. Instead, they took on a critical and hard attitude towards the minority cabinet. The behaviour of Flemish Interest can be explained by their voter orientation: they are not interested in influencing the government's policy constructively but rather in critically challenging the minority cabinet to maximise their own electoral support (See Tables 3, 4, and 5 in Annex).

The party's discourse was focused on emphasising the lack of (electoral) support for the minority government, while taking the position of defending the interests of the majority of the (Flemish) population:

> You speak of unity, but we are further from it today than ever. Not only have you sidelined the two election winners, who together account for 1.4 million votes, you have publicly taken off even the largest party in this country, which also attracts 1 million votes. Il faut le faire! … You will only receive a certificate of incapacity from us. You will receive the bill from the population. (Tom Van Grieken, 19 March 2020, pp. 11-13)

The party used sharp language to openly question the legitimacy of the government:

> The last word will always be with the people. If you continue to betray the confidence of the people, then in the next elections the people will do away with the parties that would show themselves to be anti-democratic or anti-

Flemish in the coming months. In 2024, don't say I didn't warn you. (Dries Van Langenhove, 26 March 2020, p. 66)

The vote-seeking behaviour can also be illustrated by a statement of group leader Barbara Pas, who emphasised that they opposed the minority government because it did not represent the will of the voters: "The Wilmès government is a government that was not elected by the people. It is not a representation of what the voters wanted" (Interview G). She continuously stressed her party's demand for new elections: "We already asked for new elections when N-VA left the Michel government in 2018 ... Either they negotiate to form a full-fledged government, or they organise new elections" (Interview G).

In terms of criticism of government policy, Flemish Interest seemed to be aimed at cultivating a bad crisis response by the government by continuously stating that this minority government had a 'blunder approach' (Interview G). For example, the party's group leaders in the regional and national parliament launched a book in June 2020 called 'The Corona Blunder Book', in an attempt to show that the minority government completely failed in its attempt to tackle the health crisis.

In line with our expectations, the Workers' Party did not support the minority government, or the plenary powers. Contrary to Flemish Interest, the Workers' Party took a more constructive attitude towards the government's policy:

We support the requisition of mouth masks or reagents, as well as the measures that aim to oxygenate our economy. But the political debate continues in Parliament. You will be able to count on our support and that of the people, who show solidarity with the refuse collectors, the bus drivers and the nurses. (Hedebouw, 26 March 2020, p. 69)

However, they do not support the plenary powers, fearing such powers will be used to carry out an 'anti-social agenda': "The PVDA will vote against these special powers, but will always be available to support constructive measures" (Hedebouw, 26 March 2020, pp. 70-74).

Their discourse is characterised by both policy-seeking and vote-seeking (Tables 3, 4, and 5 in Annex). Their policy orientation was emphasised by the group leader of the Workers' Party, who explained that they did not support the minority government because of the content of its policy. More specifically, according to group leader Hedebouw, the governmental parties have proven in the past that they do not sufficiently invest in healthcare, one of the core themes of the political party. He emphasised that their main goal is to have a substantial influence on the content of the policy and that they were willing to constructively cooperate with other political parties. Although they were not in a position to substantially influence the content of the government's policy, the COVID-19 crisis constituted an electoral opportunity to show the importance of their political project: focus on healthcare and the working class. Furthermore, the group leader stressed that their secondary goal is electoral growth as a political party, which shows their voter-seeking motives (Interview F).

The Green group, consisting of Groen and Ecolo, had, contrary to our expectations, a tolerant and supportive attitude towards the minority cabinet. They trusted the minority government and supported the plenary powers. Group leader Kristof Calvo explicitly stated that their attitude was not driven by electoral considerations:

> In all fairness, and this may sound a bit naive or implausible, but I don't have that much electoral calculation in mind at the moment.... This crisis rewards on the one hand the government parties and on the other hand [those parties that foster] the indignation. It may be true that we are neither one nor the other. But I don't want to make any other choice. (Interview E)

This is supported by the statements of the group in the parliamentary debates (Tables 4 and 5 in Annex). Group leader Calvo emphasised that the goal of the Green group is to get the country through this crisis with particular attention to the most vulnerable in society (Calvo, 19 March 2020, p. 5). Moreover, he claimed that there should be no difference between government and opposition during exceptional times of crisis. He recognised that there were ideological differences between the parties but that there was no room for contradistinctions between government and opposition (Interview E).

5 Conclusion

This article sheds light on the drivers of opposition parties' attitude vis-à-vis the government in times of crisis. More specifically, the focus is on the behaviour of opposition parties towards the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium. We analysed whether and how the party type influences the position of the party vis-à-vis the governmental coalition. Given this constraining influence of partitocracy in Belgium, we argued that the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the caretaker minority government that was in place after the 2019 elections provided a POS that incentivised opposition parties to support the government. In other words, the need for a response to the pandemic as well as the particularly rare situation of the minority caretaker government created, much more than in 'normal times', a specific opportunity for Belgian opposition parties to support the government. More specifically, we expected mainstream opposition parties to support the government because of policy- and office-seeking motives while we expected the challenger opposition parties to refrain from supporting the government because of vote-seeking motives.

Our analysis, primarily, confirmed that, similarly to other countries, especially the UK (Louwerse et al., 2021), Belgium's opposition parties accommodated to the government's crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit in different ways. These different types of behaviour by the opposition parties can certainly be explained by the fact that Belgium is a federal country and that some parties are in opposition at the national level but have government responsibility at the regional level. Similarly to the case of Germany (Louwerse et al., 2021,

p. 1029), this federal nature helps to explain why, for instance, N-VA supported the plenary powers but not the new minority government. More generally, the rally-around-the-flag did have its effect – so Belgium offers here another confirmation of this thesis – but in varying ways, as our analysis has shown, confirming findings about Belgium and other countries (Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Pattyn et al., 2020). In other words, it does help to explain opposition parties' attitude, but other factors (like federalism and partitocracy) played a decisive role as well.

Indeed, the exogenous pressure of COVID-19 on Belgium's partitocracy created a fading understanding of what 'opposition' actually means. The pandemic caused uncertainty and triggered positions of parties that were not entirely in line with what was expected. Also, the fact that a minority government was voted into office meant that every opposition party, whether challenger or mainstream, had to carefully choose its attitude towards the government and its COVID-19 response. PS, sp.a and cdH supported the government, both in the confidence and the special plenary powers vote, confirming our hypotheses. Similarly, the challenger parties Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party voted against, in line with our expectations. However, the behaviour of mainstream opposition party N-VA, as mentioned, only partially confirmed our expectations. Finally, the green parties did not confirm our expectations when they supported both the minority government and its plenary powers.

Our article made clear that the government formation influenced the attitude of the various opposition parties. Challenger parties such as Flemish Interest and the Workers' Party were very critical towards the minority government, whereas mainstream political parties, such as the Social Democrats, were more constructive towards the government. Moreover, the Greens took a rather constructive stance as they were hoping to be part of the new government, which eventually happened. For them the minority government looking for support in its COVID-19 response created a real opportunity. Given their disappointing electoral results in 2019, one may wonder whether they would have entered the government without the pandemic and their chance to show that they were 'governmentable'.

Mainstream opposition parties were clearly prompted by these political opportunities, while challenger parties adhered to what they always do: oppose the government (and its mainstream government and opposition parties). It remains to be seen whether the positioning of these parties will last beyond the pandemic or if a new minority government is voted in parliament. In other words, future research will be able to analyse whether this period – and the particular behaviour of the opposition parties – was truly exceptional or whether it will have lasting effects (in clearly distinguishing between mainstream and challenger parties, in the nature of opposition within the Belgian case, whether antagonistic or consensual), by comparing over time or with other cases, such as Denmark (where minority governments are no exception) or other Western European countries hit by the same pandemic. Such comparative analyses will further improve our understanding of the factors that explain the answer challenger and mainstream parties need to formulate: to support or not to support?

Annex

Table 2   *List of interviews*

Interview	Political Party	Abbreviation	Respondent	Date ofinter-view	Medium
A	Socialist Party Different	sp.a	Meryame Kitir	19/05/2020	Telephone
B	Socialist Party	PS	Ahmed Laaouej	12/05/2020	Zoom
C	Humanist Democratic Centre	cdH	Catherine Fonck	29/05/2020	Zoom
D	New Flemish Alliance	N-VA	Peter De Roover	06/05/2020	Zoom
E	Green/Ecolo	Groen-Ecolo	Kristof Calvo	15/05/2020	Zoom
F	Workers' Party of Belgium	PTB-PVDA	Raoul Hedebouw	20/05/2020	Zoom
G	Flemish Interest	Vlaams Belang	Barbara Pas	18/05/2020	Zoom

Table 3   *Coding interviews*

	Policy-oriented	Office-oriented	Voter-oriented
Sp.a	High	High	Low
PS	High	Moderate	Low
cdH	High	/	/
N-VA	High	High	High
Groen-Ecolo	High	Moderate	/
PTB-PVDA	High	Low	High
Vlaams Belang	High	Low	High

Table 4   *Coding parliamentary debate (19 March 2020 - confidence)*

	Policy-oriented	Office-oriented	Voter-oriented
Sp.a	High	/	Low
PS	High	/	Low
cdH	High	/	/
N-VA	High	High	/
Groen-Ecolo	High	/	Low
PTB-PVDA	High	/	Low
Vlaams Belang	High)	/	High

Table 5   *Coding parliamentary debate (26 March 2020 – plenary powers)*

	Policy-oriented	**Office-oriented**	**Voter-oriented**
Sp.a	High	/	/
PS	High	/	/
cdH	High	/	/
N-VA	High	/	Moderate
Groen-Ecolo	High	/	/
PTB-PVDA	High	/	/
Vlaams Belang	High	/	High

Table 6   *Examples of coded paragraphs*

Orientation	Example of coded paragraph
Voter-oriented	This is a government, with 38 of the 150 seats in Parliament, that is not elected by the people. The government is not a representation of the voters' will […] We have been without a government for a very long time. We have been asking for early elections since N-VA left the government. […]
Voter-oriented	The last word will always be with the people. If you continue to betray the confidence of the people, then in the next elections the people will do away with the parties that would show themselves to be anti-democratic or anti-Flemish in the coming months. In 2024, don't say I didn't warn you
Policy-oriented	We try to be an opposition of ideas, an opposition of proposals, and there was room for this. We handed in a lot of proposals and a lot of them were taken into account. So there is room for a clean, moderated way of opposition.
Policy-oriented	Perhaps the most important thing is this: it is not because we are constructive and because we show understanding for the situation that the special powers may or can be abused by the government. In that regard, I repeat what I said this morning: I still don't understand why the government has taken the pharmaceutical law, which already went through the entire procedure in the committee, which was approved by the committee and is ready to be discussed in plenary, off the agenda, with the corona crisis as an argument.
Office-oriented	We have called on the chairmen to talk to each other to find common ground among the parties in order to look for a [parliamentary] majority. We are trying to take the lead to ensure that we are ready by September and have a full-fledged government because we are now in a health crisis.
Office-oriented	We have shown our willingness to put aside our differences but we were brutally and coldly rejected. Apparently, the fear of contamination by the N-VA among some parties was greater than the fear of corona. The aversion to let the biggest party in the country take its responsibility in this crisis stood in the way of a widely supported solution.

Note: The examples of coded paragraph have been translated from the original language (Dutch/French) to English by the authors.

Notes

1 The debate on the support for the minority government (19 March 2020) and the debate on the plenary powers (26 March 2020) are considered the main plenary debates at the start of the COVID-19 crisis.
2 Cabinet Alexander De Croo was installed on 1 October 2020 as a coalition government of the Liberals, the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Flemish Christian Democrats.

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Performing the COVID-19 Crisis in Flemish Populist Radical-Right Discourse

A Case Study of Vlaams Belang's *Coronablunderboek*

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Abstract

In June 2020, the Flemish populist radical right party Vlaams Belang (VB) published the Corona Blunder Book (CBB; Coronablunderboek in Dutch), detailing the government's mistakes in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Populist parties can 'perform' crisis by emphasising the mistakes made by opponents (Moffitt, 2015) and may use a specifically populist discursive style, consisting largely of aggressive and sarcastic language (Brubaker, 2017). This paper takes the CBB as a case study in the populist performance of crisis and the populist style, finding that the book is, first, a clear example of populist 'everyman' stylistics and the performance of crisis, and, second, that VB uses the book to shift the COVID-19 crisis from a public health crisis to a crisis of governance, seeking to blame Belgium's federal structure for the government's alleged mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic and hence arguing for Flemish independence, one of the party's main agenda points.

Keywords: populism, COVID-19, crisis, discourse.

1 Introduction: The COVID-19 Crisis and Vlaams Belang in Belgium's Political Landscape

The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 disproportionately affected Belgium in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, not least due to a lack of precautions in nursing homes and a shortage of protective material for medical personnel, the latter resulting from the Belgian federal government destroying face masks due to storage issues right before the start of the pandemic (Bové, 2020; De Morgen, 2020; Het Laatste Nieuws, 2020; Het Nieuwsblad, 2020; Stevis-Gridneff, Apuzzo, Pronczuk & Lima, 2020). As the initial wave of the pandemic wound down, Belgium had one of the highest per capita death rates in the world (Brussels Times, 2020), and some international media organisations would later blame the country's glacial response and chaotic communication on its administrative complexity (Araujo, 2020). Although governments and organisations all over the world have largely failed to respond decisively and effectively to the pandemic, espe-

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cially in its initial phase (Gebrekidan & Apuzzo, 2021), Belgium nonetheless remains a stand-out case in the early stages of the pandemic in Europe.

As the first wave of COVID-19 infections subsided in June 2020, the Flemish populist radical right party (cf. Mudde, 2007) Vlaams Belang (VB), or Flemish Interest, published the *Corona Blunder Book* (*CBB*), which outlines the mistakes made by the government in tackling the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium. VB is one of Belgium's and Flanders's most popular political parties, growing into the second-largest party in Flanders in the 2019 General Elections (Biard, 2019). In a December 2020 poll, as much as 26.3% of participants indicated that they would vote for VB (De Morgen, 2020). In Belgium, each region has its own legislative and executive power, but the federal level also has a separate legislative and executive branch. Political parties traditionally form broad-based coalitions to create a functioning government at the federal level (Timmermans & Moury, 2006). In 1993, after other attempts and several discussions (starting in 1989), all other Flemish parties effectively barred VB (then Vlaams Blok or Flemish Bloc) from governing, by agreeing that no party can form a coalition with it, for the simple reason that VB "did not subscribe to the elementary norms and values of civilization" (De Standaard, 2004). In 2000, all parties represented in Parliament formalised this cordon sanitaire by signing a treaty precluding any cooperation with the then Vlaams Blok. It should be noted that VB's current direct competitor, the conservative right-wing N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie or New Flemish Alliance), was founded in 2001 and has never signed any agreement to formalise the cordon. Later, in 2004, Vlaams Belang was convicted for racism, scapegoating immigrants, inciting hatred and not respecting the principles of freedom of speech (De Standaard, 2004, Geysels, De Lange & Fennema, 2008). After the conviction, Vlaams Blok changed its name to Vlaams Belang (VRT, 2009). Nonetheless, the cordon stands to this day (De Morgen, 2020). The government coalition at the federal level, formed in 2020, prompted criticism from VB (2019) because the coalition excluded it and N-VA, meaning that the federal government had no majority in Flanders. VB's political agenda consists, broadly speaking, of stopping immigration and reducing social security benefits for immigrants; defederalisation of Belgium, leading towards eventual Flemish secession from Wallonia; re-regulation of the public sphere through policing and surveillance; defunding public media and NGOs concerned with minority rights; installing a Flemish-European "leading culture" that should be taught in schools (cf. the German term *Leitkultur*); reducing development aid and stopping the so-called Islamisation of Belgium (Vlaams Belang, 2019).

The *CBB*, published on 16 June 2020, was written by two prominent members of VB: Barbara Pas, the party's vice president and fraction leader for the party in the Chamber of Representatives, and Chris Janssens, its fraction leader in the Flemish Parliament. The preface to the book was written by the party's president, Tom Van Grieken, which means three high-ranking figures of VB have worked on the *CBB* and effectively endorsed its contents, making it more than just an individual action from random VB members. This paper takes the party's *CBB* as its object of study. Its primary objective is to expand academic knowledge on the relationship between (radical right) populism and crisis by examining the

CBB as a populist performance of crisis and as an example of populist stylistics. The paper therefore first asks *how* VB performs crisis and uses a populist discursive style in the *CBB*, before homing in on *why* the party does so. It hypothesises that the book performs crisis most clearly by spectacularising failure (i.e. linking failure to a deeper crisis), by using a populist style and by presenting simple solutions, with the purpose of discrediting its opponents, promoting its own agenda and setting itself apart from other parties (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2015). The paper uses a qualitative discourse analysis that, on the one hand, focuses on Moffitt's (2015) steps of performing crisis, and on the other, takes on board the populist style of discourse. It therefore subscribes to the idea that populism can productively be approached as a political *style* (Moffitt, 2015: 211, ct. Filc, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt & Tormey, 2013; Taguieff, 1995). In this respect, its main theoretical contribution to research on populism is that it explicitly links Moffitt's (2015) performance of crisis to typically populist stylistic devices, such as simplicity, sarcasm and crude personal attacks (Brubaker, 2017), and that it further distinguishes types of discourse within Moffitt's performance of crisis. The paper's key empirical contribution is that it is, thus far, the only case study on VB's *CBB* as well as a rare examination of an entire book published by a populist party. It fills a gap in the literature on VB that should not be underestimated, since the *CBB* reveals how the party fabricates, performs and sustains a sense of crisis among its voters, not least by discrediting establishment politicians, scientists and Belgium's federal structure. Moreover, the party seems to be inching towards a closed-off communicative ecosystem (perhaps more aptly called an 'echo chamber'), to propagate its ideas without fact-checking, which is criticised as unfair censorship – the party's recent move towards the barely regulated platform Telegram[1] being a case in point, much like right-wing Americans once turned to the social media app Parler, but now have also moved to Telegram (De Vynck & Nakashima, 2021). A niche publication like the *CBB* can arguably also be included within that informational ecosystem and therefore warrants a closer look. In addition, while populist responses to COVID-19 in several European countries have been examined (Bobba & Hubé, 2021), VB's approach has not been studied in depth thus far. In what follows, the paper first discusses the complex relationship between populism and crisis. Then, it outlines an analytical framework for the qualitative discursive analysis of the populist performance of crisis as well as its stylistic properties. Next, it applies that framework to VB's *CBB* in a descriptive case study, before finally drawing conclusions and outlining avenues for further research.

2   Theoretical Framework: Populism, Performance and Style

While populism is notoriously difficult to define, scholars have generally moved towards a 'flexible' approach to this slippery concept (Macaulay, 2019; ct. Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Those adhering to such a 'thin interpretation' of populism generally agree that populism relies on the division of society into two camps – the virtuous people and the evil establishment elite – engaged in an antagonis-

tic relationship, with the people having the only legitimate claim to sovereignty (Spruyt, Keppens & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016: 335, ct. Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove, 2014; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Rooduijn, 2014; Stanley, 2008; Van Kessel, 2014). This bare-bones discursive logic does not entail any ideological position (e.g. right or left wing) per se, as populist discursive strategies are compatible with and are deployed by political actors subscribing to a wide range of ideologies and in various (sub)national contexts (Macaulay, 2019). Generally, research on populist discourse often focuses on speeches by populist leaders, party programmes or social media (Fielitz & Marcks, 2019; Macaulay, 2019). By contrast, there is a distinct lack of research on long-form publications by populist parties, for example, the *CBB* – an entire book elaborating a party's stance on a single topic. This makes the *CBB* a particularly intriguing case study to examine populist discourse.

The *CBB* is also interesting because it deals extensively with a period of *crisis* – a phenomenon that is typically difficult to conceptualise in the context of populism (Moffitt, 2015) due to populism's 'fuzzy relationship' with crisis, as the tangible benefit of crisis for populist actors varies on a case-by-case basis (Pappas & Kriesi, 2015: 303). Likewise, while many scholars have long seen crisis as causally related to populism, most often in the historical sense, populism has also been electorally successful in areas that have *not* experienced significant crises. The implication is therefore that crisis and populism are not necessarily structurally or causally related, and that their intertwinement also depends upon the subjective *perception* of crisis (Moffitt, 2015). At any rate, populists generally aim to exploit crises and are, more often than not, seen as beneficiaries of crises, especially if mismanaged by governments (Brubaker, 2017; Bobba & Hubé, 2021). In many cases, crisis plays into the hands of populists by boosting populist parties' relative appeal, which depends at least in part "on the *lack of faith* in the workings of representative politics" (Brubaker, 2017: 380, emphasis in original). Even though the link between populist discourse and crisis (i.e. how different populists use crisis as a discursive strategy) is "ambivalent" and varies widely (Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 5), it may be productive to see crisis not as an external phenomenon that is then deployed as a discursive tool to gain popularity, but as inherent to populism itself, in the sense that populists may also 'perform' crisis and engage in the 'spectacularisation of failure' to generate and extend a sense of crisis among voters (Moffitt, 2015: 190). This approach allows us to take into account how a *perception of crisis* is created, which is often based on and emanates from real structural factors, but is nonetheless subjective. This better explains the relationship between populism and crisis, since moments of crisis, and especially establishment actors' responses to those crises, are inevitably 'mediated' or represented in some form (most often through discourse) and can therefore be invoked and sustained by populist actors who 'perform crisis' (Moffitt, 2015: 189). Such (real or imaginary) crises can be used as a target for anti-establishment criticism by 'spectacularising failure' – linking individual failures to deeper, systemic issues – and can be called upon to highlight the populist actor's response to the crisis (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2015: 210, 2016; Ostiguy, 2009). This makes populism as much a trigger of (perceived) crisis as crisis is a (per-

ceived) trigger of populism (Moffitt, 2015). Conversely, effective crisis manage-
ment by establishment politicians can temper populist sentiments. Populist
actors can highlight, reiterate or even dramatise a crisis for electoral gain, but
establishment actors can "perform non-crisis" (Brubaker, 2017: 380) by reassur-
ing the population, inspiring confidence and managing the crisis effectively.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of unprecedented scale, and responses
from populists, while generally seeking to politicise the crisis, have varied widely
across the world. In Europe, three major approaches can be observed: populist
parties in opposition have attempted yet failed to effectively exploit the pandemic
for electoral gain (although they tried to by highlighting government failures);
populists in power, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán and the Czech Republic's
Andrej Babiš, have sought to depoliticise COVID-19 and emphasise strong deci-
sions taken by individual leaders and, finally, parties hoping to govern in the near
future have generally not taken any radical stance, one way or the other (Bobba &
Hubé, 2021). In this context, VB stands out from many other radical-right popu-
list parties because it is effectively a permanent opposition party that is both
extremely popular but ineligible to govern due to the cordon sanitaire, which has
allowed the party to freely ignore elementary political decency and adopt an
exceptionally aggressive rhetorical style focused on discrediting opponents, nam-
ing and shaming incumbent ministers, verbal abuse and sharp sarcasm (Meijen,
Raube & Wouters, 2021).[2] In the case of the pandemic, VB has frequently criti-
cised government officials and emphasised government errors, and has moved
from strong support for stricter lockdowns to a more sceptical stance (Goyvaerts
& De Cleen, 2020; Van Berlaer, 2020). The *CBB* is therefore an interesting case of
radical- right populist discourse in a period of crisis. Moreover, the party's perma-
nent opposition status is closely related to another central component of populist
parties' electoral appeal: their disruptive uniqueness, or the idea that they aim to
do away with the political elite's 'business as usual', end the status quo and usher
in a new era in politics. This allows them to present themselves as a sui generis
political actor that fulfils the neglected wants and needs of disillusioned voters
(Brubaker, 2017). While VB's political agenda, rhetorical style and exceptional
position in the cordon already establish its exceptionality, the *CBB* may further
emphasise that sense of uniqueness.

Regardless of VB's rhetorical carte blanche due to the cordon, the party
steered clear from publicly endorsing conspiracy theories, such as anti-vaccina-
tion theories in public media (although they often question the legitimacy of Bel-
gian virologists), while handing out face masks and advocating for stricter COVID
regulations, which contrasts starkly with the stance of populists like Trump and
Bolsonaro, who downplayed the virus (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020; Van Berlaer,
2020). This may be the case because the party hopes to present itself as a legiti-
mate governing party in order for the N-VA to agree to a coalition in the future
(effectively breaking the cordon), but perhaps also because VB continuously
sought to "link COVID-19 to its nativist demands" (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020:
16) by blaming immigrants for breaking COVID-19 regulations, for example,
claiming that one-third of COVID rule-breakers are allegedly "not Belgian"
(Vlaams Belang, 2021). The intricacies of the Belgian case as a whole and of VB in

particular make the *CBB* a worthwhile case study, especially considering that this paper shows how the *CBB does* promote conspiracy theories regarding the origins of the virus and the reliability of virologists – implying that VB's discourse towards its close followers differs from its public discourse. The main focus of this paper, however, lies on the *CBB* as a performance of crisis and as an example of the populist discursive style. The populist style can usefully be termed a populist 'stylistic repertoire' (Brubaker, 2017: 360) – not necessarily a singularly recognisable and conceptually coherent style, but rather a collection of stylistic elements that populists freely draw upon. One crucial element of that repertoire is "a 'low' rather than 'high' style that favors 'raw' and crude (but warm and unrestrained) over refined and cultivated (but cool and reserved) language and self-presentation" (Brubaker, 2017: 366, ct. Ostiguy, 2009). This should not be too surprising, considering that populists frame themselves as the ultimate representative of 'the people' in government and therefore need to adopt a style that is recognisable and understandable for the people they claim to represent. For populist voters, a populist 'speaks their language' – as opposed to the official, bland and seemingly dispassionate language of establishment politics. This populist style "performatively devalues complexity through rhetorical practices of simplicity, directness, and seeming self-evidence" (Brubaker, 2017: 366, ct. Saurette & Gunster, 2011), generally privileging first-hand sensory experience over abstract knowledge. Moreover, populists stretch the limits of what is acceptable discourse in the political sphere, often criticising political correctness and provoking the establishment, all while subverting political conventions and presenting themselves as a taboo-breaking, rebellious bull in a china shop (Brubaker, 2017).

All of this amounts to an 'everyman' style utilised by populist parties that does away with political decorum and pretends to speak freely, vulgarities included. Populist discourse presents commonsensical arguments – 'Any child can see this!' – mixed with a dose of anti-intellectualism and the questioning of scientific expertise; uses jokes, wisecracks, puns, irony and sarcasm, often drawing upon folkloristic or popular sayings and stories; valorises the emotions and experiences of regular citizens who feel neglected, including anger, humiliation and powerlessness. Indeed, populism is highly emotional, appealing to feelings of anger and humiliation while deeply concerned with "*honor, respect*, and *recognition*, which may be seen as unjustly withheld from 'ordinary' people and unjustly accorded to the unworthy and undeserving" (Brubaker, 2017: 363, ct. Hochschild, 2016, emphasis in original). The populist political style taps into feelings of *unacklowedgement* among the population – the sense of not being heard or being recognised for certain achievements and efforts – and leverages such negative emotions to stimulate political mobilisation. In the case of VB, research has shown that the party utilises blunt and aggressive language that ignores political conventions and explicitly attacks political opponents and Belgium's democratic system (Meijen et al., 2021). VB has also long established itself as a party that aims to break taboos, especially regarding migration, and it is explicitly opposed to socially inclusive initiatives and language, which its election programme describes as "the dictatorship of multicultural political correctness" (Vlaams Belang, 2019: 14).[3] Populist parties like VB make a claim to exceptionality that resonates most

with citizens disillusioned with establishment politics, a key electoral group for the party (Goovaerts et al., 2019). This reveals the strategic purpose of the populist style: by deviating from the usual content and form of establishment politics through the performance of crisis and the populist everyman style, a populist party can distinguish itself from the establishment, highlight its exceptionality and gain more disillusioned voters. It will become evident that the *CBB* serves as a clear example of crisis performance and stylistic deviation.

3 Analytical Framework: Destructive and Promotional Discourse

To fully grasp the intricacies of the populist discourse deployed by VB, the *CBB* will be analysed through a qualitative discourse analysis. Considering the prevalence of sarcasm, irony and jokes in the populist style and the complex discursive forms that crisis performance may take, any automation of the analysis would inevitably miss the inferences and nuances inherent in the discourse. In that sense, a manual approach is essential. Furthermore, considering that the analysis zooms in on the *CBB* as a case study in the populist performance of crisis and as an example of populist stylistics, a quantitative approach does not seem feasible, since the performance of crisis and populist stylistic elements are difficult to quantify without making reductive abstractions. The analysis will therefore go through the *CBB* and search for textual evidence that the book performs crisis and does so in a populist discursive style. To facilitate such analysis, Benjamin Moffitt (2015) has usefully broken down the performance of crisis into six steps (from Moffitt, 2015: 198):

1 Identify failure: Populist actors bring attention to particularly salient political failures and points of contention.

2 Elevate to the level of crisis by linking into a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension: The failures highlighted in step one are, often through performative spectacles, linked to other failures and embedded into a temporal context in order to present discrete and potentially unrelated events as symptoms of a single systemic crisis that must be resolved urgently.

3 Frame "the people" versus those responsible for the crisis: The elite and/or other social groups (often minorities) are presented as or linked together with the actors responsible for the systemic crisis invoked in step two, thereby inventing a rationale for discrimination that pretends to go beyond purely racist or ideological motives.

4 Use media to propagate performance: To capture and hold media attention (through which their performance of crisis is disseminated), populists communicate in an unusual style, often focusing on controversial and emotional topics, and organise spectacles such as marches and media events, thereby making the failures identified in step one more salient, deepening the sense of crisis generated in step two and reinforcing the group divisions of step three.

5 Present simple solutions and strong leadership: This step consists of two rhetorical techniques. On the one hand, populists portray other political

actors as totally incompetent, as uncaring towards the victimised people and wholly unaware of how serious the crisis really is. In short, they are presented as elitist and estranged from regular people. On the other hand, populists subsequently present themselves as the perfect solution to the crisis performed in the previous steps. Moreover, they claim to be above the ideological differences and everyday concerns of party politics, portraying the workings of establishment politics as inefficient, slow and overly complex in times of crisis, while the populists' modus operandi would be straightforward and effective. This step is commonly achieved by oversimplifying the usual procedures and institutions of the political system the populists find themselves in, presenting establishment politics as unabashedly corrupt.

6   Continue to propagate crisis: A continuous performance of crisis is difficult to maintain due to the temporally bounded nature of crisis itself, and due to the potential loss of salience of particular issues over time. Populists slow the dissipation of interest by changing their presentation of the crisis being performed (e.g. from economic to cultural) or by expanding the breadth and extent of the crisis.

Since going over all the steps of crisis in the *CBB* would exceed the scope of this paper, the analysis will focus on step five. This choice can be explained by taking into account VB's political agenda and earlier research on its discursive strategy: Vlaams Belang, as a secessionist party, frequently and openly criticises Belgium's administrative complexity and federal system as well as its establishment politicians (Meijen et al., 2021), so this focused approach should be able to reveal how the *CBB* functions as a performance of crisis by both painting the establishment as incompetent and presenting VB as having simple solutions. Nonetheless, it seems productive to distinguish two overarching types of discourse within step five: destructive discourse and promotional discourse. This differentiation is useful not just because Moffitt (2015) explains the step in two parts as well, but also, first, because it allows us to gain a more fine-grained understanding of the surface-level discursive forms involved in performing crisis, and second, because both types of discourse aim to achieve something fundamentally different: while the discourse on establishment politics is outward oriented and aggressive, the discourse presenting solutions is primarily inward oriented and focuses on promoting the populist actor itself. It therefore makes sense to keep these two types of discourse, although subsumed under the same step of crisis performance and in some ways overlapping, analytically distinct. One notable overlap is that a populist actor may still attack establishment elites in its promotional discourse, but the key difference here is that the attack is promotional discourse if its fundamental purpose is to paint the populist actor in a positive light (e.g. by criticising an establishment actor for not doing something the populist actor is advocating for), while destructive discourse is purely aimed at reducing the credibility and legitimacy of other actors.

The analytical framework aims to capture the *CBB*'s combination of crisis performance and populist style in order to gain deeper insight into how populist parties, on the one hand, can develop and deepen a sense of crisis to criticise estab-

lishment politics (through destructive discourse), but also, on the other hand, emphasise and exaggerate their uniqueness in the political landscape and present simplistic solutions, cementing their electoral appeal (through promotional discourse). In other words, this subdivision allows the *subjective representation* or *fabrication* of crisis (in addition to discrediting the establishment) and the subsequent *exploitation* of that potentially fabricated crisis to remain analytically distinct by splitting the discourse up into two categories. This is useful for the simple reason that the former sets the scene for the latter: the criticism of establishment politicians through developing and deepening a sense of crisis necessarily functions as a contextual springboard for self-promotion. This discursive strategy can be compared to how the scenery of a theatre stage supports the actors performing the play, in that populist actors first establish a background in order to perform their spectacle.

Based on populism's discursive style, a number of stylistic elements can be linked to destructive and promotional discourse and hence to the performance of crisis. Most notably, the analysis focuses on whether the book's style is, first, blunt, provocative, crude, taboo breaking, sarcastic, crude and aggressive towards individual people, and second, simplistic, self-evident, anti-elitist, sarcastic and biased towards personal experience rather than abstract knowledge. More concretely, the book is read with specific attention for key markers that indicate the use of destructive or promotional discourse, with the units of analysis hence being individual phrases within the book. Destructive discourse can be recognised in the naming and shaming of specific ministers and parties through crude personal attacks, attacking political opponents' moral integrity, questioning the legitimacy of the federal government and mocking political opponents. Promotional discourse can be recognised in presenting the party's usual agenda as simple solutions, offering procedural and institutional simplifications (cf. Moffitt, 2015, ct. Rosanvallon, 2011) and claiming to protect the victimised and humiliated people against an uncaring, selfish elite. The qualitative discourse analysis can be summarised as follows (see Table 1).

As can be deduced from Table 1, the qualitative set-up is designed to be flexible and leaves room for further interpretation. This is due to the necessarily varied forms of textual expression that these key markers and stylistic elements can take. Admittedly, an inevitable weakness of this approach is that it remains somewhat methodologically opaque and does not set out strict lines of categorisation. Nonetheless, this flexibility is essential to gather evidence, not only because the discourse used by VB itself must, like any discursive utterance, be interpreted, but also because populist discourse naturally leans towards the facetious and disingenuous through its prolific use of sarcasm, irony and dubious simplifications. In that sense, taking populist discourse at face value, without leaving room for further analysis with regard to its strategic purpose and possible categorisations, would be naïve.

Table 1   *Schematisation of the qualitative discourse analysis*

	Strategic purpose	**Key markers**	**Stylistic properties**
Destructive discourse	Reduce credibility and legitimacy of political opponents, experts and the establishment system	Naming and shaming specific ministers and parties, attacking opponents' moral integrity and competence, mocking opponents and scientific experts, questioning governmental legitimacy and motives of scientific experts	Blunt, provocative, rebellious, taboo breaking; sarcasm, jokes and irony; lack of political decorum, crude personal attacks and insults; humiliation and anger
Promotional discourse	Promote the party, emphasise its exceptionality, increase own legitimacy, exploit crisis to advocate for its usual talking points	Presenting the party's usual agenda as simple solutions, offering procedural and institutional simplifications of complex processes, claiming to protect the victimised people against the elite, advocating for strong leadership and unrealistic reforms	Simplifications, expressions of self-evidence, anti-elitism, sarcasm, preferring first-hand sensory experience over abstract knowledge

4   Case Study: A Qualitative Discourse Analysis of the *CBB*

In what follows, the case study of the *CBB* is structured along the lines of the analytical framework. It distinguishes between destructive discourse, aimed at attacking political opponents and questioning the integrity of scientists, and promotional discourse, focused on promoting the party's usual agenda points. As noted in the introduction to this paper, VB's president, Tom Van Grieken, wrote the preface to the book. His contribution functions as a microcosm of the entire book, blending destructive and promotional discourse. He immediately questions the personal moral integrity of Maggie De Block and the "communist" virologist Marc Van Ranst (11).[4] He also attacks the legitimacy of Belgian establishment politics and already tries to shift the COVID-19 crisis (then expected to not last as long as it has) into a crisis of governance by claiming that "this public health crisis was exploited to install a government without any democratic legitimacy" (12).[5] This rhetorical strategy is typically used to extend the performance of crisis beyond the temporal boundaries of the initial crisis (Moffitt, 2015). Van Grieken calls for revenge, arguing that the ministers responsible must be punished and "should not get away with the inexcusable failure of the past few months" (12),[6] clearly aiming to identify failure, linking this failure to incompetence or negligence and blaming establishment politicians. In terms of style, Van Grieken blends jokes, puns and sarcasm in his criticism of the government: "In the traditional picture of the new government, the ministers kept a distance of 1.5 meters between them, but the government was primarily standing miles apart from the

voter" (12). In the same vein, he notes that "the citizens of this country pay the highest tax rate in the world, but get policies in return that would embarrass a crazy dictator in a faraway banana republic" (13-14). This sarcastic hyperbole is reinforced by another joke: "If one would send face masks with people's tax returns, they would get to the people in time" (13). Van Grieken's contribution is already indicative of destructive discourse, of the populist style, and touches upon different steps of crisis performance. After the preface, the book proceeds chronologically about the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium. It mainly describes mistakes made by the Belgian government, but also interlaces this description with direct quotes from VB members, mostly comments and interpellations by the party's representatives in plenary meetings of various political institutions and press releases by the party. The book juxtaposes those quotes with vehement criticism of government actions during the crisis, thereby strategically emphasising the fact that the party publicly calls out other parties for their mistakes, highlighting its rebellious, taboo-breaking image as well as corroborating its claim that VB actively defends the people against the elite within political institutions. These provocative direct quotes are therefore, especially through juxtaposition, clear examples of both destructive and promotional discourse. The analysis will now categorise and analyse the use of both types of discourse throughout the book.

4.1 Destructive Discourse

A significant part of the book is a personal attack on Maggie De Block, Belgium's minister of health during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is evident from the book's cover page, which is a picture of De Block edited to have her wear her face mask over her eyes, symbolising her alleged blindness to the COVID-19 crisis. The first section details a range of reports on the efficiency of face masks in the case of potential pandemics, with the authors noting that "we can assume Maggie De Block has never read this advice. Which, in hindsight, is a pity" (20),[7] referring to the fact that, during the first months of the pandemic, face masks were in short supply in Belgium. They further indicate that plenty of face masks were available, "but alas, they did not account for Maggie De Block" (20).[8] The authors note that "this blue excellence" (20), sarcastically referring to De Block and the colour of the liberal-democratic party she represents (Open-VLD), took office as minister of health when there were around 60 million face masks available. The entire supply of masks was destroyed, since they were all three to five years past their expiry date. The book then quotes Dries Van Langenhove, an independent politician representing VB in the Chamber of Representatives, asking De Block whether the masks were destroyed to make room for refugees and asylum seekers – a claim that has been proven to be false (Emmery, 2020), but which nonetheless is intended to question De Block's honesty and integrity. Furthermore, Van Langenhove notes, "What is the point of this parliament if the minister can simply refuse to answer our questions? In that case, we might just as well abolish this expensive charade" (23).[9] Through the quote, the book questions the purpose of Belgium's democratic institutions, and specifically its federal Parliament – an institution that VB does not consider legitimate.

Early on in the pandemic, Minister De Block asserted that Belgium can easily handle the virus, and the authors compare this claim to Angela Merkel's famous quote "Wir schaffen das" ("we can do it"), which is a typical example of performing non-crisis (Brubaker, 2017), although in this case, the authors aim to mock De Block's attempt to downplay the severity of the crisis. The authors proceed to call De Block "Maggie Merkel" (31), "criminally negligent," "lax" and "in denial" (23). Later on, De Block is called incompetent (63), blind, naïve and stupid (64), and she is claimed to spread "vulgar lies" and "fake news" (64).[10] The authors also imply that De Block's purchase of face masks was so late due to corruption, since she initially ordered masks from a former member of her own party (63), but these accusations have not been proven. These direct insults lack any political decorum and clearly serve to discredit De Block's competence and personal integrity, thereby questioning her legitimacy as a politician.

The book invokes feelings of powerlessness and claims that "the situation calls for revenge" (114), hinting at jail time for De Block, and describes, among others, "the pain that the lonely suffering and death [of elderly patients] has caused for their powerless families and friends" (114).[11] To exact revenge, the authors suggest a commission of inquiry resulting in a jury trial or tribunal, although they immediately warn that keeping VB out of such a commission would likely result in the findings being covered up and kept from the people (116-117), presenting VB as the only party with the moral integrity and political legitimacy to decide who must be punished via the commission. De Block's creation of a corona virus task force is also criticised, and the leader of the task force, Philippe De Backer (Open-VLD), is sarcastically described as "the Excellence" who left politics after a "public crying fit" but returned from "hibernation" while retaining his high-paying position, and is described (once again, sarcastically) as being an expert at nearly anything due to the wide variety in his previous ministerial posts (68).[12] The task force is criticised for not being able to order face masks in time, which is called "[another droplet] in the bucket of humiliation" (74).[13] The Ministry of Defence was then tasked with ordering the masks, and the authors implicitly accuse a minister of corruption once again, this time targeting Philippe Goffin of the Wallonian centre-right party Mouvement Réformateur. They also claim that the firm where Goffin ordered the masks has ties to Palestinian authorities and terrorists depositing "martyr money" to defend convicted terrorists in court, and that "anyone who is not a Belgian Minister of Defence would immediately wonder what is going on here" (76).[14] They insinuate that Goffin must have known and hence, again through sarcasm, subtly accuse him of either turning a blind eye to these activities or being somehow involved in them. VB hence attacks establishment politicians De Backer's and Goffin's moral integrity through sarcastic praise – often using that sarcasm to *imply* wrongdoing without directly stating it, neatly circumventing laws that prevent the dissemination of baseless accusations while still peddling these theories to its voters. Furthermore, the authors mention that "questions regarding this method [of purchasing the face masks] were not welcome … *Démocratie à la Belge*" ("Democracy the Belgian way") (78),[15] further questioning the legitimacy of Belgium's democratic system as a whole. The authors suggest that the cause for politicians' choice to import (rather than

produce) face masks is an "anti-Flemish attitude" (79),[16] playing into a sense of victimhood and persecution and presenting the federal government's interests as squarely opposed to those of the Flemish people.

This allusion to an anti-Flemish attitude is reinforced by the next chapter, largely devoted to attacking another establishment politician, the then prime minister Sophie Wilmès, who is immediately called a "French-crazed fury."[17] The authors note that moments of crisis are golden opportunities for strong leaders, but that Wilmès "has shown the charisma of a street sparrow" and blame her "terrible … carnival Dutch" for her alleged inability to inspire trust among the Flemish (80).[18] Doubling down on their attacks, the authors claim that Wilmès has long refused to speak Dutch, hates the Flemish and is a symbol of "aggressive Francophone imperialism around Brussels" (81).[19] The book explicitly claims that her mistakes while speaking Dutch during press conferences stem from a deep-seated malevolence, and that "for someone who hates and abhors the Flemish, it must be difficult … to have to speak the wonderfully sweet Flemish language" (81),[20] failing to note that Flemish is not a language in itself, but rather a form of Dutch. Going even further, the authors allege that Wilmès shows an "innate arrogance" in plenary meetings, where she, when confronted, "looks upset like a child who just got caught" due to "a lack of education." Finally, the authors note that "these incivilities and this misconduct do not belong in [our political institutions]" (82). After a final personal attack, mentioning that she "lacks charisma and leadership" (84), the book also questions Wilmès' legitimacy as prime minister. Her minority government, the book notes, is built from "spit and spiderwebs" (a folk saying in Flanders indicating something built on unstable footing or lies), and "like the corona virus has damaged public health, the Wilmès government has damaged the last bit of what was left of our democracy" (86).[21] In short, the book explicitly attacks Wilmès' intelligence, competence, moral integrity and, finally, her legitimacy as a politician.

De Block, De Backer, Goffin and Wilmès are not the only incumbents who are personally attacked in the book. The book also targets Flemish Minister-President Jan Jambon from the conservative Flemish party N-VA, one of VB's key electoral competitors. Again, the book does so through irony, calling him "*strong Jan* Jambon" (37) while describing the Council's decisions as "half-hearted and utterly weak" (47) and later questioning his "political leadership" (104).[22] Belgium's first lockdown was preceded by people partying en masse for one more night, and the book claims that "Maggie De Block and Sophie Wilmès created an ideal hotbed for COVID-19" (49).[23] The people going out to party are not blamed for their actions, although the authors argue that "sometimes, one should protect dumb people from themselves" (50).[24] As an example, it cites one Jimmy Geurts, a bartender who was happy with the final night before the lockdown. The authors then directly attack the common sense of an establishment politician in a personal attack, writing that this is

> a foolish and sad attitude, but not a surprise if you know that Jimmy Geurts
> is the husband of the then-leader of Open-VLD [the Flemish liberal party],

Gwendolyn Rutten ... Common sense apparently runs in the family there (50).[25]

What perhaps stands out most here is the fact that the authors lace their accusations of incompetence with implications of malice, questioning the moral integrity of politicians and their family members. They try to paint their political and ideological opponents as morally corrupt – as secretive, untrustworthy liars; as selfish and vain; as people who spend their time lining their pockets with hard-working citizens' money rather than serving their country. The book also devotes significant attention to the formation of the federal interim government during the first weeks of the pandemic in Belgium, which, due to the cordon sanitaire, excluded VB. The authors claim that the establishment politicians forced a Flemish minority government at the federal level by creating a coalition without VB. They call their direct opponent, N-VA, "hungry for power" (120), dub their political opponent Patrick Dewael "an old monkey" and claim that the politicians forming the new government (a notoriously difficult task in Belgium) were just happy to keep their highly paid positions, while stating outright that "such a political coup cannot be justified by any crisis" (121).[26] They describe the formation of this coalition as a "coup" multiple times, blaming "leftist and Francophone political games" for the situation (121).[27] Establishment politicians are further discredited by these accusations of political dishonesty.

Another notable aspect of the book's anti-establishment criticism lies in its attacks on scientists, who are framed as ideological opponents and enemies of the people by associating them with the communist regime in China through a conspiracy theory. The first section of the second chapter is suggestively titled "Made in China" and essentially blames China for the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is unapologetically xenophobic as it uses the term "Chinese virus" (67), popularised by Donald Trump, and calls China's markets "unimaginably dirty" and "disgusting" places that "allow any virus to grow unchecked" (25). Again, jokes and sarcasm go hand in hand with questionable claims, as the authors state that it "is not at all certain that COVID-19 originates from the culinary delight of a smoked bat or a marinated pangolin" (25).[28] They then suggest the virus was likely lab grown, but instead of diving into this rabbit-hole of conspiracy theories (but only after already suggesting a conspiracy theory), the authors focus on "human error, ignorance, bad luck, idiotic decisions and most of all malevolent silence" (29),[29] referring to the mistakes made by establishment politicians.

Nonetheless, the authors still hint at a communist plot in the book. The second subchapter outlines the comments of Maggie De Block and one of Belgium's most prominent virologists, Marc Van Ranst, on the Chinese response to the virus, with the authors arguing that Van Ranst "praised his Chinese comrades" (31) for their actions and criticising the minister for telling people not to panic in the early stages of the pandemic. The book continuously mentions De Block together with particular virologists – even dubbing them "her" virologists (32) – and links their downplaying explicitly with that of organisations such as the South African ANC, which, the authors claim, downplayed South Africa's AIDS epidemic (33). The authors also claim that the "arrogant" De Block (34) and Van

Ranst, with his "unforgivable" (40) and "deadly advice" (41), "bear a heavy responsibility" (34), juxtaposing De Block's description of COVID-19 as similar to the flu with the circumstances in Italian hospitals in March 2020.[30] In doing so, both De Block's and Van Ranst's competence is brought into question. They also criticise King Philippe of Belgium (likely deliberately misspelling his name as the French Philippe instead of Filip, the usual spelling in Dutch) for meeting with President Xi Jinping and trying to arrange extra deliveries of face masks (65).

The allusion towards a conspiracy between China, communists and scientists is reinforced by the book's attacks on the World Health Organisation (WHO). The authors claim that the WHO's leader is a corrupt communist who, as the Ethiopian minister of health, covered up three cholera outbreaks (42). At the same time, the authors praise former US president Donald Trump for cutting funding to the "Chinese propaganda machine that the WHO has become" (43),[31] echoing claims repeatedly made by Donald Trump that have been widely debunked (Koh & Gostin, 2020). Incumbent politicians and virologists are accused of hiding behind the WHO's instructions (69). The authors argue that Van Ranst's praise of China for its strict approach is not surprising because China and Van Ranst are both communist, questioning the virologist's political neutrality (43) – although Van Ranst's support for the far-left populist party PVDA (Partij van de Arbeid or *Labour Party*) in Belgium is a far cry from supporting the Chinese Communist Party. The authors claim that Van Ranst is not trustworthy because of his political opinions, since, the authors claim, he does not have the support of "half of the Flemish voters" (as per the authors) and hence "does not have a broad societal platform" (44).[32] They then argue that Van Ranst's 'prejudice' raises the question of whether he is really tackling the COVID-19 crisis in a scientific and politically unbiased manner (44). They also question his scientific capabilities: "Marc Van Ranst is so active on social media and stars in so many television shows that one has to wonder when he is in his laboratory" (44-45).[33] In addition, the authors point out that Marc Van Ranst initially thought face masks were not effective at all (71), calling him a hypocrite and mocking the fact that Van Ranst later advised people to wear a mask in public after all. By claiming that Van Ranst is prejudiced due to his political views, the authors imply that scientists' competence and credibility depend on their political affiliation, thereby discrediting any experts who do not fit the ideological position of VB, and by extension, questioning any government approach based on the advice given by experts. Seemingly, in the eyes of VB, any failure by a politician or virologist is a consequence of malice, and the authors consistently imply deeper, potentially more insidious motives to further attack politicians' moral integrity. In the same vein, the authors claim that the government's failures have led to undue secrecy during the COVID-19 crisis: "Other than North Korea, there is no country that keeps so many things hidden from its population" (85).[34] It is unclear whether the authors use a sarcastic hyperbole here, or whether this claim is to be taken literally. The authors then allude to a conspiracy when discussing the potential reasons for the government not releasing some documents on the pandemic:

Do they think the population is too infantile and retarded to read these documents? ... Perhaps this is the reason why virologist Van Ranst was lying for

weeks? ... Or are they afraid that their skeletons in the closet will be discovered? Like in the case of Maggie De Block and the face masks that were destroyed? Secrets invite questions. And all this underhanded, covert, sneaky behaviour is naturally creating a healthy distrust of the government. And in the so-called experts... (85).[35]

The book explicitly fosters distrust in establishment politicians and scientific experts not just by calling attention to government failures, but also by questioning the moral integrity and competence of politicians and scientists, most clearly through direct personal attacks. The authors also question the legitimacy of the government. Aside from using destructive discourse to develop and deepen a sense of crisis, the book also deploys promotional discourse to present VB as the ultimate solution to that crisis.

4.2 Promotional Discourse

The authors also present VB's usual political agenda as solutions to the crisis. Once again, the party's populist style comes to the fore, as its anti-establishment and anti-elite tone leads to a preference for simplicity and solutions that seem straightforward at first glance, but that nonetheless entail procedural and institutional simplifications. For instance, the book claims that reforms to the justice system, border controls and immigration – some of VB's main themes and talking points – would have helped in tackling the COVID-19 crisis. The book attacks the former minister of justice, the Christian Democrat Koen Geens, whose policies are called ineffective and dangerous in the book. His plan

> to make the Justice system more efficient, turned out to be a paradise plan for criminals ... His policies became laxer, while a softer approach naturally leads to more and more severe crime (52).[36]

While this is clearly an attack on Koen Geens, this can be categorised as promotional discourse, since the attack is used to present one of VB's main agenda points – a reform of the justice system – as a simple solution to the complex issue of crime. One of the authors, Barbara Pas, quotes herself making another sarcastic joke at Geens' expense:

> If I see the rate at which Minister Geens releases inmates, even terrorists, I think it would be better to order bulletproof vests to protect our citizens, rather than face masks that would be delivered far too late anyway (52).[37]

In a hyperbolic and dubious claim, the book states that a "failing return policy [for asylum seekers] has created an army of illegals" (54) being released due to COVID concerns, and argues that "the left was not clapping for the healthcare sector, but for the release of these illegals" (55),[38] when in fact people in Belgium were collectively clapping outside their homes for the nurses and doctors caring for COVID-19 patients. Again, while clearly using an aggressive tone, these claims are used to present VB as a straightforward solution to the COVID-19 crisis itself and to the various indirect consequences of the crisis.

In a similar vein, the authors argue that the crisis has shown "that our borders can indeed be controlled" (55), but also criticise the Belgian government for not deploying the army to perform border controls during the COVID-19 pandemic (56) – all without explaining how this would have made a difference in practice or how this plan could have been realised. Interestingly, another author of the book, Chris Janssens, quotes himself claiming in Parliament that "many citizens have concluded that the European obsession with open borders" was responsible for the spread of the virus (38),[39] implying that closed borders, one of VB's most central yet also most unrealistic agenda points, would have stopped the pandemic. No scientific evidence for this claim is presented, and the procedures and institutions to be involved in entirely closing the country's borders are never mentioned, resulting in the procedural and institutional simplification typical for populist discourse. In a sarcastically positive characterisation, the book blames "our beautiful world without borders" (29)[40] for bringing COVID-19 to Belgium. Clearly, VB aims to present its usual agenda points as commonsensical solutions to the pandemic, without explaining in any significant depth how these measures would provide tangible benefits or how they could be executed in practice. The style of this promotional discourse is simplistic, most evidently in its omission of any technical explanations with regard to the implementation of the policies in question, while nonetheless claiming that establishment politicians outright refused to take these seemingly obvious measures.

The Belgian political system, and especially its composition of regional governments and a federal government, is discredited as inefficient throughout the book, and is even presented as the root cause for Belgium's alleged mismanagement of the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis. When describing the measures taken in the first weeks of March 2020, the book targets various ministers and officials, sarcastically calling them "important" (47) people who failed to see what regular people had already noticed long ago. This is already a clear signal of a populist epistemology: the authors claim that regular citizens' common sense trumps the intellect of establishment politicians. The authors also quite explicitly devalue Belgium's administrative complexity and present complicated procedures and divisions of competences as bureaucratic red tape that only slows down the decision-making process. To that end, the authors quote a press release from VB in which party member Dominiek Sneppe states the following:

> This blame game makes clear that the so-called "cooperative federalism" is not working and that it can even be damaging to our health. After the crisis, Flanders must have homogeneous competences, in order to develop effective healthcare and to be able to act forcefully (48).[41]

Once again, these calls for reform and claims of increasing efficiency through redistributions of responsibilities into "homogeneous competences" at the regional level are core agenda points for VB, but they are not substantiated with concrete policy proposals or procedural reforms. The authors suggest that VB would provide strong and effective leadership, but do not substantiate their claims.

The authors also repeatedly highlight Belgium's administrative complexity: "In this country, with its inefficient structures, one could almost predict that things should go wrong [with contact tracing for COVID-19 infections]" (111).[42] The authors also blame miscommunications between different governmental levels and between officials for the confusion surrounding COVID-19 restrictions in residential care centres (104), and they wonder, "Did the fact that elderly care is a regional competence cause the [residential care centres] to be neglected?" (107)[43] By making this suggestion, the authors imply that politicians at the federal level either deliberately sabotage or complicate politics at the regional level, further fomenting distrust towards Belgian politicians and the Belgian federal structure. The same goes for their claim that Sophie Wilmès' interim government "eliminated all monitoring … and transparency" by allegedly reserving the right to use any means necessary to halt the pandemic, "which has not been seen since World War II" (123)[44] and which resulted in an "insane system" (125).[45] Again, the book claims that 'the inefficient Belgian state structure has severely hampered our management of the corona crisis,' and specifically that 'deliberations between regional and federal institutions' (126)[46] slowed down the decision-making process, once more implying that VB's push for defederalisation of competences (and preferably total secession for Flanders), as explained in its election programme (Vlaams Belang, 2019), would be a simple solution for the administrative confusion complicating the Belgian approach to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ironically, the book accuses other parties of using the COVID-19 crisis for political gain (119), while the book is, in itself, intended to exploit the crisis to delegitimise and discredit VB's political opponents, scientists and the Belgian federal system, and at the same time, promote VB's own agenda points. This is followed by a quote from VB's president, Tom Van Grieken, who stated that "Vlaams Belang supports the people, but not this government," that other politicians "should be ashamed of themselves," that Sophie Wilmès "publicly humiliated [literally: pulled the pants off] the largest party in the country, good for one million votes" and that the establishment "cast Flanders aside" (122).[47] Clearly, shame, humiliation, anger and neglect feature prominently in Van Grieken's speech and are indicative of the emotional appeal of VB's discourse, but the key here is that Van Grieken positions VB as the sole representative and protector of the Flemish people. The authors then argue that the recent call for the re-federalisation of competences by political opponents is inefficient, self-serving and opportunistic, while lamenting the Flemish monetary transfers towards Wallonia and alleging that Wallonia is freeriding on Flanders' purported financial efficiency (128). Re-federalisation is called "theft by the country's southern region" (128).[48] The book concludes that "the inefficiency of the Belgian state structure, along with the failing policies of incumbent Ministers, has cost lives" and that Belgium is a "failed state" (131).[49] Hence, the authors argue, Flanders must become autonomous and should no longer be Belgium's "prisoner" (132). Belgium is "a leaking ship" that "cannot be held afloat," (133) as allegedly evidenced by the COVID-19 crisis.[50] Again, while clearly hostile in tone, the purpose of such discourse is to advocate for VB's core agenda points, present VB as a protector of the people and argue for strong leadership and sweeping yet unrealistic reforms. The call for Flemish inde-

pendence in the book is evident, regardless of the practical complexity of such a process, and through promotional discourse, defederalisation is presented as the ultimate solution to all the problems of the COVID-19 crisis.

5   Conclusion: COVID-19 as a Crisis of Governance?

This paper shows that VBb uses the *CBB* to perform crisis, and specifically, to first personally attack establishment politicians and scientists via destructive discourse and then present simplistic solutions and (unrealistically) strong leadership via promotional discourse, in order to advocate for its usual agenda points and main distinguishing policies: a more punitive justice system, less immigration, closed borders and defederalisation of governmental competences (i.e. a transfer of competences from the federal to the regional level). The *CBB* is clearly written in the typically populist everyman style: the book uses crude jokes and insults, simplifies complex processes, proposes strong leadership and sweeping reforms, regularly deploys sarcasm and irony to mock its opponents and invokes feelings of humiliation, powerlessness and anger. Through such unusual and extraordinary language, the party reinforces its uniqueness and exceptional position in the Belgian political landscape.

Interestingly, VB blames the Belgian federal structure for the mismanagement of the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, arguing that an independent Flanders would have managed the crisis more efficiently. In that sense, it can be argued that the central purpose of the book is to shift the COVID-19 crisis from a public health crisis to a crisis of governance. Moreover, the authors claim that redistributing federal competences is the only solution to the complexity that exacerbated the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium; however, this redistribution is a simplistic solution that is exceptionally difficult to execute in practice. By reframing the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis of governance, the party can exploit the COVID-19 crisis even when its salience in the public debate dissipates. This discursive shift from one form of crisis to another is a typical way of propagating the performance of crisis and maintaining a sense of crisis among the population (Moffitt, 2015).

The *CBB* specifically targets Marc Van Ranst, Flanders' most prominent virologist, who is openly left leaning. The authors go as far as calling him and establishment politicians criminals responsible for thousands of deaths (59), and argue that they should be brought before a tribunal (117). In the eyes of VB, any failure by a politician or scientist is a consequence of malice, and the authors often hint at deeper, more insidious motives. These insinuations come together in the Sinocommunist-scientist conspiracy theory suggested in the book. Through unsourced and unconfirmed claims, the authors cast doubt on the scientific consensus regarding the origins of the virus and the motives of virologists in Belgium. The dangers of such implications became clear in May 2021, when a Belgian soldier and far-right extremist associated with VB stole automatic weapons and rocket launchers from a military base, threatening to attack 'the regime' and kill the virologist Marc Van Ranst, before disappearing into the woods, prompting a

large-scale manhunt that ended with the rogue soldier being found dead (Bosschaerts & Mariotti, 2021; Verstraete, 2021).

5.1 Theoretical and empirical implications

This paper has a number of theoretical implications for research on populism and crisis. First, it proposes to differentiate between destructive and promotional discourse as two distinct types of discourse in the performance of crisis. The differentiation between these types allows for a more fine-grained analysis of populist discourse and of the steps of crisis performance by bringing Moffitt's largely content-focused steps of crisis performance down to the level of discourse. It links crisis performance to the actual language used by populists. This contribution will allow future research to better identify how populists exploit crises to both criticise others and promote themselves. Second, the paper also shows that Moffitt's sixth step of crisis performance – the continuation of one crisis by shifting it to another or by expanding its scope – may be used to 'reverse-engineer' crises: instead of using an acute crisis (such as COVID-19) to fabricate another crisis, populists may aim to integrate the acute crisis into their own pre-existing fabricated sense of permanent crisis, with the former only being a surface-level symptom of the latter. In the case of VB, one could argue that the *CBB*, instead of *shifting* the COVID-19 crisis, actually *integrates* one crises into another: the party has fostered a sense of permanent governance crisis for decades, and paints the COVID-19 crisis as just another symptom of that governance crisis, allowing the sense of crisis generated by COVID-19 to resonate further. Further research could determine whether that phenomenon is unique to populism's (or VB's) response to COVID-19 in particular, or whether other empirical examples could be found of such reverse-engineering. Third, this paper links the performance of crisis to the populist discursive style, most notably its use of sarcasm, simplification and crude insults. In doing so, it has shown that the populist everyman style can be taken on board in an analysis of crisis performance. By linking populist stylistic elements to the performance of crisis, the paper has demonstrated that content and form in populist discourse – or substance and style – can reinforce one another, but also that both aspects, in some cases, cannot be considered in isolation, especially if sarcasm and jokes are involved. More broadly, the paper opens the way for further analysis of the strategic purpose of the populist style, which, in turn, is deeply intertwined with the populist claim of representing 'the people': to reinforce the idea that a populist actor represents regular people, the actor may use a discursive style that resembles that of regular people. Further research could examine whether this pattern of what one could call 'popular replication' – imitating regular people for electoral gain – can be detected in other aspects of populist discourse as well.

The paper also makes empirical contributions to research on populism and crisis. It offers a descriptive case study of how a populist party performs crisis in general and the COVID-19 crisis in particular. It found that the *CBB* deploys destructive discourse to explicitly attack VB's political opponents, uses promotional discourse to advocate for VB's usual policies and shifts the COVID-19 crisis from one of public health to one of governance. The case study therefore corrobo-

rates previous research on the relation between populism and crisis, and, specifically, several aspects of Moffitt's crisis performance framework (2015). Although populism and crisis have a context-dependent relationship, the paper's findings may imply that, regardless of context, populists will try to spin crisis into a political narrative that fits their agenda – in other words, while the *outcome* of populist exploitation of crisis may vary, the *intent* of exploitation may not. Further research would be necessary to corroborate or disprove this claim. Likewise, more empirical research would be useful to discover whether the nature of the crisis (financial, political, public health, etc.) changes populists' strategies of exploitation. With regard to VB's relation to crisis in general, the paper has shown that the party clearly aims to exploit the COVID-19 crisis, but does so largely by shifting the COVID-19 crisis to a crisis of governance. This could be a useful avenue for further research, because it may reveal a broader tendency within VB to exploit national crises for political gain through 'crisis shifting' (from any form of crisis towards a crisis of governance), which arguably runs counter to its claims that it is only concerned with the well-being of the Flemish people. It would also be interesting to investigate the performance of crisis in VB's social media discourse, as the party has a significant presence on various social media platforms. Within Belgium's broader political context, this paper reveals how VB uses crisis performance to trace back governmental mistakes in crisis situations to administrative complexity, thereby discrediting Belgium's political system and the cordon sanitaire that has long barred the party from governing. The *CBB* can therefore be seen as part of the party's longer term strategy of delegitimising Belgian democracy through attacks on political opponents, and ultimately, of building a case for Flemish independence, even though nothing indicates that secession would have helped the Belgian or Flemish government to tackle COVID-19.

Notes

1 https://t.me/s/vlbelang.
2 Within the Flemish context, Vlaams Belang's radically anti-pluralist discourse (entailing the rejection of any and all dissenting opinions) distinguishes the party from other right-wing parties such as N-VA, which is not as far to the right on the political spectrum, and from left-wing populist parties such as PVDA, which is populist but, by contrast, pluralist in its approach to politics (Meijen et al., 2021; Pestieau & Logghe, 2019)
3 "De dictatuur van de multiculturele politieke correctheid."
4 For each direct quote from the *CBB*, the page number in the book is included between brackets and the original Dutch quote is included in the footnotes.
5 "Men slaagde er zelfs in om deze gezondheidscrisis te misbruiken om een regering in het zadel te helpen zonder enige democratische legitimiteit."
6 "In geen geval moeten we aanvaarden dat deze ministers wegkomen met het wraakroepende gebricoleer van de voorbije maanden."
7 "... we mogen ervan uitgaan dat [Maggie De Block] ook dit advies nooit heeft gelezen. Wat achteraf bekeken heel jammer is."

8   "Maar helaas, dat was buiten Maggie De Block gerekend!"
9   "Wat is het nut van dit Parlement als de minister gewoon kan weigeren om te ant-woorden op onze vragen? Dan kunnen we deze dure poppenkast evengoed afschaf-fen."
10   "Vulgaire leugens", "fake news".
11   "Hoeveel verdriet heeft hun eenzame lijden en levenseinde niet veroorzaakt bij hun machteloze familie en vrienden?"
12   "De excellentie", "politieke huilbui", "winterslaap", "postje".
13   "De emmer der vernederingen".
14   "zodat iedereen die geen Belgisch Defensieminister is zich onmiddellijk zou afvragen wat daarvan de reden is".
15   "Het werd al snel duidelijk dat vragen van parlementsleden bij deze gang van zaken ongewenst waren".
16   "Anti-Vlaamse attitude".
17   "Fransdolle furie" – the precise meaning of the term is not immediately clear in the Dutch version.
18   "Ze toonde doorheen de coronacrisis eerder het charisma van een straatmus", "scha-bouwelijk … carnaval-Nederlands".
19   "Agressief Franstalig imperialisme rond Brussel".
20   "Voor iemand die Vlamingen minacht en verafschuwt moet het waarlijk niet eenvou-dig zijn om nu als premier af en toe een verplichte poging te doen om de wonderzoete Vlaamse taal te spreken".
21   "Aangeboren arrogantie … Als een betrapt klein kind ging de eerste minister dan maar stuurs voor zich uitkijken", "een gebrek aan opvoeding" (another possible translation is "due to not being raised right"), "dit soort onbeschoftheden en dit soort wangedrag horen niet thuis in het halfrond", "Zoals het coronavirus hier de volksgezondheid aan-tastte, zo heeft de regering-Wilmès ook het laatste beetje wat hier nog over was aan democratie aangetast".
22   "'*sterke Jan*' Jambon,", "halfslachtig en uiterst zwak", "politiek leiderschap".
23   "Zorgden … voor een ideale COVID-19-broeihaard".
24   "Maar soms zou men domme mensen toch wat beter tegen zichzelf moeten bescher-men".
25   "Een dwaze en betreurenswaardige, maar geenszins verbazingwekkende houding wan-neer men weet dat Jimmy Geurts de echtgenoot is van toenmalig Open VLD-voorzit-ter Gwendolyn Rutten … Het verstand zit daar blijkbaar in de familie".
26   "Machtshongerige N-VA", "een oude aap", "zulke politieke machtsgreep is door geen enkele crisis te verantwoorden".
27   "Linkse en Franstalige politieke spelletjes".
28   "Onvoorstelbaar smerige voedsel- en dierenmarkten aldaar … Op deze locaties is wer-kelijk alles aanwezig om om het even welk virus welig te laten tieren … [Het is] hoege-naamd niet zeker dat COVID-19 zijn oorsprong vindt in het culinaire genot van een gerookte vleermuis of een gemarineerd schubdier".
29   "Menselijke fouten, onwetendheid, pech, idiote beslissingen en vooral kwaadwillig stilzwijgen".
30   "Onvergeeflijk", "dodelijk advies", "dragen een zware verantwoordelijkheid".
31   "De Chinese propagandamachine die de WHO geworden is".

32 "Hij heeft immers geen breed maatschappelijk draagvlak".

33 "Marc Van Ranst is zodanig veel aanwezig op de sociale media en in tv-programma's dat men zich de vraag dient te stellen wanneer hij nog eens in zijn labo aanwezig is."

34 "Naast Noord-Korea is er geen enkel land waarin de bevolking zoveel wordt onthouden, verzwegen, en achtergehouden als in dit landje".

35 "Acht men de bevolking gewoon te infantiel en te achterlijk om documenten gelezen te krijgen? … Of moeten we de geheimdoenerij zien als een poging om de mensen niet te laten panikeren? Misschien de reden waarom viroloog Van Ranst wekenlang onwaarheden verkocht? … Of heeft men schrik dat er nog lijken uit de kast zullen vallen? Zoals in het geval van Maggie De Block en de vernietigde mondmaskers? Geheimen roepen vragen op. En al dat achterbakse, heimelijke, geniepige gedoe creëert vanzelfsprekend een gezond wantrouwen in de regering. En in de zogenaamde experten…".

36 "Het beleid werd lakser, terwijl een zachte aanpak uiteraard alleen maar meer en hardere criminaliteit oplevert".

37 "Als ik het tempo zie waarin minister Geens massaal gedetineerden vrijlaat, zelfs terroristen, meen ik dat u beter massaal kogelvrije vesten kan bestellen om onze burgers te beschermen dan mondmaskers die toch veel te laat geleverd worden".

38 "Een jarenlang falend terugkeerbeleid … een heus leger illegalen", "de linkerzijde stond die dagen niet zozeer voor de zorgverleners te applaudisseren, maar eerder voor de vrijlating van deze illegalen".

39 "Een vaststelling van veel burgers is dat de Europese obsessie met de open grenzen aanzienlijk heeft bijgedragen aan de snelle verspreiding van de ziekte over ons continent".

40 "Onze mooie wereld zonder grenzen".

41 "Het zwarte pieten aan elkaar doorgeven is een bewijs dat het zogezegde 'samenwerkingsfederalisme' niet werkt en zelfs schadelijk kan zijn voor de gezondheid. Na de crisis moet Vlaanderen homogene bevoegdheden krijgen, zodat we een degelijke gezondheidszorg kunnen ontwikkelen, maar ook krachtdadig kunnen optreden".

42 "In dit land met zijn inefficiënte structuren kon bijna voorspeld worden dat het ook op dit vlak moest mislopen".

43 "Speelde het feit dat de ouderenzorg een gewestelijke bevoegdheid is mee in de stiefmoederlijke behandeling door de federale regering van de voorzieningen?"

44 "Dat was sinds WO II ongezien".

45 "Waanzinnig systeem".

46 "Oeverloos overleg tussen regionale en federale instanties".

47 "Vlaams Belang staat aan de kant van de bevolking maar niet aan de kant van de regering", "u zou zich moeten schamen", "u hebt zelfs de grootste partij van dit land, ook goed voor 1 miljoen stemmen, publiekelijk de broek afgedaan", "zette Vlaanderen aan de kant".

48 "Diefstallen richting het zuiden van het land".

49 "De verrommeling en de inefficiëntie van de Belgische staatsstructuur, gekoppeld aan het falend beleid van bevoegde ministers, heeft mensenlevens gekost", "*failed-state*"

50 "Het lekkende Belgische schip is echter niet meer drijvend te houden".

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The Praise for a 'Caretaker' Leader

Gendered Press Coverage of Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès in a COVID-19 Context

Clémence Deswert[*]

Abstract

Studies on media coverage of women politicians have underlined how the media contribute to the association of the figure of the political leader with masculinity. Yet, the social construction of leadership seems to evolve towards a more 'femininity-inclusive' definition. Research on the 'glass cliff' phenomenon suggests that stereotypical feminine attributes might be expected from political leaders in a time of crisis. We investigated the gendered construction of political leadership in the press in a COVID-19 context through the case of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès. In line with the 'think crisis-think female' association, our discourse analysis shows an appreciation of traditionally feminine traits, and particularly care-related qualities, in the evaluation of what a 'good' leader should be in pandemic times, although some characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity are still considered valuable assets in the journalistic portrayal of Wilmès' leadership.

Keywords: political leadership, crisis, care, Belgium, gendered media coverage.

1 Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in politics has been the object of constant concern in the public debate and the academic sphere. Research has investigated the multiple factors restraining women's participation in public life, as well as examined the relative influence they have gained in democratic institutions in the last two decades. In general, scholars in gender and politics have approached the political representation of women through Pitkin's conceptualisation (1967) and the three dimensions of representation: descriptive, substantive and symbolic. *Descriptive representation* refers to the extent to which the representatives' characteristics reflect the social composition of the represented group and is therefore understood as the number of women in political institutions such as parliaments, governments and political parties, while *substantive representation* has to do with the extent to which representatives, and particularly women

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politicians, are likely to 'act for' women in their political activities (Wängnerud, 2009). The third aspect is *symbolic representation*, defined by Pitkin as the emotions and attitudes developed by the represented group towards the representatives, implying "that the people accept or believe that the political leaders represent them" (1967: 102). As stressed by Lombardo and Meier, the notion remains "at the same time broad and understudied by scholars in gender and politics, and in politics more broadly speaking" (2014: 3). Gender and politics research has engaged with the notion of symbolic representation in various ways, but in general, existing literature discusses the social significance of women's presence in politics, the perception of their role and the way their performances are assessed in this masculine bastion.

In this context, mediatic discourse has been considered a privileged ground to study gender construction in the sense that if media suggest frames to guide citizens in their interpretation of events (Gamson, 1992; Goffman, 1974), they can convey a certain conception of women's and men's role in society. As a result, an important literature, both in political science and communication studies, is devoted to the analysis of how female politicians are represented in the media, often in comparison to their male counterparts (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020), and more broadly to "the manner in which the mediated presentation of politics is gendered" (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996: 112). Most of the analyses have focused on election candidates to legislative office or incumbent parliamentarians and to a lesser extent to candidates to executive functions (Murray, 2010). The coverage of women at the head of a government or a political party have been less studied, certainly because their presence at this level remains marginal in most countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2020). In addition, few studies have considered gendered media coverage in terms of political leadership (Aaldering & Van der Pas, 2020: 914), and an important part of the existing work consists of quantitative content analysis, leaving less room for a qualitative approach to the analysis of gender in press coverage (Adcock, 2010).

Building a theoretical framework based on literature on mediatised political leadership and the gendered construction of the concept, we intend to study the gendered construction of political leadership in the press in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, through the case of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès. Indeed, we consider that this crisis constitutes an opportunity to test the 'think crisis-think female' theory (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno, 2011), understood as the idea that stereotypically feminine traits are expected from leaders in a time of crisis since Sophie Wilmès had to face two crises during her mandate. She was appointed Prime minister at the head of a minority *caretaker* government in the context of a long political crisis in October 2019 and had to manage the COVID-19 pandemic a few months later.

We conducted a discourse analysis based on a selection of articles published in the Belgian French-language press during Wilmès' mandate, to investigate the potential influence of the COVID-19 crisis context on the gendered construction of political leadership. In line with the 'think crisis-think female' association (Ryan et al., 2011), we found an appreciation of traditionally feminine traits, and particularly *care*-related qualities, in the evaluation of what a 'good' leader should

be in pandemic times, although some characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity are still considered valuable assets in the journalistic portrayal of Wilmès' leadership.

The paper will proceed as follows. We will begin by reviewing the literature on political leadership, gender and the media, to build our hypotheses. Next, we will present the Belgian case and explain the method employed to construct a selection of relevant press articles and analyse them in-depth. We will conclude with suggestions for further research.

2 Talking Political Leadership in the Media

2.1 The Personalisation of Leadership

What is political leadership? The answer to this question is not obvious. Indeed, when studying political leadership, one will be faced at the same time with the difficulty to define an "indefinable" and "essentially contested concept" (Elgie, 1995: 2), and the flexibility to fill the concept with the meaning that is the most appropriate for the research. In this regard, one of the approaches adopted has been to identify leadership character dimensions, understood as the definition of characteristics leaders possess or should possess in the eyes of voters. There have been various theorisations of political leaders' characteristics (Funk, 1999; Kinder, 1986), but Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016) tried to find a common ground among existing literature and conceptualised six leadership traits: political craftsmanship, vigorousness, integrity, responsiveness, communicative performances and consistency. Their conceptualisation is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the consideration of political leadership through personality traits appears very relevant in contemporary politics, since leaders and their personality have gained increasing significance in the eyes of voters (Costa Lobo & Curtice, 2014), a phenomenon Blondel and Thiébault (2009) labelled "the personalisation of leadership." Secondly, Aaldering and Vliegenthart's framework (2016) was established to allow for the conduct of empirical analyses of the construction of leadership images in media content. In this perspective, political communication, including mass media, has proved to be influential in the personalisation of leadership (Garzia, 2011).

2.2 Gender Effect on Leadership Images in the Media

The personalisation of political leadership, as well as its mediatisation, is not without implications regarding gender. Indeed, studies on leadership gender stereotypes have stressed the association of leadership with masculinity. Men are perceived as agentic (assertive, competitive, decisive), while women are seen as communal (kind, warm, compassionate); and the former characteristics are considered the most suitable for a leader, so that "conceptions of leadership hardly ever strayed into feminine territory" (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011). Consequently, women politicians, and women leaders in other traditionally male-powered domains, have often faced a "femininity/competence double bind" (Jamieson, 1995: 120). On the one hand, when they perform stereotypical mascu-

line traits to try to conform to the behaviour expected from them as politicians, they take the risk of being accused of betraying societal expectations of femininity. On the other hand, the performance of stereotypically feminine traits by women politicians can be regarded as a failure to conform to a male-driven normative environment and raise doubts about their competence and credibility. This congruence between political leadership and traditional male characteristics seems to be even stronger when it comes to executive political leadership so that the constraint of being perceived as 'too masculine' or 'too feminine' might particularly affect women candidates to executive office (Murray, 2010). Furthermore, Lakoff (1975) identified a double bind in language affecting women speakers: taking distance from the so-called 'women's language' might be labelled as a 'not feminine enough' attitude, while women embracing it might face difficulties to be taken seriously. One of the most important consequences of these double binds for women politicians is a permanent conscious or subconscious adaptation of their communicative attitudes and gender-marked discursive strategies to the circumstances, for example, by avoiding an emotional style to not be targeted as 'too sensitive' to handle public affairs or by privileging more stereotypical feminine references when they try to appeal to a feminine electorate (Charteris-Black, 2009; Mukhortov & Malyavina, 2019).

Media have contributed to the gendered conception of political leadership, by using certain gender frames in their coverage of politicians. Media discourses have focused more on women politicians' gender, family lives and appearance than on the ones of their male colleagues, suggesting a 'gendered mediation' of politics (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999). In their analysis of gender bias in Dutch newspapers reporting, Aaldering and Van der Pas (2020) found that female politicians were less discussed in terms of leadership traits than their male colleagues and that the attributions of these characteristics followed gender stereotypes, with men receiving much more media coverage in terms of political craftsmanship and vigorousness. While Ross claimed that "little has actually changed since the early days of researching the relationship between women, politics and media in the 1990s" (2017: 56), other scholars argued that persistent stereotyping has in fact stood alongside praises on the breakthrough embodied by female leaders or denunciation of sexism (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Trimble, 2018). Recent contributions have stressed that coverage remains gendered but include reports of a more positive tone in the evaluations of women politicians (Thomas, Harell, Rijkhoff & Gosselin, 2020) and less stereotyping through time, showing "the power of symbolic representation to increasingly normalise women's presence in powerful political positions" (Trimble et al., 2021: 166).

3 Women as Suitable Crisis Managers?

Although political leadership has been traditionally associated with masculinity, the evolution towards a leadership style that includes more stereotypical feminine attributes has been suggested by scholars. The general complexification of society has allowed for a more *transformational* leadership (Bass, 1985), a form of

leadership based on a consensual and empowering relationship between leaders and followers (Campus, 2013: 19). Since it requires more 'communal' qualities, this type of leadership has been associated with women leaders (Stempel et al., 2015), and presented as a "tool for closing the leadership gender gap" (Campus, 2013: 20).

Scholars working on leadership gender stereotypes have also called for context to be taken into consideration, by suggesting an "extension of this line of research into specific organisational settings in which the influence of contextual effects can be examined" (Powell, Butterfield & Parent, 2002: 190). Among other examples, a perspective has focused on crisis contexts as opportunities for a renewal in the gendered construction of the concept and a challenge of the so-called 'think manager-think male' association (Schein, 1975). Studies have provided evidence that stereotypically feminine traits could be expected from leaders in a time of crisis (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Ryan et al. (2011) referred to this association as the 'think crisis-think female' relation, while Gartzia, Ryan, Balluerka and Aritzeta (2012) also evoked a "'think crisis–think in a stereotypically feminine way of leading' relationship" (604). This possibility was investigated for the first time in organisational psychology by Ryan and Haslam (2005; 2007) in their study of a phenomenon they called "glass cliff," defined as the idea that women are nominated at leadership positions when organisations face difficult times, and the risk of failure is higher. In a second step, Ryan, Haslam and Kulich (2010) tried to verify this hypothesis in politics, by showing that women candidates were preferred to contest hard-to-win seats in the 2005 UK general election. Several contributions also suggested that some nominations or elections of women at high political positions in the last decades might have reflected the 'glass cliff' phenomenon, such as the appointments of Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence, first women to become State Premiers in Australia and appointed "after their party had been exposed to humiliating scandals" (Haslam & Ryan, 2005: 88), or Angela Merkel, who became CDU's first female leader in 2000 after the party's financial scandal debacle (Petitfils, 2013: 389). More recently, the case of Theresa May, nominated as United Kingdom Prime minister following the Brexit referendum, has been raised (Kulich & Ryan, 2017), as well as the appointment in 2020 of Dominique Anglade, first woman at the head of Quebec Liberal Party and first black woman at the head of a political party in Quebec, in the pandemic context and following an important loss of the Liberals at the 2018 Quebec general election (Lalancette & Pilote, 2020). This latter example is especially interesting considering that the 'glass cliff' might also affect ethnic minorities (Kulich, Ryan & Haslam, 2014).

Lastly, the identification of crises as opportunities for the evolution towards a femininity-inclusive leadership has been discussed in contributions dealing with the idea that women leaders could have been more 'successful' in the COVID-19 crisis management (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021; Johnson & Williams, 2020). Although the project of determining whether women heads of State or government managed the crisis better is subject to caution, it is interesting to note that these texts considered the performance of "a clear, empathetic, interpersonal, and decisive communication style" (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021:

415), as well as the "motherly feelings of caring, empathy and compassion" (Johnson & Williams, 2020: 945) of women leaders to be a possible factor for the enthusiasm their leadership has brought. In particular, Johnson and Williams (2020) state that the COVID-19 crisis "has opened up particular opportunities for perceived everyday feminine traits in the private sphere to be valued in women leaders, including by the media" (944) and that "there is a clear need for further analyses, including into the question of whether problematic gender stereotypes have been reinforced during the pandemic or whether conceptions of good leadership are now more inclusive of traditionally feminine traits" (948). This paper intends to contribute to the discussion of these issues by examining how political leadership was constructed in the press in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

4   Research Question and Hypotheses

To investigate the 'think crisis-think female' theory (Ryan et al., 2011) in media coverage of political leadership in the context of COVID-19, the question raised in this article is whether stereotypical feminine traits have been considered characteristics that a 'good' leader should possess during this crisis. We examine this question by studying the construction of political leadership in the portrayal of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès in the Belgian French-language daily press. Sophie Wilmès was appointed Prime minister in October 2019, when political parties were struggling to form a regular federal government, then had to manage the COVID-19 pandemic until a regular government was formed in October 2020. Both her nomination as Prime minister and the way her government handled the COVID-19 crisis were particularly well documented in the media, including in the daily press. We believe that this intense media scrutiny, together with the fact that media are important actors in the personalisation of political leadership and its gendered construction, makes the one-year mandate of Wilmès an interesting opportunity to examine the influence of a crisis context in leadership style evaluations.

In line with the 'think crisis-think female' theory (Ryan et al., 2011), which suggests that stereotypical feminine characteristics might be expected from leaders in a time of crisis, we expect Wilmès' performance of traditionally feminine attributes to be presented in the journalistic discourse as fundamental elements to be a 'good leader' in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

5   Belgian Case

Belgium sets an example in the adoption of legislative measures aimed at increasing the presence of women in politics. Laws and decrees, such as the 2002 legislation requiring gender parity on electoral lists, resulted in a rise in the number of women in the different parliaments of the country. Yet, the initiatives taken to promote the presence of women at the executive level were less ambitious. The number of women ministers or secretaries of state certainly increased, but mostly in a smaller proportion than the number of female parliamentarians.

Nonetheless, the federal government has recently showed an important evolution: while it reached only 22.2% of women in 2014, the team that took office in October 2020 became the first egalitarian Belgian federal government in terms of gender parity, and the first government in the European Union to include a transgender person.

Even though Belgium stands out as a pioneer in terms of gender quotas, the country is not as successful when it comes to the appointment of women at the highest positions. Fourteen women have obtained the presidency of a major political party, and only three women have been appointed heads of governments of federated entities. Even more paradoxically, the country waited until 2019 to appoint its first woman Prime Minister, the French-speaking liberal Sophie Wilmès.

Wilmès, who worked as Minister for Budget in the previous government, was appointed Prime Minister on the 27th of October 2019 when the former Prime Minister Charles Michel left for the presidency of the European Council. Her nomination occurred in what could be seen as a 'glass cliff' position since she had to deal with two successive crises. Firstly, in a context of long political crisis, she became head of a minority – since the departure of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA from the coalition government in December 2018 – and *caretaker* – since the legislative elections in May 2019 – government. Her position – well-known in Belgium's recent history (Dandoy & Terrière, 2020) – was therefore seen as temporary, while waiting for a regular government to be constituted. Secondly, four months after her appointment, Sophie Wilmès had to face more unexpected events, with the Covid-19 crisis hitting Belgium in late February 2020. Sophie Wilmès remained Prime Minister until the 1st of October 2020, when a regular government led by the Dutch-speaking liberal Alexander De Croo was formed. Indeed, the minority position of the Flemish political parties in the federal coalition – the two Flemish parties which scored the highest in the 2019 legislative elections, the Flemish nationalist party N-VA and the nationalist far-right party Vlaams Belang, were not included – and the fact that the last three Prime Ministers were French-speaking, made it politically almost impossible to appoint a French-speaking Prime Minister once again. Wilmès has continued to exercise executive functions in this newly formed government, by becoming Belgium's first woman Minister of Foreign Affairs.

6 Research Design and Method

To conduct this research, we selected the six Belgian French-language newspapers with the highest circulation, namely the different press publications from the Sudpresse group (*La Capitale, La Meuse, La Nouvelle Gazette, Nord Éclair, La Province*), *Metro, Le Soir, L'Avenir, La DH/Les Sports+* and *La Libre Belgique* (CIM, 2016). The press titles of the Sudpresse group, whose core content relies on local news items, were gathered since the national news items, and therefore the articles, which are most likely to include information on the Prime minister, are the same in all the titles of the group. This selection of newspapers allows for a bal-

Table 1   *Definition of Aaldering and Vliegenthart's political leadership dimensions (2016)*

Political craftsmanship	Whether the leader knows the norms, rules and power structures related to the political world, has political experience and intelligence
Vigorousness	Whether the leader is decisive, assertive, able to incarnate power and 'leadership' in the strict common-sense definition of the term ('strong leadership' or 'weak leadership')
Integrity	Whether the leader shows concern for the general interest rather than its own personal achievements, acts on an altruist and selfless basis
Responsiveness	Whether the leader is aware of the population's expectations and able to listen to its concerns
Communicative performances	Whether the leader is able to be empathic, kind, to inspire citizens and to communicate clearly to the public, including through the media
Consistency	Whether the leader is reliable and shows continuity or regularity in its viewpoints and actions

ance between 'qualitative' and more 'popular' editorial policies, which we consider one of the most relevant divisions in Belgian media system. Indeed, when it comes to the relationships between political parties and editorial lines, Belgian media have largely taken distance from their old partisan affiliation (Soontjens, 2019). Besides, the selection considers almost all daily newspapers available in the francophone market. To generate a corpus of articles, we used the database Europresse to gather all the articles mentioning the word 'Wilmès' in these newspapers from the 27th of October 2019 (beginning of Wilmès' mandate) to the 1st of October 2020 (end of Wilmès' mandate). Even though we focus on Wilmès' political leadership evaluation in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, we consider discussion on political leadership throughout all her mandate to put our results on the COVID-19 crisis in perspective with the way Wilmès' leadership style was discussed before the outbreak of the pandemic and pinpoint potential specificities of her COVID-19 leadership coverage in terms of gendered leadership traits evaluation. This research led to 2.406 results. We browsed all the articles to have an idea of their content, and only kept the articles directly related to Sophie Wilmès. Indeed, lots of articles mentioned the name of the Prime Minister only once to cover subjects, which were not related to her person or behaviour.

Moreover, to extract the articles contributing to the construction of leadership images, we used the mediatised political leadership dimensions identified by Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016) and their definitions. In Table 1, we provide brief definitions of what these political leadership aspects cover.

The articles could discuss these dimensions both in a positive or a negative way. For instance, when an article described Wilmès as being able to relate to people and communicate with them with empathy, the article was included in the sample because it was linked to the dimension of 'communicative performances'.
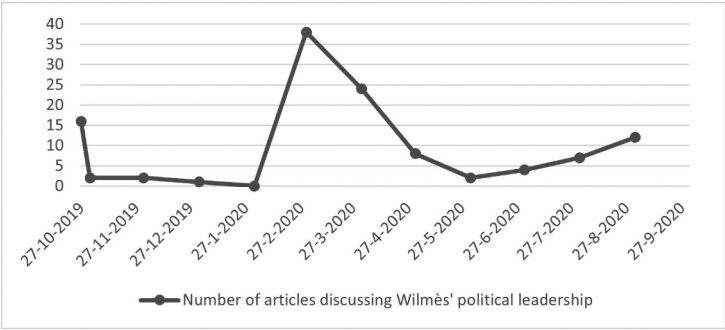
Figure 1   *Evolution of the number of articles discussing Wilmès' political leadership during her mandate*

If an article stated that she lacked experience at the federal level, we included it too because it was related to the leadership dimension 'political craftsmanship'.

This identification of discussion on Sophie Wilmès and political leadership in newspapers led to the isolation of 112 articles. National newspaper *Le Soir* is the most important provider, with 40 articles, followed by the *L'Avenir* (21), Sud-presse newspapers (20), *La DH/Les Sports+* (19) and *La Libre Belgique* (14). Only two articles are from *Metro*, which might be explained by the fact that *Metro* is a free newspaper opting for short factual articles rather than extensive reports. There is variation in the amount of newspapers coverage of Wilmès' political leadership style throughout her mandate. Her appointment is a moment of intense media coverage, as well as the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in March. Then, the number of articles decreases but there are still lots of them as Wilmès appears regularly in the media to speak to the population and conducts weekly press conferences held by the Belgian National Security Council (Figure 1).

To study the gendered construction of political leadership, we decided to analyse how stereotypical feminine attributes, as well as stereotypical masculine attributes, associated with Wilmès' leadership style were considered by journalists through her mandate, and particularly in the context of her management of the COVID-19 crisis. To do so, we first had to clarify what a 'stereotypical feminine attribute' and a 'stereotypical masculine attribute' are. Drawing on earlier studies to define a clear line between perceived femininity and masculinity in the news was not straightforward, given that studies on media coverage of politicians can sometimes have slightly different definition of what a traditionally 'feminine' or a traditionally 'masculine' trait is. We decided to refer to the meta-analysis conducted by Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) because it has the advantage to include general conclusions based on the analysis of various studies on gendered media coverage in terms of characteristics. In Table 2, we resume which traits are perceived as traditionally 'female' and which are perceived as traditionally 'male' in Van der Pas and Aaldering's meta-analysis.

Once we had identified articles involving discussion on Sophie Wilmès' political leadership, and determined the gendered character of political leadership traits, we could analyse their content in-depth to study the gendered construction

Table 2   *Gendered perception of traits in studies on gendered media coverage of politicians*

Stereotypical feminine traits	Stereotypical masculine traits
Communal qualities	Agentic qualities
Passive, dependent, noncompetitive, gentle, weak leader, emotional, compassionate, affectionate, kind, honest, warm, attractive, honest, altruistic, unintelligent, uninformed, friendly, helpful, nurturant, sensitive	Tough, independent, competitive, ambitious, objective, unemotional, dominant, aggressive, strong leader, assertive, knowledgeable, effective, untrustworthy, dishonest, decisive, self-confident, intelligent

Note: The characteristics which do not belong to one of the two above categories are considered gender-neutral in our analysis.

of political leadership. In line with research using discourse analysis to study gender mediation in media coverage (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Wright & Holland, 2014), we consider journalistic discourse as a social and cultural construct reflecting power structures in society, and the discourse on politics as a social construction involving three discursive actors: journalists themselves, politicians and public opinion (Neveu, 1997: 27). As we intend to examine the influence of the COVID-19 crisis context on political leadership construction, we paid particular attention to consider not only the texts themselves but the links between the articles, to properly connect a certain conception of political leadership – which emerges from these articles – with its social and political context.

7   Results

7.1 The Beginning of the Crisis and the Mother of the Nation

We identified three main stages in the construction of Wilmès' leadership style in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The first period covers what can be considered the first weeks of the Covid-19 crisis in Belgium. Indeed, on the 1st of March, a second coronavirus case is identified in the country. Throughout March, the number of cases kept increasing and on the 12th of March, the federal government announced, through its Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès, the closure of schools, restaurants, cafés and the prohibition of a range of public and private activities. Five days later, lockdown is finally announced. From that moment, the National Security Council organised almost every week a press conference to inform Belgians on measures taken to deal with the pandemic. The leaders of federated entities – the Ministers-Presidents of Regions and Communities – were invited to participate in the meetings of the National Security Council and to the press conference but the Prime minister remained the main speaker, announcing the outlines of the agenda related to the crisis management. A first consequence of this large visibility in the media was the focus on a particular leadership dimension in the press during this period: Wilmès' communicative performances.

Our analysis of the discussion on Wilmès' leadership style during this first stage of the pandemic management showed that characteristics socially associated with femininity, such as her empathy, emotion, humility, humanity, kind-

ness, sincerity, altruism and nurturance, were presented as particularly valuable and appreciated assets to deal with the pandemic. For instance, *La Meuse* (18 March 2020) indicated that she spoke to the population with "a lot of calm, emotion and empathy." *Le Soir* editorial writer in chief (16 March 2020) considered that "the serious and empathetic tone as well as the great humility displayed by the Prime minister aroused respect and trust" and added that "it is time to show modesty, to put the testosterone on ice."

Moreover, some articles referred to motherhood or parenthood when covering Wilmès' communicative skills, describing her as "a Mother of the nation," and praising her "maternal tone, rigorous but benevolent" (*La DH/Les Sports+*, 29 March 2020). Surprisingly, some of the traits underlined by journalists to question Wilmès' leadership at the time of her appointment as Prime Minister were framed in a positive manner at the first stage of her COVID-19 crisis management. For instance, while her perceived lack of experience and discretion raised concern when she was nominated at the head of the federal government – some newsmakers writing that she might be perceived 'too discreet' and that she has to "convince, particularly in Flanders, that she has what it takes for the job" (*Le Soir*, 28 October 2019) –, these same inexperience and discretion seem to participate to the perception of Wilmès as a 'good leader' in the context of the pandemic. The editor-in-chief of *La Meuse* (18 March 2020) considered the announcement of lockdown by Wilmès to be "a 'made in Belgium' pragmatic, benevolent, discreet and human compromise." *Le Soir* (14 March 2020) referred to "the touch of inexperience that made her human, her right tone," and its editorial writer in chief (19 March 2020) stated that "She's too weak for the job? Someone else – a man of course, more experienced, with more electoral legitimacy – would have done better? This is a real lie and a very macho denial of the reality." This positive appreciation of inexperience contrasts with the scepticism of the press regarding her lack of experience at the federal level at the time of her appointment and appears intriguing, given that political experience is normally considered an important trait in 'good leadership' images, as suggested by Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016). Moreover, the experience prerequisite sometimes affects women politicians in particular. For example, experience has been identified as a key requirement for women running for executive offices to succeed, so that "a woman without sufficient experience is unlikely to be credible" (Murray, 2010: 244).

Although stereotypical feminine traits were particularly highlighted and appreciated in the discussion on Wilmès' leadership, we also noted that some of stereotypical masculine attributes, her determination and firmness, were presented as important dimensions in her success to lead the country in the first stage of the pandemic. In fact, Belgian French-language newspapers seemed to argue that Wilmès exercised a new type of leadership, "a Wilmès style, a way of exercising power" (*La Libre*, 21 March 2020), based on the performance of both traditionally masculine traits and traditionally feminine traits. She was perceived as "a soft power-enthusiast," and a journalist explains that "her authority is filled with empathy" (*La Libre*, 21 March 2020). Newspapers agreed that Wilmès' performance during those first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis management was what

made her a strong leader and "end her process of transformation to become a true stateswoman and woman of power" (*La Meuse*, 28 March 2020). Wilmès was considered "to have won her spurs as a Prime minister" (*Le Soir*, 16 March 2020) after taking "a super-accelerated stateswoman class" (*La Meuse*, 18 March 2020). A journalist argued that "the discreet Prime minister of a caretaker government has evolved, in a few days, into a reassuring and charismatic leader" (*La DH/ Les Sports+*, 19 March 2020), while other editors stated that "the transformation of the discreet Prime minister into the leader against the bad coronavirus wasn't easy" (*Le Soir*, 21 March 2020).

This combination of both stereotypical feminine and stereotypical masculine attitudes in a female political leaders' behaviour could reflect the "strategic stereotype theory" (15) conceptualised by Fridkin and Kenney (2014): women politicians might perform a more agentic leadership style to challenge gender stereotypes, while at the same time capitalise on their perceived role as primary caregiver to convince voters. This "balancing act" (Murray, 2010: 225) can be understood as a way for women officeholders to negotiate the "femininity/competence double bind" (Jamieson, 1995: 120) constraining their participation in politics: playing both the agentic and the communal leadership cards allows them to conform to the masculinity of the political arena – and therefore avoid illegitimacy claims – and to ensure the performance of stereotypical feminine qualities traditionally expected from them as women.

Yet, a new insight we wish to highlight is the important focus put by journalists on 'caring' qualities when discussing Wilmès' leadership in the context of the pandemic. Indeed, among the stereotypical feminine characteristics used by journalists to describe Wilmès' leadership style, lots of them are related to the idea of taking *care* of others, by showing compassion, nurturance and other 'caring' attitudes that have traditionally been associated with women's qualities in the private sphere. Gender studies have provided a particularly interesting basis for the analysis of the association of women with 'caring' behaviour through the concept of *care*, which encompasses the idea that women have been primarily socialised with values stressing the importance of taking care of others. This notion, which originated from Gilligan (1982), has known considerable development, including its definition as a socially and historically situated practice unequally distributed between women and men (Tronto, 1993). In politics, Mackay (2001) has suggested that *care* should be considered not only as a burden, which constrains women's participation in politics but also as a "strategic resource" (Mackay, 2001: 5) in political practices, in order "to humanise politics by positioning care as a central political value and promoting associated attributes such as attentiveness, responsibility, connectedness, reciprocity and respect for diversity" (Mackay, 2001: 130).

From the analysis of journalistic discourse during the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium, we can draw that stereotypical feminine characteristics, and particularly *care*-related attributes, are associated with the figure of a 'good leader'. The issue to be addressed now is whether this specific gendered construction of political leadership continues to be reflected by the daily press discourse on Wilmès' leadership style until the end of her mandate.

7.2 The Shift to a More Agentic Style

Firstly, and as a general remark on the evaluation of Wilmès' political leadership by the press, an attentive reading of the article makes clear that the enthusiasm for her communication style is not continuous throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, while in March, her communicative performances received unanimous appreciation, during what we can consider the 'second stage of lockdown', in April, the tone is more nuanced and sometimes negative.

On the 5th of April, Sophie Wilmès spoke to the population through a Facebook video, asking Belgians to keep on following the government's guidelines to limit the spread of the virus. In their coverage of this speech, French-language newspapers seemed to acknowledge a change in communication style, with a more "solemn" (*L'Avenir*, 6 April 2020; *La Meuse*, 7 April 2020) and "presidential style" (*L'Avenir*, 6 April 2020; *Le Soir*, 9 April 2020) embodied by the Prime minister. The 15th of April marks a turning point in the evaluation of Wilmès' political leadership. Stereotypically feminine traits were not used anymore to characterise her leadership style, and her ability to properly meet the expectations of the population was called into question. Criticisms focused on the decision to allow visits in nursing homes and the lack of clarity of her communication, the "first decisional and communicational failure of the Prime minister" (*La Meuse*, 17 April 2020). The National Security Council press conference hold the 24th of April at 10 pm and involved the display of an unclear PowerPoint presentation, which also led to criticisms of Wilmès' communication performances. Besides, articles added that Wilmès is perceived to "lack of charisma" (*L'Avenir*, 18 April 2020; *Le Soir*, 24 April 2020) or "lack or leadership" (*Le Soir*, 16 April 2020; *La Libre*, 17 April 2020; *Le Soir*, 24 April 2020; *La DH/Les Sports+*, 28 April 2020) in the Flemish-speaking part of the country.

7.3 The Mother of the Nation Has Returned

Lastly, a third period, corresponding to the initiation of the end of lockdown, is the opportunity of a 'reviving enthusiasm' for Wilmès' communication performance. From May 2020 approximatively, the analysis of the press discourse on her political leadership reveals that journalists appreciate that her communication style remained similar to what she had shown during the first weeks of the crisis management in March. Personality traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as her empathy and humility, were particularly welcomed and compared to the previous change in her communication style. *Le Soir* (7 May 2020) explained that she "could get back the right tone between a real compassion and her role as representative of the public authority" in comparison to the previous press conferences and speeches when "she had forgotten the human aspect which has forged her particularity" and that further measures would be followed by Belgian citizens "without the irritation caused by a botch communication and the wound of a lack of empathy." For *La DH/Les Sports+* (8 May 2020), the Prime Minister "neglected the human aspect" in her last speeches but "wants to avoid making the same mistakes" by "focusing more on the emotional aspect." One could wonder whether the relational and 'human life-centred' aspect of the crisis, particularly when the focus was put on human losses during the first phases of the pandemic,

has not allowed more room for Wilmès' emotion display to be considered positively. The particular nature of the crisis could have prevented her from being labelled as too 'emotional', a characteristic that has often been put forward to exclude women from the management of public affairs (Falk, 2008; Harp et al., 2016). Furthermore, research showed that men politicians are usually more likely to benefit from the performance of emotion than their female colleagues (Johnson, 2013; Ross, 2017).

Lastly, despite the fact that Wilmès embraced her empathetic side again was positively welcomed by the press, some articles stressed that her political leadership still triggered interrogations in Flanders. On the contrary, French-language newspapers deployed a 'soft' approach to what they considered to be Wilmès' past mistakes, arguing that it would be "too easy" (*L'Avenir*, 26 September 2020) to criticise her. From their perspective, the Prime minister was not the only one to blame and her humility was underlined by journalists, who agreed on the fact that "she could listen to the criticism, fix the guidelines and even apologise" (*Le Soir*, 20 June 2020) and that "at least she never pretended that she was all-knowing" (*L'Avenir*, 26 September 2020). *Le Soir* also stressed that she had to deal with the complexity of the measures "which didn't help" (7 May 2020), that this complexity was even higher given that "she was so alone to deal with it" (24 September 2020), and explicitly defended the Prime minister: "But was it really the Prime minister's fault that measures were muddled? No" (25 September 2020).

8   Conclusion and Further Research

This article aimed to study the gendered construction of political leadership in the press with a contextual perspective and through the case of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès. The expectation was to find an association between stereotypical feminine attributes and the conception of what a 'good leader' is in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, in line with the 'think crisis-think female' relationship (Ryan et al., 2011). Drawing from the discourse analysis we conducted, we can conclude that this hypothesis is generally verified. The analysis revealed an important focus on stereotypical feminine attributes in the evaluation of Wilmès' leadership in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The analysis showed that attributes traditionally considered feminine were considered to play an important part in the figure of a 'good leader' in pandemic times. Indeed, at the end of February and through March, these stereotypical feminine characteristics were intensively used by journalists to discuss Wilmès' leadership and her leadership style is praised while in April, the stereotypical feminine characteristics progressively disappeared, and her leadership was called into question. From May, traditionally feminine traits were mentioned again and Wilmès was considered to embody the appropriate leadership style to deal with the crisis. Moreover, these characteristics were mainly related to 'caring' behaviours, a phenomenon that might be explained by the fact that the idea of taking care of others has been particularly underlined during COVD-19 lockdowns. Despite this important focus on femininity and *care*-related traits, it is important to note that the performance

of some stereotypical masculine characteristics, such as determination and deci-siveness, were also identified as requirements to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

Our analysis could set the stage for further research. In terms of empirical scope and as mentioned in the literature part, other women heads of govern-ment's leadership performance have known an important media coverage in the context of COVID-19. In this respect, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has often been presented as the ideal type of what a new and more 'femi-ninity-sensitive' political leadership could or should be. Research involving other case studies would thus be useful to better understand the evolution of the gen-dered construction of political leadership in media coverage of politicians. These case studies could involve both women and men leaders to study the impact of gender identity on the gendered construction of political leadership. Moreover, studies on the aftermaths of the pandemic have certainly addressed the issue of its influence on trust and support for government and political leaders, for example by questioning the 'rally-round-the-flag effect' in the context of the pan-demic (Devine, Gaskell, Jennings & Stoker, 2020) but have much less explored to what extent this crisis could (re)shape the conception of political leadership itself. While this article adopted a clear gender perspective to study the construction of political leadership in media discourses in a COVID-19 context, further research could involve the examination of other aspects.

Lastly, we argue that the promotion of *care*-related qualities in media cover-age raises perspectives on the construction of what could represent a specific way to perform as a leader, especially in the context of COVID-19. This idea of political leadership is constructed by the media, but women politicians are not passive recipients of their coverage and research has stressed their *agency* in the construction of their own image in the media (Wagner & Everitt, 2019). In this regard, women politicians' communication strategies on social media have been analysed with a gender perspective (McGregor, Lawrence & Cardona, 2017). Therefore, our analysis of the press could be completed with an examination of Sophie Wilmès' political communication, to determine to which extent and how she managed to construct a certain image of herself beyond media mediation. This approach might also help to determine whether such strategies present risks of reinforcing gender stereotypes or to the contrary have potential to improve the symbolic representation of women in politics. Building a complementary analysis of both mediatic discourse and social media strategies could help us understand how, while Wilmès' nomination as Prime minister made her head of a *caretaker* government, the COVID-19 crisis was an opportunity to present her as a 'care-taker' leader in the gendered sense of the term.

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Economic Insecurity and Populist Radical Right Voting

PhD by Take Sipma (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen), supervisors: M. Lubbers & N. Spierings

Eelco Harteveld[*]

The populist radical right (PRR) continues to grow in terms of its electoral success and its impact on politics around the globe. As a result, the literature seeking to explain the roots of its appeal has blossomed. Rather than giving in to the lure of proposing yet another class of explanations, Take Sipma observed that some of the existing accounts have not been scrutinised – and hence have not been understood – properly. His PhD thesis takes up the task of assessing the impact of economic insecurity on PRR support. By taking previous null-findings seriously, he opens up (and answers) new research questions that improve our understanding of the roots of PRR support. Take Sipma shows that an effect of economic insecurity on radical right support exists, but in conditional ways. Rather than following an easy dichotomy of 'economy' versus 'culture', this thesis shows that all explanations are multifaceted. The result is a rich thesis that will be of interest to many.

The claim that PRR support would be somehow rooted in economic insecurity is an old one, but Take Sipma argues that the theoretical mechan-

isms are insufficiently understood and that previous evidence remains shaky at best. Theoretically, his thesis argues that it is possible to synthesise the mechanisms proposed in previous work, in particular ethnic competition, losers of modernisation or economic voting theories. What these have in common is that economic insecurity is expected to foster *grievances towards both immigrants and mainstream politics*, bolstering, in turn, support for the radical right, which is seen as most capable of dealing with these grievances. This is the central hypothesis of the thesis.

Empirically, previous contextual-level studies have found mixed evidence (at best) for a relationship between worsening economic conditions and PRR support across regions or countries. At the individual level, PRR support does tend to be higher among those with (among other factors) lower status jobs and lower levels of education. But while such structural conditions arguably involve more economic insecurity, they might also foster PRR support through alternative mechanisms. In short, the jury is

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still out. Why does the literature not find more unequivocal evidence for a relationship between insecurity and PRR support, and what does this tell us about the mechanisms involved?

Before setting out to study this question in more detail, the second chapter of the thesis takes more systematic stock of the existing literature through a meta-analysis of the relationship between contextual-level unemployment and the fortunes of PRR parties. This includes 49 studies that estimated the effect of either the level of or the change in unemployment on the fortunes of PRR support across the globe. Take Sipma shows that while the correlation is positive, it is very small ($r = 0.04$). Tellingly, significantly positive coefficients almost exclusively appeared in studies that explicitly hypothesised an effect of unemployment, pointing to publication bias. Next to underlining how valuable meta-analyses are, this exercise confirms that economic insecurity is an unsteady correlate of PRR support.

Starting with this puzzle, the thesis posits three modifications of the theoretical framework, each of which is discussed and tested in an empirical chapter. The thesis does not formulate an elaborate overarching theoretical rationale for continuing the search in these rather than other potential directions. Still, all share the intuition that the relationship between insecurity and radical right support is reinforced or (often) dampened by other factors and that by omitting these our previous picture is incomplete. The empirical analysis provides convincing evidence that this intuition is a very fruitful one.

The first contribution is to problematise the assumption (often left implicit in extant theoretical accounts) that PRR parties would be deemed most capable of addressing grievances resulting from economic insecurity. While such insecurity can heighten tensions between majority-group populations and immigrants (to the benefit of the PRR), it also increases the salience of economic issues. This, in turn, is not an issue owned by the PRR. The third chapter compares individual and regional data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2014 (after the worst period of the economic crisis) with that in 2009. The worse the economic conditions in a region, the more salience citizens attach to the economy, which subsequently suppresses PRR support. This shows that while there might be some merit to 'scapegoating' theories that objective economic conditions bolster ethnic prejudice, their effects can be balanced out by citizens' concern that the radical right is not the safest pair of hands with which to salvage the economy.

Secondly, the thesis argues that insecurity should be operationalised beyond class or occupational status. More specifically, it raises the possibility that class and occupation interact to shape precarity. Those in lower classes with temporary employment should be more easily attracted to the PRR than those in the same class with relatively stable jobs. The thesis argues that, after all, ethnic competition in most countries is fiercest in lower-paid jobs, and so is the impact of modernisation shocks (one might instead emphasise globalisation in this respect). Relying on seven waves of the ESS, the fourth chapter finds no evidence that having an insecure job posi-

tion matters more among lower class voters. Importantly, *perceived* job insecurity does lead to PRR support, through perceptions of immigrants' threat to one's job. By pitting subjective and objective conditions against each other, this chapter argues that the two are often weakly related at best. This suggests that such perceptions are endogenous to radical right support.

Third, the thesis argues that the study of insecurity has overlooked the important role of households in creating or dampening insecurity. Couples not only share resources but also tend to discuss and interpret politics together. In other words, the structural position of partners might matter through either or both of the couple's experiences and attitudes. Hence, the fifth chapter studies the role of partners in nine waves of the Dutch LISS panel (2007-2019). It shows that especially women's vote choices tend to align with those of their husbands. Regardless of one's own precarity, having a partner in a better socio-economic position reduces support for the *Party for Freedom* (PVV). The partner's position does so both directly and indirectly through the partner's attitudes. Even if this chapter does not make full use of the inferential benefits of longitudinal data – for instance, by zooming in on changes in a partner's positions – it convincingly shows that voting does not take place in isolation. This means that previous studies taking an individual perspective to insecurity probably underestimated the role of economic insecurity.

In short, Take Sipma's thesis makes a significant contribution to the field by, first, providing a more systematic overview of the association between economic insecurity and PRR support, both through a valuable meta-study and through its own analysis of a range of secondary data sources. This shows that the association is weak across the board. The second aspect of the significance of its contribution is in its identification of the complexity underlying this weak association, in particular the moderating roles of salience perceptions and household composition. The thesis thus provides evidence that insecurity does matter in more conditional ways, enriching our understanding of the roots of PRR support. In particular, the possibility that previous null-findings are due to counterbalancing effects casts the existing literature in a new light.

Like all theses, this work also leaves some questions unanswered. First, while the thesis plausibly calls for a synthesis of the various proposed theoretical mechanisms, the analysis mostly cannot disentangle which psychological or structural processes are involved in linking insecurity to PRR support. What is the nature of the grievances that those in insecure positions develop towards both politicians and immigrants? What role does more objective competition with immigrants play compared with projected scapegoating? Does a rejection of mainstream politics follow from this, or does it develop in tandem? Now that the thesis has uncovered conditions under which we should look for an effect of economic insecurity, these questions can be answered more fruitfully.

Secondly, while taking important steps to fine-tune the measurement of economic insecurity at the individual level, the thesis operationalises contextual insecurity in a relatively crude

way (mostly through unemployment) and at a very high geographical level (mostly by comparing countries). Chapter 3, which includes a comparison between regions, tellingly finds stronger associations, even if these regions still cover vast areas. Recently, the literature on context effects has taken a promising turn towards studying more local conditions (for instance in municipalities or neighbourhoods) and towards operationalising economic conditions in alternative ways (such as directly observing globalisation shocks). With these innovations, economic insecurity might or might not turn out to matter somewhat more than currently meets the eye. Nevertheless, all follow-up studies will benefit from Take Sipma's careful and thorough analysis, which convincingly shows that economic insecurity shapes PRR fortunes in ways that are more complicated than previously suggested.

Pragmatic Citizens – A Bottom-Up Perspective on Participatory Politics

PhD by Hannah Werner (KU Leuven and Universiteit van Amsterdam), supervisors: Sofie Marien, Wouter van der Brug & Marc Hooghe

Anna Kern[*]

Across established democracies, concerns about citizens' dissatisfaction with the way politics works are regularly voiced in the scholarly and public debate alike. The deficit in perceived democratic legitimacy is reflected in low levels of trust in political institutions and politicians, more specifically, lack of public compliance and cooperation, strong support for populist and protest parties, and a general feeling that politics is out of touch with ordinary citizens. In this context, policymakers and scholars have experimented with the establishment of participatory processes – ranging from nationwide referendums to small-scale deliberative citizen panels – that are expected to counteract this deficit in perceived legitimacy. But is it actually working? Can participatory processes tackle resentment and strengthen perceptions of democratic legitimacy?

Hannah Werner's doctoral dissertation *Pragmatic Citizens* provides insights into these questions by focusing on citizens' perceptions of participatory processes. She argues that past debates on the merits of participatory decision-making are shaped primarily by normative democratic thinking that often disregards the perspective of citizens. Rather than reasoning about democratic institutions like political philosophers, citizens are embedded in specific political and personal contexts that will shape their view of participatory politics. Hence, Werner proposes that we should not consider more participation as desirable *per se*. Rather, we should ask what participatory processes can deliver *for citizens*. The main argument of the thesis is that citizens think about participatory processes in a pragmatic fashion. If citizens think these processes can solve a particular problem, for instance the delivery of a certain policy outcome or addressing deficits in the representative relationship between citizens and politicians, they will support the use of such processes and consider them more legitimate.

Concretely, Werner tackles two timely research questions, namely (1) *What explains citizens' support for participatory processes?* and (2) *Do participatory processes produce more perceived democratic legitimacy than representative processes, especially among those who are dissatisfied with the decision?* To address these questions, Werner a)

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develops a theoretical model to explain citizens' support for participatory processes and b) complements the existing theoretical framework on the relationship between participatory procedures and legitimacy perceptions. These new arguments are tested on the basis of an impressive multi-method approach that relies on secondary cross-national data, original cross-sectional surveys, panel surveys, experiments as well as qualitative in-depth interviews. In doing so, Werner combines the study of two real cases (a referendum in the Netherlands and a small-scale participatory process in Belgium) with the study of citizens' general preferences and reactions to hypothetical scenarios.

With regard to the first research question that revolves around explanations for citizens' support for participatory processes, Werner finds that support for referendums is driven by pragmatic considerations. She finds that while dissatisfaction with politics represents a consistent driver of referendum support, citizens do not naively prefer referendums out of frustration with the political system. In fact, citizens consider referendums pragmatically as a tool that can solve only some problems that they perceive in the current functioning of democracy. More specifically, dissatisfaction with the government *not listening to citizens* drives support for referendums, whereas dissatisfaction with the government *not leading well* is associated with less support for referendums. Dissatisfaction with the government not leading well is argued to arise for citizens for whom government responsibility is more important than responsiveness. These citizens think the government should be free to follow its own initiatives during the legislative term rather than public opinion. Notably, the association between government *not listening* and referendum support varies across countries, and it weakens with an increased use of referendums. It seems as if citizens in countries that rely more frequently on referendums became disillusioned with its capabilities. Werner, furthermore, shows that citizens are more supportive of decision-making by means of referendums when they believe that the majority of the populations share their opinion on a specific issue – another manifestation of their pragmatic reasoning.

So, while pragmatic considerations play an important role in citizens' referendum support, some citizens turn out to be more principled than others. *Pragmatic Citizens* shows that populist citizens hold more principled attitudes towards referendums and base their support for this decision-making procedure less on instrumental considerations as compared with non-populist citizens. Also, populist citizens turn out to be more gracious losers than non-populist citizens, being more willing to accept the outcome of the referendum, even when they lost.

Finally, with regard to citizens' preferences for participatory processes, this doctoral dissertation shows that process preferences are not stable but vary across issues – yet another indication of citizens' pragmatic reasoning. However, the finding is more nuanced because general preferences do play a role as well. In fact, both general ideas about democracy and policy-specific considerations affect support for a specific referendum independently. So, while citizens appear largely pragmatic in their reasoning, norma-

tive ideals also partly explain their process preferences. On the basis of these insights Hannah Werner suggests a new model of process preferences in which general attitudes (driven by normative views of democracy or a general resentment towards politics) represent only *one* component of process preferences. In contrast to the existing literature, this model, additionally, takes instrumental considerations, dissatisfaction with specific aspects of the functioning of democracy as well as populist attitudes into account. Process preferences are hence represented as a multilayered *composite attitude*, consisting of various layers that are partly stable and partly volatile.

With respect to the second research question that revolves around the legitimacy strengthening potential of participatory processes compared with representative processes, the study shows, in line with previous research, that the potential of participatory processes to strengthen legitimacy depends largely on outcome favourability. Decision losers exert lower levels of perceived legitimacy than decision winners. However, *Pragmatic Citizens* also shows that, compared with representative decision-making, small-scale participatory processes can strengthen perceptions of democratic legitimacy even under circumstances in which the outcome is unfavourable and the topic is highly controversial. Importantly, this finding holds even for citizens who did not participate in the small-scale process themselves but who merely heard about the process, indicating that the legitimacy generating effect of participatory processes can even transcend to a larger public.

Finally, Werner suggests a second mechanism – in addition to outcome favourability – that can explain the legitimacy strengthening potential of participatory processes, namely the relational mechanism. *Pragmatic Citizens* suggests that citizens appreciate relational aspects of citizen involvement and consider respect and recognition by politicians as the most important element for positive evaluations of these processes. Hence, both instrumental and relational mechanisms can explain why participatory processes produce more perceived democratic legitimacy than representative processes.

This dissertation contributes theoretically by proposing a pragmatic perspective on participatory processes, considering those as tools that can offer specific solutions to particular legitimacy-related problems. *Pragmatic Citizens* skilfully connects insights from participatory and deliberative democracy theory with psychological theories on procedural fairness to propose two mechanisms that can explain why participatory processes can strengthen perceptions of democratic legitimacy: instrumental and relational considerations. By theorising about the tension between process and outcome effects, Werner also contributes to the discussion on how participatory processes should be evaluated – a discussion that is also societally highly relevant. In addition to the theoretical contribution, *Pragmatic Citizens* adds empirically to the literature by studying citizens' perspectives on participatory processes from various angles and by relying on different kinds of data and methods.

An important limitation of the thesis is that referendums and small-

scale participatory processes have not been studied simultaneously, as Werner herself points out. Hence, it is possible that certain mechanisms are particularly suited to certain types of participatory processes: possibly, referendums activate more instrumental considerations than small-scale participatory processes, and relational considerations might be more important in small-scale participatory processes. Although this question cannot be answered on the basis of this dissertation, it presents an interesting avenue for future research.

All in all, Hannah Werner's *Pragmatic Citizens* provides a nuanced picture of participatory processes that are not a 'one-size-fits-all solution' for political resentment. However, when employed cautiously they can foster perceptions of democratic legitimacy even for citizens who were not directly involved. The dissertation contains an impressive synthesis of literature from political science and social psychology, particularly organisational and legal psychology. It also stands out by the skilful application of various research methods. The dissertation is particularly convincing through its continuous theoretical and empirical innovation. It is therefore a must-read for scholars and practitioners interested in direct, participatory and deliberative democracy. It is no wonder that the members of the examination committee attested to this dissertation as being of exceptional quality (within the top 10% of the discipline) and awarded the highest distinction – *cum laude*.

Allied Against Austerity Transnational Cooperation in European Anti-Austerity Movement

PhD by Bernd Bonfert (Radboud University Nijmegen), supervisors: Angela Wigger & Laura Horn

Mònica Clua-Losada[*]

The last decade has seen an unprecedented level of grassroots organising against austerity-driven crisis management that characterised the post-2008 financial crisis in Europe and beyond. While there have been considerable studies of the different movements, and there have even been some comparisons between movements across countries (see, for example, Bailey et al., 2018), this is the first transnational analysis that combines both specific country case studies (Greece, Spain and Germany) with an analysis of austerity crisis-management and transnational coalitions at the EU level. Specifically, the thesis is driven by two research questions – first, "how we can explain the movement's diverse manifestation between countries, particularly Spain, Greece and Germany," and "to what extent [is] this diversity informed the development of transnational cooperation across the movement" (Bonfert, 2020: 371). These two questions already point at the dual nature of the thesis, moving across different scales of analysis.

In "Allied Against Austerity: Transnational Cooperation in the European Anti-Austerity Movement," Bernd Bonfert provides a fascinating account of social movements in Europe over the last decade. A key strength of the thesis is the thorough theorisation provided by Bonfert. By engaging in a critique of existing comparative approaches to social movements' studies, Bonfert offers a Historical Materialist framework that is deeply interwoven with an analysis of hegemony, crises and the state. The theoretical depth of the thesis cannot be underestimated. Bonfert's research design investigates the following three aspects of transnational cooperation:

1 "the politico-economic context of European anti-austerity movement in the form of European and national crisis management;

2 the domestic manifestations of the anti-austerity movement in Spain, Greece and Germany; and

3 the transnational dimension of the anti-austerity movement in the form of practical cross-country collaboration and transnational coalitions between activists" (Bonfert, 2020: 55).

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The thesis raises important questions both in relation to how we approach the study of social movements and how movements themselves strategise scale. If anything, European anti-austerity movements have forced social movement scholars to place issues to do with material demands and concerns back at the forefront. For example, in 2015, Donatella Della Porta called for the incorporation of Capitalism into social movement analysis. A return, or rather, a rediscovery of critical political economy has bridged the gap between analyses of protest and resistance with our understanding of changes in the political economy. In Bonfert's own words

> a critical analysis of the European anti-austerity movement should focus on the practical agency of that movement, while also analysing it in relation to the crisis management context it was struggling against (Bonfert, 2020: 18).

Precisely, a key strength of the thesis is the ability to combine a robust contextual analysis of the (critical) political economy of neoliberal austerity at both the EU level and domestic levels, as well as provide such an in-depth study of protest cases and social movement organising.

Importantly, the thesis provides us with a framework to analyse transnational coalitions. Bonfert offers three ideal types of transnational coalitions: the first type, 'Reform Coalitions' are characterised by focusing their efforts at the EU institutional level attempting to achieve concrete policy reforms. The nature of their organising efforts translates into a professionalisation of resistance, to a certain extent. Lobby-

ing in Brussels requires a certain 'know-how' which often challenges their capacity "when trying to translate their claims into something the general public can respond to" (Bonfert, 2020: 51). The second type, 'Disruption Coalitions' are more radical in their demands and protest styles and methods. For example, rather than lobbying in Brussels, they may go and demonstrate outside the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. However, they are generally short-lived and organised around particular moments. Their genealogy, according to Bonfert, can be traced back to the Global Justice Movement. Finally, Bonfert's third type, 'Solidarity Coalitions' are focused on horizontal grassroots organising at the local level, while enacting loose transnational networks among themselves. Their stance tends to avoid vertical institutionalisation, yet they provide solid local foundations in their grassroots organising. While these three types are not mutually exclusive, and there may be some cross-pollination of the three strategies across the three types of coalitions, the capacity to combine the three types is ultimately very difficult to achieve according to Bonfert.

The last typology 'Solidarity Coalitions' is worthy of some further consideration. At a time when far-right and neo-fascist groups are gaining ground all over the globe, and with the constant threat of misinformation being spread by powerful groups, Bonfert's typology offers some hope. It would be important to further consider the role of solidarity coalitions in reducing the possibility of right-wing threats, misinformation, and the development of exclusionary spaces. For example, much of the

grassroots provision of basic needs in Spain, such as housing or food banks, during the worst years of austerity was done by social movements that could be considered part of Bonfert's 'Solidarity Coalitions'. Yet, Greece and Italy had some examples of far-right groups practicing exclusionary provisions of basic needs, such as Golden Dawn's organisation of food banks for Greeks only.

I would also like to highlight the discussion Bonfert offers in relation to research ethics when analysing social movements. Often, in our quest to produce solid research, we forget to think how our research may be used by authoritarian security apparatuses, especially when movements may present a challenge to the authority and power of states and capital. Bonfert's choice of using data from publicly available sources, rather than reveal what social movements may prefer to conceal or keep private (for example, certain strategic debates), is an important issue to raise. Research is always produced for someone and for some purpose. Methodologically, the thesis is also very strong and demonstrates a sophisticated command of mixed research methods; from documentary analysis, ethnographic methods of data collection, interviews to statistical social network analysis.

The thesis findings provide some fascinating conclusions, which expand our understanding of anti-austerity movements and the challenges and opportunities for transnational organising or collaboration. In relation to the first research question, which relates to how we can understand different social movement configurations and protest dynamics across the three

cases considered, Bonfert concludes that

> the scale and composition of domestic mobilisations directly reflected the socio-economic impact of austerity and neoliberal restructuring on national class constituencies and the degree to which this impact led to an erosion of hegemonic consent (Bonfert, 2020: 277).

Significantly, if activists were effective in the erosion of hegemonic consent at the domestic level, they would be less focused on transnational action.

Turning to the second research question, which considers how domestic variation within movements and their domestic contexts may affect their transnational activity and motivation, Bonfert – using the three-type typology discussed earlier – develops an understanding of transnational cooperation and organisation

> defined by the uneven material, political and praxeological characteristics of domestic struggles, while also pursuing distinct political strategies in relative autonomy (Bonfert, 2020: 279).

This demonstrates the complexity of the thesis and the importance of considering transnational action and domestic organising as two sides of the same coin, while incorporating the deep contextual analysis that Bonfert's thesis is able to provide.

In summary, I thoroughly recommend Bernd Bonfert's thesis, and I look forward to seeing more publications emanating from the research produced for the thesis. This is impres-

sive work, with a sophisticated theo-
retical discussion, the ability to move
across levels of analysis and an exten-
sive analysis of crisis-management and
protest at the EU level as well as in
Spain, Greece and Germany. The depth
and breadth of the analysis is not only
extraordinary, but it also represents an
outstanding example of a PhD thesis.
It is rare to find a PhD thesis that
makes a contribution on so many dif-
ferent levels, theoretically, methodo-
logically and empirically. Bonfert is
well placed to become a leading scholar
in social movement research within
the discipline of critical political econ-
omy.

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