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POPULIST NATIONALISM AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

The construction of moral antagonisms in the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Belgium

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Introduction

Populism and nationalism are, in many respects, natural bedfellows (de Cleen, 2017). This chapter attempts to explore their relationship in theory and practice. Theoretically, the two concepts are joined by the notion of ontological security: the idea that individuals require confidence that the material, social and political resources perceived as necessary to sustain their basic values and way of life are protected, if they are to feel at home or secure in their lifeworld (Giddens 1990; Della Salla, 2017). The nation-state has historically provided a context of ontological security for individuals and, for that reason, citizens are inclined towards a defence of the nation-state as a means for continuing to safeguard their values and interests. Populism, I argue, is a form of politics whose success depends on real or imagined threats to citizens' ontological security. Yet, populism need not always take on a pronounced nationalistic frame in attempting to exploit citizens' fears concerning their ontological security. For example, economic populists may seek to emphasise domestic injustices and economic mismanagement as a threat to the material bases of citizens' ontological security without appealing to a nationalistic narrative. Populism, however, is most likely to be nationalistic when threats to ontological security are capable of being portrayed as at least partly the result of foreign agents who are undermining the state's capacity to provide for its citizens' ontological security.

The first part of this chapter fleshes out in greater detail the relationship between nationalism, populism and ontological security. This discussion offers a slightly modified version of the standard ideational definition of populism, while explaining how this definition relates to the political-strategic and socio-cultural approaches to the phenomenon. Furthermore, in this section, I explain how ambiguities in liberal nationalist defences of the nation-state concerning the

conditions for preserving ontological security are central to building the populist nationalist narrative. The second part of the paper attempts to better understand populist nationalism in practice. I do this by focusing on political parties that use the rhetoric of national homogeneity to resist forms of immigration and power-sharing with corporate agents construed as foreign or non-national. The cases upon which I focus my analysis are the British United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Switzerland's Schweizerische Volkspartei/Swiss People's Party (SVP), and Belgium's Vlams Belang/Flemish Interest (VB) and Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA). Each of these parties has had a substantial impact in their national political arena over significant periods of time. By taking these sample cases, the chapter attempts to better understand how populist nationalist parties can impact mainstream politics, as well as the conditions for the longevity of these parties as influential political forces.

Populism, nationalism and ontological security

This chapter will largely follow Cas Mudde's (2017) ideational understanding of populism as a set of ideas drawing a morally laden distinction between two groups in society that are portrayed as antagonistic – the pure authentic people and the corrupt elite. In effect, the populist's claim is that they themselves represent the true voice of the people, whereas existing elites are concerned with pursuing agendas not in the people's interests. Although Mudde is correct to highlight the primacy of the corrupt elite/pure people antagonism, populism would necessarily seem to imply the possibility of a second type of moral antagonism. The purportedly corrupt elite must be in the service of someone other than the people. It's possible that they serve only themselves, but more likely they are (also) serving some other set of actors deemed to be incompatible with the good of the people. Mudde (2017: 33) claims that such actors are classed by populists as "special interests", who are also somehow construed as being part of the elite (e.g. bankers, the 1%, etc.).

If the corrupt elites are always in the service of other elites, then it makes perfect sense to follow Mudde and conceive of populism as creating a single vertical antagonism. Yet, it seems that there are other groups in society, which cannot be construed as elite, but whose interests the elite may be perceived as representing over and against the true people. These others could be (illegal) immigrants, welfare recipients, criminals and so on. Such groups are not treated as morally neutral by populists, but rather as an active threat to or corruption of the authentic people. On some occasions, a large swathe of citizens may be even construed as supporting the corrupt elite for their own narrow interest, and thereby betraying the true spirit of the people. In sum, we can correctly follow Mudde and think of populism as a singular vertical moral antagonism between the corrupt elite and the authentic people, when the activities of the corrupt elite are supposed to be serving the interests of themselves and other elite groups. But, when the corrupt elite are construed as representing non-elite interests, rather than those of the people, a second horizontal moral antagonism emerges between the authentic people and those

non-elite groups. There is nothing in the idea of populism itself that identifies what outgroup may be the target of this second moral antagonism. In this respect, it is other ideological features embodied by the populist and the context in which they find themselves that will be the deciding factors.

Two alternative conceptions to the ideational understanding of populism have been put forward: the political-strategic and the socio-cultural approach. On the former perspective, populism is best conceived as a distinctive political strategy to gain political power or policy influence ‘via the decisive role of personalistic, plebiscitarian leadership’ (Weyland, 2017: 54). Meanwhile, on the latter account, ‘the flaunting of the low is the core feature of populism’ (Ostiguy, 2017: 75). In other words, on this view, what differentiates populists in their attempt to gain political influence is their willingness to undermine the norms of the “proper” or “civilised” politics practised by the corrupted elite by valorising shocking and provocative modes of speech as expressive of subaltern or ignored truths. Although a fuller discussion is not possible here, the tension between the ideational, strategic and socio-cultural accounts as alternatives may not be too great. The populist claim to represent the singular people would seem to be best expressed when reified in the singular voice of a personalistic leader. Similarly, the moral outrage pertaining to a people undermined by corrupt agents may be effectively expressed by using acerbic language to ostracise those agents. As such, although a personalistic leadership style or a low form of political language may not be constitutive of populism, we may take them as strong indicators of a populist narrative based on the construction of vertical (and horizontal) moral antagonisms.

Populists are widely regarded as thriving on crises of representation (Kriesi, 2015; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2018). Indeed, some of the highest profile rises in populism have been in direct response to major events that reveal an existing or create a new representative deficit in the political system. The establishment of puppet governments in Greece and Italy, installed to deal with the euro crisis and impose austerity on their populations at the behest of European institutions, provide stark examples of how quickly populism can emerge when faced with serious crises of representation. The Five Star Movement in Italy and the very different populisms of Golden Dawn and Syriza in Greece all enjoyed dramatic electoral success as a result of the glaring failures of their respective political classes. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to think that populism can only arise in response to high intensity crises of representation. It is also possible that such political entrepreneurs develop with low intensity, over time, and in response to systemic representative deficits to which the populists continuously draw attention in mobilising support. As we shall see in the following section, the cases in this chapter provide good illustrations of this more gradualist populism.

It’s important to note, however, that not just any representative deficit will provide the energy required to sustain a populist challenge to the mainstream political consensus. What must be perceived to be at stake is something deeply significant, namely citizens’ ontological security. In other words, for the populist challenge to find sufficient support, the representative failure must be such that it leaves at

least some part of the citizenry feeling insecure about their ability to maintain the material, social and political conditions to continue their way of life, either in the present or some future time. In effect, the populist builds its momentum by giving expression to or creating a sense of fear among citizens concerning the sustainability of their livelihoods and ways of life.

The primary container of ontological security for contemporary citizens is the nation-state. The political philosophies of liberal nationalism (Miller, 1995) and republicanism (Pettit, 2012) provide an enlightened normative defence of the nation-state. On democratic grounds, they maintain that politics develops in historical contexts and is thereby markedly influenced by idiosyncratic norms and traditions that provide a context of meaning within which political decisions makes sense to those whom they are subject (Walzer, 1983). In this regard, the nation-state provides a familiar and legitimate context for decision-making that can provide strong grounds to resist ceding too much decision-making power to distant international bodies whose norms and practices may be more difficult to understand and engage with for ordinary citizens (Bellamy and Lacey, forthcoming). On grounds of justice, it is argued that nation-states do have cosmopolitan duties towards non-nationals, minimally requiring efforts that work towards securing the human rights of individuals globally. However, the nation-state is seen as a scheme of co-operation among citizens over time that generates duties of justice to compatriots that are thicker than those owed to non-nationals (Miller, 2016). On this account, states may be justified in fairly controlling immigration and access to welfare and public services to non-nationals, especially when failure to do so could overload the human or fiscal capacities of the state.

Populist nationalism transpires when defence of the nation-state from *foreign agents* and their supporters becomes the predominant framing of moral antagonisms. In the contemporary setting, these agents are typically institutions of international governance and various form of immigrant. The populist may implicitly or explicitly draw upon potentially legitimate arguments in defence of the nation-state, such as those enumerated above. However, in doing so, they play on *the uncertainty concerning what kinds of openness are consistent with the preservation of the nation-state*. Since there is no clear agreement on these issues, the arguments that the reach of international institutions has grown too great and is eroding national sovereignty in unacceptable ways, or that the number of immigrants are simply far too many for the nation-state to handle, are always available for exploitation.

The populist claim concerning national sovereignty is that international institutions, and national elites who have allowed the former to usurp national sovereignty across successive governments, do not represent the people. National and international elites are painted as corrupt, benefiting the same set of economic or ideological interests that see national sovereignty as something to be overcome to the extent that it constitutes a barrier to their self-serving goals. Meanwhile, the representative deficit that these national and international elites have co-constituted through the respective usurpation and ceding of national sovereignty is deemed to be resolvable only under certain circumstances: either by reclaiming

national sovereignty from the international institutions, or by electing populists to power so that these authentic voices may reshape the national relationship with these institutions for the benefit of the people.

The populist claim regarding immigrants is that they pose a threat to the material and social fabric of the nation-state. On this narrative, immigrants must be kept out, unless they are deemed to be of a class that can be of direct benefit to the community and from a background that ensures they will respect the national community's traditions and values. To the extent that the government has presided over "unacceptable" levels of immigration, especially when many of these are deemed to be either economically or culturally undesirable, the government is accused of betraying the real people for the sake of mere immigrants and those domestic special interest groups who stand to benefit from this (e.g. exploitative employers). As the socio-cultural account of populism expects, populist nationalists will typically flaunt the low in making these vertical and horizontal claims. This is especially true for immigrants when a populist nationalist party is also nativist. By defending the nation-state not (just) on the basis of political and socioeconomic appeals, but on the need for ethnic or cultural purity to ensure the undiluted continuity of the inherently valuable community, immigrants and ethnic minorities in particular may face more extreme prejudice in the face of populist nativists.

Populist nationalism can focus on national sovereignty and international institutions, or the immigration issue, or both. When they focus on both, and when the question of sovereignty and the question of immigration align in some way, the populist narrative can become especially powerful. As we shall see greater evidence for below, this may be one reason why populism has become such an explosive force within the EU. As a form of political organisation beyond the state, where free movement is a constitutive feature, the EU has led to a loss of sovereignty for nation-states that includes major limitations on how member states govern access to their borders and socioeconomic systems. In effect, membership of the EU becomes identifiable as a source of ills pertaining to the both loss of national sovereignty and the levels of immigration. In this way, the EU becomes a major source of vertical antagonism that can fuel the moralistic ire of the populist perspective.

Populist nationalism in Belgium, Switzerland and the United Kingdom

With this theoretical specification of populist nationalism in place, I attempt to demonstrate more concretely how this phenomenon manifests itself in Western Europe. Belgium, Switzerland and the UK are by no means the only Western European states to have been affected by populist nationalism in recent times. What these cases help to illustrate, however, are three very unique ways in which populist nationalism can have major impacts on mainstream politics. UKIP may be seen as an outsider political party that has successfully put electoral pressure on mainstream parties at multiple levels of government, maximising its leverage on the governing party to ensure that its agenda is either adopted or given a full public

hearing. The Swiss SVP is an insider mainstream political party turned populist nationalist that has ensured its agenda is consistently in the public eye through both its governing role and its use of popular votes. Meanwhile, the VB is an outsider party whose extremism has helped pave the way for the N-VA, a peculiar political party that is more moderate than the VB and surely a nationalist party, but causes far more debate among scholars concerning its populist credentials. The N-VA an insider political party whose impact on mainstream Belgian politics in pursuing Flemish autonomy has been impressive. All four parties may, to very different degrees, also display nativist tendencies.

Brexit with UKIP

UKIP bears all the hallmarks of populist nationalism. Its primary moral antagonisms are the mainstream political elite and the European Union elite, on the one hand, and (EU) immigrants on the other. Through their support for membership of the EU, the UKIP narrative goes, mainstream political parties have prioritised their own interests and those of a minority of the population over and against the ordinary British people. Politically, economically and culturally, the ontological security of the real British people is deemed to be under threat. Politically, unaccountable EU institutions have legislatively straightjacketed British institutions and thereby undermined the ability of the real British people to express its will. From a justice perspective, immigrants are supposedly undermining the livelihoods of ordinary citizens by taking jobs, driving down wages and putting a strain on the welfare system and public services. The capacity of the EU, through its Court of Justice, to ensure non-discriminatory access of EU citizens to the British labour market and social welfare schemes is emphasised as a core problem of ceding sovereignty to this institution. Culturally, opportunities are taken to express the nativist view that lax immigration policies ensure that many immigrants will be unable or unwilling to adapt to the cultural norms and styles of the community. For example, being surrounded by foreign languages in one's own country because immigrants have failed to learn the local language is thought to be jarring and uncomfortable, while symbolic of cultural erosion (Phipps, 2016).

These ideational populist features have been also accompanied by a low form political discourse and personalist leadership. In the first instance, UKIP has become associated with insulting behaviour, especially towards EU elites,¹ as well as provocative statements and stunts to draw attention to a purportedly reckless immigration policy.² In the latter regard, UKIP became an actual and consequential populist party only with the emergence of Nigel Farage as its charismatic leader from 2006–2009 and 2010–2016. The plausibility of Farage as voice of the people and his ideological construction of moral antagonisms have been greatly facilitated by the clear pro-European attitude of the Conservative and Labour parties, in contradistinction to a genuine split across the voter base of these parties concerning attitudes to the EU. UKIP served as the only significant political party that set itself in direct opposition to EU membership. Meanwhile, with the Conservative

Party's failure to carry out an electoral promise to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands during their time in government between 2010 and 2015, the party lost its issue ownership over immigration to the more divisive and hard-line rhetoric of UKIP (Dennison and Goodwin, 2015).

UKIP is an outsider political party, having claimed little or no representation in the national parliament, while often being the object of disdain or ridicule by mainstream parties. Eventually, outsider parties tend to require some kind of representation in the national parliament so that they may have access to the publicity and funds required to establish themselves as a more formidable political force. Remarkably, UKIP have managed to become a major force in British politics with hardly any representation at Westminster. They have done this through success at European and local elections, and an increase in support during general elections. Achieving substantial representation in the European Parliament from 1999 onwards, UKIP became the largest British party represented there in 2014 with 27% of the national vote. This rise in electoral fortunes was to a large degree also borne out at the local and national level. Although UKIP had always fared poorly at national elections, it more than quadrupled its previous best polling results for Westminster to 12.9% in the 2015 general elections. However, given the UK's majoritarian "first past the post" electoral system, this translated into no more than one seat in parliament.

The intensification of electoral pressure from UKIP can be seen as the catalyst that provoked then Conservative Party leader David Cameron in 2013 to promise an in/out referendum on EU membership, should his party be re-elected in the upcoming 2015 election. For decades, the Conservative Party has harboured a significant but minority Eurosceptical wing. As such, a large swathe of UKIP's electoral gains had been coming from traditionally Conservative voters. As someone who believed in the UK remaining part of the EU, Cameron's calculated risk was that citizens would not vote to leave. By securing this result, the expectation was that the issue of EU membership would be decided for a generation and thereby take the wind from the sails of UKIP, in addition to dousing the growing protestations of the Eurosceptical wing of the Conservative Party.

When the Conservative Party were returned to government in 2015, with a mandate to hold a referendum, the parliament did not stand in the way but overwhelmingly backed the proposal to hold referendum with 544 in favour to 53 against. UKIP achieved a major success by forcing virtually the entire political elite to agree to open up the question of EU membership, despite the relatively pro-EU attitude of the vast majority of parliamentarians. During the referendum campaign, UKIP retained its outsider status as part of the Leave.EU campaign. UKIP was both unwelcome and unwilling to join the more mainstream Vote Leave campaign, driven mainly by Eurosceptical Conservative Party members. In effect, although there was overlap between the two camps in terms of arguments for withdrawing from the EU, there were distinct differences in emphasis and style. Vote Leave presented itself as consistent with respectable politics and high modes of discourse, prioritising issues pertaining to sovereignty and the economy.

By contrast, Leave.EU was more prone to flaunting the low, while leaning heavily on the immigration issue. Dividing labour in this way across the leave camp by targeting different electorates, whether intentionally or unintentionally, was arguably a key factor in 52% of British citizens voting to leave the EU: ‘a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people’, as Nigel Farage put it on the night of the referendum result.³

Having achieved its central goal of inducing Britain to leave the EU, the electorate have clearly signalled the obsolescence of UKIP. Indeed, to the extent that the party so closely linked membership of the EU with immigration problems, voters seem content that mainstream parties will be better able to handle immigration policy in the future. The two issues over which UKIP claimed ownership, from the electorate’s perspective, appear to be resolved. Voters made their verdict known in 2017 when UKIP were virtually wiped out in local elections while their vote share in the snap general election dropped to historic lows of less than 2%.

The SVP’s magic formula

Unlike the British referendum on continued EU membership, which appears to have signalled the death knell of UKIP, it was a referendum on Switzerland joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1992 that led to the prodigious ascent of the SVP. Traditionally a moderate conservative party, mainly representing farmers and small businesses, the SVP has been a constant presence on the stage of Swiss politics. As it began to lose support in the early 1990s, however, it took a populist turn under the charismatic leadership of millionaire Christoph Blocher. On this populist narrative, membership in the EEC was rendered incompatible with Swiss sovereignty, which the mainstream elites were enthusiastically willing to sell down the river without any scruples. As the only notable political force in opposition to Swiss membership of the EEC, the decision to reject the motion by 50.3% of the electorate represented a major victory of the SVP over the predominant political class.

This victory consolidated the SVP’s populist stance, which remained highly critical of future Swiss–EU bilateral agreements and subsequently developed an anti-immigrant stance. In typical populist nationalist style, openness to the EU and too many immigrants have been painted as threatening to Swiss ontological security on political, justice-based and cultural grounds. The political argument against the EU, however, is somewhat unique in the context of Swiss populist nationalism. Because Switzerland is not part of the EU, but has nevertheless negotiated treaties in lieu of EEC membership (so that the Swiss can enjoy access to the single market and other schemes of European integration), Switzerland is a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker. That is to say, it must follow all relevant EU legislation without any say in the construction of these rules (Eriksen and Fossum, 2015). In a nation-state that has strong associations between sovereignty and the capacity to make and challenge laws through popular votes, the SVP has been able to exploit the purported democratic deficit induced by Swiss–EU relations to fuel its moral antagonism against the national and international elite (Lacey, 2017: 201).

Much of the SVP's success can be undoubtedly put down to the personalistic populism of Blocher. In the Swiss context, where the traditional mode of campaigning is far more understated and with limited emphasis on personality, Blocher's style is in and of itself upsetting to the political establishment and seen as a low form of politics (Mazzoleni, 2015: 113). Similarly, by putting hard-line motions on the parliamentary agenda and successfully using institutions of direct democracy to call for popular votes on such issues, the SVP regularly provokes shock and outrage. Sometimes, these perturbations have taken on international dimensions. Such was the case when an SVP-led citizens' initiative resulted in a 2009 popular vote that banned the future building of minarets in a symbolic bid to protect Swiss culture from infiltration by Muslims. SVP's populist nationalism, however, is largely restricted to its areas of issue ownership concerning Swiss-EU relations and immigration. The party also draws support for its broadly mainstream conservative profile on economic and other issues, upon which it infrequently adopts a populist style. Indeed, a substantial part of SVP discourse is rather ordinary, with one review of SVP party communications revealing that 61% of its discourse did not contain any discernible populist rhetoric (Bernhard, Kriesi and Weber, 2015).

The SVP is an insider turned populist nationalist party. From 1959 to 2003, it held a seat on the Swiss executive, the Federal Council, along with the three largest political parties who each held two seats. This stable 2:2:2:1 formula was based on electoral outcomes in the National Council, or lower house, where the SVP consistently polled at around 12% of the national vote. Gaining ground since its populist turn in the early 1990s, the SVP finally upset the "magic formula" by claiming for itself a second seat on the Federal Council in 2003 at the expense of the Christian Democrats.⁴ Since this time, the SVP have been the largest party in the National Council by a wide margin, returning between 26% and 29% of the national vote share at each election.

The SVP provides an intriguing counterexample to the common view that populist parties will be tamed when in government (cf. Albertazzi, 2008). The Swiss political system uniquely allows for political parties to simultaneously straddle the line between government and opposition. This is due to the fact that a) the executive constitutes a distinct body to the parliament and b) there are a range of bottom-up direct democratic devices available to parties and citizens. As such, parties who have representatives in the Federal Council can nevertheless contest this body either in parliament or through direct appeal to the people in popular votes. Although other parties also make regular use of direct democratic devices, the SVP have grown increasingly fond of citizens' initiatives. This is a device that, following the collection of 100,000 signatures, allows a group of citizens or associations to formulate measures for direct approval by the people. The SVP have been remarkably successful in their employment of this device. Compared with an average 10% success rate for citizens' initiatives, over a third of such popular votes launched by the SVP have been passed (Varone, Engeli, Sciarini et al., 2014: 119).

The most controversial votes, where the SVP positioned itself against virtually the entire political establishment and succeeded, include: the minaret vote in 2009

mentioned above; the decision to automatically deport foreign criminals in 2010; and the decision to put a cap on the number of immigrants entering Switzerland in 2014. Given the flexibility of representative institutions in interpreting popular votes at the implementation stage, the more hard-line intentions of the SVP have been arguably watered down by the representative institutions. Such flexibility proved particularly important in ensuring that legislation drawn up in accord with the vote to restrict immigration was compatible with EU law concerning freedom of movement within the single market. The SVP, however, has been keen to fuel its populist narrative on these occasions by accusing mainstream parties of obscuring the people's will. In 2016, the SVP were even willing to return to the people a second time to counteract the government's attempt at adopting moderate legislation to implement the vote on deporting criminal foreigners. On this occasion, the initiative was unsuccessful. Although the extent of Switzerland's consensual tradition of decision-making may be exaggerated (Lacey, 2017: 189–190), it is undoubtedly the case that the rise of the SVP has made Swiss politics more conflictual at the elite level (Traber, 2015). Attempts at compromise, especially on the SVP's core issue areas, are less common, with the Social Democrats providing the most trenchant opposition.

In sum, by countering the political establishment, the SVP have had a major impact in shaping Switzerland's policy and political culture. On the one hand, the SVP have played a substantial role in determining the nature of Swiss–EU relations and Swiss immigration policy through parliamentary and direct democratic means. On the other hand, the SVP have changed the magic formula, made Swiss politics less consensual, and shifted the colour of political campaigning to one that is more infused with personality as political leaders have increasingly sought to compete with Blocher. As Switzerland's largest party by some margin, in times when the issues of international co-operation and immigration have become more rather than less salient, it is difficult to see the SVP's central place in Swiss politics wane in the near future.

The decline of the VB and the rise of the N-VA

Unlike the populist nationalism of UKIP and the SVP, national populism in Belgium is defined less by opposition to the EU and more by tension between the demands of Flemish separatists and the overwhelmingly popular desire in Wallonia for a united Belgium. Flemish nationalism is an intergenerational movement in response to the political and cultural dominance of Walloons and the French language in Belgian society throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Although the movement became tarnished with an association to fascism in the interwar period, it was reborn in the 1950s with the emergence of the Volksunie/People's Union party, whose progressive approach to Flemish nationalism in its role as a pressure party and occasional junior coalition government partner has helped induce several state reforms. This process has led to the gradual transformation of Belgium from a unitary to a federal state by 1993.

The Vlaams Blok were a breakaway from the VU in 1978, seeking to go beyond the state reform ambitions of the latter and pursue the more radical demand of full independence of Flanders from Belgium. Failing to impress the electorate in its initial outings, the Vlaams Blok decided to rekindle the Flemish movement's far-right past (Bouveroux, 1998: 212), transforming themselves into a text-book far-right populist party that counter-posed itself to political elites, francophones, immigrants and law-breakers, all of which were framed as a threat to the ontological security of the homogeneous Flemish people in some respect. The Vlaams Blok leaned especially heavily on nativist themes concerning the protection of Flemish culture from infiltration by francophones and migrants. Its Euroscepticism has been also primarily based on the openness to migrants that membership of the EU entails, as well as the "one size fits all" model of EU governance that impinges upon hard won Flemish autonomy. The VB may be considered a paradigmatic example of a populist party that flaunts the low, with its nativist rhetoric in particular designed to have high shock value (Moufahim and Humphreys 2015). Furthermore, a substantial portion of its success since its populist turn has been driven by the enduring popular appeal and personalistic style of its key figure, Filip De Winter.

Between 1985 and 2004, the Vlaams Blok was the most popular Belgian party, winning up to 24% of the popular vote. Mainstream identification of the Vlaams Blok as a dangerous and racist party led to virtually all other Belgian parties agreeing upon a *cordon sanitaire*, that is, the refusal to cooperate with the Vlaams Blok and thereby exclude it from government coalition. In effect, the Vlaams Blok was isolated as a permanent outsider party – a status that it used to fuel its anti-elite narrative and win still further support with the claim that the party would eventually become too big to ignore. A court case ending in 2004, which found the party in breach of anti-racism laws, led to the transformation of the Vlaams Blok to the Vlaams Belang (VB), the name change indicating a break with some of its more extreme positions and political communication styles (Moufahim and Humphreys, 2015).

Although this signal towards a slightly more moderate direction may have cost the VB some support, its impressive electoral decline in recent years can be seen as a result of other factors. Perhaps most significantly is the emergence of the N-VA from the ashes of the Volksunie. As one author put it, the Volksunie's electoral decline and eventual dissolution in 2001 was due to an 'overdose of success' in having its relatively moderate autonomist demands met through successive rounds of state reform over decades (De Winter, 2006). The N-VA was established in 2001, taking on the VB's radical independence goals, while nevertheless distancing itself from the VB's other extreme positions. After an initially lukewarm reception, the N-VA has managed to communicate a comprehensive and distinctive centre-right socio-economic programme, while establishing itself as a more credible party than the VB on the question of Flemish independence. Since 2010, the N-VA has been Belgium's largest party and entered coalition government in 2014.

The rise of the N-VA corresponded with massive electoral losses of the VB who, by 2014, won less than 4% of the national vote. Although the N-VA clearly

siphoned votes from the VB by challenging the latter's issue ownership of Flemish independence, the N-VA nevertheless distinguished itself from the VB by taking a pro-EU stance while not doing much to politicise the immigration issue. It could not, therefore, have stolen support from the VB on these kinds of issues. According to Teun Pauwels (2011), the VB's strategy of valorising its outsider status eventually backfired. With the emergence of the less radical N-VA and its more credible governing potential, as well as the increasing sense that a vote for the VB is a wasted vote, the influence of the latter has waned.

The N-VA is undoubtedly a nationalist party and claims to construct its nationalism on a civic or liberal nationalist basis, in contrast to a more ethnic or nativist approach. While some are unwilling to concede the purely civic credentials of the N-VA, with former Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt drawing attention to the inclusion of former VB members on its party lists during elections (Leruth, 2014), it is thought to have 'borderline status with regard to populism' (Pauwels and Rooduijn, 2015: 127). Much like the SVP, the N-VA hardly engages in a populist narrative on a wide range of socio-economic issues, mostly taking a conservative stance. Indeed, there is little effort to create a moral antagonism between the Flemish elite politicians and the people of Flanders. However, a populist frame has been clearly discernible with regard to Wallonia in connection with issues of Flemish autonomy.

The creation of a federal Belgium, where Flemish and Walloon authorities retain sovereignty over cultural issues, has provided the Flemish with a large degree of ontological security from francophone cultural dominance. Nevertheless, the N-VA promotes a defensive discourse when it comes to cultural issues vis-à-vis Walloons. For example, francophones living in the Flemish region are framed not as co-citizens, but as "immigrants" like any other who are only welcome to the extent that they integrate with Flemish society (Ceuppens, 2011).

More fundamentally, however, the N-VA insist that continued political integration with Wallonia is a threat to the ontological security of Flanders in both political and economic terms. Politically, both Walloon elites and citizens are portrayed as obstructionist to the true will of the Flemish people, who wish to finally become an independent state and shape their lifeworld in accord with their own traditions and preferences. This situation is not chalked down to a case of reasonable disagreement, but is fundamentally regarded as a result of Walloon corruption. The fiscal transfers between economically powerful Flanders and economically depressed Wallonia, where the former has subsidised the latter's welfare system for decades, are substantial. The N-VA have capitalised on this phenomenon, claiming that the incompetent Walloon elites are seeking to maintain the support of their lazy and unproductive citizens by keeping Wallonia dependent on the hard-working Flemish people in a unified federal state. The switch to low political discourse, invoking parasitic images of Wallonia (Jamin, 2011) that are particularly shocking to the Walloons, and the prominence of the N-VA's charismatic leader Bart De Wever in making the case for Flemish independence against Wallonia, is consistent with familiar populist features.

The prospects of full Flemish independence in the near future look slim, not least because of the more moderate position regarding state reform held by the other parties. Nevertheless, by making itself a palatable coalition partner, the N-VA have managed to expand the realm of possibility in terms of Flemish autonomy goals, while impacting Belgian political culture in significant respects. Not only have the N-VA provoked the sixth reform of the state in 2011, involving a greater devolution of competences to the regions, they have also made Flemish politics less consensual. Nowhere was this more evident than in 2010 when, following its electoral victory, the N-VA stalled government formation for 541 days by refusing to compromise on its state reform demands. Such a long period without compromise, of course, only contributed to the N-VA's narrative that the will of the Flemish people cannot be translated into policy so long as power is shared with Wallonia. The party is now eyeing further state reforms in advance of the 2019 elections and the fear of political deadlock returns.

The influence of the VB, however, should not be entirely discounted: it now seeks to recover lost supporters from the N-VA, which is portrayed as just another part of the corrupt elite. In an effort to retain such voters, in recent years the N-VA have drifted further towards some of the VB's core positions, adopting a tougher stance on immigration (Pauwels and Van Haute, 2017), while abandoning its pro-European attitude in favour of "Europealism" (or moderate scepticism) pertaining to European integration (Leruth, 2014).

Populist nationalism and political influence: some lessons

Populist nationalism takes the nation-state as the container of ontological security for citizens. It draws on ambiguities in liberal nationalism concerning what counts as a genuine threat to the nation-state in its ability to persist through time and ensure that citizens feel secure in their political, social and economic environments. Essential to the political success of populist nationalism, however, is the sufficiently widespread sense that established political representatives are failing to do what is necessary to provide the conditions for protecting ontological security. With the possible exception of the N-VA, who may just straddle the border of liberal nationalism and populist nationalism, UKIP, the SVP and the VB are clear examples of populist parties. They fulfil the essential ideational conditions of the phenomenon, in addition to displaying the non-essential but indicative features of personalistic leadership and low political discourse.

The first lesson from the three cases presented in this paper is that high intensity crises of representation are not necessary for populist success. A rise in populism is often associated with major events, like economic shocks or the sudden influx of refugees to a region, which reveal or induce a crisis of representation that can be then exploited by populist entrepreneurs. In all three cases discussed here, however, populist nationalism has been a slow-burning affair in response to long-term and systemic grievances. In particular, the cases demonstrate that populism thrives on forms of depoliticisation where citizens feel unable to sufficiently influence

political decisions. In each case, populist nationalism has sustained itself for decades on the loss of sovereignty to the EU and its purportedly technocratic and hegemonic form of governance. Belgian populism in particular is also fuelled by constitutionally enforced power-sharing between parties across the Flemish and Walloon regions – a constraint that naturally limits the ability of citizens from different regions to translate their votes into policy.

The cases also offer several lessons pertaining to the ability of a populist nationalist party to have an influential presence on the political stage over time. First of all, being a credible candidate for government formation would seem to have an impact, at least in the long run. UKIP's inability to break into Westminster and the VB's forced exile from government coalition undoubtedly played a role in their respective electoral declines. By contrast, the SVP have a long-tradition of serving in government as a non-populist party prior to 1992, while the N-VA has impressively built on the pre-existing governing credentials of its predecessor, the Volksunie. In effect, although taking up the role of political outsider can help populists in their anti-establishment appeals, electorates appear to have limited patience for parties with low chances of attaining access to power.

Second, and relatedly, the SVP and the N-VA illustrate the importance of developing publicly demonstrable competence in a range of issue areas to improve chances of longevity. Indeed, the prospect of serving in government can be an incentive for parties to develop such a profile. Although both UKIP and the VB had broader socioeconomic platforms, their public communication strategies on the national level at least have been overwhelmingly focused upon their areas of issue ownership. Once UKIP's demands largely appeared to be met on their areas of issue ownership as a result of the Brexit referendum, and once the N-VA integrated some radical VB demands into a more comprehensive and moderate overall programme, the influence of the former parties rapidly began to wane. In effect, populist nationalism is not immune to the vulnerabilities associated with building a political profile that continuously foregrounds a narrow range of issues.

There are, however, factors external to populist nationalist parties that make them less likely to be in government and thereby more likely to build their profile as a whip on just a small number of issues. First, it has been regularly observed that populists fare better under proportional representation, rather than electoral systems operating under a purely majoritarian logic. Essentially, by ensuring that a lower proportion of first preference votes are required to gain parliamentary access, systems of proportional representation ensure that fledgling populist parties can more easily gain a foothold in parliament and thereby begin to develop as a more formidable political force with potential access to government power. The inability of UKIP to attain significant representation in Westminster's majoritarian system, compared with its ascendance in consecutive European Parliamentary elections operating in accord with a system of proportional representation, offers support for this view. Further evidence is provided by the electoral fortunes of the SVP: though constituting the largest party in the lower house, which is elected by means of Proportional Representation, they are only the fourth largest party by

some distance in the upper chamber, which is elected according to majoritarian rules. Secondly, as the VB case demonstrates, at least in political systems where coalition government is the norm, the willingness of mainstream parties to enter into coalition with populist nationalists can be key to how the electorate perceives the latter's chances of governing.

Due to the increasing role of international institutions, and the related rise of immigration, both of which are a result and driver of globalisation processes that challenge the nation-state as traditionally conceived, populist nationalism has the right conditions to both survive and thrive. Nevertheless, systemic representative deficits and more specific crises of representation signal a vacuum that need not lead to major populist gains. Rather, such vacuums have the potential to be filled by political entrepreneurs of varying stripes. The crucial task for such entrepreneurs – be they liberal nationalists, supranationalists or even cosmopolitans – is to demonstrate that their vision provides the best means of protecting citizens' ontological security in a changing world.

Notes

- 1 Perhaps most famously, in the context of questioning the legitimacy of the first President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, Farage told Van Rompuy that he had 'all the charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk', among other things. www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/25/nigel-farage-herman-van-rompuy-damp-rag, accessed on 4 February 2017.
- 2 Infamously, during the Brexit campaign and in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, Farage stood proudly in front of a billboard depicting lines of refugees coming towards the onlooker, with the phrase "Breaking Point" printed across it to suggest that the UK was about to be overrun by refugees if it stayed in the EU.
- 3 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/24/nigel-farage-dawn-is-breaking-over-independent-uk/, accessed 29 January 2017.
- 4 Due to a small party split in 2007, prompted by the refusal of the National Council to re-elect Blocher to the Federal Council, the SVP lost both its seats in the executive. One was quickly regained in 2008, whereas the second was not regained until 2016.

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