

Extreme Right and Role of the Left: country report from Belgium.

I will start with an overview of right wing populism in Belgium and of some explanation of its successes and evolutions those last two decades. I will then develop some ideas to stop extreme right, with a special stress put on the role of the left parties to put an end to it.

Overview

In Belgium as elsewhere in Western Europe, we have seen a rise of extreme rise from the late eighties. Those parties tend to **crystallizes the “anti-system vote”**, paradoxically with the aid of the fact that voting is compulsory. Indeed, this system tends to reinforce the extreme right, while in other countries (such as France), the distrust in the whole system is highly reflected in the abstention (especially in the labourers vote). As you know, Belgium is politically, administratively and culturally divided between Flemish and French speakers, so the **existence of two different public opinions** requires to study distinctively the rise of the extreme right.

Wallonia and Brussels

over the years, the only occasional successes of extreme right parties (mainly the Front National) made it **difficult to form a sustainable structure**. Nevertheless, its weakness, and then its parliamentary disappearing at the former elections has to be mainly understood as a consequence of this incapacity to organize itself. There is indeed a **strong precarious social basis very responsive to security and xenophobic themes**, so there is ground for a future rebirth of extreme right. However, from now, the French speaking Socialist Party, thanks partly to its organic ties to the socialist trade union FGTB (in a country where nearly 90% of the population is connected with a trade union) ensure a strong social guidance for the ones excluded from the system. This allows the socialist party to attract their votes despite the sometimes very right wing positioning on migration and security issues of socialist voters.

Flanders

Contrary to the French speaking Belgium, the Flemish extreme right, impersonate since the 1980s by the **Vlaams Belang** (who was called before Vlaams blok), is born on an extreme Flemish nationalist position, with a **strong refusal of the solidarity between Flanders and Wallonie** (Flemish part has a prosper service economy, when Wallonia and Bruxelles are characterized by disindustrialisation and a high rate of unemployment). After its first electoral successes, the VB moves rapidly towards a **radically hostile discourse against migrants**. With those two ideological pillars, the VB has become more and more successful, until becoming the second largest Flemish party with 24% of the vote in regional elections of 2004 (in comparasion, even at his best times, the Frot National never cross the line of 8 percents). While the French speaking extreme right is characterized by its weak structure, the VB is on the contrary very well organized and strategically coherent, Having a training institute for his employees, and showing a **great will to influence traditional parties’ political orientations**, does not hesitate to quote Gramsci and the need to win the “cultural hegemony”, mainly on the migration issue. A very successful plan, since the party has very often managed to put its themes (security, regionalism, migration) on the top of the agenda in Flanders and, therefore, in Belgium, despite of the policy of “cordon sanitaire”, the equivalent of the Republican Front against Far right in France.

VB’s success story was strongly stopped during the 2010 national elections. On this very date, **the extreme right party dropped from 2nd largest position in Flanders to 5th in favor of the NV-A (New-flemish Aliiance)** which became the first party of the country. The NV-A built its success on combining efficiently on one hand a **populism for rich** (characterized by its refusal of the solidarity with the south,

and in a lower level, with migrants) and on the other hand a **ultra-liberal economic stance** (that allow to catch the votes of the traditional right in Flanders). If we cannot speak of an extreme right party in its traditional sense, the NVA plays systematically with a confusing position on right-wing issues, flirting openly with VB's traditional electorate. Until now, it has refused to form a coalition with the extreme right's party, but many of VB's members defected and joined the NV-A shortly before the 2012 local elections. For example, the VB program's writer (who was so xenophobic that it led to a penal sanction in 2004) became a civil officer at the Flemish municipality of Alost. Its leader, Bart de Wever, and the policies he implements as mayor of Antwerp are strongly right wing, with a particular hostility against migrants (e.g. the refusal to reimburse HIV medicines for illegal migrants).

Even if there is an academic controversy about to qualify NVA as authoritarian right, there are a lot of worrying signs: His **openly willing to destroy the Belgian social model**; His flirt with far right; his political practice on the local level; His refusal of any political compromise (as the political crisis with more than one year without government shows), the very charismatic figure of his leader, and so on... All of that suggest a **real authoritarian danger**. Some polls placing him and the VB with Flemish absolute majority for the general elections of 2014, what could place him in a politically inescapable position. In a certain way, the quasi-hegemony of the NV-A turns is more worrying than VB's high scores of the 1980s-1990s.

The impact of economic crisis.

we cannot say that the crisis has led to a rise of populist right. First of all, Belgium stayed a long time unaffected by the austerity measures due to the **absence of government**. Secondly, and perhaps the most important point, the last elections has been largely dominated by the **obviously strong community division between Flemish and French-speakers**. Moreover, we cannot really speak about a social-inclination of the rhetoric of far right: they occasionally mentions the necessity to save Belgian social model, but they essentially aim to reinforce the feelings against migrants – which are accused to threaten the social security sustainability. That kind of speech has not been significantly exacerbated with the crisis. For those reasons, we cannot talk today of a social shift in the extreme-right groups rhetoric such as in France during the last presidential elections.

How to fight right-wing populism and what does the left can do?

Refuse to endorse right-wing populism themes

Traditional reflex by mainstream parties is **to endorse the extreme right subjects** (security, migration, in the case of Flanders: the refusal of solidarity with Wallonia). This strategy has show a clear failure in Belgium. in Flanders, **almost all of traditional parties have adopt the extreme right's rhetoric against financial transfers from Flanders to Wallonia**, and this has not lead to any significant weakening of the Vlaams Belang until the last legislative elections and its replacement by the NV-A (which, as we have seen, cannot be considered as a victory against of Extreme right but as a new expression of right wing populism). As the candidate Sarkozy demonstrated during the 2012 presidential campaign, **the adoption of the extreme-right subjects only leads to legitimate them**.

To advocate and defend the workers' rights and social achievements

The best option for the left to respond to the rise of right wing populism could be **to strongly defend the interests of the workers**. It may sounds a bit cliché, but the example of Belgium is very enlightening about that. At the 2009 regional elections, the very left-oriented campaign of the PS has contributed to the disappearing of extreme right from wallonian parlement. It's also interesting to note that the positions of social democrats regarding precarious people may have a clear impact on the extreme

right vote: French speaking Belgian socialists is one of the more leftist in the Party of the European socialists, when the Flemish one is very social-liberal and considered as a middle class interest party. As know that a large part from right populist basis was former socialist voters, we are incline to see that the strong result of extreme right in Flanders and his weakness in Wallonia must be interpretate regarding the respective positions of socialists parties towards precarious people.

Traditionally very weak and divided in Belgium, radical left may have to face a big responsibility regarding extreme right for the national and regional elections of 2014. Indeed, the picture of a French speaking social-democrat party closed to the needs of precarious people is largely broken by the fact that the party is leading the quite right-wing oriented actual government, who is mainly making anti-social policies. So it will be hard for the PS to continue to pretend to defend precarious people, what should benefit to anti-systemic movements, what radical left should efficiently impersonate, or this place will be taken by extreme-right.

It's generally hard to speak about left wing due to his historical weakness, but it's interesting to note that in Flanders, the PTB (Belgian Worker Party, the biggest of the radical left formations) has made a significative rise at the last local elections with an exact opposite position to NVA and VB: The party campaigned in favor of a unite Belgium and in favour of union between all workers against anti-social policies. This fact is even more significative than he made his beST performanceS (8 percents) on the municipality of Antwerp, historical main place of extreme right in Flanders.

To think about a new rhetorical approach on the migrations issues.

We should not neglect that the shift of traditionally pro-left precarious people towards the extreme-right is closely linked to the immigration issue and to the prejudices against migrant people. A number of studies show that the radical left capacity to emperonate rupture with the system for some of the losers of the neo-liberal globalisation is largely hindered by their supposed too immigration-friendly approach. As a response, **instead of adopting an anti-immigration rhetoric (what, as we have seen just legitimized those thematics), the left will have to find a new position, a new pedagogy and new concepts to convince excluded people that the foe isn't the stranger, but the capitalist system,** and of the importance for migrants and non-migrants to merge their respective strikes.

To re-appropriate itself the idea of sovereignty, promote an alternative view of citizenship.

Xenophobia and vote for populist right is partly a consequence of the impression shared amongst popular classes that they **are losing control of their destiny**. By allowing them to take back control over their socio-economical future, of which they are feeling deprived, it is possible to contribute to the end to this feeling. In other words, left parties (from radical and from social-democrats) have to oppose to the restrictive ethnic based citizenship promote by right wing populism, a **social and political based citizenship that allow to give a reapropriation of the popular sovereignty, especially in socio-économical areas**.

Conclusion: to bring appropriates responses to each cases on the basis of shared experiences.

To conclude, I would like to insist on the fact that if we absolutely have to **make specifics strategy for each countries or regions** and that we have to avoid to think that we can make efficient struggle against extreme right in the same way for all territories, there are some guidelines that could be followed for everybody, and each national case can feed the reflexion for others. In that sense, the Belgium, with the existing of two public opinion, can be a laboratory to elaborate a common strategy in the context of the very high degree of diversity of political situations in Europe.