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# Doing gender at the far right

## A study of the articulations of nationalism and populism in Vlaams Belang's gender discourses

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Debates over the difference between populism and nationalism have been at the forefront of political research on the far right in recent years. This paper aims to provide an empirical support for the claim that nationalism and populism are two distinct phenomena by analysing the articulations of both discourses in Vlaams Belang gender politics. In this perspective, this paper starts by presenting Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis's discursive-theoretical distinction of populism and nationalism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 2020), before to introduce the literature on far right gender politics. The contribution then analyses Vlaams Belang's gender discourses by mobilizing this theoretical framework in order to show how this distinction can help us identifying the different dimensions underlying contemporary far right gender discourses. The article concludes by suggesting new avenues for a better understanding of the various discursive strands composing far right politics.

**Keywords:** Far right, Vlaams Belang, Articulations, Nationalism, Populism, Gender

### 1. Introduction

The definition of far right parties and movements has generated a fruitful debate in political science. Can modern far right organisations be defined as populist, nationalist, or both? And if these parties can be considered both populist and nationalist, what is their ultimate defining characteristic? The political science literature has explored these questions, questioning the centrality of the concept of populism in analyses of the far right phenomenon (Glynos and Mondon 2019; Rydgren 2017). In particular, scholars from *Discourse theory*, such as Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017, 2020), have sought to construct a clear

conceptual distinction between populist discourses on the one hand and nationalist discourses on the other. The confusion between these two notions would indeed lead to the reification of the link between populism and the far right (Stavrakakis *et al.* 2017).

The aim of this paper is to provide an empirical support for the claim that nationalism and populism are two distinct phenomena by analysing the articulations of those two discourses in Vlaams Belang gender politics. Although the Flemish far right party is often defined as the prototype of West-European far right parties (Pauwels 2011, 2019), the gender politics of Vlaams Belang (VB) have received very little attention (Akkerman 2015; de Lange and Mügge 2015). For instance, while Belgium has been an important anti-gender hub for conservative intellectuals and organizations (Bracke *et al.* 2017), most of the important collective contributions that structured the field in recent years (Möser *et al.* 2022a; Vida 2022; Dietze and Roth 2020) curiously ignore the case of Vlaams Belang. This contribution can therefore be seen as one of the first attempt to provide an in-depth account of contemporary Vlaams Belang gender politics, as well as a contribution to the theoretical debates surrounding the distinction between populism and nationalism.

In order to show how the distinction between populism and nationalism can be fruitfully mobilized in order to analyse far right gender politics, this paper is structured in four steps. First, the contribution introduces the discursive theoretical approach to far right politics by defining the notions of populism and nationalism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 2020). Secondly, it gives a short insight of the literature on the gender politics of far right parties, and stresses how populism and nationalism can be articulated to far right gender discourses. Thirdly, the paper introduces the methodological framework of the research. Fourthly, the contribution analyses two dimensions of VB's gender politics – its populist anti-woke discourses on one hand, and its femonationalist politics (Farris 2017) on the other – by connecting them to populist and nationalist discourses. In conclusion, by studying the gender politics of VB, this paper shows how gender is fundamentally intertwined with nativist nationalism and populism, and how this distinction between the two concepts makes it possible to achieve a better understanding of the various discursive elements composing far right discourses.

## 2. Populism and nationalism in far right discourses

Debates regarding the distinction between nationalism and populism have been at the heart of far right research in recent years. Indeed, on one hand, some scholars, like Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017, 2020), prefer to look

at populism and nationalism as two distinct yet often overlapping concepts. In this sense, they situate populist discourse on a vertical axis, and nationalist discourse on a horizontal one. On the other hand, others, like Rogers Brubaker (2020), advocate for a mono-conceptual solution in which populism is seen as a two-dimensional discursive space, populism being defined at once as a space of inequality, and as a space of difference (see also Taguieff 2007; Mény and Surel 2000). In this perspective, populism would be regarded as an ambiguous and polysemous discourse employed to construct both vertical and horizontal oppositions. The main point of contention of this debate therefore concerns whether populism and nationalism should be understood “as discursive repertoires with specific nodal points, or contents, or whether the analytical interdependence between them should be blurred because of the polysemy of ‘the people’” (Vulović and Palonen 2022, 547).

If Brubaker's proposal makes it possible to grasp the ambiguity of some populist appeals, the conflation of nationalism and populism inherent to this framework however remains problematic, as a consequence of its reification of the link between populism and the far right (Stavrakakis *et al.* 2017). In fact, if populist politics are *often* intertwined with nationalism, they do not *always* include a nationalist dimension. The mono-conceptual account indeed essentializes the populist phenomenon to its nationalist articulations, while populist politics can be articulated to various other discourses: populism can either be inclusionary or exclusionary (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), for the underprivileged or for the privileged (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado 2023), nationalist or not (Anastasiou 2020). To systematically associate nationalism and populism therefore contributes to the delegitimization of other forms of populism which are more inclusive. For instance, European left-wing populist parties present very different constructions of signifiers such as “the elite”, “democracy”, or “sovereignty” than the far right (Custodi and Padoan 2023; Borriello and Brack 2019).

In opposition to this mono-conceptual account, De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 2020) argue that nationalism and populism are to be regarded as two distinct ways of discursively constructing “the people”. According to them, in populist discourses, “the people” is constructed as people-as-underdog, while in its nationalist constructions, it is represented whether as a nation or as a people-as-nation (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 312). In addition to this criterion, according to these two authors, the differences between populism and nationalism can also be identified and highlighted spatially “by looking at the architectonics of populism and nationalism as resting on very different antagonistic socio-political arrangements, constructed from a bottom-up and inside-out axis, respectively” (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 302). In this perspective, populist discourses

would be constructed on vertical axis, while nationalist discourses would be elaborated on a horizontal one.

By distinguishing populism from nationalism, De Cleen and Stavrakakis's discursive-theoretical account makes it possible to avoid the normative issues related to the conflation between populism and far right politics inherent to the bidimensional definition of populism advocated by Brubaker. This justifies the use of De Cleen and Stavrakakis's framework in the perspective of this contribution. Furthermore, De Cleen and Stavrakakis's account of the distinction between populism and nationalism has already been fruitfully mobilized in empirical inquiries (Anastasiou 2019; Breeze 2019; Jenne 2018). Those contributions, however, do not concern far right gender discourses. This paper therefore aims at fulfilling this gap, by giving empirical support to the claim that populism and nationalism are two distinct concepts, and by arguing that this sharp conceptual distinction can help us to better understand how far right gender politics are structured.

Before to introduce the literature on far right gender politics, a last remark regarding far right discourses remains necessary. Defining far right parties as nationalist or populist is indeed not enough, since both phenomena are present all over the political spectrum. In other words, political actors that are not commonly regarded as nationalist or populist might be adopting a populist or a nationalist discourse or both. As we shall argue, in far right nationalist discourses, which are structured around the nodal point of the "nation", the populist signifiers "people" and "elite" only acquire meaning through their articulation with the nativist discourse (De Cleen, Glynos, Mondon 2021). Nativism can be defined as following:

A racist and xenophobic discourse structured around an exclusionary vision of "the nation" in which the "native" is discursively constructed as a disadvantaged and threatened "in-group" through its juxtaposition along antagonistic and horizontal lines to a racialised "non-native", "foreigner", or "non-integrated cocitizen."  
(Newth 2021, 12)

In conclusion, far right discourses thus articulate a nationalist discourse, which is itself determined by its nativist construction of the in/out axis, with a populist political logic. However, as De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2020, 318) stated, "a populist politics is never exhausted by its populist dimension", and one needs to study how it this anti-elitist discourse is articulated with other political discourses such as conservatism, authoritarianism of liberalism. Following this invitation, the rest of this paper is dedicated to the study of how far right discourses articulate gender discourses with nativist nationalism and populism. Before to do so, the next sections introduce both the literature on gender and the far right and the methodological framework of this research.

### 3. Articulations of gender, nationalism and populism in far right discourses

Unlike other aspects of far right party politics, such as nationalism, authoritarianism, or Euroscepticism, the gender politics of the far right have long been remarkably neglected in political science (Heinemann and Stern 2022, 314; Spierings *et al.* 2015, 3). Gender has however always been embedded in the nativist construction of the people. Nativism itself can be regarded as a gendered discourse, and nationalist politics as a “major venue for accomplishing masculinity” (Nagel 1998, 251). For, the logic of masculine protection underlying nativism creates a parallel relationship between the man protecting the woman and children at home and the state protecting the nation and its citizens, with the nation, which must be protected, becoming gendered feminine (Christley 2021; Fangen and Lichtenberg 2021, 86–87). This gendered nationalism also serves to fuel the far right narratives that seek to recover the idea of a strong nation that has been weakened by its feminization (Agius *et al.* 2020, 439; Rheindorf and Wodak 2019).

A way of underlying the articulation of gender and nativism in far right politics is to consider the femonationalist discourses that those parties have been constructing. Sociologist Sara R. Farris (2017) developed the concept of femonationalism (i.e. the contraction of nationalism, femocrats and feminism) to capture “the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam (but also anti-immigration) campaigns and the participation of some feminists and femocrats in the stigmatisation of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality” (Farris 2017, 4). Femonationalist discourses seek to stigmatize Islam on the basis of the consecration of gender equality as a fundamental value of the European social order. Indeed, femonationalism constructs Islam as a misogynistic, backward and barbarian religion.

Femonationalist discourses are particular in that they seek to construct a double stigmatisation of the Muslim “Other”. On one hand, the Muslim man is constructed as the enemy of gender equality, as a misogynist and oppressor (De Giorgi *et al.* 2023, 493). As a practitioner of a religion that does not respect the norms of gender equality currently prevailing in European societies, the Muslim man is designated as a potential threat to the progressive Western sexual order. On the other hand, the Muslim woman is for her part designated as a passive victim of the congenital violence of Muslim civilisation, a victim in need of protection from the West. Muslim women are therefore defined as a homogeneous and monolithic entity, backward, and characterised by the status of a victim object (Farris 2017, 139). The West is then defined as more advanced, and more progressive than non-Western societies, especially in terms of gender equality. Femonationalist discourses thus rely on a discourse of “sexual exceptionalism” (Dietze

2020), a narrative of Western supremacy based on the belief that the West has a superior, privileged and most progressive sexual order.

Gender narratives therefore underline nativist constructions of the people by sexualizing the non-native Muslim migrants. Populism, for its part, is no stranger to gender logic either. Although for Cas Mudde and Crisóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015, 16), “conceptually, populism has no specific relationship to gender”, gender is indeed often articulated to populist constructions of the people by far right parties. For instance, it has been argued the anti-genderism defended by European far right parties “is best understood as a form of populism” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 56), since anti-gender discourses construct a populist dichotomy between a “people”, connected to notions of “family” and “our children” on the one hand and liberal, leftist and feminist elites, supported by the gender mainstreaming policies of the European Union and the United Nations on the other hand (Hennig 2018, 209).

Anti-gender discourses regard gender as “the ideological matrix for a range of abhorred social and ethical reforms, including sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, adoption, new reproductive technologies, sex education, gender mainstreaming, protection from gender violence, etc.” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 16). In this perspective, far right parties strive to construct an enemy through anti-gender discourses in which gender equality, gender mainstreaming and feminist victories are criticised and questioned (Wodak 2021, 195–224):

Right-wing populists logics are built on the construction of an inner enemy (the “corrupt” elite, feminists, LGBTQI activists, political correctness etc.) and an outer enemy (immigrants as competitors for jobs and welfare and as threat to the national culture and sexual liberty of White women, “gender ideology”, as transnational menace to families, children, and the reproduction of the nation).

(Dietze and Roth 2020, 13)

If both nativism and populism are therefore inherently gendered (Spierings 2020), political science research has not been investigating their articulation with gender discourses in depth. Some researchers have therefore called for further studies of the strategic choices being made by far right parties regarding gendered rhetoric (Christley 2021, 24), and to “formulate bigger claims about when and how gender politics are essential to ethno-nationalist, ultranationalist or racist/white supremacist agendas (Blee 2020, 430). This will be done, in this endeavour, by bringing the discursive-theoretical lenses on the articulation between nativism, populism and gender in far right discourses.

The aim of this paper will therefore be to examine the different discourses developed by the far right in relation to gender, and to see how they are articulated with the political logics of nationalism and populism. Although linking the gender

positions of far right parties to their conservatism is both discursively (De Cleen 2018) and ideologically (Akkerman 2015) consistent, this paper will focus exclusively on nationalism and populism, for the aim of this contribution is to determine how Vlaams Belang articulates those discourses with its gender politics. In what follows, the methodological framework regarding both the case selection and the data collection analysis is therefore introduced, before to move to the analysis of the articulation of gender, nationalism and populism in VB discourses.

#### 4. Methodological framework

In order to study the gender politics of Vlaams Belang, we have collected the online publications of the party on its website (including its manifestos and pamphlets) and on its social medias (i.e., Twitter and Facebook) between October 2017 and June 2022. October 2017 was an important moment for feminist politics, since it was marked by the Weinstein affair, which triggered a new wave of denunciations of sexual violence and its recurrence. In addition to those online publications, we have also studied both the Youtube Channel of the party and the one of Dries Van Langenhove, leader of the Flemish identitarian movement *Schild & Vrienden* and until recently federal MP for Vlaams Belang. We choose to study Van Langenhove's channel because of the fact that he was the most active VB MP on Youtube and on gender-related issues at the time of the data collection. Van Langenhove also represented the most radical fringe of Vlaams Belang with regard to these issues, which makes it interesting to study as an extreme case of Flemish far right gender politics.

Gender studies in politics can be concerned with a range of phenomena. In our analysis, we have therefore chosen to focus only on party publications which were related to two aforementioned discursive strands distinguished by the literature on far right politics and gender, i.e., femonationalist discourses and anti-gender populism. Indeed, this combination of nativist sexism and anti-gender rhetoric is often considered as the trademark of far right gender politics (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 2). This has led some political analysts to regard this juxtaposition of femonationalism and anti-gender discourses as a "paradox" (Möser *et al.* 2022a) or as a "contradiction" (Erel 2018). As this paper shall argue, the distinction between populism and nativist nationalism coined by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) will help us to see that although the far right gender politics incongruency, their femonationalist and anti-gender discourses can be seen as pursuing a common goal – opposing gender equality – while being articulated to two distinct discourses – nativism and populism.



In order to analyse the gender politics of VB, the data collected was coded by categories using NVivo software and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Schreier 2013). In a first time, the collected data was assigned to two categories, that is, femonationalism and anti-gender. In a second time, relying on those two main categories, the collected data was then segmented in subcategories. This segmentation was first based on the key concepts highlighted by the literature concerning femonationalism and anti-gender rhetoric. Some additional categories were then added on the base of the collected empirical data. On one hand, the four femonationalist subcategories are: sexual exceptionalism; veil; femonationalist articulations of security issues; and public spaces. On the other hand, the four anti-woke subcategories are: racism; anti-feminism; public subsidies; education. The next section presents how those subcategories are articulated in VB gender discourses regarding femonationalism and anti-gender populism.

## **5. Femonationalism and anti-woke populism in Vlaams Belang discourses**

Gender issues rarely appear in far right parties' programmes (Mudde and Katlwasser 2015). For instance, in the VB 2019 manifesto (VB 2019), the word "women" appears only five times, and no chapter is explicitly devoted to the theme of women's rights. This is however not to say that the Flemish far right party does not engage with gender politics. For, as we shall see in this section, on one hand, in its exclusionary political agenda, VB articulates a femonationalist discourse of sexual exceptionalism that allows it to stigmatise Islam as an essentially misogynistic religion while presenting Flanders as an egalitarian community in terms of gender equality (Farris 2017; Dietze 2020). On the other hand, although until 2022, the party led by Tom Van Grieken produced little elaborate anti-gender rhetoric, VB regularly criticised feminism in its anti-woke discourses.

### **5.1 Vlaams Belang's femonationalist discourses**

Femonationalism, i.e., the exploitation of feminist themes in order to stigmatize Muslims under the banner of gender equality (Farris 2017, 4), has been an important element of the modernisation strategy of far right parties (e.g. Krzyżanowski 2013). It is therefore no surprise that women's rights are regularly being invoked in VB speeches for femonationalist purposes. For instance, in its only mention of women's rights in its 2019 programme, VB makes the following statement:

Thanks to an evolution of centuries, we live in a largely laicised society in Flanders today. Islam has missed this evolution. Even in Flanders, Islam dominates the personal lives and morals of many thousands of Muslims. This is more than problematic, also because Islam is at odds with Western achievements such as civil liberties and equality between men and women. The most striking examples are the headscarf imposed on women and the ban on apostasy. (VB 2019, 31)

By constructing Islam as a monolithic fundamentalist religion that violently discriminates against women, VB has sought to present itself as champions of gender equality and women's rights. Indeed, this discourse of sexual exceptionalism (Dietze 2020) makes it possible for VB to define the Flemish society as more advanced and more progressive than non-Western (Muslim) societies, especially in terms of gender equality. Ruth Wodak (2021, 222) proposes to think of this phenomenon as part of a "neo-colonialist sexism", in the sense that dichotomies are constructed between quasi-homogenous "civilized" Europeans and an oriental, anachronistic and barbaric Muslim "Other" whose is in opposition to Western norms and values.

As any femonationalist discourses, VB Islamophobic politics seek to construct a double stigmatization of the Muslim. On one hand, in the Flemish far right party discourses, the Muslim man is constructed as the enemy of gender equality. Indeed, according to VB, the Muslim tradition would be a barbarian macho-culture, in which a sexual obsession around control of women is ingrained (VB, 5 February 2021) and in which men play the dominant role, making them more likely to commit sexual crimes (VB, 18 August 2021). In this sense, according to VB, the best way to tackle gender-based violence would be to adopt an anti-immigration and anti-Islam policy.

If Muslim men are therefore designated as "instinct-driven, hypersexual" (Wodak 2021, 199), on the other hand, Muslim women are seen as lacking agency and autonomy. In particular, the veiling practices are regularly criticized VB's femonationalist discourses. Indeed, according to the Flemish far right party, "if there is one threat to women's emancipation in our society, it is creeping Islamisation with the headscarf as its main tool" (VB April 2021, 5). VB therefore advocates for a ban on the wearing of the veil by minors (VB, 8 March 2021) and in education (VB, 4 July 2018). In this perspective, as Birgit Sauer (2016) stated, the veil should not be seen as mere clothing, since in VB femonationalist discourses, the woman's body is made to function as a signifier representing cultural, religious and ethnic differences.

Femonationalism is also to be witnessed in the way the Flemish far right party frame security issues. VB regularly denounces on its website or on its social networks physical violence against women, whether it occurs in the private sphere or in the public spaces. Commenting a European survey showing that 83 percent of

young women avoid public places for fear of attack or harassment, VB has been campaigning for the legalization of pepper spray (VB, 22 February 2021). Federal MP Katleen Bury, former lawyer and expert in judicial politics, is particularly active on sexist violence. She criticizes for instance the lack of actual enforcement of penalties in case of domestic violence (VB, 24 January 2022; 2 August 2021), advocates for awareness-raising campaigns against sexual violence (VB, 7 May 2021), life imprisonment for domestic homicide (VB, 16 September 2021), etc.

If the fight against sexist violence is thus recurrent in VB's rhetoric, it is however never linked to the existence of an overarching patriarchal social order in which such violence contributes to the maintaining of men domination (Hunnicut 2009), which would be a feminist position. Moreover, admittedly, VB denounces violence against women when committed by white Flemish people. However, violence against women is often mobilized for its nativist and Islamophobic agenda. VB indeed regularly emphasizes the (North) African origins of sexual violence offenders (see for instance VB Facebook, 5 March 2018). For instance, while denouncing the fact that one in three women feel unsafe on public transport, the Flemish MP Wim Verheyden stressed the fact that it was mainly caused by people "which often come from certain groups in our society", i.e., migrants or Muslim communities (VB, 26 November 2020).

In the same vein, the theme of public spaces is also the object of a femonationalist articulation by the Flemish far right party. For example, commenting the Brussels plan against violence against women, the Brussels VB MP Dominiek Lootens-Stael argued that "it is a problem of cities where many men who come from countries with a macho culture live, or in many cases downright misogynistic cultures" (VB, 14 January 2021). In fact, VB regularly denounces the "Islamic sex apartheid" in what is designated as "Muslim neighbourhoods, "where you barely see women on the streets, unless veiled and/or under male supervision. Neighbourhoods shunned by Jews, homosexuals and girls and women in particular, or where they adjust their clothing and/or behaviour" (VB June 2018, 16). Finally, the organization of male-free evenings in swimming pools, whether by municipalities (VB 27 October 2017) or by Mosques (VB, 13 October 2022), is also heavily criticized by VB, who frames it as a "disgusting segregation" (VB, 6 July 2021).

In conclusion, in VB discourses, femonationalism represents an attempt to articulate a nationalist construction of Flanders through a xenophobic discourse based on constructed racist and sexual differences. As Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2017, 2167) noted, such discourses claiming to defend women rights "present themselves as attempts to emancipate women from an oppressive patriarchal culture, but really only target and punish women with charges and penalties by demonizing a particular garment, without ever considering the

agency of the bearer". Racial prejudice and gender discrimination thus interact and reinforce each other. To this extent, the concept of femonationalism allows us to understand how gender feeds into the nativist discourse of the far right and vice versa.

## 5.2 Anti-woke populism

Far right parties have played a key role in shaping the anti-gender campaigns and dynamics that have characterized gender debates in Europe over the past decade (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). However, unlike other European far right parties, VB produced few explicitly anti-gender speeches (see however VB May 2021, 26–27). For instance, the only mention of the term “gender” in the 2019 party manifesto is when the VB states that “an engineering degree is of greater value to our society than a gender studies degree” (VB 2019, 75). In particular, VB regularly criticises any questioning of the sex binarity, and has addressed critics to the “gender cake” (*genderkoek*), a learning resource offered to schools by the Flemish LGBTQI+ advocacy group *Çavaria*. According to the Flemish far right party, this learning tool in fact corresponds to disinformation, since it tells that “there are more than two biological genders, which is not true”, and that it also “falsely claims that gender, gender identity and sexual attraction are completely independent of each other” (VB October 2021, 4).

The fact that VB, contrarily to its European counterparts, do not explicitly rely on anti-gender discourses can be explained by the fact that the Flemish far right largely focused on independence issues, and preferred to approach questions of gender and sexuality from a femonationalist perspective. As a consequence, while Belgium has been an important anti-gender center for conservative intellectuals and organizations (Bracke *et al.* 2017), VB only sporadically used anti-gender rhetoric during the studied period. However, this is not to say that the party did not address what is described as gender ideology at all. Indeed, more generally, the terms “*wokism*” (wokeism) or “*woke culture*” are frequently used by representatives of VB to criticize feminist movements.

Anti-woke populism can be defined as a culture war discourse through which “social justice struggles like anti-racism, anti-sexism and pro-LGBTQ rights are being abnormalized and positioned as extreme deviant political position” (Cammaerts 2022, 730). As a form of moral panic (Mahoudeau 2022), it seeks to neutralise contestations against racist, sexist and anti-LGTBQ+ views. While anti-woke populism is to be distinguished from anti-gender campaigns, since they have different backgrounds and aims, both discourses sometimes overlap and strengthen each other. For, each of these speeches are to be regard as an attack on feminism, women’s rights and gender equality. As a consequence, this section

focuses on anti-woke populism, which has not yet received specific attention in the literature on the far right and gender, rather than on anti-gender politics.

Van Langenhove, the leader of the group *Schild en Vrienden* and former federal MP, is one of the most active Flemish far right actors regarding the criticism of what he calls “wokeism”. Van Langenhove defines woke culture as following:

Woke culture is actually a catch-all term for ways of thinking that largely parallels cultural Marxism. Today it is about oppression and intersectionalism. It is about privileges. Woke is a real way of looking at the world, at reality. Everything is reduced to power relations and oppression. The pure philosophical basis for that wokeism can already be found in some French neo-Marxist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. (Dries Van Langenhove Youtube Channel, 24 March 2022)

The woke culture is said to be imported from the US and being spread by EU-liberal elites, multinational celebrities, the media and academia. It not only concerns feminist politics, but also anti-racist and ecologist movements. In this perspective, VB anti-wokeism rhetoric can be seen as a counter-discourse aimed at tackling the wave of progressive politics arising from political momentum such as the MeToo or the Black Lives Matter movements.

In fact, the woke culture is used here as a chain of equivalence under the empty signifier (Graff and Korolczuk 2022) “wokeism” against an elite that wants to impose wokeness on the Flemish people against its “genuine” interests. In other words, wokeism refers “neither specific social phenomena or policies, nor an ideological point of view, but a vague (though loaded with affect) rejection of the evolution of family policies, gender equality, sexuality policies and sex education” (Mayer and Sauer 2017, 59). In the frame of this paper, we propose therefore to conceptualize such discourse as *anti-woke populism* in order to highlight its anti-elitist dimension.

Attacks on feminism are one of the elements composing anti-woke discourses. Feminism is, according to the Flemish nationalist party, a movement that no longer aims at gender equality, but seeks to antagonize men and women, even to establish female domination. Following this anti-feminist logic, VB regularly criticises gender mainstreaming initiatives. It accuses for instance the famous Van Dale dictionaries to introduce “woke gender ideology” due to the company’s decision to add the M/F/X mention in front of a series of words to make the dictionary more inclusive (VB, 12 January 2022). Another example can be found when the federal parliament decided to replace the legal concept of *Bonus pater familia* with more gender-neutral terms. The nativist party then stated that “government has other priorities than this gender-neutral nonsense” (VB, 8 April 2021). According to VB, such initiatives only concern left-wing feminists who are far removed from the “real problems” of the Flemish people.

The “woke hysteria” (*woke-hysterie*) or “woke madness” (*woke waanzin*) would be very present in both education and academia (Schminke 2020). VB states that “a *pensée unique* increasingly prevails in education”, where “from kindergarten through higher education, young people are immersed in leftist thinking and dissenting opinions are problematic” (VB 2021, 10). According to the VB Flemish MP Kristof Slagmulder, “the woke madness is a serious threat to academic freedom, making ‘any debate, any exchange of ideas impossible’” (VB, 27 September 2021). Slagmulder therefore wish to launch an independent investigation “in order to map the presence and impact of woke and cancel culture propaganda” in the Flemish higher education system and “to guarantee academic freedom” (VB, 16 March 2021).

Last but not least, the issue of funding for woke culture is also raised by VB. The Flemish far right party indeed proposes to end subsidies to what it calls the “diversity industry”, i.e., anti-colonialist associations (VB, 24 March 2022). In 2021, for instance, VB took action against Culture Minister Jan Jambon (N-VA), claiming subsidies cut for “left-wing activism and multiculturalism” (VB April 2021, 12). If for the moment, VB mainly targets anti-racist organisations such as the Hannah Arendt Institute, an organisation conducting research on diversity, urbanity and citizenship, and Levl, an organisation that Levl strives for an “inclusive society, free from racism and discrimination” (VB, 24 March 2022), this can also be interpreted as a rhetoric paving the way to budget cuts in the field of gender studies, feminist associations, or LGBTQI+ activism, that rely on public funding.

In conclusion, the feminist struggle is described by VB as “a product of cultural Marxist lobbying”, “assisted by some progressive officials and all sorts of subsidized clubs” (VB, 12 January 2022). A populist logic is thus underlying VB’s anti-feminist discourses, since a political elite is accused to “get angry about the past (street names, statues, ...)”, while the VB is said to “be worried about the future (Islamic terror, immigration)” (VB, 17 August 2017). A good example of such anti-feminist populism and its articulation with femonationalist rhetoric can be found the party’s reaction to the Brussels authorities’ decision to feminise street names, in which the party states ironically that it would be better for women to secure public space in the face of the misogynist Islamic threat, rather than waste time renaming streets:

What would a woman feel best about? That she can walk in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek [a Brussels municipality known for its significant Moroccan and Turkish minorities] without being harassed by misogynistic *kansenparels*<sup>1</sup> via the masculine

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1. Sarcastic term that often crops up in Flemish far right circles which designates immigrant criminal who flouts the opportunities he is given in society.

Fernand Brunfaut Street to the equally masculine Graaf Van Vlaanderen metro station? Or that that street be renamed, say, Sihame El Koukoudingesstraat<sup>2</sup> and the metro station to Princess Elisabeth Station, but that she be shouted at and spat at on her way, and with some bad luck, molested outright?

(VB June 2021, 7)

## 6. Conclusion

The gender politics of West-European far right parties such as VB can be divided into two discursive streams. Indeed, on one hand, VB seeks to construct femonationalist discourses, that is, a kind of “ethnosexism” (Dietze 2016) which uses the theme of gender equality as an argument against immigration policies, by making an explicit association between sexual and homophobic violence and racialised men, and by supporting the ban on wearing the burqa in the name of women’s rights. This makes it possible for VB to present itself as a defender of women’s rights by accusing Islam of being a backward and sexist religion, and by constructing a nativist articulation of feminism, this showing how gender and nativism can be intertwined in far right discourses. On the other hand, although surprisingly, despite the strength of the conservative parties in the north of the country, there is no major anti-gender movement in Flanders, VB also elaborated critics of feminism and gender mainstreaming through the construction of anti-woke discourses.

The dual nature of the gender policies of contemporary European far right parties such as VB has led political scientists to conceptualise these politics as a paradox, or even as a contradiction, with the aim of highlighting the instrumental and fallacious nature of the far right parties’ Islamophobic defence of women’s rights. For instance, Cornelia Möser, Jennifer Ramme and Judith Takács stated that “attacking immigrants for their lack of sexual modernity, and at the same time, gender studies for their alleged transformation of traditional sexual politics seems to be one of the most central paradoxes of right-wing sexual politics” (Möser *et al.* 2022b, 5). Far right gender politics would therefore be composed of two distinct and contradictory discursive trends, i.e., femonationalism and anti-gender discourses. However, those apparently contradictory politics do not mean that those parties are ideological incoherent. Indeed, both femonation-

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2. Sihame El Kaouakibi is a Flemish MP and former member of the Flemish liberal party, Open VLD. She has found herself at the heart of a financial scandal, accused of, among other things, fraudulent use of government subsidies and private donations, forgery and breach of trust. Of Arab origin, she is a scapegoat for the far right and embodies the subsidy culture denounced by the VB, making her a prime target for the party.

alist discourses and anti-gender politics seek to undermine women rights: while femonationalism makes it possible to dissimulate gender inequalities in Europe by claiming that Muslims are the main issue regarding this matter, anti-gender discourses oppose feminism and its claims.

In this perspective, the distinction between nationalism and populism can help us to better understand this articulation of femonationalism and anti-gender in far right discourses. For example, as we have seen, VB constructs both femonationalist speeches and anti-woke politics that the party uses to oppose feminist and anti-racist struggles. One way to understand how the Flemish far right party succeeds to combine two seemingly paradoxical discursive strands is to consider how those discourses are being respectively articulated. For, in VB discourses, femonationalism is articulated with nativism so that the “native” is discursively constructed as a disadvantaged and threatened “in-group” through its juxtaposition along antagonistic and horizontal lines to a racialised “non-native” (Newth 2021), but also to a sexualized one. By contrast, anti-woke discourses of the Flemish far right party opposes a woke elite, disconnected from the the Flemish people, and seeking to impose left-wing liberal feminism on it, while Flemish does not feel concerned by this extremist ideology. As a consequence, while the two discursive strands of far right gender discourse may be seen as contradictory, the distinction between nationalism and populism provides a better understanding of the different dynamics at work.

Finally, although the distinction between nationalism and populism contributes to a better understanding of the paradoxes of far right gender politics and of the way gender politics are articulated to other discourses, one should not forget that populism – and to a lesser extent, nationalism, of which gender is an important dimension (Yuval-Davis 1997), might not be the most relevant concept to be mobilized in a study aiming at analysing the gender politics of the far right. At a time of populist hype (Mondon and Glynos 2019; Maiguashca 2019) where populism is monopolising the attention of political scientists, other understudied concepts are probably better suited for a study of the gender politics of the far right. For instance, conservatism is surprisingly under-conceptualized in far right research (but see De Cleen 2018; Akkerman 2015), and is the subject of little academic engagement. The notion of “familialism”, which aims at “strengthening the care capabilities of families while insisting that families (which, in practice, means mostly women) remain the ones responsible for conducting the care work” (Ennser-Jedenastik 2022, 157), is another example of a conceptual tool deserving more attention for far right studies. Future research on the far right should therefore seek to extend and reinforce the research on gender politics by strengthening the conceptualisation of the notions used to understand these politics, and by











applying them to new empirical research, showing their relevance in the current European political context.













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