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Political colour of metaphor, with focus on black:

The rise and fall of the Flemish extreme right *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*.

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Abstract

"Black Sunday" still is how Belgian citizens speak about the 1991 election victory of the Flemish extreme right party *Vlaams Blok*. The 2004 condemnation by court for racism made the party chose a softer image and a new name. This article examines the ideological meaning of the transformation of *Vlaams Blok* [*Flemish Bloc*] into *Vlaams Belang* [*Flemish Interest*]. Do the changes implemented by the party similar to other European radical right parties testify of a real ideological transformation or are these just a cleansing of the top visible layer? This empirical article presents a comparative metaphor analysis and a thematic content analysis of seven hundred party press releases (2002-2014). The press releases testify of different thematic contents embedded in a by the years slightly less extreme right wing metaphor style that may have contributed to the 2014 passing on of the parties' votes to the right wing Flemish nationalist populist party N-VA [*Nationaal Vlaamse Alliantie*].

Keywords

Extreme right, political discourse, Belgian politics, metaphor.

Introduction

The rise and success, the role of the media in it, and the internal functioning of extreme right parties throughout Europe have been the subject of intensive research during the last decades. Social, ethical and political implications of the unanticipated electoral shift towards the extreme right have been broadly examined (Norris, 2005; Walgrave and De Swert, 2004; Spruyt, 2000).

Rhetoric of extreme right groups and parties is a powerful source of information for political scientists, especially in Belgium, where extreme right parties are currently excluded from government positions by a ‘cordon sanitaire’. When there is a scarcity of observable governmental political acts the need to focus on discourse is even more obvious, because it became one of the few tangible “products” to derive conclusions from. An examination of the discourse of extreme right parties and groups and their political leaders may clarify the most important aspects of extreme right ideology and it may enable us, most importantly, to discover the implications for politics and society (Bonnafoous, 1998; Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998).

This article details the relation between metaphor, discourse, and extreme right ideology. The first part presents a theoretical overview of the core issues. Scholars might argue that real rhetorical or style differences between political ideologies do not exist and that one should concentrate on the mere content aspect of discourse when studying ideology (van Dijk, 2004). But from empirical research can be concluded that there exist significant ideological differences in language style between extreme right and other parties (De Landtsheer 1998; Taran, 2000). The second, empirical, part deals with the Belgian-Flemish extreme right party *Vlaams Blok/ Vlaams Belang* (VB). This part investigates how a specific discourse, a right-wing extremist discourse, is used by a specific political party, a right-wing extremist political party. *Vlaams Belang* uses an extremely powerful metaphor language compared to other parties, as is shown in Figure 1 (De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2011). These results refute the idea that ideological variation should only be sought at the manifest content level of discourse. The third, concluding part of the article sheds some light upon the ideological meaning of the *Vlaams Blok* transformation into *Vlaams Belang* and the trend in their extreme-right discourse until today.

[Figure 1 about here]

Discourse, extreme right ideology, and metaphor

What is the relation between discourse and ideology? How to describe the extreme right ideology, discourse content and style? What is the role of metaphor in right-wing extremist discourse?

Discourse and ideology

Discourse performs in relation to ideology a communicative and a constitutive role. Discourse and ideology are dependent and independent variables. Discourse has a communicative function in ideology. Because ideology has to be shared, one needs discourse to spread ideology. Through discourse, ideologies are explicitly expressed and acquired, learned, propagated, or contested (van Dijk, 2004). But ideologies or ideological beliefs are also discursively constituted (Weltman and Billig, 2001; Graber, 1976). Political discourse constitutes the language of ideology and it is structuring and shaping the internal functioning of ideologies and politics. Rhetoric that in this way structures politics and guides political action resembles motives or frames (Burke, 1969; Brock et al., 2005). Discourse in conclusion, makes use of political language in a reality building process that affects the very reality within which it is being produced, while it affects itself (Montero, 2005).

In so far that political leaders ('ideologists') produce discourse to shape and express their ideology, an accurate examination of the discourse itself may give useful information on the core values and characteristics of a particular ideology (Sutherland, 2005). For a complete understanding of ideology, one has to study *what* and *how* is said. The presence of ideological characteristics at the discursive level in content and style, gives evidence that a particular discourse is strongly connected to a particular ideology, and it testifies of ideological work (Sutherland, 2005: 198). Evidence of attempts to construct a persuasive version of reality can be found in the unity between style and content and in the deployment of persuasive techniques or tropes, other than straight logical argument, like metaphor and metonymy (Cooper, in Sutherland, 2005: 198; Hastings, 1998: 209). This version of reality is presented as a polished believe system and it becomes the central ideological theme. Ideologies develop a coherent worldview in order to better compete with other worldviews. They adjust style and content to each other, but in specific cases it may be valuable to disconnect content and style as we will show.

Extreme right discourse and extreme right ideology

Because the aim of this article is to clarify the relation between content, style and ideology in the case of the Flemish Belgian party *Vlaams Belang*, the former *Vlaams Blok* party, it is necessary to identify what constitutes the core of the extreme right ideology.

For what concerns ideology, extreme right denotes the extreme right side position in the political spectrum, which covers a cluster of ideologies that have important common characteristics and also differences. Fascism, neofascism, ideological racism, extreme nationalism, totalitarianism and Nazism are ideologies of the extreme right. It is sometimes difficult to compare extreme right parties because they produce their own ideological cocktail. But fascism is the ideology “par excellence” because it covers most of these characteristics (Heywood, 1998; Ignazi, 2003). To define extreme right ideology as a fascist or a fascist-like ideology allows to identify the core characteristics of this ideology: irrationalism, nationalism, racism, strong leadership, negativism and anti-politics. Irrationalism (and anti-rationalism) indicates that fascism addresses the soul, the emotions and the instincts, rather than the mind (Heywood, 1998: 217). Fascist thinking thrives on emotions, merely on the emotion of anxiety to determine people’s thinking and acting (Lasswell, in Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005). Nationalism, and people’s emotional attachment to the nation, is yet another fascist theme in which irrationality is playing a role. Negative emotions of the in-group, the nation, can be projected onto an out-group of foreigners, so that racism is encouraged (Finlayson, 2003; Gaus, 2004). Democracy puts the ultimate political power in the hands of ordinary men and women, but fascism argues that only strong and charismatic leaders can ensure the best choices to be made (Lasswell, in Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005). It seems that fascism is at odds with the main aspects of the democratic political system because at least three principles (irrationalism, racism, and strong leadership) are in contradiction with it. The anti-politics characteristic of right extremism may be found in that scholars who refuse to call all European extreme right parties fascist at least agree to see them as anti-system parties (Ignazi, 2003; Brock et al., 2005). Extreme right politicians and parties generally deny themselves being fascists for strategic reasons. Filip Dewinter, who for the past decades was the leader of *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*, argues that “one million Flemish people would not be that crackbrained and foolish to elect an inveterate racist, fascist and anti-Semite Nazi, wouldn’t they” (*Gazet Van Antwerpen*, 31/10/2005). Our identification of *Vlaams Blok* as a fascist-

like party is motivated by the 2004 condemnation by the Belgian court of *Vlaams Blok* for racism, racism being a crucial theme in fascism.

Content analysis

For what concerns discourse, this article expects that the themes and principles of fascism that represent the party ideology are reflected in the party discourse at the stylistic and the thematic or content level. At the manifest content level, a first indicator is the presence of important fascist themes (racism, xenophobia, nationalism). Furthermore, the fascist discourse should contain anti-political and negative content. Fascism-like ideology defines the present political situation and the system as highly problematical and it assumes that we need a fundamental change. The anti-political content should raise support for the upheaval of the current political system. The negative content seeks to create feelings of general discomfort, of insecurity and anxiety that urge important changes (Lasswell in Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005).

The emphasis on change, anti-politics, negative feelings and strong emotion of the “fascist-like” parties is reflected equally at the style level. The party ideology is in need of a militant and carefully orchestrated rhetoric to attain their groundbreaking goals (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998: 7). Fascist-like parties should speak the language of emotion because parties who do have a better chance to connect with the audience (Jerit, 2004: 566). The task to connect with the audience proves to be a difficult one for extreme-right parties, because their ideas are fundamentally different from the thinking inside the political system. Voters may not want to be associated with a party that holds extreme statements, or may no longer be attracted to a party which is not that extreme anymore (Simon-Vandenberg, 2008). The “language of emotion” can bring these two groups of voters back to the extreme-right party.

Style analysis

Scholars observed several stylistic choices that are typical for fascism or fascist-like extreme right ideologies and parties. The management of anxiety seems crucial for the fascist-like discourse, both at the content and the style level. Extreme right discourse repeats, in order to ease persuasion, on

and on certain key words, it often employs rhetorical questions, and ideas are formulated with low integrative complexity (De Sola Pool, 1956; Vandebussche, 1995). These characteristics resemble Lasswell's (1949) "ornamental, effect-contrasted, emotive, repetitious and accessory" propaganda style of crisis. Fascists define the present situation as an unbearable crisis and seem to live in permanent crisis. Metaphors may as we will argue below be the perfect tools for the extreme right to convey their emotion-loaded messages.

Metaphors in extreme right discourse

Before addressing extreme right metaphors we have to elaborate some more on the defining characteristics of metaphors, on the effects of metaphor use and on why exactly they are effective. As a starting point we refer to a broad definition of a metaphor as a word or word group (denominated as the vehicle, the source, or the focus of the metaphor) that is transferred into a context (denominated as the tenor, the target or the frame of the metaphor) that is not the word's or word group's natural or common context which transference generates new meaning (Beer & De Landtsheer, 2004; Cacciari, 2001; Richards, 1936). An example is the racist metaphor used by the Vlaams Belang leader in his 2014 May 15 election campaign speech. Filip De Winter blamed coloured people for all kind of problems: "not the silvering [ageing] of society is the problem but the bronzing [colouring brown] of it" [niet de vergrijzing van de samenleving is het probleem maar de verbruining] (Gazet Van Antwerpen, May 16, 2014). Metaphor is the main classical style element in rhetoric, but it has no minor role in generating content and meaning. Metaphors penetrate the brain in presenting subjects by way of other subjects, and thereby frame things in a particular sense, in which 'blending' they evoke strong emotions that ease persuasion. In not respecting the conventional, straightforward meaning of discourse, metaphors destroy the logic of the current situation, and they offer a distorted perception of reality". Gerolf Annemans, who is equally an important Vlaams Belang leader, putted is as follows in his 2014, May 15 campaign speech: "The Vlaams Belang has always made it clear that they want to get no piece of the pie -no, the Vlaams Belang wants to change the recipe of the cake" (Gazet Van Antwerpen, May 16, 2014). Metaphors are for all parties important rhetorical instruments. Metaphors ease persuasion and simplify complex problems. By using specific images and by disregarding others,

politicians are able to stress particular aspects of reality, and hiding others. Politicians' use of metaphors evokes emotion while these vivid image words enhance the perceived greatness of the speaker. Metaphors can direct attention towards ambitious leaders, they can direct general levels of emotionality in society and they can promote deviating opinions and world views (Emrich et al., 2001; Hellsten, 2002; Sopory and Dillard, 2002; Gibbs et al., 2002; Beer and De Landtsheer 2004; De Landtsheer, 2009). Data testify of a significant increase of metaphor power during severe economic or political crisis and in election times. For the extreme right (and also the extreme left) metaphors are the tools par excellence for realizing their cognitive and emotional 'work'. Groups of the right and left extreme of the political spectrum tend to use more and stronger metaphors Using strong metaphors allows extreme right politicians to make close contact with their public and to influence their opinions, ideas and views on society. The metaphor discourse of the extreme right could be labelled demagogical and militant. In their intensive use of metaphor, the extreme right makes use of the full "political" capacity of metaphor. (Windt and Ingold, 1987; De Landtsheer, 1994, 1998, 2009; Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998; Taran, 2000; De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2011).

The Nazi's "Language of the Helping Professions" illustrates the functioning of metaphors in an extreme right ideology in a clear way (Edelman, 1977). The fascist national socialist ideology directed, by defining and describing threats to the Nazi state as dangerous diseases and deadly plagues, attention towards the Nazi leaders, who were framed as the doctors that would cure society. Also, these images evoked anxiety because the diseases and plagues were treated as life-threatening. It is still a technique commonly employed by propagandists and persuaders to suggest solutions for problems they defined themselves and that render people anxious. It can be concluded that his "illness" strategy that involves the use of "medical metaphors" becomes "practical" if either radical change or the consolidation of a deviant system is "necessary" (De Landtsheer, 1987).

The Belgian case: Vlaams Blok and Vlaams Belang

The empirical part of this article presents the case of the Belgian-Flemish extreme right party *Vlaams Blok* transformed into *Vlaams Belang*. Can we find traces of an extreme right ideology in the content and style of the discourse by this political party? In answering this question for the Belgian-Flemish

party we hope to throw some light on the practice of extreme-right discourse. First, we introduce the party *Vlaams Blok/ Vlaams Belang*, after which we describe the general hypotheses, the method, sampling, and coding procedures. Second, we describe the results of our inquiry into the extreme right nature of the VB discourse, and into the transition effect of *Vlaams Blok* into *Vlaams Belang*. It may be clear that discourse is not exclusively determined by purely ideological factors but also by culture (e.g. media norms, rituals, trends), the speaker's personality (e.g. leadership capacities), and political events (e.g. elections).

Vlaams Blok and Vlaams Belang

In its early years, *Vlaams Blok* concentrated on nationalist issues. The party started in 1978 as a merge of two radical Flemish nationalist parties, but broadened its focus in the early eighties (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998; Ignazi, 2003; Coffé, 2005). *Vlaams Blok* adopted the anti-immigration theme in which anti-Walloon ideas were complemented with more general anti-foreigners opinions. The 24 November 1991 election result of 12 seats in the Belgian Parliament and 405.247 votes indicated that new move was a good one. The elaborated focus was firmly established in 1992 as *Vlaams Blok* issued its *70 Proposals list* with often radical and sometimes racist measures that should resolve the immigration problem (Ignazi, 2003). But Belgian parties agreed upon a *cordon sanitaire*, the formal refusal of coalitions with *Vlaams Blok* (Erk, 2005). Throughout the nineties *Vlaams Blok* successfully manoeuvred further away from other parties until the 18 May 2003 election in which it gained 18 seats in the Belgian Parliament and 761.407 votes. For this period the *Vlaams Blok* discourse was found to look as follows. At the content level the party had adopted a broad range of typical extreme right positions, for example against immigration and the establishment (anti-politics), against permissivism (a lenient view of criminality), and in favour of (Flemish) nationalism (Ignazi, 2003; Walgrave and De Swert, 2004: 484-485). Research at the stylistic level found that rhetorical strategy employed in the nineties was very militant (Breuning and Ishiyama, 1998). An illustration of this militant *Vlaams Blok* rhetoric is the mid-nineties slogan "The Big Cleanup" ["Grote Kuis"], that was used to convey anti-establishment and anti-immigrant messages. Since 1999, as part of a vote maximizing strategy and in order to break the "cordon sanitaire", *Vlaams Blok* aimed at shifting slightly to the centre of the right.

At the content level, the party changed some of its most radical ideas on immigration (e.g. the “70 Proposals” were dismissed) and it expanded the focus by including other than typical extreme right topics (Coffé, 2005; Erk, 2005). These changes were reinforced and accelerated by the conviction of *Vlaams Blok* for being a racist party in November 2004. After a lawsuit of more than four years, the court judged that *Vlaams Blok* in its party publications had offended the anti-racism law by fuelling and inciting hatred against foreigners. The judges cited numerous examples from the *Vlaams Blok* discourse in which they identified a racist scapegoating mechanism (e.g. “...water proof immigration stop...¹” and “...in a multicultural society, rape is the most intimate form of integration...²”). The moderation of the *Vlaams Blok* discourse since 1999 should be considered against the background of this ongoing lawsuit and the anticipation of a conviction. The need for change accumulated into the creation of a new party *Vlaams Belang* [*Flemish Interest*] a few days after the conviction. The renaming of *Vlaams Blok* was a deliberate attempt to make clear that *Vlaams Belang* is a different party than its radical predecessor of the nineties. But *Vlaams Belang* had to make sure that the traditional hardliners that proved to be the strongest and most reliable supporters within the party still were able to identify themselves with *Vlaams Belang*. The aim to preserve the original appeal brought a dilemma to the party. The claim that nothing had changed included the risk of further condemnation, but the claim of views that changed would voters make wander away (Simon-Vandenberghe, 2008). *Vlaams Belang* faced the difficult task, after the condemnation, of attracting a broader ideological spectrum of voters, while retaining those who particularly liked *Vlaams Blok* for being a party that stood out of the traditional political system. It seems as if *Vlaams Belang* could not hold on to its voters. *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* won every single election from 1985 until 2004, but in 2009 the electoral support dropped (Pauwels, 2011). In recent election polls VB’s share in Belgian politics was continually decreasing (De Morgen, 13/02/2014) and in the May 25 2014 elections, its seats in the Belgian parliament dropped to 3.... Our current analysis of the discourse by *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* at both the content and the style level may help to clarify why the task had failed.

While there has been some research on the changes at the manifest content level, the role of style in the twofold strategy has received much less attention. Because *Vlaams Belang* was forced to soften and moderate the discourse at the content level an analysis of the parties’ style can be useful.

Vlaams Belang had to choose between two options at the style level. On the one hand, *Vlaams Belang* could change its style, for example using less and more weak metaphors. This choice reinforces the ideological break with the past, but risks driving away the traditional radicals. On the other hand, *Vlaams Belang* could persist in using a militant style and thereby reconnect with its radical extreme right origin. This may conflict with the softened or broadened content, but this strategy has a chance of preserving the traditional extreme right votes. *Vlaams Belang* leaders argued that their final goal is to please the biggest amount of voters, and the softening of their discourse is due to a voluntary strategical decision rather than forced by the law. As can be read in the hypotheses, it is assumed here that *Vlaams Belang* will choose the second option of complementing the softened content with a militant persuasive rhetorical style.

Hypotheses

Our theoretical fundaments enable to formulate some hypotheses on the relation between the extreme right ideology of *Vlaams Blok* (VB) and *Vlaams Belang* (VBg) its manifest content and its form or style.

1. Political discourse reflects ideology. We can establish typical traces of extreme right thinking in the discourse produced by *Vlaams Blok* (VB). These traces can be found at the content and style level of VB's discourse. At the content level, VB addresses the specific extreme right issues and themes. At the style level, VB uses strong and powerful metaphors in order to raise negative emotions that prepare the people for a radical change.
2. The transition from *Vlaams Blok* to *Vlaams Belang* and the long-lasting attempt of some VB politicians to render their party more "acceptable" have had an extensive impact on the parties' discourse. We assume *Vlaams Belang* (VBg) to discuss more issues and also less radical ones (moderation at the content level) and we expect to see no significant changes in their use of metaphors, which aims at pleasing both old and new voters.
3. Other than ideological factors are influencing VB's and VBg's discursive style and contents. We expect personal characteristics to influence the metaphorical discourse. This

factor is connected to the mainly ideological factors because strong leadership and strong personalities are important for extreme right ideologies.

Method

The choice of methods reflects our opinion that form and content are inseparable and that meaning is generated through both discursive content and style. The thematic content analysis and the metaphor style analysis respectively examine the manifest ideological meaning and the meaning of the style for the right-wing extremist discourse. The application of both methods allows to clarify the relation of stylistic aspects to the manifest content and to detail the role of emotive metaphor language.

Content analysis

The thematic content analysis was performed according to the content coding categories presented in Table 1. The content categories are based on the titles of the sections that can be found in the *Vlaams Belang* manifesto. The manifesto consists of 12 sections and each section represents a different subject or theme.

[Table 1. About here]

Metaphor analysis

The method used in this study to analyse metaphor is the Metaphor Power Index (MPI) method. Most methods to study metaphor are qualitative and from linguistics or critical discourse analysis, but the metaphor analysis hereby used is a quantitative political-semantic metaphor analysis. The method aims at assessing the metaphors and emotive power of ideological discourse and to examine conceptual metaphors and subsequent framing processes and generation of meaning in public opinion. The method is conceived for social, political and communication sciences , but it (also) draws on linguistics.

Here is how the MPI method works (De Landtsheer, 2015, 2009). From a linguistic point of view, the method combines two types of metaphor research. From the classic *linguistic* angle the (type 1) effects of *all* metaphors to be found in everyday language are examined (Gibbs et al., 2002). Every metaphor is worth examining and focus is on the combined effect. MPI method first takes into account

all metaphors used in a particular political text, because of the mere rhetorical effects of metaphor (cfr. type 1). The increasingly popular cognitive metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2000) (type 2) in contrast, identifies a few (key, universal) source domains of metaphors. This theory concentrates on a few metaphors that may act as important framing devices denominated as *conceptual* metaphors. MPI method classifies all metaphors according to particular source domains that may direct thinking and perception in certain ways (cfr. type 2).

The Metaphor Power Index (MPI) is calculated by multiplying the scores on three variables, metaphor frequency (MF), metaphor intensity (MI) and metaphor content (MC). Using more metaphors results in higher MF-values, using more creative or novel metaphors results in higher MI-values, and using images from less emotive and less escapist content categories (“popular”, “nature”, and political/intellectual”metaphors) yields lower MP-scores, compared to the more emotive and escapist content categories (“disaster”, “sports” and “medical” metaphors) result in higher MP-scores (For detailed information on the method, see De Landtsheer, 2009).

Samples

We chose to examine the discourse in the press releases by *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* because these provide a rich source for ideological discourse in a standard format. An extensive database of *VB* and *VBg* press releases is available online on their websites.³ Press releases are targeted at the journalists that control the gates of news selection, but they also aim to persuade potential voters and, at least, to inform and motivate party supporters. Because Belgian journalists often refuse to select news from *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*'s “,⁴ the party uses every available opportunity to reach their publics, which includes issuing press releases.

This study consists of 700 press releases (in total 228.816 words), or three samples, all dealt with independently. The first sample consists of 500 press releases, of 325.5 words on average, from 12 February 2002 till 24 October 2005 (total 162,743 words). 401 press releases have been written by a single author and 97 press releases mention more than one author.⁵

The coding was performed by 100 second year students.⁶ They calculated metaphor indices (MP) for each press release, according to the political-semantic metaphor analysis. They also coded

the subject or theme of the press releases. Coders had to find one suitable theme for each press release. If a press release did not fit at all, they had the choice to pick a thirteenth undefined category.⁷ If coders did not agree, we computed mode frequencies to determine which category suits best.

The second sample consists of 100 press releases, of 300,6 words on average, from 21 October 2009 till 25 March 2010 (total 30.060 words). 45 press releases were written by one single author, and the other 55 press releases were written by two or more authors.

The third sample consists of 100 press releases, of 360,1 words on average, from 27 July 2013 till 11 February 2014 (total sample of 36.013 words). 75 press releases have been written by a single author, whereas 25 press releases were written by more than one author.

The coding of the latter samples happened in the same manner as the earlier 500 press releases, however they were coded by only one coder. For the third sample, the inter-coder reliability with the head coder of the earlier press releases was .7465 (Krippendorff's Alpha). This is interpreted as a reliable score, because we deal with the interpretability of metaphors.

Results

The first general question we want to address is whether we can actually find traces of the extreme right fascist ideology in the discourse of *Vlaams Blok* (VB) and *Vlaams Belang* (VBg). The second question is whether VB's desire to become a broad platform party and whether the lawsuit against VB has had an observable influence on the discursive contents and style of VB/VBg. Finally, the third question relates to the role of non-ideological factors that influence the style aspect of the discourse (e.g. leadership capacities).

Extreme right party?

Table 2 shows information on the themes VB/VBg discusses in the press releases and on their metaphor indices between 2002 and 2005. Regarding the themes of VB's discourse, we can confirm earlier findings (Ignazi, 2003; Walgrave and De Swert, 2004; Erk, 2005). The typical fascist themes – nationalism (theme 1), anti-politics (theme 2), immigration problems (theme 5) and crime (theme 6) – are most prominent in the discourse. Somewhat surprising economic topics (theme 7) too get a lot of

attention. Anti-politics (164 press releases) and Flemish nationalism (128 press releases) make up for more than half of all press releases examined, while the other fascist themes get significantly less attention, and the presence of other themes is almost negligible. Most of the prominent themes feature a very negative content in order to promote urgent change. Two examples illustrate this. First, in “Time to punish VLD” (theme 2, 8-1-2003), *Vlaams Blok* converts the neutral announcing of the election date into an anti-establishment message aimed at harming the liberal party VLD: *Vlaams Blok* sees the elections as a good opportunity to get rid of “the untrustworthy liberals”. Second, a typical example of negative nationalist discourse is entitled “Di Rupo, return to your village” (theme 1, 8-5-2003). In this press release *Vlaams Blok* blames Elio Di Rupo, a Walloon socialist party leader and mayor of a big Walloon city, who later became the prime minister of Belgium, but a son of poor Italian immigrants, for disturbing Flemish politics. Summarizing, the topics discussed in the press releases are typically fascist topics and they feature a very negative content.

The Metaphor Power Index (MP) for the press releases from between 2002 and 2005 is 8.487. This mean value is very high, even higher than the MP-value of 7.265 found for VB in an earlier study (De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2011). This strengthens the idea that press releases can be a valuable and rich source for ideological persuasive discourse. As the mean metaphor index is this high, it indicates that traces of the extreme right ideology can be found at the style level of the discourse that complements the content level.

Right-extremists need strong, emotive and persuasive language to make their radical policy proposals seem acceptable and even necessary. This especially becomes clear if we focus on the 10 press releases with the highest metaphor indices. Three of them are recent *Vlaams Belang* press releases, whereas the seven others belong to *Vlaams Blok*. Their “lowest” MP-value is 23.87 and the overall highest value is 35.36. In all of these press releases, VB demands radical change and uses strong emotional language to reinforce their claims. For example, the day before the National Day of Flanders (10-7-2003) VB issues a press release that blames the new federal government for damaging Flanders’s future. They explicitly call for the overthrow of the Belgian state. They do so by employing strong and emotive metaphors. A short list of some eye catching metaphors: “VB calls for *opening front*”, “the Flemish demands get *a first class funeral*”, “a three-star *deep-freeze* for

problems”, “the Flemish *capitulation*” and “the *empty hands* of Flemish negotiators”. Especially the death and war metaphors can be very effective. The use of “front”, “capitulation” and “funeral” increases overall anxiety levels and evens at the same time the path for important changes. Because people dislike “funerals” and the “war front”, they are more willing to follow those who say they can make an end to all problems.

Turning to the metaphor indices per theme, what immediately stands out are the high metaphor indices of the two most prominent fascist themes: VB produces the strongest metaphorical messages when it tries to “attack” Wallonia (theme 1: MP = 10.137) and the political system (theme 2: MP = 8.476). For example, anti-separatist reforms are “a slap in the face” (theme 1, 30-4-2002), most pro-Flanders measures are only “a palliative” (theme 1, 26-9-2002) and the royal family “excommunicates” the party by criticizing it (theme 2, 22-7-2002). These examples illustrate how metaphors can render messages more emotive and persuasive. The party uses metaphors to reframe political events in such a way that they become stronger and ask for more radical change or more radical reaction. The economic theme (7; economic nationalism) too has high metaphor indices. Economic issues are not only more prominent than expected, they also are much more persuasive and emotive. Probably this is due to the nature of the messages coded as “theme 7”: these press releases are often a specific type of theme 2 messages as they signal important shortcomings of the economic policy. Just like the theme 2 messages, they have a very negative content aimed at harming those who are responsible for the policy.

Metaphor indices of theme 6 (crime: MP = 7.257) and mainly theme 5 (immigration: MP = 6.724) are somewhat surprisingly below the mean level. An analysis of variance shows a significant difference ($p < 0.01$) between the metaphor indices of the first content category (nationalism) and the fifth category (the immigration problem). This is rather surprising as these themes really are at the core of present-day fascism. Before addressing possible causes, we argue that these values are still quite high. The fact that they are lower than the MP-values of other content categories does not undermine the initial idea that VB’s use of metaphors reflects their ideology. We only signal that VB uses less or less powerful metaphors when talking about immigration or related issues than when discussing the desirability of a Flemish nation or when they report the failures of the political system. However, we

see two possible explanations that could account for these lower MP-values. First, as described above, scholars have reported a softening or moderation of VB's rhetoric as it developed from its small but extremely radical nationalist roots to a broad platform party that seeks to appeal to as much voters as possible. This way, softening their ideas on foreigners and immigration goes hand in hand with softening their rhetoric on these themes.

A second explanation says that lowering the explicit vividness and decreasing the emotive power of discourse is part of a deliberate rhetorical strategy of VB/VBg. We could describe this strategy as the shift from persuasion to argument, or, from the appeal to *logos* and *pathos* to a stronger appeal to *logos* without *pathos*. A logical appeal that denies emotion can be advantageous in two cases: if the facts are crystal clear and if it's dangerous to mix facts with emotion. We believe the latter explains the lower MP-values on the immigration-theme. VB chooses to put its messages on this theme in a more straightforward, transparent way to counter opponents who accuse them of blowing the immigration problem out of proportion and who even launched legal proceedings against the party for this reason.

In the second sample, press releases from between 2009 and 2010, a different image evolves. The themes that are most addressed in the press releases are 'anti-immigration', 'Flemish nationalism', 'environment & mobility', 'crime' and 'international politics'. These ratios differ from the first sample. Anti-immigration press releases predominate this sample, which was not the case in the period between 2002 en 2005. The nationalist theme is still important, but press releases in the category of anti-politics are not that much written in the period of the second sample.

The Metaphor Power Index (MP) for the press releases of the second sample is 5.833. This value is certainly lower than the MP for the 500 coded press releases from 2002 till 2005 (MP = 8.487). *Vlaams Belang* produces the strongest metaphorical messages in press releases in the categories anti-politics (MP = 9.330), Flemish nationalism (MP = 8.341) and social nationalism (MP = 9.213) (see table 1). High MP-values are found in the two most prominent fascistic themes, the nationalistic category (theme 1) and the anti-politics category (theme 2). Within the press releases on these themes metaphors are used which strengthen the message and build it up emotionally. Examples are: "It is unthinkable that the current Flemish government, after the clarifications of Leterme, would carry on.

Unless the virus of coming into power takes precedence at any price“ (theme 1, 05-01-2010). Or: “The process against Wilders and the potential conviction is an organised attempted murder on one of the most important political movements in the Netherlands” (theme 2, 19-10-2010). Striking is the fact that the MP-value of the theme ‘security and justice’ in this sample (MP = 2.548) is nearly the lowest in the entire sample.

The Metaphor Power Index (MP) for the recent press releases is 6.667, certainly lower than the MP for the 500 coded press releases from 2002 till 2005 (MP = 8.487). *Vlaams Belang* produces the strongest metaphorical messages in press releases in the categories anti-politics (MP = 9.4993) and Flemish nationalism (MP = 8.5300) (see table 1). In “N-VA makes traditional parties heave a sigh of relief” (theme 1, 31-8-2013), with an MP of 25.14, metaphors related to war are used: “N-VA wants to be in government and has yet hoisted the white flag, even before the battle has begun.” In “Party funding bill is an expensive operation” (theme 2, 24-8-2013), with an MP of 13,20, different sport metaphors were used. For example: “They are the champions of clean politics.” However, the highest MP was found in the category ‘family’ (MP = 11.4100). This theme was on the other hand just coded once, which is why this must not be stressed.

[Table 2 about here]

Likewise, the themes anti-immigration and Flemish culture have an MP above the mean, followed by ‘Flemish education’ and ‘crime just below the mean Metaphor Power Index. In the three samples there occurs a trend toward the use of more and stronger metaphors by VB politicians in press releases within the theme ‘anti-immigration’.

The five press releases with the highest MP-values fall into different categories, namely category 2 (anti-politics), category 6 (crime), category 1 (Flemish nationalism) and 5 (anti-immigration). In “A Belgian government cannot do anything for Flanders” (theme 2, 9-10-2013), with an MP of 31.04, strong ‘technical’ (“This government will be recorded in history as an *invisible Higgs particle*”), ‘disaster’ (“The number of jobs *falls in the battle* galore”), ‘sports’ and ‘medical’ metaphors are used to criticize policies proposed by the government. In “Total lawlessness in

Meulenberg” (theme 6, 14-10-2013) strong ‘medical’ metaphors are used to characterize the approach to the unsafety in the multi-cultural neighborhood Meulenberg: “*hallucinated*, is the least we can say about the scenes of the last days in the ‘multicultural’ neighborhood Meulenberg.”

What can be concluded from the data to find an answer to the first hypothesis is the fact that VB/VBg press releases overall have a high mean Metaphor Power Index. MP-values are often higher in themes related to the extreme right, in which metaphors help to raise negative emotions. In the case of VB/VBg, political discourse reflects ideology. Therefore, we have to assume the first hypothesis to be true.

Broad platform party?

On the content level, figure 2 shows the frequency of the themes for both *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*. As the *Vlaams Belang* period is much shorter than the *Vlaams Blok* period, we calculated relative scores and we show the expected frequencies per 500 press releases. Three observations attract our attention. Firstly, anti-politics is the most important theme for *Vlaams Blok*, whereas *Vlaams Belang* talks most about nationalist issues. It seems difficult to find an explanation for this shift. It proves nationalism is still a very important theme for *Vlaams Belang*. However, the decreasing anti-politics frequency scores could mark the very preliminary beginning of the softening of the parties’ discourse. Perhaps *Vlaams Belang* prefers taking part in the system, rather than trying to destruct the system itself. Secondly, *Vlaams Belang* seems to grant attention to more diverse topics. Themes 8 (social nationalism), 9 (Flemish culture) and 11 (environment & mobility) hardly received any attention from *Vlaams Blok*, but are more important for *Vlaams Belang*. Thirdly, theme 5 (anti-immigration) becomes less prominent. It’s not sure whether this has anything to do with *Vlaams Blok* being convicted for racism, though the shift is remarkable. All these findings seem to suggest that *Vlaams Belang* indeed is less extreme than *Vlaams Blok* and that the party tries to convert itself in an acceptable coalition partner.

[Figure 2 about here]

Themes 1, 5 and 6, high in frequency in the second sample, are the extreme right themes. However, themes addressed in *Vlaams Belang* press releases are becoming more and more diversified. We saw an increase in press releases about ‘international politics’ from *Vlaams Blok* to *Vlaams Belang*, and this trend can also be revealed in this sample. The themes mostly addressed in the selected press releases from 2013 and 2014 are crime, international politics, anti-politics and anti-immigration (see figure 3). This image differs strongly from the first sample. Press releases about a Flemish state have decreased in their share. Anti-politics is still an important theme in the press releases of *Vlaams Belang* nowadays, but press releases about other themes are becoming more and more common.

[Figure 3 about here]

Now let’s turn to the style differences between *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang*. Figure 4 shows the evolution of the metaphor index over time. We see some fluctuation, but we can not distinguish a specific turning point that marks the ending of an old style and the beginning of something completely different. This is conformed by a t-test: the mean metaphor index after the conviction (MP *Vlaams Belang* = 8.73) is slightly higher than the mean metaphor index before the conviction (MP *Vlaams Blok* = 8.35), but, these differences are not significant. Therefore, we can not state that the transition from *Vlaams Blok* to *Vlaams Belang* marked a shift in style directly after the transition. The style remains militant and at an equally high persuasive and emotional level. However, when analysing press releases of more recent years, we see a decrease of the high MP-values.

These observations make that hypothesis 2 can only be partly confirmed. A clear moderation on the content level is what was expected and found. However, these changes were also complemented with some small style changes. The use of strong metaphors has decreased, but is still somewhat high.

Strong leadership?

We expected to observe the influence of personal characteristics on the metaphor use as some people seem to have the gift to pick at all times the best words, whereas others lack that kind of creativity. From now on, we only take into account the press releases written by strictly one author, as

we don't know which of multiple authors contributed most to a press release. Table 3 presents the mean MP-values of all the VB politicians that have written at least 6 press releases between 2002 and 2005.

The table shows clearly that personal variation exists. For example, we found a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the party's chair Frank Vanhecke (MP = 9.245) and the less known Stijn Hiers (MP = 4.453). However, part of these differences could again at least partially be due to ideological influences: as strong leadership is a crucial characteristic of the ideologies of the extreme right, party leaders, like Frank Vanhecke, will use more and stronger metaphors than the other people in the party. In order to test this, we computed mean scores of the top 3 politicians of VB (Frank Vanhecke, Filip Dewinter and Gerolf Annemans) and then we compared their mean score (MP = 9.2) with the mean MP-value of the other politicians in the party (MP = 6.8). This simple t-test revealed that the differences between the two groups are significant ($p < 0.000$).

In the press releases of 2013 and 2014, twenty-two different politicians have written the 100 press releases under study. In the analysis of the MP-values per politician, 8 politicians who wrote just one press release are excluded. Again, only the press releases written by one author are included in this analysis. Gerolf Annemans, chairman of Vlaams Belang, was in 2002-2005 the one with the highest mean MP, and also in 2013-2014 he scores as the user of most powerful and strongest metaphors.

[Table 3 about here]

When the same analysis is done for the three most important politicians of Vlaams Belang in the most recent sample, Gerolf Annemans, Barbara Pas and Filip Dewinter, no significant difference is found with the other politicians ($p = .085$). What we see is that Gerolf Annemans (MP = 10.0633) and Barbara Pas (MP = 10.0280) provide very strong and powerful metaphors. However, Filip Dewinter does not have such a high mean MP in this sample (MP = 5.8950) as in the first sample (MP = 8.821).

It can be stated that personal characteristics influence metaphorical discourse. Also, most important politicians of VB use more and stronger metaphors than less known VB politicians. Therefore, the third hypothesis can be confirmed.

Conclusion

The focus of this article is on the relation between the extreme right ideology and extreme right discourse, in the case of the for years increasingly successful parties Flemish Belgian *Vlaams Blok* (VB) and *Vlaams Belang* (VBg). Their share in Belgian politics has however known a serious decrease. The conviction for being a racist party, the smooth name and party transition, the ongoing discussion about whether the party is fundamentally different from the other parties in the political spectrum and the recent data collection added more significance to this research. Uncovering some characteristics of VB's discourse can help in deciding whether the moderation and softening of their discourse, reported by various scholars, is mainly due to a radical shift of their ideological groundings towards the acceptable centre, or whether this is part of an accurately planned rhetorical strategy, aimed at achieving at least some of their originally stated goals. This is part of the more general question whether the genuine spirit of fascism lives on or whether fascist parties progressively abandon their traditional values and beliefs (Heywood, 1998: 237).

We tried to answer these questions by examining the ideological foundations of the VB and VBg, and by splitting up, somewhat artificially, discourse in content and style. We argued that VB and VBg may manage content and style differently in order to reach different goals or to cope with different situations. In general, we established strong links between the traditional characteristics of extreme right ideologies and the content and style of their discourse. In VB and VBg content and style seem to complement each other: the discourse features the typical content for extreme right ideologies as it focuses on nationalism, anti-establishment feelings, and on immigration problems. Almost all content is aimed at achieving a radical change that destructs the current system in some way. A militant style with strong metaphors has to persuade the people of the necessity of the change by evoking strong negative emotions like anxiety. This way, both content and style reinforce each other.

However, when we compare the *Vlaams Blok*'s discourse with the *Vlaams Belang*'s discourse, we observe a difference: the complementarities of content and style are more prominent in *Vlaams Blok*'s discourse than in *Vlaams Belang*'s discourse. *Vlaams Belang* has altered, softened or broadened its content over the years, while still preserving a more negative, anxiety increasing style. Nevertheless,

a slight decrease in the use of strong metaphorical discourse is shown. Although it is still not clear whether this is a strategy to maximize voting, and preserving its fascist core, it definitely contains a more extensive shift towards the political centre. With the obvious result that the right nationalistic populist party N-VA at the May 2014 elections had eaten most of the *Vlaams Belang* plate. Icon of *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* Filip Dewinter was nevertheless accused of being responsible for the defeat by younger partisans, as he had not respected, in mentioning the “brown coloring of society” problem, the party campaigning agreements regarding softer word use ... (Bart Laeremans in Radio 1 News, 28/05/2014)

[Figure 4 about here]

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¹ “*Eigen volk eerst, Vlaams Blok, Reeds 20 jaar de stem van het volk*”, 1997

² “Vrij Vlaanderen, Sterk Europa”, december 1997

³ www.vlaamsblok.be and www.vlaamsbelang.be

⁴ This practice is sometimes referred to as the “*cordon mediatique*”, or the idea that in order to fight against the racist VB, media and journalists should not give the party a free podium.

⁵ Two press releases were written anonymously.

⁶ Each coder had to code 25 press releases. Computing intercoder reliability is rather difficult as we have a lot of coders and as they had to decide themselves whether words or word groups are metaphorical or not. Preliminary data analysis show that there are individual biases, but that trends seem to persist. As there is no absolute rule on whether something is metaphorical or not, our results have to be interpreted as the mean of several valuable opinions. Only when the coding instructions have been misapplied, coding can be formally wrong. Ideally however, it would be a better option to instruct all coders to code everything or to have a single coder code all press releases.

⁷ However, this happened only once.

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Table 1. Content Categories of Press Releases by *Vlaams Belang* and *Vlaams Blok* (2002-2014).

<i>Nr.</i>	<i>Category</i>
1	<i>Flemish nationalism</i> (Flemish nationalism, federalism, the Flemish independence, ...)
2	<i>Anti-politics</i> (the Parliament, politics, the political system, political parties, media and democracy, the “cordon sanitaire”, the “cordon mediatique”, the Vlaams Blok lawsuit, ...)
3	<i>Family</i> (child care, combining job and family, elderly people, ...)
4	<i>Pro-life</i> (abortion, bio-ethics, euthanasia)
5	<i>Anti-immigration</i> (immigration problems, abuse, illegal immigrants, ...)
6	<i>Crime</i> (Prevention, zero tolerance policy, juvenile delinquency, crime statistics, ...)
7	<i>Economic nationalism</i> (money transfers between Flanders and Wallonia, an independent Flemish economical policy, globalisation, unions, strikes, ...)
8	<i>Social nationalism</i> (a Flemish social policy, health care, social housing, poverty, ...)
9	<i>Flemish culture</i> (local cultural life, sports, radio and television, the Dutch language, ...)
10	<i>Flemish education</i> (reforms, being a teacher, ...)
11	<i>Environment and mobility</i> (Kyoto, mobility problems, agriculture, industry, ...)
12	<i>International politics</i> (international politics, the European Union, development aid, ...)
13	<i>Other</i>

Table 2. Theme Frequency and MPI-value in Press Releases by *Vlaams Belang* and *Vlaams Blok* (2002-2014).

<i>Theme</i>	<i>2002/2005</i>		<i>2009/2010</i>		<i>2013/2014</i>	
	<i>Theme Frequency</i>	<i>Metaphor Index</i>	<i>Theme Frequency</i>	<i>Metaphor Index</i>	<i>Theme Frequency</i>	<i>Metaphor Index</i>
1. Flemish nationalism	128	10.137	13	9.341	6	8.5300
2. Anti-politics	164	8.476	8	9.330	15	9.4993
3. Family	6	6.722	0	-	1	11.4100
4. Pro-life	1	1.074	0	-	0	-
5. Anti-immigration	55	6.724	17	5.947	14	6.7157
6. Crime	44	7.257	10	2.548	19	5.9574
7. Economic nationalism	44	9.844	6	3.692	7	5.3543
8. Social nationalism	5	6.829	5	9.213	2	4.8000
9. Flemish culture	7	6.363	7	3.645	8	7.3025
10. Flemish education	3	6.305	9	6.421	2	6.4050
11. Environment & mobility	8	6.246	12	2.472	7	4.9671
12. International politics	34	6.968	10	5.679	17	5.5071
13. Other	1	7.828	3	4.348	2	3.8600
Total – Mean	500	8.487	100	5.833	100	6.667

Table 3. MPI-values of different VBg politicians (2013-2014)

<i>Politician</i>	<i>2002/2005</i>		<i>2013/2014</i>	
	<i>MP</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>MP</i>	<i>N</i>
Gerolf Annemans	10.089	10	10.0633	6
Philip Claeys	8.048	6	7.1400	3
Dominiek Lootens	6.126	10	3.9771	7
Joris van Haeltem	7.759	55	7.2300	7
Bart Laeremans	7.147	9	6.2356	9
Klaas Slotmans	-	-	5.4520	15
Stijn Hiers	4.453	13	9.0500	2
Wim van Osselaer	-	-	3.7367	3
Filip de Man	-	-	5.6625	8
Rita de Bont	-	-	4.8000	2
Barbara Pas	-	-	10.0280	5
Filip Dewinter	8.821	46	5.8950	4
Dimitri Hoegaerts	3.893	6	5.5233	3
Frank Vanhecke	9.246	186	-	-
Bart Debie	8.517	16	-	-
Francis Wouters	2.332	8	-	-

Figure 1. MPI-values of Flemish Belgian political parties in newspaper and magazine interviews (January-March 2005) (based on De Landtsheer and Vertessen, 2011)

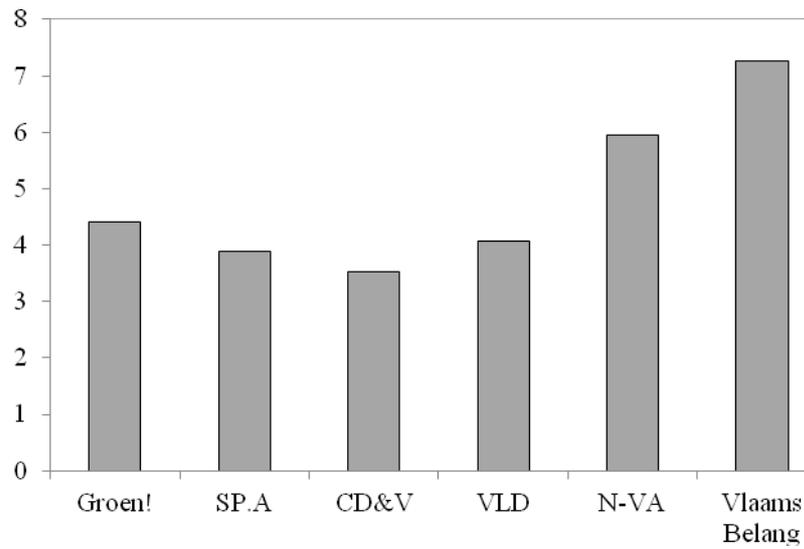


Figure 2. Frequency of content categories in *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* press releases (2002-2005)

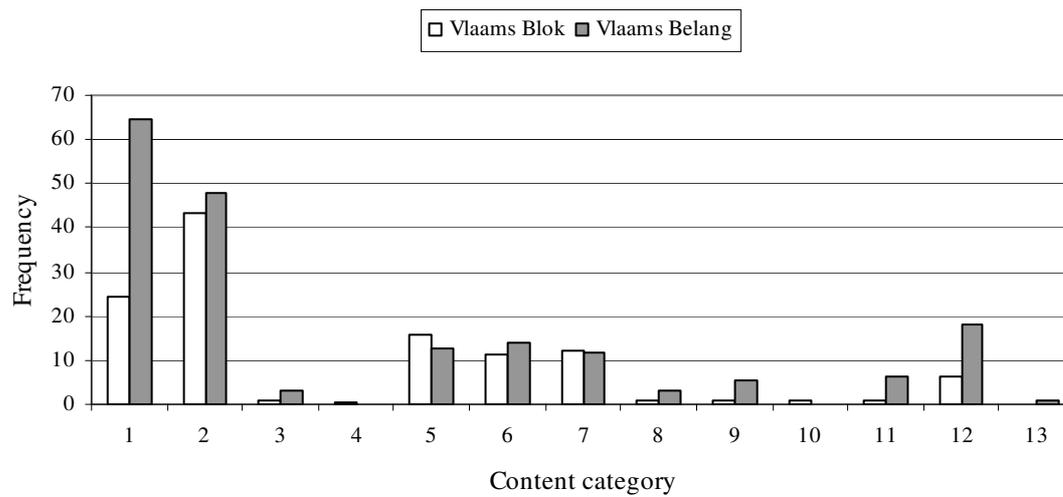


Figure 3. Frequencies of content categories in *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* press releases

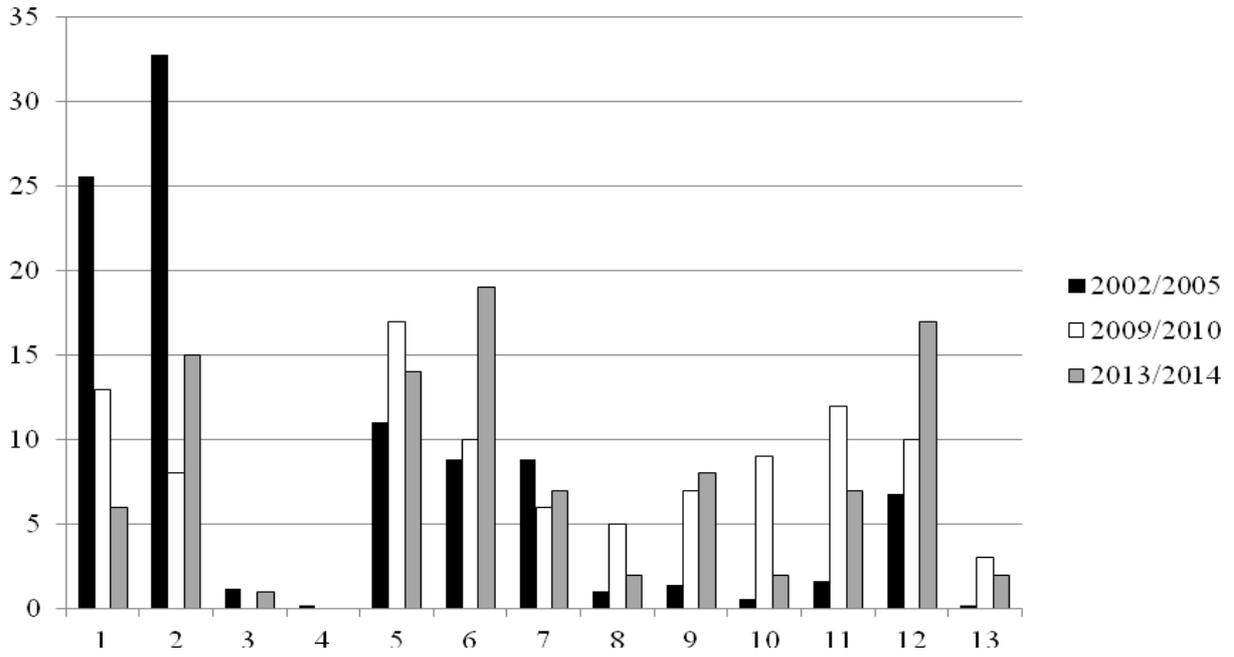


Figure 4. MPI-values through the years in *Vlaams Blok* and *Vlaams Belang* press releases

