

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

A Case Study of Vlaams Belang's *Coronablunderboek*

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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CBB as a populist performance of crisis and as an example of populist stylistics. The paper therefore first asks *how* VB performs crisis and uses a populist discursive style in the *CBB*, before homing in on *why* the party does so. It hypothesises that the book performs crisis most clearly by spectacularising failure (i.e. linking failure to a deeper crisis), by using a populist style and by presenting simple solutions, with the purpose of discrediting its opponents, promoting its own agenda and setting itself apart from other parties (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2015). The paper uses a qualitative discourse analysis that, on the one hand, focuses on Moffitt's (2015) steps of performing crisis, and on the other, takes on board the populist style of discourse. It therefore subscribes to the idea that populism can productively be approached as a political *style* (Moffitt, 2015: 211, ct. Filc, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt & Tormey, 2013; Taguieff, 1995). In this respect, its main theoretical contribution to research on populism is that it explicitly links Moffitt's (2015) performance of crisis to typically populist stylistic devices, such as simplicity, sarcasm and crude personal attacks (Brubaker, 2017), and that it further distinguishes types of discourse within Moffitt's performance of crisis. The paper's key empirical contribution is that it is, thus far, the only case study on VB's *CBB* as well as a rare examination of an entire book published by a populist party. It fills a gap in the literature on VB that should not be underestimated, since the *CBB* reveals how the party fabricates, performs and sustains a sense of crisis among its voters, not least by discrediting establishment politicians, scientists and Belgium's federal structure. Moreover, the party seems to be inching towards a closed-off communicative ecosystem (perhaps more aptly called an 'echo chamber'), to propagate its ideas without fact-checking, which is criticised as unfair censorship – the party's recent move towards the barely regulated platform Telegram¹ being a case in point, much like right-wing Americans once turned to the social media app Parler, but now have also moved to Telegram (De Vynck & Nakashima, 2021). A niche publication like the *CBB* can arguably also be included within that informational ecosystem and therefore warrants a closer look. In addition, while populist responses to COVID-19 in several European countries have been examined (Bobba & Hubé, 2021), VB's approach has not been studied in depth thus far. In what follows, the paper first discusses the complex relationship between populism and crisis. Then, it outlines an analytical framework for the qualitative discursive analysis of the populist performance of crisis as well as its stylistic properties. Next, it applies that framework to VB's *CBB* in a descriptive case study, before finally drawing conclusions and outlining avenues for further research.

2 Theoretical Framework: Populism, Performance and Style

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 Analytical Framework: Destructive and Promotional Discourse

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

- 1 Identify failure: Populist actors bring attention to particularly salient political failures and points of contention.
- 2 Elevate to the level of crisis by linking into a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension: The failures highlighted in step one are, often through performative spectacles, linked to other failures and embedded into a temporal context in order to present discrete and potentially unrelated events as symptoms of a single systemic crisis that must be resolved urgently.
- 3 Frame “the people” versus those responsible for the crisis: The elite and/or other social groups (often minorities) are presented as or linked together with the actors responsible for the systemic crisis invoked in step two, thereby inventing a rationale for discrimination that pretends to go beyond purely racist or ideological motives.
- 4 Use media to propagate performance: To capture and hold media attention (through which their performance of crisis is disseminated), populists communicate in an unusual style, often focusing on controversial and emotional topics, and organise spectacles such as marches and media events, thereby making the failures identified in step one more salient, deepening the sense of crisis generated in step two and reinforcing the group divisions of step three.
- 5 Present simple solutions and strong leadership: This step consists of two rhetorical techniques. On the one hand, populists portray other political

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1 Schematisation of the qualitative discourse analysis

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

4 Case Study: A Qualitative Discourse Analysis of the CBB

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

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

4.1 *Destructive Discourse*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Ranst, with his “unforgivable” (40) and “deadly advice” (41), “bear a heavy responsibility” (34), juxtaposing De Block’s description of COVID-19 as similar to the flu with the circumstances in Italian hospitals in March 2020.³⁰ In doing so, both De Block’s and Van Ranst’s competence is brought into question. They also criticise King Philippe of Belgium (likely deliberately misspelling his name as the French Philippe instead of Filip, the usual spelling in Dutch) for meeting with President Xi Jinping and trying to arrange extra deliveries of face masks (65).

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

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

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

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

4.2 *Promotional Discourse*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.1 *Theoretical and empirical implications*

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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- 32 “Hij heeft immers geen breed maatschappelijk draagvlak”.
- 33 “Marc Van Ranst is zodanig veel aanwezig op de sociale media en in tv-programma’s dat men zich de vraag dient te stellen wanneer hij nog eens in zijn labo aanwezig is.”
- 34 “Naast Noord-Korea is er geen enkel land waarin de bevolking zoveel wordt onthouden, verzwegen, en achtergehouden als in dit landje”.
- 35 “Acht men de bevolking gewoon te infantiel en te achterlijk om documenten gelezen te krijgen? ... Of moeten we de geheimdoenerij zien als een poging om de mensen niet te laten panikeren? Misschien de reden waarom viroloog Van Ranst wekenlang onwaarheden verkocht? ... Of heeft men schrik dat er nog lijken uit de kast zullen vallen? Zoals in het geval van Maggie De Block en de vernietigde mondmaskers? Geheimen roepen vragen op. En al dat achterbakse, heimelijke, geniepige gedoe creëert vanzelfsprekend een gezond wantrouwen in de regering. En in de zogenaamde experts...”.
- 36 “Het beleid werd lakser, terwijl een zachte aanpak uiteraard alleen maar meer en hardere criminaliteit oplevert”.
- 37 “Als ik het tempo zie waarin minister Geens massaal gedetineerden vrijlaat, zelfs terroristen, meen ik dat u beter massaal kogelvrije vesten kan bestellen om onze burgers te beschermen dan mondmaskers die toch veel te laat geleverd worden”.
- 38 “Een jarenlang falend terugkeerbeleid ... een heus leger illegalen”, “de linkerzijde stond die dagen niet zozeer voor de zorgverleners te applaudisseren, maar eerder voor de vrijlating van deze illegalen”.
- 39 “Een vaststelling van veel burgers is dat de Europese obsessie met de open grenzen aanzienlijk heeft bijgedragen aan de snelle verspreiding van de ziekte over ons continent”.
- 40 “Onze mooie wereld zonder grenzen”.
- 41 “Het zwarte pietten aan elkaar doorgeven is een bewijs dat het zogezegde ‘samenwerkingsfederalisme’ niet werkt en zelfs schadelijk kan zijn voor de gezondheid. Na de crisis moet Vlaanderen homogene bevoegdheden krijgen, zodat we een degelijke gezondheidszorg kunnen ontwikkelen, maar ook krachtadig kunnen optreden”.
- 42 “In dit land met zijn inefficiënte structuren kon bijna voorspeld worden dat het ook op dit vlak moest mislopen”.
- 43 “Speelde het feit dat de ouderenzorg een gewestelijke bevoegdheid is mee in de stiefmoederlijke behandeling door de federale regering van de voorzieningen?”
- 44 “Dat was sinds WO II ongezien”.
- 45 “Waanzinig systeem”.
- 46 “Oeverloos overleg tussen regionale en federale instanties”.
- 47 “Vlaams Belang staat aan de kant van de bevolking maar niet aan de kant van de regering”, “u zou zich moeten schamen”, “u hebt zelfs de grootste partij van dit land, ook goed voor 1 miljoen stemmen, publiekelijk de broek afgedaan”, “zette Vlaanderen aan de kant”.
- 48 “Diefstallen richting het zuiden van het land”.
- 49 “De verrommeling en de inefficiëntie van de Belgische staatsstructuur, gekoppeld aan het falend beleid van bevoegde ministers, heeft mensenlevens gekost”, “*failed-state*”
- 50 “Het lekkende Belgische schip is echter niet meer drijvend te houden”.

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