**The Populist Radical Right & the Media in the Benelux: Friend or Foe?**

**Abstract**

*While most scholars acknowledge that the media play an instrumental role in furthering or limiting the spread of populism, the exact nature of the relationship between right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) and the media remains poorly understood. This article analyses the various ways in which the media choose to deal with RWPPs in the Benelux region (i.e. Belgium; the Netherlands; and Luxembourg). Using evidence from interviews with media practitioners (n=46), the findings suggest that in the absence of a credible right-wing populist challenger, media practitioners in Luxembourg and Wallonia adhere to strict demarcation, whereas the Dutch and Flemish media have become gradually more accommodative to RWPPs. This study makes two contributions to the field. First, it systematically theorises the different ways in which the media can approach the populist radical right. Second, it provides illustrative, comparative evidence about the rationale for why some media provide space for RWPPs while others deny it, thereby illuminating the under-researched topic of societal responses to the populist radical right.*

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**I. Introduction**

Since the early 1980s, Europe has experienced a rising tide of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) (Rooduijn 2015). While most scholars acknowledge that the media play an instrumental role in furthering or limiting the spread of populism, the exact nature of the relationship between RWPPs and the media remains poorly understood. Indeed, several studies have shown that media coverage can influence election results (e.g. Hopmann et al. 2010; van Spanje & de Vreese 2014). It is also widely acknowledged that the media are central to understanding the success of populist parties (e.g. Eatwell 2003; Kriesi 2014: 265; Mudde 2007: 248-53). However, empirical research on this topic remains scant (Aalberg & de Vreese 2017: 4; Ellinas 2018: 279). Specifically, there are few comparative studies that shed light on why some media provide space for RWPPs while others deny it.

This contribution examines the interaction between the media and the populist radical right by analysing how the media choose to deal with RWPPs. It does so by focussing specifically on the Benelux region (i.e. Belgium; the Netherlands; and Luxembourg). Despite being otherwise very similar (in terms of geographic location as well as political, historical and socio-economic contexts), these countries have had different experiences with right-wing populism. Indeed, RWPPs have been more successful in the Netherlands and Flanders (i.e. the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) than in Luxembourg and Wallonia (i.e. the southern, French-speaking part of Belgium).[[1]](#footnote-2) Therefore, the Benelux countries provide an ideal ‘laboratory environment’ to examine the extent to which media strategies can differ. Using evidence from a series of semi-structured interviews with editors-in-chief and journalists of traditional media outlets (i.e. newspapers, radio- and television-stations), this article sheds light on the differences in the media landscapes and the various ways in which media practitioners in the Benelux countries deal with RWPPs.[[2]](#footnote-3) The evidence suggests that in the absence of a credible right-wing populist challenger, media practitioners in Luxembourg and Wallonia adhere to strict demarcation, whereas the strategies of Dutch and Flemish media practitioners have evolved over time and become more accommodative.

This study makes two contributions to the field. First, it systematically theorises the different ways in which the media can approach RWPPs. Second, it provides illustrative, comparative evidence about the rationale for why some media provide space for RWPPs while others deny it, thereby illuminating the under-researched topic of societal responses to the populist radical right. The argument proceeds as follows. The second section provides relevant background information including a working definition of RWPPs, an overview of the research design, and a brief introduction to the four case studies: Luxembourg; Flanders; Wallonia; and the Netherlands. Drawing on the literature on mainstream party responses to RWPPs, the third section conceptualises different media strategies from a theoretical point of view. The fourth part presents the different media strategies in the four cases. The closing section compares the ways in which the media approach the populist radical right in the Benelux and identifies avenues for further research by discussing possible explanations for media behaviour. Drawing on the seminal work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), it also reflects on the ways in which different media structures and strategies can create favourable (or unfavourable) opportunity structures for the rise of RWPPs.

**II. Background**

***Towards a Working Definition***

Given the conceptual disagreement on what exactly constitutes this new ‘party family’, it is necessary to provide a definition of right-wing populism. This article is primarily concerned with so-called ‘right-wing populist parties’ (or RWPPs), also referred to here as ‘the populist radical right’. RWPPs are radical, in a sense that they are critical of the existing constitutional order without necessarily being anti-democratic (Mudde 2007: 25); they are nativist (Mudde 2007: 19); and they are exclusionist (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Unlike ‘mainstream’ (i.e. traditional) right-wing parties (e.g. Christian Democrats), they are also populist. In line with the ideational approach (Mudde 2017: 30-31), populism is defined here as a thin ideology, according to which society is divided into two homogeneous, antagonistic groups (i.e. the pure, virtuous people and the corrupt, evil elite), and which considers politics to be an expression of the general will of ‘the people’ (Mudde 2004: 543). The term ‘far right’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to a broader range of parties on the right-end of the political spectrum, including extremist ones (Mudde 2010).

***Research Design***

This article employs a qualitative comparative case-study research design. The aim of the case-oriented comparative investigation is twofold. First, it serves to generate in-depth knowledge about the selected cases. The goal is ‘to understand or interpret specific cases because of their intrinsic value’ (Ragin 1987: 35). Second, while the small-*N* case study design restricts the generalisability of the results, it can serve as a pathway to produce new theories. The conclusion therefore discusses the broader implications of the findings by suggesting avenues for further research.

The article relies primarily on evidence gathered during semi-structured face-to-face interviews (n=46) with media practitioners in the Benelux countries.[[3]](#footnote-4) The interviews were conducted between September 2016 and 2017. Representatives of traditional media outlets (mainly newspapers, but also commercial and public service television as well as radio stations) were contacted. The aim of the interviews was to understand 1) why some media outlets choose to provide space for RWPPs while others deny it, and 2) how journalists justify their coverage of RWPPs. To this end, interviewees were asked about the ways in which they (and their media outlet) deal with right-wing populism and related topics such as immigration. Interviewees were also asked to compare past and present practices, and to reflect on specific instances. The interviews were held and transcribed in the native languages of the interviewees (i.e. Luxembourgish, French and Dutch).[[4]](#footnote-5) The narratives were then organised thematically and compared. To contextualise the interview data, the article draws on existing studies on the media landscapes of the four cases. It also relies on the rich secondary literature on the populist radical right in order to examine the extent to which claims made in interviews match up with the existing literature.

***Cases***

Despite numerous similarities, the Benelux countries have had different experiences with RWPPs; they have historically been more successful in the Netherlands and Flanders than in Wallonia and Luxembourg. Since the early 2000s, the Netherlands has witnessed the rise of several right-wing populist movements including the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (List Pim Fortuyn or LPF), which imploded soon after the assassination of its charismatic leader, and, above all, Geert Wilders’s *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Freedom Party or PVV),which established itself as a lasting force in Dutch politics (see van Kessel 2015). The PVV, which has held seats in the Dutch Parliament since 2006, came in third in the 2010 general elections by gaining over 15 percent of the votes (or 24 of 150 seats), and subsequently provided parliamentary support for a minority government. In the early 2012 general elections, the PVV’s share of votes declined to 10 percent. However, in 2017, the PVV became the second largest party by winning 13 percent of the votes.

Belgium is a particularly interesting case because there are important regional differences with regards to the electoral performance of RWPPs (Coffé 2005). The Belgian state is organised into three territorial regions (Flanders; Wallonia; and Brussels), comprising three different language communities: the Flemish (or Dutch speakers); the Walloons (or French speakers); and the Germans. The Belgian party system as well as the media reflect the linguistic divisions of the country; parties compete in one of the language communities only, while the media system is composed of monolingual French-speaking media system next to a Dutch-speaking one (De Cleen & Van Aelst 2017: 99). Since the country does not have a national party system (even for federal elections), it is possible to treat the Walloon and Flemish regions as two separate cases (Coffé 2008: 179). While RWPPs have historically been very successful in Flanders with the *Vlaams Belang* (formerly known as the *Vlaams Blok*), they have failed to rally broad popular support in Wallonia (see Coffé 2005). Although comparable movements to the VB have surfaced occasionally in Wallonia with the Belgian *Front National* (FNb,1985-2012) and, more recently, the *Parti Populaire* (People’s Party or PP), the francophone region has remained relatively ‘immune’ to right-wing populist tendencies. Since the 1980s, the VB has consistently outperformed its Walloon counterparts (Coffé 2008). In sum, despite the VB’s recent decline (see Pauwels 2011), it remains safe to say that ‘[r]ight-wing populism is very much a Flemish affair’ (Deschouwer 2012: 96).

RWPPs have also been largely unsuccessful in Luxembourg. While xenophobic sentiments and movements emerged occasionally, they have never been able to gain ground. Luxembourg does not have an electorally significant far-right equivalent to the French FN or the Austrian FPÖ. However, the Luxembourgish *Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei* (Alternative Democratic Reform Party or ADR) is sometimes described as a ‘soft version of right-wing populism’ (Blau 2005: 89). Although the party has held seats in parliament since 1989, the ADR’s influence has remained limited. In the three most recent legislative elections (2009, 2013 and 2018), the party’s electoral support fluctuated between 11.3 and 8.3 percent, and since 2018, the ADR holds four out of sixty parliamentary seats.

As shown below, media practitioners in the Benelux countries have very different strategies when it comes to dealing with RWPPs. Prior to presenting the empirical analysis, the following section theorises the different ways in which the media can choose to deal with RWPPs.

**III. The Media and the Populist Radical Right**

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there appears to be a growing consensus in the literature that the mediatisation of politics has played into the hands of populists. Indeed, scholars often highlight the changing character of the media landscape as an important factor when seeking to explain the rise of RWPPs in Western Europe (e.g. Mudde 2007: 248-53). While some studies have focussed specifically on the role of the media in the electoral success and failure of RWPPs (e.g. Ellinas 2010), the exact *mechanisms* remain relatively obscure and hence poorly understood. This section, therefore, seeks to further investigate the relationship between the populist radical right and the media by theorising the various ways in which journalists might deal with RWPPs. It does so by drawing on the rich scholarly literature on mainstream party responses to RWPPs (e.g. Downs 2001; Heinze 2018; Minkenberg 2001; van Spanje 2018).[[5]](#footnote-6)

Just like mainstream parties, media practitioners can choose between a variety of strategies when it comes to dealing with RWPPs. The following paragraphs sketch out three different approaches that media practitioners can assume vis-à-vis the populist radical right, ranging from 1) demarcation to 2) confrontation and 3) incorporation. These strategies are to be understood as ‘ideal types’; in reality, they are often conflated or altered over time, which makes it difficult to distinguish them from one another (see Heinze 2018: 290).

First, media practitioners can opt to demarcate RWPPs by treating them as pariahs (see Minkenberg 2001). In its ‘purest’ form, this strategy involves disengaging with RWPPs by ‘silencing them to death’. However, as Mudde (2007: 252) has noted, there are virtually no countries where RWPPs are truly ignored. Instead, journalists can choose to ostracise RWPPs by means of strict demarcation. For instance, media outlets might choose to deny access to politicians who are associated with RWPPs by means of a *cordon sanitaire médiatique.* Generally speaking, a *cordon sanitaire* is a guarded line put in place to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. In this case, it is a measure designed to prevent the spread of (right-wing) extremism. It is important to note that the aim of the *cordon sanitaire médiatique* is not to ignore certain parties (and the issues they bring up), but to isolate them (Damen 2001). In other words, demarcation implies ‘differential treatment’ of RWPPs.

Second, media practitioners might assume a confrontational stance vis-à-vis RWPPs by opting for an overtly critical stance towards RWPPs. This strategy is similar to the demarcation approach described above; however, it differs in the sense that RWPPs are not treated as pariahs. Instead, RWPPs are considered ‘normal’ political contenders; in other words, they are not excluded from participating in the political process. However, media practitioners may seek to distance themselves from RWPPs by demonising or stigmatising them. For instance, they may try to ‘expose’ them (i.e. by showing their ‘true face’), or they can delegitimise their policies through unfavourable news coverage.

Third, journalists can opt for a more accommodative strategy by offering a platform to spread their views. In its ‘purest’ form, this strategy implies granting direct access to RWPPs. In practice, it is often much subtler; for instance, media practitioners might incorporate some of their rhetoric in their news coverage (e.g. by paying attention to the ‘silent majority’) and/or focus extensively on issues that are ‘owned’ typically by RWPPs, notably immigration, nationalism and crime-related topics (see, for example, Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart 2007).

Just like political parties, the choices of media practitioners depend on the organisational and institutional context in which they operate (see Heinze 2018: 291). Indeed, the choices behind the various media strategies are likely to be influenced by a broad range of factors, including the structure of the media system as well as political affiliations, ethical standards and commercial interests of the different actors (news organisations, journalists, editors etc.) that make up the media landscape (Ellinas 2010: 211). Considering these factors, the following section seeks to shed light on the ways in which media practitioners choose to deal with RWPPs in the Benelux region.

**IV. The Media and the Populist Radical Right in the Benelux**

***Luxembourg***

The Luxembourgish media landscape is very distinctive. Given the size of the country, the number of potential media consumers is relatively small; yet, the media landscape is characterised by an unusual number of media outlets (Barth & Hemmer 2008: 208); next to six daily newspapers as well as a dozen weekly and monthly print publications, there are three national radio stations and one national television channel. The remarkable quantity of media outlets can be ascribed to the Grand Duchy’s protectionist media legislation and the persistence of partisan ties in the written press. In an attempt to safeguard media pluralism, print publications benefit from a generous public funding scheme, which amounts to nearly €7.5 million annually (*Service Information et Presse* 2017). Thanks to these press subsidies, economic pressures are limited, and most media outlets have the luxury not to have to cater to consumer demands.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Furthermore, contrary to most Western European countries where the print media gained independence from political parties in the 1960s, partisan ties persist in the Luxembourgish press, and there are few truly independent (print) publications. This helps explain the high number of dailies, as ‘[t]he difference between the various paid [print] titles on offer has less to do with each newspaper’s areas of specialisation than […] its political or ideological leanings’ (*Service Information et Presse* 2013: 3). Virtually all paid daily newspapers have historic partisan ties. For example, the *Luxemburger Wort* (the oldest and largest daily newspaper in Luxembourg), which is read daily by 32 percent of the population (TNS ILRES 2017), is published by the *Imprimerie Saint-Paul* (IPS). IPS belongs to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Luxembourg and the *Wort* is generally associated with the conservative Christian Social People’s Party (CSV). The *Tageblatt* (the second largest newspaper) is published by *Groupe Editpress*, which is partly owned by the socialist-oriented trade union (OGBL) and maintains ties to the Socialist Workers’ Party (LSAP) (Barth & Hemmer 2008: 210). Whilst partisan links are fading, they remain a reality in the minds of the Luxembourgish people. As one editor-in-chief put it, the legacy of these partisan ties continues to ‘rub off on the image of the newspapers’.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Finally, because of the country’s small size, there is a high degree of familiarity between the media and political actors. Indeed, it is common for journalists to maintain personal relationships with key actors in politics and civil society. One study conducted in 2003 about the Luxembourgish media landscape showed that 80 percent of the Luxembourgish editors-in-chief maintained personal relationships with political decisionmakers (compared to 46 percent in Germany) (Barth & Bucher 2003: 11). In addition, there seems to be a ‘revolving door’ mechanism at work in the sense that many politicians used to work in journalism prior to entering politics. For instance, no less than five of the eighteen government ministers between 2013 and 2018 were former journalists, four of whom used to work for RTL.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The high degree of familiarity in combination with partisan ties and government subsidies make for a very moderate media landscape. One interviewee described the Luxembourgish media landscape as ‘something terribly artificial’, by explaining that it is very diverse but lacks an economic basis:

We have I don’t know how many daily newspapers, we have X weekly journals, revues and gazettes and this and that, and we have radios, and one or two television channels. And all of this runs on a market of 550.000 people. That’s just not possible. [This also creates challenges as far as the content quality is concerned]. Therefore, I’d say, there is no reflex in our media landscape to make it [i.e. right-wing populism] an issue. There’s more of a ‘let’s stay away from this’.[[9]](#footnote-10)

While all interviewees maintained that there was no formal agreement on how to deal with RWPPs, many pointed to the ethics code of the press council, explaining that there appeared to be an informal understanding among Luxembourgish journalists to be highly critical towards populism and extremism. According to one interviewee, ‘there is a great tacit consensus in the press against racism and exaggerated nationalism, even among the more conservative newspapers’.[[10]](#footnote-11) Indeed, the Luxembourgish media generally reflect the moderate views of the political elites. Given the uncommercial nature of the media landscape, there is little evidence of ‘sensationalism’ in the Luxembourgish press.[[11]](#footnote-12) In comparison to other countries, topics such as immigration are not very politicised in the media, even though these views are not necessarily shared by the public.

In Luxembourg, there is a broad consensus at the elite level that immigration and diversity contribute to the country’s wealth. This became ever more obvious in the debates on ‘foreigner voting rights’ (i.e. the so-called *Auslännerwahlrecht*) leading up to the 2015 referendum. The initiative to further enfranchise non-national residents by granting them the right to participate in national elections was initiated by the three governing political parties at the time (i.e. Liberals, Social Democrats and Greens). The ‘Yes’ camp for the proposal was remarkably strong, as it was supported by the youth wings of the four main political parties (Socialists, Greens, Liberals and Conservatives) as well as the two main trade unions (the socialist-oriented OGBL as well as the Christian-conservative LCGB). The print media were also generally sympathetic to the government’s initiative. In an article entitled ‘If the “Wort” could vote’ published in May 2015, the editors of the *Luxemburger Wort* expressed their support for granting foreigners the right to vote:

The editors of the ‘*Luxemburger Wort’* are willing to open the right to vote (not, however, the right to be elected) to foreigners having resided in Luxembourg for more than ten years on the basis of their noticeable integration into everyday-life. We don’t see it as a threat to the political order nor to the Luxembourgish language, which we perceive to be more alive than ever (Siweck 2015).

This decision was surprising given that the *Wort* is generally considered to be a conservative newspaper. Interestingly, no media outlet spoke out against the *Auslännerwahlrecht.* Yet, the government-led initiativewas rejected by 78 percent of Luxembourgish voters. This suggests that the public debate in Luxembourg is generally steered by the moderate views of the ruling elites, and these views are reflected in rather than criticised by the media. Because of the uncommercial character of the Luxembourgish media landscape, journalists have little incentive to establish close affinities to their audiences, spread anti-establishment sentiments or adopt a ‘populist newsroom logic’. The Luxembourgish media system is therefore not compatible with the populist logic. As a result, there is little evidence of ‘media populism’ in the Grand Duchy.

Overall, there seems to be a strong aversion towards right-wing populist tendencies among Luxembourgish media practitioners. For instance, when asked about his editorial line towards right-wing populism, the Editor-in-Chief of the liberal *Journal* said the following: ‘We try to debunk the various clichés and prejudices that are spread by those people, and those unfounded ideas – we try to expose them… by depicting reality’.[[12]](#footnote-13) The aversion towards right-wing populist tendencies is so strong that it has become a bit of a taboo topic. The then Editor-in-Chief of RTL Radio remembered an incident that occurred in the wake of the Balkan wars, which led to an increase of refugees from former Yugoslavian countries, where he interviewed a government representative about the prospect of hosting thousands of people in the *LuxExpo* exposition building: ‘In light of the very sudden and rapid influx of refugees, I asked, “Don’t you think that that might be a bit too many?” That’s when immediately so-called progressive journalist colleagues put me in the corner of the ADR. That is to say: I was apparently very right-wing extremist at that time’.[[13]](#footnote-14) Thus, overall, Luxembourgish media practitioners choose to demarcate RWPPs; while there is no formal agreement on how to deal with RWPPs, there is an implicit consensus not to give too much voice to these tendencies.

***Wallonia***

In francophone Belgium, media practitioners adhere to strict demarcation. Indeed, there is an explicit agreement among media commentators not to offer a platform to the far right. This agreement, which is generally known as the *cordon sanitaire médiatique*, was initiated by the francophone media in the 1990s in response to the rise of the Flemish Interest Party (discussed below) and later formalised by the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel* (Superior Council of the Audio-visual or CSA), which is an organisation that regulates electronic media in Belgium (i.e. television and radio). The cordon stipulates that, during election campaigns, audio-visual media cannot provide direct access to people who are linked to parties or movements that are considered racist or ‘*liberticides*’, i.e. profoundly hostile to freedom (CSA 2012). However, it is not up to the CSA to decide when a party or a movement can be considered ‘hostile to freedom’, which appears to be the greatest difficulty with the *cordon sanitaire*. [[14]](#footnote-15) It is important to note that the *cordon sanitaire* was not imposed by the CSA; instead, it is a purely voluntary, self-regulatory measure that was initiated by media practitioners.

In Belgium, political parties are represented on the governing body (*conseil d’administration*) of their public service broadcasters (the Flemish VRT and the francophone RTBF) proportionally to the number of votes they receive in their respective language communities. When the *Vlaams Belang* won seats on the board of the VRT after the party’s initial electoral breakthrough in November 1991, the board of the RTBF decided to come up with a set of loose guidelines to prevent far-right parties from gaining media access. Specifically, extremist parties were not to be interviewed on livestream, and they were to be barred from participating in televised debates. These two guidelines were intended to obstruct extremist parties from gaining influence, because the RTBF feared that granting initial access would be impossible to reverse. To use the words of the RTBF’s director of legal affairs, who helped develop the *cordon médiatique* at the RTBF: ‘once the worm is in the fruit, it will continue to make its way through the apple.’[[15]](#footnote-16) Given that there was a consensus among francophone editors to maintain the *cordon sanitaire,* the CSA regulation became legally binding for electoral campaigns in 2011 (CSA 2011). Thus, televisions and radio stations in Wallonia have agreed not to feature ‘extremist’ politicians in live-stream in the runup to elections.[[16]](#footnote-17)

The cordondoes not only apply to Belgian politicians. A representative of the RTBF explained that they would also never feature live interviews with representatives of the French *Front National*.[[17]](#footnote-18) Most editors-in-chief adhere to this principle year-round – even outside electoral campaign periods. It appears to be primarily a matter of principle – a principle that is taken very seriously. As one journalist at RTL television put it: ‘*On ne s’approche pas du diable*’ - You don’t talk to the devil.[[18]](#footnote-19) Similarly, the director of legal affairs at the RTBF explained, ‘As journalists, we are the watchdogs of democracy, and as watchdogs, it is our job to bark and – if necessary – to bite’.[[19]](#footnote-20) The written press also generally adheres to this ostracising principle, although some interviewees admitted that this position is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. The deputy Editor-in-Chief at *Le Soir,* for instance, raised the problem of deciding who should be covered by the *cordon*: ‘Say we receive a chance to interview Donald Trump – do we do this? And what about Marine Le Pen? Where do you draw the line?’.[[20]](#footnote-21)

Overall, given the communication barriers, the Walloon media landscape seems impenetrable to RWPPs. To use the words of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the media deprive far-right movements of the ‘oxygen of publicity’. In such a hostile media environment, it seems particularly difficult RWPPs to thrive.

***Flanders***

Whilst the political *cordon sanitaire* also persists in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, there was never a formal media cordon in Flanders (De Cleen & van Aelst 2017: 103). Although most media outlets initially did not treat the Flemish Interest Party as an ‘ordinary party’, media coverage of the party became more nuanced over time (Schafraad et al. 2012). In other words, the positioning of media practitioners vis-à-vis RWPPs has shifted over time from demarcation to confrontation and accommodation. This can partly be explained by the rapid growth of the VB, as it is difficult to justify isolating a party once it has gained a substantial portion of the vote. In 2001, the Flemish public service broadcaster (VRT) published a special note on its democratic and societal role (entitled *De VRT en de democratische samenleving*) in which it explained why it treated the VB differently. However, this guideline was set up *after* the VB had become relevant. According to a VRT journalist, this helps explain why the Flemish media cordon was never implemented as rigidly as in Wallonia: ‘We set up the cordon when the VB had already started to gain momentum. Wallonia has not yet seen a successful far-right party, so the cordon is applied much stricter: in Wallonia, the populist radical right is nipped in the bud.’[[21]](#footnote-22)

As the VB gained influence, media coverage intensified and became more nuanced, thereby turning the party from a ‘controversial outsider’ into an ‘established outsider’ (Schafraad et al. 2012). Some interviewees linked this shift to market pressures, by pointing out that putting a substantial part of the electorate offside would simply not be beneficial from a commercial point of view. This became evident when interviewing the Editor-in-Chief of the *Gazet van Antwerpen,* a regional newspaper sold predominantly in the city of Antwerp, where the VB reaped some of its earliest electoral breakthroughs. She explained that, in the early days of the Flemish Interest Party, the *Gazet* sought to maintain a cordon, but this position was simply not sustainable because the party became such an important electoral force in Antwerp:

There were lots of discussions here at the office at the time: ‘Why did that have to be so big?’; ‘Again Filip Dewinter?’; ‘Don’t put that on the front page!’ or ‘Keep this in the regional pages’ – those were the discussions we had constantly. But I think we’ve grown up a bit by becoming much calmer about this […]. So [the *Vlaams Belang*] has become a party that we treat with wariness, but we *do* talk to them.[[22]](#footnote-23)

In general, most interviewees in Flanders highlighted the importance of maintaining an open mind when it comes to right-wing populist parties. For instance, the Editor-in-Chief of *VTM Nieuws* (the daily news broadcast of the commercial Flemish Television Company) explained that it is important to dare to ‘call things what they are’, maintain an open spirit and portray different opinions.[[23]](#footnote-24) Similarly, the Editor-in-Chief of the left-leaning newspaper *De Morgen* stated that, as a journalist, he had learned to become relatively self-critical and cautious not to judge people who vote for RWPPs by distancing himself from this classically progressive way of thinking. Instead, he was interested in analysing what motivates people to vote for these parties:

It’s difficult to say that you’re interested in their incentives – even though you may not agree with these incentives, and even though you can see the risks of those incentives – but you cannot look at this with an open mind whilst also maintaining that those politicians are not allowed to speak. That simply no longer works from a journalistic point of view.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Overall, readers’ views were taken very seriously in Flanders. The Editor-in-Chief of the *Gazet van Antwerpen* explained that, as a newspaper, they always try to respect their readers by taking their fears and opinions seriously: ‘In my op-eds, I always try to show some degree of understanding – not for the politicians who say these things, but for those people who might be prone to believe in it. That is a nuance that I find important.’[[25]](#footnote-26) The effort of media practitioners to focus on the experiences of common citizens (i.e. populism by the media), as well as their tendency to open up to populist messages (i.e. populist citizen journalism) is illustrative of the populist newsroom logic (see Esser et al. 2017: 268-71), which makes the Flemish media landscape accessible to RWPPs.

***The Netherlands***

These trends were also visible in the Netherlands, where editors held similar views as in Flanders. Most media practitioners highlighted the importance of maintaining an open mind. When asked about the role of newspapers in society, one editor-in-chief said the following: ‘We’re a platform for collisions. And if you have a closed worldview as a newspaper, well, you take position on one side of the debate… Yes, and I find that boring from an intellectual point of view’.[[26]](#footnote-27) Similarly, the Editor-in-Chief of the weekly newsmagazine *Elsevier Weekblad* stated: ‘It’s our job to collect facts and arguments, and to pass them on to society. It’s not for us journalists to decide whether someone might benefit from that information. We should be able to call things what they are; throw it into the open.’[[27]](#footnote-28)

In general, the Dutch media see their role less as educators; instead, they think of themselves as providing a forum for debate. This was exemplified in their emphasis on ‘populist citizen journalism’ (see Esser et al. 2017: 371). Several media practitioners highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for readers and viewers to express their opinions. For instance, the Editor-in-Chief of the popular newspaper *Telegraaf* stated that the views of ‘the common people’ are considered just as important as those held by elites.[[28]](#footnote-29) The two biggest newspapers in the Netherlands, the *Algemeen Dagblad* (AD)and the *Telegraaf,* bothreserve pages in their newspapers for readers to voice their hopes, fears and concerns. This view is based on the premise that newspapers should also serve as an ‘exhaust valve [*uitlaatklep*]’ for people to express their views.[[29]](#footnote-30) According to the Editor-in-Chief of the AD, it is crucial for a newspaper to stay close to its readers:

There are two groups of people who are overrepresented in the media: the elites, and the opposite, that is: those who are kicking at everything. The large group in the middle does not feel represented. And that is our group! We are *your* voice; we cater to the average Dutch person – not because they are average, but because there are so many of them. […] If you have to say something, you can do it here – not just in our letter section, but also in interviews: people like *you.* So if we write about education, we always feature the educators, not the directors.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Overall, there is a great drive among Dutch journalists to address uncomfortable issues to avoid creating any taboos. This marks a clear departure from the media’s demarcating stance during the 1980s and 90s towards earlier (and less successful) far-right movements, notably the Center Democrats (C*entrum Democraten*), which was portrayed as ‘a party of fascists, criminals and scum’ (Rensen 1994). Indeed, in the past, the Dutch media ‘did all it could to damage the party’s reputation’ (Art 2011: 85; see also Ellinas 2010: 209; Mudde & van Holsteyn 2000: 148). Nowadays, however, there is a broad consensus among Dutch media practitioners to substitute demarcation with more confrontational and accommodative stances.

This shift can be traced to the sudden electoral success of Pim Fortuyn in the early 2000s, for which many news outlets considered themselves partly responsible (see Koopmans & Muis 2009). Indeed, Fortuyn’s spectacular rise to fame marked an important turning point in the Dutch media landscape, after which journalists decided to start paying more attention to the ‘silent majority’. This was an event that contributed to the dissemination of populist discourses in the media. According to one editor-in-chief, ‘all sluices burst open’ after Fortuyn gained prominence, explaining that his success ‘showed that we’d really been locked into our own bastions […], and we have not listened enough to the people living in working-class neighbourhoods’.[[31]](#footnote-32)

This trend was reinforced by the Brexit vote and, above all, the election of Donald Trump, which produced an ‘issue culture’ (see Esser et al. 2017: 374) that generated favourable ‘discursive opportunity structures’ (see Koopmans & Muis 2009) for the populist radical right. One week after the 2017 American Presidential Elections, the head of the main Dutch public broadcaster (NPO) wrote an op-ed published in the *Volkskrant* to announce that the Dutch public broadcaster was going to learn from the American elections, explaining they were going to pay more attention to the ‘common people on the street’:

In the Netherlands, the question is raised whether the so-called mainstream media know what happens on the street. Whether they give sufficient voice to all Dutch people, or whether they only give voice to the highly-educated, cosmopolitan Dutch person. We here in Hilversum take this discussion seriously. Because the public broadcaster belongs to everybody. [...] It is our duty to take all sounds and visions in society seriously and to give them a voice and show them (Rijxman 2016).

This sort of self-criticism is a recurring theme among Dutch media practitioners since the electoral breakthrough of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 (Akkerman 2016). There is a tendency in the Dutch media to (over)compensate for the past lack of attention given to the concerns of Dutch citizens by seeking to amplify the voice of the ‘common people’. In an article, the co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of the online news website *de Correspondent* argued that, after Pim Fortuyn proclaimed the failure of multiculturalism,

‘[a] long-brewing discontent with diversity flared up, seemingly out of nowhere. Politicians in The Hague looked on in shock as the bald professor from Rotterdam shook the foundations of the status quo. Meanwhile, Dutch journalists looked in the mirror despairingly. How did we miss this? What followed was a decade of “saying the unsayable”’ (Wijnberg 2017).

Similarly, the Editor-in-Chief of *Elsevier Weekblad* noted: ‘In the past, some issues were ignored by the media, and Fortuyn was able to benefit from this. Following his rise, the immediate reaction of the media was to say: “We did something wrong”, and what followed, was a lot of: “Let’s hear the voice of the people” – it really led to hypercorrection.’[[32]](#footnote-33) This newsroom logic makes the media more accessible to RWPPs; after all, these parties also seek to portray themselves as representatives of ‘the common people’.

Thus, in contrast to Wallonia, RWPPs in the Netherlands do not receive special treatment and are generally not seen as pariahs. When asked how they deal with right-wing populism in general and Geert Wilders in particular, most editors-in-chief in the Netherlands explained that they treat him like any other politician – although some newspapers seemed more cautious than others. For instance, the deputy Editor-in-Chief of the more ‘elitist’ *NRC Handelsblad* said the following: ‘Should we put him [i.e. Wilders] in the newspaper or not? We *always* have heated debates about this. We often end up doing so, but we neverdo so without prior consideration’.[[33]](#footnote-34) By contrast, the Editor-in-Chief of the popular tabloid-style newspaper *Telegraaf* explained, ‘we approach right-wing populism (as far as it translates into political power and parties) just like any other parties, that is to say: we approach them critically. I don’t see any difference. […] We follow him [i.e. Wilders] and the PVV with great interest, because it’s important what is happening there – after all, it’s the second biggest party.’[[34]](#footnote-35) Similarly, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Algemeen Dagblad* explained, ‘You always get questions like: “Should we give the floor to Wilders?” Well, there are people who feel represented by him, so yes, we should do this.’[[35]](#footnote-36) However, all interviewees drew a clear line when it came to the infamous ‘*minder, minder Marokkanen’* (i.e. fewer, fewer Moroccans) incident in 2014, when Wilders asked the crowd at a campaign rally if they wanted ‘fewer or more Moroccans’ in their city. When the crowd responded with ‘Fewer! Fewer!’, Wilders answered: ‘We are going to take care of that’ (see The Guardian 2014). Virually all editors-in-chief pointed out that Wilders had gone too far with this statement because it called into question the rule of law.

**V. Conclusion**

This article has shed light on the ways in which the media deal with RWPPs in the Benelux region, thereby illuminating different motivations behind societal responses to populism. As Ellinas (2018: 269) has noted, the ways in which the media choose to treat the populist radical right reflect some of the thorniest debates in democratic politics; specifically, ‘[m]edia coverage raises questions about the degree of tolerance societies should display when it comes to the often intolerant ideas of right-wing radicals and, more generally, questions about the limits of freedom of expression democracies grant to groups and individuals’. The evidence presented here suggests that Dutch and Flemish media practitioners have gradually become more accommodative towards RWPPs, whereas Walloon and Luxembourgish journalists adhere to strict demarcation. How do media practitioners justify their coverage of RWPPs?

The willingness of media practitioners to engage with populist radical right actors can be linked to the electoral trajectories of these parties. In Flanders and the Netherlands, media practitioners justified their strategies by explaining that it would simply be ‘bad journalism’ not to give space to an electorally successful party. More generally, electoral success can weaken the inhibitions of some media to grant access and exposure to RWPPs (Ellinas 2010: 219). Luxembourg and Wallonia have yet to witness the rise of a charismatic leader of the likes of Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders, and there is no doubt that the absence of a credible right-wing populist contender makes it easy to maintain a media cordon. Yet, it is worth mentioning that Luxembourgish and Walloon media practitioners generally maintained a more principled and normative stance than their Dutch-speaking colleagues by arguing that the media should not provide any space to far right movements. Particularly Walloon media practitioners underscored time and again that they would stick to these principles - even if they were to be confronted with an electorally successful far-right movement. This suggests that journalists in the Benelux region hold different views about their societal role. These views are likely to be influenced by the broader media landscape in which journalists operate.

The structure of the media in Western Europe has changed significantly in the post-war period. In the past, media outlets were often tied to political parties, trade unions or churches; from the 1960s onwards, however, the media started to gain political independence. This trend was accompanied by the dismantling of public broadcasting monopolies and the proliferation of private media outlets (Ellinas 2010: 33). The increased competition launched a ‘struggle for readers and viewers and, consequently, a focus on the more extreme and scandalous aspects of politics’ (Mudde 2004: 553; see also Esser et al. 2017: 365). This can have an impact on media content. Specifically, it ‘changes the social function of journalism, as the journalist’s main objective is no longer to disseminate ideas and create social consensus around them, but to produce entertainment and information that can be sold to individual consumers’ (Hallin & Mancini 2004: 277). Market pressures incentivise the media to feature political actors with lively personalities, thereby pushing the media ‘into a symbiotic relationship with the Far Rightists’ (Ellinas 2010: 211). Indeed, populists seem to benefit from the commercial character of the growing popular news media and tabloid-press industry, as ‘these media give passionate attention to what happens in the usually animated precincts of populist movements’ (Mazzoleni 2008: 50).

There is tentative evidence that the changes in the media systems have been more profound in the Netherlands and Flanders than in Wallonia and Luxembourg. Specifically, it appears that the Dutch-speaking media are shifting away from the world of politics towards the world of business (as predicted by Hallin & Mancini 2004: 75). Throughout the interviews, there was evidence of commercial thinking among Dutch and Flemish media representatives. In Flanders, several media practitioners maintained that it would not be sensible from a commercial point-of-view to alienate a substantial portion of readers and viewers. In the Netherlands, interviewees routinely referred to their readers and viewers as ‘clients’. Some pointed to sales trends and business models, while others proclaimed their interest in becoming ‘the largest newspaper’ – concerns that did not come up in any interviews in Luxembourg or Wallonia. More generally, the Dutch-speaking media seem to have transitioned toward the more commercialised ‘Liberal Model’, which implies ‘a shift toward the neutral journalistic professionalism, of the sort that is particularly strong in the United States’ (Hallin & Mancini 2004: 285). In Luxembourg the persistence of the partisan press as well as the subsidy system have prevented convergence towards the ‘Liberal Model’ (see Hallin & Mancini 2004: 162). In Wallonia, political concerns simply seem to outweigh commercial considerations. Future studies should seek to determine under which conditions political considerations outweigh commercial interests and vice-versa. In addition, to assess the wider impact of commercialisation, we need to refine the concept to determine how different aspects of commercialisation (e.g. media ownership concentration; stronger orientation toward news values; dependence on advertisement…) affect different media strategies.

It is possible that media practitioners in Luxembourg and Wallonia have ‘drawn lessons’ from the experiences of their neighbouring countries. Particularly in Wallonia, there was evidence of ‘learning’: After witnessing the rise of the Flemish Interest Party, Walloon media practitioners came up with a set of principles and practises that were intended to prevent a similar electoral breakthrough in their polity. These guidelines were institutionalised over time and eventually formalised into a rigid *cordon sanitaire*. In Flanders and the Netherlands, on the other hand, the media did not have any rigid and formal guidelines *prior* to the rise of the LFP and the VB. This flexible stance could help explain why Dutch and Flemish media practitioners became gradually more receptive to RWPPs.

Unlike in Wallonia and Luxembourg, there is a growing consensus among Dutch-speaking media practitioners that journalists are to remain ‘neutral’ commentators. Indeed, they consistently underlined the importance of maintaining an open mind and covering *all* viewpoints. Crucially, however, the Dutch and Flemish public-service broadcaster also subscribed to this view. This is interesting given that they are primarily funded by the state and therefore isolated from market mechanisms. This suggests that the differences in media strategies cannot simply be attributed to commercialisation. The media do not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, ‘[m]edia organisations operate in political environments and their behaviour is also determined by their interaction with this environment’ (Ellinas 2018: 278). Thus, we cannot fully understand the media without considering the nature of the states, party systems, wider social structures in which they are embedded (Hallin & Mancini 2004: 8). After all, ‘[i]n settings where the media have strong ties with the political system, it is reasonable to expect that the treatment of radicals is at least partly driven by political considerations’ (Ellinas 2018: 278). This is particularly true for democratic corporatist media systems that are characterised by a high degree of political parallelism (see Hallin & Mancini 2004). Therefore, further research is needed to investigate the linkages between political and media structures, and how these linkages affect the ways in which media practitioners deal with RWPPs as well as the electoral trajectories of RWPPs (see also van Spanje 2018: 149).

There is ample evidence that media behaviour does not simply reflect but also *shapes* the electoral advances of RWPPs. For instance, the media can play an instrumental role in rallying support and disseminating the populist message, which can contribute to legitimising their cause by ‘remov[ing] the stigma of extremism’ (Ellinas 2018: 273). Particularly in the earlier phases of a party’s life cycle, the media can be an important asset to gain national visibility and legitimacy. Thus, to some extent, ‘the media control the gateway to the electoral market’ (Ellinas 2010: 3). Media ostracism can therefore narrow the discursive opportunities available for RWPPs to gain relevance (particularly when mainstream parties also adhere to ostracism). However, this strategy may only be effective if the cordon is truly ‘airtight’ and established *before* the rise of a successful challenger (see Art 2011: 44). Indeed, timing appears to be a crucial element when setting up a successful *cordon sanitaire* (see Heinze 2018), as media strategies (as well as mainstream party responses) seem particularly pertinent prior to a party’selectoral breakthrough (Ellinas 2018: 275). Future studies might seek to assess the importance of timing (i.e. *when* the media cordon is initiated) and the rigidness of the cordon(i.e. how strictly it is enforced) on the electoral trajectories of RWPPs.

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**Annex – List of Interviews with Media Practitioners in Chronological Order (N = 46)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Interviewee Title | Type of Medium | Countries Discussed | Date | Place |
| 1 | Director at Radio 100,7 | Public Service Radio Station | Luxembourg | 2.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 2 | Editor-in-Chief at RTL Television Luxembourg | Main TV channel; commercial with public service mission | Luxembourg | 5.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 3 | General Secretary of the Press Council; retired journalist at *Tageblatt* | Press Organisation; left-leaning daily newspaper, owned by the socialist trade union & affiliated with the Social Democratic party (LSAP) | Luxembourg | 6.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 4 | Editor-in-Chief at RTL Radio Luxembourg | Main Radio station; commercial with public service mission | Luxembourg | 8.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 5 | CEO at Saint Paul Luxembourg S.A. | Largest publishing house in Luxembourg | Luxembourg | 9.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 6 | Founding Member & Editor at WOXX | Weekly independent newspaper; previously affiliated with the Green Party | Luxembourg | 12.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 7 | Director and Editor-in-Chief at *Lëtzebuerger Journal* | Daily newspaper, affiliated with the Liberal Party | Luxembourg | 20.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 8 | Manager and Editor-in-Chief at *Lëtzebuerger Land* | Weekly independent newspaper | Luxembourg | 20.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 9 | Deputy Editor-in-Chief at *Tageblatt* | Daily newspaper, owned by the Socialist trade union & affiliated with the Social Democratic party | Luxembourg | 20.9.16 | Esch-sur-Alzette |
| 10 | Editor-in-Chief at *Luxemburger Wort* | Daily newspaper, owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese & affiliated with the Christian democratic party | Luxembourg | 20.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 11 | Political Journalist at *Luxemburger Wort* | Daily newspaper, owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese & affiliated with the Christian Democratic party | Luxembourg | 22.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 12 | Editor-in-Chief at Radio 100,7 | Public Service Radio Station | Luxembourg | 27.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 13 | Deputy Editor-in-Chief at Radio 100,7 | Public Service Radio Station | Luxembourg | 27.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 14 | Director of ALIA (*Autorité luxembourgeoise indépendante de l'audiovisuel*) | Organisation that regulates audio-visual media located Luxembourg (including RTL stations) | Luxembourg & Wallonia | 28.9.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 15 | CEO & Founder at *Paperjam* | Monthly magazine, published in French and English by *Maison Moderne*, an independent publishing house | Luxembourg | 24.10.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 16 | Director of the Media and Communication Department of the Ministry of State of Luxembourg | N/A | Luxembourg | 18.11.16 | Luxembourg City |
| 17 | Editor-in-Chief of *Volkskrant* | Centre-left daily newspaper, published by *Persgroep,* formerly linked to the Catholic pillar | Netherlands | 21.3.17 | Amsterdam |
| 18 | Editor-in-Chief of *Trouw* | Centre-right daily newspaper, published by *Persgroep,* formerly linked to the Protestant pillar | Netherlands | 22.3.17 | Amsterdam |
| 19 | Editor-in-Chief of NOS | One of the organisations that make up the Dutch public broadcasting service (NPO) | Netherlands | 23.3.17 | Hilversum |
| 20 | Editor-in-Chief of  *Telegraaf* | Daily tabloid newspaper, published by *Mediahuis* | Netherlands | 23.3.17 | Amsterdam |
| 21 | Editor-in-Chief of  *Algemeen Dagblad* | Daily tabloid newspaper, published by *Persgroep* | Flanders | 24.3.17 | Rotterdam |
| 22 | Journalist at *Apache* | Membership based, investigative journalism platform | Flanders & Wallonia | 27.3.17 | Antwerp |
| 23 | Editor-in-Chief of *Gazet van Antwerpen* | Flemish local tabloid newspaper, published by *Mediahuis* | Flanders | 27.3.17 | Antwerp |
| 24 | Director of News and Sports, RTBF | Francophone public service broadcaster | Wallonia | 29.3.17 | Brussels |
| 25 | Political Journalist, VRT | Flemish public service broadcaster | Flanders | 29.3.17 | Brussels |
| 26 | Editor-in-Chief (opinionated), *De Morgen* | Left-leaning daily newspaper, published by *Persgroep,* formerly linked to the Socialist pillar | Flanders | 30.3.17 | Kobbegem (Asse) |
| 27 | Editor-in-Chief for TV, VRT | Flemish public service broadcaster | Flanders | 31.3.17 | Brussels |
| 28 | Editor-in-Chief, *Het Nieuwsblad* | Daily tabloid, published by *Mediahuis* | Flanders | 4.4.17 | Antwerp |
| 29 | Editor-in-Chief (opinionated), *De Standaard* | Daily newspaper, published by *Mediahuis*, formerly linked to the Christian Democrats | Flanders | 5.4.17 | Groot-Bijgaarden |
| 30 | Editor-in-Chief, *La Libre* | Centre-right daily newspaper, published by IPN, formerly linked to the Christian Democrats | Wallonia | 6.4.17 | Brussels |
| 31 | General Editor-in-Chief, VTM | Main commercial television station in Flanders | Flanders | 6.4.17 | Vilvoorde |
| 32 | Representative of CSA (*Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel*) | Organisation that regulates audio-visual media in francophone Belgium | Wallonia | 7.4.17 | Brussels |
| 33 | Director of Programmes, RTL | Main commercial television station in francophone Belgium | Wallonia | 7.4.17 | Brussels (via phone) |
| 34 | Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *Le Soir* | Daily newspaper, published by *Rossel* | Wallonia | 7.4.17 | Brussels |
| 35 | General Director, BNNVARA | One of the organisations that make up the Dutch public broadcasting service | Netherlands | 10.4.17 | Brussels (via phone) |
| 36 | Political journalist, RTL | Main commercial television station in francophone Belgium | Wallonia | 12.4.17 | Brussels |
| 37 | Editor-in-Chief, *Het Laatste Nieuws* | Daily tabloid, published by *Persgroep,* formerly linked to the Catholic pillar | Flanders | 19.4.17 | Luxembourg (via Skype) |
| 38 | Editor-in-Chief, *Elsevier Weekblad* | Independent weekly magazine | Netherlands | 9.8.17 | Cambridge (via phone) |
| 39 | Dutch TV & freelance newspaper journalist; UK correspondent | N/A | Netherlands | 12.8.17 | London |
| 40 | Former Lobbyist | N/A | Netherlands | 14.8.17 | Amsterdam |
| 41 | Former Editor-in-Chief of *Volkskrant* | Centre-left daily newspaper, published by *Persgroep,* formerly linked to the Catholic pillar | Netherlands | 15.8.17 | Hilversum |
| 42 | Editor-in-Chief, RTL | Commercial television station in the Netherlands | Netherlands | 15.5.17 | Hilversum |
| 43 | Deputy Editor-in-Chief, NRC | Daily newspaper published by *Mediahuis* | Netherlands | 16.8.17 | Amsterdam |
| 44 | Director of Legal Affairs, RTBF | Francophone public service broadcaster | Wallonia | 28.9.17 | Brussels |
| 45 | Political Journalist, *Algemeen Dagblad* | Daily tabloid newspaper, published by *Persgroep* | Netherlands | 29.9.17 | Rotterdam |
| 46 | Europe Correspondent for *de Volkskrant* | Centre-left daily newspaper, published by *Persgroep,* formerly linked to the Catholic pillar | Netherlands; Wallonia & Flanders | 29.9.17 | Breda |

1. Following Ellinas (2010: 16), success is defined here as ‘a substantial increase in party strength that crowns minor players with the perception of a national political relevance’. A party is considered ‘relevant’ if its existence has an impact on party competition, for instance by being able to coerce governing parties to change their policies or behaviour (Sartori 1976: 123). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This article does not consider the role of ‘new media’. While social media may be more receptive to populism, it is doubtful whether they can match the effects of traditional media platforms (Ellinas 2018: 277; Esser et al. 2017: 377). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In some instances, interviews were conducted via phone or skype. A full list of interviews is provided in the appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Where appropriate, quotations have been translated into English by the author, and country experts were consulted to triangulate findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. While these scholars solely discuss the reactions of mainstream parties to RWPPs, their theories are also applicable to media practitioners. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Because of their prominent position, RTL (i.e. the only commercial television and radio station) have signed an agreement with the Luxembourgish government to carry out a ‘public service mission’. In return, radio and television frequencies are made available to RTL by the Grand Duchy, and part of the production and broadcasting costs are covered by the state. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Lëtzebuerger Journal* (20.09.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The former journalists who were in government from 2013 until 2018 are: Félix Braz, Corinne Cahen, Francine Closener, Marc Hansen and Lydia Mutsch. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Interview with Director of public service radio 100,7 (02.09.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Lëtzebuerger Land* (20.09.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Luxembourg does have a ‘tabloid’ news outlet called *Lëtzebuerg Privat*. However, it is boycotted by other news outlets and circulation numbers are not included in national surveys, which makes it difficult to gauge the number of regular readers. Moreover, demand for ‘tabloid’ newspapers is covered by foreign news outlets such as the German *Bild Zeitung*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Interview with the Editor-in-Chief of the *Lëtzebuerger Journal* (20.09.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of RTL Radio (08.09.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Interview with CSA representative (07.04.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Interview with Director of Legal Affairs at RTBF (28.09.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. This is not to say that they do not quote them; the media just never feature these parties directly; all quotes are contextualised. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Interview with Director of News and Sports at RTBF (29.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Interview with political journalist at RTL (12.04.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Interview with Director of Legal Affairs at RTBF (28.09.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Interview with deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Le Soir* (07.04.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Interview with political journalist at VRT (29.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of the *Gazet van Antwerpen* (27.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of VTM (06.04.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *de Morgen* (30.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of the *Gazet van Antwerpen* (27.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Volkskrant* (21.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Elsevier Weekblad* (09.08.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Telegraaf* (23.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Telegraaf* (23.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Algemeen Dagblad* (24.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Volkskrant* (21.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Elsevier Weekblad* (09.08.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Interview with deputy Editor-in-Chief of *NRC Handelsblad* (16.08.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Telegraaf* (23.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Interview with Editor-in-Chief of *Algemeen Dagblad* (24.03.2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)