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# The Populist Radical Right on Their Colonial Past

A Discourse Analysis of *Vlaams Belang* and the *Alternative für Deutschland*

Bachelor's thesis in European studies

Supervisor: Anna Brigevich

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# Abstract

The colonial memory of populist radical right (PRR) parties is an understudied topic. This thesis aims at filling this gap by analysing the colonial memory of *Vlaams Belang* and the *Alternative für Deutschland*. Even though postcolonialism in itself is not a primary interest of PRR parties, the thesis argues that PRR parties understand postcolonial debates in terms of their general ideology of anti-leftism and anti-wokeness. Conducting a discourse analysis, the thesis finds that *Vlaams Belang* and the *Alternative für Deutschland* have a selective colonial memory that acknowledges that European colonialism had its negative sides, but that refuses to give these negative sides importance. Instead, the positive sides are emphasized. Their colonial memory allows them to construct local variations. Most prominently, the colonial memory of *Vlaams Belang* is adapted to its' Flemish nationalism. In despite of the primacy of PRR parties' opposition to immigration, this feature does not take place in their colonial memory.

# Sammendrag

Koloniminnet til høyrepopulistiske partier er et understudert tema. Denne oppgaven bidrar til å fylle dette gapet ved å analysere koloniminnet til *Vlaams Belang* og *Alternative für Deutschland*. Selv om temaet postkolonialisme i seg selv ikke er hovedinteressen til høyrepopulistiske partier, mener denne oppgaven at partiene forstår postkoloniale debatter i form av deres generelle ideologi bestående av å kritisere den politiske venstresiden og politisk korrekthet. Ved å utføre en diskursanalyse argumenterer oppgaven for at *Vlaams Belang* og *Alternative für Deutschland* har et selektivt minne til kolonitiden som erkjenner at europeisk kolonialisme hadde negative sider, men som ikke tilkjenner disse negativene sidene betydning. Istedenfor blir de positive sidene understreket. Koloniminnet deres åpner for variasjoner mellom partiene. Det mest fremtredende eksempelet er at *Vlaams Belang* sitt koloniminne er tilpasset partiets flamske nasjonalisme. Selv om begge partiene er innvandringskritiske, er dette trekket ikke en del av koloniminnet deres.

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# List of Abbreviations

AfD	<i>Alternative für Deutschland</i> (the Alternative for Germany)
PRR	Populist, radical right
PVV	<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> (Party for Freedom)
VB	<i>Vlaams Belang</i> (Flemish Interest)

# 1 Introduction

Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties are heavily studied. Much research has already been devoted to their Islamophobia and Euroscepticism and recently, more attention has been devoted to their nostalgia and memory politics (Couperus et al., 2022, p. 1). Voters of PRR parties are often identified as the losers of globalization who has given up on the future and are reminiscing about the 'good old days', a time when their nation was grandiose and virtuous. PRR politicians pick up on this nostalgia and pessimism. 'The good old days' is a notoriously vague concept as it does not specify which specific period is meant. In a speech, Geert Wilders from *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) described the Netherlands as "once the most beautiful country in the world [...] we had a strong, self-willed, and above all a proud country ... Nobody was able to break us". When he was asked by a political opponent to specify which period of Dutch history he referred to, he symptomatically answered: "Before 1850, approximately" (Couperus & Tortola, 2019, p. 111).

Studies show that PRR party voters are prouder of their nation's history than the voters of any other party group (Lubbers & Smeekes, 2022). Although the history of any nation includes more than just times of grandiose, it is viable to assume that these times in particular are subjects of pride. With the ongoing trend of Europe losing its hegemonic status in international politics, PRR parties might be even more inclined to reminisce about the past when Europe virtually 'ruled the world' as colonial empires. The trend of Europe losing its superpower status is by no means new, but its importance has increased since countries of the Global South, and especially China, are becoming global powers and growing more assertive in their roles, demanding the treatment of being an equal.

Simultaneously, there is a movement within Europe that this paper will refer to as postcolonial debates. These national debates centre around the inequality between white and coloured Europeans, the racism and colonial stereotypes that certain European traditions portray, the critique of the fact that society, through for example memorials, honours historical figures complicit in colonialism, and simultaneous pushes to de-colonize society. The Black Lives Matter movement politicized and popularized these debates, that PRR parties typically discredited as merely 'woke'.

PRR parties and national colonial memories in general are both two heavily studied subjects, but the colonial memory of PRR parties is understudied. This paper aims at filling this gap by studying the colonial memory of two PRR parties, that being *Vlaams Belang* (VB) in Belgium and the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). What colonial memory do VB and the AfD have and how does it show in their ideology and political behaviour? With the knowledge that a popular strategy to defend colonialism is to point out that other colonial powers were worse, this paper hypothesizes that Belgium cannot do the same as Belgian colonial rule is known as 'the worst of the worst'. The choice of countries picks up upon Verbeek's notion that Belgium and Germany form a fruitful although less frequent comparison regarding postcolonialism (2020, p. 302).

This paper acknowledges that neither colonialism nor the related postcolonialism are main interests of European PRR parties, but it argues that postcolonial debates are understood as woke, leftist ideology, which is a main interest of PRR parties. Through conducting a discourse analysis, this paper argues that the AfD and VB construct their colonial memory

in a way that is adapted to their general ideology of showing pride in the past, opposing immigration, the left and wokeness. VB also constructs its colonial memory in a war that shows their pro-Flemish independence stance.

The thesis is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the thesis will briefly summarize the colonial history of Belgium and Germany. The same section will also define what the paper understands as postcolonial debates. Thirdly, the paper defines PRR parties and relates this party group to the theme of this paper, that is postcolonialism and postcolonial debates. After doing so, the paper lays out earlier research and literature about PRR parties and their colonial memory. The fifth section outlines the chosen methodology before presenting the results, and then concluding. The paper will mainly treat the Congo and Namibia as representatives for all Belgian and German colonies, due to the paper's limitations in scope and because they have been the most politicized and important colonies.

## 2 Colonialism and Postcolonial Debates

In order to be acquainted with the topics and phenomena that VB and the AfD refers to, this paper begins with a brief outline of the colonial histories of Belgium and Germany from their beginnings in the 1880's and until today. Summarizing almost two centuries of history is challenging and thus includes a prioritization of which events to mention. This summary therefore clearly has its shortages. Both Belgium and Germany were among the smaller colonial empires and integrated themselves in the colonial quest relatively late, beginning with the Scramble for Africa in the 1880's. Their similarities end with this fact.

The Belgian State initially had little interest in colonialism, whereas the Belgian King Leopold II had. He managed to achieve the private possession of the Congo, named the Congo Free State, which he owned and ruled as a private enterprise from 1885. That one person owned a huge country as the Congo as private property is unique in European colonial history and resulted in the Congo not being an official Belgian colony, but the property of the King. Only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1908 exactly, following international and national critique of the brutality of King Leopold II's rule, did Belgium overtake the Congo as an official colony. In 1919, Belgium received the neighbouring and smaller Rwanda and Burundi after they were deprived from Germany following the Treaty of Versailles. After a period of independence movements, the Congo gained independence in 1960, and Burundi and Rwanda a couple of years later.

The Belgian colonialism in the Congo is now known for its brutality and being 'the worst of the worst', i.e. the most violent example of a phenomenon violent by definition (Goddeeris, 2015; Rosoux, 2022; Verbeeck, 2020). This usually refers to King Leopold II's rule. It is argued that the Belgian remembrance of their colonial era has been particularly weak (Goddeeris, 2015; Verbeeck, 2020), although this may have changed by now as Clippele & Demarsin celebrate Belgium to be the first former colonial empire to pass a law on the restitution of artifacts (2022). In 2020, the Belgian Parliament established a commission named the Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's Colonial Past, whose aim was to evaluate the Belgian colonial era and discuss appropriate measures to take regarding their former colonies, but the Commission was criticized for its broad mandate which made it difficult to conclude with substantial recommendations (Destrooper, 2022, p. 2). The commission's work ended in December 2022. VB participated in the commission through its seats in the Belgian Parliament, but was at the same time a vocal opponent of it.

The nexus of Belgian colonialism and Flemish nationalism is interesting. Because the French-speaking Belgians used to form the ruling elite, and because it indeed was the King who initiated Belgian colonialism, Flemish nationalist parties like VB can project Belgian colonialism on to Wallonia and the Royal Family and thereby present the Flemish as innocent. According to Goddeeris, the Flemish and Walloons have constructed different colonial memories (2015, p. 436), and Flemish PRR parties use the Belgian colonial era to ridicule the Royal Family, although Goddeeris adds that they did not deem it very important (2015, p. 440). This notion ignores the fact that the Flemish were unproportionally invested in the Congo (Goddeeris, 2015; Kanobana, 2022, p. 263). Although 'Flemish PRR parties' includes more parties than merely VB, but it is implied that VB will be among them.

Like Belgium, the German Empire showed little interest in the colonial quest of the time. This is explained by state leader Otto von Bismarck's disapproval of it (Thiemeyer, 2019, p. 968), so it was the German Royal Family who initiated German colonialism from the 1880's. Germany possessed colonies with a greater spread than Belgium, with colonies in Western, Southern, Eastern and Central Africa (Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania), the Pacific (Papua New Guinea) and small parts of China in Eastern Asia. The empire conducted to bigger wars in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1904-1908 Herero Wars in Namibia and the 1905-1907 Maji Maji Rebellion in Tanzania. Unlike Belgium, however, German colonialism did not end after a period of de-colonization. It ended abruptly following the loss of World War One. In the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the country was deprived of all of its colonies which were given to other colonial empires.

Germany is considered a role model for dealing with and coming to terms with national atrocities for the "Wiedergutmachung" (redemption) after Holocaust, but regarding the German colonialism, the official remembrance has been dominated by silence and denial, and only for the last years also acknowledgement (Augsten et al., 2022, pp. 1-2). The Herero Wars conducted in Namibia have since been classified as a genocide on the Herero and Namaqua people, something that was officially recognized by the German Bundestag in 2021. The AfD opposes this recognition. The AfD also opposes the debate that sees and discusses the continuity between German colonialism and Holocaust. This debate has been ongoing since the 1950's and supporters see the German colonialism as a predecessor for Holocaust (Urban, 2022; Verbeek, 2020, p. 303). Moreover, the debate is not limited to a German context as it hypothesizes whether colonialism *itself* was a forerunner for all Fascist violence (Verbeek, 2020; Urban, 2022; Bernhard, 2016). For example, Patrick Bernhard argues that Hitler used Italian colonial rule in Africa as inspiration for Holocaust (ibid.).

Postcolonialism as a theory or a lens examines and brings to focus the continuation of unequal power-structures between former colonizer and former colonized after official colonization ended and the former colonies were independent nations (Verbeek, 2020). This paper understands postcolonialism to also thematize the inequality between white and coloured European citizens, so that with 'postcolonial debates', it refers to any debate about the continuation of inequality between the former colonizer and the former colonized and whether the former has any responsibility over the latter, between white and coloured citizens in Europe, and related pushes to de-colonize society. Examples include states officially apologizing and paying reparations for colonial atrocities, the restitution of colonial artifacts, the demolition of colonial memorials and the scrutiny of traditions that are understood to portray racist and colonial stereotypes. The Black Lives Matter movement is by many considered and identified as an external shock that popularized these post-colonial debates and brought them on the agenda (Kesic et al., 2022; Augsten et al., 2022; Kaya, 2021; Destrooper, 2022; Cammaerts, 2022; Herling, 2022; Clippele & Demarsin, 2022).

### 3 Populist Radical Right Parties

VB and the AfD are identified to be members of the party group named populist, radical right (PRR). Much has been written about this party group, and much is yet to be written about it. Cas Mudde's seminal definition defines them as nativist, populist and authoritarian parties (Mudde, 2017; Mudde, 2020). Andreas Fagerholm draws on this definition in his maximal definition as parties that, additionally to be nativist, populist and authoritarian, support traditional ethics and welfare chauvinism and criticize the government system, the left, the EU and globalization (Fagerholm, 2018). Additionally, many scholars see PRR parties as nostalgic parties, even though this feature is yet to be considered a defining feature (Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018; Betz & Johnson, 2004; Rydgren, 2017; Kaya, 2021; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Lubbers & Smeekes, 2022). Lastly, this paper argues that more attention should be given to these parties' opposition of the politically correct or wokeness.

Nativism is a combination of nationalism and xenophobia which makes nativists oppose the existence of any internal minority within the borders of their nation. Nativism does not define which specific groups who are the non-natives, and in theory, they can be anyone. In reality, however, PRR parties tend to especially perceive minorities from Muslim countries as the worst minority (Rydgren, 2017; Dias, 2022; Mols & Jetten, 2014). PRR parties do not consider themselves to be racist. They oppose minorities on the ground of their foreignness and not because of any perceived inferiority. Despite this claim, PRR parties tend to associate these minorities with clearly negative characteristics, like being dirty, criminal and violent (Griffini, 2022).

Populism can be summarized as anti-elitism. Populists divide society in two antagonistic and homogenic groups, the elite – often characterized as corrupt or evil – and the people, characterized as good or hardworking. The two groups are hostile towards each other, even though they are of the same nationality. Authoritarianism is a system that supports the existence of a hierarchy in society. Authoritarian parties tend to support the notion of punishment and respect for authoritative figures. PRR parties support traditional ethics and welfare chauvinism. Defining the former can be tricky – what is a tradition? When does something become a tradition? – but it means the opposition of society changing too radically and too quickly, and the belief that things should be like they always have been. Welfare chauvinists believe that only natives should be subjects of national welfare goods. This paper understands welfare chauvinism in a broader sense to the belief that only natives should be subjects of receiving national money in all cases. This is relevant as a postcolonial debate when European countries discuss paying reparations to their former colonies.

The last four features of Fagerholm's definition of PRR parties are 'anti-attributes' which describe what the parties oppose: the government system, the left, the EU and globalization. PRR parties are also nostalgic, fearing the bleak future and longing for the glorious past that supposedly was better than the present and future. Their idea of the past is exaggerated and romanticized and does not represent how the past really was (Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018). Studies show that PRR party voters tend to feel more pride in their nation's history than what voters of any other party group do (Lubbers & Smeekes, 2022). PRR parties' nostalgia is especially attractive for pessimists and the 'losers of globalization'. With the ongoing trend of Europe losing its grip as a global

superpower, PRR parties and their voters may be more inclined to feel nostalgic about a past when Europe 'ruled the world and the waves' as colonial empires.

This paper argues that more attention should be given to the anti-woke stance of PRR parties. As Kessel et. al. write, these parties criticize more groups than merely their political opponents, they also criticize the "'politically correct' opinion-makers in academia and the media" (2021, p. 586). According to Cammaerts, the British conservatives have started a war against woke culture and cancel culture and although his research is limited to the British landscape, he writes that this 'war' is present in several European countries (2022). The right-winged side of the political landscape in Europe in general consider the left-winged side to ruin countries with their identity politics and political correctness (Pogrmilovic, 2019, p. 107). PRR parties see the nexus of their anti-elitism, anti-leftism, anti-globalization as 'woke' or politically correct. Woke originally meant being aware of and opposing social and racial injustice in society, but the term has been weaponized and is now also used by, for example, politicians who oppose the 'woke' policies and ideas that were meant to fight injustice (Zavattaro & Bearfield, 2022; Whiteout, 2018).

This paper acknowledges that neither colonialism nor postcolonialism are the main interests of PRR parties, but it argues that they understand postcolonialism and postcolonial debates as 'woke'. Criticizing 'woke' and the politically correct is becoming increasingly important for PRR parties. To diminish issues PRR parties do not agree with as 'woke' is a popular strategy to brush off criticism. In the Netherlands for example, Geert Wilders from PVV abstains from engaging in dialogues with his critics and instead disqualifies them as "remnants of 'politically correct and obsolete multiculturalism'" (Jones, 2016, p. 614). Therefore, postcolonial debates is an integrated part of PRR parties' general anti-elite, anti-left and anti-globalization rhetoric. An example of how PRR parties relate to and oppose postcolonial debates, is blackface. White Europeans painting their skin black in order to portray black characters was used to be perceived as normal, until people criticized the 'tradition' for its racist and colonial stereotypes. As the paper will see, VB refuses to acknowledge that critique because the party consider it to be a tradition.

## 4 Theory and Hypotheses

There is only limited literature available on the colonial memory of PRR parties. Griffini examines the colonial memory of Italian *Lega Nord* and *Fratteli d'Italia* and finds that they have a selective memory that neglects any negative sides of colonialism and highlights aspects that can be perceived as positive (2022). Kaya compares how Front National and the AfD use the past in their nostalgic politics, but he only examines the colonial past of France, and not Germany (2021). Couperus & Tortola examine how Dutch and Italian PRR parties use their dark past. They use the Dutch dark past of colonialism in their study, while the Italian dark past is constituted of the Fascist period (2019). Other articles do not examine PRR parties' colonial memory on its own, but mention it when discussing other themes. For example, Ostermann & Stahl find that PRR parties oppose paying official development aid, something which is similar although not identical to paying reparations (2022).

Selective memory is the construction of the past that deliberately chooses which aspects and events of history to remember and to forget. This paper understands memory to be selective by definition, insofar as the process of creating a memory must include a prioritization of what is remembered and forgotten, and as it is impossible to construct a correct or an objective memory (Griffini, 2022). The fact that PRR parties have a selective memory is therefore not surprising on its own. These parties construct their colonial memory in a way that consistently downplays and even partly contests aspects of colonialism that are likely to be perceived as negative, for example violence, inequality, racism and exploitation (hence, bad sides), and highlights aspects that can be perceived and interpreted as positive (hence, good sides) (Griffini, 2022; Hyslop, 2021; Couperus & Tortola, 2019). Mols & Jetten has the same finding of how PRR parties construct their memory of the national past in general, not only their colonial past (2014), so the selective memory of minimizing bad sides seem to be a common strategy for PRR parties.

Their colonial memory does not, at least officially, contest or refuse the fact that European colonialism had bad sides. For example, politicians from *Lega Nord* and *Fratteli d'Italia* acknowledged the violence that the Italian colonial empire committed, like the use of asphyxiating gas in Ethiopia (Griffini, 2022, p. 10). Instead, PRR parties choose to consider it unimportant or less important than the good sides. There are many strategies that can be used for this purpose: some examples are the strategies of blame reversal, normalization and victimization (Griffini, 2022; Couperus & Tortola, 2019). The strategy of blame reversal silences critique through pointing to other actors that, allegedly, should be criticized instead. The strategy of normalization argues that the bad sides of colonialism, like violence, are not really 'bad' or negative, because colonial violence was normal at the time and because 'everyone did it'. Victimization construct ones' nations as the victims. For example, in discussions about the Dutch colonial past, PRR parties have claimed the Dutch were victims of Arab enslavement, a claim which is identified as dubious Couperus & Tortola (2019, p. 110).

Even if PRR parties mostly acknowledge the bad sides of colonialism, their genuineness can to a certain degree be contested. Couperus et. al. argue that when PRR parties actively



question, reject and counter mainstream historical references and tropes, they actually contest mainstream understanding of history (Couperus et al., 2022, p. 3). Even though one politician from *Lega Nord* acknowledged the use of gas in Ethiopia, another politician from the same party denied the fact that the Italian colonial rule had concentration camps in Libya (Griffini, 2022, p. 10). And when discussing whether Italy should apologize to its former colonies, PRRP politicians supported Italy apologizing only if it had reason to do so, thereby not contesting the apology in itself but the reason: ergo, crimes were not committed (Griffini, 2022, p. 11). A possible explanation for this ambiguity can be that PRR parties connect apologizing to the feeling of guilt, so that it is the guilt they oppose more than the bad sides. In any case, this paper expects VB and the AfD to acknowledge colonial atrocities but to not give it importance.

*H1: VB and the AfD will acknowledge the existence of bad sides before continuing to minimize their importance and highlighting the good sides.*

The paper has stated that PRR parties highlight good sides about colonialism, but not elaborated what they are. Good sides that are mentioned include both material goods, like infrastructure, development and the state system (Griffini, 2022), and non-material things and ideas, like "a more civilised culture, dignity to human beings, protection of the weak" (Griffini, 2022, p. 9), and ending local warfare and the Arab slave trade (Hyslop, 2021, p. 111). One politician from the AfD claimed that colonisation "saved the conquered nations a lot of blood and a lot of sweat" (ibid.). The historical fact that the Arabs led a slave trade in Africa which European nations abolished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lets PRR parties integrate their Islamophobia in the debate. This paper expects this notion to be a prominent feature of the good sides that PRR parties mention due to the primacy of their Islamophobia.

This paper sees connections between mentioning the good sides of colonialism to the myth that ones' colonial rule was particularly good. In virtually all former colonial powers, there is a myth about their nation being good, just and incapable of doing evil. This myth is then subjected onto their colonial rule. In Italy, the myth is called *Italiani brava gente* (Griffini, 2022, p. 9). The Netherlands is presented as an "essentially innocent [...] and a 'just' nation" (Jones, 2016, p. 605), and in Germany there is the "the glorified image as a benign colonial power" (Augsten et al., 2022, p. 2). Even Belgium used to consider the Congo a "model colony" (Goddeeris, 2015, p. 435). However, today Belgian colonialism in the Congo is remember for its brutality, which makes it less feasible for VB to make this claim anymore.

*H2: the AfD will argue that German colonial rule was particularly good, but VB cannot use the same strategy. One of the 'good things' both parties will mention is that European colonialism abolished the Arab slave trade.*

As nativist parties, opposing immigration is among VB's and the AfD's defining features. Immigration can be seen through a postcolonial lens because colonialism has triggered movements of people, and it can also be hypothesised whether former colonial empires have a certain responsibility to tolerate immigration from their former colonies. Goddeeris sees immigration through a postcolonial lens when mentioning that Belgium has had the lowest postcolonial immigration of all former colonial empires (2015, p. 434). Griffini, too, uses this lens. She identifies the colonial discourses of criminalising and inferiorising in the way Italian PRR parties construct today's immigrants (2022). However, except for these two examples, there is a lack of sources that makes this connection between immigration

and postcolonialism. This may suggest that PRR parties indeed do *not* see immigration through a postcolonial lens.

However, there are examples of PRR parties using immigration as the bigger evil when responding to postcolonial debates. One politician from *Frattelli d'Italia* who opposed Italy apologizing to Libya was open to the hypothetical exception if it would curb migration: "if it becomes fundamental to do so [apologize] in order to stop migrants' boats from coming to Italy, I will apologise, even if I don't know why, because Italy does not have anything to apologise for" (Griffini, 2022, p. 12). This resonates with the statement of an AfD representative, who stated that curbing migration was first priority even if would be depriving for the German economy (Ostermann & Stahl, 2022, p. 9). This hypothetical rhetoric shows the primacy of opposing immigration for PRR parties.

*H3: Neither VB nor the AfD will connect immigration to postcolonialism. They might accept the lesser evil (like apologizing or pay restitutions) in order to curb the bigger evil (migration).*

One of the defining features in Fagerholm's maximal definition of PRR parties is that they are anti-left. The left supports multiculturalism and liberal ideas like the liberal democracy (2018, p. 542), which PRR parties oppose. In fact, according to Rydgren, PRR parties especially identify the left parties to be their political 'enemies' (2017, p. 490).

Postcolonialism can easily be connected to PRR parties' anti-leftism because the political left often includes or views postcolonial debates as important or integral parts of their ideology. For example, Kaya writes that the French political left supported anti-colonial values which continued to be denounced by the two Le Pens Front National (Kaya, 2021, p. 8). Also in the German political landscape, it is the leftist side that has integrated colonialism's connections to racism and anti-colonial values as important themes in their ideology (Hyslop, 2021, p. 103). Because postcolonial debates are an interest of the political left and the left is the main political opponent of PRR parties, this paper hypothesizes that VB and the AfD will discredit and delegitimize postcolonial debates as leftist debates. The debates are also likely to be discredited as woke.

*H4: VB and the AfD will delegitimize postcolonial debates to be the woke ideas of leftists.*

## 5 Method

The thesis will conduct a discourse analysis which is a much-used method for researching national identities (Aydin-Düzgit, 2014; Wodak, 2018) and populism (Wodak, 2018). It will examine two types of text forms. These are picture slogans posted on the Facebook accounts of the respective parties and parliamentary motions. The paper has chosen to analyse posts on Facebook knowing that this channel of communication is limited in substance. There are only so many words a Facebook post and the attached image can fit, and this limits VB and the AfD in explaining and elaborating their claims properly. The paper nevertheless argues for the feasibility of using this text form in the discourse analysis because social media is the preferred channel of communication for PRR parties. Since the analysis also takes use of parliamentary motions, VB and the AfD are given the opportunity to ground their arguments thoroughly.

The collecting of Facebook data was done manually. The researcher found pictures that were posted on the timelines of VB's and the AfD's Facebook pages and looked for posts containing the word postcolonialism. Very few posts did. Since the focus of this paper is postcolonial debates and a post of this topic not necessarily includes that word, the researcher broadened the search to include the names of former colonies, mostly the Congo and Namibia, tradition, wokeness, identity, racism and immigration. This was a relatively broad scope of themes which increased the possibility of becoming irrelevant results. For example, the concept wokeness or traditions is not necessarily always related to postcolonialism. Indeed, the researcher found one post where the AfD criticized the wokeness of eating vegetarian food in official cantinas, which is not relevant for this analysis. The researcher examined every result more carefully before either confirming or rejecting it as relevant evidence.

When collecting parliamentary motions, the researcher used the Belgian and German parliaments' search engines and searched for the words colonialism, postcolonialism, Namibia or Congo, and identity. Again, each result was read more detailed before being confirmed as relevant evidence. It was easier to obtain evidence on Facebook from VB than the AfD. VB had more relevant Facebook posts in a shorter time span (06.12.2020 until 01.05.2023) than what the AfD had in a larger time span (02.09.2019 until 01.05.2023). But the AfD had more relevant parliamentary motions. This may imply that VB is more active on social media than what the AfD is.

VB is a Belgian (Flemish) and the AfD a German party and the evidence was naturally written in either Dutch or German. The researcher speaks German and could therefore read the original version of the Facebook posts and parliamentary motions from the AfD. The researcher has translated all the quotes that are used in this paper. This was not the case for the evidence from VB, where the researcher was dependent on online translation. This is an obvious flaw. It would be more balanced if the researcher could read the original texts from both parties. However, using online translation was the only opportunity to conduct this research. The researcher used Google Translate.

**Table 1: Number of results according to text form.**

	<i>Vlaams Belang</i>	<i>Alternative für Deutschland</i>
Facebook	20	12
Parliamentary motions	4 (33 pages)	6 (40 pages)

## 6 Analysis and Discussion

This section of the paper will analyse and discuss the results. The first hypothesis touches upon the selective colonial memory of VB and the AfD. It asks whether the parties acknowledge the bad sides of colonialism but minimize their importance. This is largely the case, although there is one example of VB actually giving importance to the bad sides. In a parliamentary motion, VB advocates for the abolition of the Order of Leopold I and the Order of Leopold II due their connotations with Belgian colonialism in the Congo, which VB describes as an "inhumane colonial rule" with its "aura of inhumane colonialism" that "only causes shame and embarrassment to the rest of the world" (VB, 2022, 2719/001, p. 1). Here, VB resonates to the 'woke leftist' ideas that the party itself criticizes. Abolishing something due to the controversies of the people connected to it, is how the left advocated for the demolition of memorials during the Black Lives Matter movement. This example only confirms that VB acknowledges colonialism's bad sides, but not that the party minimizes their importance.

However, the hypothesis is not rejected. In another parliamentary motion, VB responds to the Black Lives Matter movement and the demolition of memorials, among them statues of King Leopold II. Here, VB does not use the same reasoning. VB again acknowledges what it calls "the less attractive sides" of historical figures, but then emphasizes that the figures "have performed great deeds" (VB, 2020, 367, p. 2) and calls them 'heroes': "A statue of local hero Edward Colston [...] was targeted for his involvement in the slave trade" (VB, 2020, 367, p. 1). Whether a memorial tagged, demolished or vandalized changes the normative meaning of the action. Words matter, and calling the act vandalism is clearly negative, as vandalism is a crime. VB consistently calls the demolition of memorials vandalism. The idea of abolishing or cancelling figures that are scrutinized, which VB supported regarding the Order of Leopold I and II, is criticized when it is performed by the Black Lives Matter movement. VB calls the movement a "disturbing development that targets our heritage" and "attacks on Western and Flemish heritage" and "attacks on our Western and Flemish history" (VB, 2020, 367, p. 2).

On Facebook, VB uses another strategy to neutralize postcolonial debates. Instead of highlighting the good sides of colonialism, VB constructs the Flemish as innocent by saying that "ordinary Flemish are not to blame for the abuses in the Congo" (VB, 2022b). Because the Flemish are not to blame, they should not pay or apologize, "let the Royal House take its responsibility" (ibid.). VB clearly acknowledges the abuses in Congo. However, they do not accept the complicity of the Flemish but blame the Belgian Royal Family for the atrocities.

The AfD, too, conforms to the first hypothesis. "Together with dark sides [...], the German colonial era especially in Africa contributed to release the continent of its archaic structures" (AfD, 2019, 15784, p. 1). Regarding the contemporary critique of historical figures complicit in the crimes of colonialism, the AfD will claim that these figures had good sides and acted heroically. Not only were their actions considered heroic during the time of the German colonial period, the AfD also consider their actions to be heroic when examining them from a contemporary point of view (AfD, 2019, 15784, p. 2). The AfD says that it "acknowledge that the wars committed by German colonial forces [...] committed excessive rigors, severities and cruelties" (ibid.). However, after this acknowledgement,

the AfD problematizes that the positive sides have found little credibility in the German memory, which the party calls a "serious deficit" (AfD, 2019, 15784, p. 2). The AfD wants to change the official German colonial memory to one that acknowledges the bad sides, but *especially* focus on the good sides of German colonialism (ibid.). This is clearly a selective memory because it argues that the good sides should receive more attention than the bad sides.

Another strategy that the AfD uses to minimize the bad sides of colonialism, is to stress that they happened a long time ago. The AfD also claims that the German empire only committed 'mistakes' during the early period of the colonial era (AfD, 2019, 15784). After these first 'mistakes', the empire learned and thus did not commit more 'mistakes'. Firstly, that the AfD calls colonial atrocities like the Herero Wars – that now are recognized as a genocide – for a 'mistake', contests the value of the atrocities. Second of all, the AfD's claim can easily be contested. German colonialism started in 1884 and ended in 1919. The two most brutal examples of German colonial violence are the already mentioned Herero Wars and the Maji Maji Rebellion that started in 1904 and 1905 respectively. Both these rebellions were clearly not committed in the developing stage.

The first hypothesis is confirmed. As expected, both parties acknowledge the bad sides of colonialism but do not give them importance. In the only example where VB places enough emphasis on the bad sides to legitimize the abolition of the Orders of Leopold I and II, the criticism is directed at the Belgian Royal House more than the Belgian rule in the Congo itself. VB puts all blame of Belgian colonialism on the traditionally French-speaking Royal Family and thus ignores the fact that the Flemish were unproportionally integrated in the Congo. In this way, VB shows their pro-Flemish independence ideology.

Moving on to the second hypothesis, the paper as expected has not found any indications of VB claiming that the Belgian colonial rule was particularly good compared to other European colonial empires. However, some examples of the AfD using this strategy was found. The AfD does this elegantly as it is not presented as the opinion of the party. Instead, it quotes the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen that lived in China during the German colonial rule and said: "at least from the Germans we have the impression that they want us to do well [...] they do not abuse our weaknesses like other countries do" (AfD, 2019, 15784, p. 4). In the same parliamentary motion the AfD writes that the British criticized the Germans for not immediately extinguishing the Namibian resistance movement "by all force" (ibid.), thereby portraying the British as more aggressive than the Germans. The Namibian resistance movement in question would later develop to the Herero Wars.

The first part of the second hypothesis is confirmed. In the second part of the hypothesis, the paper expects VB and the AfD to integrate their Islamophobia in constructing colonialism as good through highlighting the fact that European colonial empires abolished the Arab slave trade. It is a historical fact that the Arabs organized a slave trade in Africa. However, if PRR parties as the paper expects stress this fact instead of acknowledging the atrocities that their nations committed, they use the strategy of blame reversal portraying the Arabs as wrongdoers and the Europeans as good for ending the slave trade.

In one parliamentary motion where the AfD discusses the restitution of colonial artifacts from German museums, the party vaguely mentions the alleged expansion of Islam. The AfD criticizes that the politics of returning colonial artifacts is used as a soft power tool in the great power competition between Europa and China over influence on the African continent, but it is very vague how the 'expansion of Islam' is relevant to debate (AfD,

2020, 19914 p. 4). In another motion, the AfD defines racism based on the colour of skin to be an Arab creation (AfD, 2023, 5226, p. 3). These two examples are not the same as mentioning the Arab slave trade, so the hypothesis should be broadened to accounts of depicting Islam in a negative aura. The paper has found one example where the AfD mentions how German colonialism abolished the slave trade in Africa as a good thing, but in this example, the party does not mention that the slave trade was led by Arabs (AfD, 2019, 15784, p. 2). There is only one example where the AfD conforms to the hypothesis. The AfD protects Gustav Nachtigal, a German doctor who was an advocate for German colonialism and whose memorials were demolished because of his pro-colonial stance, against critique because he opposed the Muslim-driven slave trade (AfD, 2022, 3696, p. 6). As such, the paper has only found one clear example of the AfD using this strategy, and none of VB using it. The hypothesis is mostly rejected. Even though the AfD use the strategy one time, the paper expected both parties to use this strategy more often.

The third hypothesis suggests that even though immigration is one of the defining features of PRR parties, VB and the AfD are unlikely to see this topic through a postcolonial lens. This is confirmed. Both parties indicate their opposition to immigration in several Facebook posts, but none of these posts are of relevance to postcolonialism. VB and the AfD oppose immigration per se and whether the immigrant is from a former colony or not, does not seem to matter. There might be two interconnected reasons for this. As nativist parties, VB and the AfD oppose immigration and minorities of any kind within their nations, but as the paper already has argued, they particularly vocalize their opposition to Muslim immigration and Muslim minorities. Neither the Congo nor Namibia are Muslim-majority countries. The second reason is that Belgium and Germany have had little postcolonial immigration. Goddeeris writes that Belgium has had the lowest postcolonial immigration of all former colonial empires (2015, p. 434), and in Germany, the biggest group of non-European immigration comes from Turkey. Therefore, the colonized Other and the Muslim Other do not correlate. It would be interesting to research whether a PRR party from a country with more postcolonial immigration makes this postcolonial connection.

The second part of the third hypothesis is more hypothetical. VB and the AfD might mention immigration in discussions about other postcolonial debates and accept the lesser evil in order to curb the bigger evil that is immigration to Europe. This is a very hypothetical question. This paper has not found any indications or examples of VB or the AfD using this reasoning. The latter part of the hypothesis is not confirmed.

The fourth hypothesis argues whether VB and the AfD understand and delegitimize postcolonial debates as the ideas of woke leftists. There are many examples on Facebook where VB and the AfD show their anti-leftism. Phenomena that the parties dislike are delegitimized as being 'left'. In several Facebook posts about the Dutch character Zwarte Piet, who has been scrutinized for portraying racist and colonial stereotypes, VB criticizes the scrutiny as the work of "left-wing politicians and some woke-crazy people" (VB, 2022f), that ordinary citizens are told by "the media and the left-wing elite that this beautiful Flemish tradition is wrong" (VB, 2021a). "Stop with this extreme leftist nonsense!" (VB, 2022e). "Again socialist minister Kitir throws 16 million euros through the window" (VB, 2022d). "250 MILLION EUROS... this is how much tax money the socialist minister Vandenbroucke distributes to Congo" (VB, 2022a). The two politicians mentioned, Frank Vandenbroucke and Meryame Kitir, are members of the social democratic party *Vooruit*, which is not socialist party. VB wants to protect Flemish universities against "being dragged into this post-colonial madness of a small group of left-wing activists and academics" (VB, 2021c).

The AfD seems to be more careful than VB when denouncing the leftists on Facebook, but there are still examples of them doing this. The AfD credits the German left to have imported the practice of vandalizing memorials from the US, which they call "racism hysteria" (AfD, 2020). AfD sees it worrying that the educational system and schools are becoming a "field of experiments for the left ideology" (AfD, 2022a). In their parliamentary motions, the AfD more frequently refers to what they call Cultural Marxism. According to the AfD, Cultural Marxism has influenced European identity, the politics of remembering the German colonial era, and both postcolonialism and decolonization. "After a more detailed look, there is nothing more behind the popular tag 'postcolonialism' or 'decolonization' than a restaging of the cultural Marxist inspired anti-imperial theories in modern clothes" (AfD, 2019, 15784, p. 9). Also VB refers to cultural Marxism. For example, the demolition of memorials is a "cultural Marxist attack on our history and identity (VB, 2020, 367 pp. 3-4). Exactly what cultural Marxism is, is not explained by neither VB nor the AfD. However, it is by Busbridge et. al. identified as a far-right conspiracy theory (Busbridge et al., 2020).

Not only do VB and the AfD connect postcolonial debates to the ideas of the left, they connect it to the *extreme* left. The scrutiny of characters is not merely the work of leftists, but the work of *extreme* leftism (VB, 2022e). Woke is driven by an extreme left-wing militantism (VB, 2023, 1536, p. 2). When criticizing the scrutiny of character Winnetou, the AfD writes that he "was denounced as racist by the crazy woke ideology" (AfD, 2022b). VB also criticized the scrutiny of Winnetou as "the WOKE MADNESS had made a new victim" (VB, 2022c). "More than ever, our traditions are under attack. And by who? By a handful of woke madmen" (VB, 2022e). The fourth hypothesis is thereby confirmed.



## 7 Conclusion

The thesis set out to examine the following research question: what colonial memory do *Vlaams Belang* and the *Alternative für Deutschland* have, and how does it show in their in their political behaviour? First, the thesis presented the historical background of the Belgian and German colonial era and defined what it understands as postcolonial debates. Thereafter, it defined populist radical right parties using Fagerholm's maximal definition (2018), and concretized postcolonialism to this definition as the leftist, woke ideology that PRR parties oppose. Then, the thesis laid out the limited literature available on PRR parties colonial memory and presented the four hypotheses. Lastly, the thesis analysed and tested the hypothesis. The hypotheses were tested using a discourse analysis of Facebook posts and parliamentary motions.

The hypotheses were mostly confirmed. VB and the AfD show their selective colonial memory by giving more attention and meaning to the good sides of colonialism than the bad ones, although they still acknowledge the existence of these bad sides. Following up on the findings of Griffini (2022) and Couperus & Tortola (2019), this might be considered the common colonial memory of PRR parties, but more research is needed before concluding. The AfD presents the German colonial rule as particularly good in comparison to other colonial empires, but as expected, VB does not. Neither parties see immigration through a postcolonial lens. This might be explained by the fact that the Colonial Other and Muslim Other do not correlate. It would be interesting to research whether a PRR party in a country with a higher degree of postcolonial immigration makes this connection, and especially if the postcolonial immigration is from Muslim-majority countries. As anti-leftist parties, VB and the AfD delegitimize postcolonial debates as the ideas of the leftist, woke ideology. The thesis was, however, surprised to learn that the parties mention how European colonialism abolished the Arab slave trade in Africa less than expected.

One of the most interesting findings is how VB's colonial memory is influenced by their pro-Flemish independence orientation. VB subjects Belgian colonialism onto the historically French-speaking Royal Family and considers the Flemish being innocent. This ignores that the Flemish were unproportionally complicit in the colonial rule in the Congo. It was particularly interesting that VB, when arguing for the abolition of the Orders of Leopold I and II, used the same strategies as they criticized when they were being used by the Black Lives Matter movement.

The paper found several interesting findings that it was unable to research further. VB and the AfD often mention the importance of neutral and balanced research and university curriculum, which they deem to be too influenced by leftism and wokeness. When opposing the restitution of colonial artifacts from European museums to the country of heritage, VB and the AfD turned to colonial discourses of the country of heritage to be unable to curate the artifacts. The paper was particularly surprised to find examples of the AfD making connections between postcolonialism and antisemitism (AfD, 2023, 5226; AfD, 2022, 20/2598). Clearly, there are several topics that should be researched further.

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