

# City Narrative

# AALST

## Belgium

## The Contemporary History of Aalst in the Aftermath of World War II

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**“Nativism, Islamophobia and Islamism in the Age of Populism:  
Culturalisation and Religionisation of what is Social, Economic and  
Political in Europe”**

This research analyses the current political, social, and economic context of the European Union, which is confronted by two substantial crises, namely the global financial crisis and the refugee crisis. These crises have led to the escalation of fear and prejudice among the youth who are specifically vulnerable to discourses that culturalise and stigmatize the “other”. Young people between the ages of 18 to 30, whether native or immigrant-origin, have similar responses to globalization-rooted threats such as deindustrialization, isolation, denial, humiliation, precariousness, insecurity, and anomia. These responses tend to be essentialised in the face of current socio-economic, political and psychological disadvantages. While a number of indigenous young groups are shifting to right-wing populism, a number of Muslim youths are shifting towards Islamic radicalism. The common denominator of these groups is that they are both downwardly mobile and inclined towards radicalization. Hence, this project aims to scrutinize social, economic, political and psychological sources of the processes of radicalization among native European youth and Muslim-origin youth with migration background, who are both inclined to express their discontent through ethnicity, culture, religion, heritage, homogeneity, authenticity, past, gender and patriarchy.

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For more information, please visit the project Website:  
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## Preface

In this research, we argue that local aspects are as important as national and global aspects to understand the root causes of radicalisation, extremism, nationalism, populism, fundamentalism and violence. In this respect, we want to magnify the contemporary history of each city in which we conduct our interviews with both native and Muslim-origin youngsters as far as the processes of deindustrialization, unemployment, poverty, exclusion, alienation and isolation are concerned. Because we claim that radicalisation processes of both groups of youngsters in the European context are likely to result from their local forms of response to the detrimental effects of globalisation. We believe that revealing local socio-economic, political, demographic and ethno-cultural dynamics may help us better understand the current forms of youth radicalisation.

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# Table of Contents

- 1. Demographic structure and History of Migration .....5
- 2. Industrialization and Impact on Local Economy ..... 11
- 3. City Politics and Participation ..... 18
- 4. References..... 22

## 1. Demographic structure and History of Migration

In the Flemish region of Belgium, urban scholars consider only three cities as urban spaces, notably Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, among which the capital Brussels is considered a separate category because of its international functions (Figure 1). Aalst<sup>1</sup> is considered to belong to a group of 11 **regional cities**, together with Oostende, Brugge, Kortrijk, Roeselare, Sint-Niklaas, Mechelen en Turnhout; Leuven; Hasselt en Genk. These cities are considered in the same group but also differ in size and urban nature (Kesteloot 2003). The city of Aalst had 84.859 inhabitants in 2017 (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur & Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018).

Aalst and its neighbouring smaller cities such as Ninove, Denderleeuw and Dendermonde together belong to the larger area designated as Denderstreek, referring to the river Dender. This entire area forms part of what has been described as the urban living complex (*stedelijk leefcomplex*, in Dutch) that surrounds the city of Brussels. This term aims to capture the larger socio-economic influence that the city (Brussels) exerts on its spatial surroundings and smaller neighbouring towns. Towns such as Aalst, and Ninove form part of the commuters' living areas (*forenzenwoonzone*, in Dutch) of Brussels. This means that at least 15% of the working population in those towns commute to the city of Brussels regularly for work (Kesteloot 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> The city's website: <https://aalst.be/>

Figure 1. Map of Aalst



Source: Google Maps

This larger socio-economic influence of the capital Brussels on the surrounding the Denderstreek entails that many of the socio-cultural issues common to the cosmopolitan city of Brussels become part of the socio-cultural fabric of the surrounding towns. Debates connected to multiculturalism, diversity, minority politics, and intercultural cohabitation easily stretch to the entire urban living complex. At the occasion of disturbances in public space and criminal offences in Brussels, the young people involved were shown to be residing in the Denderstreek. Vice versa, when repeated offences were reported at train stations in towns of the Denderstreek, the involved youth lived in Brussels. Jo Fonck, the previous mayor of the city of Denderleeuw ((sp.a- *Socialistische Partij Anders*, i.e. the social-democrat party) described his city as “the widening oil slick of Brussels” (De Morgen 2017).

Additionally, newcomers or immigrants have traditionally arrived in so-called gateway cities, particular areas that form part of usually large, cosmopolitan cities. Over the last decades, however, it has

been demonstrated that more and more fresh immigrants arrive directly or even immediately settle in smaller, regional cities, rural areas or suburban neighbourhoods (Boost and Oosterlynck 2019). Aalst and its neighbouring towns, such as Ninove, belong to the urban living complex of Brussels and are considered to be such new arrival places for immigrants. Boost and Oosterlynck (2019) studied the social network of sub-Saharan immigrants in Aalst. They found that the relocation to Aalst in approximately half of their interview sample was motivated by their social network. In the other cases, there were “more structural factors such as the affordable housing market, the availability of schools for their children, or social welfare provisions that explicitly appointed them to the city” (Boost and Oosterlynck 2019, 161) (see Table 1) .

Table 1. Number and percentage of persons with a foreign nationality (i.e. non-Belgian nationality) in Aalst and the Flemish region in 2019

Nationality groups	Total number	% of total number of inhabitants in Aalst	% of total number of inhabitants
Total EU	3.589	4,2	5,7
Total non-EU	3.736	4,3	3,3
Turkey	261	0,3	0,3
Maghreb	351	0,4	0,5
<b>Total</b>	7.325	8,5	9,0

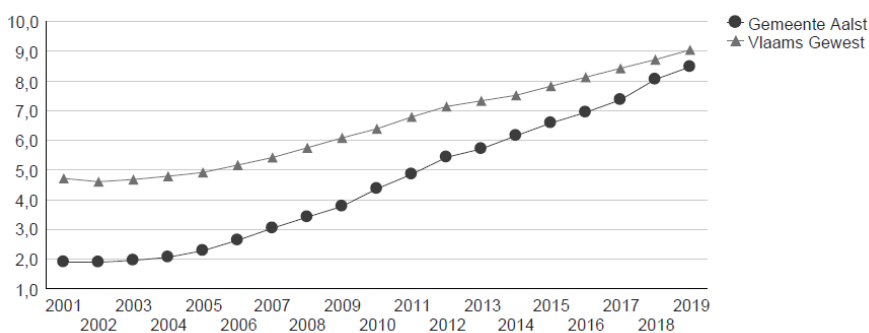
Source: Noppe 2019

The graph below (Graph 1) indicates the evolution of the percentage of inhabitants with foreign nationality (non-Belgian nationality) from 2001 to 2019 (Noppe 2019). The city of Aalst is represented by the lowest line. This graph shows that over the last 18 years, the percentage of inhabitants with a foreign nationality has gradually increased and started to approximate the average of the overall Flemish region. While the average of the Flemish region has witnessed an increase from less than 5% to 9% over this period

(+4%), **the city of Aalst witnessed a sharper increase of foreign nationals** from 2% to 8,5% over the same time period (+6,5%). This sharper increase in time, however, only led to an approximation of the regional average and could, therefore, be seen as a catching-up with general developments in Flanders as a region.

Graph 1. The evolution of the percentage of inhabitants with foreign nationality (non-Belgian nationality) from 2001 to 2019

Evolutie van aandeel vreemdelingen t.o.v. de totale bevolking van 2001 tot 2019 in %



Source: Noppe 2019



Table 2. Top 5 of foreign nationalities residing in Aalst compared to the Flemish region.

Aalst	Number	% of total inhabitants	Flemish region	% of total inhabitants
<b>Netherlands</b>	996	1,2	<b>Netherlands</b>	2,2
<b>Romania</b>	868	1,0	<b>Poland</b>	0,7
<b>DR Congo</b>	559	0,6	<b>Romania</b>	0,6
<b>Syria</b>	542	0,6	<b>Morocco</b>	0,4
<b>Poland</b>	485	0,6	<b>Italy</b>	0,4

Source: Noppe 2015

It has been noted that the presence of the Democratic Republic of Congo in the top 5 is unusual compared to other Belgian cities (Noppe 2015) (Table 2). Additionally, many of the migrants coming from the Netherlands have Congolese roots (Raspoet 2012) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number and percentage of persons of foreign descent (i.e. when the current or first nationality of the person is non-Belgian, or the nationality of their mother or father is non-Belgian) in Aalst in 2017

Nationality groups	Total number	% of total number of inhabitants in Aalst	% of total number of inhabitants in the Flemish region
<b>Total EU</b>	4.662	5,5	9,4
<b>Total non-EU</b>	12.642	14,9	11,7
<b>Non-EU Europe</b>	1.506	1,8	1,5
<b>Turkey &amp; Maghreb</b>	4.203	5,0	5,4
<b>Total</b>	17.304	20,4	21,1

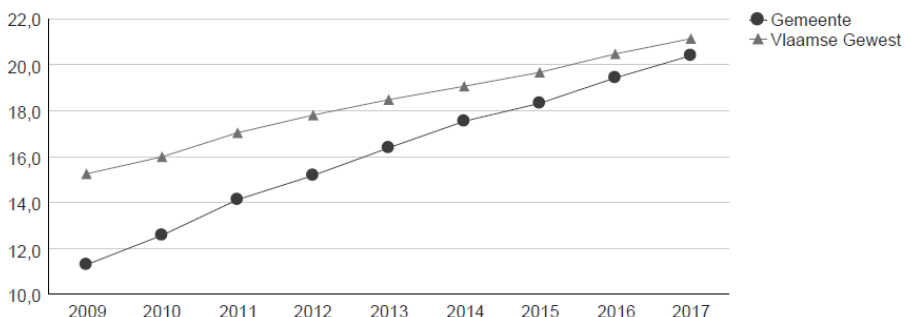
Source: DWH AM&SB KSZ, processed by Statistiek Vlaanderen (Noppe 2019).

The graph below (Graph 2) indicates the evolution of the percentage of inhabitants of foreign descent (with a current or first

foreign nationality (non-Belgian nationality), or whose mother or father has a first nationality which is non-Belgian), from 2009 until 2017. The lowest line represents the city of Aalst. Also, this graph shows that the percentage of inhabitants of foreign descent has started to approximate the regional average over the last 8 years. With an increase of almost +9% over the last 8 years, ***the city has experienced a much sharper and steeper increase of new inhabitants of foreign descent*** than the regional average of +5,3%. Also, this change, however, can be considered as catching up with developments on the regional scale of Flanders.

Graph 2. The evolution of the percentage of inhabitants of foreign descent (with a current or first foreign nationality (non-Belgian nationality), or whose mother or father has a first nationality which is non-Belgian), from 2009 until 2017

Evolutie van aandeel personen van buitenlandse herkomst ten opzichte van de totale bevolking van 2009 tot 2017 in %

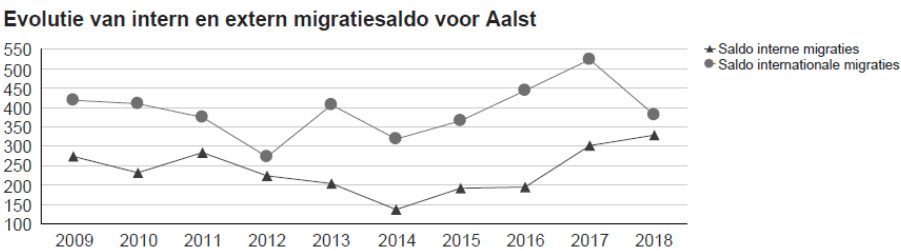


Source: Noppe 2019

The final part of this section addresses incoming and outgoing migration by comparing ***internal and external migration movements to and from the city of Aalst*** (Graph 3). Internal migration refers to inter-communal movements from within the Belgian borders, external means international movements.

The lowest line (with triangle) represents the net migration rate following internal migration movement within Belgium to and from Aalst over the last 9 years. The top line represents the net migration rate following international migration movement to and from Aalst over the same period (Noppe 2019).

Graph 3. Incoming and outcoming migration comparison of internal and external migration movements to and from the city of Aalst between 2009 and 2018



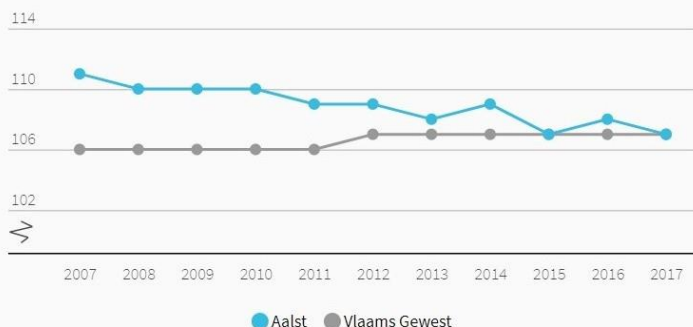
Source: Noppe 2019

## 2. Industrialization and Impact on Local Economy

The overall welfare level of Aalst is above the average for all Belgian citizens, and since 2013 it approximates the average welfare level of inhabitants of the Flemish region (Graph 4). If the average fiscal income of inhabitants of Belgium is represented by 100, then Aalst inhabitants' wealth declined from 111 in 2005 to 107 in 2017. The average for the Flemish region was 106 in 2005 and remained stable, with a slight increase to 107 in 2017 (Welvaartsindex Aalst 2017) (Graph 4).

Graph 4. The overall welfare levels of Aalst and the Flemish region between 2007 and 2017

## Welvaartsindex ratio



Source: Provincies.incijfers.be (Welvaartsindex Aalst 2017)

Over the last 12 years, the overall welfare level of Aalst inhabitants was above the Belgian and Flemish average but declined slightly to approximate the Flemish level. This points at relative social, economic deprivation, as inhabitants of **Aalst have experienced a welfare loss over the last 12 years**, while still remaining steadily above or close to the Flemish average.

**Levels of employment** (in wage labour and the percentage of entrepreneurs) and unemployment approximate the overall average Flemish levels (Welvaartsindex Aalst 2017).

The graph below (Graph 5) indicates the employment ratio of the population (15-64 years) in Aalst in comparison to the Flemish region between 2007 and 2017. Here again, the city approximates the average Flemish ratio.

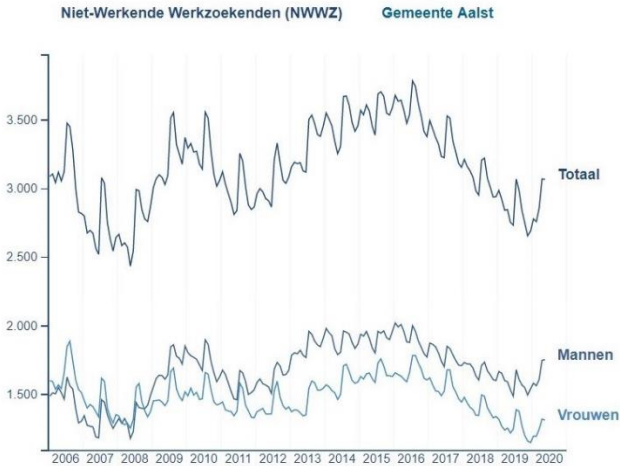
Graph 5. The employment ratio of the population (15-64 years) in Aalst in comparison to the Flemish region between 2007 and 2017



Source: Provincies.incijfers.be (Welvaartsindex Aalst 2017)

The graph below (Graph 6) indicates the **unemployment** ratio of inhabitants of Aalst (2005-2020). Coincidentally, the total number of unemployed inhabitants has returned to virtually the same level as 15 years ago (3262 individuals in June 2005 and 3068 individuals in May 2020).

Graph 6. The unemployment ratio of inhabitants of Aalst between 2006 and 2020



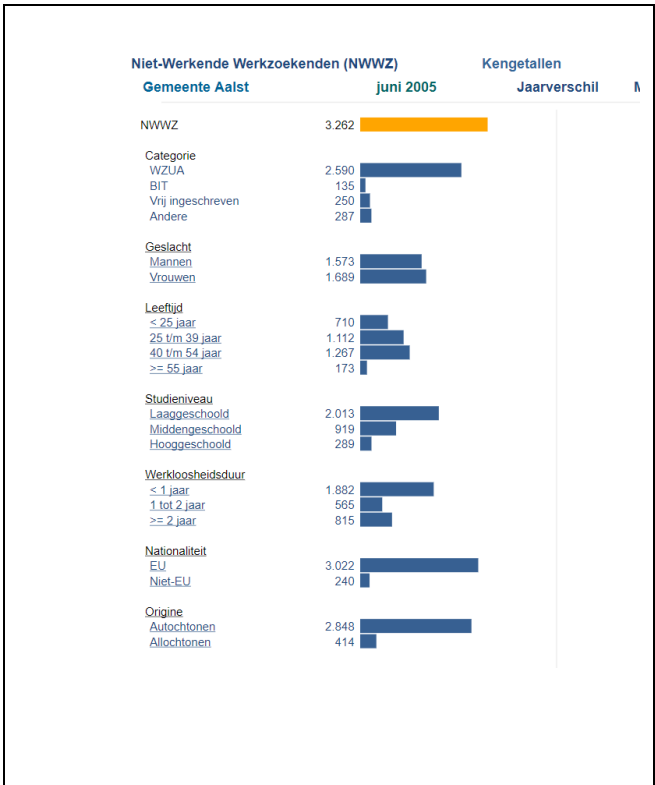
Source: Arvastat.vdab.be

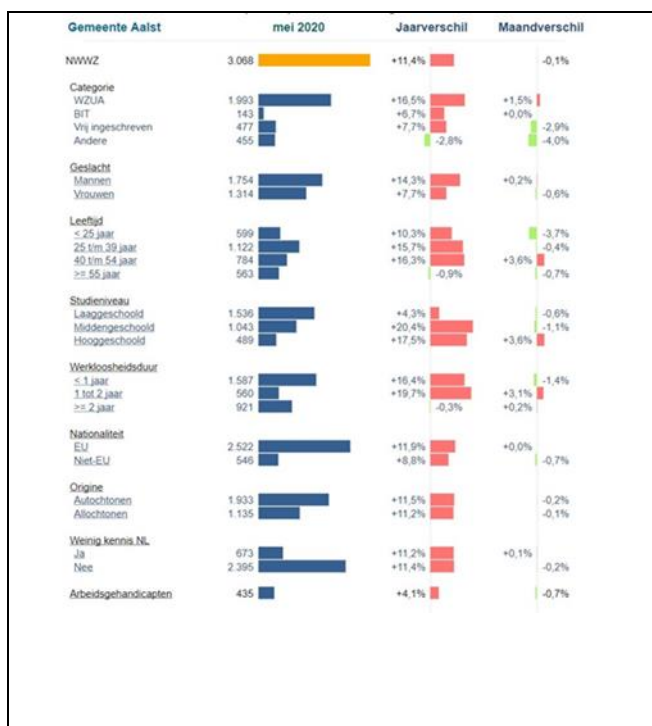
The share of migrants among the unemployed population has increased sharply over the last 15 years. The figure below (Figure 2) compares the situation of unemployment in June 2005 to May 2020. Migrated citizens are indicated as “allochtonen”, in contrast to “autochtonen” as the non-migrated native population. In 2005, the total group of unemployed inhabitants of Aalst numbered 3262, of which 2848 were so-called “autochtonen” (83,3 %) and 414 “allochtonen” (12,7%). In May 2020, of a total of 3056 unemployed, “autochtonen” make up 63% and “allochtonen” make up 37%.

***This means that the share of unemployed migrants in the total of unemployed inhabitants of Aalst tripled over the last 15 years, while the absolute number of the unemployed remained virtually the same.*** In 2005, half of the 12,7% unemployed migrants were of African origin. In 2020, their percentage rose to 18,8%. Unemployed migrants from Syria form 3,8% and from Turkey 2,6%.

In sum, migrants are highly over-represented in the group of unemployed citizens.

Figure 2. Comparison of the the state of unemployment in June 2005 and May 2020



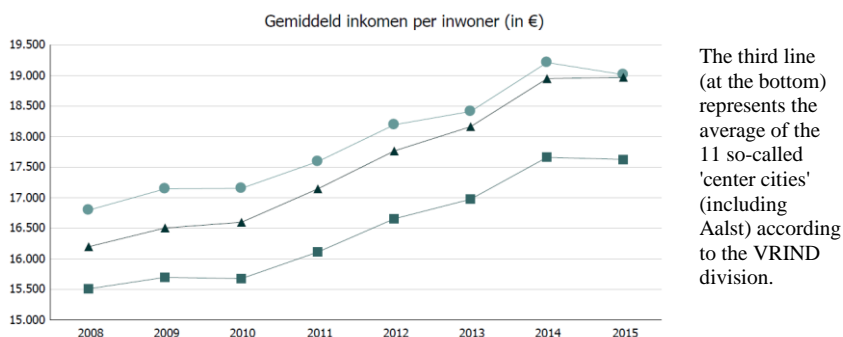


Source: Arvstat.vdab.be

**The average income of inhabitants** of Aalst is 19.014 euro/year in 2015. It is virtually the same as the average for the Flemish region, 18.970 euro/year (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur & Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018, 102). The graph below (Graph 7) indicates the city of Aalst in the highest line and the average of Flanders regions in the middle line.

Graph 7. The average income of inhabitants of Aalst and the average for the Flemish region between 2008 and 2015



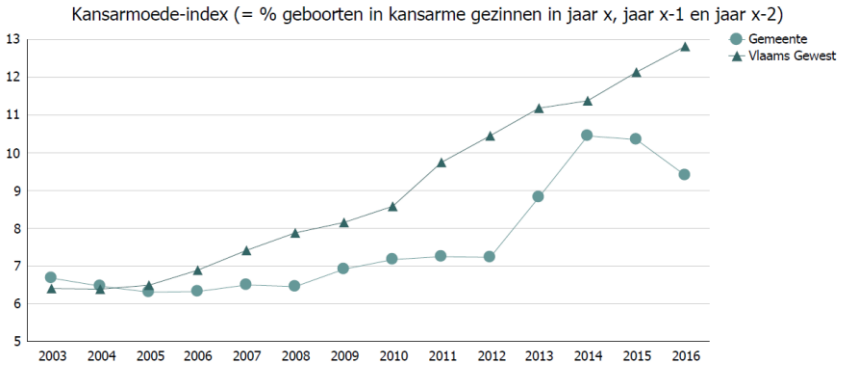


Source: Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur & Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018, 102

**Agricultural production** in Aalst mainly consists of the following sectors: cattle, floriculture and vegetables. The number of agricultural companies in the city has declined drastically over the last 16 years: from 231 in 2003 to 106 in 2019 (Welvaartsindex Aalst 2019b). This observation is in line with an overall tendency in the Flemish region: agricultural and horticultural companies have been declining over the last decades. Many of these companies are in family ownership, and farmers often do not find successors at retirement. Secondly, there is an economic need for continuous scale expansion (enlargement of land), and this factor brings farmers in high competition with each other (Calus et al. 2010).

The number of inhabitants that **rely on social welfare and earn the minimum wage (leefloon)** totals 8,17 % of the population, and it is slightly higher than the average Flemish percentage of 6,23% (Welvaartsindex Aalst 2019a). The number of children born in families that are considered at risk of poverty or living in poverty has been shifting rapidly over the last 8 years. The graph below (Graph 8) shows the changes for children born in families at risk of poverty and the lowest line indicating the level for Aalst (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur & Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018, 107).

Graph 8. The changes for children born in families at risk of poverty in Aalst and the Flemish region



Source: Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur & Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018, 107

### 3. City Politics and Participation

Since the 1980s, the Christian Democrat party (CVP ,*Christelijke Volkspartij*, changed its name to CD&V, Christen, Democratisch & Vlaams – Christian, Democratic & Flemish in 2001 ) has been dominant in the city of Aalst. Between 1989 – 2006 there was an interlude when the liberal party (Open VLD) ruled the city coalition and offered the city mayor. **Since 2012, the city saw a rise of right-wing parties**, both the right-center party of N-VA and the extreme right-wing party of Vlaams Belang won significantly.

In the local elections of 2012, the right-wing party N-VA won the elections for the first time and provided the mayor Christoph D’Haese (N-VA). N-VA considers itself a center-right party but has pronounced right-wing political viewpoints on migration and minority groups and is a staunch supporter of neoliberal economic

policy. The party aims to reduce the inflow of refugees and proposes strong integration and assimilation politics for new migrants. Mayor Christop D’Haese initially entered politics with the

liberal party of Open VLD but joined N-VA in 2011. He enjoys wide support in his constituency.

***The coalition of 2013-2018*** included N-VA, CD&V and the social-democrats, sp.a. In 2014, the local party division of sp.a withdrew from the party, and it formed the local group called Sociaal Democraten & Progressieven (SD&P) instead, and they renamed themselves again in 2018 as Lijst A. (List A.). The split was in fact caused by the dissolution of the national party of sp.a after an ongoing disagreement between the Flemish sp.a leadership and the local elected representatives in Aalst. The Flemish leadership did not agree with the coalition agreement that was made after the 2012 elections as they found that it did not sufficiently include social-democrat policy measures. Moreover, they disagreed with the appointment of national politician Karim Van Overmeire (N-VA) as a city councillor. They argued that the local party representatives should refuse to enter such coalition (VRT 2012). After dissolving the local sp.a division, those in favor of participating in the local coalition founded the SD&P, and later List A.

Karim Van Overmeire was a Member of Parliament and strongman of the extreme right-wing party of Vlaams Belang for decades. He left this party in 2010 after a disagreement with the national political strategy. He founded the local movement 'Aalst, Anders en Beter' (Aalst, Different and Better) and he was a candidate in the local elections of 2012 on the N-VA list and as a member of this movement (De Morgen 2011). His electoral success led to him being supported to take up the first position of "local councillor of Flemish Affairs", with the task to safeguard the Flemish character of the city (De Standaard 2012). This proposition caused the rupture mentioned above between the Flemish leadership of the social-democrat party of sp.a and the local sp.a representatives. He

was eventually appointed as the second counsellor of Education, Library, European and international cooperation, Heritage, Immigration, Integration and Flemish character.

In sum, both current mayor and influential local politician Christoph D’Haese with a background in the liberal party of Open VLD, and Karim van Overmeire, a popular national politician with a background in the extreme right-wing Vlaams Belang, joined the N-VA in 2011, contributing to the rising local success of the right-wing parties and N-VA party in particular ever since.

In his capacity as councillor of Immigration, Integration and Flemish character, Van Overmeire introduced a prohibition of ritual slaughter of animals (which is an exception requested by Muslim citizens in the frame of Eid al Adha festivities) and a special ‘taxation of foreigners’ (Lievens 2018). In the run-up to the local elections of October 2018, local representatives of Vlaams Belang contacted N-VA through the media to propose a collaboration after the elections. This approach of N-VA was controversial given the agreement among all national party leadership to maintain the so-called ‘cordon sanitaire’, i.e. to exclude the extreme right-wing party of Vlaams Belang from any ruling coalitions because it supported anti-democratic values and policies. At the local level, Vlaams Belang often tries to circumvent and break this long-standing agreement. Van Overmeire, who until 2010 enjoyed national status as one of the main leaders and ideologues of Vlaams

Belang, stated that he would be interested in talking with the party as he does not support the principle of the cordon sanitaire while declaring that immigration policies already were under his leadership between 2012-2018 and were as strict as was legally possible (Lievens 2018).

In the **local elections of 2018**, Christof D’Haese was re-elected as mayor, and N-VA won a third of the votes. Traditional parties such

as CD&V, Lijst A. and Open VLD lost while the extreme right-wing party of ***Vlaams Belang won more votes compared to the last elections and became the second-largest party, after N-VA.*** The current ruling coalition, however, maintains the cordon sanitaire and includes N-VA, Open VLD and CD&V (VRT 2018). At the local elections, Vlaams Belang rose again across the entire region of Flanders by about 5-8%, hereby re-occupying a prominent position in the Flemish political landscape, after having suffered a gradual decline of votes in the last decade.

The rise of Vlaams Belang in the local elections foreshadowed their resurgence in the federal elections a few months later, in May 2019. After those elections, citizens with a minority background in Aalst received “hate letters” in their letterboxes (De Maeseneer and Arnoudt 2019). The anonymous writer of the letters argued that the gain of Vlaams Belang by the city voters demonstrated that their presence was no longer wanted. This action, however, seemed initiated by individual(s) and was not claimed or supported by any organisation.

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