'No room for hate in our country':

Constructing the LGBTI-friendly nation in news discourses

after the murder of a gay man in Belgium

Emma Verhoeven, Alexander Dhoest and Steve Paulussen

Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract

This article analyzes othering discourses in the news media coverage of an alleged homophobic murder in Belgium. The case study is based on a critical discourse analysis of news articles published in Dutch-speaking Belgian news media. Using the framework of homonationalism, this analysis finds that Belgium's LGBTI-friendly status is deeply anchored in the national identity. Discourses in mainstream news media following the murder appeal to a unified imagined community of Belgians based on the assumed shared value of tolerance. This LGBTI-friendly status spills over in the exclusionary discourse in right-wing alternative media towards groups that are represented as a homophobic threat outside the nation (Central and Eastern Europe) and within it (Muslims and migrants).

Introduction

On 6 March 2021, the body of a gay man, David Polfliet, was found in a park in Belgium. The murder was deemed homophobic and became heavily mediatized. The nationwide attention resulted in politicians announcing new national measures against homophobia, such as safe spaces for victims of sexual intimidation. In this paper, we investigate the reporting about the murder to analyze the mediated public debate about LGBTI equalities[i] and homophobia in Belgium, focusing on the importance of the nation in the coverage. For this analysis, we draw on Jasbir Puar's concept of homonationalism (2007), a widely used framework in the literature concerning 'homophobic others'. The aim of this paper is to use a critical discourse analysis to investigate how the Belgian nation is constructed in Dutch-speaking Belgian news media following an alleged homophobic murder, and who is portrayed as 'other'.

In recent years, a growing body of research investigated the news media representation of LGBTI themes and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Dhoest, 2020b). Various studies have been carried out on countries where LGBTI people are othered, such as Russia and Poland (Edenborg, 2021; Kulpa, 2020; Weiss and Bosia, 2013). This paper aims to contribute to the field by analyzing othering discourses about a domestic event, the murder of a gay man, and aims to expand the scope by investigating discourses in a Western European country that presents itself as gay-friendly, as existing Anglophone analyses of media discourses about antigay homicides are predominantly situated in the U.S. (Meyer, 2020; Ott and Aoki, 2002).

Homophobia and othering

Othering is the process that marks a group by its difference from an in-group, 'us'. This difference between opposites establishes meaning, which helps us to better understand the world, but often does so in a 'crude and reductionist way' (Hall, 1997: 235). Homophobia is

one form of othering, where the in-group is constructed as heterosexual and the other deviates from this heterosexual norm. Various scholars have analyzed the workings of homophobic discourses (Baider, 2018; Lovelock, 2018) or discourses based on a homophobic event (Baden and David, 2018). Research on a case similar to Polfliet's, the homophobic killing of Matthew Shepard in the U.S. in 1998, found that news coverage made a political symbol out of this murder (Ott and Aoki, 2002). The media focused on Shepard's gayness, but ignored broad-scale homophobia. In the previous year, 27 other antigay murders and many more homophobic attacks had occurred, yet received little attention. Husselbee and Elliott (2002) found that most coverage on the Shepard murder framed the killers as lone offenders who disturbed otherwise tolerant communities.

Since the 21st century, the status of white and normative gay people has gradually changed from 'other' to part of the nation as they have become included in the image and politics of many countries in the so-called 'Western world'. In this context, Puar (2007) coined the term homonationalism, which refers to the way that certain gay groups have embraced 'nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas' (p. xxiv). Gay-friendliness has become essentialized and presented as an attitude inherent in European nations, in contrast to homogenized 'homophobic others'. Rather than distinguishing between good and bad politics, the concept of homonationalism offers a framework that enables the critique of 'narratives of progress and modernity that continue to give some populations access to citizenship – cultural and legal – at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations' (Puar, 2013: 337). For homonationalism to work, there needs to be a 'backwards' nation or group to scapegoat, which is why Puar (2022) argues that authoritarianism works in tandem with homonationalism. The status of certain countries and populations as 'gay-friendly' and others as 'homophobic' is formed and maintained through homonationalist discourses that can be traced in the media. We follow Hall's (1992: 86) definition of discourse as 'a group of

statements that provide a language for talking about […] a particular kind of knowledge about a topic'. Homonationalist discourses entail a range of discursive strategies that implicitly or explicitly ascribe gay-friendliness or homophobia to a nation or community (Dhoest, 2020c).

Civic nationalism

Nationalism, as implied in the concept of homonationalism, is not limited to politics but also references broader representations of the nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). In *Banal Nationalism*, Billig (1995) notes that references to the nation are indicated continuously and in an inconspicuous manner to remind the intended audience of nationhood. Using Anderson's (1983) and Billig's (1995) definitions of the nation and nationalism, we understand 'the people' as conflated with 'the nation', which are both contrasted with 'the outside' (Brubaker, 2020). Cultural values and a sense of shared identity are central to this understanding of nationalism in what Kohn (1946) labels civic nationalism. It represents the nation as 'as united by a common public culture, a way of life, a national character, which is shared by all citizens irrespective of ethnic origin' (Brown, 2000: 33). Civic values that are supposed to be shared within an imagined community, such as LGBTI acceptance, can be passed on through the subtle and continuous flagging of banal nationalism. Civic nationalism is the opposite of ethnic nationalism, which relies on the belief that nations should be inhibited by people who share fixed features like an ethnicity or a native-born status. This opposition does not grasp all the intricacies of nationalism but functions as an ideal type that allows us to better describe such an abstract concept (Kennedy and Van Ginderachter, 2021).

While the dominant belief is that civic nationalism is inherently more inclusive, several studies have indicated the opposite for countries in Western Europe. Based on a 2008 survey, Simonsen and Bonikowski (2020) found that citizens from countries in Northern and Western Europe that are characterized by a high degree of civic nationalism indicated more anti-Muslim

attitudes. European radical-right parties often frame their discourse in civic rather than ethnic terms, portraying the own nation as one of tolerance that 'is threatened by an influx of intolerant, reactionary and narrow-minded "others"' (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013: 109).

Many of these othering mechanisms have been studied on the European level, as LGBTI-friendliness is frequently attributed to (Western) Europe and its institutions (Szulc, 2022). Two groups or regions that are frequently constructed as European others on the basis of sexuality and gender are Muslims (Dudink, 2016) and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Dhoest, 2020a). Muslims are represented as a homogenous group that is irreconcilable with Europe on cultural grounds, marking Islam as fundamentally heterosexual, misogynist and homophobic (El-Tayeb, 2011). While CEE is also routinely framed as homophobic, this homophobia is framed as 'curable' by Europe (Kulpa, 2014: 432). The representations of both others engender a European identity based on moral superiority regarding gender and sexuality.

Belgium and LGBTI equalities

Belgium is divided into three regions: Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part; Wallonia, the French-speaking part; and the bilingual Brussels Region, geographically located in the Flemish region. The country is characterized by substate nationalism in Flanders, with the two Flemish nationalist parties receiving the most votes (16% for N-VA, 12% for Vlaams Belang) in the most recent Belgian elections in 2019. However, the country is led by a coalition of liberals, greens, socialists, and Christian democrats. One of the reasons the Flemish nationalists are not governing on a national level is the *cordon sanitaire* against Vlaams Belang, implemented in 1989 to exclude the party from power (De Lange and Akkerman, 2012). There is no media cordon in Flanders, so while the party has little policy power, Dutch-speaking Belgian media have gradually become more accommodating to Vlaams Belang (De Jonge, 2019; Ellinas, 2018; Schafraad et al., 2012). Vlaams Belang was the only Flemish party to unanimously vote

against same-sex marriage in 2003 and opposed the more controversial bill for same-sex adoption in 2006 as well. Both bills were accepted. In recent years, Vlaams Belang has changed its position to include gay (but not transgender) equalities[ii].

From the 2000s onwards, Belgium has created an extensive legal framework regarding LGBTI equalities. Although the regions mentioned above have legislative powers, almost all LGBTI legislation is handled at the national level. Since 2003, Belgium has an antidiscrimination law that enhances the penalty for offenses such as assault if the motive is hate, contempt, or hostility towards someone because of a protected characteristic, including sexual orientation. The offense would then qualify as a hate crime. Although there are still gaps such as the situation for intersex people, Belgium has gained the status of a 'paradise for LGBT rights' (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011: 1058). Indeed, according to a survey conducted among European LGBTI people by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), legal discrimination due to being LGBTI in Belgium is relatively low and there is a general openness about sexual diversity (FRA, 2020). However, in the meantime, 14% of the Belgian respondents indicated that they were attacked physically or sexually in the last five years, which is more than the EU average (11%) and 42% of the Belgian respondents indicated that they were harassed in the past year, more than the EU average of 38% (FRA, 2020). A Belgian survey from 2013 indicated that homophobic and transphobic prejudices are widespread (Dierckx et al., 2017).

Turning to the Belgian media, LGBTI persons have increasingly gained attention in the news ever since the 2000s, but these stories remain mostly negative in nature as the major topics are gay-bashing and violence against LGBTI people (Jacobs and Meeusen, 2020). In 2012, reporting on homophobia reached a peak as two homophobic murders were reported in Liège, a city in Wallonia. The victims were Ihsane Jarfi (April 2012) and Jacques Kotnik (July 2012). Whereas the Kotnik case was barely covered in Flanders, the Jarfi case became

mediatized and the coverage problematized the elements of Belgian Moroccans (like Jarfi), sexuality, Islam, and migration. News coverage of anti-LGBTI violence in Belgium, and particularly in Flanders, remains understudied. In his ethnographic content analysis of two homophobic incidents in Brussels in 2011 and the murders in 2012, Peumans (2017) found that the link between Islam, migration, and homophobic violence was reinforced in newspapers. Because the Polfliet murder happened in Flanders, it was presumably considered more newsworthy than those beyond the language border.

The Polfliet murder is not a unique case; in 2021, ILGA Europe reported potential homophobic murders in Azerbaijan, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Russia, Spain, and Turkey (ILGA Europe, 2022). However, the Belgian national context is particularly interesting for studying media discourses about LGBTI equalities and homophobia. Despite its gay-friendly reputation and the political and legal support for LGBTI equalities, there is a high incidence of antigay harassment and violence (FRA, 2020). In this context, the murder of David Polfliet received considerable media attention. While every national context is unique and these findings cannot be generalized, elements such as high numbers of bias-motivated violence (FRA, 2020) and the presence of homonationalist rhetoric (El-Tayeb, 2011; Hiller, 2021) indicate that the results are relevant for several European countries.

Methodology

Case and sample

When David Polfliet was killed, the media immediately placed the murder in the context of the two previous homophobic killings in Belgium, and stated that if the motive was homophobia, Polfliet would have been the first deadly victim of 'gay-bashing' or 'gay hate' in Flanders. At the time of writing, the officially recognized motive for the Polfliet murder remains unknown. As a result, media refrained from using the words 'hate crime'. Even

Polfliet's family stated that it was premature to assume that the motive was homophobia. However, news coverage focuses on LGBTI issues and homophobia specifically for days following the murder. Polfliet was positively represented as an openly gay, single, sociable father, often referred to as simply 'David', while the suspects were represented as three underaged 'gang members' who 'beat the bejesus out of'[iii] Polfliet. All over the country, people came together for wakes and to protest homophobia. The murder was discussed in Parliament and more measures against homophobia were announced. Attention for the case gradually dwindled, until two weeks after the murder, when the suspects declared that they had been 'pedo-hunting', i.e., arranging dates with men who would meet up with underage boys, to steal the men's belongings. The amount of information about the suspects was limited because Belgian law protects information about minors. The sample for this analysis is based on three weeks of media coverage about the Polfliet case. News articles on the murder published between 7 March and 28 March 2021 were collected through the Belgian press database GoPress. We included seven mainstream Flemish daily newspapers and two mainstream online news sites (see Table 1). Besides mainstream media, we included alternative media to gain a broader image of the present discourses. Relying on mainstream news media alone could provide a biased view, as they tend to reflect the dominant or hegemonic view on issues. Alternative media 'position themselves as correctives of the mainstream news media' or are perceived as such by their audience (Holt et al., 2019: 862). Three alternative online news sites were added to the sample to broaden the scope: *DeWereldMorgen*, characterized by its left-leaning citizen journalism, *PAL NWS*, a right-wing, conservative, and Flemish nationalist website, and *Doorbraak*, an opinion website with roots in Flemish nationalism. Data collection was based on eleven search terms on LGBTI and the Polfliet case and produced 457 articles. Articles that contained search terms but were not related to the case (e.g., the Vatican

condemning homosexuality) were filtered out of the sample, together with articles from regional sections of the newspapers. The final sample consisted of 146 articles.

Table 1. Articles by medium.

Medium	Type of medium	Number of articles
De Morgen	Quality newspaper	21
De Standaard	Quality newspaper	24
De Tijd	Quality newspaper (business)	4
DeWereldMorgen	Alternative news site (left)	5
Doorbraak	Alternative opinion site (right)	1
Gazet van Antwerpen	Regional newspaper	16
Het Belang van	Regional newspaper	8
Het Laatste Nieuws	Popular newspaper	23
Het Nieuwsblad	Popular newspaper	11
Knack.be	Mainstream news site	12
PAL NWS	Alternative news site (right)	7
VRT NWS	Mainstream news site	14
Total		**146**

Critical discourse analysis

The sample was analyzed using Carvalho's (2008) functionalist approach to critical discourse analysis, to interpret the textual meanings situated in their cultural context. Through structural close readings, critical discourse analysis analyses 'opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 2006: 204). Rather than looking at manifest meanings or quantifying textual features, this approach aims to interpret meanings of texts and situate them in wider social cultural structures (Richardson, 2007). As such, this study does not aim to provide a quantitative overview, but at some points quantitative indications are given to clarify the prevalence of a pattern.

The news texts were repeatedly read and coded in NVivo software, with a focus on their objects (topics or themes in the texts), actors (represented as subjects that do things or objects that are talked about), language use, and framing. Framing is a discursive strategy that 'organize[s] discourse according to a certain point of view' (Carvalho, 2008: 169). In this

analysis, particular attention was paid to othering through explicit or implicit us/them binaries (Wodak, 2008) and the discursive construction of the nation and to the values ascribed to insiders and outsiders of the said nation (Wodak et al., 2009).

News reporting on the Polfliet murder

'Inclusive' nationalism

'It is important that together, we make it clear that there is no room for hate in our country. Here, everyone should be able to be themselves, whatever your sexual preference or gender identity is.' (*Knack*, 9 March 2021 – all cited media are listed in Appendix B) These are the words of Prime Minister Alexander De Croo as he responds to the murder by raising the rainbow flag above the headquarters of the Belgian government, thereby signaling support for LGBTI people in the name of the nation. As the representative of the country, he sets the tone in his first reaction by calling the murder 'a sad low point for our country' (*Het Nieuwsblad,* 09 March 2021). Throughout all his statements, he creates a unified Belgian in-group by using 'us', 'we' or 'our country', which Billig (1995: 94) describes as the 'crucial words of banal nationalism'. By repeatedly locating acceptance within the boundaries of the nation, Belgium becomes explicitly linked with LGBTI-friendliness, and by appealing to 'us' as Belgians, the understanding of LGBTI-friendliness as a shared civic value is reinstated. When stating that 'there is no room for hate in our country' (*Knack*, 09 March 2021), De Croo uses a metonymy in which the product (hate) replaces the cause (those who hate). This way, and in all other statements as well, he avoids explicitly naming someone as other, meanwhile reinforcing the understanding of Belgium as LGBTI-friendly although a gay man was recently murdered. This pattern does not construct a LGBTI-friendly/homophobic dichotomy, but it facilitates exclusionary nationalist discourses through the anchoring of gay-friendliness as a shared civic value in the national image.

In using the rhetoric of 'inclusive' civic nationalism, this discourse presents LGBTI equalities as fully established and obfuscates domestic homophobia. It reinforces the narrative of sexual exceptionalism, an essential frame within homonationalism that portrays the nation as superior regarding LGBTI acceptance (Puar, 2007). Four articles in the sample explicitly follow a pattern where gay hate is called 'unthinkable' or 'unbelievable' because LGBTI people in Belgium have acquired extensive political support and legal equality over the past two decades. In ten other articles, 'shock' is the central focus, suggesting that this kind of homophobia is unthinkable in Belgium. The Belgian legal framework is repeatedly contrasted with less progressive legal situations regarding LGBTI equalities, creating a homophobic other that is lagging or antimodern. As discussed in the literature review, most LGBTI legislation was passed at the Belgian level. Therefore, in this discourse in which the legal framework is central, almost all references to the nation relate to Belgium. One example is this editorial:

> You cannot imagine it here – where you can marry or adopt children as LGB[iv] just as well – but worldwide there are still 68 countries where homosexuality is a criminal offense. (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 10 March 2021)

This position of Belgium as forerunner of LGBTI equalities creates a utopic image of a country in which 'homophobia becomes a problem of not-yet-adjusted individuals' (Ammaturo and Slootmaeckers, 2020, para. 5). Although this comparative pattern recurs throughout the sample, it is important to note that many use it as an introductory remark to contrast the legal situation with the lived realities of LGBTI people in Belgium, highlighting the negative everyday experiences for this group. By repeatedly using other countries as a starting point, this discourse reinforces the idea of certain countries as backwards and Belgium as at least legally progressive. References to Belgium as a LGBTI-friendly nation are widely present in

mainstream publications, indicating that this understanding is part of hegemonic common sense. It is by far the most used and thus dominant pattern in the discourse following the Polfliet murder.

The threat of Central and Eastern Europe

Beside expressions of civic nationalism, in a second notable trend Belgium is frequently contrasted with CEE, which is represented as a foreign homophobic threat outside of the LGBTI-friendly nation. The focus mainly shifts from the murder to CEE in opinion pieces. A journalist states that LGBTI equalities have not been fully realized in Belgium:

> This is apparent not only from the murder of David, but also from the many stories about gay hate that have surfaced once again. And that in our country, that may be considered one of the better students in Europe. In Poland and Hungary, cities are shamelessly declaring themselves LGBTQ-free. When will the EU act *against* this fundamental violation of human rights? (*Het Belang van Limburg*, 10 March 2021)

This discourse builds on the framing of gay equalities as human rights that has characterized European LGBTI-activism since the 1990s (Holzhacker, 2014) but may easily spill over into homonationalist rhetoric (Schotel, 2022). References to CEE also appeared in other articles, such as the following interview question: 'Were you surprised that this happened in Belgium? We expect deadly violence aimed at gays in, say, Chechnya.' (*De Standaard*, 13 March 2021) Chechnya is represented as synonymous with homophobia in a different article as well, titled 'And suddenly Belgium resembles Chechnya a little bit more' (*De Standaard*, 9 March 2021). These statements refer to the state-sponsored antigay purges in this part of the Russian republic and the violence LGBTI people face by Chechen authorities.

Besides Chechnya, the homophobic threat located in CEE is also represented by Hungary and Poland, who are mentioned together five times in the sample. The reason for this is the precarious legal situation for LGBTI people, with laws limiting the 'promotion' of homosexuality in Hungary and 'LGBTI-free zones' in Poland, that was covered extensively in the news as it clashed with 'European values' (see Chetaille, 2013; Slootmaeckers 2019). These developments in Poland and Hungary should be seen in the context of political homophobia (see Weiss and Bosia, 2013) and successful antigender campaigns (see Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Because the European Union and Belgium promote themselves as LGBTI-friendly, this is a source of conflict and crisis (Slootmaeckers, 2019). Someone who protests against LGBTI-phobia is quoted:

It has been proven that [prides] remain necessary. We don't have to look far for that right now. Just look at Poland, where 'gay zones' have been introduced, or Hungary, where the constitution states that marriage can only exist between a man and a woman. (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, 15 March 2021)

The man is cited referencing Poland and Hungary rather than the murder which is the reason the protest is organized in the first place. In his argument that 'we' – again banally referencing Belgium – 'don't have to look far for that right now', the image arises of a foreign homophobic threat that is, both spatially and temporally, closing in on the nation. The argument shifts from the potential homophobic murder to the legal situation. In this logic, even though a gay man was just murdered, Belgium still has the upper hand over other(ed) countries because of its extensive legal framework protecting LGBTI equalities. By routinely resorting to legal equality rather than lived equalities, this discourse reinforces the homonationalist divide between the 'progressive West' and the 'antimodern East' in which CEE does not share 'our'

values. This pattern of CEE as a homophobic threat is present exclusively in mainstream news media. Although it is less present than purely 'inclusive' civic nationalism, it is a generally accepted understanding and way of talking about LGBTI equalities.

Muslims and 'imported gay hate'

A third discursive trend in the news coverage is related to anti-Muslim and antimigration sentiments. The victim of the murder was a white Belgian man. Details about the suspects, including their ethnicity, remain largely unknown as Belgian law prohibits spreading information that could identify minors in juvenile court. The only exception can be found in the last sentences of a news article, when a representative from a local LGBTI organization is cited saying none of the suspects has a migration background: 'The only thing I want to say about it is that there is not a single boy with an allochthonous background among them.' (*De Morgen*, 20 March 2021) Little information is shared about the suspects, which makes the choice to share *this* fact even more relevant. It explicitly contradicts the implicit presupposition that the perpetrators are, in fact, 'allochthons' – a racialized term that literally refers to someone with a migrant background. The term is deemed stigmatizing as it upholds racist understandings of who does not 'truly' belong to the nation (Wekker, 2016) and is usually used in reference to Muslims or people of color, mostly those of Turkish and Moroccan descent. The information shared by the LGBTI organization was not confirmed or disproved in the rest of the news coverage. Ten other articles, mostly readers' letters or articles on right-wing news sites, suggest that the suspects may be 'foreign', illustrated in the following example: 'Will it be made public […] from which environment they come? Will certain policies be linked to their environment, upbringing, background? These boys didn't come from Mars.' (*Het Belang van Limburg*, 18 March 2021). In several other cases, the focus shifts from the suspects towards

a general profile of a 'foreign' homophobe. An opinion piece written by a member of the right-wing Flemish-nationalist party N-VA mentions research from the Netherlands:

> When asked whether you would accept a gay boy or a lesbian girl as a friend, 72 percent of the students with Turkish roots and 64 percent of the students with Moroccan roots answered negatively. Remarkable: a quarter of the autochthonous Dutch students also did not want a gay friend. (*De Standaard*, 15 March 2021)

Here, the threat of the other is portrayed by 'foreigners' located *inside* the nation who threaten its cultural values from within, namely people with a migrant background and Muslims. Spatially, this group is included in the state and considered domestic, yet symbolically it is excluded. The words 'remarkable' and 'also' suggest that the author expects homophobia within migrant groups, but not within the native Belgian group. Homophobia is attributed to racialized others, contrasted with 'autochthonous' Belgian citizens who are supposed to share the civic value of LGBTI-friendliness. This portrayal of racialized homophobic others can be found in all articles of right-wing alternative news sites (*PAL NWS* and *Doorbraak*) and in a few readers' letters of newspapers. A similar homonationalist train of thought is put into words by a columnist of *PAL NWS*. According to him, this murder is heavily mediatized and branded as homophobic because it portrays…

> […] Western society – in reality the most gay-friendly society ever – as still threatened by an invisible and omni-present gay hate. Especially when it turned out that the perpetrators were not allochthons, nothing stood in the way of an unbridled wave of indignation […]. (*PAL NWS*, 20 March 2021)

Homophobia is represented as a visible, contained, and easily identifiable problem situated in a few problematic others. 'Western society' remains undefined, allowing it to serve as a floating signifier, but suggesting a native and white population. Said society is unified by its gay-friendliness and based on this civic value, migrant and racialized others are de facto excluded by the author. He suggests that the media and politicians imagine homophobia where there is none, ignoring the real threat from 'foreigners'. A similar article is found on the opinion website *Doorbraak*, in which the liberal Flemish Minister for Equal Opportunities Bart Somers is framed as the cause of 'imported' gay hate:

Somers and co. are silent about the link between Islam, migration, and gay hate. Research from the Flemish government itself has shown that the aversion towards homosexuality is mainly an allochthon problem. Most of the autochthonous Flemings are very tolerant towards sexual difference, while that's much less the case for respondents from African, Turkish, Moroccan, but also Romanian and Polish backgrounds. (*Doorbraak*, 16 March 2021)

The author identifies homophobia as a threat that has been imported into the nation by migrant groups. 'African' is used as a national marker along with Turkish and Moroccan, grouping an entire continent as a homophobic other. Romania and Poland come as an afterthought, indicated by 'also', suggesting that CEE is not the focus of the author's argument. Most actors reproducing this discourse that problematizes Muslims and/or migration do not explicitly refer to Belgium as the nation. The example above illustrates how Flemings are considered the in-group. This discourse moves away from the legal understanding of homophobia and interprets it exclusively as a sociocultural issue. This facilitates attributing LGBTI-friendliness to Flemings without referring to national politics. Migration is also

handled on the national level, which in turn enables Flemish-nationalists to criticize the federal government for supposedly 'enabling' homophobia through its migration policies. The difference between Belgium and Flanders is not explicitly present in this discourse, however, as the baseline is that 'native' Flemings and/or Belgians are more tolerant than Muslims and people with a migration background. Whereas the 'inclusive' nationalist discourse attempted to bring together Belgians with shared LGBTI-friendliness, here the appeal is taken one step further by explicitly attributing homophobia to those outside of the nation, whether it is Belgium or Flanders.

The Flemish populist radical-right party Vlaams Belang is the most prominent source for this linkage of migration, Islam, and gay hate. When its party leader tweets that '[t]here's no room in our society for such homophobic scum' (*Twitter*, 8 March 2021), he is criticized in the media by politicians, journalists, readers, and interviewees, who position the tweet against the party's own anti-LGBTI actions and statements. In recent years, despite the official gay-friendly party line, MPs from Vlaams Belang have called transgender people abnormal and have criticized same-sex marriage as well as same-sex adoption. Minister Bart Somers is among the people who criticize Vlaams Belang. After reprehending Vlaams Belang for an old homophobic tweet of its party leader in 2011, Somers becomes a target in the party's antimigration rhetoric. The leader of Vlaams Belang is cited as follows: '[Somers] should look in the mirror and judge the gay hate his party has imported the last decades.' (*PAL NWS*, 11 March 2021) In more euphemistic terms, the same discourse of an Islamic threat within the nation is reproduced with the terms 'multiculturalism' or 'problematic neighborhoods'. These neighborhoods create the image of threatening homophobic multicultural or 'Islamizing' neighborhoods that stand in contrast with white-dominated areas and reinforce the idea of a Muslim homophobic threat within the nation. A newspaper article about a parliamentary debate

summarizes the contributions of two Vlaams Belang MPs, Barbara Pas and Chris Janssens, as follows:

> Both emphasized that the problem of homophobia is a lot bigger in certain multicultural areas. Pas: "In Molenbeek they [LGB's] can't go out in the street holding hands." Janssens: "Non-European, often African, Islamic boys and men are overrepresented in [the statistics of] perpetrators of physical violence against LGBs." (*De Standaard*, 13 March 2021)

This is the only mainstream article that cites Vlaams Belang. The journalist uses 'multicultural areas', thereby referencing Molenbeek, a city with a large number of Muslim inhabitants. The article continues with an overview of Vlaams Belang's turn to include gay rights despite the party's 'ethical-conservative roots'. Vlaams Belang and its members produce this antimigration and anti-Islam discourse on right-wing alternative media, specifically on *PAL NWS*, the only medium in the sample that allows Vlaams Belang to speak without being critically contextualized. Although there is no information on the migration background of the suspects, Vlaams Belang members shift the focus from the murder toward 'imported gay hate' (*PAL NWS*, 11 March 2021). All references to migration are linked to Islam, and migrants from countries that criminalize homosexuality are equated with those repressive regimes, implying that all Muslims are heterosexual and homophobic. According to Vlaams Belang, being pro-migration is irreconcilable with being pro-gay. Muslims are represented one-dimensionally as a homophobic threat, and people who facilitate migration are portrayed as complicit and a threat to white, non-Muslim LGBTI Belgians. Through protecting LGB (but not T or I) equalities, Vlaams Belang is able to formulate their antimigration and anti-Muslim agenda through civic rather than ethnic terms, which may grant the party more legitimacy.

Homonationalism becomes visible in this discourse in the form of othering Muslims as homophobes, either through the presupposition that the perpetrators were Muslim or through contrasting Muslim communities with LGBTI-friendly autochthons. This more overt and explicit form of homonationalism occurs mainly in alternative right-wing publications that are known to pay more attention to radical-right political actors (Buyens and Van Aelst, 2021). Traces of it are also present in newspapers in columns and readers' letters. The marginal position of this discourse suggests that it is regarded as illiberal.

All mainstream news articles describe Vlaams Belang's ambiguous position concerning LGBTI equalities as opportunistic and anti-Muslim. In three opinion pieces in newspapers, people go against this scapegoating of Muslims under the veil of LGBTI equalities. In his opinion piece, anthropologist Wim Peumans states that *'the combination of homosexuality and Islam is a wet dream for right-wing politicians. It is politically beneficial to use one minority to scapegoat another minority: from homophobia to Islamophobia.'* (*De Morgen*, 13 March 2021) Political scientist Dave Sinardet publishes similar insights in his column*:* 'Politicians who want to push Muslims away suddenly embrace LGB people and their rights as a rebound.' (*De Standaard*, 13 March 2021) We include these examples to indicate that there are (academic) experts countering this discourse, changing the narrative that depicts homophobia as a foreign and inherently non-Belgian threat.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper analyzed how news media portray the nation and who is othered following a potentially homophobic murder, by studying news media through critical discourse analysis. The findings indicate that the understanding of Belgium as an LGBTI friendly nation is firmly reinforced in mainstream news outlets, often framed in civic terms of shared values to appeal to a unified community. In doing so, even these 'inclusive' nationalist discourses create an

East-West divide by frequently referring to CEE countries, creating the image of a homophobic threat outside the nation. Moreover, Muslims and migration are problematized although, as far as known, neither Muslims nor people with a migration background were involved in the murder. The present study broadly supports the findings of earlier analyses, such as the contrast between Belgian LGBTI-friendliness and the 'antimodern' CEE in nationalist discourse (Kahlina, 2015; Wiedlack, 2017; Szulc, 2022) and the depiction of Muslims as homophobic others (Dhoest, 2020c; El-Tayeb, 2011).

The results show that homonationalist discourses are prevalent in the coverage of the Polfliet murder and vary in intensity and overtness. This study highlights the persistence of 'inclusive' homonationalism in mainstream media. In uniting 'the people' through civic nationalist appeals, these 'moderate' homonationalist discourses pave the way for more radical homonationalist discourses that reinforce racist, antimigration and anti-Muslim sentiments. The most overt antimigration and anti-Muslim statements originate from members of the radical right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang. These findings reflect those of Halikiopoulou et al. (2013), who found that European radical-right parties frame their exclusionary agendas in civic terms. Previous studies have also demonstrated the culturalist rhetoric of Vlaams Belang that connects Islam and Muslims to a 'repressed' view on gender and sexuality (De Cleen et al., 2017; Harder et al., 2020; Rahbari, 2020).

Although there is no media cordon (see de Jonge, 2019), Vlaams Belang's exclusionary discourses receive little attention in mainstream news media. In this regard, this case is similar to the previous homophobic murders in Belgium in 2012. Back then, Vlaams Belang tried to capitalize on them but the party's opinion pieces were not published by newspapers either and only appeared on their website (Peumans, 2017). This analysis shows that they spread this discourse with the help of alternative media that offer a platform for radical right-wing parties (see Buyens and Van Aelst, 2021).

Mainstream media coverage largely ignores this antimigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Instead, said media reinforce Belgium's LGBTI-friendly status, sometimes but not necessarily referencing CEE countries as a homophobic other. As mainstream news articles reinforce LGBTI-friendliness as a shared Belgian civic value, discrimination and violence may become implicitly linked with those considered 'non-Belgian'. This understanding became apparent when a citation in a mainstream newspaper explicitly countered the implicit understanding that the perpetrators were 'allochthonous', or 'not from here'.

The logic underlying mainstream news media is not inherently problematic but can easily be abused by groups who benefit from anti-Muslim and antimigration sentiments and rhetoric, such as the radical right. The argument that homophobic violence *must* originate from people with a migration background and/or Muslims becomes more credible if the general understanding is that non-Muslim and 'native' Belgians are LGBTI-friendly. Furthermore, it can obfuscate the discrimination and violence that LGBTI people face in 'LGBTI-friendly' countries. Although the mainstream outlets in this study refrain from othering Muslims in their own journalistic pieces, they do publish columns and readers' letters that implicitly or explicitly attribute homophobia to migrant groups. One possible explanation is that editors want to represent 'all sides of the debate'. More research is required into the position of newsrooms regarding discriminatory prejudices in op-eds.

A limitation of this study is that the results are not generalizable as it addresses one specific case, with linguistic and geographical intricacies. The analysis was limited to print news media and did not consider television news or other areas where homonationalist discourse may be present, such as political speeches and social media. Further work might explore if readers agree with this message through audience research or compare the Flemish coverage with its French-speaking counterpart. Despite its limitations, this study still has important implications for future research on LGBTI equalities in news media, as it paints a

nuanced picture of the discourses about homophobia using the framework of homonationalism, which so far has been mainly used in the field of international politics.

Funding

References

Ammaturo FR and Slootmaeckers K (2020) The politics of rainbow maps. In: *Engenderings*. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/05/28/the-politics-of-rainbow-maps/ (accessed 18 May 2021).

Anderson BRO (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Baden C and David Y (2018) On resonance: a study of culture-dependent reinterpretations of extremist violence in Israeli media discourse. *Media, Culture & Society* 40(4). DOI: 10.1177/0163443717734404.

Baider F (2018) "Go to hell fucking faggots, may you die!" Framing the LGBT subject in online comments. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14(1): 69–92. DOI: 10.1515/lpp-2018-0004.

Billig M (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.

Brown D (2000) *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural, and Multicultural Politics*. London: Routledge.

Brubaker R (2020) Populism and nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism* 26(1): 44–66. DOI: 10.1111/nana.12522.

Buyens W and Van Aelst P (2021) Alternative media, alternative voices? A quantitative analysis of actor diversity in alternative and mainstream news outlets. *Digital Journalism*: 1–23. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2021.1929366.

Carvalho A (2008) Media(ted) discourse and society: Rethinking the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Journalism Studies* 9(2): 161–177. DOI: 10.1080/14616700701848162.

Chetaille A (2013) Is the 'Other Europe' homophobic? *Raisons Politiques* 49(1): 119–140.

de Jonge L (2019) The populist radical right and the media in the Benelux: Friend or foe? *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24(2): 189–209. DOI: 10.1177/1940161218821098.

De Lange SL and Akkerman T (2012) Populist parties in Belgium: a case of hegemonic liberal democracy? In: Mudde C and Rovira Kaltwasser C (eds) *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 27–45.

Dhoest A (2020a) Eastern others: Homonationalism in the Flemish press. *International Communication Gazette* 83(6): 616–635.

Dhoest A (2020b) Homonationalism and media. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.

Dhoest A (2020c) LGBTs in, Muslims out: Homonationalist discourses and counterdiscourses in the Flemish press. *International Journal Of Communication* 14: 155–175.

Dierckx M, Meier P and Motmans J (2017) "Beyond the box": A comprehensive study of sexist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes among the Belgian population. *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 4(1): 5. DOI: 10.11116/digest.4.1.1.

Dudink S (2016) A queer nodal point: Homosexuality in Dutch debates on Islam and multiculturalism. *Sexualities* 20(1–2): 3–23. DOI: 10.1177/1363460716642153.

Edenborg E (2021) 'Traditional values' and the narrative of gay rights as modernity: Sexual politics beyond polarization. *Sexualities*. DOI: 10.1177/13634607211008067.

Eeckhout B and Paternotte D (2011) A paradise for LGBT rights? The paradox of Belgium. *Journal of Homosexuality* 58(8): 1058–1084. DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2011.598414.

Ellinas AA (2018) Media and the radical right. In: J Rydgren (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*. Oxford University Press.

El-Tayeb F (2011) *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. University of Minnesota Press.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020) *A long way to go for LGBTI equality*. Luxembourg: FRA. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/publication/manifestation_identifier/PUB_TK0120462ENN (accessed 5 August 2021).

Halikiopoulou D, Mock S and Vasilopoulou S (2013) The civic zeitgeist: Nationalism and liberal values in the European radical right. *Nations and Nationalism* 19(1): 107–127. DOI: 10.1111/j.1469-8129.2012.00550.x.

Hall S (1992) The West and the rest: Discourse and power. In: Hall S and Gieben B (eds) *The Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 275–320.

Hall S (1997) The spectacle of the 'other'. In: Hall S (ed.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, pp. 223–279.

Hiller LJ (2021) Queer asylum politics of separation in Germany: Homonationalist narratives of safety. *Gender, Place & Culture*: 1–22. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2021.1931048.

Holt K, Ustad Figenschou T and Frischlich L (2019) Key dimensions of alternative news media. *Digital Journalism* 7(7): 860–869. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2019.1625715.

Holzhacker R (2014) Gay rights are human rights: The framing of new interpretations of international human rights norms. In: Andreopoulous A and Kabasakal Arat ZF (eds) *The Uses and Misuses of Human Rights: A Critical Approach to Advocacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29-64.

ILGA Europe (2022) *Annual review 2022*.

Jacobs L and Meeusen C (2020) Coming out of the closet, also on the news? A longitudinal content analysis of patterns in visibility, tone and framing of LGBTs on television news (1986-2017). *Journal of Homosexuality* 68(13): 2144–2168. DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2020.1733352.

Kahlina K (2015) Local histories, European LGBT designs: Sexual citizenship, nationalism, and 'Europeanisation' in post-Yugoslav Croatia and Serbia. *Womens Studies International Forum* 49: 73–83. DOI: 10.1016/j.wsif.2014.07.006.

Kennedy J and Van Ginderachter M (2021) The use of binaries in nationalism studies. *National Identities*. DOI: 10.1080/14608944.2021.2006168.

Kohn H (1946) *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background*. New York: McMillan.

Kuhar R and Paternotte D (eds) (2017) *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.

Kulpa R (2014) Western leveraged pedagogy of Central and Eastern Europe: Discourses of homophobia, tolerance, and nationhood. *Gender, Place & Culture* 21(4): 431–448. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.793656.

Kulpa R (2020) National menace: Mediating homo/sexuality and sovereignty in the Polish national/ist discourses. *Critical Discourse Studies* 17(3): 327–343. DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2019.1584578.

Lovelock M (2018) Sex, death and austerity: Resurgent homophobia in the British tabloid press. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35(3): 225–239. DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2018.1442013.

Meyer D (2020) Omar Mateen as US citizen, not foreign threat: Homonationalism and LGBTQ online representations of the Pulse nightclub shooting. *Sexualities* 23(3): 249–268. DOI: 10.1177/1363460719826361.

Ott BL and Aoki E (2002) The politics of negotiating public tragedy: Media framing of the Matthew Shepard murder. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5(3): 483–505. DOI: 10.1353/rap.2002.0060.

Peumans W (2017) Same-sex sexualities and Belgian Moroccan communities. In: *Moroccan Migration in Belgium: More than 50 Years of Settlement*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, pp. 285–303.

Puar J (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Puar J (2013) Rethinking homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2): 336–339. DOI: 10.1017/S002074381300007X.

Puar J (2022) Whither homonationalism? In: Sifaki A, Quinan CL, and Lončarević K (eds) *Homonationalism, Femonationalism and Ablenationalism: Critical Pedagogies Contextualised*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 2–8.

Richardson JE (2007) *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schafraad P, d'Haenens L, Scheepers P, et al. (2012) The evolution of a media image: Newspaper attention to the Flemish far right 1987–2004. *Acta Politica* 47(4): 356–377. DOI: 10.1057/ap.2012.12.

Schotel AL (2022) Mainstream or marginalized? How German and Dutch newspapers frame LGBTI. *Social Politics*.

Simonsen KB and Bonikowski B (2020) Is civic nationalism necessarily inclusive? Conceptions of nationhood and anti-Muslim attitudes in Europe. *European Journal of Political Research* 59(1): 114–136. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.12337.

Slootmaeckers K (2020) Constructing European Union identity through LGBT equality promotion: Crises and shifting othering processes in the European Union enlargement. *Political Studies Review* 18(3): 346–361. DOI: 10.1177/1478929919877624.

Szulc Ł (2022) Uncanny Europe and protective Europeanness: When European identity becomes a queerly viable option. *Sociology* 56(2): 386–403. DOI: 10.1177/00380385211024117.

Vliegenthart R and Walgrave S (2008) The contingency of intermedia agenda setting: A longitudinal study in Belgium. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 85(4): 860–877. DOI: 10.1177/107769900808500409.

Weiss ML and Bosia MJ (eds) (2013) *Global Homophobia*. University of Illinois Press.

Wekker G (2016) *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wiedlack MK (2017) Gays vs. Russia: Media representations, vulnerable bodies and the construction of a (post)modern West. *European Journal of English Studies* 21(3): 241–257. DOI: 10.1080/13825577.2017.1369271.

Wodak R (2006) Critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. In: Östmann J-O, Verschueren J, and Versluys E (eds) *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 204–210.

Wodak R. (2008) 'Us' and 'them': Inclusion and exclusion – Discrimination via discourse. In: Delanty G, Wodak Ruth, and Jones P (eds) *Identity, Belonging and Migration*. Liverpool University Press, pp. 54–77.

Wodak R, De Cillia R, Reisigl M, et al. (2009) *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Appendix A: cited media

Antonissen D (2021) Onze opinie. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 10 March, 2.

Brinckman, B (2021) Bart Somers: 'Er is hier maar één partij die systematisch flirt met homofobie. *De Standaard*, 13 March, 7.

Ceder J (2021) De homomoord die er geen was. *PAL NWS*, 20 March. Available at: https://palnws.be/2021/03/de-homomoord-die-er-geen-was/ (Accessed 4 May 2021).

De Coninck D (2021) Jagen op pedo's maar ook vooral hun spullen roven. *De Morgen*, 20 March, 6.

Het Nieuwsblad (2021) Çavaria: "Veel gevallen van homohaat worden nooit aangegeven"., 9 March, 3.

Gazet van Antwerpen (2021) Heet van de tong. 15 March, 21.

Het Belang van Limburg (2021) Brieven. 18 March, 16.

Knack (2021) Regenboogvlag wappert boven Wetstraat 16. 9 March. Available at: https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/moord-beveren-regenboogvlag-wappert-boven-wetstraat-16/article-belga-1709511.html.

Notteboom R (2021) Van Grieken over beschuldigingen homofobie door Somers: "Bijzonder laag niveau". *PAL NWS*, 11 March. Available at: https://palnws.be/2021/03/van-grieken-over-beschuldigingen-homofobie-door-somers-bijzonder-laag-niveau/ (Accessed 4 May 2021).

Peumans W (2021) Wie wijst wie met de vinger? *De Morgen*, 13 March, 22.

Roggeman B (2021) Ingetogen protest: "Om David te herdenken en onze stem te laten horen". *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 15 March, 8.

Sanctorum J (2021) En plots werd de driekleur een regenboogvlag: Metamorfoses in en rond de Wetstraat. *Doorbraak*, 16 March. Available at: https://doorbraak.be/en-plots-werd-de-driekleur-een-regenboogvlag/ (accessed 4 May 2021).

Sinardet D (2021) Van schandpaal tot schild. *De Standaard*, 13 March, 61.

Sintobin S (2022) [Twitter] 22 May. Available at: https://twitter.com/StefaanSintobin/status/1528281602605850624 (Accessed 1 August 2022).

Tielens F (2021) 'Tienerjongens bouwen hun identiteit vaak op de verwerping van homo's'. *De Standaard*, 13 March, 18.

Van Diepen T (2021) Liefde is liefde. *Het Belang van Limburg*, 10 March, 2.

Van Grieken T (2021) [Twitter] 8 March. Available at: https://twitter.com/tomvangrieken/status/1368826386195091461 (Accessed 4 May 2021).

Van Houten R (2021) En plots lijkt België wat meer op Tsjetsjenië. *De Standaard*, 9 March, 33.

Vermeersch J (2021) Onze eigen gruwelijke geschiedenis. *De Standaard*, 15 March, 35.

Endnotes

[i] Although the use of such acronyms is sometimes disputed for being simplistic or homogenizing, LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) is the most prevailing collective term used in Belgium. We use the term 'LGBTI equalities' here to reflect legal, political, cultural, and social inclusion.

[ii] It should be noted that this is the official party line, but some members still stigmatize LGB people, often by denouncing Pride parades. Recent examples include MP Dries Van Langenhove correlating monkeypox with 'unprotected anal sex with nine different men during one "pride"-weekend' (a tweet which was deleted by Twitter for violating the rules of the social network) and MP Stefaan Sintobin who opposed 'pride hysteria' (*Twitter*, 22 May 2022).

[iii] All statements are translated from Dutch by the author.

[iv] In Flanders, 'holebi' is a common abbreviation for gay, lesbian, and bisexual.