LGBTs In, Muslims Out: Homonationalist Discourses
and Counterdiscourses in the Flemish Press

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This article aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on homonationalism by exploring a European region that has not been discussed so far, Flanders (Belgium), focusing on media discourses. Homonationalism refers to the way LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) rights are increasingly incorporated in (mostly Western) conceptions of nationhood, at the expense of ethnic and religious "Others" (most prominently Muslims) who are considered inimical to the LGBT-friendly nation. Using discourse analysis to analyze three months of Flemish newspaper reporting on homosexuality in relation to Muslims, this article inquires into which nations LGBT rights are incorporated and by whom, and how homonationalist discourses relate to broader discourses on Muslims and homosexuality. The analysis finds examples of explicit homonationalist discourse, originating with nationalist politicians, but also implicit homonationalist discourse that only refers to Muslims, as well as counterdiscourses. Implicit and partial discourses are particularly insidious in spreading homonationalist arguments contributing to wider Islamophobic discourses.

Keywords: homonationalism, discourse analysis, newspapers, Flanders, Islamophobia

　　　　As first defined by Jasbir Puar (2007), homonationalism refers—among other things—to the growing inclusion of LGBT rights and individuals in (mostly Western) conceptions of nationhood. At face value, this could seem like a positive evolution because sexual minorities have long been positioned at the margins of the nation, as enemies threatening national unity and morality. However, Puar argues that the way same-sex sexuality is increasingly incorporated in ideas of nationhood is problematic because it is premised on the exclusion not only of nonnormative LGBTs, but also, and particularly, of ethnic and religious "Others," who are considered inimical to the LGBT-friendly nation. Most prominently, Muslims are framed as the villains here, but this argument extends to other religions, cultures, and regions, both in the West and beyond: (people from) Eastern Europe and Russia, the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Sub-Sahara Africa. All of these constitute out-groups ("them") that are placed in opposition to, and instrumentally used

to redefine, the national in-group ("us"). The complexity of the nation is reduced by presenting it as a superior, uniformly LGBT-friendly in-group and contrasting it to absolutely homophobic out-groups.

This article provides a brief discussion of the literature on homonationalism and aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge in three empirical ways. First, it explores Flanders, the northern Dutch-language part of Belgium, a region that has hardly been discussed in academic writing on homonationalism to date. Second, whereas most of the literature on homonationalism is situated in fields such as political science (e.g., Paternotte, 2018) and sexuality studies (e.g., Mole, 2017), this article takes a media studies approach by focusing on journalistic texts. Third, it aims to expand our understanding of homonationalist discourses by situating them in the broader range of discourses, including (1) implicit discourses, which only contain parts of homonationalist reasonings, and (2) counterdiscourses, understood here as discourses countering the binary oppositions inherent in homonationalism (El-Tayeb, 2012). Based on this empirical exploration, the conclusion critically reflects on wider methodological and theoretical implications for the further study of homonationalism.

Contextualizing Homonationalism

The seminal text on homonationalism is Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007). Puar's key observation concerns the way certain queer subjects[2] were increasingly included in the American national imaginary post-9/11, based on sexual exceptionalism—presenting the U.S. as exceptionally accepting of homosexuality—and opposed to Muslims in the context of the "war on terror." This implied a "dual movement in which certain homosexual constituencies have embraced U.S. nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas" (Puar, 2007, p. xxiv). Returning to the topic in her 2013 article "Rethinking Homonationalism," Puar mostly stressed the second part of this dual movement: the way homosexuality was embraced by nationalist agendas. She noted how "acceptance" and "tolerance" for gay and lesbian subjects became the barometer by which nations were judged, "gay-friendliness" becoming a desirable characteristic for contemporary nations.

While it is impossible in this context to disentangle the full complexity of homonationalism, it is useful to point out some of its ramifications. To start, while innovative and influential, Puar's arguments build on a number of previous analyses. In general terms, Puar contributes to the literature discussing the ways that nations delimit acceptable sexual behavior for national citizens (Pryke, 1998). While sexual minorities were historically seen as a threat to the national community "by undermining the family, failing to adhere to national gender stereotypes, challenging its internal homogeneity and deviating from shared national norms" (Mole, 2017, p. 660), over the past decades, researchers observed the increasing cultural normalization and social inclusion of lesbians and gay men, establishing new boundaries of belonging as well as new exclusions (Richardson, 2017).

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[2] While I use the term *LGBT* as an umbrella term throughout this article, for the sake of consistency and because it most closely matches the terms used in Flanders, I will adopt the terms used by the authors when discussing literature and quoting newspaper articles.

As such, homonationalism can be situated in broader processes of "sexual nationalism," in which certain gender and sexual norms are incorporated in politics of the nation (Bilge, 2012). This, in turn, conforms to the broader logic of nationalism that aims to create a homogeneous political and cultural entity (Gellner, 1983). As emphasized by Stuart Hall (1992), this national homogeneity is discursive; politics and culture present the nation as a unity while repressing internal diversity. De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) further disentangle the discursive construction of the nation, focusing in particular on what they call strategies of "assimilation" (constructing intranational sameness) and "dissimilation" (constructing differences among nations), highlighting the use of the personal pronoun "we" to refer to the national in-group.

In relation to the inclusion of certain sexual minorities in the national in-group, Puar is indebted to Lisa Duggan's (2002) writing on homonormativity, defined as a politics upholding and sustaining dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions "while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 179). Homonormative sexual minorities, then, are embraced by and in turn support the neoliberal nation. In relation to the concomitant new exclusions of out-groups, Puar's argumentation about homonationalism points at a new reincarnation of Orientalism, whereby the "undeveloped" (Oriental) Other is now defined as sexually backward and homophobic (Sabsay, 2012). Homonationalism is also connected to the rise of Islamophobia in the West post-9/11, which equally relies on tendencies of Orientalism, Othering, and homogenization (Powell, 2011; Saeed, 2007).

Puar's arguments were quickly picked up and echoed, for instance, in the writing of Haritaworn: "Sexual freedom has moved from the realms of the immoral or perverse to the realm of the morally superior, a central ingredient of U.S. and Western exceptionalism." (2008, para. 8). Moving beyond the U.S., homonationalism was also detected in a great number of other Western contexts (e.g., in Québec by Bilge, 2012, and in Sweden by Kehl, 2018). However, while spreading, the meaning of the term *homonationalism* also broadened, which led to criticism. For instance, Zanghellini (2012) takes issue with the all-too-easy use of the term, which leads to a thesis about the near ubiquity of homonationalism, often discrediting any form of gay rights discourse and activism as Islamophobic. In a review of the evolution of the concept of homonationalism, Schotten (2016) equally argues that the broadened meaning and application of the term— beyond the original U.S. context—has diminished its critical force. Similarly, Ritchie (2014) criticizes oversimplifications that lead to homogenizing and universalizing accounts instead of analyses of concrete sociohistorical contexts.

What seems necessary, then, is further disentangling the specific regional and national forms of, and contexts for, homonationalist discourse. Thus, across the world, different out-groups are defined, which are discursively contrasted to the own nation. For instance, in the Western European context, Eastern Europe and Russia figure prominently in homonationalist discourses. Authors such as Kulpa (2014) and Kahlina (2015) criticize the polarized opposition between the supposedly homotolerant West and Europe, and the uniformly homophobic Central and Eastern Europe as a backward Other that has to "catch up." Similarly, Baker (2017) discusses the Eurovision Song Contest as a node in the geopolitics of LGBT rights, reflecting an "essentialist binary between an inherently tolerant West and an inherently homophobic Russia, reducing complex politics of gender and sexuality in any of these countries to a simple national us-them" (p. 107). Another region figuring prominently in homonationalist discourse is Africa. Based on an analysis of Swedish

newspapers, Jungar and Peltonen (2017) criticize the repeated and uniform representation of African homophobia that supports the image of Sweden as a civilized, benevolent, and gay-friendly Western nation.

The most relevant point of comparison for the analysis of homonationalism in Flanders is that of the Netherlands, with which it shares a language and very similar legal provisions and social attitudes toward LGBTs. At the same time, the Netherlands is one of the prime examples in the literature on homonationalism. Wekker (2009) identifies a growing "homonostalgic" tendency in the Netherlands to place Islam in opposition to lesbian and gay emancipation, using a homogenizing us–them scheme that puts a progressive "we" against a traditional and backward "them." Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens (2010) further explore the contexts in which sexual politics are increasingly connected to anti-Muslim discourses in the Netherlands. Beside broader European tendencies such as the culturalization of citizenship and the escalating criticism of Islam, they identify three specifically Dutch contexts: a high degree of secularization, a strong emphasis on sexual freedom, and the normalization of gay sexuality, all of which are shared by Flanders. Bracke (2012), drawing on the work of Gayatri Spivak, also explores Dutch homonationalist discourses, focusing on the "rescue narratives" that extended from "saving women" (particularly Muslim women) to "saving gays"—not only White gays, but also "gay Muslims," who are seen as victims to be saved.

Indeed, queer Muslims occupy a precarious position in these debates, in the Netherlands as elsewhere; their sexual and ethno-religious identities are seen as mutually exclusive, so they are considered a group to be saved from their homophobic culture (Yildiz, 2017). Incidents of gay bashing are a central trope in discourses on the "intolerant Muslim migrants" in the Netherlands (Mepschen, 2016; Yildiz, 2017). According to Rahman (2010), queer Muslims are caught between cultural and political Islamophobia and homophobia. Jivrai and de Jong (2011) add that queer Muslims are silenced because of the imposition of a homonormative model of "out" and "visible" queer sexuality. El-Tayeb (2012) concurs, stating that an intersectional queer critique and counterdiscourse is necessary to deconstruct the "seeming clash between progressive, tolerant European society and the traditional, intolerant, static Muslim community" (para. 86) in which queer Muslims are expected to take sides. While this critique is less developed in Flanders, the work of Peumans (2018) on queer Muslims is exemplary in disentangling the complex intersections of sexuality, religion, and ethnicity.

Building on this rich theoretical literature, this article aims to contribute to its empirical grounding. In doing so, I focus on the second part of the dual movement observed by Puar: the way LGBTs have been embraced by national agendas, not how LGBTs have embraced national agendas (which does deserve attention, but would necessitate a separate analysis). While there are many other aspects to the concept of homonationalism, I will operationalize it here as any discourse opposing a supposedly LGBT-friendly "national" in-group to a homophobic out-group. "National," in this context, is not limited to nation-states; both nations within larger states (such as Québec) and larger regions (like Western Europe) have been included in earlier analyses. In this sense, *homo-ethnocentrism* may be a more accurate term, but for the sake of clarity, I will use *homonationalism*, albeit in this broader sense not limited to nation-states.

The focus in all of this is on discourses about Islam and Muslims, taking a cue from the situation in the U.S. and other countries where Muslims constitute the most prominent (but certainly not only) out-group connected to homophobia. As such, this article equally aims to contribute to the literature about

media discourses on Islam and Muslims, which also considers the process of differentiation between "us" and "them" but tends to focus on issues of terrorism and fundamentalism rather than homonationalism (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010); gender-related issues such as headscarves are also prominent themes in this literature (De Cleen, Zienkowski, Smets, Dekie, & Vandevoordt, 2017).

The Flemish Case

Turning to Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking region in Belgium, a first observation to make is that the term *homonationalism* has not found wide currency yet. While the term has been used in French-language Belgian LGBT activism and academia for some years now, it was only recently adopted in Flemish activism, and to date, only one academic has written about homonationalism in Flanders. Bart Eeckhout (2014) cautions against the all-too-easy application of this semantically ambiguous term, noting the differences with the U.S. context. On the one hand, it was originally used to refer to pronationalist attitudes among LGBTs in the U.S., for instance, through their inclusion in the armed forces—a link that is mostly absent in Belgium, where there is no such link between LGBTs and the armed forces. On the other hand, homonationalism refers to the embrace of LGBT rights by the state as an ideological tool, which in Belgium is clearly the case, but Eeckhout calls for a more fine-grained analysis that considers the country's internal political tensions; that is what this article aims to offer.

Belgium is culturally and politically divided between a Dutch-speaking northern community, Flanders, and a southern French-language community, Wallonia, which overlap in the bilingual capital, Brussels. While many consider Flanders a nation, certainly in cultural terms, legally it is a region and community within the broader Belgian federal state. Hence, a first research question concerns the "us" in homonationalist discourse:

RQ1:   Into which "nation" are LGBT rights and individuals incorporated, Flanders, Belgium, or larger entities such as Europe?

Flanders is a region with independentist forces and strong right-wing nationalism, so a second question asks:

RQ2:   Who are the actors in these discourses, nationalist politicians or also others?

Third, this article also aims to offer a broader picture by asking:

RQ3:   How do homonationalist discourses relate to broader discourses on Muslims and homosexuality in the Flemish press?

Instead of only analyzing clear, explicit instances of homonationalist discourse in which two groups are clearly opposed, I consider the full range of discourses on Muslims and homosexuality.

To address these questions, the remainder of this article focuses on the Flemish press as a key instance for the circulation of political discourse and social commentary. In the current context of "mediatization," in which media play a key role in constructing social, cultural, and political realities (Couldry & Hepp, 2013), journalists continue to play a key role as an interpretive community circulating discourse

(Zelizer, 2017). While media reports have been included in research on homonationalism, to date, hardly any research on the topic has taken media as its starting point. However important political programs and speeches are to this topic, it is often through media that the broader public hears about them—although increasingly, the gatekeeping role of journalists is overruled by social media, which should be included in future research.

More concretely, the Flemish newspaper database GoPress was searched for a randomly chosen period of three months, from April to June 2018.[3] The sample size was limited to three months to allow for the in-depth analysis of articles, and a continuous period was chosen to follow the development of news stories. All general Flemish newspapers were analyzed,[4] including their online versions, using multiple search terms to look for combinations of "homo" (the Dutch-language translation of "gay," which is also part of any term referring to homosexuality), "holebi" (the Dutch-language acronym used to refer to lesbians, gays, and bisexuals), or "lesbian,"[5] with terms referring to groups often mentioned in the international literature: Muslims and Islam; Putin and Russia or Russians; and Africa.

After these articles were collected, they were analyzed using discourse analysis, inspired by Carvalho's (2008) model and focusing on themes, actors, and discursive strategies. I used NVivo to thematically code the articles "in vivo," that is, devising the codes inductively. The initial analysis led to a long list of 57 codes referring to actors, groups, countries or regions, religions, and themes. Based on these codes, the articles were clustered, and the underlying discourses were reconstructed, focusing on discursive tropes as identified in the literature discussed earlier.

This initial exploration revealed the predominance of Islam and/or Muslims as Others (referenced in 158 articles, while Russia was mentioned in 51 and Africa in 46). These numbers should be approached with caution because they don't say anything about the actual discourse about these groups; however, they do indicate the strong presence of discourses about Muslims. For this reason, and to focus the argumentation, the remainder of this article will be limited to discourses about Islam and Muslims. A closer look at these articles indicates that only 38 (of 158) develop an argument connecting Islam and homosexuality, and they form the core corpus analyzed in this article.

Homonationalist Discourses

About one third of the articles (13 of 38) can be qualified as explicitly homonationalist, as they clearly place an LGBT-friendly in-group in opposition to a homophobic out-group. The most prominent actors in these discourses are nationalist politicians, and the two most outspoken instances of homonationalism are related to the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang. On the one hand, this is not surprising; this is the most blatantly Flemish nationalist party, whose openly xenophobic discourse led to its massive breakthrough in the early 1990s under its former name, Vlaams Blok (Ceuppens, 2011). On the other hand, this may be surprising,

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[3] This is a random period, chosen for practical reasons: It immediately preceded the data collection in July 2018, but it is particularly interesting because of several LGBT-related news events, as will be discussed.

[4] *De Morgen, De Standaard, De Tijd, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, Het Laatste Nieuws,* and *Het Nieuwsblad*.

[5] The terms *transgender*, *bisexual*, and *queer* were also searched for, but yielded no additional results.

because for a long time, Vlaams Belang has opposed, or at least not defended, LGBT rights. Indeed, a further search in the newspaper database disclosed that the only time Vlaams Belang commented on homosexuality in the period under study was in relation to Islam, which confirms that its discourse on homosexuality is firmly entrenched in its broader xenophobic discourse about Islam.

For instance, when announcing the municipal list for Vlaams Belang in Antwerp, newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* quotes candidate Sam van Rooy, who states,

> I hear stories of young women, homosexuals and Jews who don't dare to go to certain neighborhoods anymore or who act or dress differently there. . . . So we've already lost those neighborhoods to Islamic rules of behavior. I want to fight that. (Vandenabeele, 2018, para. 4)[6]

A first thing to note is that LGBT rights are linked to women's rights here, a common association in homonationalist discourses (Bracke, 2012). As such, homonationalism is part of a broader pattern of sexual nationalism, which also incorporates gender norms in discourses about Islam and Muslims (Bilge, 2012). Second, it is important to note that Islam is explicitly opposed to a "we" here, a key characteristic of nationalistic discourse (De Cillia et al., 1999), although it remains unspecified which group this refers to. Considering the party's political profile, we can safely assume that this refers to the Flemish people. In the same month, Vlaams Belang party leader Tom Van Grieken protests against pupils from a school in his municipality visiting a mosque, stating, "It would be better to teach youngsters to think critically and to consider the attitude of Islam toward gays and lesbians, genital mutilation, slaughter without stunning or headscarves" ("Vlaams belang hekelt," 2018, p. 23). Again, he condemns Islam for its homophobia but also connects it to gender-related issues such as genital mutilation and headscarves, introducing these issues with the sole purpose of attacking Islam. However, this quote does not explicitly refer to "us" or "we."

This is also the case in many other instances, in which Islamic homophobia is condemned, but only implicitly opposed to an LGBT-friendly in-group, mostly by politicians of right-wing nationalist party N-VA.[7] This party successfully attracted former Vlaams Belang voters with an agenda proposing a seemingly more inclusive version of Flemish nationalism, which, however, remained rooted in an exclusive and essentialist ethnocultural notion of the Flemish nation (Maly, 2016). One cluster of reports was occasioned by Zuhal Demir, N-VA member and Belgian Secretary of State for Equal Opportunities in the period under analysis. On May 11, 2018, she launched an Action Plan against discrimination and violence toward LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) persons, consisting of a list of actions to be taken by different Belgian governments and organizations. Before listing the actions, the report gives an overview of research, amply referring to surveys showing that homophobia is widespread among Muslims. Not surprisingly, then, several actions focus on achieving broader acceptance of LGBT people among Muslims; for instance, Action 26 refers to the survey "Samenleven in Diversiteit" [Living Together in Diversity], which returns in many articles and will be discussed next. The Action Plan, as such, was criticized for being homonationalist, Islamophobic, and racist by a large

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[6] All quotes are translations from Dutch by the author. References without page numbers refer to articles only published online.

[7] Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (New-Flemish Alliance).

group of mostly French-speaking Belgian activists and academics because it targeted, homogenized, and stigmatized Muslims while drawing very selectively from research ("Un plan d'action interfédéral LGBTI," 2018). As mentioned, this critique on homonationalism is less developed in Flemish activism and particularly academia, although it is growing.

In articles on the Action Plan, the strong link with Islam returns. For instance, in *Het Belang van Limburg* (Gyssels, 2018, p. 7), Zuhal Demir is quoted on the importance of protecting LGBT rights, only singling out one specific group: "Research shows that mostly Muslim youngsters sometimes have a hard time with it," she says. "So there is a big need for information and sensitization. But respecting LGB rights is not a matter of opinion. You can think what you want, but everyone has to respect the law." As in the Action Plan, this is discursively justified by referring to "research," and only research connecting Muslims to homophobia is discussed, excluding more balanced accounts on the topic while presenting Muslims as uniformly homophobic.

A few days later, a call for projects to raise acceptance of homosexuality among ethnic minorities, referenced in the Action Plan discussed earlier, was launched by the Flemish minister of Equal Opportunities Liesbeth Homans, also of N-VA. In an article in *Het Nieuwsblad* (Cattebeke, 2018, p. 8), she echoes Demir's discourse quoted earlier, saying, "There are many painful examples of LGBs of foreign origin who stay in the closet or are cast out because of their orientation." The article then refers to the survey among a number of ethnic minorities in Flanders, asking about their well-being but also about their views on different topics, including homosexuality:

> In the recent survey "Living Together in Diversity" of the Flemish government 31 percent of the Turkish and 28 percent of the Congolese respondents indicated that to them homosexual men and women should not be allowed to lead the life they want. In the survey done by *Het Nieuwsblad* earlier this year, up to 73 percent of the Muslims called homosexuality indefensible. Among non-Muslims that was 17 percent. (Cattebeke, 2018, p. 8)

The "we" is not named here, but the reference to "non-Muslims" does reconfirm the main axis of opposition. Research is selectively quoted here and instrumentalized in a discourse opposing "us" and "them," while other variables of relevance in explaining and contextualizing these differences (such as age, gender, and class) are omitted.

The one subsidized organization working for ethnic minority LGBTs in Belgium, Merhaba, is asked for an opinion, and they counter the minister's discourse by referring to the equally important issue of racism within the LGB community (Cattebeke, 2018, p. 8). In an op-ed piece on the alternative news site *DeWereldMorgen,* Merhaba objects to the problematic framing and homogenizing representation of Muslims:

> Yet again "the Muslims" are presented as a homogenous group, and the differences and the gap between them and non-Muslims are focused upon. Yet again the same point is made that Muslims are homophobic. Yet again the illusion is created that Islam is a source of intolerance and rigidity. Repeating the same mantra over and over again burdens a whole group of people—which is very heterogenous internally—with a stigma of intolerance. (Merhaba, 2018, para. 8)

Note the critique on the homogenization of a supposedly homophobic out-group (in this case, Muslims), one of the key processes in homonationalism.

Another occasion for N-VA to combine LGBT-friendliness with Islamophobia was Antwerp's 2018 "courtesy campaign." This campaign has been organized annually since 2014 to stimulate mutual respect. In 2018, the focus was on LGBTIs, and rainbow flags and lighting were present throughout the city. *Gazet van Antwerpen* reports on the campaign, proudly referencing Belgium's second position in ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Index, a ranking of European countries in relation to LGBTI rights (https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking). Although valuable, this ranking is often recuperated in self-congratulating nationalist narratives of exceptionalism. Fons Duchateau, N-VA alderman for diversity, says that "we" have come a long way in terms of LGBTI rights, but "we" are not there yet:

> With this campaign we make a call for tolerance and demand respect for everyone. And certainly for people who have a hard time within their community to come out of the closet or to enter the public sphere with their orientation. We cannot demand from anybody that they truly "believe" in equal rights for LGBTI. That's a process. But we demand that everyone accepts it as an axiom. (Vanheusden, 2018, para. 2)

Reference is made to "intolerant communities," which are not named; however, considering the wider discourse of N-VA, it is clear that Muslims in particular are targeted. "We" most directly refers to the city council of Antwerp, but, by extension, its ruling party N-VA and ethnic majority Flemings. Duchateau also comments on an attack on the N-VA float during the Belgian Pride Parade in Brussels: "'By an extreme left LGB group condemning us of homonationalism,' Duchateau says. 'As if we supported LGBTIs because we are Islamophobic. Which we aren't. But we also don't evade the problems. Also not because some people think that's politically correct.'" (Vanheusden, 2018, para 4). Homonationalism is explicitly named and refuted here, and the familiar right-wing trope of "naming problems" is invoked and opposed to "politically correct" parties. While the scope in this article is slightly broadened to also include other religions, Islam is again centered on.

What is striking is the consistency of the N-VA discourse across instances and politicians, and the lack of other actors spreading similar discourses, with the exception of extreme right party Vlaams Belang and one op-ed piece by economist Peter De Keyzer on Muslim radicalism, in which he states:

> The average Fleming, Belgian or European is very tolerant and flexible. The majority of the population has no prominently radical opinions on forms of cohabitation, religious dietary prescriptions, vestimentary prescriptions, freedom of speech or gay rights. At the same time this means that we are particularly vulnerable to stubborn minorities. (De Keyzer, 2018, p. 10)

Note how he explicitly lists and equates different in-groups (Flemings, Belgians, and Europeans) while considering Muslims as a stubborn minority—read: homogenized out-group. This is the only instance

of a nonpolitician explicitly setting up this kind of us–them opposition in the sample studied, as well as the most explicit definition of the in-group—which includes not only Flemings, but also Belgians and Europeans.

So far, answering the first research question, it seems that Flanders, Belgium, and (to a lesser degree) Europe appear as the "us" in homonationalist discourses in the Flemish press. Answering the second question, it seems that the actors in these discourses are mostly right-wing, nationalist politicians targeting Muslims as homophobic. While this very much fits in the wider, exclusive and racist nationalism that Vlaams Belang has always embraced (Mielants, 2006), for N-VA, this reflects its gradual move toward more restrictive views on immigration as part of its nation-building strategies, which involve processes of boundary drawing (Adam & Deschouwer, 2016). Although N-VA's defense of LGBT rights seems genuine, given that the party also figures some prominent gay politicians, the frequent connection to Islam is problematic because it clearly instrumentalizes the issue as part of an Islamophobic political agenda, in line with tendencies criticized in the international literature on the topic (e.g., Bilge, 2012; Puar, 2007).

While the strong presence of N-VA politicians as actors in homonationalist discourses is not unexpected, given the party's prominent position in government and its great media exposure, what is more surprising is that Flanders is seldom explicitly named as an in-group. Although further research is warranted, one possible explanation is that Flanders is seen as a self-evident context. Not only is Flanders a "banal," taken for granted context in Flemish media, echoing Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism (Dhoest, 2007), but it is also the case that, as Maly (2016) argues, N-VA party leader De Wever deliberately aims for a Flemish nationalism that is seen as banal, "normal," and natural. In such a context, there is no need to explicitly mention Flanders because it is the self-evident framework for any statement.

Implicit Homonationalism

While the articles discussed earlier can be qualified as explicitly homonationalist, they only constitute about one third of the articles connecting Muslims and homosexuality in the period under study. Another 10 articles partially contribute to this discourse by connecting Islam and Muslims to homophobia (so defining an out-group), without, however, contrasting them to a national in-group. Most of these articles are short and rather factual reports, as opposed to the longer articles, including interviews with politicians, discussed earlier. The actors here are not politicians, but journalists reporting on news events. Some of these articles report on Belgian news—for instance, a judicial investigation into homophobia in Islamic schoolbooks ("Gerecht buigt zich," 2018), or an inquiry on homophobia in the training of imams in Brussels (Eeckhaut, 2018). Other articles report on international news—for instance, about jihadist terrorists in France targeting homosexuals (Maeckelberg & Van Vlierden, 2018), or a Malaysian university aiming to convert LGBT students ("Wedstrijd in Maleisië," 2018).

Although diverse, all these articles in some way report on Islam in relation to homophobia, whether in Belgium or abroad. At the individual level, they are relatively unproblematic because they do not explicitly stigmatize Muslims as a group, but factually report on news events. Taken together, however, they are problematic because they give a one-sided, negative view of Islam as homophobic and thus contribute to the homonationalist reasoning developed in the first group of articles. Although the national in-group (however defined) is not explicitly mentioned in these articles, it is clear that these reports speak from an

assumed shared acceptance of homosexuality. Hence, while it seems unjustified to straightforwardly classify them as "homonationalist," they do partially repeat and reconfirm homonationalist discourse by highlighting one part of the argumentation: Islam (only, always) equals homophobia. For this reason, I consider them as "implicitly homonationalist."

These articles connect to the Islamophobic slant in homonationalist discourse: the representation of Islam as an undeveloped, Oriental Other (Sabsay, 2012). Following Cheng (2015), "Islamophobia" is defined here as the rejection of Islam and Muslim individuals on the basis of prejudices and stereotypes, making Muslim minorities responsible for all the "sins of society." Indeed, these articles fit in wider patterns of media reporting on Islam, which tends to be represented as monolithic, homogenized, and sexist, while Muslims are generally framed as heartless, brutal, uncivilized religious fanatics, militants, or terrorists (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Post-9/11, Islam is generally represented as the main "them" to a Western "us," be that the U.S. (Powell, 2011) or Europe (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013). Easat-Daas (2018) observes a similar pattern in Belgium: Islam is mostly framed as a threat in Belgian media, which, while not being the source of Islamophobia, "rearticulates and exacerbates Islamophobic narratives that stem from both the national context and also those coming from global sources" (p. 96). Similarly, the implicitly homonationalist articles do not develop a clear Islamophobic discourse, but they do fit in broader media discourses that only represent Islam in a negative light, homogenizing and creating fear.

Counterdiscourses

The remaining 15 articles connecting homosexuality and Islam all offer some sort of counterdiscourse, going against homonationalism, albeit in various forms and to different degrees. What is noticeable here is the wider range of actors as compared with the strong presence of politicians in explicit homonationalist discourse.

A first group of actors consists of journalists, only one of whom explicitly discusses the issue of homonationalism. In *De Standaard,* editor Bart Brinckman (2018a) explains the attack on the N-VA float during the Brussels Pride Parade as a reaction of left-leaning LGBTs to the growing success of homonationalism. However, Brinckman criticizes the assumption underlying this discontent, under the title "Wake Up. Gays Don't Necessarily Vote Left." He argues that proponents of LGBT rights can be opposed to migration, calling those voters "homonationalists," in the first meaning identified by Puar (2007). Ultimately, he urges the left-leaning LGBT movement to accept support for LGBTs from the right rather than questioning the right's strategic recuperation of LGBT rights. Former *De Morgen* editor Paul Goossens is more critical of homonationalism. Without using the term, he clearly identifies the workings of homonationalist politics and targets the instrumentalization of LGBT rights as part of NV-A's broader Islamophobia: "De Wever never talks about citizenship. What does he have to say about women's emancipation, about gay rights, about equality? Nothing, unless Islam pops up. Then it's suddenly interesting to be for equality" (Eeckhout, 2018, p. 36)*.*

A second group of actors consists of politicians criticizing N-VA's polarizing discourse. Thus, liberal party Open VLD[8] politician Bart Somers calls populists (such as N-VA politicians) "western Salafists" (Brinckman, 2018b) because they oppose any kind of change to their way of life and traditions. He also contradicts the feared "soumission" (submission) to Islam, stressing how many Muslims were born in Belgium and do not have problems with "our values":

> I am irritated by that easy discourse. "They have to become like us. They have to make an effort." But they can never reach the norm of assimilation, they can never change color. We also have to make efforts to integrate in a new reality. (Brinckman, 2018b, p. 22)

While questioning homonationalism, Somers does illustrate one of the contradictions of political counterdiscourses, which often take recourse to the very "us–them" oppositions they criticize. In that sense, these are reverse discourses that do not fundamentally question the underlying conceptual categories. Former chairman of the socialist party sp.a[9] Bruno Tobback is more successful in avoiding this pitfall when he states that indeed, disruptions of public life or violence by a Muslim minority should not be accepted, stating,

> But that doesn't mean you have to blame all Muslims. People seem to easily forget this, but freedom of religion is also an important value of the Enlightenment. I think it's completely irresponsible how De Wever and Francken, the so-called defenders of the Enlightenment, set people up against each other. (Abbeloos & Goossens, 2018, p. 12)

Bart De Wever is N-VA party leader and mayor of Antwerp, and Theo Francken is the controversial former N-VA State Secretary for Asylum Policy and Migration, an avid Twitter user who takes up a firm anti-immigration stance. Rather than Muslims, they are the villains here in a statement that explicitly criticizes the homogenization of Muslims.

A third group of actors consists of LGBT activists. For instance, an article on gay bashing in the city of Ghent quotes Jordy De Boo, a Mister Gay Belgium candidate who was harassed, stating he doesn't dare to walk hand in hand with his boyfriend in the streets anymore; he adds, "And it is not only a part of the Muslim community that is guilty of that" (Luyten, 2018, p. 2) While questioning the connection of gay bashing to Muslims, this quote also invokes this connection, which is omnipresent in reports on gay bashing; this is also noted by Mepschen (2016) and Yildiz (2017) in the Dutch context. LGBT activist Rémy Bonny more actively resists the association between homophobia and Muslims, explicitly criticizing N-VA Secretary of State Zuhal Demir for so strongly focusing on the Muslim community:

> It's true that within communities with a strong religious background the aversion toward homosexuals and transgender people is big. But populist and stigmatizing remarks will not increase tolerance. Government and the LGBT community should reach out to

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[8] Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats).
[9] Socialistische partij.anders (socialist party.different).

> Muslims, Jews and Catholics. Only through dialogue and mutual respect will we come to a
> society where hate has no place. (Bonny, 2018, p. 37)

Bonny extends the typical argument about Muslims to other religious communities, but rather than radically Othering them, he calls for dialogue and respect. The "us" here includes not only the government, but also the LGBT community that is asked to reach out.

A fourth group of actors consists of representatives of ethnic minority and Muslim organizations. For instance, Landry Mawungu, director of the Minderhedenforum [Minority Forum], an organization that unites ethnic-cultural associations in Flanders, points at the growing acceptance of LGBTs among second-generation migrants and urges people to address different forms of discrimination at the same time:

> Of course that gap has to be closed, and we need to create more openness about sexual
> orientation. But combatting homophobia, sexism and racism, that's one and the same
> battle. Those different forms of discrimination are pitted too much against each other.
> (Vergauwen & Vanschoubroek, 2018, p. 8)

The "we" here refers to people with a migration background, but while distinguishing this group, Mawungu stresses connections rather than divisions. Similarly, Mehmet Üstün, the chairman of the Executief van de Moslims van België [Executive of Muslims in Belgium], the official body representing the Muslim community in Belgium, advocates for a moderate Islam, including noncondemnation of homosexuality: "We cannot stigmatize anyone based on his or her sexuality. There is indeed a place for homosexuals in our society. We cannot intervene in personal choices. Then we put ourselves in God's place. That's not allowed" (Boufker, 2018, p. 5). "We" here refers to Muslims, who are presented as part of "our society"—again, a more inclusive discourse.

A fifth group of actors in counterdiscourses consists of people taking up an intersectional position, in particular, queer Muslims. For instance, Abdellah Bijat, a former Mister Gay Belgium candidate, is a role model for LGBT Muslims, aiming to integrate these different identifications: "I want to show that you can be gay ánd Muslim, that's why I march in the Pride Parade" ("Ik wil tonen", 2018, p. 18). He aims to create bridges among different communities, being critical both of the Muslim world and of the gay scene, which he deems too White:

> If you think about the gay scene, you don't immediately think about Turkish and Moroccan
> boys and girls. The image that's spread about is, is rather white. That's a pity, because,
> as a result of this, young LGBs with a migration background don't find their way into the
> LGB community easily. ("Ik wil tonen", 2018, p. 18)

Echoing El-Tayeb (2012), Bijat draws attention to the intersectional position of queer Muslims, who belong to different communities, but question the supposed clash between them. Going against the representation of queer Muslims as a group to be "rescued" (Bracke, 2012), Bijat and other queer Muslims claim agency and refuse the false choice between the Muslim community and broader society (El-Tayeb, 2012).

A similar bridging voice is that of Gunther Malin, a Flemish man who is in a relationship with a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim. Of all the people quoted so far, Malin most explicitly criticizes the instrumentalization of LGBT rights in homonationalist discourses: "Gays are recuperated as part of an anti-Islamic discourse" (Stampmedia, 2018, para.1). While Malin acknowledges the more limited acceptance of homosexuality among Muslim youngsters in Flanders, he questions the opposition between gays and Muslims, which to him is fueled by media and politicians:

> While Muslim youngsters are talked into homophobia, gays are talked into Islamophobia. As a consequence, both are made afraid and will avoid each other. That way, the bridge is blown up from both sides, nobody gets to know each other and intolerance keeps on ruling. (Stampmedia, 2018, para. 13)

Rather than simply reversing homonationalist discourses, Malin and others go against their underlying polarizing nature by stressing connections instead of oppositions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question guiding this exploration of homonationalism in Flanders concerns the in-group: Into which nation are LGBT rights and individuals incorporated, Flanders, Belgium, or larger entities such as Europe? About one third of the articles analyzed here connect Islam with homophobia, taking up an explicitly homonationalist stance by setting up an us–them opposition. However, the in-group mostly remains unspecified in these articles, and when it is named, reference is made to Flanders, but also to Belgium and Europe. Although Flemish nationalism is prominent, homonationalist discourses do not often explicitly refer to Flanders; this is surprising, but may be partly due to the success of Flemish nationalism in making Flanders a self-evident, "banal" context (Maly, 2016), as mentioned earlier. Moreover, claiming LGBT rights as "Flemish" is complicated because most legislation in relation to LGBT rights is situated on the federal, Belgian level. Compared with the Netherlands, where politicians like Geert Wilders and the late Pim Fortuyn explicitly counterpose Islam to LGBT-friendly Dutch identity (Mepschen et al., 2010), for Flemish nationalist politicians, it is harder to credibly claim LGBT rights as part of Flemish identity, and they seem hesitant to acknowledge the important role of the Belgian state in relation to LGBT rights.

The second research question concerns the actors in homonationalist discourses: Are these discourses mainly propagated by nationalist politicians, or also by others? Here, the answer is rather clear: These discourses are mostly expressed by right-wing nationalist politicians, most strongly from Vlaams Belang, and most consistently from N-VA. The prominence of these voices complements the answer to the first research question: While Flanders is not often explicitly mentioned, that homonationalist utterances are mostly made by Flemish nationalist politicians does suggest that Flanders is the implicit point of reference, as it commonly is in their broader politics aimed at drawing the boundaries of the Flemish nation (Adam & Deschouwer, 2016).

The third research question concerns the relation of homonationalist discourses to broader discourses on Muslims and homosexuality in the Flemish press. Here, we can distinguish two additional categories. On the one hand, a number of articles can be considered implicitly homonationalist because they

connect Islam with homophobia, but do not place this out-group explicitly in opposition to an LGBT-friendly in-group; at the same time, they do fit in the wider tendency of the Islamophobic press, reporting homogenizing Islam and connecting it to all kinds of threats (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Easat-Daas, 2018). On the other hand, a number of articles present counterdiscourses as they question the binary oppositions inherent in homonationalism (El-Tayeb, 2012). What is striking here is the broad range of actors, which includes politicians and journalists, but also LGBT, Muslim, and queer Muslim voices. All of them, to different degrees and in different ways, go against the homogenization of Muslims and their opposition to an equally homogenized in-group. Whereas the first two categories of articles thrive on explicit or implicit oppositions, this latter category aims to question those, although occasionally (political) actors do take recourse to the very same categorizations they question.

While the relatively strong presence of counterdiscourses (at least in this sample) is encouraging, what is worrying is the predominance of explicit and implicit homonationalism in articles connecting Islam to homosexuality, in a broader context of Islamophobia in Belgium (Easat-Daas, 2018). The implicitly homonationalist articles in particular may be part of broader and less immediately apparent discursive patterns. This article only focused on the joint discussion of homosexuality and Islam in a single newspaper report, but homonationalism may be just as powerful through the separate repetition of its constituent parts across different articles: on the one hand, the emphasis on Belgian or Flemish accomplishments in term of LGBT rights, and on the other hand, the strong focus on problems (including, but not limited to, homophobia) in reporting on Islam.

Journalist Joël De Ceulaer (2018) hints at this, when he comments on the enthusiastic political and popular response to the transition of transgender TV journalists Bo Van Spilbeeck, contrasting it with the widespread indifference to the fate of an Ethiopian refugee who was killed on a Flemish motorway that same week. Although there is no apparent connection between both events, he is struck by the enormous support for Bo Van Spilbeeck across society and different political parties, while reports on the death of a refugee trying to escape from the police lacked compassion. He adds,

> I am not surprised at all about the openness toward LGBs and transgender people by people who reject migration and the increasing diversity in Europe. I think that those two attitudes are almost causally connected among some people. It is because one is against migration that one can't be progressive enough in terms of sex and gender. For in that manner, one distinguishes oneself from the unenlightened, backward hordes Europe threatens to be flooded by. (De Ceulaer, 2018, p. 12)

Without referencing homonationalism, De Ceulaer clearly unpacks its underlying logic: "One kind of diversity is not the other: the in-group sticks together against the out-group which is experienced as inimical" (De Ceulaer 2018, p. 12). He pinpoints the issue of double standards: In Belgium, LGBT rights are strongly embraced, but human rights for ethnic minorities and refugees seem to be increasingly jeopardized.

In this light, future research should not only focus on explicit and coherent utterances of homonationalism that counterpose an LGBT-friendly in-group (however defined, not limited to nation-states) to homophobic out-groups (including, but not limited to, Muslims), but also analyze repetitions of its constituent

parts in broader discourses, in the press as well as political discourse and on social media. Moreover, as the analysis of three full months in this article suggests, it may be useful to track discourses over a longer period to better understand where homonationalist discourse around a particular topic originates and how it spreads. While it is unproductive to consider each connection between Islam and homophobia as homonationalist, the consistent and one-sided connection between Islam and homophobia, in contrast with an LGBT-friendly in-group, over time and across platforms, certainly is a symptom of homonationalism.

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