Ethnoregional political parties (sometimes also called ethnoregionalist) in Europe are a highly interesting phenomenon from the point of view of political science: they are situated on a problematic border between regionalism studies, party studies and ethnopolitical studies, usually combining all three of these dimensions. Lieven De Winter defines ethnoregionalist parties as parties that are united on the basis of two common denominators: “1) a subnational territorial division; 2) a population that the ethnoregionalist party assumes to constitute a category that is culturally distinct and has an exclusive group identity” [7, p. 130–131]. Such parties are a clear example of what Charles Tilly calls state-seeking nationalism: “representatives of some population that currently did not have collective control of a state claimed an autonomous political status, or even a separate state, on the ground that the population had a distinct, coherent cultural identity” [17, p. 133]. Some of them are separatist, though not all secessionist parties may be qualified as this: they may also be irredentist or autonomist.

Since this study is a part of a broader context and has a limited scope, we had to choose the cases. We have initially chosen for a “most similar – different output” (MSDO) strategy: pointing out the cases that are most similar and finding the dissimilarities in their future fate. If we stick to this choice, one of the possible options would be discussing Belgium and the Netherlands. These countries have long been in a common cultural and historical continuum; they constitute the so-called “Low Countries” group and the integration grouping Benelux (together with Luxembourg). Both countries had a more or less strong nationalist/regionalist movement that was different from the mainstream state-led nationalism (in the terms of Charles Tilly): the Flemish Movement in Belgium and the Frisian Movement in the Netherlands. Moreover, at certain stages of their development, these cultural emancipatory movements gave birth to a political party. That is the point where the similarities vanish.

We should bear in mind that Belgium is an ethnically divided country, divided between the Flemish and the Walloon (almost equal) parts of the population. If we add here the former situation of de facto oppressed position of the Flemish (officially Dutch) language that is spoken by the Flemish half of the population, a position that has not been improved until the early 20th century, we see that there have been ideal
conditions for the emergence of a nationalist movement. In 1831, a year after the Belgian Uprising, Charles Rogier, one of its leaders, said that French should be the only language of the Belgians. So the first speech in Dutch was held in the Belgian parliament only in 1869, and in 1898, Dutch became one of the two official languages of the Belgian nation. The main actor fighting for the improvement of the position of Dutch (Flemish) in Belgium, was the so-called Flemish Movement.

The Flemish Movement that we consider an umbrella phenomenon for different Flemish nationalist parties, movements, students’ leagues, press and so forth, has been a driving force behind the major political processes in the country in the 20th century, which culminated in a row of constitutional reforms that stipulated the de facto split of the country. This Flemish Movement, as a cultural and philosophical branch of thought aimed at the ideological founding of the maximal autonomy of the Flemish people and of Flanders, is still present and very active in the northern part of Belgium, in Flanders. The institutionalized forms thereof, i.e., the political parties Flemish Interest and New Flemish Alliance, are now main epitomes of right-wing political populism with a strong regionalist agenda. Some scholars also add Lijst DeDecker to this list; however, we think it is not quite correct because of the lack of nationalist ideology. It should be also noted that in Belgium no federal level party system exists, there are only regional parties that are represented both in regional parliaments and in federal parliament; so, all Belgian political parties are regional, though not all of them are ethnoregional.

Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang; originally, Flemish Block, Vlaams Blok) was established in 1978 as a merge of the Flemish National Party and the Flemish People’s Party. There are two “wings” within the party: the one championing the Flemish independence (the unofficial leader of which is Gerolf Annemans) and the one championing anti-immigrant and traditionalist rhetoric (the unofficial leader of which is Filip Dewinter). The clear link of the party with the above-mentioned Flemish Movement is obvious: the party stands for the Flemish independence, and it was Flemish Block that in 1990 organized a congress “Independence Necessary and Possible” in Strombeek-Bever; the congress is often considered the first political claim for Flemish independence after the WWII.

The party positions itself as right-wing conservative and separatist. In 1980, the immigration issue was included in the party program. Nowadays the party is established on the strife for “Flemish independence, the opposition to multiculturalism, and the defense of traditional Western values” [2, p. 84]. In the wave of the dédiabolisation trend set by the French Front National, the party officially stands as philosemitic; party members have even patrolled the Jewish quarter of Antwerp in the period of the second “Intifada”. Here we should recall the words of Tony Judt, British historian, who wrote that “Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket” [11, p. 803]. However, one should be careful when assessing the degree of the new
philosemitism of the European right-wing populist parties: it may be just a cosmetic measure, and it may apply to party leadership only, while rank-and-file members and the electorate remain filled with anti-Semitism [16, p. 120–121].

It is worth mentioning that the party acts in the situation of cordon sanitaire that was introduced in 1992 against possible coalitions with Flemish Block in the parliament. In 2004, the NGOs “Center for Equal Opportunities” and “Human Rights League” made the court in Brussels to dismiss the party; however, in five days, the new party named Flemish Interest was established, with the same people on the top and practically the same program (though a bit softened on immigrant and economic issues).

If we use the terminology suggested by Paul Taggart and Alex Szczerbiak, the party’s euroscepticism may be characterized as “hard” one, i.e., the one calling for reforming the basics of the European Union and for the withdrawal from the EU [15, p. 3–4]. In 2014 elections, one of the key motto’s of Flemish Interest was “For Europe, so against the EU”. In party socioeconomic program of 2012 it is written that “the EU is organized as a federalist bureaucratic moloch (...) of the United States of Europe. (...) Flemish Interest is proud to be a eurocritical and Eurosceptic party” [19, p. 138–139].

New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie. N-VA) has inherited the air and influence of one of the most important Flemish political parties in the 20th century, i.e. the People’s Union (Volksunie) that seized to exist in 2001. The latter was a clear heir of the Flemish Movement ideas; N-VA can be also situated within this framework. It does not stand for the fully-fledged independence of Flanders, but for a further state reform leading to a “confederative model where most powers will be in the regions” [20, p. 33]. It is rather interesting that we find exactly the same demands in the program of the Flemish Christian Democrats (Christen Democratisch en Vlaams, CD&V), one of the most well-established mainstream parties; this fact clearly demonstrates the influence that the regionalist parties have on the entire political system of Flanders.

For N-VA, immigrant and European integration issues are not that important; however, they are clearly republican-oriented and Francophobic; the party warns against the possible gallisation of the Brussels periphery (Vlaamse Rand). Though the party position is far more moderate than that of the Flemish Interest and it avoided the cordon sanitaire and is now one of the ruling parties in Belgium, it is regularly included in the lists of successful right-wing and sometimes even extremist European parties [13]. However, it is considered more respectable and influential than Flemish Interest, and for the last 15 years, more than 50 members of VB have left for N-VA [18]; the party leader, nowadays the Antwerp mayor Bart De Wever said that “cooperation between N-VA and VB on any level of state governance is impossible” [5].

The party also warns against turning the EU into a “European super-state” and the “United States of Europe”; however, it does not demand the withdrawal of Belgium from the Union, which allows classifying the N-VA euroscepticism as “soft”. The party is
afraid of hardening its euroscepticism because than one of the most important programmatic differences with Flemish Interest would be blurred; moreover, it exploits the existence of the effective European management as the possible reason to get rid of the “Belgian washer” between Flanders and the EU [12, p. 164–165].

In 2014 federal parliament elections, New Flemish Alliance got 33 seats out of 150, so it became a ruling party that formed the government; Flemish Interest got only three seats. According to the Dedicated Research public opinion service, in 2017, N-VA enjoyed the support of 27.1 % Flemings (and retained the position of the most popular political party in Flanders), and FI of 11.7 % [14].

To sum up, the Flemish history gave all the reasons for creation of a strong nationalist movement. The Flemish Movement became an umbrella phenomenon that encompasses all institutional forms of the strife for the Flemish independence. Flemish Interest and New Flemish Alliance have a very different history, but both of them emerged from a broader spectrum of traditional Flemish regionalist-oriented Belgian parties. Nowadays, they enjoy a very different status: New Flemish Alliance is a ruling party in Flanders and one of the ruling parties in Belgium, and Flemish Interest witnesses a considerable decline in popularity and a sanitary cordon that prevents it from building any coalition in parliament. This situation is a result of different historical roots of the parties, different degree of radicalism in what concerns immigration, Flemish independence and the European Union; the electorate tends to vote for those who are more moderate, but who still express their views. However, both parties may be considered right-wing populist and ethnoregionalist and have all points necessary for such a classification; moreover, both parties still enjoy a rather high degree of popularity.

The only Frisian political party that is now present in the political landscape of the Netherlands is Frysk Nasionale Partij, i.e. Frisian National Party. It was founded in 1962 and first took part in the local elections in 1966. Frisian National Party also emerged out of a cultural-nationalist movement, i.e. the Frisian Movement. This phenomenon was relatively successful in the matter of language policy and the strife for the emancipation of Frisian in the public sphere. However, unlike the Flemish Movement, it has not generated a successful political structure, presumably because of a closer affinity of the Frisian population with “metropolitan” Dutch society (the two peoples are very close relatives, which is definitely not the case with the Flemish and the Walloons). The Frisian language has not been used in official domains in Friesland, one of the provinces of the Netherlands, before the 1900s, and in courts – before 1951, when the protest against such a situation was smashed with police riots (the so-called Kneppelfreed, i.e. “the Friday of Cudgels”), but still gave impulse for political discussion of the Frisian language status. In 1970, Friesland becomes officially bilingual, and since 1980, Frisian is a compulsory subject in basic education. Since 1995, Frisian is a language of governance.
The main goals of the party are the preservation of the Frisian language and broader autonomy for Friesland, altogether with a broader context of “center-periphery cleavage” [10, p. 145]. One of the party motto’s in the 90s was even “Frisian and Federal” (in 2000s, it became a more moderate “More Friesland, less Netherlands”). The party may not be considered right- or left-wing because it has some clear national-conservative features combined with a rather socialist-style view on economy and a green attitude towards the environment [10, p. 150–151]. As to the regionalist agenda, the party has reactivated it after the referenda in Scotland and Catalonia. A significant number of publications in national and local media signalize a growing interest of FNP towards the Catalan and the Scottish examples [6; 8]; the party has even sent observers to the Scottish referendum [4]. However, these developments are combined with a remarkable thaw in a language-nationalist stance within FNP: in 2016, it even recognized the Dutch language as one of the party working languages (previously this has been Frisian only) [3]. Moreover, though a referendum on more autonomy for Friesland was proposed for 2018 [9], it was close to impossible to find any references to this event in the media.

The results of the party at the national elections are not quite satisfactory: only 1 seat in the upper chamber. To achieve this rather low-scale goal, the party had to join efforts with the Greens in 1995. The striking difference with the Flemish case can possibly be explained through a different level of regional political self-conscience and stronger affinity with the close to homogeneous Dutch unitary state. It is quite understandable that in an almost 50–50 heterogeneous and federal Belgium, where the ties across the language border are minor, regional identity would be much stronger.

Another important point can be that FNP is mostly regarded as a single-issue party, i.e. a language party or a regionalization actor; that is why it may attract only those voters in Friesland who associate themselves with the Frisian Movement. On the contrary, New Flemish Alliance and Flemish Interest make a much broader appeal based on their well-developed immigration, economic and social programs. For sure, regionalism is a key feature of their ideology, but they still successfully produce an image of fully-fledged many-issue political parties.

Finally yet importantly, we should not also forget that the Frisians are a minority, while the Flemish are de facto not. Though the image of the Flemish people in the 19th and the 20th centuries was coined as an image of a rural minority suppressed by the French-speaking “metropolitan” elite, the Flemish constitute more than half of the country’s population. They should be actually considered not as a minority but as one of the two constituting nations, likewise the Quebecois in Canada. However, the Flemish Interest and the N-VA are still definitely regional and regionalist parties because they operate only in one region and pursue regionalist agenda.
We may assume that in the emancipation of an ethnic minority there are at least three stages: 1) linguistic and cultural emancipation; 2) attempts to form a political structure; 3) territorial rearrangements (usually in a direction of an extended territorial autonomy or federalization). If seen like this, the Flemish parties have successfully undergone all three stages, unlike their Frisian counterpart that had to stop somewhere in the middle of the second phase (the political structure was formed, but still has not enough power to enter politics on a national level). We may see that even in the countries that share common history and are situated in a single sub-regional cluster, the role of regional parties is quite different. In a more decentralized Belgian polity, the two multidimensional Flemish parties may attract much more votes than an (almost) single-issue party in the unitary Netherlands. The “glass ceiling” for the Frisian regionalists proved to be language emancipation; the Flemish regionalist activities have led to a fully-fledged state reform that may be further continued, despite of a certain balance reached in the recent decades.

Though the choice of just two cases is far from being representative, we still may claim to draw some preliminary conclusions. The factors of success of an ethnoregional party may be as follows: political culture of the host state (traditions, state structure, “particular pattern of orientations to political action” [1, p. 396]). ethnodemographic character of ties between ethnic minority and ethnic majority (number of population, relevance of common historical and linguistic roots, etc.) and the character of a party itself (whether it may go beyond a regionalist agenda). The combination of these factors determines finally, whether an ethnoregionalist party is doomed to success or to failure.

References