

Shifting forms of vertical power: from participation to authoritarian liberalism

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10th Power Conference

Text of the oral presentation | Unpublished

Today, I would like to present a broader contribution on recent transformations in the exercise of political power in Belgium. Belgium is a federal state composed of three levels of government: the federal level, the regional level, and the community level. Following the 2024 legislative elections, the two main French-speaking right parties—the Reformist Movement (MR) and Les Engagés (LE)—came to power in the Walloon Region and the French-speaking Community, while also joining the federal government coalition. The Prime Minister comes from the Flemish nationalist and economically liberal party, NVA. In addition, both parties strengthened their position in the local elections held later that same year¹. In this presentation, we argue that Belgium is currently witnessing the resurgence of what the German legal scholar Hermann Heller described as “authoritarian liberalism”². To illustrate this argument, let us first consider the example of social policy.

Beginning in the 1980s, the “new social question” increasingly focused on labor-market reintegration and unemployment reduction through policies of activation. The active welfare state was legitimized by scientific, political, and media discourses that gradually displaced the issue of social inequalities in favor of the concept of social exclusion³. As a result, social problems were no longer understood primarily as structural. Instead, responsibility for improving one’s situation and finding a job was increasingly placed on the individual. In the early 2000s, the liberal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt even declared that it was no longer acceptable “for money to be wasted on people who clearly have absolutely no desire to look for work”⁴. However, as Dimitri Zamora-Vargas argues, the active welfare state does not simply push inactive individuals into the labor market. It tries to transform them⁵. Following Soss, Fording, and Schram⁶, the aim is not so much to “punish” the poor—as suggested by Loïc Wacquant⁷—than to “discipline” them. More concretely, the objective is not only to make

¹ Restricting their analysis to the lists officially registered under a regional party number by the five parties entitled to do so, Biard and Istasse find that both the MR and Les Engagés recorded electoral gains in the majority of municipalities where they competed and for which comparison with the 2018 local elections is possible. B. BIARD et C. ISTASSE, « Les résultats des élections communales du 13 octobre 2024 en Wallonie », *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, juillet 2025, n° 17-18, pp. 5-168.

² H. HELLER, « Autoritärer Liberalismus ? », *Die Neue Rundschau*, 1933, vol. 44, n° 3, pp. 289-298.

³ M. HAMZAOUÏ, « La politique sociale différenciée et territorialisée : activation ou ébranlement du social », *Travail-Emploi-Formation*, 2003, n° 4, pp. 11-25.

⁴ All translations from French are the author’s own. G. VERHOFSTADT, « Déclaration de gouvernement prononcée par le Premier Ministre Guy Verhofstadt », 14 juillet 2003.

⁵ D. ZAMORA VARGAS, *De l'égalité à la pauvreté: une socio-histoire de l'assistance en Belgique, 1895-2015*, Sociologie et anthropologie, Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2017, p. 209.

⁶ J. SOSS, R.C. FORDING et S. SCHRAM (éds.), *Disciplining the poor: neoliberal paternalism and the persistent power of race*, Chicago studies in American politics, Chicago; London, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

⁷ L. WACQUANT, *Punir les pauvres: le nouveau gouvernement de l'insécurité sociale*, Contre-feux, Marseille, Agone, 2004.

individuals more active in job seeking, but also to encourage the internalization of a flexible, responsible, autonomous, and compliant habitus. To this end, a wide range of policy instruments have been developed, and are designed “to incentivize, structure, and cultivate mentalities of self-rule”⁸. It includes individualized social support, labor-market integration pathways, and so on.

As part of my doctoral research, I am particularly interested in the policy framework governing Social Integration Services (*Services d’Insertion Sociale*). These institutions were formally recognized for the first time by the Walloon Decree⁹ of 17 July 2003 on social integration¹⁰. They are spread across the Walloon territory and offer collective activities such as theater workshops, artistic projects, cooking classes, or sports programs. Their target audience consists of people considered to be “in situations of social exclusion,” primarily unemployed individuals. Through this integration framework, public authorities expect participants to engage in what could be described as a form of “work on self”¹¹. A close reading of the law reveals two main objectives: first, helping individuals regain self-confidence; and second, helping them relearn basic social norms and behaviors, such as “getting up in the morning,” “listening to others,” or “managing a personal budget”¹². These examples are cited by politicians during parliamentary debates. It is important to note that many of these activation and integration policies were promoted by social democratic and Green parties. The decree that created these Social Integration Services, for example, was introduced by a Green minister and adopted unanimously, including by opposition parties.

Since 2024, however, analyzing power relations in Belgium requires us to pay renewed attention to coercion. The governments formed mainly by right-wing parties¹³ challenge the Foucauldian perspective that has long dominated analyses of Belgian social policy. We are now seeing a stronger emphasis on sanctioning, monitoring, and constraining unemployed people¹⁴ and welfare recipients. One of the key measures adopted by the federal government in 2025 is

⁸ J. SOSS, R.C. FORDING et S. SCHRAM (éds.), *Disciplining the poor*, op. cit., p. 297.

⁹ Décret wallon du 17 juillet 2003 relatif à l’insertion sociale, *Moniteur belge*, 28 juillet 2003.

¹⁰ They are now enshrined in the Walloon Code of Social Action and Health.

¹¹ D. VRANCKEN et C. MARQUET, *Le travail sur Soi. Vers une psychologisation de la société ?*, s.l., Belin, Paris, France, 2006, disponible sur <https://orbi.uliege.be/handle/2268/13135> (Consulté le 30 janvier 2026).

¹² PARLEMENT WALLON, Travaux parlementaires du décret relatif à l’insertion sociale, 2002-2003, 515, p. 2, <https://www.parlement-wallonie.be/pwpages?p=doc-recherche-det&iddoc=3978>.

¹³ The Flemish social-democratic party Vooruit is also a member of the federal Arizona coalition.

¹⁴ « Contrôle et sanction. Nous obtenons davantage de contrôle et de sanctions en utilisant les allocations de chômage comme un instrument d’activation du marché du travail. » GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL, « Accord de coalition fédérale 2025-2029 », s.d., p. 2.

the limitation of unemployment benefits to a maximum duration of two years¹⁵. At the same time, social integration work no longer appears to be a policy priority. For example, the federal program *Participation et Activation sociale* which enabled local social institutions to develop social integration initiatives was abolished in 2026. Social Integration Services themselves have also been weakened by the announcement of a broader reform of employment-support subsidies¹⁶. This suggests that the internalization of autonomous behaviors is no longer the main objective of social policy. Instead, policymakers assume that making unemployment more precarious will encourage people to return to work. Participatory forms of governance have not totally disappeared, but they are now increasingly combined with, and replaced by, more direct forms of constraint-based on precarisation.

This resurgence of coercion must also be understood in relation to changes in political legitimation. To understand this question of legitimacy, it is interesting to analyze how politicians relate to citizen participation. Since the 2010s, several Belgian parliaments, both federal and federated, have institutionalized citizen participation through deliberative committees composed partly of randomly selected citizens¹⁷. However, following the most recent elections, these mechanisms have increasingly come under scrutiny. In the Walloon Region, for instance, the Liberal Minister for the Air-Climate Plan abolished the Citizens' Climate Panel, which had been established during the previous legislative term by a Green minister. To understand this abolition, it is first necessary to examine the origins of these mechanisms, without idealizing their subversive dimension. Belgium is a representative regime based on the principle of national sovereignty rather than popular sovereignty¹⁸. The Belgian Constitution establishes the primacy of electoral representation and formally excludes mechanisms that would challenge this principle¹⁹. Referendums and imperative mandates, for example, are seen as incompatible with this constitutional order. Elected representatives are

¹⁵ Loi-programme du 18 juillet 2025, *Moniteur belge*, 29 juillet 2025.

¹⁶ PARLEMENT WALLON, Travaux parlementaires du décret portant création d'un incitant unique à l'embauche, 2025-2026, 536.

¹⁷ A. GUSTIN, G. GRANDJEAN et V. AERTS, « L'institutionnalisation du tirage au sort au sein des assemblées parlementaires belges. I. Le cadrage par une élite culturelle et l'alignement des partis politiques », *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 2025, n° 2658-2659, 62 p. ; A. GUSTIN, G. GRANDJEAN et V. AERTS, « L'institutionnalisation du tirage au sort au sein des assemblées parlementaires belges. II. Les parlements régionaux et communautaires », *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 2025 n° 2660-2661, 106 p. ; A. GUSTIN, G. GRANDJEAN et V. AERTS, « L'institutionnalisation du tirage au sort au sein des assemblées parlementaires belges. III. La Chambre des représentants et le Sénat », *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 2025, n° 2662-2663, 87 p.

¹⁸ C. BEHRENDT, « Les parlementaires sont-ils des mandataires ? A propos des notions de souveraineté nationale et populaire », in M. EL BERHOUMI *et al.* (éds.), *Droit constitutionnel et démocratie: de la nation à l'Europe: dialogues avec Hugues Dumont*, Bibliothèque de droit public, Bruxelles, Larcier Intersentia, 2025, pp. 829-836.

¹⁹ Read together, Articles 33 and 42 state that "all powers emanate from the Nation" and that "the members of the two Chambers represent the Nation, and not those who elected them".

considered the only actors capable of identifying the interests of the Nation and, as such, are required to preserve their autonomy in decision-making.

What role, then, is assigned to citizen participation, before 2024? As Jacques Donzelot and Renaud Epstein have shown, participatory mechanisms often reflect “the dream of obtaining unanimous confirmation of political decisions from citizens [...]”. In this perspective, elected officials seek through participation “much more a legitimization of decisions than a mobilization for action.”²⁰ Participatory mechanisms therefore allow governments to display public support and respond to demands for more democracy, without sharing decision-making power.

But if these mechanisms are not very threatening, why abandon them? Our argument is that the coercive turn identified in social policy also affects political legitimation. Elections increasingly tend to be presented as the only foundation of political authority. So, electoral legitimacy would be sufficient to justify political choices regardless of their degree of social acceptability²¹. Recent political statements illustrate this shift. For example, the Prime Minister has explicitly embraced the unpopular character of reforms, stating: “I am not afraid to take responsibility for unpopular measures when they are necessary.”²² Georges-Louis Bouchez, president of the liberal-conservative Reformist Movement (MR), declared during a period of significant social mobilization: “We are not afraid of demonstrations. We will not change course. What the left lost at the ballot box, it wants to regain in the streets.”²³

What conclusions can we draw from these developments? Our aim is not to suggest a shift from horizontal to vertical forms of power. Verticality is built into representative government itself, as Bernard Manin demonstrates in *The Principles of Representative Government*²⁴. We do not wish to idealize the relationship to participation that existed prior to 2024. What is

²⁰ J. DONZELOT et R. EPSTEIN, « Démocratie et participation : l'exemple de la rénovation urbaine », *Esprit*, 2006, n° 7, p. 33.

²¹ J. FANIEL, « Affaiblir la concertation sociale, est-ce réformer la Belgique sans le dire? », *L'Echo*, 4 juin 2026, disponible sur <https://www.lecho.be/https://www.lecho.be/economie-politique/belgique/general/affaiblir-la-concertation-sociale-est-ce-reformer-la-belgique-sans-le-dire/10673750.html> (Consulté le 7 juin 2026).

²² S. VAN WIELE et K. VANMARSENILLE, « Bart De Wever blikte terug op 2024: “Als ik alleen met Bouchez een regering moest maken, was die in een week gevormd” », *Nieuwsblad*, 31 décembre 2024, disponible sur <https://www.nieuwsblad.be/binnenland/bart-de-wever-blikte-terug-op-2024-als-ik-alleen-met-bouchez-een-regering-moest-maken-was-die-in-een-week-gevormd/55882783.html> (Consulté le 7 juin 2026).

²³ G.-L. BOUCHEZ, « « Ce que la gauche a perdu dans les urnes, elle va vouloir le gagner dans la rue. Mais nous ne changerons pas de cap. » », *Blog de Georges Louis Bouchez*, 6 janvier 2025, disponible sur <https://glbouchez.be/ce-que-la-gauche-a-perdu-dans-les-urnes-elle-va-vouloir-le-gagner-dans-la-rue-mais-nous-ne-changerons-pas-de-cap/> (Consulté le 7 juin 2026).

²⁴ B. MANIN, *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*, Champs, Paris, Flammarion, 2019.

fundamentally changing is the way political power seeks—or increasingly refuses to seek—the consent of the governed. For several decades, both the “conduct of conduct” in the socio-economic fields and the search for public support for political representation appeared central to representative politicians. Today, however, we are witnessing the return of an openly coercive form of power. The policies implemented since 2024 fit within what Grégoire Chamayou describes as the paradigm of authoritarian liberalism: “the emergence or re-emergence of forms of state power that are liberal in their economic program while being, to varying degrees, authoritarian in political terms.”²⁵

Authoritarian liberalism departs from the Foucauldian conception of governmentality: the production of individual self-regulation no longer appears to occupy a central place in social policy. Instead, more direct measures are increasingly favored, particularly those aimed at reducing public expenditure on unemployed people²⁶. More broadly, we believe it is important to emphasize that the authoritarian dimension of this transformation cannot be reduced to the use of coercive policies in the service of economic liberalism. It is equally visible in the discourses and governing practices through which public authorities “assert themselves as the only legitimate authors of political will”²⁷. In this context, the rejection of participatory mechanisms and the strong emphasis on electoral legitimacy both point in the same direction: a reassertion of centralized political authority.

²⁵ C. SCHMITT, H. HELLER et G. CHAMAYOU, *Du libéralisme autoritaire*, Paris, Zones, 2020, p. 78.

²⁶ Concurrently, recent reforms further contribute to the increasing flexibilization of the labor market.

²⁷ G. CHAMAYOU, *La société ingouvernable : une généalogie du libéralisme autoritaire*, Paris, la Fabrique éditions, 2018, pp. 263-264.

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