

The Coalition Politics Behind Sudden Welfare Reform

A Multiple Streams Analysis of Belgian Unemployment
Benefit Reform

Dahlia Deweer

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Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Steven Van de Walle
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Populaire samenvatting

De beperking van de werkloosheidsuitkeringen in de tijd is het zelfverklaarde koninginnenstuk van de regering De Wever. Daarmee verdwijnt een uniek kenmerk van het Belgische systeem: werkloosheidsuitkeringen waren er in principe onbeperkt in de tijd. Tegelijk staan nog andere grote hervormingen van de sociale zekerheid op til.

Een voor de hand liggende verklaring klinkt snel: “Natuurlijk wordt er nu hervormd, de PS zit niet in de regering.” Alleen trad tien jaar eerder óók een regering aan zonder de PS. Michel I had bovendien een homogener centrumrechts profiel en twee regeringspartijen waren uitgesproken voorstander van een tijdslimiet. Toch kwam die er niet. Hoe kon een bredere coalitie, mét sociaaldemocraten, de hervorming dan amper zes maanden na haar aantreden realiseren?

Om dat te begrijpen, reconstrueerde ik beide besluitvormingsprocessen aan de hand van twaalf elite-interviews met onder meer kabinetsmedewerkers, parlementariërs, experts en sociale partners die de Wetstraat van binnenuit kennen. Daaruit komt een verklaring naar voren die verder gaat dan de afwezigheid van de PS.

Een puur ideologische lezing van Michel I mist de communautaire olifant in de kamer. MR was de enige Franstalige regeringspartij, terwijl CD&V zich als het “sociale geweten” van de centrumrechtse regering profileerde. Voor CD&V botste een tijdslimiet met haar sociale profiel. MR stond alleen op de Franstalige flank, terwijl Wallonië harder door de hervorming zou worden getroffen. Hun relatieve positie deed ertoe: als de hervorming slecht viel, hadden ze weinig partners op hun flank met wie ze de politieke schuld konden delen.

Tijdens de regeringsvorming zaten net zij op cruciale posities. Voor zo’n hervorming was dat het moment waarop het erop of eronder was. Peeters en Michel leidden de formatie als co-formateurs. CD&V hield de tijdslimiet al vóór de echte coalitieonderhandelingen tegen, terwijl MR weinig initiatief nam om haar vooruit te duwen.

In de jaren daarna veranderde het politieke speelveld. Onder nieuwe partijvoorzitters werden oude posities opgebroken en de verkiezingen van 2024 veroorzaakten een politieke aardverschuiving in Wallonië. Ook het onbeperkte karakter van de werkloosheidsuitkering werd steeds meer als probleem gezien. Tegen de formatie van De Wever I verzette geen enkele toekomstige coalitiepartner zich nog principieel.

Over het principe waren de coalitiepartners het dus eens, maar ze gaven er elk hun eigen politieke betekenis aan. N-VA en MR claimden de hervorming offensiever, met taal over het *profitariaat* en *l’assistanat*, terwijl CD&V, Les Engagés en Vooruit vaker de nadruk legden op wederkerigheid en sociale bescherming. Toch liepen die verhalen inhoudelijk sterk in elkaar over. Alle partijen koppelden de hervorming op hun manier aan een bredere notie van rechtvaardigheid: werken moest lonen, rechten gingen samen met verantwoordelijkheden en de sociale zekerheid moest ook op langere termijn houdbaar blijven. Net die gedeelde kern maakte het mogelijk om de hervorming gezamenlijk te dragen, ondanks verschillende accenten en politieke stijlen.

Maar waarom ging het daarna zo snel? De regeringsvorming had een *window of opportunity* gecreëerd. Ook wie aan de knoppen zat, maakte De Wever I bijna tot het spiegelbeeld van Michel I. De Wever hield als formateur de pen vast en daarna kwam Werk bij MR terecht. Voor MR was de tijdslimiet een topprioriteit. De regering wilde de budgettaire opbrengsten snel laten ingaan én tonen dat ze echt zou hervormen. Het kabinet Werk zette daarom vaart achter de uitwerking, met de zomervakantie als deadline. Ditmaal zaten de grootste voorstanders in de institutionele cockpit.

Dat helpt verklaren hoe een hervorming die jarenlang politiek onhaalbaar leek, plots bijzonder snel werkelijkheid kon worden. Zelfs in het Belgische compromislandschap kan veel bewegen wanneer coalitiebelangen, timing en politieke controle op het juiste moment samenvallen.

Popular summary

The De Wever government presents the time limit on unemployment benefits as one of its flagship reforms. It ends a distinctive feature of the Belgian system: unemployment benefits were, in principle, unlimited in duration.

An obvious explanation comes quickly: “Of course reform is possible now, the PS is not in government.” Yet ten years earlier Belgium also had a government without the French-speaking Socialist Party. Michel I was even more uniformly centre-right, and two coalition parties strongly supported a time limit. Still, the reform never happened. It did not even reach substantive coalition negotiations. How, then, could a broader coalition including social democrats adopt it within six months?

To find out, I reconstructed both processes through twelve elite interviews with cabinet staff, MPs, experts and social partners who know Belgium’s federal politics from the inside.

A purely ideological reading of Michel I misses an important feature of the coalition. MR was its only French-speaking party, while CD&V positioned itself as the government’s “social conscience”. A time limit was politically sensitive for both, for different reasons. For CD&V, restricting social protection clashed with the social profile it wanted to defend. MR stood alone on the French-speaking side, while Wallonia would be affected much more strongly by the reform. Their relative position within the coalition mattered: if the reform proved unpopular, both had few partners on their own flank with whom to share the political blame.

They also held key positions during government formation. For a reform of this scale, that was the make-or-break moment. Those same parties also led the coalition negotiations, giving them considerable influence over which proposals made it into the coalition agreement. CD&V stopped the time limit before real coalition bargaining began, while MR showed little initiative to push it forward.

Over the following years, the political landscape changed. New party leaders helped shift positions that had previously appeared relatively fixed, while the 2024 elections produced a major political shift in Wallonia and made a new coalition possible.

The parties agreed on the principle but gave it different political meanings. N-VA and MR claimed the reform more assertively, presenting it as a break with welfare dependency and abuse and as a way to make work pay. CD&V, Les Engagés and Vooruit more often stressed reciprocity and the protection of social security. Yet these stories overlapped around a common idea of fairness: work should pay, rights come with responsibilities, and social security must remain sustainable. That shared core made joint ownership possible.

But why did the reform then move so quickly? Government formation had created a window of opportunity. This time, the parties most eager to push the reform forward were also in the best position to do so. As formateur, Bart De Wever controlled the central negotiating text, while after government formation the Employment portfolio went to MR, which treated the time limit as a top priority. The government wanted the budgetary effects to start quickly and also wanted an early reform success before moving on to even harder measures. The Employment cabinet therefore set to work immediately, with the aim of getting the reform through before the summer recess. This time, the strongest advocates were in the institutional cockpit.

The lesson of this reform is therefore more complicated than “without the socialists, reform becomes possible”. What mattered was not only who entered government, but also the roles parties played within it and who was in a position to act when the opportunity arose.

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I left a book presentation and debate on Quinten Jacobs' *Het Betonnen Beleid* in October unexpectedly inspired. It made me wonder how a reform as far-reaching as limiting unemployment benefits in time could happen so quickly in a country known for political immobility. A perhaps unhealthy number of rewatches of *Wissel van de Macht*, together with Wouter Verschelden's *W16* newsletters, only made me more curious about what was happening inside the infamous *Wetstraatbubbel*. Rather fittingly, a couple of months earlier I happened to be interning in the Federal Parliament when the Programme Law containing this reform was actually voted on. Somewhere along the way, that intrinsic curiosity became this thesis.

Finally, I want to thank the people who supported me outside the academic part of this project over the past nine months. Laurens, despite having very little interest in politics, you proofread my thesis, tried your best to understand it all - without having a popular summary - and supported me unconditionally. I am also grateful to Diane for all the care along the way and for occasionally making sure I was actually moving along when I needed it.

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1 Introduction

Politics is, as Bismarck famously suggested, “the art of the possible” (Shapiro, 2021). The remark is especially apt in the context of welfare-state reform, where political possibility is shaped by more than ideology alone. Governments that appear most ideologically favourable to radical reform are not always those best able to carry it through (Armingeon et al., 2016).

Post-war economic growth enabled governments to expand social programmes substantially. From the 1970s onwards, slower growth, rising costs and changing demographic and labour-market conditions placed continuous pressure on governments to adjust welfare programmes or contain expenditure (Pierson, 2001b). These pressures increased the need for reforms, without making reform politically easier.

In mature welfare states, reform often carries high political costs. Cutbacks create visible and concentrated losses for beneficiaries, while their gains are diffuse and uncertain. Established programmes have also generated organised constituencies with strong interests in preserving existing arrangements, encouraging political actors to avoid blame and favour incremental adjustment over far-reaching change (Pierson, 1996; Swank, 2001).

The political costs of retrenchment are not distributed evenly across parties. Left-wing parties have historically had stronger links with trade unions and other organised defenders of social protection. However, national institutions shape their capacity to resist adverse policy change and secure compensation (Swank, 2001). Yet broad coalitions with left-wing participation may, under certain conditions, facilitate politically costly reform by distributing burdens and negotiating compensation (Armingeon et al., 2016; Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen, 2019).

Belgium offers a particularly challenging test of this argument. As a continental, conservative-corporatist welfare state, it combines strong social partnership with multiparty coalition bargaining. Additionally, linguistic federalism adds conflict over redistribution and competences (Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen, 2019; Powell et al., 2020). A general time limit marked a major departure from Belgium’s longstanding absence of a general maximum duration for unemployment benefits (Nuyts, 2023, p. 2).

Nevertheless, De Wever I wrote a general time limit into its 2025 coalition agreement and enacted it within six months (Federale Regering, 2025, p. 15; *Programmawet van 18 juli 2025*, 2025). One simple explanation would be the absence of the French-speaking Socialists (PS), which explicitly opposed limiting unemployment benefits in time (Parti Socialiste, n.d.). Yet PS had also been absent from Michel I ten years earlier. That more uniformly centre-right coalition, in which N-VA and Open Vld together held a majority of coalition seats, did not adopt a time limit. The proposal did not even reach substantive coalition bargaining. Paradoxically, the more heterogeneous De Wever I coalition, including social democrats, implemented it rapidly.

The literature on welfare-state reform explains why retrenchment is politically risky, how governments manage those risks through blame avoidance, compensation and coalition-building, and how political institutions shape opportunities for support and resistance (Armingeon et al., 2016; Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen, 2019; Pierson, 1996; Weaver, 1986). However, it pays less attention to how a contested reform proposal moves from exclusion to adoption. This thesis therefore follows the proposal across time, tracing how it remained

available, developed and eventually became politically usable within a different coalition configuration.

The societal stakes are also significant. Replacing open-ended entitlement with a maximum duration changes how the insurance principle and the balance between rights, responsibilities and solidarity are understood. The government's reform agenda has also met persistent social resistance, including ten major union actions within little more than a year (Dekock, 2026). The speed of the reform challenges Jacobs's (2025) image of Belgian policymaking as policy "set in concrete" and may offer insight into future reforms, including within the domain of long-term sickness.

The central question of this thesis is as follows: How can the failure to adopt a general time limit on unemployment benefits under Michel I and its rapid adoption under De Wever I be explained?

It addresses three subquestions:

1. How did political and institutional conditions shape the proposal's access to and trajectory through coalition decision-making under Michel I and De Wever I?
2. How did coalition actors' framing and justification of the proposal shape coalition ownership and political feasibility in the two periods?
3. What explains the rapid translation of the De Wever I coalition commitment into legislation?

To answer these questions, the thesis uses comparative process tracing based primarily on semi-structured elite interviews, complemented by targeted documentary sources to verify chronology and triangulate key claims. Kingdon's (2003) Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) structures the comparison of political, policy and problem dynamics across both periods, with particular attention to coalition formation under Michel I, where the decisive exclusion occurred.

The thesis argues that the decisive change occurred in the political stream. Under Michel I, the proposal was excluded before substantive coalition bargaining and never acquired shared coalition ownership. Under De Wever I, a broader coalition redistributed the social and territorial roles associated with reform ownership. Different partisan claims overlapped around reciprocity and fairness, while package bargaining made agreement possible. Concentrated agenda-setting and portfolio authority then enabled rapid legislative completion.

The thesis first reviews the literature on welfare-state reform and introduces the analytical framework before presenting the research design, reconstructing both political episodes and comparing the mechanisms that produced their divergent outcomes.

2 Literature review

2.1 Welfare State Reform Under Permanent Austerity

In his seminal work, Pierson (1996) argues that the transition from welfare-state expansion to austerity changed the political logic from the “old politics” to the “new politics”. During the expansionary period, governments were able to claim credit for relatively popular programmes and benefits. From the 1970s onwards, governments came under increasing pressure to contain the costs of or restructure these programmes. Measures such as benefit cuts, stricter eligibility criteria or shorter benefit durations are generally referred to as retrenchment.

However, structural pressure alone does not inevitably lead to reform because of the political costs involved. Retrenchment is particularly difficult for governments to pursue because it creates visible and concentrated losses for beneficiaries, while the gains are more diffuse and uncertain. In addition to the clear electoral risks, mature welfare programmes have generated their own well-organised constituencies and institutional commitments, further reinforcing the status quo (Häusermann et al., 2019; Pierson, 1996).

Under conditions of permanent austerity, Pierson (2001a) distinguishes three dimensions of welfare-state restructuring:

1. Cost containment: limiting expenditure growth.
2. Recommodification: restricting alternatives to labour-market participation.
3. Recalibration: adapting welfare programmes to contemporary goals and demands for social provision. Within this dimension, rationalisation concerns new ways of achieving established goals, while updating responds to changing social conditions and risks.

In short, Pierson’s (1996) New Politics approach establishes why the risks associated with welfare-state reform make blame avoidance the central logic of retrenchment politics.

2.2 Political Strategies and Coalitional Conditions

2.2.1 Blame avoidance, legitimization and credit claiming

Blame avoidance, originally introduced by Weaver (1986), refers to attempts by political actors to limit the electoral repercussions of unpopular decisions. Pierson (1996) placed this logic at the centre of retrenchment politics, although later work shows that such strategies may facilitate reform as well as reinforce inertia (Vis & Van Kersbergen, 2007).

Hinterleitner & Sager (2020) distinguish between (1) agency strategies, which shift responsibility; (2) policy strategies, which alter the design, timing or visibility of retrenchment; and (3) presentational strategies, which reframe or justify unpopular measures. They also stress that timing matters: agency and policy strategies generally require preparation, whereas presentational strategies can be used before and during a blame game.

More recently, scholars have nuanced the idea that governments can only manage retrenchment by hiding losses or distancing themselves from responsibility. Altermark & Plesner (2025) identify a recurring model in Swedish social democracy in which welfare cuts were portrayed

as necessary to safeguard the welfare state. Party elites linked sound public finances, economic growth and work incentives to the long-term sustainability of social protection. Retrenchment could then be justified as preserving rather than dismantling the system.

Röper (2026) takes this argument further by showing that blame avoidance and credit claiming are not mutually exclusive. In four German pension reforms, governments combined both but relied more heavily on frames presenting reform as responsible, fair or courageous. They simultaneously limited blame by downplaying losses, exempting groups or sharing responsibility. Röper describes this as mixed framing and argues that the balance between the two strategies depends on the political context.

2.2.2 Compensation, packages and trade-offs

Reform design provides another way of handling opposition. Van Kersbergen, Vis and Hemerijck (2014) show that welfare-state reforms as a response to the Great Recession rarely consisted of pure retrenchment. Governments usually combined cost containment with social investment or other expansionary measures, sometimes across a broader reform agenda rather than within one measure.

Häusermann, Kurer and Traber (2019) describe compensation and political exchange as central explanations for how such packages can reduce opposition. Compensation creates a trade-off by combining losses in some dimensions with gains in others. Their conjoint experiment on Swiss pension reform shows that compensating elements can partly offset opposition, although their effectiveness depends on their design and on the groups affected. The authors acknowledge that compensation may be less necessary and less effective where risks are more concentrated, as in unemployment policy.

2.2.3 Partisan and coalitional conditions

Comparative evidence also complicates simple partisan expectations of associating the right with retrenchment and the left with defending benefits. Armingeon, Guthmann and Weisstanner (2016) find that during fiscal consolidation, welfare-state retrenchment was most pronounced under left-wing broad coalition governments, particularly when the consolidation programme was large. They explain this through a “Nixon goes to China” logic: parties regarded as welfare-state defenders may have greater credibility to implement cutbacks without appearing motivated by ideological dismantling. Broad pro-reform coalitions may further reduce electoral risks by sharing responsibility and balancing burdens across constituencies. Partisanship therefore matters, but not through a simple opposition between a reforming right and a blocking left.

Ideas may also help assemble support across partisan divisions. Béland & Cox (2016) describe certain ideas as coalition magnets: positively valued and sufficiently broad concepts to which actors with different interests can attach distinct policy meanings. Their influence depends on political actors who promote them and decision-makers who adopt them as a shared language for reform. Framing can therefore do more than legitimate losses to the public. It may provide a flexible normative basis through which divided actors can support and take ownership of the same reform.

2.3 Institutional Mediation of Welfare-State Reform

As previously mentioned, structural pressure does not inevitably lead to reforms. Swank (2001) argues that political institutions mediate these pressures by shaping three elements:

- (1) the opportunities available to affected groups to resist change or demand compensation,
- (2) their relative political strength,
- (3) the broader norms within which conflict is negotiated.

Social corporatism and inclusive electoral institutions tend to strengthen organised pro-welfare interests and channel policy change towards slower and more negotiated forms. Decentralised policymaking authority has a more ambiguous effect: it creates formal veto points but may also weaken coherent national coalitions and organise distributive conflict along territorial lines. Institutions therefore shape the depth and character of restructuring rather than mechanically determining whether reform occurs.

Nevertheless, consensus democracy should not be reduced to a system of institutional blockage. Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen (2019) argue that these same arrangements may support transformative reform by stabilising commitments over time, distributing burdens, compensating groups facing losses and fostering trust and policy learning. However, within their study, Belgium illustrates the limits of this capacity. Linguistic fragmentation of the party system and federalisation connected welfare reform to conflicts over territorial redistribution and institutional reform, making an overarching policy consensus harder to construct.

These tensions become particularly visible in the federal governance of unemployment policy. Luijckes & Vandenbroucke (2021) conceptualise its financing as an intergovernmental insurance arrangement: unemployment benefits are regulated and financed federally, while activation is largely organised regionally. Regional policy can therefore affect the duration of federally financed claims without regions bearing their full fiscal cost, creating a risk of institutional moral hazard. Persistent regional unemployment differences can further make federal spending appear as structural redistribution rather than temporary insurance.

2.4 Unemployment Benefits as a Specific Reform Field

The political cost of reform also depends on the specific policy field. Introducing a general time limit on unemployment benefits is a clear form of retrenchment because entitlement ends after a fixed period. Specifically, it can be seen as *recommodification* in Pierson's (2001a) sense because it restricts alternatives to labour-market participation. This builds on Esping-Andersen's (1990) concept of decommodification, referring to the extent to which social rights reduce dependence on market income.

Unemployment-benefit retrenchment is not limited to changes in expenditure or income replacement rates. Varjonen et al. (2020) show that protection can also be restricted through shorter benefit duration, tighter eligibility conditions, waiting periods and increased conditionality.

This reform direction forms part of a broader shift from passive income protection towards activation and employment-oriented welfare provision. Activation itself can be seen as

retrenching when it relies on stricter conditions, sanctions and work requirements (Ferragina, 2022; Varjonen et al., 2020).

In continental welfare states, the shift also responded to the long-standing problem known in the literature as “welfare without work”. This refers to the combination of high social spending, passive income protection and low employment participation (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen, 2019).

Another distinct trait of unemployment-benefit reforms is that they often affect a narrower constituency than reforms to pensions or healthcare. Furthermore, the breadth of support depends on how unemployment risk is distributed. Rehm et al. (2012) show that support for unemployment insurance is broader when unemployment risk also affects middle- and higher-income groups. Support is narrower and more polarised when it is concentrated among lower-income citizens. Bremer & Bürgisser (2023) find in their experiments that labour-market policies receive less priority than pensions and education when citizens must choose between policy fields. However, people in insecure labour-market positions are more opposed to cuts in unemployment benefits than other respondents.

2.5 From Pressure to Policy: Explaining Reform Trajectories

In summary, existing scholarship explains how political strategies, coalition dynamics and institutions shape the feasibility and political costs of welfare-state reform.

The literature reviewed here pays less attention, however, to a different analytical question: how a far-reaching welfare reform proposal develops from a contested idea into a politically viable and decision-ready policy option. The approaches reviewed above provide different parts of this explanation. They show how political costs arise and may be managed, and how coalitional, institutional and policy-specific conditions can facilitate or constrain reform. What they provide less directly is an explanation of how these factors become connected to a particular policy alternative over time. Rather than comparing two equivalent reform attempts, this study reconstructs the proposal’s trajectory across distinct political episodes, examining how it remained available, evolved as a policy alternative and was eventually converted into a concrete policy decision. This matters because focusing only on the moment of adoption obscures the longer political process through which reform ideas are preserved, adapted and made politically usable. The next chapter therefore turns to MSF to trace how these mechanisms interacted over the proposal’s trajectory.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Policy Change Under Conditions of Ambiguity

To examine the reform's trajectory, this study applies the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). MSF understands policymaking as a non-linear, time-sensitive and contingent process shaped by ambiguity. Governments do not necessarily identify a problem first, compare possible solutions and then select the most effective one. Instead, problem definitions, policy alternatives and political conditions develop partly independently and may become connected at specific moments. Ambiguity means that policymakers may interpret the same condition through competing problem definitions and connect it to different policy alternatives (DeLeo et al., 2024; Kingdon, 2003).

MSF draws its assumptions from the garbage-can model of organisational choice by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972). Policymakers operate under severe time pressure and can devote attention to only a limited number of issues. A feasible proposal may therefore exist without political ownership, while a persistent problem may remain unsolved when no acceptable policy option or supportive political configuration is available (DeLeo et al., 2024).

Kingdon (2003) then distinguishes three mostly independent streams:

The *problem stream* concerns how conditions are recognised as problems that the government needs to address. Indicators, focusing events and feedback on existing policies can draw policymakers' attention, but it is still up to political actors to interpret the problem and decide whether action is required (Kingdon, 2003).

The *policy stream* covers the proposals developed within policy communities, which may include civil servants, experts, political parties, ministerial advisors and interest groups. Policy proposals mainly survive when they are sufficiently technically feasible, financially viable and compatible with the values of relevant actors. Even if a technically developed proposal exists, it may not be a viable coalition proposal. In this study, policy-stream readiness will not only assess policy availability, but also whether a sufficiently specified alternative could become usable within the governing coalition (DeLeo et al., 2024; Kingdon, 2003).

Finally, the *political stream* contains the configuration of political support and opposition surrounding an issue. It may involve changes in government and parliament, party positions, coalition relations, interest-group mobilisation and policymakers' perception of the national mood. The latter specifically concerns what political actors *think* voters will accept or punish. The stream is favourable when politically influential actors are willing to advance a proposal and opposition is not considered prohibitive to agenda access. In MSF, the majorities required for adoption may still be assembled during decision-making and therefore need not already exist at the agenda-setting stage (DeLeo et al., 2024; Kingdon, 2003).

3.2 Windows, Agenda Coupling and Decision Coupling

An opportunity for policy arises when the streams are sufficiently ready and a temporary *policy window* opens. Windows generally originate within the problem stream, through worsening

indicators or critical policy feedback or in the political stream through events such as elections, government turnover or coalition formation. Importantly, the window creates an opportunity for change, but political actors decide whether it can be exploited or fails.

Subsequent scholarship distinguishes *agenda windows* from *decision windows*. During *agenda coupling*, policy *entrepreneurs* link an available solution to a recognised problem and demonstrate that sufficient political support exists to place it on the decision agenda. If this succeeds, a decision window opens. During *decision coupling*, the challenge is to secure the required majorities, overcome veto players and obtain the institutional consent required for formal adoption (DeLeo et al., 2024; Herweg et al., 2015). Analytically, this distinction is useful to determine whether reform failed before substantive coalition bargaining or during the subsequent attempt to convert the agreement into legislation.

Entrepreneurs play a vital role in the coupling of the three streams. Modern MSF scholarship differentiates between *policy entrepreneurs* and *political entrepreneurs*. Policy entrepreneurs invest time, expertise and other resources in developing and framing alternatives, while political entrepreneurs use their positions of political leadership to organise support and manage veto actors during decision coupling. These functions may be performed by the same actor or by several actors across different stages (Herweg et al., 2015; Kingdon, 2003).

Recent MSF scholarship describes the following sequence as *doctrinal coupling*: when a window opens in the political stream, actors begin with a preferred proposal and connect it to relevant problem definitions. This logic is particularly relevant to the comparison between Michel I and De Wever I, which examines how a long-circulating proposal was excluded during one government formation but adopted during another (DeLeo et al., 2024).

3.3 Applying MSF to a Parliamentary, Coalition and Multilevel System

After MSF's original development in the United States, subsequent scholarship has adapted it to parliamentary and multilevel systems. In parliamentary systems, political parties and coalition governments structure both policy development and political support more directly. Policy communities may therefore include party study services, ministerial cabinets and parliamentary advisers, while coalition bargaining determines whether a proposal developed within one party becomes a jointly authorised government project. During decision coupling, the number and position of veto actors become especially consequential, since political institutions determine whose consent must be obtained for formal adoption (Herweg et al., 2015; DeLeo et al., 2024).

For this study, the political stream is therefore not reduced to the ideological composition of government. It also encompasses the intensity of coalition parties' preferences, the distribution of authority within the coalition and the capacity of particular actors to block or advance a proposal (DeLeo et al., 2024).

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Case Selection

To examine why a general time limit on unemployment benefits remained blocked under Michel I but was rapidly adopted under De Wever I, this thesis adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design. The comparison follows a most-similar logic: both episodes concern the same reform principle within the same broad institutional setting, while differing political and socioeconomic conditions allow potentially relevant changes to be identified (Beach & Pedersen, 2016; Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Three decision-making thresholds structure the comparison: access to the coalition agenda, coalition-wide ownership and completion of the legislative process. Process tracing is used within each episode to reconstruct how the proposal crossed, or was blocked at, these thresholds and to assess the mechanisms underlying the divergent outcomes.

The temporal scope covers Michel I from 2014 to 2018 and the period from the 2024 federal election to the enactment of the reform in July 2025. The two episodes are not treated as fully independent. Developments under De Croo I are considered as intervening context where relevant, rather than as a third case. The analysis focuses on federal decision-making, while regional and territorial dynamics are considered where they affected the reform process.

4.2 Data Collection

The empirical material consists primarily of twelve semi-structured elite interviews, supplemented by targeted public documents. Given the focus on political feasibility, informal coalition bargaining and institutional gatekeeping, elite interviews were a logical choice because they provide access to the internal political processes that are not fully captured in public records (Tuncel, 2026). Much of the relevant process knowledge was concentrated among a relatively small group of actors directly involved or closely familiar with the reform's trajectory. Respondents were therefore purposively selected based on their direct involvement in, or specialised knowledge of, the reform process (Helgetun & Coppe, 2026).

Recruitment sought respondents occupying different institutional positions and political perspectives, allowing accounts of the same events to be compared across the policy process. Professional referrals and existing contacts were used to identify and access additional respondents with relevant process knowledge.

Table 1: Overview of interview respondents

Profile	Role	Relevant experience	Interview date
1	Senior cabinet-level actor	Direct experience of federal coalition negotiations across both governmental periods	15 April 2026
2	Labour-market and social-security policy expert	Experience in employer organisation	3 April 2026
3	Senior cabinet-level actor	Policy preparation and inter-cabinet coordination across both governmental periods	14 April 2026
4	Federal parliamentarian	Long-standing experience in social policy	20 April 2026
5	Senior trade-union policy expert	Technical expertise in social-security and labour-market policy	16 April 2026
6	Cabinet-level adviser	Closely involved in translating the reform agreement into legislation	15 April 2026
7	Senior parliamentary staff member	Long-standing experience in legislative and parliamentary preparation	9 April 2026
8	Cabinet-level policy adviser	Cross-government employment-policy experience and close involvement in De Wever I coalition preparation	14 April 2026
9	Senior federal administrative official	Specialised expertise in unemployment policy	15 April 2026
10	Former senior cabinet-level actor	Closely involved throughout the Michel I coalition negotiations	16 April 2026
11	Trade-union policy adviser	Expertise in labour-market policy	14 April 2026
12	Labour-market sociologist	Expertise in employment and social policy	30 April 2026

The sample was deliberately weighted towards executive and cabinet-level actors, reflecting the study's focus on coalition bargaining and executive decision-making.

Interviews were conducted in April 2026, in person or through Microsoft Teams, and lasted approximately 60 to 150 minutes. The semi-structured interview guide covered problem framing, policy development, coalition dynamics, social-partner involvement and key moments of decision-making, while allowing respondents to elaborate within their own areas of expertise.

All respondents provided written informed consent in accordance with the SMEC procedure. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed locally using Whisper. Quotations originally provided in Dutch or French were translated into English by the author.

Because the small pool of actors with direct access to federal coalition bargaining creates a risk of deductive identification through combinations of political affiliation, institutional role and period of involvement, additional safeguards were necessary. Several respondents also explicitly requested that their identities remain untraceable. Two separate pseudonymisation systems were therefore used. Interview material is attributed to letter codes (Respondents A-L), while Table 1 presents numbered profiles using generic role and experience descriptions. The numbers do not correspond to the letter codes, and the linking key is retained by the researcher only. This preserves transparency about the sample's expertise without linking statements to potentially identifiable professional trajectories.

Public documents were used selectively to verify factual details and formal policy positions, while media sources provided evidence of publicly expressed political frames.

4.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative, mechanism-oriented process. A chronological reconstruction was first developed for each governmental episode, primarily from the interview material, while analytical notes recorded relevant events, emerging explanations and points requiring further clarification. Data collection and analysis partly developed in parallel: interpretations from earlier interviews were treated as provisional and informed additional probes in later interviews, reflecting the open-ended and context-dependent character of elite-expert interviewing (Helgetun & Coppe, 2026).

A deductive coding approach based on the three MSF streams was initially piloted. Although useful for broad thematic organisation, it proved less suited to comparing accounts of specific events and possible causal mechanisms. As the analysis developed, an evidence matrix was therefore created around substantive claims, events and proposed mechanisms. For each claim, the matrix brought together accounts that supported, qualified or contradicted the interpretation while retaining information on the relevant stage of the process and respondent involvement. Broad MSF categories remained useful for organising the material, but causal reconstruction relied on comparison of these accounts rather than recurrence of codes. This aligned more closely with process tracing's emphasis on diagnostic evidence situated within a causal sequence (Collier, 2011).

Table 2: Structure of the evidence matrix

Evidence ID	Stream	Mechanism	Case	Source base	Claim	Illustrative passage
E29	Policy	Proposal presence within government	Michel I	Respondents A, B, C, E	The time-limit proposal circulated during Michel I but did not become a concrete coalition negotiating option.	“Not that I know of, at least. To my knowledge, it was not concretely on the table. It may have appeared in a number of electoral programmes at the time, but not concretely in the negotiations.”

The complete evidence matrix is retained as a private research document and is not reproduced because it contains detailed combinations of respondent codes, process information and interview material that could facilitate deductive identification.

Interview accounts were not treated as equivalent observations. Evidentiary weight depended on respondents' proximity to the relevant event and the basis of their knowledge, as well as corroboration, qualification or contradiction by other accounts. A directly involved account could therefore carry greater diagnostic weight than several more indirect accounts (Gonzalez-Ocantos & Masullo, 2026).

Finally, the reconstructed processes were compared across these three decision-making thresholds. The empirical chapter is therefore organised around the resulting causal sequence rather than by MSF stream.

4.4 Limitations and Evidentiary Scope

Interview evidence presents different temporal limitations across the two episodes. Accounts of Michel I concern events eight to twelve years before the interviews and are therefore vulnerable to selective memory and retrospective coherence, particularly because respondents were explicitly asked to explain why the reform did or did not advance. Temporal distance may, however, have reduced immediate political stakes and encouraged greater candour. De Wever I accounts concern recent events, reducing long-term recall problems but increasing incentives to justify ongoing political decisions or present party roles strategically.

The executive-heavy sample provides particularly strong evidence on coalition bargaining, institutional gatekeeping and policy development, but a weaker basis for claims about party-wide motivations, voter behaviour or public opinion. Because De Croo I is treated as intervening context rather than as a third case, the study can assess the proximate mechanisms of blockage and adoption more confidently than the longer-term causes of party repositioning between the two episodes.

Confidentiality also limits disclosure of respondents' exact institutional positions and therefore readers' ability to independently assess source proximity. Finally, the recency of De Wever I prevents assessment of longer-term implementation and policy effects.

4.5 Use of Artificial Intelligence

Interview recordings were transcribed locally using OpenAI Whisper [Large V3 Turbo]. Transcripts were manually reviewed where needed to resolve substantial errors or unclear passages, while minor inaccuracies that did not affect interpretation were not systematically corrected. Limo AI Assistant, Google Scholar Labs and ChatGPT were first used to explore the literature field and later to search for studies that might already address the identified research gap. All sources included in the thesis were consulted in their original form and referenced accordingly. ChatGPT was also used to refine the research question, structure the interview guides around the three MSF streams, and explore ways of organising and presenting the empirical analysis. After the main causal mechanisms had been identified, it was used as a critical sparring tool to test interpretations against alternative explanations and flag possible

inferential gaps or overstatements. Given the confidential nature of the interview material, AI was not used to code or analyse interview data. A more detailed account is provided in the GenAI statement preceding the table of contents.

5 Empirical analysis

5.1 Case Background and Comparative Context

A general time limit had circulated in Belgian politics for years. Michel I excluded it from the coalition agreement and pursued activation and reinforced degressivity instead. De Wever I incorporated the principle into its coalition agreement and enacted it less than six months after taking office (Federale Regering, 2025; *Programmawet van 18 juli 2025*, 2025).

5.1.1 Michel I (2014-2018)

Michel I brought together N-VA, MR, CD&V and Open Vld. The coalition was also nicknamed the “Kamikaze coalition” due to MR’s position as its sole Francophone partner (Hooghe, 2015).

Charles Michel and Kris Peeters acted as *co-formateurs*¹. Michel became prime minister, while Peeters became deputy prime minister and minister of Employment, positions that later mattered for control over the unemployment-policy agenda. The coalition agreement omitted a general time limit and instead prioritised activation and reinforced degressivity (Federale Regering, 2014).

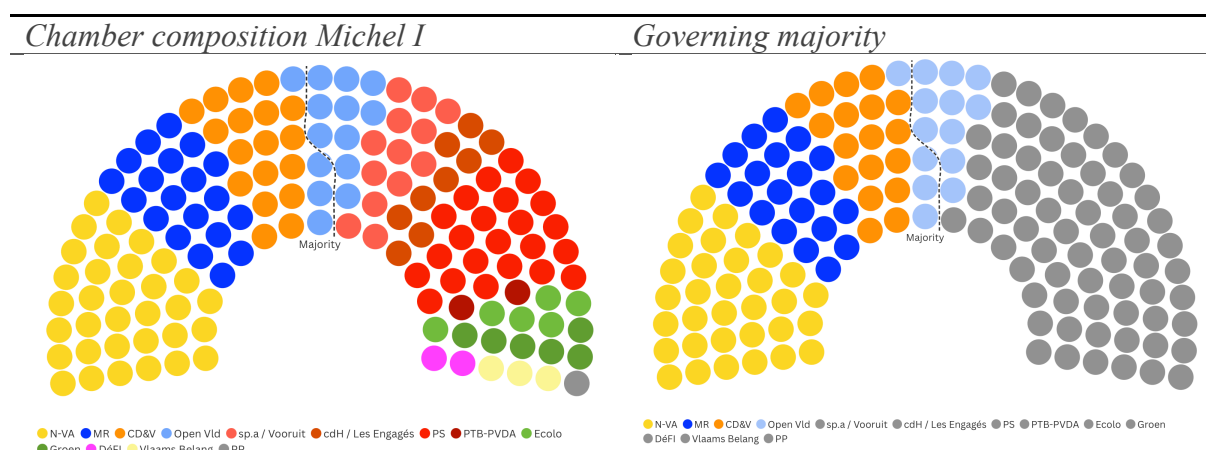


Figure 1: parliamentary composition and governing majority under Michel I

Note. Author’s visualisation based on official election results from the Federal Public Service Interior, Elections Directorate (2014). Created using Flourish.

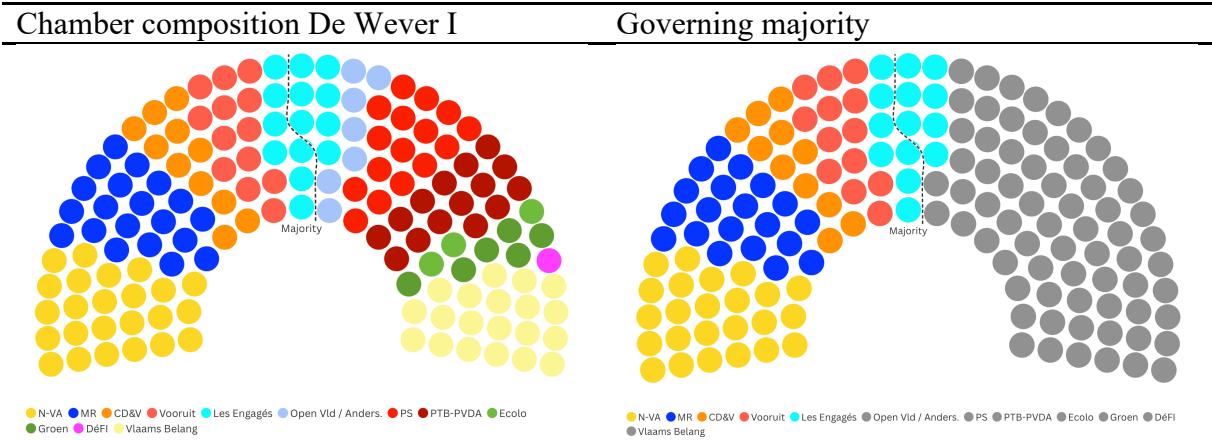
5.1.2 De Wever I (2025-)

De Wever I combined N-VA, MR, CD&V, Vooruit and Les Engagés. Its formation followed a major shift in Francophone politics: MR became the largest party in Wallonia and formed the Walloon government with Les Engagés, while PS moved into opposition.

Bart De Wever served as formateur and became prime minister, while MR’s David Clarinval became deputy prime minister and minister of Employment. The coalition agreement combined socio-economic reform and budgetary consolidation with an explicit commitment to limit

¹ In Belgian government formation, a “formateur” is appointed by the King to negotiate and assemble a new federal government. A “co-formateur” performs this role jointly with another political figure.

unemployment benefits in time. The measure was enacted through the Programme Law of 18 July 2025, less than six months after government formation (Federale Regering, 2025, p. 15; *Programmawet van 18 juli 2025*, 2025).



Note. Author’s visualisation based on official election results from the Federal Public Service Interior, Elections Directorate (2024). Created using Flourish.

5.1.3 Comparative socioeconomic context

Both episodes occurred within the same federal and consensus-based system, while the division of labour-market competences and the role of organised social partners remained broadly stable. However, the pressures surrounding the reform differed. Michel I governed amid higher unemployment and weaker labour demand, whereas De Wever I entered office with a tighter labour market but a substantially larger government deficit. The case for reform had therefore not simply become stronger over time. Rather, the balance shifted from labour-market pressure towards greater fiscal pressure.

Table 3: key indicators of problem pressure, 2014 and 2025

Indicator	Michel I context (2014)	De Wever I context (2025)
General government balance (% of GDP)	−3.2%	−5.2%
ILO unemployment rate, ages 15–64	8.6%	6.2%
Inactivity rate, ages 15–64	32.3%	28.1%

Note. General government balance is expressed as net lending (+) or net borrowing (−) by the general government sector as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). The unemployment rate follows the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition. Labour-market indicators refer to persons aged 15–64. Sources: Eurostat (2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

5.2 Blocked Before the Brackets: Exclusion and Alternatives under Michel I

A general time limit was already present in the policy stream and among its advocates. It circulated among N-VA, Open Vld and employer-oriented actors within a government that placed employment creation and activation at the centre of its socio-economic agenda.

The available evidence is clear that the proposal never advanced to substantive coalition bargaining, although respondents slightly differed on the precise stage at which it was filtered out. Respondent E did not recall a general time limit being concretely discussed during the formation, whereas Respondent H remembered that the proposal had at least “passed in review” and that N-VA possessed concrete, partly costed scenarios. Respondent B explained that contested issues could sometimes remain “between brackets” during the earlier stages of coalition negotiations and be deferred to the final negotiations but did not recall the time limit ever reaching that stage. [B, C, F, H]

Respondent F, who had direct knowledge of central coalition preparation, recalled that, before negotiations on the coalition text began, the parties agreed on a preliminary set of issues that would remain outside the negotiations:

Before discussions on the negotiating texts even began, a kind of baseline agreement had been reached on a number of issues that would not be put on the table. Limiting unemployment benefits in time was one of them, at CD&V’s request
(Respondent F, translated from Dutch)

The early exclusion from the formation negotiations did not remove the proposal from political circulation. N-VA periodically reintroduced the time limit and related proposals during annual budgetary discussions, inter-cabinet working groups and in public debate. [C, F, H]

Respondents C and F interpreted this primarily as strategic. Since N-VA knew that the proposal was politically off-limits, reintroducing it could put pressure on coalition partners, provoke reactions and function as a *ballon d’essai*². Respondent H also acknowledged this strategic element but stressed that this did not make the underlying policy preference any less genuine. The repeated proposals could therefore serve tactical purposes while still reflecting a genuine policy preference.

Once the time limit had been excluded, coalition partners nevertheless demanded reform within unemployment policy. Respondent F recalled that the political burden then shifted towards CD&V and the employment portfolio: if a general time limit was off-limits, they were expected to supply an acceptable alternative. By the second half of Michel I, the Employment cabinet and the RVA had developed a budget-neutral model that simplified the numerous benefit periods, strengthened initial protection and created a clearer declining trajectory. It fitted the government’s vacancy- and activation-centred problem definition and remained compatible with the preliminary political settlement. Reinforced degressivity was therefore not merely a diluted version of a time limit. It was the coalition-ready policy alternative through which Michel I could pursue unemployment reform without reopening the excluded time limit. [C, E, F]

Under Michel I, the time limit was thus available within the policy stream, partly developed and repeatedly advocated. In MSF terms, the broad policy idea was available and partly developed among its advocates, but political opposition prevented it from becoming jointly specified and coalition-viable for agenda coupling.

² A *ballon d’essai* (“trial balloon”) is a proposal floated to test political reactions and gauge the available room for movement.

5.3 The Reconfiguration of Political Constraints

Parliamentary seat shares provide only a partial picture of the power dynamics within the Michel I coalition. Political ownership did not only depend on seat shares, but also on preference intensity, institutional position and the capacity to absorb territorial costs.

5.3.1 From veto to design bargaining: CD&V's changing role

When asked why a general time limit never became a serious coalition alternative under Michel I, most respondents pointed to CD&V and, more specifically, Kris Peeters. [B, C, E, F, H]

This creates a clear puzzle. CD&V held only 18 of the coalition's 85 seats, while N-VA and Open Vld, the two parties supporting a time limit, held 47 between them. Yet this numerical majority did not translate into control over the reform agenda.

The parties did not attach the same degree of importance to the proposal. Respondent F described the time limit as a genuine Open Vld preference, but not as a condition for entering government. Open Vld therefore accepted its exclusion once the preliminary settlement had been reached. CD&V, by contrast, treated the exclusion of the principle as part of the terms on which the negotiations would proceed. [F]

CD&V was also well positioned to translate its opposition into agenda control. As co-formateur, Peeters had substantial influence over the initial scope of the negotiations. The evidence does not show that he unilaterally removed an already developed proposal from the negotiating text, but it does place CD&V at the centre of the preliminary agreement that kept the time limit outside the negotiations. His later positions as deputy prime minister and minister of Employment strengthened the party's capacity to defend this boundary and shape the alternative reform path. [B, C, E, F, H]

The party's institutional leverage became consequential because its opposition rested on both policy preferences and strategic positioning. A general time limit was absent from the party programme, while reinforced degressivity remained the preferred reform route. At the same time, CD&V presented itself as the social counterweight within a predominantly right-wing coalition. Opposing the time limit therefore served both a substantive policy preference and a strategic function: it distinguished the party from its more economically liberal partners and reassured its social flank. [C, D, E, H]

Several respondents described this balancing role as characteristic of centrist parties with heterogeneous constituencies. What made it decisive under Michel I was its interaction with control over key institutional gateways. [C, D, E, H]

CD&V's role as Michel I's "social conscience" also appears to have delivered limited political returns. Respondent C described the strategy as not particularly successful. ACV remained highly critical of the government's socio-economic record and of CD&V's limited influence within the coalition, despite Peeters' efforts to position the party as its social counterweight (D'Hoore, 2015; Leemans, 2015). Historical proximity between the two remained, but it no longer guaranteed broader political protection or clear electoral reciprocity. [C, F]

A clear change in CD&V's position became visible under Sammy Mahdi's leadership. In December 2022 - during De Croo I - Mahdi publicly proposed limiting unemployment benefits

to three years for claimants who continued to refuse work (Schillewaert, 2022). According to Respondent C, this shift did not follow from a settled internal debate:

It certainly wasn't the conclusion of a long internal debate. Some will have choked on their coffee, whilst others will have thought, 'Finally'.
(Respondent C, translated from Dutch)

Mahdi thus acted as an intra-party policy entrepreneur by establishing a new party default before that position had been fully settled internally. Respondent C situated this intervention within a relationship in which civil-society organisations remained important but were less able than before to bind the party's position. [C]

By the 2024 elections, the shift had become embedded in the party programme, which explicitly supported limiting unemployment benefits in time (CD&V, 2024). CD&V no longer expressed its social profile by vetoing the principle, but by seeking to moderate its design through duration, exemptions and transitional protection. [C, H]

5.3.2 Is anything ever truly *acommunautaire*?³

When respondents looked back on why the reform failed under Michel I, CD&V's explicit veto was usually the first obstacle they mentioned. MR emerged as a second constraint, but in a different way. The interviews do not reveal an equivalent hard veto. Instead, they point to a party that was reluctant to own the reform from its already exposed position as the coalition's sole Francophone partner. [B, C, E, F, H]

MR's later emergence as one of the reform's principal champions under De Wever I makes this earlier reluctance easy to overlook. Under Michel I, N-VA and Open Vld already faced CD&V's veto, while MR did not actively support the proposal either. Charles Michel's positions as co-formateur and later prime minister gave the party considerable institutional weight, but MR did not use this position to advance a general time limit. [C, E, F, H]

The explanation lies partly in the *communautaire* elephant in the room. The "Kamikaze coalition" consisted of three Flemish parties and MR as its sole Francophone component, while PS remained the largest party in Wallonia but entered opposition (Hooghe, 2015). Although the government was constitutionally legitimate, its Francophone representation rested entirely on MR's twenty seats. Actively owning a reform expected to affect Wallonia disproportionately could therefore reinforce the image of a predominantly Flemish right-wing coalition imposing its preferences on the Francophone regions. [B, C, E, F, H]

Supplying the prime minister did not remove this vulnerability. Charles Michel had to seek coalition-wide accommodation while defending a government whose legitimacy was already contested on the Francophone side. Respondent E described this perceived political asymmetry vividly:

When it came to convincing the Francophone side, we were inaudible in the media. Charles Michel would speak for one minute about his new policy, followed by nine minutes of academics, associations, mutualities, trade unions and opposition parties explaining what he was doing wrong.

³ *Acommunautaire* is a Belgian political term for an issue that is *not* structured by the country's linguistic divide

(Respondent E, translated from French)

These concerns were intensified by the reform's territorially unequal expected effects. Unemployment was substantially higher in Wallonia and Brussels than in Flanders, meaning that a larger share of their populations potentially stood to be affected. Respondents also perceived differences in political emphasis, with solidarity and income protection carrying greater weight in Francophone debate, while activation and individual responsibility featured more prominently among Flemish reform advocates. [C, E, H, I]

Table 4 Regional differences in indicators

Region	Unemployment rate 2014	Unemployment rate 2025	Inactivity rate 2014	Inactivity rate 2025
Flanders	<u>5.1%</u>	4.3%	30.1%	24.9%
Wallonia	<u>12.0%</u>	7.9%	35.8%	32.3%
Brussels	<u>18.5%</u>	12.7%	33.4%	32.9%
Belgium	8.6%	6.2%	32.3%	28.1%

Source: (Statbel, 2021, 2026)

This combination helps explain why MR's constraint took the form of reluctance rather than an explicit veto. Under Charles Michel, the party represented a more socially tempered form of economic liberalism than the profile later adopted under Georges-Louis Bouchez. Since CD&V had already excluded the principle, MR was never forced to clarify how far its own reluctance would have extended. The reform therefore lacked the active support of a second institutionally central coalition actor without producing an observable second veto. [C, E, F, H]

By 2024, the Francophone political environment surrounding the reform had changed substantially. MR had overtaken PS in Wallonia and entered the federal coalition alongside Les Engagés, while regional differences in unemployment had narrowed considerably since 2014, even if they remained pronounced. MR therefore no longer carried sole Francophone responsibility for supporting a reform whose effects were still expected to fall unevenly across regions. [D, E, H]

The opposition surrounding the reform was also less concentrated outside the coalition than under Michel I. Les Engagés brought links to Christian-social and civil-society networks that MR could reach less easily on its own, while Respondent H similarly described the party as covering part of the socially oriented Francophone flank. The territorial and social tensions surrounding the reform had therefore not disappeared, but they were less politically isolating for MR than under Michel I. [D, E, H]

5.4 Building Coalition Ownership: Fairness, Insurance and Exchange

By the formation of De Wever I, the hard vetoes that had constrained the reform under Michel I had largely disappeared. At the same time, coalition parties moved beyond accepting the principle and actively took ownership of the reform. Understanding that shift requires looking at the different political meanings they attached to the time limit. Coalition ownership rested on two related mechanisms: different partisan justifications overlapped around a broader

normative core of reciprocity and fairness, while the wider *supernota*⁴ distributed political costs across dossiers.

5.4.1 Different Frames, Shared Reciprocity

By De Wever I, the politics of the time limit had shifted from whether the principle could be accepted to how coalition parties could justify and claim the reform. Several respondents linked this shift to a different labour-market context. Memories of mass unemployment, reinforced by the financial crisis, had made a time limit appear too drastic under Michel I and left little perceived public support for arguments centred on individual responsibility. By De Wever I, lower unemployment and widespread vacancies had made such arguments politically easier to sustain. [B, C, H, I, J]

This broader acceptability was also visible in the employment negotiations. Respondents described the principle of a time limit as effectively settled, with bargaining concentrated primarily on modality, compensation and implementation. This sectoral consensus did not predetermine the government agreement, because the reform remained conditional on the distributive balance of the *supernota*. Coalition ownership was therefore genuine within the dossier but contingent across the wider package. [C, E, H, I]

N-VA and MR were the reform's most assertive champions and relied on a similar contrast between contribution and perceived dependency. Both presented the time limit as a break with the socio-economic model they associated with PS. [E, H]

In MR's discourse, *l'assistanat*⁵ was often contrasted with the position of low-paid workers, who were portrayed as seeing non-working neighbours receive comparable incomes. This made the reform part of a broader argument about making work pay (RTL Info, 2023; RTL Info, 2024). [E]

N-VA drew on a similar contrast between *profitariaat* and the "hard-working Fleming", a contrast that also featured prominently in the party's 2024 campaign against PS (Struys, 2024). Respondent H gave this logic a more explicitly territorial dimension, linking the reform to a reduction in interregional transfers and describing it as a "mini state reform". De Wever later publicly characterised the limitation of unemployment benefits as an explicitly *communautaire* reform (Schillewaert & Huyghebaert, 2025).

CD&V, Les Engagés and Vooruit publicly claimed the reform in less antagonistic terms, while still presenting it as part of their own political project. CD&V particularly stressed activation, making work pay and fairness towards working people (CD&V, 2024). After adoption, Mahdi similarly framed the reform around work being rewarded and social protection combining rights with responsibilities (Mahdi, 2025). More broadly, Les Engagés presented socio-economic reform as necessary to preserve a model it considered increasingly unsustainable, while combining this with a centrist emphasis on political balance and compromise (Dobbelaere & Struys, 2026). Vooruit placed greater emphasis on reciprocity and the legitimacy of solidarity. For the party, prolonged unemployment could undermine support for social protection, but

⁴ During the 2024-2025 federal coalition negotiations, the *supernota* referred to De Wever's consolidated negotiating text bringing together proposals and trade-offs across multiple policy domains.

⁵ *L'assistanat* refers pejoratively to perceived long-term dependence on social benefits. The Dutch-language term *profitariaat*, used below, similarly refers to perceived abuse of, or free-riding on, the welfare state.

responsibility did not rest exclusively with the claimant. Public institutions also retained a responsibility to provide realistic support, training or adapted employment. [D, I]

Although the parties claimed the reform differently, they shared a similar understanding of its underlying logic. Across the coalition, unemployment protection was presented as a social right tied to reciprocity and responsibilities, while fairness towards people who work and contribute provided a common justification for limiting entitlement in time. This did not require agreement on the reform's primary purpose. Parties continued to connect the time limit to different objectives, including fiscal consolidation, activation, making work pay, interregional redistribution and the long-term viability of social protection. [D, E, H, I]

5.4.2 Contested Meanings of the Insurance Principle

Reform advocates argued that indefinite entitlement had become difficult to reconcile with the insurance function of unemployment benefits, which they understood as protection during a period of job search rather than as permanent income support. [A, F, H]

The same insurance principle could, however, support the opposite conclusion. Respondent E recalled that earlier opponents viewed unemployment benefits as a contributory right: workers had paid into the system and were therefore entitled to protection when the insured risk occurred. Respondent I continued to attach importance to this contributory logic even while accepting a time limit as a political compromise. [E, I, K, L]

The disagreement therefore concerned not only the appropriate balance between rights and duties, but also what the insurance character of unemployment protection itself meant.

5.4.3 Shared Principle, Unequal Preferences

Shared ownership of the principle did not mean that coalition parties arrived there from the same starting point or preferred the same policy design. For Vooruit, acceptance reflected a longer evolution rather than a sudden conversion during the 2024 formation. This shift was already visible under De Croo I, when party president Conner Rousseau proposed that people still unemployed after two years should receive a publicly provided “basis job”, with continued refusal ultimately resulting in the loss of unemployment benefits. This was not equivalent to a general and automatic time limit, but it did introduce a conditional endpoint to open-ended entitlement (Belga, 2023). [H, I]

The general time limit adopted under De Wever I was nevertheless not Vooruit's preferred policy alternative. Its proposal for an “ultimate offer” did not secure coalition support, while the party obtained additional resources for the social economy and other mitigating measures. Vooruit's support therefore combined an earlier shift towards reciprocity with compromise over the concrete policy design. [E, H, I]

CD&V and Les Engagés also accepted the principle and supported moderating provisions concerning duration, transitional protection and selected exceptions. However, preferences over moderation still differed within the coalition. Respondent I recalled that Vooruit sometimes stood relatively alone in seeking broader protection for people facing severe health, social or labour-market barriers. Where broader exemptions proved unattainable, the party instead sought additional resources for local social assistance and adapted employment. [E, H, I]

These remaining differences over design could be accommodated through wider coalition bargaining. Respondent I indicated that Vooruit was more willing to compromise on the time limit than on pension reform or capital taxation, partly because unemployment reform affected a narrower group and could be combined with tailored support. Respondent H likewise described the measure as one component of the *supernota*, in which difficult labour-market and pension reforms were balanced against taxation of capital and contributions from the “strongest shoulders”. Each party had to “step over its own shadow”. The wider package allowed parties that shared the principle, but differed over its preferred design and political salience to reach a final coalition agreement. [H, I]

5.5 From Coalition Ownership to Rapid Reform

Once coalition authorisation had been secured, the reform moved with remarkable speed. Less than six months after government formation, the time limit had been enacted into law (*Programmawet van 18 juli 2025*, 2025). Its rapid decision coupling rested on three advantages: substantial pre-specification during the formation, control over the institutional gateways that followed, and a post-formation process compressed by legal expertise, fiscal front-loading and a fixed legislative deadline.

5.5.1 Aligning Agenda Control and Portfolio Authority

Under Michel I, supporters held a majority of the coalition’s seats but lacked control over key positions in the decision-making process. As discussed above, Kris Peeters could block the principle during government formation and later controlled the Employment portfolio, while MR withheld active support. Respondents also noted that far-reaching measures excluded from a coalition agreement are unlikely to be pursued later.

De Wever I presented an almost mirror image. As *formateur*, Bart De Wever controlled the drafting process, and coalition partners recalled that a time limit appeared in every version of the *formateur*’s note. N-VA subsequently supplied the prime minister and remained the largest coalition party. Another coalition partner said [D]:

The importance of the note placed on the table should not be underestimated. The prime minister (*formateur*) speaks to everyone and then drafts a text. That text sets the direction: negotiations can move somewhat to the left or right, but they do not reverse the direction entirely.
(Respondent D, translated from Dutch)

MR approached portfolio allocation with a clear lesson from previous governments: supporting a reform was insufficient without control over the ministry responsible for developing and implementing it. The party therefore deliberately claimed the Employment portfolio. Since the time limit had been a central MR campaign promise, respondents described control over the portfolio as necessary to advance it quickly. [E]

This portfolio strategy extended beyond Employment. Respondent H described the concentration of Employment, Finance and Pensions among the principal owners of the *supernota* as a deliberate lesson from previous governments. Reform advocacy was considered insufficient when the relevant departments remained under the control of reluctant coalition

partners. Under De Wever I, the parties that had shaped the socio-economic package also controlled the principal administrative gateways required to implement it.

5.5.2 From Party Proposals to Legal Specification

A time limit did not enter the 2024 formation as an entirely new or technically unspecified policy idea. During Michel I, N-VA had developed costed scenarios, while under De Croo I, MR put forward a more limited and conditional proposal aimed at very long-term unemployment and repeated refusal of work or training. These initiatives show that several variants were politically and technically conceivable, but they remained tied to individual parties and were never converted into a common coalition model. [E, H]

Respondents described the time limit as the endpoint of a sequence of less drastic interventions. Stricter availability requirements and reinforced degressivity were seen as insufficient. Degressivity had also become less usable as a further reform path: its lowest levels already approached social assistance, while a steeper trajectory would require raising initial benefits. Respondent C described the Michel I model as coherent and budget-neutral, primarily oriented towards activation, simplification and filling vacancies. By De Wever I, the reform was also expected to deliver direct expenditure savings, communicative clarity and a visible endpoint. A time limit fitted this combination of objectives more closely than further degressivity. [C, D, H, I]

The coalition agreement changed the proposal's status. The principle was now politically authorised, while bargaining focused on duration, employment history, transitional arrangements, exceptions and accompanying measures. Political authorisation and specification were not entirely sequential: respondents D, E and H indicated that several central parameters had already been fixed and budgeted during the formation. Post-formation drafting therefore refined a politically specified model rather than starting from scratch. [D, E, H]

Once the coalition agreement was concluded, technical and legal drafting moved quickly. Interview evidence indicates that behind-the-scenes policy experts played an important role in drafting the legislation under considerable time pressure. Their knowledge of the existing rules helped resolve questions concerning transitional arrangements and exceptions. This less visible expertise helped make rapid adoption possible.

The legal route was itself a deliberate design choice. Although the minister could in principle have proceeded largely through Royal Decrees, Respondent D considered parliamentary legislation more appropriate for a reform of this significance. Enacting the core reform through an act of Parliament also concentrated constitutional review before the Constitutional Court and reduced the risk of fragmented litigation before different labour courts. Respondent C nevertheless described the resulting combination of statutory provisions and amended Royal Decrees as technically awkward. The chosen route strengthened parliamentary ownership and legal durability without producing an entirely coherent regulatory architecture. [C, D]

Respondents also indicated that legal scrutiny filtered some of the exceptions sought during coalition bargaining. Extensive differentiation between categories of beneficiaries risked weakening the reform on equality and non-discrimination grounds. Proposals to retain benefits for people enrolled in selected training programmes leading to shortage occupations illustrate this constraint. Such exceptions had to rely on distinctions that could be defended as objective

and proportionate. The final design therefore reflected both coalition bargaining and the perceived need for legal robustness. [A, D, G]

5.5.3 Compressing and sustaining the decision window

The 2024 elections opened the political window, while the reform's repeated inclusion in the formateur's note and eventual incorporation into the coalition agreement converted that opportunity into a decision window. The sequence resembled doctrinal coupling: political turnover elevated a pre-existing solution and connected it to fiscal consolidation, labour-market participation and fairness towards working citizens.

Political authorisation settled the principle, while implementation still required substantial bargaining over how the reform would affect different groups and institutions. Respondent C described initial texts circulating under intense time pressure, with inter-cabinet discussions focusing on transitional groups, the geographical distribution of affected claimants, OCMW capacity and financing, and coordination with regional employment services.

Respondent I similarly recalled continued bargaining over training exemptions, older and particularly vulnerable claimants, carers, local social-assistance capacity and adapted employment. These negotiations concerned how the reform would be implemented and its consequences managed, rather than whether the time limit itself would proceed. Coordination was facilitated by the fact that the federal coalition parties also governed at the regional level in Flanders and Wallonia. [C, I]

Speed also followed a fiscal and political logic. Respondent D explained that the budgetary table already assumed an early entry into force: delay would postpone both possible employment effects and direct expenditure savings. Rapid adoption also allowed N-VA and MR to demonstrate governing capacity in a policy field that had long appeared politically untouchable. [D, E, H]

The pre-summer Programme Law supplied a final procedural deadline. By concentrating political attention and legal preparation before the parliamentary recess, it limited opportunities for delay. [D]

Fiscal incentives, political pressure to demonstrate reform capacity and the approaching summer deadline thus kept momentum behind a reform whose principle had already been settled. The decision window remained open long enough for political agreement to be translated into law.

6 Discussion

This thesis began with the assumption that Michel I offered a more favourable ideological setting than De Wever I for introducing a time limit on unemployment benefits. Yet the proposal never reached substantive coalition bargaining under Michel I. By contrast, De Wever I was ideologically more diverse and adopted it within six months of taking office.

The comparison points most clearly to changes in the political stream. Under Michel I, CD&V expressed a clear veto while MR remained hesitant. CD&V's role as the coalition's social counterweight and MR's position as its sole Francophone party increased the political costs of supporting the reform. Their control over key institutional positions gave these preferences greater weight within the coalition. Under De Wever I, no party opposed the principle outright. CD&V shared the coalition's social flank with Vooruit and Les Engagés, while Les Engagés also shared the political exposure of reform ownership on the Francophone side. Simultaneously, agenda and portfolio control were now concentrated in the hands of the main reform advocates.

This pattern is consistent with research showing that broader coalitions can facilitate welfare-state reform by sharing responsibility and distributing political costs across parties and policy fields (Armingeon et al., 2016; Häusermann et al., 2019). The Belgian comparison further shows that coalition breadth matters through the political roles it redistributes among the parties involved.

Under De Wever I, Vooruit could occupy the relative left flank through social corrections and trade-offs rather than by blocking the principle, while the social and territorial costs of reform ownership were generally spread across more parties. This fits an institutionalist understanding of institutions as structuring opportunities for resistance and compromise rather than determining outcomes directly (Hemerijck & Van Kersbergen, 2019; Swank, 2001).

The ideological composition of a coalition should therefore not be understood simply as the number or average position of left- and right-wing parties. It also matters which party occupies the coalition's relative left flank, who bears the territorial costs of reform, and how these positions affect what parties are willing to block, moderate or actively own. Under De Wever I, all coalition parties shared ownership of the reform, although they claimed the reform differently.

Across their different frames, the parties converged around fairness towards people who work and contribute and the idea that social rights entail responsibility. This shared understanding gave parties with different priorities a common basis for claiming the reform as compatible with their own political projects. This is consistent with Béland and Cox's (2016) coalition-magnet logic, while the *supernota* provided the package through which remaining design and distributive differences could be negotiated.

Party leadership also mattered. Sammy Mahdi helped establish a new CD&V position, Conner Rousseau's "basis jobs" proposal showed that Vooruit's shift predated the formation, Georges-Louis Bouchez gave MR a more assertive socio-economic profile, and Bart De Wever combined party leadership with agenda influence as formateur. These cases suggest that leaders helped redefine, prioritise or translate party preferences into coalition bargaining, consistent with the role of political entrepreneurs in MSF (DeLeo et al., 2024; Herweg et al., 2015).

In MSF terms, these changes prevented agenda coupling under Michel I but enabled it in 2024. The new political constellation brought a pre-existing proposal onto the coalition agenda, after which parties connected it to fiscal, activation, territorial and fairness concerns. This resembles doctrinal coupling, in which political change elevates an available solution that is subsequently linked to relevant problem definitions (DeLeo et al., 2024).

The problem and policy streams also contributed. Michel I governed with higher unemployment, and respondents linked memories of mass unemployment and the financial crisis to the limited acceptability of arguments centred on individual responsibility. By De Wever I, lower unemployment and widespread vacancies made such arguments easier to sustain, while a larger government deficit added fiscal pressure. The open-ended character of unemployment benefits had also become more strongly problematised, while further degressivity was increasingly perceived as an exhausted reform path. These developments made the time limit more politically usable without, by themselves, explaining adoption.

Government formation functioned as the critical policy window. Measures absent from the coalition agreement were described as highly unlikely to be enacted later, while formation enabled politically costly measures to be balanced against concessions elsewhere. Under De Wever I, inclusion in the *supernota* and later the coalition agreement completed agenda coupling and opened the decision window.

The comparison also shows that agenda and decision coupling depended on control over different institutional positions. During agenda coupling, the *formateur* could shape the baseline negotiating text. After coalition agreement, control of the Employment portfolio became important for priority and legislative translation. Michel I showed the reverse configuration: CD&V combined influence during formation with control of Employment and redirected reform towards degressivity. Under De Wever I, a principal reform advocate controlled Employment and advanced the agreed measure rapidly, supported by technical and legal expertise, fiscal front-loading and the pre-summer legislative deadline.

Party positions had also shifted significantly between the two episodes. CD&V, MR and Vooruit all moved towards greater acceptance or even active support of a time limit. However, this study cannot establish with confidence what ultimately drove these shifts. The present analysis is therefore better able to explain how these changed positions affected the reform process, rather than why the positions changed.

Future research could examine whether similar mechanisms apply to long-term sickness and disability reform, a harder test given greater regional disparities in inactivity, a more heterogeneous affected population and stronger medical uncertainty and deservingness concerns. Whether a similarly broad coalition can generate sufficient political ownership in that domain remains open.

7 Conclusion

An idea can circulate for years without ever becoming policy. In this case, the decisive window opened during the formation of De Wever I. Under Michel I, the principle was excluded before it could become a jointly designed coalition option. Under De Wever I, agreement on the principle allowed bargaining to proceed towards design, compensation and implementation.

Overall, the decisive shift occurred in the political stream. Under Michel I, CD&V's position as the coalition's social counterweight and MR's exposure as its sole Francophone party increased the political costs of the reform and prevented shared ownership from emerging. Under De Wever I, the broader coalition distributed these social and territorial roles across several parties. The parties did not justify the reform in the same way, but their claims overlapped around reciprocity, fairness towards people who work and contribute, and the idea that social rights also involve responsibilities. This helped create shared ownership, while the *supernota* provided the broader package through which remaining differences over policy design and political costs could be negotiated across dossiers. These findings are consistent with research showing how broader coalitions and political exchange can facilitate politically costly welfare-state reform (Armingeon et al., 2016; Häusermann et al., 2019), and with Röper's (2026) finding that retrenchment can be actively justified through frames of fairness and responsibility.

The concentration of agenda-setting and implementation authority in the hands of reform advocates was also important for the speed of adoption. The *formateur*'s control over the negotiating text helped secure the reform's position on the coalition agenda, while the Employment portfolio and specialised policy expertise enabled its rapid specification and legislative translation.

MSF helps explain why the reform looked sudden, even though its coalition-readiness had been ten years in the making. What appears as an abrupt reform was preceded by a much longer process in which the proposal remained available, political constraints changed and a window eventually opened for coupling. The distinction between agenda and decision coupling helps show why the proposal remained blocked before substantive bargaining under Michel I but moved rapidly from coalition agreement to legislation under De Wever I.

A proposal may circulate for years, attract committed advocates and even be technically ready. Its time came when a political window opened, coalition bargaining turned it into a shared project, the coalition agreement authorised it, and its strongest advocates controlled the route from political agreement to law.

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9 Annex

9.1 Thematic interview guide

Methodological disclaimer: The interview guide below presents the common thematic backbone used across the semi-structured elite interviews. Questions and follow-up probes were adapted to respondents' institutional roles, proximity to the reform process and areas of expertise. As data collection and analysis partly developed in parallel, later interviews also included additional probes based on issues emerging from earlier interviews. Not all questions were therefore asked in identical wording or order in every interview.

Theme	Core question	Indicative follow-up probes
Position and proximity	Could you briefly describe your role in relation to unemployment benefit reform and your proximity to the dossier during Michel I and/or De Wever I?	Direct involvement in negotiations, preparation, positioning or implementation? Which stage of the process were you closest to?
Michel I: point of blockage	At what point did it become clear that a time limit on unemployment benefits would probably not be adopted under Michel I?	Was there a specific blocking point? Did the dossier lose momentum gradually? Did it reach coalition negotiations?
Michel I: explanation	If you had to identify the most important reason why the reform did not go through under Michel I, what would it be?	Coalition opposition? Policy readiness? Social resistance? Territorial considerations? Other priorities?
Problem pressure	To what extent was there already perceived urgency around unemployment, labour-market participation, fiscal sustainability or work incentives?	Did actors agree on the problem? How was it framed?
Policy readiness	How developed was the proposal under Michel I?	Legal detail? Administrative feasibility? Transition rules? Compensation?

De Wever I: acceleration	When did you first get the sense that the reform would actually be adopted under De Wever I?	Coalition formation? Political ownership? Budget negotiations? A specific turning point?
What changed?	What changed most between Michel I and De Wever I?	Political context? Party positions? Policy design? Problem definition?
Decision readiness	What made the reform easier to translate into a concrete decision under De Wever I?	Technical preparation? Exceptions? Package deals? Implementation planning?
Political actors	Which actors were most important in moving the proposal towards adoption?	Who advanced it? Who managed coalition opposition? Who shaped the proposal?
Point of no return	Was there a moment after which the reform became very difficult to stop?	Coalition agreement? Formal political commitment? Legislative drafting?
Comparative diagnosis	Looking across both periods, what best explains the different outcomes?	Which factors changed and which remained broadly constant?
Territorial dynamics	To what extent did regional or linguistic political dynamics matter?	Flemish/Francophone differences? Public framing versus coalition bargaining?
Counterfactual	If Michel I had possessed one of the conditions present under De Wever I, which would have mattered most?	Different coalition configuration? Stronger ownership? Better timing or preparation?
Closing reflection	What do outside observers usually misunderstand about why the reform failed earlier but succeeded later?	Relevant documents? Additional actors to interview?

9.2 Role-specific follow-up questions

The following questions were used selectively depending on respondents' institutional roles and areas of expertise.

Respondent profile	Core questions	Indicative follow-up probes
Political and cabinet actors	Which political actors were most important in advancing or blocking the reform? How were disagreements within the coalition managed?	Which parties treated the issue as a priority? Who could effectively veto or advance the proposal? Were trade-offs across dossiers necessary?
Parliamentary actors and staff	How did the reform move from political agreement to legislative preparation?	At what stage were the main political choices already settled? Which issues remained open during parliamentary preparation?
Trade-union representatives	How did organised labour respond to the proposal in the two periods? Why was opposition more or less effective?	What channels of influence were available? Did social dialogue offer genuine room for negotiation? Which aspects of the reform were considered most problematic? Were mitigating measures able to reduce opposition?
Employer organisations	What role did employer organisations play in promoting or developing the reform?	How much influence did you have over the decision making process? How developed was the proposal within employer circles? Which arguments were considered politically persuasive?
Administrative and technical experts	How technically and administratively developed was the proposal in each period? What implementation constraints mattered?	What legal or administrative difficulties had to be resolved? How important were transitional arrangements and exceptions? What were the expected effects on social assistance and regional employment services?

Respondent profile	Core questions	Indicative follow-up probes
Academic and policy experts	How should the contrast between Michel I and De Wever I be understood from a broader welfare-state and policymaking perspective?	Did the difference primarily reflect political opportunity, accumulated policy preparation or changing problem pressure? How important were Belgian coalition and federal structures? Does the case fit broader patterns of welfare-state reform?
