Cleen, Benjamin de. "The Stage as an Arena of Political Struggle: The Struggle between the Vlaams Blok/Belang and the Flemish City Theatres." *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*. Ed. Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik and Brigitte Mral. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 209–220. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544940.ch-014>>.

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The Stage as an Arena of Political Struggle: The Struggle between the Vlaams Blok/Belang and the Flemish City Theatres

Benjamin de Cleen

Since the early 1990s, the Flemish populist radical-right party VB (Vlaams Blok; renamed Vlaams Belang after a legal conviction for racism in 2004) has been an important player in Belgian politics. Founded after the split of the more radical nationalist and rightist wing from the nationalist Volksunie (People's Union) in the late 1970s, the VB became one of the most successful populist radical-right parties in Europe, although its heyday seems to have been from the early 1990s until the mid-2000s. This chapter discusses the VB by looking at the party's rhetoric about the Flemish city theatres in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels. These are the three largest Dutch-speaking theatres in Belgium, which are funded by the Flemish Community and (to a lesser extent) by the respective cities. This choice is informed by the fact that these Flemish city theatres have been the cultural institutions most consistently criticized by the VB and have been among the most active opponents of the VB since the early 1990s. The VB's rhetoric about the theatres is characteristic of its views on the role of (subsidized) cultural institutions and of its ways of dealing with opposition from outside of political parties.

In order to lay bare the structure of the VB's rhetoric, a discourse-theoretical analysis (see Carpentier & De Cleen 2007) was carried out. Its main conceptual framework is drawn from the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001; Laclau 2005, Glynos & Howarth 2007). Discourses are defined as systems of meaning that establish relations between identities, objects and practices, and provide subject positions that people can identify with (Howarth 2000: 9, Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 3, Torfing 2005: 14). Every discursive practice builds on existing structures of meaning, for it would not make sense otherwise. In a concrete analysis, it is helpful to differentiate, analytically, the practice under study from the systems of meaning that existed before and that encompass much more than this practice under study (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 140–1). Therefore, a distinction is introduced in this chapter between rhetoric and discourse. *Rhetoric* refers to the structures of meaning produced through the discursive practices under study (the rhetoric of the VB, the rhetoric of the theatres). *Discourse* refers to the more encompassing and more stable structures

of meaning on which rhetoric draws (and which are reproduced, contested or altered by rhetoric). Rhetoric is the result of the articulation of (elements of) discourses. The notion of *articulation* refers to the combination of (elements of) different discourses within a particular rhetoric (see Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 3, Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 105). The central question of this chapter is: on which discourses (and which elements from which discourses) does the VB's rhetoric draw and how does the party articulate (elements of) those discourses?

In order to answer this question, the chapter analyses texts using qualitative content analytical procedures of categorization, a process of sorting and organizing pieces of data and linking them together by grouping them into categories that are tied to the concepts used by the researcher (Coffey & Atkinson 1996, Titscher et al. 2000: 62). Three linguistic categories are of particular relevance to analysing how discourses are articulated in texts: vocabulary, semantic relations between words and sentences, and assumptions and presuppositions (Fairclough 2003: 129–33). Empirical material consists of written texts produced in the period between 2005 and 2006, during which the struggle between the VB and the city theatres reached a peak. The corpus consists of external communication by the VB (28 texts)¹ and the theatres (97 texts),² VB interventions in the Flemish Parliament (20 texts), the Brussels Flemish Community Commission (10 texts), and the Antwerp City Council (2 texts), coverage in the Dutch-speaking Belgian press (241 texts), on Flemish television³ (2 texts) and in theatre magazines (34 texts).⁴

Each of the following sections discusses a discourse drawn on by the VB: nationalism, conservatism, populism and authoritarianism. With each successive section the picture becomes more complete, as the way the VB articulates these different discourses becomes clearer. The focus is on the VB, but in order to get a good understanding of the party's objections to the theatres, the chapter touches upon the rhetoric of the theatres as well.

Flemish nationalism versus the theatres' rhetoric of cultural diversity

As is the case for other populist radical-right parties, an exclusive and radical nationalism lies at the heart of VB rhetoric (Eatwell 2000, Spruyt 2000, Swyngedouw &

¹ Nine articles in the VB Magazine, 3 texts from the VB national website, 3 articles in the Antwerp VB magazine, 7 articles in the Brussels VB magazine, 3 articles in the Ghent VB magazine, 2 articles in the electronic newsletter of the Antwerp VB; 1 election propaganda booklet for the 2006 elections in Antwerp.

² Het Toneelhuis (Antwerp): 3 annual programme booklets, 11 monthly magazines, 7 promotional texts about plays; Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (Brussels): 3 annual programme booklets, the bi-monthly magazine from January 2005 to December 2006 (12 issues), 17 printed press/promotional texts, 3 speeches at a presentation for the season 2005–6; 10 KVS website blog posts; the KVS mission statement; a text about the history of the KVS; Publiektheater/NTGent (Ghent): 14 monthly brochures, 3 press/promotional texts for an installation.

³ The analysis is conducted on a literal transcript of the broadcast and does not take into account visual aspects.

⁴ 16 articles in *Rekto: Verso*, 18 articles in *Etcetera*.

Ivaldi 2001, Mudde 2007). Nationalist discourse is built around the nodal point⁵ nation, which is envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space (e.g. Freedon 1998, Sutherland 2005, Anderson 2006). Because the nation has no positive identity – the members of a nation share no given essence that makes them a nation – it is constructed by opposing it to out-groups. These can be located outside the borders of the nation's territory (other nation states) and inside its borders but outside of the nation (foreigners) (Triandafyllidou 1998, Dyrberg 2003, Wodak et al. 2009: 27).

One of the main points of struggle between the VB and the Flemish city theatres is the theatres' Flemish character. The struggle revolves around the question of how strongly a Flemish city theatre should occupy itself with the boundary around the nation, how the boundary is defined and what this boundary implies for the relations between the nation and the outside. The struggle needs to be understood in light of the theatres' history. The establishment of the Flemish city theatres in the nineteenth century was rather closely tied to the history of the nationalist Flemish Movement – a label grouping the organizations and individuals striving for the emancipation and (later) autonomy of the Dutch-speaking population of the North of Belgium. In the first half of the twentieth century, the theatres were even more closely involved in Flemish nationalist politics, to the extent that they became involved in collaboration with the German occupier in two World Wars. After the Second World War, the city theatres were increasingly institutionalized within the developing autonomous political structures of the so-called Flemish Community. At the same time, however, the theatres' history was never Flemish nationalist alone. Of particular interest here is that, after the Second World War, the theatres moved away from and became increasingly critical of Flemish nationalism as a political project (Geerts 2009, Vanhaesebrouck 2010).

It should come as no surprise then that the theatres reacted very negatively to the electoral breakthrough of the VB in 1991. In a first stage, this mainly gave rise to reactions *against* the VB structured around a rejection of the VB's racism and a defence of democracy. In a later stage, the theatres also started to focus on positive strategies to increase cultural diversity in their personnel, productions and audience (Jans 2010). In the period under study, the theatres' position towards cultural diversity revolved around an opposition between their own openness and the closed character of the VB's nationalism. This openness has two aspects (that are often hard to disentangle): openness of the boundaries *around* the Flemish in-group and openness *of* the Flemish towards other groups. The VB's exclusive nationalism is contested by presenting immigrants and their descendents as part of Flanders, which is exemplified by plays that define minorities as part of Flanders and mix references to Flemish history with elements from minority cultures (see Vanhaesebrouck 2010). A vocabulary of dialogue, cross-fertilization and contact is also used to signify the open position towards those who are non-Flemish. The theatres oppose what they consider the VB's treatment of Flanders as an 'island'.⁶ An open definition of Flanders is articulated with a city discourse.

⁵ In Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, nodal points are 'privileged discursive points that partially fix meaning within signifying chains' (Torfing 1999: 98). Other signifiers within a discourse acquire their meaning through their relation to that (those) nodal point(s) (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 112).

⁶ Reyniers, J., *Brussel is de toekomst*, De Morgen, 14 March 2005.

Particularly the Brussels Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (Royal Flemish Theatre, KVS) takes the cultural and linguistic diversity of Brussels – the officially bilingual French and Dutch-speaking capital of Belgium and a city characterized by the strong presence of minorities – to mean that it should open its doors to French-speakers as well as to minorities.

The city theatres' position is not exactly applauded by the VB. To the city theatres' rhetoric of openness, contact and dialogue, the VB opposes a radical nationalism. The party will not settle for anything less than an independent Flemish state, and demands strict protection of the boundaries around the nation. At the heart of the VB's criticism of the theatres' relation with Flanders lies an essentialist conception of Flemish identity. The task of the Flemish theatres, for the VB, is to protect that Flemish identity. This is particularly pertinent in Brussels, which the party considers a frontier zone in the defence of Flemish identity. From this perspective, the Brussels KVS is treated as a weapon in the 'struggle for the preservation of the own identity'⁷ in an environment that is defined by the 'hostility'⁸ of the Francophone majority and the purported threats of a large immigrant population. This reveals the view of a Flanders engaged in a constant struggle with other cultures/nations for the preservation of its own identity. Within the VB's nationalism, the theatres' attention for and openness towards 'cultures' other than the Flemish is profoundly problematic. The VB sees this as an unacceptable diversion from the role of the Flemish theatre and a threat to the Flemish identity the theatres are supposed to defend. To the VB, the KVS should focus on producing Dutch spoken theatre for the Flemish population. Instead of being 'ashamed'⁹ of their Flemish identity and Flemish nationalist history and embracing cultural diversity, the VB contends that the city theatres should be proud of and defend Flemish identity. As the VB's vocabulary of roots, history, threats and preservation already indicates its nationalism is profoundly conservative. But its conservatism goes beyond the defence of national identity. The next section looks at the VB's conservatism in more detail.

Conservatism versus cultural diversity and the avant-garde

A second discourse the VB draws upon is conservatism. This dimension of the struggle between the VB and the theatres revolves around the relation between past, present and future. Unlike most definitions of conservatism, the definition of conservatism used here does not characterize conservatism as an attitude towards objectively identifiable change (e.g. Wilson 1973, Jost et al. 2003) or as a particular set of demands (e.g. Scruton 1980, Nisbet 1986, Eccleshall 1994, 2000), but as a particular structure of meaning that can be used to formulate and support very different demands (see Huntington 1958, Vincent 1994: 210). Conservative discourse is built around conservation, envisaged as

⁷ E. Arckens in *Bespreking van de beleidsnota Cultuur 2004–2009*, Vlaams parlement, stuk 15 (2004–5), nr. 7-D.

⁸ Arckens in *Bespreking van de beleidsnota*.

⁹ Arckens, E., Interpellatie tot de heer Bert Anciaux, Vlaams Minister van Cultuur, Jeugd, Sport en Brussel, over het problematisch karakter van het gentrificatieproces in Brussel op sociaal-cultureel vlak, Handelingen Commissie voor Brussel en de Vlaamse Rand, 29 June 2006.

a process of conserving into the future (part of) a present that has come to us from the past, and that is legitimated through reference to a desirable continuity between past, present, and future (see Narveson 2001: 10). It is the structure of the demand that counts, not its substance. Conservatism defines itself in opposition to what it presents as threats to the continuity between past, present and future (Huntington 1958: 461).

The VB draws on conservative discourse to formulate its nationalist demands as well as its rejection of avant-garde theatre. The party's nationalism is strongly articulated with conservatism, for its nationalism has at its core a Flemish identity rooted in the past. The division of the world into nations, each with their own state, is presented as natural. Flemish nationalism, to the VB, is about the defence and preservation of a pre-political identity, that is, an identity that has existed since long before any political party formulated nationalist demands. Against this, the theatres argue that their attention for cultural diversity is a matter of 'tuning the artistic project to the culturally diverse and plurilingual reality'.¹⁰ They oppose this to the VB that 'turns its back on the challenges and continues to stare at an idealized Flemish past, as if it would be possible to turn back time'.¹¹ Using a conservative discourse, the VB opposes the (currently existing) multicultural society, which it blames for uprooting the natural and preferable state of things, as well as the multicultural politics of the theatre, which in the eyes of the VB is utopian. This strategy of delegitimizing opposition as utopian and of obfuscating its own profoundly political nature is characteristic of a conservatism that identifies itself as a 'political position opposed to ideological politics' (O'Sullivan 1999: 52, Eccleshall 2000: 281–2).

Conservatism also plays a role in the VB's resistance to avant-garde theatre. In Flemish theatre, innovation has taken up a central position since the 1980s (De Pauw 2006). Although this focus on innovation is being criticized from within the theatre by 2005, a taboo-breaking, innovation-centred tendency is still very prominent in the theatre. The VB rejects what it considers as provocations and insults of traditional values and long-standing identities (mocking Flanders, explicit sexuality, mocking religion). However, strongly voiced conservative arguments about the downfall of Western civilization and the crisis of society due to the morally, sexually and otherwise deviant nature of culture and media, which in earlier times could be heard regularly from the VB, have become far less prominent by 2005. The party's rejection of experimental theatre has become increasingly grounded in a populist discourse that criticizes avant-garde art because it is élitist.

Populism versus the artistic élite

The VB started out as an explicitly élitist party, but like other radical-right parties, it has become strongly populist (Rydgren 2005, Mudde 2007). Populism claims to speak for a powerless 'down' (the people), whose identity is constructed by opposing it to a

¹⁰ KVS. *Terug van weggeweest*. KVS seizoen 2005–6, p. 1.

¹¹ Jans, E. and Janssens, I. *Een horizon van belangrijke vragen*. Etcetera 93, June 2005, 16.

powerful 'up' (the *élite*) (e.g. Mény & Surel 2000, Reinfeldt 2000: 51, Dyrberg 2003, Laclau 2005, Mudde 2007). The VB claims to be the party of the people, and seeks to delegitimize the so-called traditional parties (and especially the socialists) as an *élite* (Mudde 1995, Swyngedouw & Ivaldi 2001: 12–14, Jagers 2006: 219–52). The VB's populism also extends beyond its criticism of competing political parties.

The VB's nationalist and conservative objections to the city theatres' rhetoric of cultural diversity, as well as its conservative objection to their focus on experiment, are articulated with a populist criticism of the theatres as *élitist*. The city theatres, the VB argues, 'must per definition aim at the entirety of the population – so also at the common man'.¹² The programme of the city theatres is argued to be too experimental and too focused on a limited audience. The VB sometimes refers to the low attendance at the city theatres, but its objection against the *élitism* of the theatre is mostly a qualitative one: the '[t]heatre is full, that's right, but it is always the same little group of people that returns'.¹³ This little group is presented as an *élite* and opposed to the people – 'the ordinary man',¹⁴ or 'average Joe'.¹⁵ The VB claims to defend the cultural needs of these ordinary people. Instead of focusing on 'avant-garde'¹⁶ and experiment, the theatres should give more space to 'classic and popular repertoire theatre'¹⁷ and 'lower the bar'.¹⁸ Within this populist discourse, demands for more accessible theatre are a matter of democracy. The VB's resistance to what it considered experimental theatre is, by 2005, much more located in a populist rejection of high art as inaccessible to ordinary people than in a conservative protection of society against moral downfall. Still, populism and conservatism are articulated, for the definition of what is acceptable is situated in the taste and opinions of the majority of ordinary people, which the VB opposes to the progressive ideas of a small artistic *élite*.

The VB also draws on populism to delegitimize the city theatres' pro-diversity stance, as well as their explicit opposition to the VB. To the VB, it is their *élitist* position that explains why theatre-makers hold on to a positive view of cultural diversity and suffer from 'identity shame'. The Flemings that work for and are the audience of the theatre in Brussels, for example, are argued to accept the dominance of French (and other languages) in Brussels and multiculturalism because of 'a certain form of urban snobbism that has and creates an overly exaggerated idealistic image of city life'.¹⁹ The party portrays them as 'people who do not have problems in Brussels. They live in a protected cultural milieu'.²⁰ The VB opposes this *élite*'s purported idealistic view on

¹² Pas, F. (2005), 'Het moest gezegd', *Vlaams Belang Magazine*, 2(4): 12.

¹³ F. Dewinter in a television interview in 'Ter Zake', Canvas, 12 March 2005.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ 'Jan met de pet', literally 'Jan with the cap', *ibid.*

¹⁶ Arkens in Beleidsnota Cultuur 2004–2009.

¹⁷ Arkens, E., Actuele vraag tot de heer Bert Anciaux, Vlaams Minister van Cultuur, Jeugd, Sport en Brussel, over de verklaringen van de minister aangaande een Cultureel Pact tussen werkveld, overheid en samenleving, wat het aspect diversiteit betreft, Vlaams Parlement, Plenaire vergadering, 24–5 January 2006.

¹⁸ Dewinter, 'Ter Zake'.

¹⁹ Arkens, problematisch karakter van het gentrificatieproces in Brussel.

²⁰ F. Van den Eynde in Hillaert, W. 'Ik zou eens Shakespeare willen zien door Shakespeare', *Rekto:verso* 19, July–August 2006.

living in the city to the reality of living in a multicultural city for 'the large majority'.²¹ The theatres' explicit resistance to the VB is dismissed in even stronger populist terms. In reaction to a number of initiatives on the part of the theatre and other artists in the run-up to the 2006 local elections, one of the party's leaders states:

What more can I do than formulate the restrained complaint that the art world in Flanders one-sidedly and unanimously condemns the VB as heretic, with that in practice strengthening the cordon sanitaire²² (that intellectual and democratic monstrosity) and de facto per definition and without nuance siding with the governing parties, so with the establishment. The Flemish art world is establishment. It marches out against the opposition and serves the powerful.²³

Through a populist argument, artists and opposing political parties are presented as belonging to one and the same élite that is opposed to the party of the people and therefore also to the people. The VB also uses this populism to fend off the accusations of authoritarianism voiced against it. The final section looks at the VB's authoritarianism and its strategies to present itself as a democratic party in some more detail.

The VB, authoritarianism and democracy

The opposition of the theatres to the VB has always drawn strongly on the accusation that the VB is undemocratic (as has much of the opposition to the VB). This is no different in early 2005 when a Brussels VB representative ends his criticism of the KVS with the suggestion to 'turn off the subsidy faucet for a certain period as ultimate instrument if need be'.²⁴ The theatres' argument goes as follows: the VB's criticisms of the theatre (particularly when combined with demands to cut subsidies) are attacks on artistic freedom, and because artistic freedom is at the heart of democracy these impingements on artistic freedom prove the VB's authoritarian character. Authoritarianism can be defined as a discourse built around an authority, envisaged as an (individual or collective) actor who has the unquestionable right to take and enforce binding decisions. Authoritarianism is characterised by closedness in that it constructs and maintains a) a closed order governed by rules/norms that limit the liberty of the individual and in which the authority enforces the individual's compliance with the rules/norms if necessary, and b) closes the space for politics by treating this order, its rules/norms, and the authority within that order as fixed and unquestionable (see Stenner 2005, Kitschelt 2007: 1179). From this perspective, the VB's rhetoric about the theatre does indeed have authoritarian elements. The party's nationalism (the claim

²¹ Ibid.

²² The cordon sanitaire (literally quarantine line) is an agreement between the other parties not to enter into coalition or make political deals with the VB on any level.

²³ Annemans, G. (2006), 'Over kunst en politiek . . .', *Vlaams Belang Magazine*, 3(12): 3.

²⁴ Arkens, E. 'Interpellatie van de Minister voor Cultuur, jeugd, sport en Brussel Bert Anciaux in de Commissie voor Cultuur, media en sport van het Vlaams parlement over het beleid van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg als Vlaamse culturele instelling in Brussel', *Handelingen van de Commissie voor cultuur, jeugd, sport en media*, 13 January 2005.

to speak for a pre-political nation), conservatism (the claim to defend unchangeable values, identities and ways of life) and populism (the claim to speak for a homogeneous people against an illegitimate élite) serve to limit the freedom of theatre-makers and to present their views as unacceptable and illegitimate.

However, the VB refuses the accusation of authoritarianism and presents itself as a democratic party. The party rejects the parallels between the VB and the Nazis that are regularly drawn by the party's critics in the theatre:²⁵

Of course no one has to 'shut up.' We continue to defend freedom of speech. That freedom should apply to everyone. And that freedom should also include freedom of artistic expression. We do not want to prohibit books or theatre plays, we do not want to throw abstract artists in jail, we do not want to have 'Entartete Kunst' burned, like the Nazis did.²⁶

As this quote shows, the VB even presents itself as the defender of liberal democratic rights. At the same time, the party does limit the freedom of the theatres to do as they wish. The VB deals with this tension mainly through a populist argument. The party presents its demands not as a matter of impinging on artistic freedom but as a matter of using subsidies in a way that reflects taxpayers' wishes. This argument supports not only the demand that the theatres play more popular theatre but also (albeit more ambiguously) the demand that the theatres do not oppose the VB. Artists, according to the VB, have the right to speak out against the VB, but not when they are subsidized.²⁷ Culture that is produced with the help of subsidies paid by taxpayers that include VB voters should not speak out 'unanimously'²⁸ against the VB or should even *reflect* the political wishes of taxpayers. The first part of the following statement by Filip Dewinter, one of the electoral strongholds of the VB, exemplifies this:

Political engagement in the theatre, evidently, but then not one-sidedly against us, not one-sidedly pro the multicult [a wordplay on multicultural, 'kul' means 'bollocks' in Dutch], not one-sidedly pro a certain inclination and only against the other. Then *everything* should be possible . . . 'where are the extreme right theatre makers?' I say: luckily there are none. I am happy there are none. Because theatre does not have as a primary goal to serve a political purpose, but to be itself, and the purpose of the theatre must indeed be itself.²⁹

As the second part of this quote shows, the VB cannot accuse the leftist theatres of pushing out right-wing artists because of a lack of (radical) right theatre-makers

²⁵ One example is the Antwerp city theatre playing *Mefisto for ever* – Tom Lanoye's play based on Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*. Roman einer Karriere, directed by Guy Cassiers – before the 2006 local elections in Antwerp.

²⁶ Vlaams belang, 'Geen censuur', 10 March 2005. <www.vlaamsbelang.org/0/381/>.[accessed 14 April 2012].

²⁷ Dewinter, F. *Eigen stad eerst?*, De Standaard, 26 February 2005, p. 30.

²⁸ Annemans, 'Over kunst en politiek. . . .'

²⁹ Dewinter, 'Ter Zake'.

who would *want* to speak out for the VB or its viewpoints. This might explain why Dewinter resorts to a *l'art pour l'art* discourse in arguing for a disconnection between theatre and politics. In doing so, the VB uses the idea of the autonomy of art from politics in an attempt to limit precisely that autonomy. Even if the argument is based on the VB being a democratically elected party, this argument has an authoritarian character, for it gives the VB the right to determine what artists can and cannot say. The party's definition of democracy is limited to elections and does not accept the legitimacy of the non-electoral politics of artists. These are dismissed as the strategies of a leftist élite opposing a party it cannot beat democratically. The party even turns the criticism of authoritarianism around by arguing that the theatres' opposition to the VB 'simply continue[s] a long tradition of abuse and manipulation of art for political goals and political indoctrination'.³⁰ This shows how populism does not merely serve to present the VB as the party of the people and to claim signifier democracy, but also to delegitimize political opponents as an élite that uses undemocratic tactics against the party of the people.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to shed light on the VB by analysing its rhetoric about the Flemish city theatres. In VB rhetoric about the theatre, nationalism, conservatism and populism reinforce each other. This results in the construction of a strong antagonism. On one side there is the VB, the party of the (ordinary) people, who wish to protect their own identity from changes caused to their environment by increasing immigration, and who are not interested in and/or are offended by the experimental high art produced by the theatres. On the other side are the city theatres and their audiences, who form an artistic élite that lives a protected life, is ashamed of its Flemish identity and embraces immigration, produces difficult art for a small élitist audience, aims to offend the feelings of the majority of ordinary people and supports the political establishment. In VB rhetoric, the two groups and what they stand for are almost completely opposed. This might explain the VB's strong criticism (and that of the theatres as well): there are many reasons to be displeased, and, in view of who the VB addresses as voters and how, the party has little to lose when it criticises the theatres. While the VB presents itself as a democratic party, its attempts to enforce what it considers unquestionable nationalist, conservative and populist demands, and the refusal to accept the legitimacy of opposing views and political opposition from outside of political parties, give VB rhetoric an authoritarian character.

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