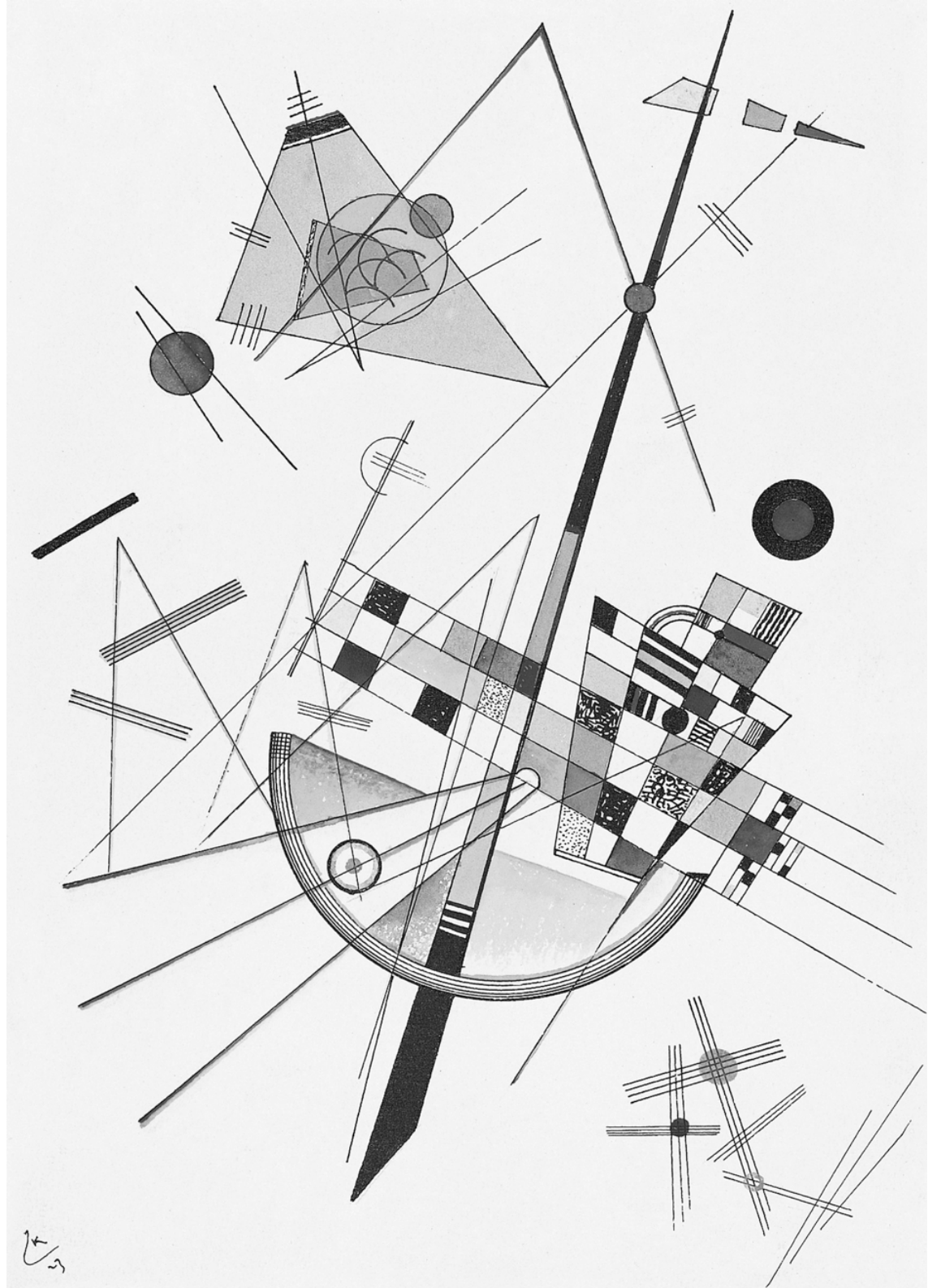


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RED FLAGS FOR CIVIC SPACE IN FLANDERS?

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Red flags for Civic Space in Flanders?

This longread is based on the publication
'Safeguarding Civic Space for a Vital Democracy'
(*'De civiele ruimte vrijwaren voor een vitale democratie'*)
a study conducted by a consortium of
KU Leuven (Lode Vermeersch) and the University of
Antwerp (Stijn Oosterlynck), in collaboration with Filip
De Rynck and Bram Verschuere (both Ghent University),
commissioned by Socius, the support and expertise
centre for civil society organizations in the field of
culture based in Flanders and Brussels.

What is civic space?

Climate activists express their discontent through a non-violent action at an industrial site. A neighbourhood platform engages legal counsel and, together with residents, submits a collective objection against the closure of the local library. A trade union distributes its views via leaflets at the public market of a small municipality. Cultural organisations jointly address a critical letter to a minister. Care organisations draft a shared memorandum on how to move care policy forward. A women's organisation produces a "safety map" of the city to draw policymakers' attention to unsafe and poorly lit areas. Parents with a migration background initiate reading-promotion activities. A group of grandparents sets up a "walking bus" so that young children can walk to school safely together.

These are all ways in which citizens come together and put forward their ideas about how they would like society to change. This is only possible because they take, and are granted, the space to do so. We refer to this as civic space.

Civic space thus denotes a concrete and dynamic practice. It is the societal space for action in which groups of citizens and organisations can freely associate, participate, and express themselves – also in critical terms. This space enables citizen movements and civil society organisa-

tions to make their voices heard, including when these voices challenge dominant narratives. In that sense, civic space allows them to engage in political action in their own way. They are not the only actors making use of this space – media, universities, universities of applied sciences, and artists do so as well – but civil society organisations constitute its core.

Civic space and democracy

Civic space does not emerge automatically; it must be actively shaped by people. Within a democracy, it is anchored in fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of expression, association, participation, and collective action. When civic organisations are prevented from voicing critical perspectives and are effectively silenced, they lose this space. Saying that people must "make" civic space also implies that it is not a residual category. Civic space follows its own logic, one that is grounded in collectivity (citizens act together), normativity (citizens hold particular views on society), and communication and dialogue (citizens deliberate, engage in exchange, and explore what connects them).

The extent to which an autonomous civil society can make use of civic space does not depend solely on the fundamental rights and freedoms inherent to a democracy; civic space is in itself also essential to the proper functioning of that democracy. There are several reasons for this.

Citizen movements and civil society organisations often act as catalysts in the defence and realisation of human rights, which for many organisations lie at the core of their mission. They also create arenas for public debate where people practise democratic skills, such as building consensus or learning to deal with difference. In doing so, civil society helps sustain trust in organisations and institutions that play a role in society, such as the judiciary or social security systems. In this way, civil society both strengthens confidence in democratic governance and provides it with broad societal support.

Moreover, a critical civil society can help prevent abuses of power or flawed public policy by identifying problems at an early stage and raising them in the public domain. Finally, civil society organisations drive innovation by developing new forms of service provision themselves. They often experiment well before such initiatives are institutionalised or taken up in policy or large-scale structures, for example in neighbourhood-based care networks, cooperative mobility solutions such as car sharing, or housing cooperatives that offer alternatives to traditional owner-occupation or rental markets.

There are thus multiple reasons why democracy functions better when civil society is granted sufficient civic space and is recognised for its role and contribution to democratic life and to shaping the direction of society.

Shrinking civic space?

There are strong indications that civic space is under pressure worldwide. In a growing number of countries, including in Europe, signals are emerging that citizens' free initiatives are being constrained. This pressure ranges from measures that make it more difficult for organisations with critical voices to express themselves freely and autonomously, to the outright repression of such organisations. In the academic literature, this phenomenon is referred to as *shrinking civic space*.

This pressure on civic space does not occur by coincidence alongside the rise of so-called illiberal democracies. While illiberal democracies may outwardly continue to resemble representative democracies – for instance by maintaining elections – they gradually dismantle civic space as a strategy to entrench authoritarian governance. In illiberal democracies, the core principles of the rule of law are typically also weakened. Yet it is precisely these rule-of-law principles that protect civic space, for example through systems of separation of powers and mutual checks and balances between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The rule of law also guarantees freedom of opinion, as well as the rights to association and assembly. It safeguards a range of fundamental rights, including education, work, a healthy living environment, and housing, and provides protection for mino-

rities. Restrictions on civic space therefore often go hand in hand with interventions that undermine the functioning of the rule of law.

Civic space under pressure in Flanders: intentional interventions or changing times?

In our country as well, there are indications that civic space is under pressure and contracting. To assess such claims, it is important to recognise that civic space is not easily measured. It has no fixed or ideal form; it is dynamic and continuously evolving. Two types of factors shape this evolution. On the one hand, there are intentional interventions: deliberate policy choices by governments or other actors that can expand or restrict the civic space available to citizen initiatives and civil society organisations. Examples include changes to legislation, funding regimes, or administrative requirements aimed at shifting the boundaries of civic space. On the other hand, broader structural changes in society also play a role, such as individualisation, digitalisation, and polarisation. These trends likewise affect how citizens engage and how organisations can and may operate, but they are not the direct result of decisions by policymakers or other power holders.

We provide two examples of changing civic space. They illustrate how certain interventions

may be deliberately aimed at reshaping this space, but also how structural developments can lead to similar outcomes.

Example 1

A politician who uses harsh language against a civil society organisation on social media may do so with the intention of intimidating or discouraging that organisation. At the same time, the use of confrontational and polemical language may simply reflect the spirit of the times. For many politicians today, this has become a primary way of conducting public debate. The specific nature of the medium also plays a role, as online communication tends to be sharper and more polarised than face-to-face interaction.

Example 2

Questioning or reducing civil society organisations' access to consultation and advisory bodies with politicians and civil servants can be interpreted as a deliberate narrowing of the civic space through which these organisations seek to influence policy. Yet it may equally be understood as a democratically legitimate response to shifting electoral preferences or emerging societal challenges. It can also reflect criticism of the functioning of certain civil society organisations that claim a monopoly on policy influence.

Whether a particular development is experienced as an intentional and targeted attack on civic space, or rather as a sign of changing times and structures, therefore often depends

on interpretation. What stands out is that civil society organisations assess such developments differently, depending on their relationships with public authorities, their position, theme or sector, and their internal strategies. An organisation actively engaged in promoting social inclusion and diversity may experience exclusion from a consultation process as a deliberate marginalisation of the voices of vulnerable minority groups in policymaking. Other similar organisations, by contrast, may interpret the same incident as a signal that they need to strengthen their organisational capacity and reposition themselves accordingly.

Another example concerns a civil society organisation with close ties to a local authority, which may be able to express dissatisfaction with policy through regular consultation structures or informal “behind-the-scenes” contacts. Organisations with fewer political connections, however, are more likely to end up in public confrontation, precisely because they are more readily perceived by politicians as “external” actors. Different positions within civic space thus lead to different experiences and, in turn, shape perceptions of being targeted.

A final illustration of the diversity of experiences related to interventions in civic space can be found in social dialogue between trade unions and employers’ organisations on wages, working conditions, and socio-economic policy. This highly institutionalised form of consultation has developed historically in Belgium, but

it is increasingly subject to criticism from both outside and within. Some elected politicians consider it incompatible with what is often called “the primacy of the political” and seek to bypass it. At the same time, internal criticism is voiced by, for example, more militant trade union members who argue that their organisation has become too embedded in institutionalized structures and therefore insufficiently acts as an independent and combative actor. This shows that adjustments to this form of consultation do not necessarily amount to a deliberate, externally driven contraction of civic space from the political side; they may also signal an internal process of repositioning.

Two perspectives for assessing civic space

It is important to note that indications of deliberate restrictions on civic space by politicians do not necessarily mean that Belgium is on the verge of sliding into an illiberal democracy. To make such an assessment, it is essential to have a clear understanding of how civic space is contracting. For our country, we propose examining this through two perspectives.

The *first perspective* concerns the protection of human rights. The international debate on shrinking civic space primarily focuses on this perspective, evaluating shifts in civic space based on the extent to which human rights are affected.

ted. Worldwide, there is abundant evidence that these rights are under pressure in many countries: reports from international organisations highlight increasing restrictions on freedoms such as expression, association, and assembly¹. Data from human rights monitors also show that repressive measures against citizen initiatives and critical civil society organisations are becoming more frequent. While Belgium cannot be compared to countries such as Russia, Belarus, India, Hungary, or Turkey in terms of human rights violations, there are nonetheless concerning signals here as well.

The Federal Institute for Human Rights in Belgium (called FIRM) emphasised in a 2024 report that human rights in Belgium should not be taken for granted. Their report, for instance, illustrates how the right to information is under pressure due to restrictive regulations, highlights incidents of violence against journalists, and points to so-called SLAPP procedures that have an intimidating effect². Of the 159 Belgian human rights organisations surveyed by the Institute, a large proportion indicated that they adjust their communication style out of fear of potential repercussions.

Also in 2024, the Flemish Bar Association analysed 677 policy proposals from the election programs of Flemish parties in terms of their compliance with the rule of law, covering areas

such as discrimination, freedom of expression, press freedom, labour, administrative enforcement, justice, privacy, asylum, and migration. The analysis revealed that a substantial share of these proposals of political parties are potentially or directly threatening to core rule-of-law principles, such as access to justice, an independent judiciary, and adherence to international obligations.

The *second perspective* focuses on active subsidiarity. Active subsidiarity means that civil society organisations take on social responsibilities and have a voice in policymaking, in exchange for guaranteed autonomy and financial or other support from the government. In other words, civil society contributes to policy while receiving certain assurances from policymakers. In Flanders, the principle of active subsidiarity has historically guided the relationship between government and civil society³. To this day, it remains an important reference point in the Flemish debate on civic space, perhaps even more so than discussions about human rights.

Compared with many other countries, Flanders has a highly structured and institutionalised system of policy consultation with civil society, combined with substantial financial support for the operation of societal organisations. This relatively unique situation creates an extensive civic space that is also strongly supported by the government.

¹ <https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-restrictions-to-freedom-of-expression-as-democracy-loses-ground>

² *Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation* are lawsuits primarily intended to intimidate individuals or organisations and discourage them from speaking out in public debate.

³ Oosterlynck, S., Vermeersch, L., Verschuere, B., De Rynck, F., Lamberts, M., & Verhaeghe, B. (2020), *Middenveld. Tussen aanval en verdediging*. Leuven: LannooCampus.

Nevertheless, concern is growing in this area as well. An increasing number of citizen organisations and civil society associations report that support from public authorities – and potentially from the broader public – for this traditionally subsidised partnership is declining. They increasingly experience criticism of the government's active subsidy policy, of their established role as policy interlocutors and advisors, of their function as collective service providers in place of the government, and of the combination of being both dependent recipients of subsidies and autonomous, critical actors vis-à-vis the state. In other words, the role of and support for civil society is being called into question more frequently.

Interventions in Civic Space

What mechanisms drive the shrinking of civic space? Based on our own survey of people active in civil society organisations, we can distinguish seven types of intentional interventions. By interventions, we mean categories of ways in which, for example, political actors can deliberately put pressure on civic space for civil society organisations:

- **Discursive interventions** take place in the media and across social networks. These include negative portrayals, the framing of organisations as “subsidy suckers” or “elitist,” as well as coordinated online attacks. Such practices erode public support for civil society organisations.
- **Psychological interventions** consist of intimidation and insinuations, both in the media and in real-life interactions. These interventions seek to undermine organisations' self-confidence and legitimacy. Deliberately ignoring organisations' advice or memoranda, or intentionally excluding them from consultations, also falls under this category. As with discursive interventions, psychological interventions often produce a chilling effect: out of fear, organisations become more cautious in fulfilling their public role.
- **Bureaucratic interventions**, in the form of increased administrative regulation, are not always intentional but they can be and they often have negative consequences for smaller civil society organisations. Examples include overregulation, complex reporting requirements, and strict governance rules.
- **Legal interventions** are increasing through procedures brought against organisations, such as SLAPP cases. This legal pressure can deter organisations from speaking out critically. At the same time, civil society organisations are themselves increasingly taking the government to court, often because other attempts to be heard are perceived as insufficient.
- **Financial interventions** are among the most direct ways to influence civic space. They include reducing subsidies or attaching strict conditions to funding. Recently, for instance,

the Flemish government threatened to reduce subsidies for non-profit organisations that had accumulated substantial financial reserves in the past – whether out of financial prudence or in preparation for future investments. Given the strong dependence on subsidies among many civil society organisations, a reduction in funding, or even the threat of it, may force them to adjust their mission or activities simply to maintain operations, ensure continuity, and remain financially stable.

- *Interventions in policy frameworks* can also be experienced as restrictions on civic space. They manifest in stricter decrees, more stringent agreements between organisations and the government, and a shift from structural to project-based funding. Such interventions increase organisations' dependence, make their operations less predictable, and limit their ability to plan for the long term. The emphasis on (excessive) control and evaluation reinforces the sense of government steering. Organisations also observe a trend toward greater decision-making power for the executive branch – especially regarding subsidies – which they experience as problematic.
- *Power interventions*, finally, concern the question of who is considered a legitimate actor in democratic decision-making. In the current debate, “the primacy of the political” is central: the idea that democratically

elected politicians claim ultimate decision-making authority and a directive role in policymaking, above other actors such as civil servants or civil society organisations. This view, increasingly embraced by politicians in Belgium, conflicts with the earlier-mentioned principle of active subsidiarity. These tensions around the primacy of the political became tangible in Flemish civil society in 2025, when the Flemish Government unilaterally withdrew “socio-cultural work” subsidies from several non-profit organisations on the grounds of an (unproven) incitement to violence, and also questioned subsidies for organisations that dared to take the government to court in certain cases.

The seven interventions outlined above together constitute a complex whole. One type of intervention often triggers another. This repertoire of possible measures places civic space under pressure not only in policy, legal, and financial terms, but also psychologically and rhetorically. In many cases, pressure on civic space begins with psychological and rhetorical actions, gradually evolving into more overt exercises of power. The cumulative effect is a shift from an open and autonomous space toward a more controlled and conditioned environment, ultimately threatening the vitality of democracy.

Strategies to safeguard civic space

To safeguard civic space and strengthen their position within it, civil society organisations can navigate strategically on three levels.

1. *At the macro level*, it is crucial to (continue to) make the societal value of civil society visible. Organisations can actively communicate their role as bridge-builders and innovators, for example by demonstrating how they channel social discontent into constructive dialogue. Politicising without partisan alignment is essential here: not by attaching themselves to a single party, but by maintaining dialogue with all democratic actors. Innovative approaches, such as citizens' panels, help reach new audiences and foster inclusion.
2. *At the meso level*, collaboration is a key strategy. Coalitions between organisations increase collective leverage, as illustrated by joint actions against the proposed protest ban in late 2023 in Belgium. Strategic networks with unexpected partners – such as businesses or universities – can further broaden support. Deploying expertise toward government is also essential. Civil society organisations often possess decades of knowledge on complex issues, as seen in the Oosterweel case in Antwerp, where

citizen movements participated in negotiations and contributed to political consensus. Reliable communication and, where necessary, legal action remain important tools for enforcing rights, as demonstrated in the so-called 'Climate Case' ('Klimaatzaak').

3. *At the micro level*, the level of individual organisations, the focus lies on trust and resilience. Organisations must demonstrate their independence while also showing that they are broadly relevant to society. Strategic communication helps articulate the organisational mission clearly without unnecessary polarisation. Diversifying resources is another crucial strategy: organisations that depend too heavily on a single funding source are more vulnerable to the pressures of a shrinking civic space. For this reason, some organisations pursue multiple funding channels or complementary income through membership fees, sponsorship, or service provision, making them less susceptible to political shifts and opposition.

These strategies require a deliberate balance between cooperation and contestation, between pragmatism and principle. Only in this way can civil society continue to fulfil its role as a driving force of democracy.

Conclusion

There are clear warning signs regarding the state of civic space in Belgium. These signals are visible both from the perspective of safeguarding fundamental rights – such as freedom of expression – and from the perspective of active subsidiarity. Polarisation and negative framing increase the associated risks. We also observe shifts toward the executive branch, which is increasingly concentrating decision-making power and, in doing so, reducing the implicit influence and voice of civil society organisations. These tendencies prepare the public system for those who wish to govern in a more authoritarian manner. Based on our survey of Flemish civil society organisations, we find clear grounds for concern about the growing discourse aimed at restricting the space available to civil society in Belgium. It is therefore high time to make the quality of civic space in our country itself a subject of public debate and to continue monitoring it closely.

Afterword

This text was based on the publication ‘Safe-guarding Civic Space for a Vital Democracy’ (‘De civiele ruimte vrijwaren voor een vitale democratie’), commissioned by Socius (Steunpunt sociaal-cultureel werk) and published in May 2025.

The publication builds on a review of the literature, but its key insights are drawn from 26 individual interviews and 3 group interviews. The authors spoke with staff members of large, established (umbrella) organisations as well as employees and volunteers from smaller citizen initiatives and civil society organisation within the (socio-cultural) civil society sector. Group discussions were organised with larger organisations, such as trade unions. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of coordinating organisations (such as Socius and De Federatie) and fellow researchers who have been following the topic of shrinking civic space over an extended period. Staff from the Department of Culture, Youth and Media also shared their perspectives in a focus group. We would like to thank all of them for their valuable contributions.

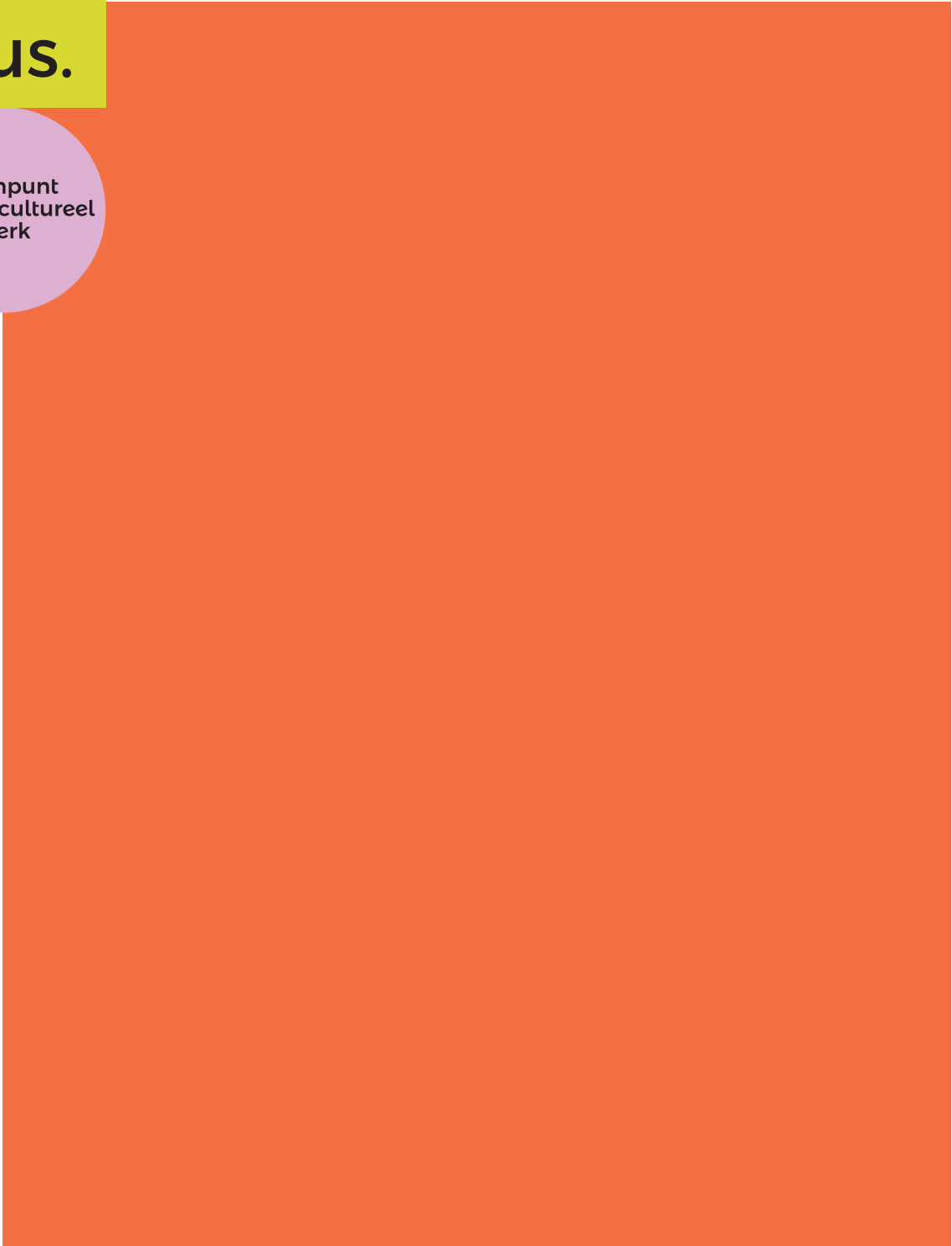
Vermeersch L., Oosterlynck, S., De Rynck, F., Verschuere, B. (2025). *De civiele ruimte vrijwaren voor een vitale democratie: kennisdossier*. Brussel: Socius.



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