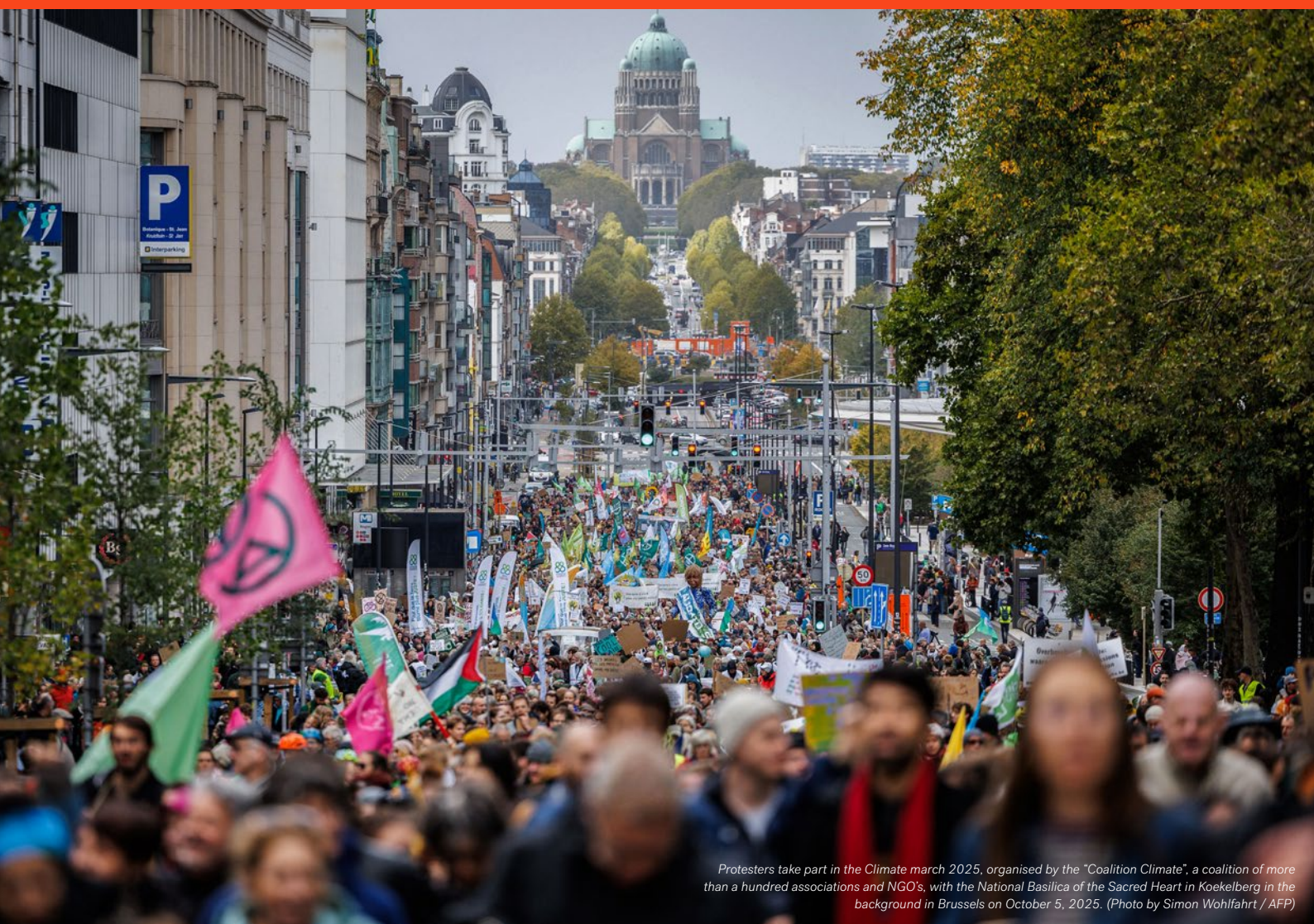


Belgium: freedom of association under threat

When Arizona takes its lead from France



Protesters take part in the Climate march 2025, organised by the "Coalition Climate", a coalition of more than a hundred associations and NGO's, with the National Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Koekelberg in the background in Brussels on October 5, 2025. (Photo by Simon Wohlfahrt / AFP)



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1. Introduction

In February 2025, Belgium acquired a new federal government formed from what is called the ‘Arizona’ coalition in reference to the flag of the US state whose colours are the same as those of the different political parties comprising it.¹ From its formation, the government of Bart de Wever announced its intention to strengthen the mechanisms for controlling civil society, using measures which broadly echo those in force in neighbouring France. In particular, the “Quintin draft bill”, named after and initiated by the Minister of the Interior, Bernard Quintin, displays a strong resemblance to the French ‘separatism law’ adopted in 2021, which opened the way to the government-led dissolution of multiple organisations and collectives.

The French experience highlights the structural impact on the exercising of public freedoms that such political and normative developments can produce. In September 2025, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory), a partnership between the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), published a report² in collaboration with its member organisation in France, the Human Rights League (Ligue des droits de l’Homme - LDH), documenting the restrictions on the freedom of association and the freedom to protest in France. The report’s principal findings included a major setback for freedom of association in the form of an increasingly hostile attitude adopted by public authorities towards civil society. This was expressed simultaneously in the development of legislation designed to hamper the exercising of this freedom, the introduction of restrictions on organisations’ access to public funding, and a shrinking of institutional spaces for dialogue with third sector bodies.

The same trends can be observed in Belgium, although they have not progressed as far and fall within a distinct political and institutional context. This convergence demands particular vigilance. The investigation conducted by the Observatory in France demonstrates that measures presented as one-off or targeted can have lasting and damaging effects on civil society as a whole, creating a climate of mistrust that contributes to the erosion of the democratic framework and the rule of law.

In June 2025, the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (FIRM-IFDH) raised the alarm concerning the “progressive reduction in the space available to citizens in Belgium to freely express their views, protest and participate fully in democratic life”.³ While 2025 seems to have marked an important stage in the escalation of attacks on the freedoms of association and assembly, civic space had already been shrinking for several years. In 2024, the FIRM-IFDH published the results of a study on the situation for human rights defenders carried out in 2022 and 2023, providing evidence of the rise in threats and pressures directed at civil society organisations from 2020 onwards. In 2021, the CIVICUS Monitor⁴ had already classed Belgium among those countries where civic space was classed as narrowed, whereas until then it had been considered open. This downgrading can

¹ The N-VA (Flemish nationalists), the MR (French-speaking liberals), Vooruit (Flemish socialists), CD&V (Christian democrats) and the Engagés (centrists).

² The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and the Human Rights League (2025), *France: Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*. Online: https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/20250922_fidh_rapport-obs-france_en-web.pdf

³ Press release from the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (FIRM-IFDH), *L’IFDH tire la sonnette d’alarme dans son rapport annuel : le droit de manifester est sous pression* [The IFDH raises the alarm in its annual report: the right to protest is under pressure], 16 June 2025, online: <https://www.institutfederaaldroitshumains.be/fr/lifdh-tire-la-sonnette-dalarme-dans-son-rapport-annuel-le-droit-de-manifester-est-sous-pression> [Accessed 8 July 2026].

⁴ CIVICUS Monitor is a research tool providing data on the state of civil society and civil liberties in 196 countries. Depending on the data collected from civil society and from independent evaluations, the civic space in a country is classified as open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, or closed. Available online at <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

be explained particularly by the proliferation of attacks on the freedom to protest, characterised by greater police violence, which interfere with the freedoms of association and assembly.⁵

Furthermore, the developments observed in Belgium are part of a wider move towards reducing civic space at regional level. Throughout Europe, the trend is towards rolling back democracy and questioning the legitimacy of counterbalancing powers, as characterised by the growing restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly.



Credit: Sophie Hugon / Hans Lucas / Hans Lucas via AFP

Legende: Man holding a sign Arizona during the mobilisation of the cultural sector in Brussels in Belgium on November 26, 2025. Gathering of the cultural sector on the third and last day of the intersectoral national strike action. Trade unions and workers gather to express their discontent with the measures of the Arizona government.

Who are human rights defenders?

The term 'human rights defender' refers to any individual or group taking peaceful action alone or in association with others on behalf of individuals or groups in order to promote, defend and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms that are recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and guaranteed by various international human rights instruments. As a result of their active commitment to defending human rights, defenders are exposed to reprisals, harassment, and rights violation by state and non-state actors worldwide.

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly on 9 December 1998, stresses individuals' right to promote, to strive to protect and to fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms at national and international level, as well as the responsibilities and duties of states to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In addition to individual situations, the Observatory analyses the restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly as components of civic space and essential preconditions for effectively exercising the right to defend human rights.

⁵ See, in particular, Police Watch, *Violences policières : pour des mécanismes de plainte accessibles, efficaces et indépendants* [Police violence: arguing for accessible, effective and independent complaint mechanisms], April 2022, online: https://policewatch.be/files/Rapport%20Police%20Watch%20LDH%202022_FR.pdf; Human Rights League press release, *Les nasses interdites mais toujours utilisées par la police bruxelloise : la LDH saisit une nouvelle fois la justice* [Kettling banned but still used by Brussels police: LDH turns again to the courts], 17 June 2026, online: <https://www.liguedh.be/violences-policieres/cp-17-06-26-les-nasses-interdites-mais-toujours-utilisees-par-la-police-bruxelloise-la-lbh-saisit-une-nouvelle-fois-la-justice/>; joint declaration by the Observatory and the LDH, *Belgique : les manifestations contre la réforme de l'enseignement alimentent les inquiétudes liées au rétrécissement de l'espace civique* [Belgium: demonstrations against education reform fuel concerns about shrinking civic space], 25 June 2026, online: <https://www.fidh.org/fr/regions/europe-asie-centrale/belgique/belgique-les-manifestations-contre-la-reforme-de-l-enseignement>.

The standards for protecting freedom of association in Belgium

Freedom of association in Belgium is enshrined in Article 27 of the Constitution, according to which “Belgians have the right to associate; this right cannot be subject to any preventative measure”. However, the Constitutional Court interprets this provision in the light of European and international law, according to which freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly are generally coupled together and jointly protected. This is the case in Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 12 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The freedoms of association and assembly are also guaranteed under Article 11 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, according to which “No restrictions shall be placed on the exercise of these rights other than such as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”. This provision is repeated in Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The current report also draws on the Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association adopted by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. According to these guidelines, respect for freedom of association implies that the “State shall not interfere with the rights and freedoms of associations and of persons exercising their right to freedom of association. It shall protect them from interference by non-state actors. The State shall also facilitate the exercise of freedom of association by creating an enabling environment in which associations can operate”.⁶ This definition of freedom of association, which was also taken up by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), opens the way to including an analysis of the restrictions relating to the relevant physical and verbal assaults on organisations and collectives and on the individuals belonging to them by state and non-state actors.

⁶ *Guidelines on Freedom of Association*, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 101st plenary session (Venice, 12-13 December 2014), para. 27.

2. Growing hostility of public authorities towards civil society

Throughout Europe, attacks on freedom of association are accompanied by increasingly hostile rhetoric directed at bodies and collectives viewed as most critical of government policies. Organisations and activists are sometimes likened to extremists, criminals or simply parasites. This leitmotiv actually plays an integral part in shrinking civic space. Respect for public freedoms in reality requires States not to curtail freedom of association (a negative obligation) as well as requiring them to facilitate its exercising (a positive obligation).⁷ In this respect, public authorities are obliged not only to refrain from defamatory or discriminatory speech directed against third sector actors and human rights defenders in general but are also required to sanction the authors of such discourse, including private actors. Consequently, as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has pointed out, contributing to this narrative amounts to violating or facilitating the violation of these rights.⁸

In France, the labelling of environmental activists protesting against the creation of giant irrigation reservoirs that use pumped ground water⁹ at Sainte Soline as “eco-terrorists” by the former Minister of the Interior, Gérald Darmanin, prompted fierce reactions. Equating protestors with a threat, a danger to public order, largely contributed to legitimising the unprecedented scale of the police response and the violence committed by the officers involved.¹⁰ The same approach consisting of labelling environmental defenders as criminals can also be found in Belgium. A notable victim of this is the Code Rouge collective which calls for civil disobedience.¹¹ In July 2025, at a plenary session of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives,¹² the collective was likened to “extreme jihadism” by the deputy Franky Demon (CD&V), who condemned “radicalisation within the climate movement” and went as far as to refer to “environmental fundamentalism”.¹³ The Flemish far right-wing deputy Sam Van Rooy (Vlaams Belang) went even further with his description of the environmental activists as a “hysterical movement” and “green poison” who conduct “climate terrorism”.¹⁴ This discourse demonstrates the semantic drift on the part of public authorities, which contributes to portraying defenders who engage in environmental civil disobedience as dangerous groups, thereby justifying a robust response from institutions that goes as far as banning or dissolving them.

Public authorities also have in their crosshairs anti-fascist groups who are subject to similar comparisons. As an example, in September 2025 the president of the MR (liberal party), Georges-Louis Bouchez, called for the dissolution of the so-called ‘anti-fa’ movement, which he described as “the greatest threat to our democracy”.¹⁵ Furthermore, the president of MR went on to attack the whole

⁷ ECHR, 20 October 2005, *Ouranio Toxo and Others v. Greece*, Application no. 74989/01, para. 37.

⁸ Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, United Nations General Assembly, 30 July 2024, A/79/263, para. 9.

⁹ Giant irrigation reservoirs (*méga-bassines* in French) are vast artificial, open-air reservoirs designed to store water drawn from water tables in winter for use in irrigating farm crops in summer. Defended by some farming unions as a climate adaptation tool, they are vigorously opposed by many scientists, environmental groups, unions, and local elected representatives, notably because of the monopolising of the resource for the benefit of a minority of intensive agri-businesses, their environmental impact, and the bypassing of democratic consultation in their implementation.

¹⁰ See France: *Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*, op. cit., p. 54.

¹¹ For a definition in international law of civil disobedience, See boxed text below – “Crackdown on civil disobedience in defiance of international law” (p. 16).

¹² The Chamber of Representatives is one of the two houses of the Belgian Federal Parliament, the other being the Senate.

¹³ Chamber of Representatives, plenary session on 10 July 2025, full minutes (CRIV 56 PLEN 059), p. 29. Online: <https://www.lachambre.be/doc/PCRI/pdf/56/ip059.pdf> [Accessed 13 July 2026].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵ See Caroline Vandenaabee, *Georges-Louis Bouchez menace de “dissoudre les Antifa”: pourquoi ce n’est pas si simple* [Georges-Louis Bouchez threatens to “dissolve the Antifas”: why it is not so simple], *RTBF actus*, 19 September 2025. Online: <https://www.rtbf.be/article/georges-louis-bouchez-menace-de-dissoudre-les-antifa-pourquoi-ce-n-est-pas-si-simple-11603776> [Accessed 9 July 2026].

of the third sector. In a speech to his party voters, he stated: “I’m tired of hearing from morning to night a whole series of organisations who are greatly concerned by the fate of those who are guilty”.¹⁶

These campaigns, which are intended to denigrate, are regularly accompanied by a questioning of the legitimate right of some organisations to receive public funding. Thus, in the course of parliamentary questions to the Minister of the Interior, the MR deputy Denis Ducarme singled out for attack the Collective for Inclusion and Against Islamophobia in Belgium (Collectif pour l’inclusion et contre l’islamophobie en Belgique - CIIB), which he accused of being close to the Muslim Brotherhood, condemning the fact it had been “generously subsidised” by the State and the European Union.¹⁷ Subsequently, the deputy asked for a commission of enquiry to be established to examine public funding granted to organisations considered “radical” and “dangerous”. Beyond this particular case, and as has been documented by the Observatory in its investigation conducted in France, this type of language conveys the idea that organisations which support discourse or actions that run counter to government policy should not receive public money. Even when funding is not directly questioned, this rhetoric has a deterrent effect and increases the risk that all civil society organisations will feel under pressure to self-censor.

By imposing this type of discourse, public authorities kill two birds with one stone: they participate in delegitimising civil society actors and legitimise the repressive policies used against these actors, before their introduction. Thus, this rhetoric acts both to prepare the way for and to justify restrictive measures and, particularly, legislation whose objective is precisely to exert greater control over third sector activities.

Media ‘cordon sanitaire’

It is worth noting that, in France, the media contribute significantly to spreading this hostile narrative, particularly under the influence of ultraconservative billionaires such as Vincent Bolloré or Pierre-Édouard Stérin, who own an important proportion of the media.¹⁸ Although Belgian media are in the hands of a few large companies, French-speaking Belgium has established a practice referred to as a ‘media cordon sanitaire’,¹⁹ which involves not giving the far right a direct voice in order to limit the spread of hate speech or discourse inciting repression. However, this practice alone is insufficient to counter such discourse because the far right does not have the monopoly on campaigns to discredit the third sector.²⁰ According to a survey conducted by the FIRM-IFDH, 22% of the Belgian organisations interviewed had been subject to a negative media campaign between 2020 and 2022.²¹

¹⁶ Speech by Georges-Louis Bouchez at the MR summer convention, 14 September 2025. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6yIgl0CMKg&time_continue=2&source_ve_path=MjE0Mjgz&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mr.be%2F&embeds_referring_origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mr.be [Accessed 13 July 2026].

¹⁷ Chamber of Representatives, plenary session on 10 July 2025, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁸ *France: Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Sonia Kronlund, podcast series *Les Pieds sur Terre*, France Culture, 8 January 2026. Online: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-pieds-sur-terre/les-pieds-sur-terre-emission-du-jeudi-08-janvier-2026-9154130>.

²⁰ Moreover, the ‘media cordon sanitaire’ has not been applied in Flanders.

²¹ IFDH (2024), *Espace pour les défenseur-e-s des droits humains en Belgique. La situation des organisations de défense des droits humains – 2022/2023* [Space for human rights defenders in Belgium. The situation of human rights organisations – 2022-2023], p. 41.

3. Legislation aimed at gagging third sector organisations

Since the beginning of Emmanuel Macron's first term in office in 2017, about forty administrative dissolutions were issued against organisations or collectives in France. The growing use of this mechanism principally arises from the adoption in August 2021 of the law "strengthening respect for the principles of the Republic", the so-called separatism law. While the administrative dissolution procedure has existed in French law since the enactment of the law of 10 January 1936 governing private combat groups and militias, it was supplemented by successive reforms that gradually expanded the grounds for dissolution. But the law was relatively rarely enforced until 2021.²² By considerably extending the grounds for the dissolution of informal organisations or groups, the 2021 law significantly increased the powers of the executive, which it readily used.

In Belgium, the draft bill concerning administrative bans on the activities of legal persons, businesses without legal status, and organisations or groups posing a serious and present threat to national security (referred to as the "Quintin draft bill"), adopted by the Council of Ministers at its second reading on 18 July 2026,²³ appears to be broadly drawn from the French model. Like the separatism law, the text is presented as an instrument to combat radicalisation and extremism which the executive can wield in order to issue banning measures against organisations or groups with no legal status. Both pieces of legislation display several common characteristics, which raise serious concerns regarding the freedom of association.



Credit: Dirk Waem / Belga / AFP

Legende: Minister of Interior Bernard Quintin attends a plenary session of the Chamber at the federal parliament in Brussels, on September 17, 2026.

²² Since the introduction of the law of 10 January 1936, one hundred administrative dissolution orders have been issued against de facto or informal organisations or groups, forty of them since 2017. A clear increase in the use of this provision can therefore be observed in recent years, notably during the period when Gérald Darmanin was Minister of the Interior (27 dissolution orders between July 2020 and September 2024).

²³ An initial draft of the bill titled "Draft Bill concerning the administrative ban directed at de facto legal entities, bodies without legal status, organisations or groups posing a serious and present threat to national security or the maintenance of democratic and constitutional order" had been adopted at its first reading by the Council of Ministers the year before, on 18 July 2025.

The first point in common lies in **the reliance on vague notions which leave the way open to a largely discretionary interpretation** by the administration. The separatism law in France introduced two grounds for dissolution (Article L212-1 of the Internal Security Code provides for a total of seven) which risk being arbitrarily applied. Firstly, the grounds for dissolving organisations “which provoke armed demonstrations in the street”, introduced by the 1936 law, is replaced by that of inciting “armed demonstrations or violent actions directed at persons or property”. The notion of “violence” against property is particularly problematic in this instance given that French criminal law in principle refers to the damage or destruction of property, while “violence” is applied solely to persons. This evolution considerably lowers the threshold for which an act is considered serious and warrants recourse to administrative dissolution; this measure can now be applied to groups openly declaring their participation in demonstrations during which there is damage to property.²⁴ Secondly, the separatism law extends the grounds for dissolution on the basis of incitement to discrimination, hate or violence, no longer punishing incitement alone but also “the actions which contribute [to it]”. Here again, the notion of contribution is particularly hazy, thereby generating concerns as to how it might be interpreted.

The Quintin draft bill provides for an outright or partial ban on the activities of organisations or collectives “when concrete factors emerge that [said entity] constitutes a serious and present threat to national security”.²⁵ This provision, set out in the revised draft bill adopted in July 2026, replaces the wording of the initial draft which provided for an administrative ban on those entities for acts that “constitute a serious and present threat: 1) either to national security, in so far as these acts seek to allow, facilitate or encourage terrorism, extremism or violent radicalism; 2) or to the maintenance of the democratic and constitutional order in so far as these acts seek to incite hate, discrimination or segregation”.²⁶

This provision was subject to fierce criticism due to its references to ill-defined notions: while terrorism is defined in criminal law, extremism and radicalism refer to concepts that are open to broad and diverse interpretation. This was particularly highlighted by the FIRM-IFDH in its opinion on the draft bill in which it stated that these notions leave “too broad a margin of interpretation to those actors responsible for applying it”.²⁷ The Council of State made the same observation, urging the government to replace or more clearly define these notions in order to fulfil the principles of legality and legal certainty.

Consequently, the reference to “radicalism” was removed from the revised bill, which nonetheless retains support for “extremism” among the acts that potentially lead to a ban on activities. The draft bill refers to organic law of 30 November 1998 on intelligence and security services, which does indeed provide a definition of extremism, but which raises just as many concerns. First, the definition contained in the organic law uses broad and ambiguous concepts: it deals with “attitudes or aims [...] [that are] anarchist, nationalist, authoritarian [...] whether political, ideological, faith-based or philosophical in nature” which would be “contrary in theory or in practice” to certain principles or to the “smooth running of democratic institutions”.²⁸ According to these terms, it is extremely difficult for organisations and collectives to determine precisely and predictably which behaviours or positions are likely to trigger an administrative ban, particularly as the notion of support itself remains ill-defined.²⁹ Above all, the definition of extremism set out in the 1998 law was devised to establish the remits of the intelligence services and not to enable the executive to take coercive measures against civil society organisations.

Despite the warnings from the Council of State and the FIRM-IFDH, the draft bill also targets “the organised or systematic dissemination of content constituting an incitement to commit or presenting

²⁴ France: *Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²⁵ Draft bill concerning an administrative ban on the activities of moral persons, businesses without legal personhood, and informal organisations or groups which constitute a serious and present threat to national security, Article 3§3.

²⁶ Draft bill concerning an administrative ban on the activities of moral persons, businesses without legal personhood, and informal organisations or groups which constitute a serious and present threat to national security, Article 3§3.

²⁷ IFDH, Opinion No. 2025/9 of 18 September 2025, p. 10.

²⁸ Article 8, 1°, c) of the organic law of 30 November 1998 concerning intelligence and security services.

²⁹ Draft bill (revised draft), *op. cit.*, Article 2, 6°.

as legitimate or justifying or encouraging” terrorist offences. This provision, despite being amended to replace terms that were considered too imprecise, reverts to sanctioning as a preventative measure for the crime of glorifying terrorism which was introduced into the new Belgian criminal code that came into force in September 2026, while circumventing the very criteria it established. In light of the context in France, where attempts were made to ban several collectives supporting the Palestinian people, the provision raises fears that it might be misused to criminalise any criticism of the policies of certain states, and particularly those of the Israeli government.

Furthermore, Article 4 of the Quintin draft bill criminalises inciting discrimination and hate by directly referring to the articles in the criminal code. These grounds had also been introduced into French law in 1972, and their use in the context of counter-terrorism had raised serious concerns. In 2020, the Collective for Inclusion and Against Islamophobia in France (Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France, CCIF) was dissolved for provoking hate and discrimination. The decision, which was approved by the Council of State on the basis that the organisation had a duty to moderate hate speech generated by its postings on social media,³⁰ set a worrying precedent regarding the difficulty with ensuring meticulous moderation in the face of the proliferation of online hate speech.

In both countries, officially, these reforms are **justified by the fight against terrorism, separatism or the threats overshadowing democratic institutions**. However, the French experience shows that the scope of their application facilitates the introduction of a restrictive environment that is likely to impact a large number of organisations. The organisations and collectives dissolved since 2021 include several Muslim cultural associations and organisations defending Muslims, environmental defence organisations, collectives supporting the Palestinian people, antifascist organisations, and those perceived as “extreme left wing”. The law, which was initially introduced as an instrument to counter “Islamic separatism”, has thus become a tool deployed against a wide variety of forms of opposition.

In Belgium, political statements associated with the introduction of the Quintin draft bill explicitly designate some organisations as special targets. These are markedly similar to those targeted by the French government. Thus, the 2025-2029 federal government agreement states the desire to create what it describes as “a legal framework to enable the banning, as in our neighbouring countries, of dangerous, radical organisations such as Samidoun [a network operating in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners] because of links to terrorism or the spreading of antisemitism in our country”.³¹ Moreover, several politicians have proclaimed their intention to deploy this instrument against the Code Rouge movement (which advocates for environmental civil disobedience) or against antifascist collectives.³²

Both legislative instruments are based on the **same rationale of bypassing judicial authority**. In both cases, the banning or dissolution measure is applied by the executive and relies essentially on reports drawn up by intelligence services. These documents remain largely confidential, consequently the options for the organisations to contest effectively the evidence held against them are at best reduced. Although the Minister of the Interior, Bernard Quintin, has indicated that the procedure envisaged would respect the adversarial principle, administrative procedure cannot provide the guarantees associated with the right to a fair trial before an independent and impartial court.

The reservations issued in this regard by the Council of State in its opinion of December 2025 – according to which dissolution, being definitive, should be decided by a court – led the Minister of the Interior to table a new version of the bill that would set aside dissolution in favour of measures to ban activities, but which would nonetheless have a markedly similar effect. In fact, in its initial form, which was approved at its first reading in July 2025, the Quintin draft bill provided for several alternative or complementary measures. Whereas the separatism law was expressly intended for the administrative dissolution of organisations or collectives, which in itself entailed a ban on their activities, the draft Belgian legislation distinguished between organisations that could be subject to administrative

³⁰ See Observatoire des libertés associatives [Observatory for the Freedom of Association], *Enquête sur la répression des associations dans le cadre de la lutte contre l’islamisme*, « Une nouvelle chasse aux sorcières » [Investigation into the repression of organisations as part of the fight against Islamism, “A new witch-hunt”], 2022, p. 39.

³¹ Federal coalition agreement 2025-2029, p. 136. Online: https://www.belgium.be/sites/default/files/resources/publication/files/Accord_gouvernemental-Bart_De_Wever_fr.pdf [Accessed 13 July 2026].

³² See section 2 of this Note: “Growing hostility of public authorities towards civil society”.

dissolution if the temporary measures to ban their activities were judged insufficient; and informal groups which, lacking legal status, would be subject to a ban on their activities.

Thus, the revised version of the draft bill protects organisations but not collectives from the dissolution measure, the latter being designated as informal groups without personhood. Furthermore, rather than leaving the judicial authority to take emergency measures via summary proceedings while awaiting more in-depth scrutiny that could inform the judge's final decision, the Belgian executive intends to replace the judicial authority while waiting for this scrutiny to happen on the pretext that legal proceedings "do not always allow a rapid response in situations where there is a serious and present threat".³³ Even temporary banning measures that lead organisations or collectives to cease activities have significant repercussions on the entities concerned and act as a considerable deterrent on the whole of the third sector. By keeping this power in its own hands, the executive signals even more clearly that it intends to exempt itself from the requirements inherent to judicial proceedings and that it is a matter of prevention thereby enabling the executive to intervene before criminal offences are committed.

As for the members of organisations and collectives, they are affected by potential legal repercussions resulting from a ban or administrative dissolution. In France, maintaining or reconstituting an organisation or group that has been dissolved carries a punishment of three years in prison and a 45,000 euro fine.³⁴ The Belgian bill goes further by setting out criminal sanctions for any individual contributing to a banned activity, such as a demonstration or communication campaign.³⁵

For all the reasons above, the Quintin draft bill prompts serious concerns regarding respect for the rights to freedom of association and of expression, as guaranteed by constitutional, European and international law. An order to ban an organisation cannot be issued except in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort given that it significantly infringes the exercising of these rights. This point is made by the European Court of Human Rights which obliges such infringement to be set out in law, to be pursued for legitimate aims and to be necessary in a democratic society.³⁶ In this regard, the Venice Commission points out that "In particular, the principal of proportionality becomes essential in the assessment of whether an association may be prohibited or dissolved. [...] such as when the association has engaged in conduct that creates an imminent threat of violence or other grave violation of the law".³⁷ The FIRM-IFDH in its opinion on the initial version of the bill demonstrated that it did not satisfy the criteria of legality and proportionality, had a disproportionate impact on freedom of association and violated the right to a fair trial as well as the right to effective remedy.³⁸ Although the Minister of the Interior revised his version to remove dissolution in favour of a ban on activities, analysis of the amended bill indicates that the disproportionate impact of the measures set out in the initial bill on freedom of association as noted by the FIRM-IFDH persists.

Given these findings, it can only be hoped that the Minister of the Interior will reconsider his preliminary draft and will not follow the example of his French counterpart who largely ignored the opinions of the Consultative Commission on Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme*, CNCDH) which had twice alerted the government as to the risks to fundamental freedoms posed by the separatism law.

³³ See the Preamble.

³⁴ Article 431-15 of the Criminal Code.

³⁵ Draft bill, *op. cit.*, Article 10.

³⁶ ECHR, 13 February 2003, *Refah Partisi (The Welfare Party) and Others v. Türkiye*, Applications nos. 41340/98, 41342/98, 41243/98 and 41344/98; ECHR, 9 July 2013, *Vona v. Hungary*, Application no. 35943/10.

³⁷ *Guidelines on Freedom of Association*, *op. cit.*, para. 114.

³⁸ IFDH, Opinion No. 2025/9 of 18 September 2025.

4. Financial reprisals directed at dissident voices

An administrative ban, in so far as it entails the immediate suspension of all or part of the activities of the organisation or group concerned, may be seen as directly infringing the freedom of association, but more insidious still are the restrictions imposed on organisations to access public funding which pose a similar existential threat.

In France, the 2021 separatism law, in addition to extending the grounds whereby the executive can dissolve an organisation, provides for the introduction of the Contrat d'engagement républicain (CER) [Contract of Commitment to the Principles of the Republic]. Since 2022, organisations applying for grants from an administrative authority or a body in charge of managing a public service have been required to sign this document. It is an undertaking to respect a number of general principles such as freedom of conscience, equality and human dignity, as well as to refrain from any action contrary to the law or that threatens public order.³⁹ The investigation conducted by the Observatory has revealed that, although the administrative judge has proved reasonably protective of freedom of association when the CER has been invoked by the administration as grounds for refusing or withdrawing public grants, the document is frequently deployed informally to put pressure on organisations, increasing the risk of self-censorship in a context in which the third sector is heavily reliant on public funding.⁴⁰ The introduction of the CER also resulted in the introduction of the supervisory power conferred on prefects,⁴¹ and thus on the executive, who intervene in relations between organisations and local authorities.

The Quintin draft bill does not contain an equivalent provision; it nonetheless introduces, among the measures that can be taken against organisations or collectives posing a serious and present threat to national security, the administrative freezing of assets linked to contentious activities. The freezing of assets directly targets the material resources that enable an organisation to pursue its activities. At the same time, as part of the recent budget reforms, the federal government has announced a reduction in the tax benefit on donations to approved organisations, which could significantly impact the private funding received by non-profit organisations.

Restrictions on access to funding already exist in the policies of Belgium's Communities and Regions. In 2024, the FIRM-IFDH reported on "a form of financial intimidation" on the part of political representatives, whose decisions to refuse or withdraw grants "appear not to be based on objective data but rather on an ideological viewpoint that they would not support".⁴² Following the line taken by French policies, the executive is evidently increasingly attempting to exercise oversight over organisations that receive public grants, even when this means bypassing decisions taken by independent commissions.

This trend is particularly marked in the **Flemish-speaking region**, where organisations critical of government policies have suffered major budget cuts despite having previously received positive evaluations from the competent authorities. In November 2025, the Flemish government decided to unilaterally cancel grants for two organisations (LABO and HOTM) and to reduce to a minimum those of four others (Climaxi, DeWereldMorgen, Vrede VZW, and Vredesactie), thus contravening the opinion formulated by the independent evaluation commission and in flagrant breach of the procedure set out in the decree of 10 March 2023 on the funding of adult sociocultural programmes, which

³⁹ Decree No. 2021-1947 of 31 December 2021 implementing Article 10-1 of law no. 2000-321 of 12 April 2000 and approving the Contrat d'engagement républicain for organisations and foundations benefiting from public funding or State accreditation.

⁴⁰ France: *Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴¹ Circular from the Ministry of the Interior and Overseas Territories, 10 October 2022, (NOR: INTD22116361C).

⁴² IFDH (2024), *Espace pour les défenseur·e·s des droits humains en Belgique. La situation des organisations de défense des droits humains – 2022/2023* [Space for human rights defenders in Belgium. The situation of human rights organisations – 2022-2023], p. 55.

established the commission. The Flemish authorities have accused the organisations of supporting “violent extremism”, notably Code Rouge, or of not being sufficiently distanced from it.⁴³ The six organisations concerned, whose mandates relate either to promoting social and environmental justice or to questions of peace and disarmament, deny the accusations which they deem groundless and unsubstantiated, and condemn the shift towards authoritarianism. They have appealed to the Council of State.

Such measures have effects that reach far beyond the six organisations concerned. As in France with the CER, there is a risk of a general censorship effect that will lead organisations to moderate their positions in order to safeguard the resources essential to their functioning.

“It is a political and ideological decision in which the Flemish government flouts its own decrees and stifles critical voices. It also sets a precedent. The whole of civil society, the cultural sector, social and educational programme leaders, artists, scholars, and activists receive the same message: watch who you criticise.”

Lichen Ullmann, Coordinator, Vredesactie⁴⁴

The Flemish government does not intend to stop there. In October 2025, it also adopted an action plan to prevent violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. The plan envisages the introduction of a new provision in the Flemish Public Finance Code (VCO) permitting the refusal, suspension or definitive withdrawal of grants to organisations suspected of being implicated in or of supporting violent extremism.⁴⁵ Mere suspicions would suffice for the minister in charge to announce a suspension, which could eventually become a definitive exclusion, on the basis of intelligence provided by security services. A draft decree to this effect was adopted by the Council of Ministers on 4 September 2026.⁴⁶ Modelled on the Quintin draft bill, this measure confers discretionary powers to authorities whose decisions are made extremely difficult to contest by the organisations concerned.

Another mechanism deployed by government authorities to censor organisations voicing criticism is to place restrictions on their methods of action when they benefit from public funding. In the programme of measures contained in the decree adopted by parliament for the 2026 budget, the Flemish government decided that “the legal costs directly or indirectly associated with legal action taken against the authority of the Flemish federal body shall not be eligible expenses under grants.”⁴⁷

In **Brussels**, two environmental organisations, Inter-Environnement Bruxelles (IEB) and Brusselse Raad Voor het Leefmilieu (BRAL), had part of their grants suspended on these grounds. Payment of the remainder was conditional on the organisations ceasing the legal action they had initiated against the Brussels-Capital regional government.⁴⁸ The position of minister Dirk De Smedt is similar to that of the former French Minister of the Interior, Bruno Retailleau, who stated the organisations receiving public funding “have no business conducting activism” and “must act in step with the State”.⁴⁹

⁴³ See Lichen Ullman, “Le gouvernement ne se contente pas de supprimer les subventions accordées aux organisations critiques. Il détruit également l’État de droit et la démocratie” [The government is not content with cancelling the grants awarded to organisations critical of the authorities. It is also laying waste to the rule of law and democracy], in the quarterly magazine issued by the Belgian Human Rights League: *La Chronique de la Ligue des droits humains*, No. 214.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Vlaams actieplan ter preventie van gewelddadige radicalisering, extremisme en terrorisme*, Action Plan approved by the Flemish government on 24 October 2025, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Council of Ministers, 4 September 2026, *Introduction de la condition d’intégrité pour les subventions et la lutte contre la fraude aux subventions : avant-projet de décret modificatif* [Introduction of the integrity condition for subsidies and the fight to eliminate subsidies-related fraud – translated from the French version of the original Flemish text]. Online: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaamse-regering/beslissingen-van-de-vlaamse-regering/ invoering-integriteitsvoorwaarde-bij-subsidies-en-bestrijding-subsidiefraude-voorontwerp-van-wijzigingsdecreet>

⁴⁷ Decree programme of 19 December 2025 accompanying the 2026 budget, Article 50.

⁴⁸ Press release by the Belgian trade unions the FGTB Bruxelles and CSC bruxelloise on 23 June 2026, “BRAL & IEB : les subsides ne peuvent pas devenir un moyen de pression politique” [BRAL and IEB: subsidies cannot become an instrument of political pressure].

⁴⁹ *France: Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

In the **Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB)**, the government announced its desire to end funding organisations considered too close to certain political parties. On 10 July 2026, the government adopted a draft decree, at its first reading, on the conditions for allocating grants to the lifelong learning sector, youth associations and heritage archive centres, “in order that organisations should no longer be permitted to use public money for actions that promote political parties”.⁵⁰ A first step had already been taken with the package of bills or decree programme of 17 December 2025, Article 103 of which alters the conditions whereby lifelong learning organisations are recognised and stipulating that any organisation presenting at least four criteria of proximity to a political party in the previous five years would see its certification limited to one year, while other organisations would be able to secure renewal for three to five years.⁵¹ The criteria include sharing premises with a political party, organising joint events or using the same colour as a party; all of which raise fears that civil society action could readily be equated with political party activity.⁵²

In Belgium, as in France, all these measures, together with deep budget cuts in the socio-cultural sector and in public funding for development, contribute to weakening the third sector which is already reeling from numerous challenges. Under international law, the capacity of organisations to apply for, receive and use financial resources is inherent to the right to freedom of association. United Nations special procedures and treaty bodies regularly point out that access to public funding, including from abroad, is protected under Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁵³ The State has the duty to facilitate the exercise of freedom of association and must therefore facilitate access to financial resources for organisations, including those which express opposing views.

⁵⁰ Press release by the President of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Elisabeth Degryse, 14 July 2026, “Vers la fin du financement indirect des partis politiques en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles” [Putting an end to indirect funding of political parties in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation]. Online: <https://degryse.cfwb.be/home/communiqués-de-presse/presses/vers-la-fin-du-financement-indirect-des-partis-politiques-en-federation-wallonie-bruxelles.html> [Accessed 19 July 2026].

⁵¹ See Matthias Sant’Ana, “Le subventionnement public comme outil de fragilisation de la vie associative” [Public subsidies as a tool to undermine the third sector], in the quarterly magazine issued by the Belgian Human Rights League: *La Chronique de la Ligue des droits humains*, No. 214.

⁵² Civil Liberties Union for Europe, *Rule of Law Report 2026, Belgium*, p. 95.

⁵³ See in particular the report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, United Nations General Assembly, 24 April 2013, A/79/263, para. 15-18, Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. Also see: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Protecting civic space in the EU*, 2022, p. 43.

The repression of civil disobedience in disregard for international law

Civil disobedience is a particular form of protest which consists of one or more acts of deliberate breaking of the law on an issue of public interest, conducted publicly and non-violently. These four criteria are used by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, who regularly points out that it is a legitimate course of action.⁵⁴ Under international law, civil disobedience is protected under the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. Notwithstanding, it remains interesting to examine attempts to obstruct it in relation to freedom of association.



Credit: BELGA PHOTO NICOLAS MAETERLINCK (Photo par Nicolas Maeterlinck / Belga Mag / Belga via AFP)

Legende: Police and protesters pictured during a mass action weekend, organized by the civil disobedience action platform Code Red/ Code Rood/ Code Rouge, against the aviation sector, on Saturday 16 December 2023, at Antwerp Airport in Deurne, Antwerp. The activists demand an end to subsidies for the sector, a ban on private jets and a radical reduction in aviation.

When it comes to the activities of the Code Rouge collective, which calls for civil disobedience, Belgian politicians are quite open about their position: the activities of the collective are seen as “radical” and “dangerous”. Consequently, the organisation could be targeted by a ban under the future Quintin law. In France, the attempt by the Minister of the Interior in 2023 to dissolve the Soulèvements de la Terre collective, which he criticised for having incited sabotage – a term specifically mentioned in the first version of the Belgian bill – and for damage to property, arise from this same conflation.⁵⁵ Subsequently, despite the eventual annulment of the dissolution order by the administrative judge, the ripple effects of criminalising civil disobedience could be observed. Several organisations suspected of encouraging civil disobedience or of closely or more indirectly supporting Soulèvements de la Terre saw their public funding called into question.⁵⁶ In particular, grants were withdrawn or denied under the Contrat d’engagement républicain (CER), which requires organisations applying for public funds “to desist from undertaking or inciting any action manifestly in contravention of the law”.

In practice, given that civil disobedience is by its very nature against the law, organisations which call for recourse to this form of action are generally aware of exposing their members to legal sanctions. Whereas the framework governing civil disobedience uses proportionality testing conducted a posteriori by the criminal justice system, the CER, however, now provides for the administrative oversight of organisations’ collective action before any offence has been committed. It imposes on organisations a prior commitment not only to desist from civil disobedience but to desist from inciting it. Until now, administrative judges hearing cases of abuse of power for decisions to withdraw funding on these grounds have tended to rule in the

⁵⁴ Position paper issued by Michel Forst, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, *State repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience: a major threat to human rights and democracy*, February 2024, p. 6.

⁵⁵ France: *Dropping out of Democracy. Obstructions to freedom of association and peaceful assembly*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 58.

organisations' favour.⁵⁷ Notwithstanding, when defeated in the courts, the administration may be tempted to deploy the CER more unofficially and used it as a means of extortion in exchange for securing public funding. Moreover, legal proceedings to contest the withdrawal of funding can prove lengthy and costly and can lead to a request for the case to be re-examined much later; this is already a major deterrent for organisations.

The restrictions on organisations' access to public funding envisaged in Flanders carry markedly similar risks. The decision by the Flanders government in November 2025 to cancel or reduce grants for six organisations is quite explicit in this regard: it is not just Code Rouge which is targeted but all organisations suspected of supporting the movement. The government's anti-radicalisation action plan, in which civil disobedience is tantamount to "violent extremism", could have even more serious consequences for the third sector: organisations risk self-censorship and the ostracization of movements calling for civil disobedience. Yet, because civil disobedience is protected by international law, the State is obliged to protect the right to use it. Consequently, punitive measures, including financial sanctions, used as a preventative measure that seek to deny this right, without consideration for the circumstances in which it would have been exercised or respect for the criteria above, are in breach international law.

The Quintin draft bill also raises concerns because of the broad interpretation of what may be considered "support" for acts of civil disobedience. The issue at hand is whether organisations that post information on their social networks about acts of civil disobedience or organise legal civil disobedience activities could face sanctions for providing logistical support to the groups undertaking acts of civil disobedience, despite not taking part in them.

⁵⁷ See in particular, the Poitiers Administrative Court, November 2023, *Préfet de la Vienne*, No. 2202694, 2202695 and the Lyon Administrative Court, 2 June 2026, *Action Justice Climat Lyon*, No. 2400786.

5. Spaces for dialogue progressively shut down

The restrictions on freedom of association under discussion reveal a climate of mistrust between public authorities and civil society. Generally, this is manifested by the shrinking of spaces for dialogue with the government. However, according to the chapter devoted to Belgium in the European Commission's 2026 Rule of Law Report, "Overall, stakeholders continue to have opportunities to engage with [public] policy-making."⁵⁸ While dialogue with the government is diminishing, civil society continues to be regularly consulted, notably by the Chamber of Representatives. In its 2024 report on the situation of human rights organisations, the FIRM-IFDH found that a majority of the organisations consulted recorded no change to or an improvement in their participation in public policy-making.⁵⁹

However, the report also refers to the difficulties encountered by some organisations which, even though consulted, "have the feeling that their suggestions are rarely taken into account".⁶⁰ The impression of being manipulated had also been described by French organisations interviewed by the Observatory in 2025. They criticised public authorities for failing to ensure an effective collaborative process and pointed to how the level of consideration given to their contributions varies according to the subjects and actors. In both countries, organisations that oppose public decision-makers on issues related to public freedoms are rarely listened to in reality.

This trend illustrates the defensive stance adopted by public authorities who are increasingly impermeable to criticism. The right to participate, guaranteed by international law⁶¹ and European law,⁶² presupposes that the role and legitimacy of civil society organisations are genuinely recognised and that their opinions and perspectives are taken seriously, including when they disagree with public policies.⁶³ This form of recognition is a prerequisite for re-establishing social dialogue and an essential component of participatory democracy.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ European Commission, *2026 Rule of Law Report*, chapter devoted to the rule of law in Belgium, SWD (2026) 901 final, p. 17.

⁵⁹ IFDH (2024), *Espace pour les défenseur·e·s des droits humains en Belgique. La situation des organisations de défense des droits humains – 2022/2023* [Space for human rights defenders in Belgium. The situation of human rights organisations – 2022-2023], p. 47.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶¹ Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

⁶² Articles 10§3 and 11 of the Treaty on the European Union; also see (EU) Recommendation (UE) 2023/2836 of the European Commission of 12 December 2023 on promoting the involvement of citizens and civil society organisations in the process of public policy-making and their effective participation in these processes.

⁶³ See the Report by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights concerning civil society space, 1 September 2026, A/HRC/63/53.

⁶⁴ See the European Union Strategy for Civil Society, November 2025.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Analysis of the restrictions on freedom of association observed in Belgium and France reveals the converging trends undermining democratic achievements. While institutional contexts and the political, legal and financial instruments differ, the dynamics seem to be the same: the progressive shrinking of civic space marked by a growing suspicion of civil society organisations, a questioning of the legitimacy of organisations' methods of action, and a strengthening of mechanisms for controlling organisations. These changes also help instil a climate of uncertainty which directly affects organisations and encourages self-censorship. Some organisations may be prompted to step back from taking a stand or decide not to take action out of fear of being exposed to smear campaigns, of being subject to administrative sanctions, or of losing funding. When confronted with these threats, organisations also have to mobilise time and resources that would usually be used to fulfil their missions.

In this respect, the French experience is a warning from which Belgium would do well to draw lessons. At a time when Belgian authorities justify certain planned measures by referring to provisions already adopted in neighbouring countries, the investigation carried out in France by the Observatory and the French Human Rights League (LDH) reveals an alarming finding as regards the harmful effects of these policies on all of civil society and on the quality of democratic debate. The dissemination of restrictive practices is particularly worrying because governments use precedents in other countries to legitimise new impediments to freedom of association. This phenomenon has been observed at a broader international level, with the reintroduction of Russian legislation on "foreign agents", from which several governments have openly drawn inspiration, including Georgia, Kirghizstan, Hungary, and Nicaragua.⁶⁵

Belgium currently finds itself at a turning point and can still change course to comply with international law. To halt the trend, Belgian authorities must recognise that freedom of association plays a crucial role in the functioning of a democracy and is a prerequisite for exercising many other fundamental freedoms.⁶⁶ As the European Court of Human Rights notes, "the state of democracy [in a country] can be gauged by the way in which this freedom is secured under national legislation and in which the authorities apply it in practice".⁶⁷ Consequently, it is essential to reaffirm that organisations' independence, capacity to question public authorities, and effective participation in public debate are not privileges but indispensable conditions for the proper functioning of the rule of law.

Recommendations

For the attention of the Belgian authorities

- Guarantee in all circumstances the rights to freedom of expression and association of human rights defenders, as recognised in Articles 19 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights;
- Refrain from spreading comments that stigmatise organisations, collectives and human rights defenders, and condemn hostile and defamatory speech directed against them, including when disseminated by non-state actors;

⁶⁵ See the dossier of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders of 21 November 2021, "Laws against 'foreign agents': the multi-functional tool of authoritarian regimes". Online: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/business-human-rights-environment/laws-against-foreign-agents-the-multi-functional-tool-of> [Accessed 23 July 2026].

⁶⁶ Guidelines on Freedom of Association, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 101st plenary session (Venice 12-13 December 2014), para. 8.

⁶⁷ ECHR, GC, 17 February 2004, *Gorzeliak and Others v. Poland*, Application no. 44158/98, para. 88.

- Withdraw the draft bill to allow for administrative bans on the activities of legal persons, organisations without legal status, and on organisations or groups posing a serious and present threat to national security, to ensure that such bans can only be handed down by a judicial authority;
- Withdraw the provisions that infringe freedom of association contained in the Flemish action plan to prevent violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism and the draft decree aimed at amending the Flemish Public Finance Code in application of said plan;
- Withdraw the draft decree concerning the conditions for the public funding of the lifelong learning sector, youth organisations and heritage archive centres in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation;
- Facilitate the exercising of freedom of association by making adequate, viable and non-discriminatory public funding available and by removing any legal or administrative impediment to accessing financial resources;
- Recognise peaceful civil disobedience as a legitimate means of action benefiting from the same guarantees as other forms of gathering, guarantee its protection under freedom of peaceful assembly and ensure that any restriction imposed is reduced to a minimum, subject to strict oversight and in line with international law, as recommended by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention;
- Guarantee effective participation of intermediary bodies and civil society organisations in drawing up, implementing and evaluating public policies, including in areas of parliamentary sovereignty, by ensuring the conditions exist for structural institutional dialogue and equitable access to spaces for consultation, in compliance with international and European law and the obligations of EU Member States stemming from the new European Strategy for Civil Society adopted in November 2025;
- Ensure effective monitoring of the recommendations issued by independent consultative institutions – such as the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights – and guarantee these bodies their independence and the resources necessary to carry out their missions.

For the attention of international actors

To the United Nations

- Include shrinking civic space in Belgium as a priority and, in particular, monitor the situation of human rights defenders and the developments concerning respect for freedom of association in order to respond to any deterioration via official statements, communications or recommendations to the Belgian government;
- As regards special procedures,⁶⁸ include the restrictions on freedom of association in Belgium in their future reports, particularly thematic reports and the annual report to the United Nations Human Rights Council; and, when concerns are raised, request information from the Belgian authorities and, if needed, address communications to the government regarding the measures that are likely to disproportionately restrict freedom of association or hinder the work of human rights defenders.

To the European Union

- Monitor shrinking civic space in Belgium and question Belgian authorities regarding the restriction on freedom of association in the context of bilateral relations as well as in multilateral forums, using the information gathered by governmental and non-governmental organisations defending fundamental rights;
- Ensure implementation of the European Strategy for Civil Society, particularly commitments to strengthen participation by, support for and the protection of civil society in the EU, and support

⁶⁸ In particular, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders and the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, as well as the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in efforts to counter terrorism.

the introduction of a mechanism to protect human rights defenders modelled on that adopted for its foreign policies;

- Contribute to providing support, including financial support, to civil society by ensuring it has the resources necessary in the context of the negotiations on the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034), in particular by providing ambitious budgetary resources to the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) component, and by ensuring that no obstacles are put in the way of civil society organisations in accessing European funding because of their method of action;
- Relating in particular to

- **The European Commission**

- Scrutinise compliance of Belgian laws and practices concerning freedom of association with European law, notably Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and, if an incompatibility should be found, instigate infringement proceedings against Belgium under Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union;
- Monitor the shrinking of civic space in Belgium and the implementation of recommendations formulated and addressed to the national authorities as part of the annual report on the rule of law, and take measures that will apply in the event the State fails to respect these recommendations;

- **The European Union Council and its rotating presidency**

- Prioritise the issue of the shrinking of civic space in Europe, including in Belgium, and include it on the agenda of the Working Party on Fundamental Rights and Free Movement of Persons (FREMP) and of the General Affairs Council (GAC) in the context of the annual dialogue on the rule of law and debates devoted to implementing the European Strategy for Civil Society, and adopt a statement or conclusions on the shrinking of civic space and attacks on human rights and environmental defenders in the EU.

- **The European Parliament**

- Condemn the illegal restrictions and the shrinking of civic space during parliamentary debates and in future reports on the subject, such as the annual report on the rule of law in the EU and the report on the state of fundamental rights in the EU, with a view to adopting statements and a resolution in a plenary session.

Establishing the facts

Investigative and trial observation missions – Through activities ranging from sending trial observers to organising international investigative missions, FIDH has developed rigorous and impartial procedures to establish facts and responsibility.

Experts sent to the field give their time to FIDH on a voluntary basis.

FIDH has conducted more than 1,500 missions in over 100 countries in the past 25 years. These activities reinforce FIDH's alert and advocacy campaigns.

Supporting civil society

Training and exchanges – FIDH organises numerous activities in partnership with its member organisations, in the countries in which they are based. The core aim is to strengthen the influence and capacity of human rights activists to boost changes at the local level.

Mobilising the international community

Permanent lobbying before intergovernmental bodies – FIDH supports its member organisations and local partners in their efforts before intergovernmental organisations. FIDH alerts international bodies to violations of human rights and refers individual cases to them.

FIDH also takes part in the development of international legal instruments.

Informing and reporting

Mobilising public opinion – FIDH informs and mobilises public opinion. Press releases, press conferences, open letters to authorities, mission reports, urgent appeals, petitions, campaigns, website... FIDH makes full use of all means of communication to raise awareness of human rights violations.

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Created in 1985, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) works for, with and through an international coalition of over 200 non-governmental organisations - the SOS -Torture Network - fighting torture, summary executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and all other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment in the world and fighting for the protection of human rights defenders.

Assisting and supporting victims

OMCT supports victims of torture to obtain justice and reparation, including rehabilitation. This support takes the form of legal, medical and social emergency assistance, submitting complaints to regional and international human rights mechanisms and urgent interventions. OMCT pays particular attention to certain categories of victims, such as women and children.

Preventing torture and fighting against impunity

Together with its local partners, OMCT advocates for the effective implementation, on the ground, of international standards against torture. OMCT is also working for the optimal use of international human rights mechanisms, in particular the United Nations Committee Against Torture, so that it can become more effective.

Protecting human rights defenders

Often those who defend human rights and fight against torture are threatened. That is why OMCT places their protection at the heart of its mission, through alerts, activities of prevention, advocacy and awareness-raising as well as direct support.

Accompanying and strengthening organisations in the field

OMCT provides its members with the tools and services that enable them to carry out their work and strengthen their capacity and effectiveness in the fight against torture. OMCT presence in Tunisia is part of its commitment to supporting civil society in the process of transition to the rule of law and respect for the absolute prohibition of torture.

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THE OBSERVATORY

Activities of the Observatory

The Observatory is an action programme based on the belief that strengthened cooperation and solidarity among human rights defenders and their organisations will contribute to break the isolation they are faced with. It is also based on the absolute necessity to establish a systematic response from NGOs and the international community to the repression of which defenders are victims.

With this aim, the Observatory seeks to establish:

- > A mechanism of systematic alert of the international community on cases of harassment and repression of defenders of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly when they require urgent intervention;
- > The observation of judicial proceedings, and whenever necessary, direct legal assistance;
- > International missions of investigation and solidarity;
- > A personalised assistance as concrete as possible, including material support, with the aim of ensuring the security of the defenders victims of serious violations;
- > The preparation, publication and world-wide dissemination of reports on violations of the rights and freedoms of individuals or organisations working for human rights around the world;
- > Sustained action with the United Nations and more particularly the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and when necessary with geographic and thematic Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups;
- > Sustained lobbying with various regional and international intergovernmental institutions, especially the Organisation of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the International Organisation of the Francophonie (OIF), the Commonwealth, the League of Arab States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The Observatory's activities are based on consultation and co-operation with national, regional, and international non-governmental organisations.

With efficiency as its primary objective, the Observatory has adopted flexible criteria to examine the admissibility of cases that are communicated to it, based on the "operational definition" of human rights defenders adopted by FIDH and OMCT: "Each person victim or at risk of being the victim of reprisals, harassment or violations, due to his or her commitment, exercised individually or in association with others, in conformity with international instruments of protection of human rights, to the promotion and realisation of the rights recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and guaranteed by the different international instruments".

To ensure its activities of alert and mobilisation, the Observatory has established a system of communication devoted to defenders in danger.

This system, called Emergency Line, can be reached through:

E-MAIL: alert@observatoryfordefenders.org

OMCT TEL: + 41 22 809 49 39

FIDH TEL: + 33 1 43 55 25 18



Ligue des Droits Humains

For over 100 years, the Ligue des droits humains (LDH) has been fighting, independently of political authority, against violations of fundamental rights in Belgium. As a countervailing force, the LDH monitors, informs and challenges public authorities and citizens with a view to remedying situations that infringe upon fundamental rights.

The LDH promotes the principles of equality, freedom and solidarity, as well as the fundamental rights of all people – adults and children alike – in Belgium. It actively defends everyone's access to fair justice, education, work... and a life of dignity. To this end, it always bases its work on legal texts signed and ratified by the Belgian State and which are therefore legally binding (such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Recognised as a continuing education organisation (since 2007), it raises awareness amongst the widest possible audience of social issues linked to human rights, with the aim of empowering people. The LDH thus seeks to give everyone the means to become critical and responsible citizens.

These objectives are achieved through the organisation of campaigns (demonstrations, legal actions, etc.), activities (conferences, debates, training courses, events, etc.) and the production of human rights awareness materials (La Chronique, leaflets, studies, analyses, etc.).

Ligue des Droits Humains

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Liga voor Mensenrechten

Liga voor Mensenrechten is a non-profit organization that promotes and protects human rights in Flanders and Belgium. It works to raise awareness of human rights, monitor violations, and advocate for laws and policies that respect and strengthen fundamental rights and freedoms. The organisation also seeks to empower people to stand up for their rights and to encourage a society based on equality, dignity, freedom, and justice.

Liga voor Mensenrechten

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More meetings