2019 Annual Report

a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in europe
## Table of contents

A word from the Civitates team 3

Civitates in a nutshell 5

How Civitates makes a difference: the story of using hope-based communications in Poland 8

Our highlights 10

Our progress made

- **Objective 1:** a strong and resilient civil society 11
- **Objective 2:** a healthy digital public sphere 17
- **Objective 3:** independent, public interest journalism 24
- **Objective 4:** a robust funder collaborative 26

Our finances 29

- Income 2019 29
- Expenses 2019 30

Our grantee partners 31

Our foundation partners 33
A word from the Civitates team

The year 2019 was one to remember. It was the year in which the issues Civitates works on were as relevant as ever, with democracy remaining at stake in Europe.

While globally seen the EU may still have the largest number of countries with open civic space, it is worrying that the conditions for civil society continue to deteriorate. A 2019 report from CIVICUS shows that there have been no major improvements in civic and political rights in Europe, and that two countries have been downgraded. Even in countries where people are usually able to exercise their political and democratic freedoms without interference, excessive use of force is being used to disrupt peaceful protest.

Challenges also continue to exist online – just think about the ongoing exploitation of data by private entities, challenges to online freedom of expression, and issues like political advertising. A large number of regulatory attempts are currently underway, both at the EU and member state levels, to tackle issues such as disinformation, bots, and hate speech, but several are too narrow in scope or risk concentrating power into the hands of unaccountable corporate actors or potentially hostile governments.

Meanwhile, attacks on media independence have spread across Europe and the overall environment has become increasingly hostile to journalists.

But 2019 was also the year in which we saw an increasing number of initiatives defend democracy in Europe, both offline and online. Civil society actively tries to improve its operating space, stepping up for one another when needed. By working together, they are making pro-democracy voices heard more widely and add political weight to their demands. Civil society has also worked hard to ensure that governments’ attempts to regulate the digital space examine all relevant dimensions and perspectives and that all voices are represented.

Throughout the year, Civitates’ grantee partners drove campaigns, brought in new ideas and tools, networked and strategized together.

1 https://monitor.civicus.org/PeoplePowerUnderAttack2019/
As a result, we’re now seeing greater connections, common thinking, trust, and personal bonds among actors.

In this report we reflect on Civitates’ journey throughout 2019: what we did, what we learned and what we perhaps could have done differently.

You’ll read about how, within our line of work aimed at a strong and resilient civil society, our grantee partners have been consolidating the work of their cross-sectoral coalitions. You’ll also learn about the first grants within our line of work that pushes for a healthy digital public sphere. Moreover, you might be pleased to find out that we’ve started preparing for a third line of work, to support the field of independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

The Civitates team is excited to see that, despite still being a young collaborative, we’ve already managed to expand and grow our work. All progress made reflects the contributions and commitments of our incredibly valuable partners – both foundation partners and grantee partners – and want to thank all of them for their great work.
Civitates in a nutshell

Civitates is a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe.

It provides funding for civil society actors to come together, revitalize public discourse, and ensure that all voices are heard. The consortium was ‘born’ in 2017 in Warsaw, when numerous foundations – concerned with the state of democracy in Europe – committed to pooling together diverse philanthropic resources to strengthen civil society actors and safeguard democratic values in Europe. Because we need new approaches to deal with the new challenges that Europe is facing.
Concerned with trends that are intensifying the vulnerability of democracy in Europe, Civitates:

1. **Obj.** Supports a strong and resilient civil society in Europe which responds collectively to challenges related to the closing space for civil society, as these prevent them from voicing the concerns of different communities and performing their watchdog role effectively.

2. **Obj.** Supports civil society groups that push for a healthy digital public sphere in which public and democratic values are safeguarded, by analysing and exposing issues impacting the quality of the public discourse and democratic fabric in Europe, as well as by improving the functioning of the digital information ecosystem and its regulatory environment.

3. **Obj.** Supports the burgeoning, yet vulnerable, field of independent public interest journalism in Europe with core support, allowing public interest journalism to defend democracy by exposing abuses of power and drivers of polarization, and defending a space in which all voices are heard (from 2020 onwards).

4. **Obj.** Serves as a robust funder platform for donors to invest collectively in European democracies, allowing donors to build on the lessons learned from the field, and allowing for the development of a common philanthropic agenda on the issues tackled by Civitates.
In addition to providing financial support, Civitates has a **Funding Plus** component, through which the fund provides capacity development and networking opportunities to its grantee partners. Civitates regularly organizes grantee convenings, during which people come together to learn about each other’s work and strategize together. Moreover, grantee partners can make use of the Civitates’ Learning Initiatives program, which allows for additional funding (up to €5,000 per grantee) for participation in trainings, workshops, network events or strategic consultancies.

Civitates, which became operational in 2018, is hosted by the Network of European Foundations and housed in the Philanthropy House in Brussels. In 2019 the initiative was supported by 16 funders.
How Civitates makes a difference:
the story of using hope-based communications in Poland

In Poland freedom and democracy are increasingly threatened. This may be best visible from local municipalities across a third of Poland having adopted LGBT free zones, creating what rights groups describe as hostile spaces for anyone who is not heterosexual. Sexual minority organisations have been targeted by media and have found it increasingly difficult to raise funds. In other sectors as well, civil society organisations experience increased challenges, such as the ones promoting democracy and civic education in schools. On top of that, the government has steadily been tightening controls over all aspects of the judiciary, chipping away at democracy.

And although the public’s trust in polish civic organizations is pretty high, people in Poland mainly associate the civil sector with helping children or with doing work on health issues and not so much with democracy or civic rights. A new campaign, set up in 2019 with support from Civitates and coordinated by the Polish Klon/Jawor Association, aims to boost the profile and presence of civil society organisations and promote the value of community engagement and public participation to counter developments as described above.
The coalition of civic organizations behind the ‘Civic Organisations – It Works’ campaign, takes an innovative approach to reach their goal. Instead of scaring the Polish audience with negative messages such as ‘Civic organizations’ activities are at risk’ or ‘organisations are “fighting” against the Government’, they use communication based on positive emotions.

One example of this hope-based communications is linked to the teachers’ strike in spring last year. While the response from the government was not exactly sympathetic towards the strikes, the civic organizations campaign succeeded in mobilising a strong positive sentiment around the teachers. In their messages they showed that many of them go the extra mile to teach more than is required and pass on universal values to children and youth.

Another example is the positive promotion of Pride Parades across the country using the slogan ‘Love — It Works’. Thanks to the positive narration of the It Works campaign, the coalition succeeded in partnering with the city of Warsaw and promoted branded graphics on billboards, city lights, bus rears and onboard displays in public transport. Two cinemas in the country are running the campaign videos before the start of the movies for some months now, reaching a very diverse audience, not so known with the work of civic organizations yet, of 5,000 each month. Other cities are now as well expressing interest to run similar campaigns.

The coalition has also been successful in establishing lasting relationships with monthly magazines, such as Vogue Poland and Pismo, a Polish opinion-forming magazine. Vogue Poland regularly publishes interviews with women activists working for and with civic organizations in its online edition reaching 200,000 users per month. Pismo started to monthly publish photographs of activities and events of civic organizations and will continue to do so throughout 2020. Both publications carry the campaign logo and contain links to the campaigns’ channels – providing additional exposure.

The hope-based messages and their positive effects make the coalition behind the It Works campaign more confident than ever that, regardless of the increasing pressure on civil liberties in Poland, this type of communication pays off. It works!
Brussels

Obj.1
Representatives of cross-sectoral coalitions come together for a first **grantee convening** to learn how each of them are strengthening the operating space for civil society in their respective countries.

Obj.2
The first grants go out to groups pushing for a healthy online public discourse.

Obj.3
The Steering Committee gives the green light to **explore a new line of work** to support independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

Obj.4
The Steering Committee approves Civitates’ **growth strategy**, ensuring the fund is fit-for-purpose for the years to come.

Warsaw

Obj.1
The cohort of grantee partners comes together at a second **grantee convening** to further strategize together on how to strengthen the operating space for civil society.

Obj.3
The Steering Committee approves the **new line of work** supporting independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

Obj.4
The Steering Committee approves Civitates’ **growth strategy**, ensuring the fund is fit-for-purpose for the years to come.
Objective 1: a strong and resilient civil society

Our goal

Civitates aims to strengthen civil society so it can perform its watchdog role effectively and ensure that all voices are heard. It therefore empowers civil society actors to respond collectively and effectively to challenges related to the “closing space” for civil society, providing an essential protection against the erosion of values such as the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.

What we did

We continued to support 13 cross-sectoral coalitions that are actively working to strengthen civil society in the following nine countries: Hungary (3), Poland (2), Bulgaria (2), Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy, and France.

All coalitions operate at the national level, ensuring a context specific approach. Aiming for collective impact, they involve partners from different sectors and beyond the capital cities. The approach taken by the coalitions varies, but all of them include both reactive and pro-active elements aimed at building up resilience and the capacity to stand up against the deterioration of democratic values in their sectors.

Examples of activities include:

- Networking: Strategic conversations and building trust and solidarity between civil society actors across sectors.
- Cooperation mechanisms: Support mechanisms to defend one another with joint actions.
- Advocacy: Engaging with policy makers on issues related to the protection of civil society.
- Capacity building: Trainings and practical tools, for example to better organize or learn how to deal with online threats.
- Communication: Campaigns aimed at improving the image of the sector, showing the impact civil society has on people’s lives.
- Community development: Providing physical space for open and critical debates and enhancing civil society’s connection with the general public.

These coalitions had started their work in 2018 already, and some even earlier. 2019 was the year in which the coalitions really got ‘off the ground’, consolidating their work and expanding their audiences. For more information about each of these grants, please check out the Civitates website.
In 2019 we gathered these grantee partners twice, to learn from each other’s work and build capacity together. The first time was in February, near Brussels. Highlights of the convening included the presentations of the coalition’s strategies, a communications training, and open space sessions on topics suggested by the participants, including strategic communications, alliance building, research, mapping and monitoring, well-being of staff and communicating with the undecided middle.

The second meeting was in Warsaw, in December. The meeting mainly focused on strengthening relations across the coalitions, which operate in many different countries. Apart from sharing updates, peer to peer advice and the exploration of possible collaboration, participants also attended an inspiring workshop on hope-based communication and learned more about how to use advocacy to strengthen the space for civil society in Europe.² Both meetings showed a clear appetite to connect across different geographies and to learn collectively.

Our grantee partners also increased their capacity thanks to Civitates’ Learning Initiatives program. In 2019 eight of the 13 coalitions have made use of the Learning Initiatives programme, for workshops and trainings set up by the grantee partners themselves (for example on strategic and crisis communication or network development), as well as to participate in trainings offered by third parties (for example on strategic litigation, EU advocacy, or increasing sustainability and resiliency).

Outcomes

Outcome #1: A better-connected field.

Our grantee partners have brought together civil society representatives from different sectors and from different parts of their respective countries. In some cases, collaboration has even appeared in less likely areas, like fundraising. The Czech coalition, for example, convinced other democracy focused organisations to submit a joint proposal to the EEA/Norway grants for €800K to support civil society.²
This is the first time in the Czech Republic that there has been such a coordinated approach to fundraising – an area in which a lot of natural competition exists.

While our grantee partners have been very busy building connections across sectors within their respective countries, they have also invested time in making connections across Europe. From the grantee convenings, which are designed to let grantee partners learn from one another and share experiences, we know there is a strong appetite for these types of exchanges.

Several of the coalitions have used Learning Initiatives to come together with other coalitions, at their own initiative, either within the same country or across borders. Some examples:

- The Slovak coalition coordinator led a workshop on strategic and crisis communications for leading representatives of civil society organizations in Slovenia, which have experienced attacks and needed support with strategic and crisis communication.

- A workshop on collective impact organized by the Czech coalition was attended by coalition representatives from Hungary and Poland. They brought in a renowned expert on community building methodology from the US and applied his methodology to boost efforts at building a shared vision, to evaluate networking and social movement building, as well as stimulate self-reflection and personal change in fragmented societies of both Eastern and Western Europe.

- Two of the Hungarian coalitions are planning a joint Learning Initiative focused on knowledge exchange and trainings for the local activist leaders.

Some connections have even been made across different Civitates cohorts. For example, a representative from the Czech coalition participated in a workshop on digital security organized by European Partnership for Democracy, which receives funds from Civitates to improve the digital public discourse.

**Outcome #2: Small wins.**

While it’s too early to talk about the impact of the coalitions, all coalitions are making progress and some early wins have already materialized. Three examples:

- In Romania the coalition helped prevent amendments to the anti-money laundering bill that would have heavily affected civil society organizations. They also won a trial, challenging a rule that made it impossible for people to speak up in local councils.

- The Bulgarian coalitions stood in solidarity with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, sending several letters of support to the media and EU institutions. In an unprecedented attempt to silence independent and critical voices, nationalist politicians had called for the dissolution of Bulgaria's biggest human rights group in the run-up to the local elections in October. They accused them of conducting “anti-Bulgarian activities” because they had defended a controversial person whose rights had been violated. The politicians didn't get elected, however, and the issue calmed down.

- In Slovakia the coalition helped to prevent a change of the existing law about non-profit organizations that provide general beneficiary services. The proposal, submitted by a far-right party, aimed to label foreign-funded non-profit organizations as “foreign agents”.

**Outcome #3: Useful tools.**

Up until now the focus of the grantee partners has been on building relationships and formalizing the coalitions. In that light, lots of trainings and capacity building workshops have already taken place across the coalitions, including on network sustainability, engaging audiences, digital security, speaking to the press, scenario building, storytelling or getting pro-bono legal advice. But several concrete outputs have emerged as well.
Three examples:

- The **Romanian** coalition produced a compliance kit regarding all the different regulations that civil society actors need to abide by, helping the sector to “get its house in order”.
- The **French** coalition created a guide for civil society actors to resist in hostile environments, which helps to build capacity in the sector.
- The **Czech** coalition has set up a warning system that identifies “red” and “orange” alerts for threats to civil society and democracy, to rapidly mobilize their network and the public more generally.

**Lessons learned**

**Insight #1:** Periods of relative calm should be harnessed for pro-active approaches.

In some countries the radical rhetoric about civil society organizations seems less present than in the past years, raising optimism and hope amongst activists. While it can be more difficult to keep all partners engaged at times when the pressure seems less present, it is crucial for the sector to use this opportunity to consolidate and strategize about more pro-active approaches. Smear campaigns continue to exist in conspiracy media, some political parties still use civil society as a scarecrow, and the operating space remains fragile.

Our grantee partners therefore undertake many pro-active measures. Three examples:

- The coalition in **Romania** is actively working on proposals to improve legislation affecting civil society, including the freedom of information act, transparency law and freedom of assembly law.
- The **Slovak** coalition prepared an advocacy campaign ahead of the legislative elections in February 2020, presenting policy and legislative recommendations which can help to protect and improve the current framework affecting civil society.
One of the coalitions in Bulgaria organised a country-wide campaign to build a common strategy for the upcoming selection of the members of the national Council for NGO Development and Support. This was to prevent that the new body would be dominated by government-led organizations or organizations that have purchased strong media influence.

Pro-active approaches are generally beneficial for coalition work. It takes committed people, and a lot of time, to create deep relationships and achieve successful collaborations across different sectors.

**Insight #2:** Diversity has been achieved in some ways, but more challenging in others.

It requires serious commitment to fully diversify a coalition’s membership. There is great diversity of membership in the sense that the coalitions funded by Civitates represent a wide range of issue areas (including women’s rights, children’s rights, rule of law, etc.). However, it has proven more difficult to achieve in other senses.

Veronika Mora from Ökotárs (Hungary):

“The Civilization coalition repeatedly attempted to develop links to large, nationwide, credible CSOs working on less politically exposed fields, mainly in service provision (e.g. working with ill children, animal protection and nature preservation) but with mixed results, as many of them are afraid of losing their image, contacts and funding if they engage in controversial or political struggles.”

Moreover, convincing civil society organizations in the countryside is often a longer-term undertaking than initially expected. Experience shows that many smaller organizations, which do good work locally, are not too interested to engage in wider cooperation and keep their distance from organizations which are working on controversial topics or which are more politically exposed. This is the case in several countries across Europe.
Insight #3: We need to better present the importance of the role of civil society.

In several countries our grantee partners had a closer look at data on the public perception of civil society. A common conclusion was that there is a lack of awareness amongst citizens about what civil society is and what it does.

Oana Preda from CeRe (Romania):
“The public perception about NGOs has been influenced by the anti-NGO discourse to a lesser extent than we thought. What is more relevant is that the vast majority of the people have no idea what civil society does and why.”

The sector increasingly understands the need to articulate a positive vision of the sector. Several of the coalitions have included a strong focus on hope-based communication in their work, while others have incorporated elements of it. Some have even inspired others to do this kind of work. It was great to see, for example, that the work of the Italian coalition has inspired Liberties, a European network of EU human rights organizations, to take up narrative change as one of its strategic priorities.

This type of work, while very important, is not easy, though. While hope-based communications is a great way of engaging citizens, it is less interesting for journalists who often look for an imbedded conflict as the interesting part of a story. Moreover, some organizations find it difficult to adjust their ways of working.

Andrea Menapace from CILD (Italy):
“The effort required to change the way small, mostly grassroot, organizations work when it comes to their communication strategy is considered too demanding by many. Others within the sector have mixed feelings about it as they fear their messages risk being watered down in order to appeal.”

What’s next?

In 2020 Civitates will continue to strengthen the grantees, as well as take stock of the work funded so far to improve our strategy going forward. In the first part of 2020, and with the help of an external consultant, we will conduct an interim assessment. We will look at particularly promising bodies of work and determine if adjustments are needed either to the strategy or to the grant-making approach, or both. In other words, we will continue to explore pathways for effectively strengthening the operating environment for civil society, in order to strengthen democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Europe.
Objective 2: a healthy digital public sphere

**Our goal**
Civitates aims at a healthy digital public sphere in which public and democratic values are safeguarded, by analysing the effect of digitization on the quality of the public discourse in Europe; exposing issues impacting the quality of public discourse and democratic fabric in Europe; and improving the functioning of the digital information ecosystem and its regulatory environment.

**What we did**

**Grantmaking**
Civitates started supporting nine civil society actors. While these grantee partners are based in six countries, all initiatives go beyond the country of location. Many cover several countries, while others take a pan-European approach. They address issues like algorithmic decision-making, disinformation, election monitoring, preventing arbitrary content restrictions, digital political advertising, and more. The cohort of grantee partners is very diverse, ranging from well-established think tanks or umbrella organizations to small grass-roots organizations that have only been around for a short duration of time but work with innovative approaches. For more information about each of these grants, please check out the Civitates website.

**A few numbers related to the selection process**
- **120 applications** were received in November 2018.
- **55 applications** were pre-selected by the secretariat and examined by a group of external experts in December 2018.
- **32 proposals** were discussed by the selection committee, which met with the expert group during a face to face meeting in January 2019.
- **16 applicants** were requested to submit a full proposal in February 2019.
- **16 applications** were discussed by the selection committee, which met with the expert group during a face to face meeting in March 2019.
- **9 grants** were provided, starting in April 2019.
In September Civitates gathered in Brussels all organizations that are receiving funds for their work on ‘improving the digital information ecosystem in Europe’. It was the first time for these grantee partners to meet as a group. They learned more about each other’s work and explored possible ways of collaboration. Presentations by each project were followed up with smaller discussions in which participants were encouraged to identify other relevant work being done in the field, identify potential partner organisations, or even identify specific ideas for collaboration. The program also included a session called ‘Ask me anything’, during which foundation representatives were open to answer questions from grantee partners, and a group discussion on monitoring and evaluation.³

There was a lot of enthusiasm and excitement in the room and it was great to see that all grantee partners are keen to further explore coordination and collaboration. The meeting participants provided very positive feedback about the meeting, indicating they learned something useful for their work, obtained useful contacts, gained a better understanding of Civitates, and really feel part of a cohort. When asked what our grantee partners liked most about the grantee meeting, several people pointed to the opportunity to interact with donors in a pleasant setting, praising “the open atmosphere and open attitude of the donors”.

Moreover, three of the nine grantee partners already made use of Learning Initiatives, participating in several conferences and other key events, as well as organizing a facilitated workshop on digital security.

³ A recap of the meeting can be found here: civitates-eu.org/civitates-grantee-convening_sept-2019

Geographical distribution of the number of grants aimed at improving the digital public sphere. While the grantees are based in these countries, their work concerns all of Europe.
Outcomes

Outcome #1: New insights.

Thanks to the work of our grantee partners, which have been analysing and exposing issues impacting the quality of online public discourse, there have been several new insights.

For example, the work of the Oxford Internet Institute and Who Targets Me shows that foreign influence was limited in the UK 2019 elections. The main actors of disinformation were mainstream political actors and campaigns, and alternative media outlets. The same goes for political advertising. In the UK there is a minority of domestic political actors which use the fact that political advertising online is largely unregulated to stretch the truth and avoid accountability. The upside to this is that, better national or international regulation, action by platforms, and a media that is literate when it comes to online campaign techniques, should be enough to hold such material to account.

Thanks to the work of Panoptykon Foundation we now also have a much clearer picture of how political micro-targeting is used in Poland. Their work showed that Polish political parties and candidates mostly avoided controversial forms of targeting. However, the analysis of Facebook’s role in the targeting process suggests that the platform itself plays a significant part in choosing which users are targeted with a political ad and why. These learnings are useful for future initiatives.

Karolina Iwańska from Panoptykon Foundation:

“It [therefore] becomes crucial to verify the existence of the political underground: non-official actors using targeted content to stir and stimulate the more contentious political debate. Moreover, we need to investigate how the platform itself optimises ad delivery. We have to push for full transparency of the entire targeting process, both on the part of political advertisers and platforms, as well as look at other forms of political communication (e.g. targeted organic posts).”

Outcome #2: New tools.

Several useful new tools have been created by our grantee partners, exposing the manipulation of the online public discourse. Three examples:

- The Who Targets Me software, which gathers and presents data on the advertising people are targeted with, was made available in all EU countries for the EU elections in May 2019. Who Targets Me now has more data and understanding of the uses, abuses, trade-offs and responsible solutions to the challenges posed by the explosion in data-driven political advertising, than any other organisation working in this space.

- The Balkan Investigative Research Network Hub and SHARE Foundation launched a digital monitoring database on digital threats and digital freedom violations in Southern and Eastern Europe. They also trained 15 people for the continuous monitoring of these violations.

- Democracy Reporting International and MEMO 98 produced a web-based toolkit for social media monitoring in election time. They also prepared a social media risk analysis for the Portuguese EU elections and supported five organisations in different EU countries to monitor elections in their respective countries, namely Austria, Portugal, Poland, Croatia, Romania and Slovakia.
**Outcome #3:** The groundwork is being laid for more evidence-based advocacy initiatives.

Several of the grantee partners actively try to improve the regulatory environment through advocacy initiatives. Algorithm Watch and the European Policy Centre are, for example, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders from civil society, academia, the private sector and policy, serving as a platform for the research, discussion, design, and advocacy of holistic policy recommendations that promote a public discourse that enables and supports the deliberative processes necessary for democracy to function properly.

It is still early days, however, and most grantee partners are still in the process of completing their work related to regulatory proposals before presenting their work to policy makers. This preparatory stage is an important one. In order to defend rights and freedoms in the digital environment, and to do effective advocacy in Brussels at European institutions, we need evidence-based policy making.

Diego Naranjo from European Digital Rights (EDRi):

“We need to have more complaints, more allegations that go to court as we try to have an evidence-based policy making, because what we usually see around us is policy-based evidence making.”

At the same time, policy research and advocacy has to remain flexible and react to ongoing, fast developments in the field - for example respond to solutions proposed by major players, instead of evaluating existing transparency mechanisms, which might no longer be in operation the next year.
Lessons learned

Insight #1: There is great potential for better connecting this field.

While coalition building was not explicitly on our agenda for this line of work, collaboration seems to happen organically among the various grantee partners. Several have spoken at and participated in each other’s events. Some grantee partners have even built close partnerships. For example, Panoptykon Foundation now uses Who Targets Me’s browser plug-in and the two organizations regularly exchange know-how and ideas. Their collaboration resulted in over 6,000 people using the tool during their campaign around the Polish elections.

The strong interest in collaboration in this field is likely related to the fact that the digital space is incredibly dynamic. Tech develops fast and regulators struggle to keep up. Moreover, the field is still emerging, and different actors are working on the same set of problems from different angles: privacy, platform dominance, surveillance, transparency of financial aspects of political campaigns, disinformation, and electoral law. It will be important to get a better understanding of the field so that organizations can engage with each other in a meaningful way, so their work can have the desired impact.

This is particularly important now that a plethora of regulatory attempts are underway, both at the EU and member state levels, to tackle issues such as disinformation, bots, and hate speech.

Mackenzie Nelson from Algorithm Watch:

“*In Europe’s race to devise regulations that hold platforms accountable, many dimensions and perspectives remain unexamined or under-represented. Instead of creating tools for democratic control, governance proposals are either too narrow in scope, or risk concentrating power into the hands of unaccountable corporate actors or potentially hostile governments.*”

Collaboration can make it easier to navigate this momentum around digital policies – especially for organizations that want to pursue a successful advocacy strategy in Brussels, but which are outside of the ‘Brussels bubble’.

Insight #2: Getting decent media coverage is a tricky balancing act.

Several civil society organizations struggle to get the right media attention for work in this area. Journalists tend to be interested in quick and “juicy” insights, whereas these topics are complex, political and abstract, and data collection and analysis require time and patience. Media particularly like to politicise issues at election time. It has therefore been difficult for some of our grantee partners to ensure that the media’s focus is on their informative and research-based messages. Instead, they were often asked about their view on which political party is engaging in
more suspicious activity or on the assessment of campaigning strategies of individual parties. Engaging social media influencers on these topics has also proven to be challenging, both because it requires credibility in this group and because of the difficulty of the topic.

Some grantee partners developed partnerships with interested media in order to get better coverage. Who Targets Me, which put a significant effort into studying and reporting on the UK election in December 2019, earned significant media coverage and many thousands of new users of their software. They set up a new service making it easier for journalists to cover online political advertising around the UK election. But it also had a flipside.

Sam Jeffers from Who Targets Me:

“We noticed many of the journalists were incentivised to write quick daily campaign stories, rather than detailed pieces about structural and regulatory issues. Also, small issues, which weren’t running at any great scale, suddenly got national media exposure. We felt some of the stories about our work were missing the wider point. For future campaigns we need to be aware of this over-correction, and the fact that there are a lot of journalists new to the issues at hand.”

Insight #3: The lack of access to data from dominant platforms needs to be addressed for civil society to perform its watchdog function properly.

Online platforms tend to provide insufficient data, in inconsistent formats. We need to improve the access to quality, privacy-protecting data about how platforms curate and moderate content or deal with issues such as political advertising. This is important for civil society (but also academics and regulatory authorities) in order to monitor the imbalance of power between social media platforms, as well as preserve the health of the digital public sphere more generally.

The work by Algorithm Watch highlighted that the current debate on how to balance potential privacy concerns, while still enabling meaningful access to dominant platform data, may be ignoring existing best practices. To fill this research gap, a study was commissioned (in early 2020) aimed at shedding light on how best practices in handling sensitive data for the public interest might be applied in the context of intermediary governance. The study will hopefully fill an important gap in the ongoing policy discussions, helping policymakers understand how they can balance potential privacy concerns while still enabling meaningful access to dominant platform data.
What’s next?

In 2020 Civitates will continue to support the existing group of grantee partners. In addition to the support provided through the ongoing grants, the Learning Initiatives, and grantee gatherings, we want to help our grantee partners anticipate challenges and respond to emerging opportunities. We will do this through our new Opportunities Fund, which provides additional funding to existing grantee partners to address critical and emerging issues that intersect with their work. Moreover, in the second part of the year an external consultant will help us draw learnings from the work so far. This interim assessment is aimed at helping us better tailor our funding to the needs, trends, challenges, and opportunities in this fast-evolving field.
Objective 3: independent, public interest journalism

Our goal
Civitates aims to strengthen the field of independent, public interest journalism in Europe so it can defend democracy by exposing abuses of power and drivers of polarization, and defending a space in which all voices are heard.

What we did
Throughout 2019 Civitates organized and participated in several meetings with experts in the European journalism field. We set up a consultative process that involved journalists from across Europe in co-designing the strategy and grant-making approach for this new line of work. From all these conversations it was crystal clear that there is a real need for strengthening the public interest journalism field in Europe by providing multi-year core support. While this body of work is still very new, we look forward to reporting on the first outcomes and lessons learned from next year onwards. For now, we’d like to share with you our plans for this new line of work.

Rationale

Reason #1: There is a need to more actively support independent public interest journalism in Europe.

Particularly at a time when democracy in Europe is under stress, it’s important to strengthen journalism. It plays a vital role in a democratic society, by providing a platform for dialogue and debate, and helping individuals to form their opinions and participate as informed citizens in democratic processes. It also monitors governmental and corporate (in) actions, holding those in power to account. Independent, in-depth journalism in Europe finds itself increasingly under pressure, though. Media freedom is in decline, trust in media is low, and business models are in distress. Yet, despite all challenges, exciting new types of journalism organisations are popping up all over Europe. These organisations are in a vulnerable position, though, especially when operating in politically hostile environments.

Reason #2: Philanthropy needs to step up its game in this field.

Public interest journalism, which is of great significance for society but currently unsustainable, is an area in which philanthropy has an important role to play – to ensure not just its survival, but its growth. There is little funding available for journalism initiatives within Europe and the field is siloed: there are few funders that take an ecosystem view, focusing instead on specific elements, specific countries, or specific challenges.
Reason #3: There is great potential for pooling funds in this area.

By pooling journalism funding under the umbrella of Civitates we bring home the message that independent, public interest journalism is essential to democracy. It also helps us maximize resources. Civitates could provide an efficient entry point for foundations currently not funding journalism, but with an interest in doing so—thereby bringing more resources into the field. Additionally, it helps improve learnings. Civitates provides an excellent basis for knowledge exchange amongst donors, advancing the learning of what works in this highly complex field. It also provides opportunities for grantees to learn from each other, as well as across the different sub-funds. Lastly, by pooling funds, donors can mitigate potential reputational risks with regard to funding journalism. Support for independent media tends to be politically sensitive, contributing to substantial risk aversion on the part of donors. Acting together could minimize these ‘risks by association’. Receiving a grant through a pooled fund also helps guarantee journalist organisations’ reputation and avoids that journalists are perceived as an instrument of a specific funders’ agenda.

Strategy outline

Civitates will, from 2020 onwards, provide core funding to a number of independent, public interest journalism organisations which have the potential to have a positive impact on democracy and solidarity, and which are likely to become stronger and more sustainable as a result of Civitates’ support. Civitates will actively try to create a diverse cohort of independent, public interest journalism organisations in Europe, facilitating a joint learning journey so they can grow stronger together. Moreover, it will try to improve the operating environment for this sector more broadly by bringing more resources into the field. Together we can strategically maximize the limited funding available in this area, and catalyze results towards a stronger, healthier, and more sustainable field.

We hope to see the following outcomes as a result of our support:

- Grantees are (measurably) more durable, resilient, impactful, and networked.
- Grantees have covered important societal stories that have been picked up widely and/or that fostered broader conversations in society.
- A diverse cohort of independent, public interest journalism organisations in Europe which grow stronger together.
- Increased understanding amongst funders of the role of independent, public interest journalism organizations in advancing democracy in Europe.
- Increased funding into the field from funders that don’t traditionally fund independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

What’s next?

The first Request for Proposals will be published in the spring and the first grants are expected to go out by the end of 2020.
Objective 4: a robust funder collaborative

Our goal
Civitates wants to reinforce the capacity of philanthropy to respond to long-term threats and to strengthen democracy in Europe by establishing a robust funder collaborative, which could last well beyond the initial three-year strategy period (2018-2020).

What we did
Now that the fund is about to enter the last year of the current strategy period, we discussed the future of the fund. The Steering Committee discussed Civitates’ growth trajectory, which aims to be aspiring as well as attainable, and addressed several important questions related to governance and operations. We also continued to engage with other funders and stakeholders at various conferences and gatherings.

Outcomes
Outcome #1: More funding leveraged.
All foundations that are supporting Civitates have confirmed the continuation of their support for 2020. Several foundations have even doubled or tripled their contributions, and new funders are joining. We are expecting a big increase in the budget: while initially donors had made pledges for €1.5M, the annual budget will be nearly €3M in 2020. We don’t have any data, however, on the total amount of funding that is being dedicated to strengthening civic space in Europe as this is not tracked as such.
**Outcome #2: High funder satisfaction.**

The feedback provided by the funders involved in the initiative has been very positive. They particularly praise:

- The work of the well-functioning secretariat, including very clear communication and the non-monetary support provided to the grantee partners.
- The great collaboration, high level of openness and good understanding established amongst the many different foundation representatives.
- The fact that Civitates is present in the discussions on the topics it works on and has started to build a reputation in the field.
- The added value of a collaborative effort like Civitates.

Moreover, funders value Civitates for the “foot” that funders can now have in areas (geographic or thematic) that they would not be able to intervene in alone. The large majority of Civitates’ partner foundations have now funded organizations that they would not have funded themselves otherwise. Most of the funder representatives involved in Civitates indicate that their foundations do not do (much) grantmaking in this field directly. For a small group there is overlap with the work they do at their foundation, but the grants are quite different. But there are also a few foundations for which there is an overlap both in terms of strategic focus and the type of grants provided.

**Outcome #3: A growth strategy.**

In December the Steering Committee adopted a growth strategy to ensure a smooth collaboration between the members and efficient operational mechanisms for the secretariat, while remaining inclusive and considering the wide spectrum of foundations participating in Civitates. As a result, the fund:

- Will adopt a **longer (5-years) framework cycle**, allowing for longer-term commitments, while providing flexibility for the different funding mechanisms and timeframes of individual foundations.
- Has agreed **minimum requirements for the creation of new lines of work** (sub-funds) within Civitates.
- Will set up a **contingency fund** to improve the fund’s impact and sustainability, facilitating administrative and operational continuity, as well as a responsible exit-strategy when the time is ripe.
- Will allow for **various engagement levels** (distinguishing between partner foundations, associated foundations and aligned foundations) to ensure that its governance remains agile and to offer flexibility for foundations that have no time capacity or interest to be involved in the fund beyond a specific line of work.
- Will be strengthened with one **additional staff member** in 2020.
Lessons learned

Insight #1: There is both a need and an appetite to keep supporting democracy and solidarity in Europe.

Even if the topics that divide society change from time to time, the tactics to intimidate civil society stay the same. Even in places were elections have provided hope for progressive civil society, the situation remains fragile. Luckily there is a continued appetite for collaboration to support democracy in Europe under the umbrella of Civitates. All foundations involved in our collaborative have confirmed the continuation of their support for 2020. Moreover, there is a general will to dig deeper, have clearer positions, and expand the timeframe of the Civitates grants. The fund has built up a responsibility towards the field. Going forward we need to recognize the strong desire for continued, longer term funding. Funding Plus activities, which are a powerful lever, also remain important. The grantee convenings and Learning Initiatives organized so far have already facilitated a considerable amount of “cross-pollination”. But there is potential for an even more dedicated approach to capacity building, as well as for connecting grantee partners across Civitates’ various lines of work.

Insight #2: We need to better balance time commitments.

Being a new fund, Civitates requires a lot of investment from partner foundations in terms of time, by some seen as disproportionate to the amount of funding involved. While this is not necessarily negative (it shows the commitment and the willingness of the funders to invest in Civitates), some foundations would like it to go down a bit over time. That being said, funder meetings can have interesting ‘by products’ and serve as learning opportunities. For example at a strategy meeting related to the creation of the new line of work supporting independent, public interest journalism in Europe, 83% of the participating donors indicated they made connections that will positively impact their work. Similarly, 83% said they had increased their knowledge in an area that is important in their work.

Insight #3: External communications remains an area to be strengthened.

In 2019 Civitates started to work with a communications consultant who regularly produces interviews of grantees. The stories do not only put the grantees’ work in the spotlight, but also highlight the dreams and hopes of the people behind the projects, hoping to trigger empathy and a sense of belonging. The interviews are published every two weeks on the Civitates website, as well as disseminated through a mailing list and on Linkedin, as well as shared by some of the foundation partners. Even more could be done in terms of external communications, though, to present the work of our grantee partners to external audiences – as was identified by the foundation partners in the anonymous end-of-the-year survey for 2019.

What’s next?

In 2020 Civitates will further develop its long-term mission. The two interim assessments of the two existing bodies of work will play an important role in this regard. The fund will also continue to grow. We will expand the team, with one additional Programme Officer, and continue to bring in new foundation partners to ensure that we have the means to turn our ambitious goals into real impact on the ground.
Our finances:

income

€25,000
Stefan Batory Foundation

€100,000
Robert Bosch Foundation

€149,533
Open Society Foundations

€210,000
Oak Foundation

€100,000
Nicolas Puech Foundation

€75,000
Mercator Foundation

€86,021
Luminate

€50,000
Erste Foundation

€50,000
European Cultural Foundation

€50,000
Fritt Ord Foundation

€100,000
King Badouin Foundation

€100,000
Korber Foundation

€50,000
Fondation de France

€150,000
Adessium Foundation

€100,000
Bertelsmann Foundation

€124,622
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

We had €1,313,500 rolled over from 2018.
We rolled over €511,600 to 2020.

Our finances: expenses

Expenses 2019

- €7,792 Evaluation
- €45,116 External Expertise
- €7,678 Funding Plus Objective 2
- €55,655 Funding Plus Objective 1
- €844,531 Grants Objective 2
- €1,000,271 Grants Objective 1
- €16,746 Communication
- €195,536 Staff and Administration
Only the name of the grantee with which we signed a grant letter is listed, even if the grantee was working in a collaborative or served as a fiscal agent for another organization. The total amount of the grant is listed.
A healthy digital public sphere
Our foundation partners

We are grateful to the following organizations that provided us with financial support in 2019:

[Logos of various foundations and organizations]