Annual Report
2021

civitates
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Looking back at 2021

The new decade started with a bang – the bang of a pandemic that came as a surprise to most of us. A pandemic that turned our lives upside down, that put pressure on journalists and civil society alike, that allowed the spread of online abuses and disinformation and let governments introduce restrictive measures on personal freedoms. As with any crisis, this one also surfaced political and societal shortcomings.

In 2021, we witnessed the storming of the Capitol in the U.S. – a direct result of widespread misinformation; Twitter singlehandedly suspending the account of the U.S. president at the time – Donald Trump; and governments buying Pegasus spyware to survey journalists and critical voices, among those affected was also a Civitates’ grantee partner – Direkt36. These examples show how tech and tech companies have gained tremendous power over our lives in just a few years and how urgent it is to regulate tech in a way that upholds fundamental rights and freedoms.

In Europe, in many countries, incidents of democratic erosion and backsliding are ongoing – the deterioration of media freedom and pluralism became evident in Slovenia after continuous governmental attempts to discredit civil society actors and journalists. A political crisis unfolded in Belarus; an immigration crisis followed on the border with Poland where civil society took again a frontline position.

At the same time, civil society pushed back when and where possible and we saw numerous examples of solidarity across the continent – in Poland journalistic organisations came together to stage a media blackout protest; in Slovenia civil society organisations set up a crowd-funding campaign to save the Slovenian Press Agency; on the European level, civil society organisations are working in unison to strengthen fundamental freedoms and democracy in the Digital Services Act and other tech-related legislation.

In 2021 journalism took a central stage with two journalists being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – something that happened only once before, in 1935. This comes to emphasise not only the importance of journalistic work for democracy and peace but also the obstacles and risks the profession entails, especially when journalism as a craft is losing people’s trust and attacks on the truth are enabled and multiplied by tech platforms’ algorithms and the spread of misinformation, especially on social media. To quote Maria Ressa’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “We are standing on the rubble of the world that was, and we must have the foresight and courage to imagine what might happen if we don’t act now, and instead, create the world as it should be – more compassionate, more equal, more sustainable.”

That’s what Civitates stands for and in the coming years, we will continue to support civil society actors to come together, revitalise public discourse, and ensure that all voices are heard. We’d like to see our grantee partners become more resilient, viable, impactful, and better connected. So, we will continue to provide flexible funding for civil society actors, strengthen their capacity, connect local and European actors, and create space and opportunities for exchanges and cross-organisational learning among all Civitates-supported organisations. Our goal is for all our partners to be able to better understand, anticipate, and react to new challenges.

We are currently in a phase where democratic pressures have been acknowledged by policy makers and put on the European agenda. There’s a strong focus on regulating the digital public sphere and ensuring media freedom and pluralism in Europe. It’s a good moment for philanthropy to step up and complement these efforts to defend democracy. We can do this by ensuring that civil society can take collective action to safeguard civic space and perform its watchdog effectively online as well as offline and that journalists can continue to cover stories of societal importance and expose abuses of power.

The challenges we are facing are shared. They demonstrate that democracy is not a done deal and requires constant investment.

CIVITATES TEAM

Marie-Laure MUCHERY, Fund director
Roy VIRAH-SAWMY, Programme manager
Ekaterina MANDOVA, Programme officer
A word from the Chair

Democracy in Europe is a shared and ongoing responsibility. The erosion of democratic principles that we are witnessing in many European countries highlights the need for increased coordinated actions and collaboration from civil society organisations and amongst philanthropic organisations.

We have seen the indispensable role civil society and journalists played in the unfolding of the pandemic in 2020. We see it now with civil society unifying cross-border in support of Ukraine. As such, existing relationships among civil society actors are extremely important so that they can coordinate efforts, react to unfavourable situations, and protect each other when needed.

The importance of mobilisation of actors on the ground, and, in parallel, the commitment from the philanthropic sector is paramount. Foundations working together as part of Civitates want to make a statement that democracy is important for us and that we are taking our part in improving the quality of our democracy in the long run.

We have worked in 2021 to renew our strategy for the next two years but as needs are evolving, we need to stay alert and keep track of developments, especially with regards to the situation in Ukraine and its inevitable implications for democracy in Europe. Having recognised this need, Civitates will further foster connections and coordinate efforts among partners so that they stand strong and united. Now is a good time to expand our collaborative and act together in supporting resilient democracies everywhere in Europe.

Stefan SCHÄFERS,
Chair of Civitates, Director at King Baudouin Foundation
What we want to tackle

Challenges related to the operating environment for civil society

→ **Space for civil society is shrinking** due to legal, economic, practical limitations, preventing civil society actors, especially activists or critical voices, from playing their essential role of intermediaries to speak up the concerns of different communities, uphold their rights and freedoms, make sure those in power are responsive and accountable.

Challenges related to the functioning of the digital public sphere

→ The digital public sphere has become a hub for disinformation, hate speech, harmful content, and practices, leading to potential opinion manipulation, polarisation of views and infringement of fundamental rights that ultimately increase tensions between communities, damage social cohesion and the democratic fabric. This situation is mainly due to the current functioning of the digital sphere, characterised by inadequate regulation, lack of transparency and accountability and unfettered influence of private companies such as big tech platforms.

Challenges related to the viability of independent media

→ The **sustainability and existence of independent public-interest journalism** as a pillar of democracy is **pressured** by economic, political and societal factors such as changing advertising market, declining media freedom, eroding trust in media, etc.

Challenges related to inherent weaknesses of Civil Society

→ **Civil society (including the media) lacks opportunities, spaces, and resources** to exchange across sectors and countries, **collaborate and coordinate** their work to address the issues mentioned above.

→ Civil society needs **adequate financial and non-financial resources** to build strong constituencies and affirm its legitimacy towards policy makers and citizens to defend and enhance democracy in Europe.

Challenges related to engagement and coordination of philanthropic actors

→ There is **little private funding** dedicated to supporting democracy in Europe

→ There is a **lack of exchange and coordination between philanthropic actors** on democracy-related issues in Europe.
What we do

1. Provide flexible funding for civil society actors
2. Strengthen the capacity of civil society actors
3. Connect the dots-local, national and European levels
4. Create space for exchange and mutual learning, amongst all actors working to enhance democracy
Our objectives

Objective 1

Strong and resilient civil society

Supporting collective action, coalition building and initiatives at local, national, and European levels that seek to respond effectively to the shrinking space for civil society. (focus 2021-2023)

For civil society to be viable and become more resilient, civil society actors have to be able to come together, strengthen their capacities and build common strategies to address the challenges affecting the environment in which they operate, so that CSOs can play their indispensable watchdog role.

What we want our grantees to achieve in the short/medium term:

- Enhance collaboration among CSOs
- Improve the perception of civil society by the general public
- Exchange best practices and lessons learned among civil society actors at local, national, and European levels
- Contribute to policy debates at the national level, as well as indirectly at the EU level, which have an impact on the operating environment of CSOs.

Changes we want to contribute to:

- Civil society actors have developed their mutual resistance and resilience capacities, they take collective action to safeguard civic space and perform their watchdog role effectively and work collectively for an enabling environment.
**Digital public sphere**

*Supporting civil society that advocates for improved checks and balances, accountability and transparency through regulation at the EU and individual country level to shape a digital public sphere that is conducive to democracy and fundamental rights. (focus 2021-2023)*

A **healthy digital public sphere** can be described as a space where citizens can inform themselves based on facts and are exposed to trustworthy and independent analyses and a plurality of views, all voices are expressed and heard safely and freely, independent of race, gender, or sexual orientation and without fear of abuse, violence or hate speech, adequate checks and balances, accountability and transparency apply, upholding democratic principles, fundamental rights and the protection of citizens.

**What we want our grantees to achieve in the short/medium term:**

- Grantees’ policy recommendations for meaningful regulation of the platforms have been taken into account
- Acquire new skills and expertise to enhance advocacy work
- Network and develop collaborations to build common ground positions leading to joint advocacy efforts at the EU and across the EU countries
- Engage with and support the capacity of actors/groups in countries where the field is still emerging or where there is a democratic backsliding
- Contribute to better awareness and understanding of decision makers about the implications of technology on democracy and society
- Contribute to the engagement of a wider scope of actors beyond the tech-focused organisations to address the societal impacts of an unhealthy digital public sphere.

**Changes we want to contribute to:**

- The digital public sphere functions in a way that upholds and enhances democratic principles, fundamental rights, and social cohesion, enabling a peaceful public debate.
For the sector of independent-public interest journalism to grow and strengthen, media organisations have to become more durable, more resilient, more networked and more impactful, while keeping full editorial control in order to play their crucial role in the good governance of democratic societies ensuring transparency and accountability, and providing the public with reliable, accurate, and balanced information.

Viable independent public-interest journalism

Providing (multi-year core) support to independent public-interest journalism organisations for general operations and strengthening. Building the case for bringing more funding to the sector by sharing our learnings with the philanthropic community in Europe. (focus 2021-2023)

What we want our grantees to achieve in the short/medium term:

- Grantees' organisations have improved their viability through finding long-term sustainability models to be able to produce high-quality journalism
- Network and develop strong connections within the cohort while growing stronger together through mutual exchanges and peer learning
- Contribute meaningfully and impactfully to the public debate by covering stories of public interest
- Contribute to funders’ awareness raising and advocacy efforts in bringing more funding to the field.

Changes we want to contribute to:

- Independent public-interest journalism organisations are strengthened, more sustainable and more connected to the ecosystem. They have strengthened their capacity to cover stories of societal importance and to expose abuses of power and drivers of polarisation. Philanthropic actors dedicate more resources to supporting independent public-interest journalism in Europe.
Robust funders collaborative

Providing a platform for funders to combine collective investment and thinking to enhance funding for democracy in Europe.

For Civitates to offer the necessary space and solid infrastructure for long-term engagement and coordination of resources and abilities from foundations, allowing effective collaboration towards a shared ambition.

What we want to achieve in the short/medium term:

- Increase the understanding and knowledge about the ecosystem of the actors working towards safeguarding democracy in Europe (learning community)
- Create space for connecting, discussing, and developing a common philanthropic agenda on the issues at stake
- Gain better recognition of the philanthropic sector as a legitimate actor in the debate about democracy in Europe

Changes we want to contribute to:

- Civil society actors (including the media) have developed cross-sector and cross-border connections and collaborations allowing them to be a strong voice in safeguarding democracy in Europe.
- More funders have joined efforts and resources and developed a common philanthropic agenda on democracy in Europe. The capacity of philanthropy to strengthen democracy in Europe in the long-term is reinforced.
Civitates in numbers

- **22** Partner foundations
- **2** Calls for proposals
- **2.6 M€** disbursed in grants
- **39** Supported organisations
- **in 17** countries
Our Highlights

Start of the partnership with independent public-interest journalism organisations (objective 3)

Two new foundations join Civitates (objective 4)

New strategy on healthy digital public sphere for 2021-2023 (objective 2)

Civitates' spring Steering Committee Meeting (objective 4)

A targeted call for proposals in line with the new strategy on a healthy digital public sphere (objective 2)

Independent public-interest journalism grantees meet online for the first time (objective 3)

Civitates grants €1,65 million to civil society advocates for a healthy digital public sphere (objective 2)

A new strategy for supporting strong and resilient civil society is adopted (objective 1)

In-person convening on revenue diversification as a way towards sustainability in journalism (objective 3)

Civitates grants €1,15 million to 14 national coalitions working for strong and resilient civil society (objective 1)

Civitates' autumn Steering Committee Meeting and a discussion with representatives from the European Commission, EEA&Norway Grants (objective 4)

Online convening on peer exchanges about progress and strategies (objective 1)
Small, flexible, and accessible grants can go a long way

Reflections of three years of ‘learning initiatives’

Grantees’ needs evolve, new challenges and opportunities constantly emerge, at the same time it is important to provide space and time for civil society and journalistic organisations to reinvent their strategies and approaches and build wider constituencies. There are plenty of important aspects of organisational strengthening that fall out of the scope of a typical grant application such as emerging collaborations, exchanges, specific thematic training opportunities, attending conferences and initiating cross-organisational visits. Civitates provides the space for connections among its grantee partners and encourages them to be in touch beyond Civitates meetings and with the funding they need to follow up on mutual ideas and projects without sacrificing their already shoestring budgets. Building on the experience in other pooled funds within the Network of European Foundations, Civitates set up a small grant scheme in 2019 to be able to further capacity and resilience among our grantee partners. These grants follow a light application procedure and amount to up to € 5,000 a year and allow existing grantees to take on unforeseen but highly beneficial learning initiatives.

This funding practice is complementary to the grants that organisations already receive, as often the activities covered by these small grants are hard to include in a project proposal – such as those related to strengthening relationships, learning more about another organisation, or addressing common needs together with other Civitates grantees or external organisations.

This opportunity is greatly appreciated by the grantees as mentioned in the evaluation reports that Civitates has commissioned:

“This funding practice is complementary to the grants that organisations already receive, as often the activities covered by these small grants are hard to include in a project proposal – such as those related to strengthening relationships, learning more about another organisation, or addressing common needs together with other Civitates grantees or external organisations. This opportunity is greatly appreciated by the grantees as mentioned in the evaluation reports that Civitates has commissioned:

“About half the groups had taken advantage of the learning initiatives, and most of the remainder are planning to. Again, these were much appreciated, with some using them for interchanges with other groups, and others using them to access expertise. One person emphasised the flexibility that Civitates has shown in this program.”

Morris Lipson,
Review of Civitates’ sub-fund “strong and resilient civil society”.

Since the start of the small grant scheme, we have observed the impact these relatively small amounts have on our grantees’ overall capacity strengthening, cross-organisational connections, and well-being.

Strategising for stronger impact

Being part of a cohort of grantees comes with inspiration and reflection on one’s organisations and what could be a better way moving forward. Organisations need to be able to adjust their strategies in view of the contexts they operate in but also the new knowledge they acquire and the development stage they are in. As such, one of our grantee partners wanted to further dive into...
“effective methodologies to collectively tackle complex problems related to inter-dependent, globalised, increasingly fragmented societies, and seek ways to produce desired and lasting social change”.

With the help of Civitates’ Learning Initiative the Neon coalition in the Czech Republic could explore how their original community development methodology may be relevant to those who build EU-, nation- and sector-wide networks and social movements. “The positive effect of the Learning Initiative was the creation of a group of CSOs changemakers who meet regularly since then and examine concrete experience on collective impact in the Czech context and give feedback to strategic issues of involved coalitions.” – shared our grantee partner. The extracted learnings have helped the coalition focus its efforts and thus strengthen the positioning of civil society. The coalition has expanded national cross-sectoral CSO infrastructure into a stronger pro-democracy social movement and has built alternative CSOs narratives that strengthen the resilience of the whole CSO sector by ensuring its effective (CSO sector-wide) measurement, evaluation, and learning. Having seen the benefits of such deep-dive strategic exercises, the Czech coalition used a similar approach for developing their Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning strategy.

Other Civitates partners used the opportunity offered by the small grants scheme to hire a facilitator to reflect on their collaboration for their Civitates project that fed into their future projects and collaborations. Still others, carried out a team retreat as their organisation was going through rapid growth and there was a need to build a sense of belonging and team spirit – all equally important aspects of building organisations’ resilience.

Fostering inspiring and impactful exchanges

When the Peace Institute in Slovenia analysed their strategy in 2019, they realised that watchdog organisations in Slovenia lacked organised and strategic approach to communication, particularly when they are under attack. The organisation identified a strong need for systematic capacity building in this field. “At that point, we were not sure how to provide the budget for it. The Civitates Learning Initiative scheme was exactly what we needed.” – shared the Peace Institute. The additional funding and the connections fostered with other Civitates’ partners allowed them to find a viable solution. “This has been seen as a good opportunity to exchange knowledge and experience within the coalitions in the Civitates cohort and learn from each other. The workshops we organised together with the Slovak coalition, who had the needed expertise, have contributed to the increased capacities of our coalition members and the wider group of CSOs and journalists. As a result, they developed more strategic responses.” – elaborates our partner in Slovenia.

The journalism organisations that Civitates supports became aware of the existing knowledge and capacity within the cohort after meeting for the first time in person in 2021. They initiated cross-organisational visits so that they can see in practice how other organisations deal with multimedia production, data-driven investigations, and business model development. The Learning Initiative scheme allowed them to organise these visits without sacrificing their already limited budgets. The exchanges are still to roll out, but we see the enthusiasm and appreciation the grantees have for this opportunity.

Resilience and staff well-being

With the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic, it became even more evident how important personal well-being is. As civil society and journalists have been on the frontlines of the pandemic, they were also hardest hit in terms of mental health and burn-out. The well-being of the staff is an important organisational trait, especially when referring to building resilience. Having recognised these aspects, some of our grantee partners reached out to Civitates and through the Learning Initiative scheme they were able to organise individual and team consultations with therapists and coaches.
“The focus of our initiative was to prevent burn-out, depression and low levels of motivation of the coalition and to encourage the partners to continue working together as actively as before and to seek new methods and tools to do so.”

One of our partner organisations in Bulgaria.

“As a small newsroom, we still too often find ourselves overwhelmed with an ever-increasing agenda but at the same time limited human resources. We have learnt that burn-out prevention is the crucial component that needs to be integrated into our overall working process to ensure the longevity and viability of our newsroom. We have learnt that our team’s health is a priority, and we want to lead by example.”

One of our grantees in Slovenia.
Objective 1:
a strong and resilient civil society

Number of organisations supported: 16
Our goal

Civitates aims to support collective action, coalition building and initiatives at local, national, and European level that seek to respond effectively to the shrinking space for civil society.

Civil society actors have to be able to come together, strengthen their capacities and build common strategies to address challenges affecting the environment in which they operate, allowing them to perform their watchdog role effectively.

What we did

Evaluation and strategy renewal

At the beginning of 2021 Civitates commissioned a mapping of the current state of the shrinking space in Europe and an evaluation of our support to our existing grantees during the first phase of this sub-fund (2018-2020). The purpose of those two external reports was to inform the strategy for the next phase starting at the end of 2021.

Lessons learnt from the evaluation report

According to the evaluation report, Civitates’ initial assumption to support coalitions made sense: the current cohort of partners and their respective approaches – for some defensive, for others proactive, depending on the context – are relevant and they are progressing towards their goals.

The pandemic and the changeable political situation for some of them have put additional pressure on their work. Still, all the coalitions supported so far have been able to set up, organise and complete their activities as originally planned. We have seen some indications of valuable results among those who developed solidarity mechanisms to respond to attacks or actively engaged in legislative advocacy.

We are aware that building collective action to reinforce democracy and strengthen civil society is a long-term effort. Most of the coalitions started their collective work only in 2018 thanks to Civitates’ funding and it will require more time and support to assess the impact of their collaboration. It is, therefore, important to build on the existing work of our partners, sustain their efforts over time, and strengthen their capacity of resistance and resilience, especially in volatile, fast-evolving political landscapes.

To better improve the capacity of CSOs, the report highlighted a couple of recommendations, especially in terms of strategic communication and impact measurement.

Lessons learnt from the mapping

The mapping provided a comprehensive picture of the current key trends and challenges affecting the civic space in Europe: it helped to better identify the systemic drivers and manifestations of the shrinking space as well as effective strategies to push back restrictions on civic space, coalition building being one of the most effective. It was also helpful to get an overview of the recent developments throughout the continent, especially in countries where the deterioration of democracy is most concerning.

Strategic developments

Civitates’ Working Group discussed the insights and the recommendations from those reports which helped to outline a way forward for this line of work.

After a round of consultations with funders and country experts, Civitates set the following priorities for the next granting phase (2022-2023):

- Renewing support to existing partners
- Amplifying the work and objectives of the supported coalitions at the European level
- Strengthening the skills and capacity of the grantees allowing them to better understand, anticipate, react, and adapt to the emerging pressures for civil society

Grantmaking

Considering that building collective action and strengthening the field to defend civic space is a long-term undertaking, Civitates invited its existing partners to submit a proposal for another round of funding. Careful to avoid funding gaps and thus, jeopardise our partners’ progress, the grant was meant to go out in December 2021, as by that time the extension grants that our partners received the year before, ended.

The mapping of the shrinking space and the consultation with experts showed that the situation for civil society is worsening in Croatia and Poland. Keeping this in mind, Civitates’ team, with the help of foundation partners, identified six potential partners in those countries that were consequently invited to submit a grant application.

After two selection meetings in November and December, the Working Group decided to support fourteen initiatives in ten countries, for a total amount of € 1.150.000:

- nine existing coalition partners with a two-year grant of € 100.000 per coalition
one existing coalition partner with an exit grant of € 50,000

one new partner from Croatia and three new partners from Poland with a pilot grant for one year of € 50,000 each

Building on the work our partners have started in 2018, they have further developed and refined their strategies and set clear priorities for the future. Their approaches depend on the context in each country and include activities such as:

- support mechanisms to defend one another from direct attacks and restrictions that limit the environment for civil society
- mechanisms to monitor and raise awareness about the deterioration of checks and balances
- communication campaigns to shift the public perception and articulate a positive vision of civil society and demonstrate its importance to the public to counter authoritarian negative narratives
- advocacy work and active participation in political debates
- capacity building activities to develop the skills of their member organisations or the coalition itself
- community development to build stronger networks and constituencies

**Capacity building**

As in previous years, we provided our partners with the opportunity to apply for additional support (up to € 5,000) under the Learning Initiatives scheme so that they could strengthen a specific aspect of their work or skills. Our partners used it in various ways, for example:

- to organise a public event with foreign guests and learn about effective strategies to resist intimidation of journalists and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation SLAPPs (Peace institute, Slovenia)
- to organise a ‘Participation Caravan’ - travelling workshops - both in person and online to inform and mobilise CSOs across the country to participate in the discussion of democratic values and civic space through the Conference on the Future of Europe (Citizen Forum Participation, Bulgaria)
- to review their Monitoring and Evaluation framework and improve communication about their impact (Neon, Czech Republic)

The capacity element of Civitates’ work is highly appreciated by our grantee partners. They share how different learning activities in the past years have a tangible impact on their work now:

“The grantee get-together organised by Civitates [in 2020] for all coalitions was very interesting for the sake of exchanging thoughts and experience with the other coalitions. We learnt a lot by their professional facilitation itself and we have developed our capacity and skills for moderation and organisation of online events which we now apply every day.”

Citizen Participation Forum, Bulgaria

“We value the experience of using the hope-based communication expert provided by Civitates and after the workshop conducted by Thomas Combes [in 2020] we’re still in touch and exchange experience and lessons we learned from him.”

Klon, Poland

Although Covid-19 did not allow for a physical meeting in 2021, Civitates invited its partners to an online get-together in December. The event allowed the coalitions the opportunity to learn, reflect, (re-) connect with their peers and
exchange experiences. The participants were invited to present their priorities and the recent achievements of their coalitions.

As Civitates aims at building the capacity of its partners to anticipate and react to emerging challenges, the grantee get-together also offered an opportunity for them to get acquainted with tech-inflicted issues that may have a direct impact on civil society’s work and democracy.

A policy and campaigns advisor at EDRi – Civitates’ grantee partner and a network working to defend and advance digital rights in Europe, shared how technology can impact civic space and democracy and how the campaign initiated by EDRi - Reclaim your face - can be an opportunity for civil society to inform themselves, get involved and make their voices heard on the topic of biometric mass surveillance.

**Grantees’ progress**

*Connecting the dots: enhanced collaboration to build, expand and strengthen the field*

Coalition building is a promising practice to empower CSOs, build and expand the field and overcome the fragmentation of the civic sector.

A strong and resilient civil society is one where organisations from different thematic and geographical areas join capacities. With diverse organisations involved, civil society can stay united and represent the needs of the whole sector in their respective countries.

**Ravni BG** coalition led by Bulgarian Fund for Women expanded its membership with 10 new organisations, bringing the total number to 38 members to date. They reached out to small organisations that had limited resources and needed support, as well as to organisations with different thematic focuses, especially those working with Roma, socially excluded and vulnerable groups. Ravni BG now represents a bigger diversity of organisations, topics, and opinions, which creates a safe space and supportive environment for the member organisations.

“The achievements of the coalition together had a significant impact on all but specifically on small and remote organisations (...) It helped them start seeing themselves not only as “service providers”, but as political actors as well.”

*Ravni BG*, Bulgaria

The Civil Map project run by one of our partners in Hungary – Ökotárs, was set as an experimental effort to generate activism and networking in areas with a low level of civic engagement. The coalition partners worked to develop and support the consolidation of 6 regional “hubs” of civil society organisations. Each of those hubs received small-scale financial support coupled with regular consultancy and mentoring on communication, skill-building workshops, and larger networking events in each region. The groups managed to start cooperating with other organisations locally and regionally, improve their image and their communications and further develop organisational skills. Now they are working on translating this progress into enhanced civic participation and advocacy.

“Coalition and network building has helped overcome attempts to divide and polarise the sector. A stronger resistance and unified voice of civil society have probably contributed to this.”

*Ökotárs*, Hungary
The “Open Spaces” coalition run by Marom in Hungary is now composed of 56 members, present in eight cities. This broader constituency – with potential for extension – has allowed cooperation between local communities throughout the country. Open Spaces Network was the only CSO to organise a nation-wide climate program during the climate week in Hungary. They initiated concrete collective actions for the whole network to mobilise in solidarity and stand up together for human rights and democracy. An example of their efforts is the whole network raising its voice and protesting the decision of the municipality to shut down Aurora – a Budapest community space. Another example of solidarity comes from their Pécs-based member organisation that declared their support for the first Pride March in the Hungarian countryside.

**Stronger advocacy and meaningful contribution to policy debates**

Several of our grantee partners have united forces to be more visible in their advocacy efforts to their respective national governments. They have strategised, proposed alternatives, and contributed to shaping the policy agenda. Our partners have reacted to attempts to deteriorate current regulations or to implement harmful legislation; they have strengthened and solidified common positions to push for a more enabling environment for the civil society sector in their countries.

Some tangible progress towards the improvement of the legal framework for the exercise of freedom of assembly was registered in Romania, thanks to the intensive advocacy work of the coalition led by CERE. Although the bill is still stuck in the Parliament, they have managed to come up with a legislative proposal that was extensively discussed with the political parties and with civil society actors. Throughout the debate, they have raised awareness among politicians about the many deficiencies of the current legislation and the necessary improvements. The coalition also convinced the government to lift the restrictions on public assemblies linked to Covid-19 measures.

In France, Vox public and its coalition members set up an Observatory of Associative Liberties to actively document repression on the freedom of association. They identified and analysed more than a hundred cases which served as a strong basis for advocacy towards MPs, local authorities, and in communicating with the media. The coalition has also been very active in the discussions of the so-called “separatism” law, introducing provisions with potentially harmful consequences to associative freedoms in France. Despite decent media coverage, the coalition’s proposals were not considered in the final drafting of the law.

The NeoN coalition led by Glopolis in the Czech Republic, has grown into a vibrant infrastructure for collaboration of eighteen networks that together reactively defend and proactively cultivate a democratic, civic space. They have successfully advocated for better engagement of civil society in different decision-making processes. One of their key achievements is related to the joint action they led around the National Recovery Plan. They addressed the members of the Parliament with concrete recommendations and send an open letter to the Deputy Prime Minister demanding transparency in the preparation of the National Recovery Plan. As a response, the coalition was offered to take part in the Committee for the National Recovery Plan. The agenda of the Committee for the National Recovery Plan is now a regular topic of discussion for the coalition.

**“Infrastructure and ecosystem for advocacy networks collaboration have been made more effective and resilient.”**

Neon coalition, the Czech Republic

The Voice of Civic organisations – the Slovak coalition led by Via Iuris – has been actively participating in the Slovak Recovery and Resilience Facility Plan. The coalition worked to influence the final design and implementation of the plan and in doing so, submitted collective feedback with proposals for improvement. Although their proposals were rejected in the final draft, the coalition has become one of the members of the Government Council for the Recovery and Resilience Plan. The coalition also managed to get elected as a member of the Chamber of NGOs which shows that they are becoming a legitimate partner in the political debate.

**Improved perception of civil society by the public**

Several grantees undertook campaigns in recent years to positively influence the perception of civil society and demonstrate its importance for democracy. Those efforts have had some tangible successes with coalitions reshaping their strategies and messaging, building alliances with the media, and engaging the public in dialogue.
To amplify and promote better its communication campaign about the value of civil society in Poland, the coalition led by Klon developed a solid partnership with the monthly magazine Znak where they published photos and articles of NGOs active in small communities, reaching an audience of more than 300,000 readers. To raise awareness among youth, the coalition also partnered with a well-known online magazine for teenagers, where interviews from young female activists are published regularly. In addition, they ran a survey to assess the effectiveness of their communication campaign, the results of which will be shared with the whole network to help them refine messages and strengthen efforts and as such build public trust around civil society organisations in Poland.

The coalition led by CILD in Italy conducted research on a communication campaign they had run earlier about the role and contribution of civil society organisations during the pandemic. The results showed that the campaign was effective as it managed to raise public awareness about the work of CSOs and that the perception of the public was overall positive towards civil society actors. The report “Civil society as an antidote for democracy crisis” will soon be available in English.

The Slovak coalition launched a communication campaign on social media under the slogan “Better life for everyone”. The aim is to counter disinformation about civil society and highlight positive stories about people working in the sector. The campaign has been well-received so far in terms of views and media attention. Together with an external expert, the coalition is currently running a survey to assess the public perception of CSOs in Slovakia and adapt their future messages accordingly.

In Bulgaria, Citizen Participation Forum organised public discussions and viewings of the documentary film “A new beginning” that depicts the work of CSOs during the first months of the pandemic. The activities took place in various cities in Bulgaria and the discussions on the role of CSOs in society were joined by students, teachers, local communities and CSOs, media and local administration representatives. The documentary has also been selected to participate at an international film festival in Turkey.

Enhanced exchanges of best practices and learnings

Now that the coalitions are firmly established, they can more easily organise the flow of information and transfer of skills among their members and beyond. In 2021, most of our grantees have organised trainings for their members, developed exchanges and shared experiences with civil society actors at local, national and European levels with the aim to solidify their own strategies.

In Bulgaria, Ravni BG developed the capacity of their coalition partners while building on the existing knowledge and skills within the coalition - especially on communications. They introduced a mentorship programme for new members through which more experienced ones conducted online trainings and consultancy thus, helping their partners understand the importance of public image and develop catchy messages, press releases, etc.

The Italian coalition designed, launched, and implemented an “Online academy” for activists, CSOs and more informal networks, consisting of five modules on Advocacy and Civic lobbying, Fundraising, Digital campaigning and Communication, Community organising, and Content strategy. The academy was well attended which shows that content to strengthen civic engagement and leadership is needed in Italy.

In addition to the opportunities and spaces offered and facilitated by Civitates, coalitions are now comfortable to reach out directly to their peers to seek help and guidance on specific matters. They are inviting each other more frequently to exchange and share experiences on specific topics. A recent example is the Hungarian coalition led by Ökotárs that invited their Slovenian peers to share how they prepare for the upcoming elections.

“This has been very timely and useful for our coalition and our engagement in the cross-coalition Voice of the People, connecting more than hundred NGOs in Slovenia for joint actions ahead of the 2022 elections.”

Peace Institute, Slovenia

Another example is the two workshops organised by the French coalition where they invited their Hungarian and Italian peers to share experience and expertise about how CSOs dealt with the Covid-19 crisis and the state of a health emergency, as well as with the implementation of lockdowns, curfews, and other special measures that affected many individual and collective freedoms and rights.
**Challenges and learnings**

**Continuous impact of the Covid-19 pandemic**

With the unstable and long-lasting health situation brought by the pandemic – scarce possibility to organise physical gatherings, travel restrictions still in place and people being tired of online meetings – our partners expressed their common difficulty in keeping a high level of engagement and participation from members in the coalition’s activities. This was also reinforced by the fact that many organisations had to shift to more urgent needs, especially those active in supporting vulnerable populations. For the coalitions, that meant additional workload and less time and resources for advocacy activities. This has been a point of attention for several of our grantees throughout the year. To address this situation, some coalitions have reviewed their internal organisation, dedicated more time and human resources to coordination activities. Others changed their backbone and management structure to create a new dynamic. For still others, it was a good time to include new partners who were able to take the leadership on a specific activity. For example, one of the Bulgarian coalitions was joined by an organisation more experienced in advocacy to strengthen its positioning.

**Communicating outside one’s ‘bubble’ is not easy**

Many supported organisations struggle to get their message through beyond their existing supporters. As Oana Prada from CERE puts it, “civic space issues are not only missing from the agenda of politicians or state institutions, but also from the agenda of journalists.”

To address that, many coalitions have invited media organisations either to join them or have developed specific partnerships with media to be able to reach a wider audience. Others, like the coalition in Italy, have made communication and media partnerships a central aspect of their strategies for the next years.

In addition, one of Civitates’ partner foundations provided the grantees with the opportunity to participate in a specific media relations workshop with a professional consultant.

Strengthening grantees’ communications to build greater support among the public for the work they do is an area where Civitates could further support them: this theme could be central to a future grantee get-together where an exchange of experiences among the coalitions could benefit all partners.

**Coalitions need to reflect on their sustainability**

Our recent consultations with grantees, funders and country experts alike confirmed that there are few sources of funding available for collective, long-term, core work to strengthen the field and its ability to address and respond to the multi-faceted challenges of the shrinking space. Some coalitions have started to look for sources of funding such as membership fees or applying for project-based funding. With few exceptions, it is still too early for their fundraising efforts to be successful.

At Civitates, we encourage our partners to share the results and value of their collective work more widely to support their efforts. The Czech coalition, for example, has recently reviewed their Monitoring and Evaluation framework – this exercise will improve their impact communication and could help them reach out to potential new donors.

**What’s next**

In 2022 Civitates will continue to strengthen our grantees, providing more opportunities for them to share their successful strategies and challenges and help them explore pathways for effective resistance and resilience with regards to their operating environments. Convening them, we would like to provide them with the opportunity to develop further links with other Civitates cohorts of grantees so that they can inform and amplify their respective work.

In the coming months, Civitates will also work on amplifying and better connecting national efforts from the supported coalitions to the European level to raise awareness about the issues at stake in the different European countries and advocate for joint EU action to support civic space across Europe.
In the eye of the storm: civil society in Slovenia stays connected and impactful

Slovenia taking over the presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2021 brought to light the hostile environment for civil society organisations, journalists, and activists in the country. Smear campaigns, funding restrictions, limited access to public participation, censorship, and undermining freedom of speech – civil society actors there saw it all.

There has been a need for civil society to mobilise, unite and stay strong in this environment to be able to resist the pressures and defend democratic principles. For our partner – a coalition that connects human rights defenders, journalists, and independent media organisations – capitalising on the work done so far and staying motivated was key to ensuring continuous operation.

Our grantee partners continuously alerted the international community about the issues of shrinking space and deteriorating media freedom. The coalition has been mapping media ownership through a series of investigative articles, podcasts, and infographics and provided key information and analyses to NGOs to better understand and report antidemocratic measures locally. This information has also been included in official reports by the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

They became an active part of a new cross-coalition of civil society organisations, groups and individuals aiming to mobilise citizens to actively participate in the parliamentary elections in 2022.

“We are extremely proud of the work our coalition has been able to do with support from Civitates in the project period. Most notably, due to the changes in the government and the corresponding shift in the socio-political environment, our coalition and activities have proven to be even more relevant and necessary than initially envisioned. The attacks on civil society and journalists have escalated and reached alarming proportions. It was crucial that our coalition was already monitoring the attacks and investigating the media ownership, so we could provide comprehensive information and analyses to raise public awareness in Slovenia and abroad about the alarming developments.

At the same time, we could immediately offer support (and tools) to civil society and journalists for countering the attacks with the use of communication and legal means, which was the focus of our coalition from the beginning of the project funded by Civitates. We have continued to develop the defence capacities and tools, including launching an online platform for reporting attacks on journalists. The fact that we could ensure a strategic approach, continuity and a broad set of tools has been key to our adequate response.” – shared the Peace Institute, the lead organisation of the coalition.

The attacks on civil society and journalists have escalated and reached alarming proportions.

Peace Institute, Slovenia
The coalition also reported that:

- civil society in Slovenia has become stronger in using legal responses to different types of attacks and restrictions for civic space, winning numerous legal battles and influencing self-confidence and resilience, but also public awareness and support to the civil society sector.

- massive public support to media freedom was for the first time manifested also financially in a substantial amount when the coalition member organised a crowdfunding campaign to save the public media under the attack of the government. The campaign mobilised the media community and civil society in collaborative action and demonstrated the resilience and power of solidarity and joint actions.

- civil society and journalists in Slovenia are more engaged and connected with the international actors, providing information, participating more actively in international forums, and also learning lessons from the resilience of civil society and journalists abroad.

- investigative reporting, including using podcast format, has reached a larger audience, support and recognition in Slovenia and abroad.

For our partners in Slovenia, there has been a great value of the connections they have created with civil society organisations as part of Civitates’ cohort: “The coalition has organised transfer of knowledge and experience with other Civitates grantees which were all applicable to our situation. At the beginning of the coalition, we hosted a Slovak coalition representative to learn about the communication strategies of the civil society coalition there. Later we also engaged with colleagues from the grantees in Hungary, France, and Poland, and learned from their actions - on defence strategies in Hungary, and on the right to protest in Poland and France. In the case of Poland, the Civitates grantee connected us with other civil society actors relevant for our needs.”

The case of Slovenia shows that a change in government is all it takes for civil society to find itself restrained. Having developed strong and resilient organisations that are well embedded in a network and work collaboratively, is the only way to resist and counter negative developments. As such, long-term funding for collective action in Europe is essential for civil society organisations to be able to build a solid basis for the unpredictable future.
Objective 2: a healthy digital public sphere

1. AW AlgorihtmWatch gGmbH  Germany
   Civil Liberties Union for Europe e.V.  Germany

2. Access Now Europe  Belgium
   EU DisinfoLab  Belgium
   European Digital Rights (EDRi)  Belgium
   European Partnership for Democracy  Belgium

3. Institute for Information Law (IViR)-University of Amsterdam  the Netherlands

4. Panoptykon Foundation  Poland

* Number of organisations supported
Our goal

Civitates supports civil society organisations that advocate for improved checks and balances, accountability, and transparency through regulation at the EU and Member State level to shape a digital public sphere that is conducive to democracy and fundamental rights.

What we did

In the midst of accrued public awareness about the importance to address the numerous challenges the digital world poses to our democracies, Civitates and its partner foundations reiterated their commitment to shaping a healthy digital public sphere by collectively reflecting on our shared objectives, updating the strategy for this line of work and committing a new set of grants.

A refined strategy 2021-2023

“Reflecting on the lessons learnt from the previous phase and the strategy design process allowed partners to collectively define what a healthy digital public sphere in Europe should look like and the showed importance of collaboration on such an important issue.” – Martijn L.M. Roos, Adessium Foundation

Following an evaluation of this line of work in 2020 and internal discussions, Civitates conducted an additional round of consultations with field experts and current grantee partners to refine the concrete next steps for this sub-fund. This process, combined with the findings of the evaluation, allowed us to:

- dive deeper into the needs of CSOs working in the digital field
- map the upcoming challenges and opportunities and
- refine our niche for collective impact over the next three years (2021-2023).

The process also allowed us to refine our common understanding of a healthy digital public sphere which could be described as one where:

- citizens can inform themselves based on facts and are exposed to trustworthy and independent analysis and a plurality of views
- all voices are expressed and heard safely and freely, independent of race, gender, or sexual orientation and without fear of abuse, violence or hate speech
- adequate checks and balances, accountability and transparency apply, upholding democratic principles, fundamental rights and the protection of citizens.

Considering the current policy momentum at the EU level, with potentially high impact legislative proposals such as the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act or the political advertising legislation being discussed, Civitates decided to focus its efforts on supporting and strengthening civil society advocates working on those files. The objective of the sub-fund has been articulated as follows:

- Civitates aims at fostering a healthy digital public sphere in which democratic values, solidarity, inclusion, and fundamental rights are upheld.

To achieve this goal the sub-fund will support a cohort of civil society organisations that:

- advocate for policy approaches towards a healthy digital public sphere
- build the capacity and constituency of civil society to engage in the debate and address the current, emerging, and future challenges of the digital public sphere.

Grantmaking

Following this process, we launched a targeted request for proposals to implement the strategy. Sixteen organisations, identified through our consultation process, were invited to submit a proposal for core/programmatic grants to support their work focused on contributing to the legislative process and aiming at fostering a healthy digital public sphere. The proposals were evaluated by a pool of external experts who advised the selection committee. Shortlisted organisations were invited for a second stage of online interviews with the Civitates team and some partner foundations, where they could present their plans, dive deeper into specific aspects of their work, and answer outstanding questions.

“Collaborating with a diverse group of funders is key to making progress towards a healthy digital world. Civitates organised an incredibly well-structured and transparent selection process that enabled us to openly share different perspectives and learn from the grantees, as well as from each other, to help shape stronger policies and structures that uphold our democratic values.”

Sabine Palatin, Porticus
Out of this process, a cohort of eight organisations emerged that was granted a total of €1.65 million for a period of two to two and a half years starting in August 2021. The grants are intended to support the advocacy efforts of the organisations on the various legislative files at the EU level that have an impact on the digital public sphere. The cohort of grantees is composed of organisations that focus on democracy strengthening, disinformation, digital rights or civil liberties broadly speaking. In addition to empowering civil society’s voice in the upcoming legislation that will shape the digital public sphere, we expect this round of grants to contribute to making the grantee partners more resilient, connected, and impactful.

It is worth mentioning that the process of the targeted request for proposal was a first for Civitates as all the previous rounds of funding were issued through open calls. This exercise was an interesting learning curve for the team and the foundation partners that took part in it.

To create a true learning experience for everyone involved in the process, we provided space to the partner foundations to exchange with experts, previous and potential grantees and among each other on the state and the needs of the digital field.

Several grants attributed in 2019 and 2020 were still running in 2021 and there are some promising outcomes towards a healthy digital public sphere that are worth highlighting

**Grantees’ progress**

**Effective advocacy and civil society affirming itself as a trusted and legitimate partner in the policy debate**

Civil society, including Civitates grantee partners, has been very active at the EU level feeding into the legislative process while committees of the European Parliament were discussing the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. As a grantee partner pointed out, “...the proposals of the DSA and DMA create a unique opportunity for civil society in Europe to promote a new vision, and the legislative framework to make it happen, of a digital public sphere with rules that foster a healthy digital space for all.”

Several demands of our grantee partners have been taken up in the final version voted by the European Parliament, related to transparency and accountability of very large platforms and other provisions that aim at addressing the spread of disinformation and public-interest access to data, for example, which all aim at shaping a healthy digital public sphere.

Some grantee partners have also been active on the Political Advertising legislation, which is a package of measures to ensure greater transparency in political advertising proposed by the European Commission in November 2021. They have participated in and or contributed to the consultation process, entertained close contacts with the cabinets of relevant commissioners and commented on the proposal when it was made public. Grantee partners are now directing their efforts towards members of the European Parliament as the legislation is being discussed. This will be particularly relevant in 2022, considering the important national elections in France, Hungary, and Slovenia.

**More prominence of the challenges of the digital public sphere in the public debate**

The work of Civitates grantee partners and the issues they address have received considerable media and public attention in 2021. This can be explained by several factors such as the current legislative agenda and journalistic investigations like the Facebook files and the Pegasus investigations or events of global importance, such as the deplatforming of Donald Trump. Those examples outline the challenges tech imposes on the digital public sphere. Civitates’ grantee partners were well prepared to contribute meaningfully to this debate building on their experience and recent work and thus, positioning themselves as legitimate and trusted experts. Their work and standpoints were featured in prominent media with various audiences at the national, European, and international levels.

This accrued public attention helped in terms of reaching out to policy makers as illustrated in the final report of the Oxford Internet Institute “Work supported by Civitates is getting good media exposure and is being presented to policy makers, such as Executive Vice-President Vestager and Werner Stengg in the European Commission, and MEP Ioan Dragos Tudorache in the European Parliament.” It also contributed to raising support for the various campaigns that grantee partners have been running as part of their advocacy efforts. One example is the letter written by AlgorithmWatch to European Union lawmakers asking them to use the Digital

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1 https://algorithmwatch.org/en/dsa-milestone-eu-lawmakers-have-responded-to-our-calls-for-meaningful-transparency-for-big-tech/
2 https://epd.eu/2021/11/25/online-political-ads-regulation-reaction/
Services Act (DSA) to defend public-interest with the research about how platforms influence our public sphere, which was signed by 36 organisations and 6,126 individuals.

Collaboration, coordination, and common demands to policy makers

Throughout 2021, there have been several exchanges among Civitates grantee partners and other organisations in the field. This has led to concrete actions, such as joint letters, petitions, and statements with common demands. We have observed that several grantees have taken the lead on specific aspects of the legislative proposals, with effective mobilisation around specific moments as needed. For example, AlgorithmWatch focused on access to data in the DSA, EDRi coordinated the input and advocacy of its membership on the DSA, Panoptykon worked on optimisation, EPD on the EDAP, and EU DisinfoLab was a driving force behind the advocacy concerning the media exemption in the DSA.

Grantee partners have also participated in broader coordination and mobilisation efforts with other civil society organisations such as initiatives like People vs Big Tech or the Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe.

Led by the BIRN Hub and Share Foundation with the support of Civitates, SEE Digital Rights Network that brings together 21 organisations dedicated to the protection of digital rights in South Eastern Europe, was also very active in 2021. While the project came to an end in 2021, the network is still growing.

New tools, trainings, and research to support civil society in fostering a healthy digital public sphere

There were several tools developed by grantee partners throughout 2021 to support the field of CSOs working towards a healthy digital public sphere. For example, Democracy Reporting International updated its election monitoring toolkit with a tool for image monitoring. This included the development of a guide with best practices for working with image and video media for social media election monitors and was embedded within their trainings on election monitoring. The materials developed through this Civitates-supported project aim to empower election monitors to identify propaganda and disinformation, especially in the form of ‘deep fakes’ or ‘doctored’ videos and images. The use of this tool also spreads beyond Europe and is being used by Democracy Reporting International to

BIRN also launched Covid-19 Crisis Tech Response Livefeed, to track and map the use of technology and digital solutions, both good and bad, in Central and South-East Europe amid the ongoing health crisis. Using a unique methodology for each mapped solution, the tool specifies the country in which the solution has been implemented, who was affected by it, if it was beneficial or harmful, or if this is still undetermined, and who developed it.

Grantee partners also produced academic papers, policy briefs and other materials that have either been presented to policy makers or taken up by journalists and civil society advocates. A few examples are:

- The Oxford Internet Institute published a report exposing recent trends in computational propaganda across 81 countries and the evolving tools, capacities, strategies, and resources used to manipulate public opinion around the globe. Among the findings of the report are that “cyber troops” activity continues to increase around the world and that private firms increasingly provide manipulation campaigns although social media companies have taken important steps to address this issue.

- The Centre for the Study of Democracy, wrapping up the research project they started in 2019, published a 112-page diagnostics and policy report and an 8-page policy brief, focused on the foreign media influence in Europe and its relation to disinformation, hybrid threats and democracy. The publication of the report was followed by a series of events to present the report, round table discussions and briefings to policy makers at national and European levels.

- The Digital Services Act (DSA) Observatory, a project run by the Institute for Information Law (IViR) at the University of Amsterdam, has published a series of papers and commentaries and organised discussions around the Digital Services Act feeding in the policy debate.

What’s next

With the new strategy in place for this line of work, over 2022, Civitates will continue to focus on fostering a healthy digital public sphere, work on building the cohort of grantees through convenings and capacity building activities, provide additional support to the field through project grants to complement the work of the cohort and collaborate closely and build synergies with the European AI Fund.

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3 See Stories of impact below for more details
4 See: Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation
In February 2021, Panoptykon started a project focused on better understanding social media optimisation algorithms – systems used by large platforms to deliver behavioural advertising and recommend content to users – to develop evidence-based policy recommendations addressing the harms caused by these systems. They partnered with a data scientist from Northeastern University, Boston, MA and conducted an experiment which demonstrated how Facebook uses algorithms to deliver personalised ads that may exploit users’ mental vulnerabilities. It showed that users are unable to get rid of disturbing content: disabling sensitive interests in ad settings limits targeting options for advertisers but does not affect Facebook’s own profiling and ad delivery practices.

“Large online platforms have become key channels through which people access information and experience the world. But the content they see is filtered through the lens of algorithms driven by commercial logic that maximises engagement to generate even more data about the user for the purposes of surveillance advertising. This automated fixation on campaign targets is indifferent to ‘collateral damage’: amplification of hate or disinformation, or – as this case study shows – reinforcement of trauma and anxiety.

Panoptykon’s case study shows that social media users are helpless against platforms that exploit their vulnerabilities for profit, but it is not too late to fix this.

“The EU Digital Services Act can be a powerful tool in protecting social media users by default and empowering them to exercise real control over their data and the information they see.”

Panoptykon Foundation, Poland

The project received prominent coverage in the national and international media outlets such as Financial Times and was used as a basis for advocacy. While the Digital Services Act was in front of the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) committee of the European Parliament, Panoptykon coordinated an open letter to the committee, signed by over twenty civil society organisations, with demands to “ensure effective oversight of the algorithms used by large online platforms that shape our experience of the world”. Several Civitates’ grantee partners signed the letter which got attention by Brussels-based media such as Politico and Euractiv.

Some of the recommendations made by Panoptykon were included as amendments to the DSA and the study also contributed to the European Commission’s proposal to distinguish between targeting and optimisation as part of the political advertising legislation presented in November 2021.

Panoptykon’s case study also received positive reactions from other organisations working on tech which contributed to the general understanding of the functioning and the role of optimisation algorithms among civil society advocates who could use it in their own advocacy positions or as a basis of new research avenues.
The Media Exemption in the DSA

The proposed Digital Services Act can be perceived as one of the instruments at the EU level that seeks to address the spread of disinformation online, among other issues related to the digital public sphere. As mentioned in Panoptikon’s report, there is a lot of hope that the DSA will do that. However, while it has been discussed in the European Parliament, some amendments were tabled, which attempts to restrict the power of Very Large Platforms to moderate editorial content uploaded by news publishers (or media). These amendments were heavily supported by the publishing and broadcasting industry. In addition, the DSA did not propose any clear definition of what should be considered as a “media”, “publisher”, and “editorial content provider”.

The latter represents a great risk when it comes to the spread of disinformation online since often disinformation is spread by organisations that would define themselves or are registered as media organisations. EU Disinfo Lab, a Civitates grantee partner that has been active on advocating for appropriate provisions within the DSA to curb disinformation, decided to organise a mobilisation against this ‘media exemption’ in the legislative proposal.

As part of their effort, they wrote several opinion pieces in prominent media in Brussels, intensified their outreach to Members of the European parliament, raised support from and mobilised civil society advocates, fact-checkers, academics, and media organisations as witnessed by the open letter they wrote to the IMCO committee of the European Parliament. They also produced a paper highlighting the most damaging examples of disinformation campaigns involving “media” as key players of malicious strategies including disinformation.

In addition to civil society and movements, the opposition to the media exemption in the DSA also had the support of Maria Ressa, 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower and Vera Jourova, Vice President of the European Commission, who described it as falling “into the box of good intentions leading to hell”. In January 2022, the media exemption was rejected by the European Parliament.

While this advocacy win is surely not solely the result of EU DisinfoLab’s work, it highlights the capacity of digital rights, media and activist community to come together and mobilise against an amendment that was tabled at the eleventh hour on a very important legislative proposal with far reaching implications. This will surely not be the last hurdle on the road to a healthy digital public sphere and in turns, highlights the essential need for effective, ready to act and well-resourced civil society actors working to address the numerous challenges the online world poses to democracy.

1 See for example: https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/opinion/digital-services-act-a-media-exemption-would-open-a-loophole-for-disinformation/

Objective 3: independent public-interest journalism

1. Magyar Jeti (444) Hungary
2. Direkt36 Hungary
3. Investigative Reporting Project (IRPI) Italy
4. Stitching Bellingcat the Netherlands
5. Fundacja Pismo Poland
6. Foundation Centre for Civic Monitoring (OKO) Poland
7. Bagabaga Studio Portugal
8. Civio Spain
9. Átlátszó Erdély Romania
10. PressOne Romania
11. Pod črto Slovenia

Number of organisations supported
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 polarisation and secure a space in which all voices are heard. Our hope is that we can help bring substantial funding into the sector, while in the meantime provide structural, core support for the exciting but stretched organisations that exist in this space.

What we did
In the midst of accrued public awareness about the importance to address the numerous challenges the digital world poses to our democracies, Civitates and its partner foundations reiterated their commitment to shaping a healthy digital public sphere by collectively reflecting on our shared objectives, updating the strategy for this line of work and committing a new set of grants.

Organisational assessment
As of 2021 Civitates is supporting eleven independent public-interest organisations with core grants for three years.

For our grantee partners, 2021 started with an organisational assessment commissioned by Civitates and led by DW Akademie – V-Sprint. The V-Sprint allows participants to design or re-adjust their strategy and react to changes in their political, legal and socio-economic environment, also due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our partners took part in five half-day sessions online. With the guidance of the facilitators, they assessed the viability of their organisations and identified priorities for making their respective media outlet more sustainable while continuing to produce high quality journalism.

The assessment entailed participation either of the whole team or representatives of the different departments for larger organisations. As such, it required time and dedication from our partners and they shared the value they saw at the end of the process:

“We learned a lot of tips about the business model and raising recurring contributions from the V-sprint training (Deutsche Welle Akademie).”
OKOpress, Poland

“We found very useful what we have learned from the workshops with V-Sprint, and it helped us work towards certain directions and clarify aims and objectives.”
IRPI, Italy

“.... the process helped us to identify weaknesses and to prioritise what we must focus on to get things moving steadily in the right direction.”
Divergente, Portugal

Several Civitates grantees expressed the need for a follow-up to revisit their strategy and work on ways to overcome any obstacles they might have been facing since the V-Sprint. The follow up is taking place in the first half of 2022.

Creating spaces for exchanges of expertise and building relations
Creating spaces for exchanges of expertise and building relations among our grantee partners is an essential part of Civitates’ strategy for supporting independent public-interest journalism. We convene our grantees twice per year, addressing the organisational and managerial side of their work and providing funding for individual capacity building opportunities.

We convened our grantee partners first in June 2021. The format of this meeting was online and the goal was for the cohort members to have an initial interaction. The second grantee convening was in November 2021, when we discussed the topic of sustainability and viability of journalism. We addressed the following questions: How are you shifting to an audience-generated revenue model? What are some best practices and know-how you can share? Diversification of funding channels - what are the options?

The goal of the meeting was two-fold:

- grantees feel inspired to cooperate with their peers and are more knowledgeable about diversified funding channels.
- make grantees reflect and become inspired from what is happening in the field that can potentially help them on their journey to sustainability, whether media training organisations or funders outside of Civitates’
portfolio such as Media Development Investment Fund, International Fund for Public Interest Media, etc.

We have already seen grantee partners reaching out to each other to collaborate on organisational and journalistic matters. PressOne and Podcrto for example have bilaterally organised a conversation on digital security, PressOne and Divergente are considering working together on reporting voting abstention in their respective countries.

After the November meeting, four of our partners (Civio, 444, Divergente and IRPI) decided to organise newsroom exchanges in the first half of 2022. The expenses of those will be covered by the Learning Initiative budget. The exchanges will address the topics of multimedia production, data-driven investigations, and business models.

From the very beginning, we were aware that there is a lot of expertise in the cohort and we wanted to build on this. As a result, after the first grantee get-together in June 2021, we kicked off an online format for regular exchanges that we call coffee chats.

The coffee chat is an hour conversation hosted by one or two grantee partners that share insights on an issue linked to grantees’ journalistic work. The idea is to address a certain issue such as measuring investigations’ impact, dealing with data, etc., and to introduce to the cohort members where the expertise lies, so if they need further assistance, they can contact each other individually. These exchanges are meant to be informal and to recreate as much as possible a conversation colleagues usually have over a cup of coffee. Often it happens that different members of the partner organisations join as they are the ones specialised or interested in a given topic.

The goal is to foster the community, set the tone for further exchanges and address the questions around the topic of journalistic core work.

**Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)**

As we have entered a long-term partnership with our grantees, we wanted to have a MEL strategy from the very beginning of the collaboration. Our goal is for the MEL to be useful for the grantees and an exercise for them that sets them on more strategic thinking about their organisations. At the same time, we want the MEL to be informative enough for us and our goals to communicate results with our foundation partners and beyond.

Civitates worked with an external expert that was selected after a closed round of applications and with the help of a small selection committee. This consultant helped the grantees in their process of setting organisational priorities and progress indicators and start thinking of long-term goals that go beyond thinking of activities.

The assessments with DW-Akademie facilitated the process of setting clearer goals which were further finetuned by the external expert.

As we would like to understand what has changed in the organisations at the end of the partnership with Civitates, together with the external expert, we decided to measure progress using the Most Significant Change (MSC) as a tool. In addition, using MSC as a monitoring tool allows us to follow up on any important change that may have fallen out of the scope of our partners’ initial organisational priorities.

As a result, the MEL framework was organised around five outcome areas:

- Organisational strengthening
- Business model development
- Audience reach and engagement
- Impact on public dialogue
- Editorial development

**Raising awareness for core-funding for independent public-interest journalism in Europe**

As part of our objective, we are trying to raise awareness about the importance of funding journalism and more precisely for core-funding, which allows for a large level of flexibility. As our partners from OKOpress share: “... it is very good that the grant is given for a long period of time - it allows for strategic and responsible planning. And not, for example, having to spend money quickly just because the project is already running out of time. This is the problem with most grants.”
Highlighting our partners’ arguments, Civitates has been part of a roundtable on sustainability in journalism during the International Press Institute global summit in Vienna.

Our efforts to sustain journalistic organisations in the long-term have been referred to in the report “A new deal for journalism” produced by the Forum on Information and Democracy, in response to the worsening international crisis facing the economic viability of independent professional journalism everywhere.

Civitates has been also interviewed for the journalism funders’ forum newsletter where we highlighted the benefits of core-funding for journalistic organisations. We have also been in touch with the International Fund for Public Interest Media with whom we have shared our approach to supporting independent public-interest journalism organisations. This connection is to be further developed once their fund is fully established.

Civitates was also part of a discussion with EEA&Norway and about twenty of their country operators on funding journalism as part of supporting democracy. The goal of the conversation was to have an open dialogue about the possible challenges, address any doubts EEA&Norway partners may have about funding journalism, and share our experience and learning from the selection process in 2020.

### Grantees’ progress

In the first year of the grant period, the grantees spent time and energy on strategising, recruiting staff members, and “professionalising their organisations” as some of them put it. This entails the separation of managerial and editorial roles that is crucial for the better operation of the organisations. It also means putting strategies and policies in place whether for audience growth or reach (Civio, Divergente) or for organisational development (OKO, Bellingcat) such as strengthening digital security, fund-raising, etc.

Our partners made a lot of progress in 2021, and at the same time internal and external challenges slowed the operations for some of them:

- the operational environment for journalists and critical voices in Hungary and Slovenia has worsened,
- Bellingcat’s investigations led them to be granted a “Foreign Agent” status by the Russian government,
- another partner lost information and its back-up due to a server burning down,
- big tech platforms’ algorithms proved unstable for attracting audience members for some partners, so they needed to find better solutions for promoting their journalism online.

Still, our partners stayed strong in the face of challenges, looked for new solutions and approaches towards viability for their individual organisations.

**Organisational restructuring for better journalism**

“Having a larger staff, we reallocated accountabilities within the team. While we still aim to maintain a very flat, non-hierarchical organisational structure, we clearly divided the responsibilities for the content/editorial work, subscriber acquisition, care and retention, and the IT/service development.”

Pismo, Poland

Recruiting extra staff has been of utmost importance for most of our grantee partners. In many cases, the new staff members are journalists which allows the organisations to explore more stories and to take part in bigger investigations. For others, the new staff members are dedicated to the general operation of the organisation, audience engagement campaigns, fund-raising, etc. Due to hiring more staff, the newsrooms could separate the roles of the director and editor-in-chief which is crucial for ensuring smooth processes and preventing burn-out.

“The separation of roles made Átlátszó Erdély a more resilient organisation: a number of key tasks no longer depends on a single person. The editor-in-chief has more time to focus on editorial projects and administration and fundraising also receive more attention. The administrative part of the project is up to date, fundraising is better, and revenues have increased.”

Átlátszó Erdély, Hungary
“Until now, business and campaign planning were mainly covered by our two founders who also work as editors and run the company’s daily operations. With the new publisher position, we will be able to share these indispensable but time and energy consuming tasks better. This will enable us to plan Direkt36’s future in a more deliberate manner.” Direkt36, Hungary

For Direkt36, having hired more journalists and backed up with core funding, allowed them to take part in international investigations such as the Pegasus Spyware and the Pandora Papers. Both investigations were not envisioned which is why long-term flexible funding is crucial for journalistic organisations. As Direkt36 emphasised: “For obvious reasons, you cannot apply for a grant with a sensitive project like the Pegasus Project. In most of these bigger investigations, you cannot tell in advance in which direction they will develop, you must follow the facts.”

Restructuring and hiring new staff allowed some to grow their audience members and individual donations as they could pursue more public-interest stories. IRPI, an investigative outlet based in Italy, experienced a huge audience increase which resulted in tripling their income from individual donations.

“This positive change was possible especially due to the fund that we created thanks to Civitates support, and that allowed us to sponsor investigations pitched by freelancers. Not only could the fund cover the time and work of freelance reporters but we could also afford to hire them for specific projects.”

IRPI, Italy

Time to reflect and strategise for stronger audience engagement

Not being understaffed allows the organisations to strategise better and think of their organisational goals long term. Grantees have time and space to strategise, learn, experiment, and adjust priorities as they see fit for their organisations. As such, a lot of them focused on understanding their audience members’ better and the motivation they have for supporting them. Our grantee partners are aware that retention of audience members and individual donors is as important as attracting new ones and some have experienced significant growth in audience-generated revenue.

Direkt36, for example, has started to work with a supervisory board to reshape their crowdfunding campaign strategy. The goal is to figure out more efficient ways to promote their work and grow their supporting community.

“A deeper understanding of our supporting community will enable us to organise more efficient and far-reaching crowdfunding campaigns and to grow our audience which is essential to the stability of our business operation. This is a must because we plan to further expand our team that will increase our expenses significantly and at the same time, we would like to keep our high level of self-sustainability.” Direkt36, Hungary

Having been involved in substantial international investigations led to their most successful crowdfunding campaign so far which is promising for the further sustainability plans of the organisation.

Civio has revised its communication and conversion strategy while taking the time and space to involve the whole team in the process. Civio is always looking for ways to stay close to its audience members and in 2021, they experimented with a new communication approach that brought positive feedback from the readers, hundred thirty new audience members and 43 one-off donations.

“We’re very satisfied with the feedback from our last Christmas campaign, where each of our team members (ten people) sent an email to our newsletter subscribers. Even the back-end developer and the financial/administrative person did, and everyone provided a personal perspective on what Civio in 2021 had meant for them, in their own words, using casual and personal language. While this approach may not be viable for a bigger organisation of fifty, or it may require some modifications, we believe the core idea is letting subscribers know every person of our team is sound and a good way of earning trust.”
As a data-driven learning organisation, Civio has dedicated time and effort to learn more about their audience members and get beyond the demographics.

“It's not totally new, but through internal talks, we've reinforced our belief that we need to be more open and closer to our audience in our communications. Ideally in-person, in our Christmas event for example, but also via online events for those who are not in Madrid, something we tended to ignore in the past.”

Another positive example of audience growth comes from 444 in Hungary who launched their membership scheme in August 2021 and managed to recruit close to fourteen thousand members before the end of the year, exceeding even their most optimistic forecasts.

“Switching to membership is a significant change in a business model (we used to rely mostly on advertising for funding) but it's much more than that. It affects our journalism, our organisation, individual and group priorities, and internal culture. It also brings new revenue, which enables us to grow at an unprecedented pace. This change of scale is the other big organisational change that has happened, and it causes all sorts of challenges.”

Together towards viable and sustainable journalism

As a direct consequence of the grantee get-together in Brussels in November 2021, we are witnessing a new group dynamic and grantees reaching out to each other.

No matter the size or the experience of the organisation, a takeaway for all of them was that they all struggle with common issues and can partner to look for ways to address these together. It is motivating to see that a lot of them got inspired by their peers and are looking to implement concrete ideas in their approaches.

“The meeting provided many ideas, and we are currently working to implement a system of pop-ups that will act as a soft paywall, asking people who spend a certain amount of time on an article page to donate.”

Átlátszó Erdély, Hungary

“One of the experiences shared in Brussels was about member-only workshops, which we are considering. That, and more regular physical meetings, even one-to-one coffee breaks.”

Civio, Spain.

“After our discussions with Civio in Brussels, we began planning for more data-focused stories and visualisations. Our 2022 election data page is already impacted by the perspectives we picked up interacting with them. Divergente inspired us for in-depth partnerships with universities, which we’re applying to our brand new, dedicated fact checking site.”

444, Hungary

It will take time, of course, for the cohort to feel like a community and at Civitates we will continue providing the space and time they need to connect, brainstorm, and cooperate.

What’s next

In 2022 Civitates is looking at more opportunities to raise awareness about the importance of long-term core-funding for independent public-interest journalism. We continue creating space and opportunities for our grantee partners to meet, exchange and collaborate. It has become evident that topics of organisational management for journalists are not widely addressed and we would like to provide the opportunity for our partners to develop their capacity on these matters and successfully continue rolling out the strategies they have so carefully prepared in 2021.
For Átlátszó Erdély, the only independent, non-profit newsroom in Romania doing investigative journalism in the public interest, focusing on the 1.2 million Hungarian community living in Transylvania, “investigating hyperlocal topics is an obligation as investigative journalism doesn’t have a long tradition in the region”. Furthermore, it’s a way to counter the narrative of the media funded by the Hungarian state. As such, Átlátszó Erdély has been labelled as ‘liberal’ and is struggling to gain the trust of the more conservative ones within the community. For them, covering local stories that are of importance to anyone and go beyond one’s political views is the way forward. This shift of stories to pursue brought them more community engagement in the form of tips for possible stories and suggestions they receive.

“The importance of responsible and detailed coverage of local topics increased because in large parts of rural Romania there are no local media.”
Átlátszó Erdély

They explain that local reporting has been increasingly replaced by local Facebook groups filled with user-generated content of various quality as small communities are in much need of sharing information and debating pressing issues.

“By covering such local issues, we found that the public perception of Átlátszó Erdély was gradually starting to change. Instead of the dismissive comments, we started receiving an increasing number of supportive messages. Some of our readers even offer to volunteer to seek expert advice, or to search for further information about a possible story.”
Átlátszó Erdély

Their local focus allowed them to grow substantially in terms of audience - by 170 % in 2020. The small reporting team has won numerous prizes for their local investigations and the impact of their public-interest journalism is visible as they explain: “Many times, there is tangible impact as well: for example, the mayor of Tordaszentlászló — the one who “forgot” to mention in his wealth declaration that he had hundreds of thousands of euros in revenue from EU-subsidised land rentals — lost the local elections, at least partly because Átlátszó Erdély published the story about his unlawful income.”

They share that to be able to embark on such stories for a small local investigative organisation like theirs “it is crucial to have core funding and training in organisational development until the team figures out a business model that can generate enough revenue to keep the operations running. Project-based funding can be a good additional revenue stream, but these small grants are by no means enough to cover the costs of operation entirely. More importantly, short-term opportunities do not provide the skills and know-how to grow the project.”

7 Based on reflections shared by Atlatszo Erdely.
Objective 4:  
a robust funder collaborative

Civitates wants to provide a platform for funders to combine collective investment and thinking to enhance funding for democracy in Europe.

Another year of a global pandemic and national lockdowns prevented the partner foundations from gathering in person. Still, Civitates partner foundations showed a high level of involvement and collaborative spirit. Working groups met to approve strategies and select grantees and the Steering Committee meetings allowed fruitful discussions on how the Fund could advance its work.

It’s encouraging to see two more foundations joining Civitates’ efforts to support democracy and solidarity in Europe in 2021. Our annual budget has increased due to these new partnerships but also because of an increased contribution from some of the existing partners.

Foster a learning community for foundation partners to improve knowledge about the ecosystem of actors working in the field of democracy in Europe

As one of our foundation partners shared being part of Civitates provides “a good mix of opportunities for involvement, input, and learning.”

Foundation partners share that through the strategic discussions within the Working Group meetings, the contribution of external evaluators and experts and the grantees’ work, they feel more knowledgeable about the different contexts our grantee partners operate in, the strategic responses of our grantee partners and how to support them best in their work towards building a strong and resilient civil society, advocating for a digital public sphere that is better regulated and viable independent public-interest journalism in Europe.

Through the collaborative work at Civitates, foundation partners have been exposed to new stakeholders and had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with developments within Europe in supporting civil society and democratic public spaces. For example, partners share that they value the opportunity to be in touch with grantees they would have not reached if not part of Civitates.

Some foundations got inspired to develop their own strategy and improve their own practices in terms of preparing selection processes and strategic discussions and fostering more exchanges among grantees. External consultations and contributions from experts in the field are another source of insights for our foundation partners.

As some funders shared, being part of a philanthropic collaborative “connects us to other foundations interested in the same topics, enhances our knowledge in areas or countries that we are less involved in, offers opportunities for refining our own approach, spotting new prospects, etc.”

Civitates allows partners to connect, exchange and learn from each other. Through pooling funding together, the partner foundations can have a greater and more coordinated impact on issues of democracy in Europe.

In our annual survey, funders shared that they’d like to learn more about grantees’ work. In 2022, Civitates will try to foster such connections through:

- more regular contacts through calls, grantee meetings and site visits
- more regular updates on the supported projects
- invitations to join events organised by the grantee partners and aimed at larger audiences

Civitates would work towards opportunities for all grantees and funders to meet, exchange and get to know each other’s work.

Provide space for sharing and discussing among funders and build a common philanthropic agenda on the issues at stake

Civitates allows collaboration, constructive discussions and trusted relationships among foundation representatives, and with the team at NEF. Funders underlined the ease and fluidity of exchanges, the “sense of pulling together in the same overall direction.”

Our foundation partners share that in the coming months they would like to:

- know better what others are funding and have more opportunities to exchange among foundations about their work outside of Civitates, as well as about their respective knowledge and experience,
- learn more about the local context in which other foundations are evolving.

As our partners are becoming more aware of each other’s work, they can more easily explore potential opportunities to collaborate or join efforts whether through co-funding, capacity building or recommending partners to potential donors.
It’s important for us as funders to collectively voice our concerns when democracy and solidarity in Europe are under pressure.

The philanthropic sector is gaining recognition as a legitimate actor in the debate about democracy in Europe

“It’s important for us as funders to collectively voice our concerns when democracy and solidarity in Europe are under pressure.”

Throughout the year, Civitates has regularly published articles about the grantees’ work and has communicated together with the foundation partners to make clear the necessity for philanthropic actors to join efforts in strengthening and supporting democracy in Europe.

Civitates has also gained visibility through various opportunities where we presented our collaborative work:

- In October, some Civitates’ foundation partners participated in an online roundtable organised by Assifero (association of Italian grantmaking foundations). The roundtable aimed to provide Italian funders with a clearer understanding of the value of structural collaboration and of collaborative funds through testimonies from our partners.

- Some foundation partners took the opportunity to present Civitates to philanthropic civil society actors at events such as Biennale Democrazia in Turin, EFC Annual Conference in Vienna, etc.

It is necessary to act jointly in our support to strengthen democracy in Europe. As such, for Civitates it is of utmost importance to place our action in a wider ecosystem, where public institutions like the European Commission and EEA&Norway Grants are strongly involved in supporting civil society as a fundamental pillar for a well-functioning democracy.

In our November Steering Committee meeting, we invited representatives from both establishments to share with the partner foundations how their respective organisations are active in this field, and thus, help us better assess what Civitates’ added value is in this broader landscape of donors. During the discussion, it became clear that the flexibility in our grant-making processes, the possibility to engage in long-term collaborations with our partners through core grants, and the opportunities to address our partner needs in terms of capacity building fill an important gap.

- **What’s next**

Civitates’ partners would like to align more and reinforce the work of the Fund. As the next step for Civitates, we would go through a strategic review and prepare the Fund’s priorities beyond 2023, which is the end of the current granting phase.

In the next months, Civitates would like to further promote our partners’ shared goal to uphold democratic values and to support civil society actors in building resilient democracy in Europe. We would like to promote the positive contribution of philanthropy and civil society to the core EU values and engage in a dialogue with the institutions at the EU level.
## Our Finances

### Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Income</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adessium Foundation</td>
<td>250 000€</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charles Stewart Mott Foundation</td>
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<td>Compagnia Di San Paolo</td>
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<td>Erste Stiftung</td>
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<td>European Cultural Foundation</td>
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<td>Fondation de France</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fritt Ord Foundation</td>
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<td>King Baudouin Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luminate</td>
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<td>Mercator stiftung</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oak Foundation</td>
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<td>Open Society Foundation</td>
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<td>Robert Bosch Stiftung</td>
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<td>Stefan Batory Foundation</td>
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<td>Rudolf Augstein Stiftung</td>
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<td>Schöpflin Stiftung</td>
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<td>Porticus</td>
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<td>Limelight Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sigrid Rausing Trust</td>
<td>112 300€</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>2 936 300€</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expenses

- Grants: 2,627,474€
- Staff & administration: 335,180€
- Evaluation & external expertise: 69,816€
- Communication: 14,206€
- Reserve: 50,000€
- Funding Plus: 137,675€
Our foundation partners

OAK FOUNDATION  OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS  ADESSIUM FOUNDATION  Bertelsmann Stiftung  RUDOLF AUGSTEIN STIFTUNG  Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo  EUROPEAN CULTURAL FOUNDATION  ERSTE Stiftung  Fondation de France  FRITT ORD  King Baudouin Foundation  Limelight  Luminate  MOTT FOUNDATION*  NICOLAS PUECH  PORTICUS  Robert Bosch Stiftung  Schöpflin Stiftung  STIFTUNG MERCATOR  THE SIGRID RAUSING TRUST
Our grantee partners

Strong and resilient civil society

RavniBG – Bulgaria
The coalition led by Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW)- called RavniBG, focuses on two aspects, namely: strengthening the capacity of civil society (mainly grassroots organisations) through a small grant mechanism and campaigning work to build a positive image of civil society in Bulgaria and advocacy around and within the Civil Society Development Council for a meaningful dialogue between civil society and the government.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: € 100.000

Citizen Participation Forum – Bulgaria
The goal of the coalition led by the Citizen Participation Forum (CPF) mostly revolves around fostering solidarity among CSOs and building the capacities of organisations in the sector. The coalition aims at improving communication, advocacy skills and mechanisms among Bulgarian CSOs and active citizens towards better-organised, sustainable, and permanent civic activism. This goal is addressed by strengthening the capacity and motivation of civil society organisations to develop common strategies and implement common actions and campaigns.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: € 100.000

Centre For Peace Studies – Croatia
The coalition led by Centre for Peace Studies gathers nine of the most active CSOs working in the field of shrinking civic space in Croatia. Their aim is to improve the level of public participation and civic engagement in the country contributing to preservation and development of civil society. Through networking, capacity building, research, campaigning, mobilisation and advocacy, the coalition builds capacities, broadens the network and strengthens coordination between CSOs and their allies to counter shrinking civic space; the coalition raises awareness of the public, puts pressure on decision makers to divert tendencies of shrinking civic space and enhances public and civil society participation in policy-making processes.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: € 50.000

Neon Coalition – Czech Republic
The NeoN coalition, led by Glocalis, has grown into a vibrant infrastructure for collaboration of eighteen networks that together reactively defend and proactively cultivate a democratic, civic space. The coalition represents more than four hundred CSOs and thousands of activists all together and strives to enhance recognition of the CSO advocacy networks and strengthen their role as representative and constructive partners in promoting effective and inclusive responses to societal challenges. The coalition focuses on four advocacy priorities: fostering civic participation and access to decision-making, improving access to public and private financing for CSOs, ensuring a CSOs-friendly regulatory environment and improving understanding and perception of CSOs advocacy work.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: € 100.000

Italian Coalition For Civil Liberties And Rights (CILD) – Italy
The Coalition led by CILD aims to increase the advocacy and media skills and visibility of new and existing leaders and CSOs within the media space so that civil society’s voice, space, and future are solidified in Italy and Europe. This will enable the sector to go from managing crises and attacks to proactively defusing the power of negative narratives by flooding the space with positive ones. In the short to medium term, CILD’s aim is to further this vision by empowering emerging CSO leadership with the tools to engage with media and activism more effectively, and by forging CSO and media partnerships and cooperation.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: € 100.000
**Network of Community Organisations For Education – Poland**
The Network of Community Organisations for Education, led by Association 61 is an initiative by an existing network of organisations mobilised to protect an open, ideology-free education system in Poland. The goal is to provide support in strengthening the content and organisational skills of the existing network of non-governmental organisations operating in the field of education in Poland and build a permanent platform for cooperation between these organisations, local authorities, school communities and organisations from civil society beyond the education sector. The aim is to counteract current centralising and restrictive trends with regard to the education system.

Grant amount for 2022: **€ 50.000**

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**Our Ombudsman Initiative - Poland**
Our Ombudsman Initiative is a coalition of NGOs led by OFOP that has recently mobilised over 1,200 civil society organisations and informal groups in the eight-months campaign for the independence of the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights and in support of an independent civil society candidate for this constitutional office. The coalitions is now seeking to cooperate with the newly elected Ombudsman on a wide range of rights issues to uphold citizens’ rights and freedoms and to gain vital space for participation and effective advocacy work.

Grant amount for 2022: **€ 50.000**

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**Coalition For Equal Participation of NGOs In Monitoring Committees - Poland**
The coalition for equal participation of NGOs in Monitoring Committees for the 2021-2027 perspectives is intended to build on the efforts of an initiative led by OFOP to increase the capacity of the non-governmental sector to engage and involve in building policies at various levels. The goal of this initiative is to enhance the participation of civil society in oversight and the management of EU funds and therefore, to raise the profile and professionalism of the sector and reaffirm the watchdog role of civil society.

Grant amount for 2022: **€ 50.000**

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**Open Spaces – Hungary**
This coalition led by Marom Klub aims at strengthening civil society activity in Hungary by providing physical space for open and critical debates as well as independent culture. Through the creation of Open Spaces, a community development initiative that relies on solidarity and cooperation, the coalition strengthens organisations at the local level, provides opportunities for the deepening of relationships between community spaces, organisations and individuals, encouraging active solidarity and welcoming public and cultural content.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: **€ 100.000**

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**Civil Map – Hungary**
Building on the experience of the Civilisation coalition, and on lessons learned from the Civic map project funded by Civitates (2018-2021), the four partners gathered in this coalition led by Ökotárs aim to help local CSOs develop their own skills and capacities to build constituencies in their smaller and bigger communities and build local coalitions to work on and defend their common causes. The focus will be on setting in motion existing ‘sprouts’ of regional networks, in two geographical areas: (1) the broader agglomeration of the capital and the Danube valley and (2) the 6 counties of Northeastern Hungary where civic participation is yet to be developed.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: **€ 100.000**

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**Peace Institute – Slovenia**
Over the past years, through the Civitates funding, the collaboration between the Peace Institute, the Slovene Association of Journalist and the media organisation Bottom Line has contributed to building the capacity of civil society and journalists to address the shrinking space. The coalition led by the Peace Institute connects defenders of human rights, media freedom and independent journalism in Slovenia. The coalition is coordinating joint actions and exchanges information and mutual support in targeted actions. It uses different methods (capacity building, campaigning, advocacy, alerting, legal defense, journalistic production etc.), to reach various stakeholders in Slovenia and abroad, and disseminate their messages and products across different communities and networks. In the coming months, the coalition will particularly aim at raising public awareness on attacks on civil society and journalists and at mobilising and empowering citizens to participate in democracy protection and in the upcoming elections in 2022.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: **€ 100.000**

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**The Resource Centre for Public Participation (CeRe) – Romania**
The coalition, led by Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe) aims to convene the energies and expertise of the Romanian civil society in
support of the liberal democracy and open society in Romania. It brings together resources and expertise from all the members to support the high-level advocacy work on themes related to the civil space and the protection of civil liberties and fundamental rights. It will identify and approach potential allies in political parties, public administration (national and local), and mass-media and offer a framework for solidarity and quick reactions for its members and like-minded organisations, civic groups, and individuals. It will actively promote open governance standards and pursue their implementation at local and central level.

Grant amount for 2022-2023: € 100.000

Voice of Civic Organisations – Slovakia
The Voice of Civic Organisations is an unique platform led by Via Iuris that unites very diverse organisations and ensures, to a certain extent, the representation of CSOs in Slovakia by making them visible to the state. The main goals of the coalition are to promote the positive development of the institutional, legislative, and financial framework for the functioning of civil society organisations, to strengthen the integrity, transparency and cohesion of the civil sector, to create a space for cooperation of civic initiatives and organizations and support their activities, and to improve general understanding of public and representatives of public authorities (e.g. politicians) about the role and benefit of civic organisations for democratic society.

Grant amount for 2022: € 50.000

Coalition for Associative Freedom – France
The Coalition for Associative Freedom led by Vox Public has grown since its creation and now has 22 members representing a wide spectrum of civil society actors. This coalition aims at raising awareness about the shrinking space issue in France. Based on the scientific work of the Observatory of Associative Freedoms and thanks to the diversity of its members, the coalition produces and disseminates awareness and advocacy tools for civil society actors and creates space for exchange – webinars, debates, open meetings – between actors on the issue of the closing space and strategies or tools to counter it.

Grant amount for 2022: € 100.000

Healthy digital public sphere

Access Now Europe
Access Now defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world. By combining direct technical support, comprehensive policy engagement, global advocacy, grassroots grantmaking, legal interventions, and convenings such as RightsCon, Access Now fights for human rights in the digital age. As one of the few NGOs working fulltime on digital rights policy in Brussels, Access Now Europe has shaped policy discourse to support a healthy digital sphere at the EU level across a range of issues – including privacy and data protection, freedom of expression, artificial intelligence, and Net Neutrality – and has operated as a registered entity since 2016. Their EU level work is an organisational priority given the bloc’s influential role in establishing positive standards worldwide.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: € 200.000

AlgorithmWatch
AlgorithmWatch is a non-profit research and advocacy organisation committed to watch and unpack algorithmic/automated decision-making systems (ADMS) and their impact on society. While the prudent use of ADMS can benefit individuals and communities, they come with great risks. Guided by the principles of protecting and strengthening individual autonomy, fundamental rights, and the public good, AlgorithmWatch considers it crucial to hold ADMS accountable to democratic control and develop technical tools and governance mechanisms to achieve this. ADMS that significantly affect individuals and collectives must not only be made public in clear and accessible ways, but individuals must also be able to understand how decisions are reached, and contest them if necessary. The organisation’s work is dedicated to enabling citizens and legislators to better understand ADM processes in order to take informed decisions and
action. Hereby, it aims to contribute to a fair and inclusive society and to maximise the benefit of ADMS. To improve accountability of platforms and enable an evidence-based, inclusive, democratic debate about the role they play for the public sphere, Algorithmwatch advocates for mandatory frameworks to data access for public interest research, and effective auditing mechanisms.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: **€250,000**

**EDRi**
The EDRi network is a dynamic and resilient collective of NGOs, experts, advocates and academics working to defend and advance digital rights across the continent. For almost two decades, it has served as the backbone of the digital rights movement in Europe. EDRi’s mission is to challenge private and state actors who abuse their power to control or manipulate the public. It does so by advocating for robust and enforced laws, informing and mobilising people, promoting a healthy and accountable technology market, and building a movement of organisations and individuals committed to digital rights and freedoms in a connected world. EDRi aims to contribute to a healthy digital public sphere by advocating for the Digital Services Act and the Digital Market Act – and related EU policy initiatives - to advance human rights, define bold procedural and transparency requirements for very large online platforms and put forward systemic changes to Big Tech’s business model.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: **€300,000**

**EU DisinfoLab**
EU DisinfoLab is an independent non-profit organisation focused on tackling sophisticated disinformation campaigns and documenting the disinformation phenomenon in Europe. As a small civil society organisation, EU DisinfoLab acts as a facilitator within the community of disinformation experts, putting emphasis on building partnerships and fostering collaboration between relevant initiatives in Europe. It gathers experts and organisations to exchange best practices, cooperate, and develop new approaches to countering disinformation. EU DisinfoLab also regularly proposes policy recommendations to EU institutions and EU Member States and offers its expertise to policymakers. EU DisinfoLab strives to jointly develop a multi-stakeholder response to disinformation – complete with a legal framework that protects our fundamental rights and offers sustainable solutions to disinformation.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: **€200,000**

**European Partnership for Democracy**
The European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) is a non-profit organisation supporting democracy worldwide. It comprises seventeen European civil and political society organisations from twelve European countries working in and outside Europe. Through innovative and collaborative methodologies, EPD facilitates the exchange of knowledge and good practices, while advocating for a stronger presence of democracy on the EU’s agenda. The vision of EPD is of a world of democracies that truly represent the interests of citizens. EPD’s four strategic priorities for its multiannual strategy 2020-2023 are: supporting democratic innovation and inclusion, safeguarding democracy, supporting strong European policies for democracy, and promoting democratic principles in the digital sphere.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: **€300,000**

**The Institute for Information Law (IViR)**
The Institute for Information Law (IViR) at the University of Amsterdam is a leading research centre in the field of information law. IViR employs over thirty researchers active in the full spectrum of information society related legal areas, including intellectual property, telecommunications, media law, freedom of expression, privacy and consumer protection. Besides research, it provides a forum for critical debate about the social, cultural and political aspects of regulating the digital public sphere and information markets. IViR is host to a variety of relevant research initiatives, including ‘The Digital Transformation of Decision-Making’ and Information, Communication & The Data Society. The ‘Digital Services Act Observatory’, supported by Civitates, acts as a hub of expertise for the EU’s Digital Services Act proposal, provides independent analysis and engages different stakeholders on the challenge of confronting platform power from a fundamental rights and democratic values perspective.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: **€100,000**

**Civil Liberties Union for Europe**
Liberties was established as a non-profit charity in Germany, operating as an EU watchdog and a network. Its vision is the full implementation of human rights in the EU; and mission is to influence the EU to respect, protect and promote human rights. Liberties is built on a network of eighteen members, which are human rights watchdogs working at national level in the Member States. It uses four tools, to influence the EU and national governments: advocacy, public education and mobilisation, strategic litigation and capacity building in strategic communications and
values-based framing to support the sector to build a broad base of public support. Liberties’ Tech & Rights program focuses primarily on pressing the EU and national governments to regulate, co-regulate tech companies or support self-regulation for a democracy-friendly online environment.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €150,000

**Panoptikon Foundation**
The Panoptikon Foundation was established in April 2009, in Poland, upon the initiative of a group of engaged lawyers, to express their opposition to surveillance. It’s mission is to protect fundamental rights and freedoms in the context of fast-changing technologies and growing surveillance.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €200,000

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**Independent public-interest journalism**

**Magyar Jeti (444), Hungary**
An independent Hungarian news portal that aims to hold the powerful to account and to amplify the voices of vulnerable groups in Hungary and beyond.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €350,000

**Direkt36, Hungary**
Non-profit investigative journalism centre with the mission to shine a light on political corruption and other forms of injustices.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €144,430

**Investigative Reporting Project (IRPI), Italy**
A journalistic initiative that leads investigations and collaborates with other European investigative publications dealing with issues such as corruption and organised crime across Europe.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €168,000

**Stitching Bellingcat, the Netherlands**
An international collective of researchers and citizen journalists using verifiable digital information to investigate its topics.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €345,000

**Fundacja Pismo, Poland**
A nationwide monthly magazine aiming to revive non-partisan journalism in Poland and restore the habit of reading long, in-depth articles.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €328,000

**Foundation Centre for Civic Monitoring (OKO), Poland**
Leading investigative and politics online portal that aims to promote values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, equality, and transparency of public life.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €349,888

**Divergente, Portugal**
An independent publication of multimedia investigative and narrative journalism that focuses on stories that scrutinise power.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €181,000

**Civio, Spain**
An independent, non-profit news organisation that develops impactful journalism projects in the public interest, focusing on public policies and their impact on citizens.

Grant amount for 2021-2023: €285,000
Átlátszó Erdély, Romania
An independent investigative journalist organisation that aims to make public expenditures more transparent, expose abuses of power by public officials and institutions, and use investigative journalism to reform public institutions.
Grant amount for 2021-2023: € 66,200

PressOne, Romania
An independent journalist organisation focusing on investigative journalism, social issues, solutions journalism, and fighting disinformation and fake news.
Grant amount for 2021-2023: € 180,000

Pod črto, Slovenia
The first Slovenian independent and non-profit media outlet focusing on investigative reporting, data journalism, and in-depth stories.
Grant amount for 2021-2023: € 149,436
Civitates is an initiative hosted by the Network of European Foundations.