

# Annual Report 2020

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# Content

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Looking back at 2020 .....	4
Civitates in a nutshell .....	6
When democracy is in danger, we need all hands on deck .....	8
Our highlights .....	10
Our progress .....	11
Objective 1: a strong and resilient civil society .....	11
Objective 2: a healthy digital public sphere .....	17
Objective 3: independent public-interest journalism .....	23
Objective 4: a robust funder collaborative .....	28
Our finances .....	31
Our foundation partners .....	33
Our grantee partners .....	34

# Looking back at 2020

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In the last decade, we have witnessed the closing of democratic spaces, a rise in disinformation, an increase in political polarisation, and trends towards more autocratic and populist leaders in many countries in Europe.

Democracy in Europe is under pressure and 2020 made no exception. If anything, Covid-19 exacerbated such trends. Limitations thought unthinkable just a year ago such as lockdowns, curfews, bans on assemblies and gatherings, limited freedom of movement, introductions of special measures and controversial bills are now common and affect the fundamental freedoms and rights of citizens. Civil society organisations found themselves trapped in these situations and faced difficulties when executing their tasks.

On the digital front, disinformation around Covid-19 has thrived with digital platforms hosting a myriad of conspiracy theories about the existence and the origin of the virus, its impact, causes, and treatment. All these undermined the efforts to deal with the crisis and created division among politicians and societal groups. The current health crisis has also led to a collaboration between governments and tech giants to create contact tracing apps. This has resulted in heated public debates about privacy and security issues, including important questions about security, effectiveness, and implementation.

Independent media was also heavily hit by the crisis with journalists being refused access to observe political discussions online. Journalists needed to fight for their right to inform the public and numerous attempts of governments to silence and censor them were witnessed. Despite the restrictions, protests took place in some European countries, where journalists were arrested, and the freedom of the press was infringed. These negative developments show that independent media is under constant threat and often the first to take a punch.

At the same time, 2020 was a powerful reminder of why civil society is vital to our democracies and why supporting, preserving, and promoting civic space is critical. In many countries, CSOs have effectively and quickly managed to adapt their activities and address the emergency of the situation and respond to the immediate needs of the most vulnerable. The current Covid-19 crisis has persuaded popular social media platforms to start monitoring and removing misinformation on topics related to public health

- an unprecedented move that comes with its pros and cons. Aware of misinformation and disinformation populating our digital lives, a lot of people turned to reliable independent media as a main source of information. As a result, independent media saw some growth in traffic and individual donations.

Despite all difficulties, our grantee partners remained committed to their work and mission to counter restrictive measures by exposing wrongdoings and engaging with decision-makers. They mobilised when needed, researched, and advocated for a healthier digital sphere with positive and encouraging outcomes that will be developed in this report.

Building long-term relationships with the organisations we support, understanding the context they operate in, their specific needs, their strengths, and the challenges they face has been an integral part of Civitates' work.

To help our grantee partners adapt to this volatile environment we have tried to be flexible and responsive to their needs and to keep an open dialogue with all of them in the shifting circumstances.

For the secretariat, it was a great satisfaction to see that the mobilisation of our partner foundations has not weakened. On the contrary, it has been strengthened, both by their active contribution to the dedicated working groups and the governance bodies.

We would like to thank them sincerely for their engagement in Civitates - a further proof if any were needed, that the work of our collaborative fund is valued way to ensure the protection and expansion of civic space, and the revitalisation of our European democracies.

## THE CIVITATES TEAM

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**Marie-Laure MUCHERY**, Fund manager

**Roy VIRAH-SAWMY**, Programme manager

**Ekaterina MANDOVA**, Programme officer



# A word from the Chair

The past year has shown that democracy cannot be taken for granted. The Covid-19 situation has demonstrated how fragile our societies are and how much we need **solidarity** and **collaboration**.

With five new foundations joining in 2020 we are now **21 partners** contributing to Civitates' budget. We are grateful to the foundations' renewed trust in and pledge to Civitates. Thanks to this support, we can enter the new strategic period (2021-2025) assured that we will continue supporting the great work of our grantees in a meaningful way.

The commitment of the foundations testifies how European philanthropy can and should play a significant part in recognising and supporting the role of CSOs in safeguarding and revitalising our European democracies.

**Civitates** is compelled to continue to act as a catalyser to empower CSOs, build their resistance and resilience, and prevent the deterioration of our public space online and offline.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our secretariat who runs the day-to-day work of the fund so skilfully. A special thanks to Roy and Ekaterina who worked double hard to bridge the four months without a programme coordinator. At the same time, let me welcome again Marie-Laure - we are glad to have you and look forward to our collaboration.

**Stefan SCHÄFERS,**  
Director at King Baudouin Foundation

# Civitates in a nutshell

Civitates is a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe. It provides funding for civil society actors to come together, revitalise public discourse, and ensure that all voices are heard. We believe in European democracies and their principles that all citizens can access information, make their voices heard, organise, mobilise and engage fully in democratic processes.

**Concerned with trends that are intensifying the vulnerability of democracy in Europe, Civitates supports organisations and civil society groups that:**

**Obj.**

**1**

Strengthen the **resilience of civil society** in Europe through collective and effective actions in their respective countries. These organisations respond to challenges related to the closing space for civil society and find ways to voice the concerns of different communities and perform their watchdog role effectively.



**Obj.**

**2**

Push for a **healthy digital public sphere** where public and democratic values are safeguarded. The civil society groups that Civitates supports analyse the effect of digitisation on the quality of the public discourse in Europe, expose issues in that regard and improve the functioning of the digital information ecosystem and its regulatory environment.



## Obj. 3

Are active in the field of **independent public-interest journalism** in Europe. These organisations defend democracy by exposing abuses of power and drivers of polarisation and secure a space where all voices are heard.



Since becoming operational in 2018, Civitates has provided 68 grants in 22 countries across Europe. In addition to providing funding, Civitates has a Funding Plus component, through which the fund organises capacity development and networking opportunities for its grantees. Moreover, grantee partners can make use of the Civitates' Learning Initiatives program, which allows for additional funding for participation in seminars, workshops, network events, and strategic consultancies.

With an average annual budget of around € 3 million, Civitates is supported by a large group of diverse foundations, of different shapes and

## Obj. 4

Civitates is meant to serve as a **robust funder platform for donors** to invest collectively in European democracies. This approach allows donors to build on the lessons learned from the field and creates opportunities for the development of a common philanthropic agenda on the issues addressed by Civitates.



sizes which bring in a wealth of expertise and different perspectives. Civitates regularly consults expert groups in the different fields it supports to be able to outline the most imminent issues, complement other funding opportunities, and stay relevant to the needs of its grantees.

The initiative is hosted by the Network of European Foundations (NEF), and housed in the Philanthropy House in Brussels and builds on lessons learned from other pooled funds. Its secretariat is composed of three people, a Fund Manager, a Programme Manager, and a Programme Officer.

# When democracy is in danger, we need all hands on deck

Governments' reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated all sorts of major economic, political, and social problems. All over Europe, laws are being pushed through, while public participation has hardly taken place, due to lockdowns. Illiberal leaders in some countries have already taken advantage of the Covid-19 crisis to tighten their political grip by weakening checks and balances, imposing censorship, and expanding state surveillance. Still, CSOs have tried to counter these developments and voice concerns.



***“We immediately noticed that no one was paying attention to civil rights and democracy. Neither politicians, nor the media challenged any of the restrictions.”***

**Oana Preda**  
Director of CeRe, Romania.

## ***In times of crisis don't forget democracy***

Since the start of the pandemic, the Civitates-supported coalitions have closely monitored the situation in their respective countries. They intervened when common European values were challenged, speaking out against cases of overreach and abuse of power, and throwing their weight behind efforts to anticipate further government restrictions on democratic rights. Civitates' grantee partner, the Romanian coalition

led by CeRe, for example, started monitoring the media and public decision-making processes when the pandemic hit Romania and a state of emergency was announced with plenty of restrictions. The goal was to ensure that democracy will not fail victim to the newly introduced measures.

As Oana Preda, the Director of CeRe, clarified: “We realised the delicacy of the situation as it was important for people to be able to trust the government and follow the measures, yet somebody needed to say something. We tried to find a balance, as we did not want to create more tension and decided to organise an online system to report abuses of power. We turned to Civitates to ask for a subsidy to build a website. With our real-time reporting channel, we built awareness amongst people about civil rights in Covid-19 times. We also used it as a basis to ask the state for specific actions, for instance, about the limited access to information of public interest and lack of transparency about decision-making procedures. Some of our requests or public statements had a real impact, still most of them were ignored by the government. Nevertheless, we are excited to show that, no matter what happens, we are here to monitor the data about civic liberty in our country. We feel that is an important statement.”

## ***Disinformation spreads faster than the virus***

During the pandemic, since everyone started working from home, much of communication moved from the public to the digital sphere. Unfortunately, the crisis accelerated many pre-existing problems in the online space with a flood of mis- and disinformation, leaks of personal data, online threats, and attacks.

Civitates' grantee Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) took the initiative to monitor digital freedom violations related to Covid-19 in six countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. BIRN together with the SHARE Foundation documented hundreds of violations in the context of the pandemic, exposing the most troubling



trends such as disinformation campaigns, online frauds, the publication of unverified information, publishing of citizens' data, increased arrests for social media posts and threats. As Sofija shared: "People have the manner to separate the offline and online world, but as technology develops, I think this is deeply wrong. Online attacks severely damage people: they fear trauma, lose money, or are otherwise hit. The consequences of online attacks are real."



***"Information that is spread online leads to many negative consequences in the offline world."***

**Sofija Todorovic**  
Project Coordinator at BIRN.

The final report, which BIRN published, provided a set of recommendations for public, independent, and private actors who have the power to influence the health of the digital sphere. Collaboration between journalists, tech- and legal experts in BIRN led to numerous results such as investigations, policy research and articles, but most importantly it enhanced the watchdog role of civil society and media in providing accurate reporting in the public interest during the pandemic.

### ***Reliable and clear information is key for democracy***

While the spread of disinformation is a sign that quality journalism is even more important than before, the Covid-19 crisis, however, has exacerbated the operating environment of journalists. On one hand, independent media face more and more financial difficulties with advertising redirecting its money to online platforms. On the other hand, the pandemic strained the fabric of the journalistic profession with journalists being shut down from political discussions online.

In Slovenia, for example, when the new government took office and the Covid-19 crisis hit, the environment for non-governmental organisations and journalists became

increasingly hostile and restrictive. As Brankica further explained: "The government proposed amendments to media laws that are detrimental for public service media. In reaction, our coalition took part in parliamentary discussions on the restrictive policy measures. We also alarmed the international community and submitted our comments to the proposed media regulation to the government. As a follow-up to these actions, we published legal and communications guidelines for NGOs and journalists and we acquired and disseminated legal advice on the right to assembly and protest. So, while the watchdog role of civil society and journalists is not so much understood across the political spectrum, we continue to defend it."

In the unusual situation the Covid-19 crisis presents, raising citizens' awareness, encouraging civic participation, ensuring trustworthy information, and demanding transparency from institutions are more important than ever to safeguard the public good. It is essential for CSOs to remain vigilant, to be able to uphold democracy.



***"What is more, there are constant threats to civic actors and critically speaking journalists."***

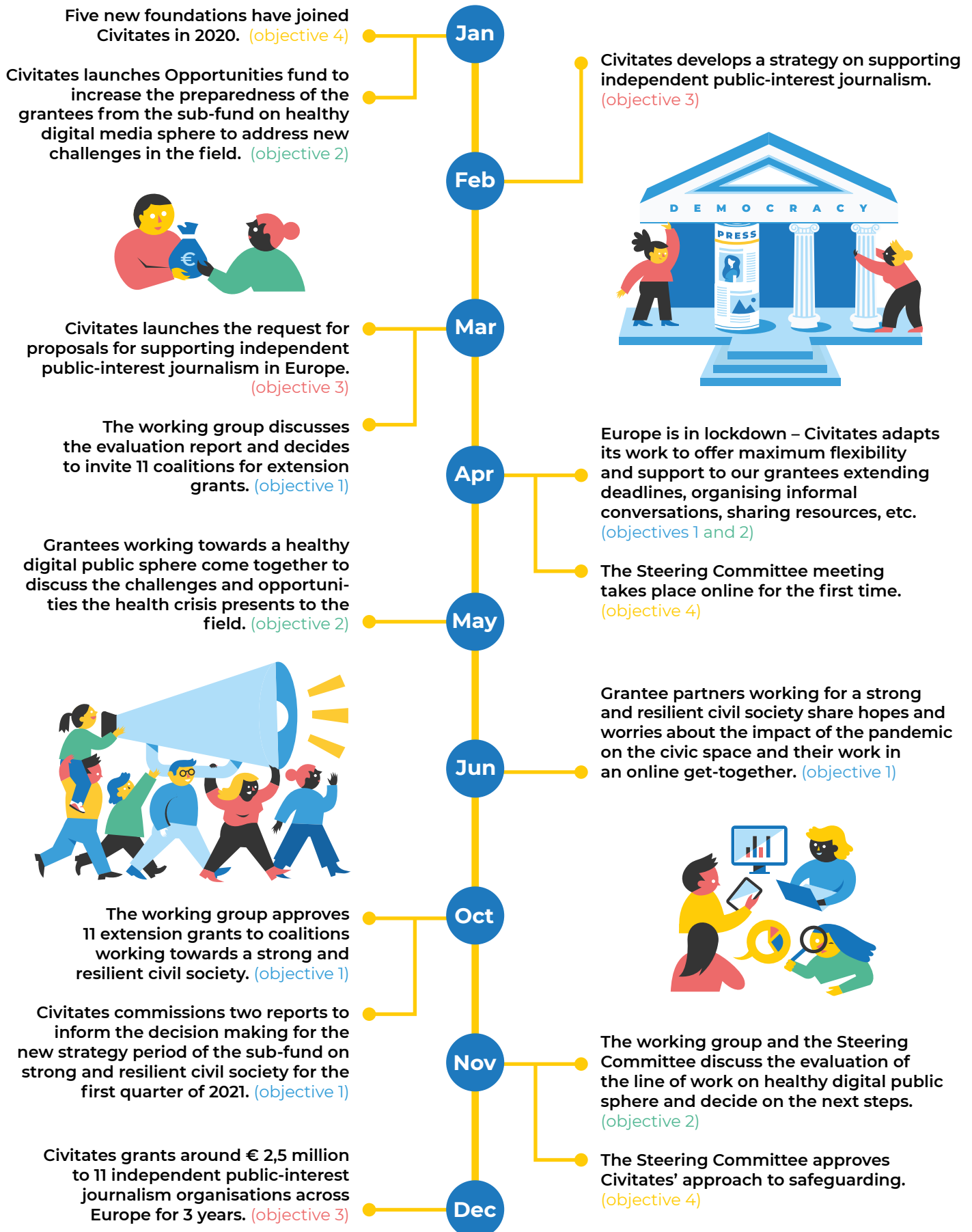
**Brankica Petković**  
Researcher at the Peace Institute.

### ***Together for European solidarity***

Committed to defending the space of civil society, Civitates' mission, and its flexible and responsive support to partners to help them navigate these troubled times is crucial. The current situation shows very clearly how Civitates' various lines of work interconnect, highlighting the need for increased coordinated action and collaboration amongst grantees and funders across the fund.

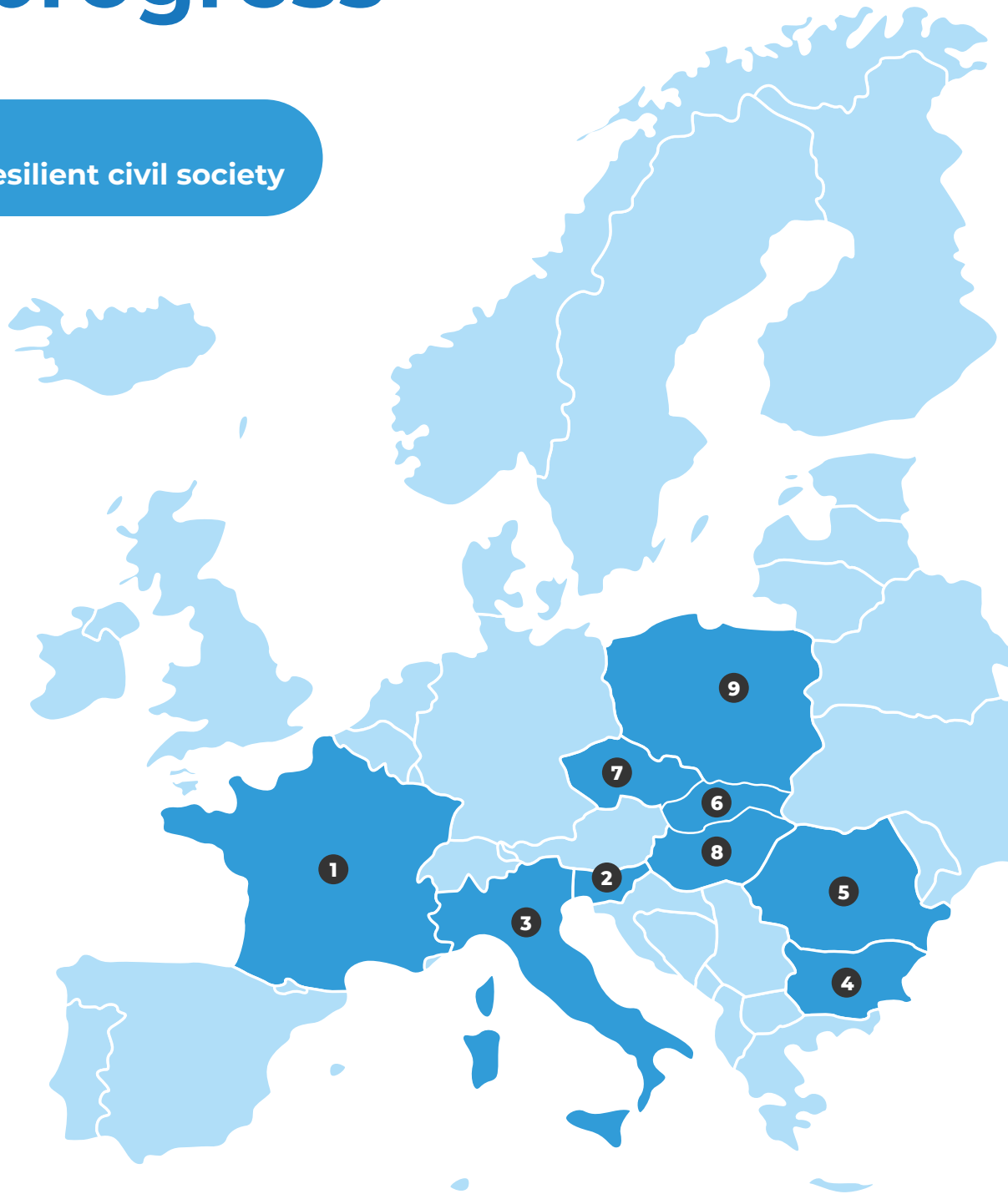
The current challenges we are facing – whether it is fighting the pandemic or ensuring economic recovery – are shared. We can address them by working together, in a spirit of cooperation and European solidarity.

# Our Highlights



# Our progress

## Objective 1: a strong and resilient civil society



1 VoxPublic [France](#)

2 Peace Institute [Slovenia](#)

3 Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD) [Italy](#)

4 Bulgarian Fund for Women [Bulgaria](#)  
Citizen Participation Forum [Bulgaria](#)

5 Resource Centre for Public Participation (CERE) [Romania](#)

6 Via Iuri [Slovakia](#)

7 Glopolis (NEON coalition) [Czech Republic](#)

8 Non-profit sector analysis association (NOSZA) [Hungary](#)  
Ökotárs (Civilisation coalition) [Hungary](#)  
Marom Klub Egyesületn [Hungary](#)

9 Klon/Jawor Association [Poland](#)  
Polish Robert Schumann Foundation [Poland](#)

## ● Our goal

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

## ● What we did

In 2020, we continued to support the work of coalitions throughout Europe, allowing them to consolidate and roll out the strategies they had planned. The coalitions involve partners from different sectors and cities. Their approach varies, but all of them include both reactive and pro-active elements aimed at building up resilience and the capacity to stand up against the deterioration of democratic values in their sectors.

### *Responding to grantees' needs*

To help our grantee partners navigate the Covid-19 crisis and adjust their work, we showed maximum flexibility in our grantmaking, postponed deadlines, and organised informal conversations to better understand their needs.

Together with an external facilitator, we organised two online grantee get-togethers. To create space for the grantees to share experiences, reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on civil society, and identify solutions to emerging challenges, we included sessions on peer-to-peer advice and joint problem-solving.

In response to the grantees' needs, we also organised two training sessions for them:

- ➔ On holding successful online gatherings – led by Kumquat Consult. This training aimed to make our partners more confident when leading online gatherings and more familiar with ways and tools to keep discussions engaging.

- ➔ On value-based framing – led by Liberties. The training aimed to provide the grantees with knowledge on how to frame the issues they are working on in a way that motivates the public to engage.

Our grantees also appreciated Civitates' learning initiatives that created further occasions for them to get useful knowledge and inspiration from the other coalitions supported by Civitates.

### *Assessment and grant extensions*

We commissioned an interim assessment to an independent consultant. The report confirmed that the grantees are making progress. Up until now, the focus of the grantee partners has been on building relationships and formalising the coalitions. Various training sessions, capacity building workshops and activities have taken place to engage the coalition members and give them time and space to get to know each other better, build trust and consensus, strategise, work on common concrete plans, and schedule for joint actions.

As stated in the interim assessment, coalitions take time to build and solidify. Based on this, we decided to invite 11 of the 13 coalitions currently funded to apply for an extension grant for one year (until December 2021). The total amount granted was € 603,472. The extension will allow the grantee partners to better adapt to the situation and carry out their reshaped activities with positive outcomes, some of which we have highlighted in the next pages.

Although the coalitions needed to revise their initial plans and adjust their activities due to the pandemic, all of them remained operational and actively engaged throughout 2020. Our grantee partners showed that civil society organisations have an important role to play in ensuring that we will emerge from this crisis in the best shape possible.



## ● Outcomes

### Outcome 1: *greater sense of belonging, collective identity, and safety*

Over the past two years, all coalitions have built on solidarity, commitment, and involvement from their member organisations. Mutual trust and solidarity have increased within the coalition members as a result of joint efforts to create safe spaces for participation, decision-making, and information sharing. As shared in internal and external assessments, the members of the coalitions felt the benefits from acting jointly: *“Our network, **NeoN**, broadens horizons and is an inspiration on how to do advocacy or how to communicate with our members. It is a space for experiments, there is joint development on all levels – of people, organisations, and networks.”*, our grantee partner from the Czech coalition shared.

Being in a coalition allows member organisations to respond to the challenges to civic space better than if they had to do so individually. Building a strong collective identity helps them feel less isolated and helpless. Our French partners from **VoxPublic** elaborated that *“the existence of the coalition itself is already a proof of a strong desire to create solidarity and links among CSOs.”* They further shared that even organisations that are not used to working together are actively participating in the French collaboration which is a clear sign of willingness to find common solutions to shared problems.

Several coalitions have expressed that they feel better equipped to face external pressure and changes because of newly established solidarity mechanisms that are designed to help them react collectively to potential attacks. This systemic response creates a kind of a safety net for organisations when threats occur. In the words of our grantee from the **Schuman Foundation** in Poland: *“We believe that our coalition partners feel more confident to deal with the outside pressure and have the confidence that if a crisis arises, they can count on the network and its full support.”*

### Outcome 2: *better internal and external communication*

Communication - within and outside the coalitions - has been a priority for most of our grantees throughout 2020.

As national lockdowns forced everybody to work from home and meetings were possible only online, the coalitions were faced with the challenge of how to keep their members informed and engaged. They needed to readjust their activities and a special focus was directed to internal communication.

→ The Hungarian coalition led by **Ökotárs**, for example, developed an intranet platform where members of the coalition could inform each other in real time and in a transparent way about their activities. The platform serves also as a tool to look out for partners, ask for help, and share useful information.

→ The Slovak coalition led by **Via Iuris** extended its communication activities and incorporated frequent newsletters and blog posts to keep the coalition members updated. This communication approach allowed them to spread information that helped the members cope and adapt to the volatile situation.

“  
**Coalition members  
have the sense of  
a community that  
stands behind them  
and reacts when  
it's needed.**

Via Iuris, Slovakia

What worried our partners in 2020 was that governments could use the sanitary crisis to further their negative rhetoric and smear campaigns towards CSOs. With this in mind, it was important for CSOs to stay vocal, articulate a positive vision of civil society and demonstrate its importance to the public. External communication was key

in achieving these goals and in countering authoritarian narratives about civil society organisations. Some coalitions made significant changes to the content of their campaigns to make them more relevant to the changing context, emphasising how CSOs contribute to society and the common good.

→ The Bulgarian coalition led by **Citizen Participation Forum** (CPF), for example, quickly adapted their communication approach. Their new message focused on the positive impact of civic organisations on society and the importance of their activities to the communities in times of crisis. The CPF showed this with a documentary about



the work of several Bulgarian CSOs that had set up a helpline for those most affected by the lockdown measures such as the elderly or the victims of domestic violence. The film also portrayed how CSOs in Bulgaria assisted municipalities in reorganising their operations and services during lockdowns. The documentary was broadcasted on national TV and contributed to the coalition's goal to convey a more positive image of the sector to the public.

- ➔ This idea to shift the narrative, to focus less on the challenges and threats that the sector faces and more on the values it stands for was at the heart of the campaign 'It depends on us' from the **Polish coalition led by Klon/Jawor**. Building on the success of their previous campaign ('It works' which ran in 2019 in partnership with Warsaw City Hall), the Polish coalition Klon/Jawor developed a new strategy to promote a positive perception of CSOs and advocate for independent and free civic space in Poland. Together with various media partners including a radio station and major online outlets, they successfully launched the campaign '#It depends on us' intending to present a vision of a desirable future, a future driven by positive values such as solidarity, empathy, and responsibility towards the community. The campaign highlighted civil society initiatives where anyone could join and participate in shaping a better common future.

### Outcome 3: *increased strategic advocacy and access to policy making*

Covid-19 has made advocacy more challenging than usual with policy debates happening often online and behind closed doors. Still, in some of the countries where our grantees are active, the coalitions could push their way to be included in policy dialogues, which is an indication that their advocacy capacity is improving as they are gaining credibility and recognition from the authorities.

- ➔ In Slovakia, the coalition cooperates now closely with the Chamber of Non-governmental organisations - an advisory board of the government on issues related to CSOs. The coalition aims to become an official member of the Chamber. In early 2020, they evaluated the electoral programmes of the political parties, and monitored and analysed the legislative proposals, published and sent out a policy paper with suggestions, of which several were adopted by the newly elected government in April 2020.

- ➔ In Bulgaria, both supported coalitions actively engaged with the process of setting up the Public Council for Civil Society Development, a new instrument for planning and implementing the national policy concerning civil society organisations. The **coalition 'Ravni BG'** and **Citizen Participation Forum** worked hard to promote transparent and effective elections for members of the Public Council. As a positive outcome, some of the coalition members have been elected. The work of the Council is still to be set in motion.

- ➔ The Czech coalition participated in the preparation of the *New Strategy toward CSO's 2021-2030* through joint inputs for key areas such as an enabling environment for CSOs, improving the public perception of the civic sector, partnership in policy dialogue, etc. The coalition was involved in the meeting held by the Governmental council about NGOs and in the preparations of a background paper on civic participation.

In some countries where civil society is under more pressure, coalitions have also managed to prevent or counteract worrying attempts of politicians to deteriorate the current legislation.

The Slovenian coalition, which focuses on media capture, anti-civil society propaganda and prevention of attacks on activists and journalists, released an investigative report on media ownership that was used as a reference point in public and political debates about the media law proposed by the government in June 2020. Our grantee partner also managed to raise awareness of the shrinking space problem in Slovenia and attract the attention of international actors and foreign media.

- ➔ The Romanian coalition, led by **CeRe**, has been acting as a watchdog for civil liberties and participation on several occasions. The coalition could react collectively and successfully to counteract several bill projects on restricting the civic space in Romania. The coalition submitted an analysis of the anti-money laundering bill, which resulted in the government dropping some of the initially planned burdensome provisions. They also developed an online monitoring system to report and inform on the state of democracy and civil rights in Romania since the state of emergency due to Covid-19 had been declared (see p.8).

## ● Lessons learned

### **Insight 1:** *investing in strategic communication is key*

While the coalitions that Civitates supports are experts in their respective fields, they face challenges to communicate their work to a wider audience because of external and internal factors. A reason could be the lack of in-house skills or staff capacity. A further challenge to CSOs is that media organisations do not usually regard their work as newsworthy. To be able to attract media's attention generally implies strategic targeting. Furthermore, in some countries, there are inherently negative attitudes towards civil society that undermine the outreach efforts. Additionally, the current context limits offline communication and imposes the necessity to rethink engagement strategies.

- Our grantees have felt the need for more strategic communication. The CILD coalition in Italy, for example, has set up a 'Narrative Lab' that is meant as a hub for civil society actors where they can find resources and training opportunities for exchange and collaboration. The hub helps CSOs create new narratives through hope-based storytelling about the topic of migration and to better reach the so-called "undecided middle".
- Another example comes from Citizen Participation Forum in Bulgaria that invited a PR expert to provide communication and message drafting training for the coalition members.
- The Romanian coalition, led by CeRe, tried a new strategy and creative ways to expand their outreach. They designed a visual communication campaign working with well-known illustrators and artists. The campaign aimed to expose some of the myths around the NGO sector and used humour and illustrations to make their messages more accessible to the public.

The efforts of the grantee partners are starting to pay off with an encouraging indication of outreach growth. Still, whether such communication campaigns can shift the perception of civil society organisations in the countries is too early to say, especially in those where civil society has a negative connotation. Strengthening the grantees' communication is an area where Civitates could further support them and an opportunity for an exchange between the grantees from this line of work and the one on independent public-interest journalism.

### **Insight 2:** *potential for more cross-coalition collaboration*

The challenges civil society faces are common across the countries and the organisations that Civitates supports. Peer-learning and exchange are more needed than ever, and natural collaboration has emerged among the coalitions. Apart from the grantees' get-togethers that Civitates organises regularly, more and more coalitions come together at their own initiative.

In some cases, networks and synergies have been fostered **on a national level**:

- Our two grantee partners in Hungary joined efforts to enhance cooperation and networks within civil society organisations from the different regions in the country. The goal was to reach more organisations and go outside the capitals to include local groups into the coalition. This is still an ongoing effort, as it takes time to overcome the initial resistance of local groups who are wary to be connected with more dissenting CSOs. To overcome this challenge, the two Hungarian coalitions organised joint capacity building workshops for representatives of local groups intended to build regional networks and hubs for civic engagement.
- Such cooperation among grantees did not stop within single countries: our partners from the Czech and Slovak coalitions found space and framework through Civitates to engage in **cross-border exchange**. This allowed their members to further develop their existing links and share experience on advocacy about policy dialogue and strategic partnership between the state and civic sectors.
- A will for **pan-European cooperation** is also present in the initiative organised by the French coalition: they invited grantee partners from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, and Italy to share their experiences of the national lockdowns. The exchange is still to take place in the first half of 2021 and will be in the form of 5 online workshops designed as a safe space for fruitful discussions about concerns, challenges, hopes, and successful strategies to cope with the restrictions imposed due to the spread of Covid-19.

We can see that there is a clear will and potential to develop further collaboration among the cohort of grantees. Our Learning initiatives and grantees' get-togethers are important tools to support the grantees' individual as well as collective work and progress.

### **Insight 3:** *coalitions aren't built in a day*

Our grantees have been actively working towards creating a better environment for an engaged civil society in their countries. Throughout 2020 we have seen evidence that the coalitions we are supporting are progressing. Our partners are better equipped to:

- ➔ clarify and defend common agendas,
- ➔ collaborate on joint projects and campaigns,
- ➔ distribute their content more widely.

By working together, they managed to:

- ➔ reach a broader range of organisations not only in their countries but also abroad,
- ➔ defend positions and solutions and participate in policy debates,
- ➔ push back restrictive draft legislation to a certain extent.

Still, the past year has created opportunities for governments to push a political agenda that could further silence civil society actors. In a context where national assemblies are difficult and it is harder than ever for CSOs to resist the pressure, it is too early to conclude whether they have been successful to effectively slow or reverse the negative trend.

Building, sustaining, and expanding coalitions is a long-term and challenging undertaking. We need to be patient and ensure long-term support to allow the grantees to have a clear impact in defending democracy.

### ● **What's next**

2021 marks the beginning of a new strategy period for our sub-fund on a strong and resilient civil society. Civitates commissioned two reports to inform the decisions of the working group on the future strategy:

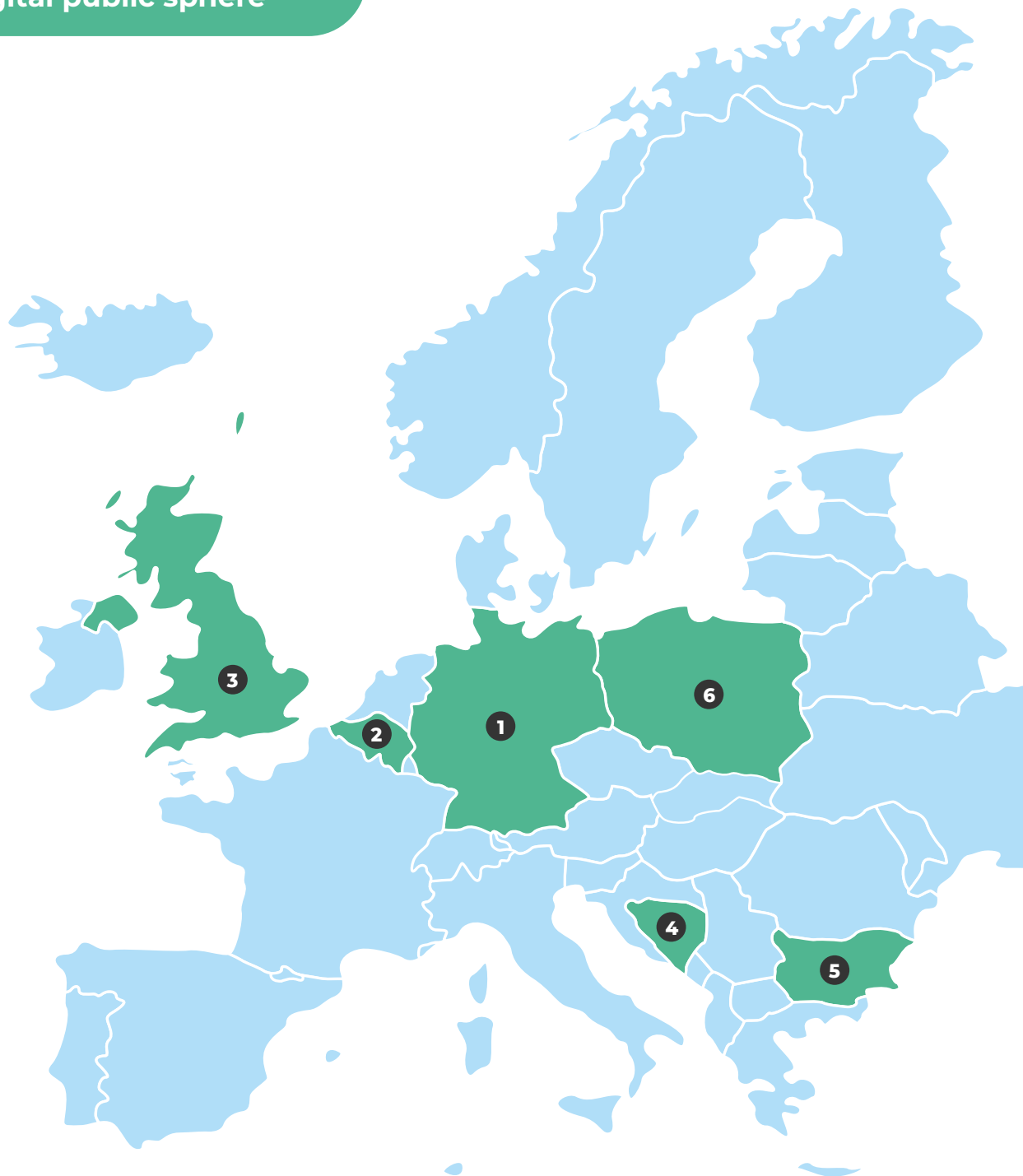
- ➔ the first report will look at the impact the coalitions have managed to achieve so far
- ➔ the second will present an overview of the state of the shrinking space for civil society in Europe and the strategies to address this issue.

Both reports are to be ready in March 2021.

Civitates is planning to finalise the new strategy by the end of spring 2021, a call for proposals and approval of the new grants will follow in the autumn of 2021.



## Objective 2: a healthy digital public sphere



- 1 AlgorithmWatch [Germany](#)  
Democracy Reporting International (DRI) [Germany](#)
- 2 European Digital Rights (EDRI) [Belgium](#)  
European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) [Belgium](#)
- 3 University of Oxford – Oxford Internet Institute [the UK](#)  
Who Targets Me [the UK](#)

- 4 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)
- 5 Centre for the Study of Democracy [Bulgaria](#)
- 6 Panoptikon Foundation [Poland](#)

## ● Our goal

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

## ● What we did

### Grantmaking

The fast-evolving nature of the digital public sphere and the growing political will, both in the EU and across the EU countries, to regulate the digital field show a need for allowing grantees to constantly develop and adjust their projects. As a result, at the beginning of 2020, the working group for this sub-fund approved the creation of an 'Opportunities Fund'. This additional financial support is meant to:

- ➔ increase the preparedness of Civitates' grantees to deal with arising challenges in the field, and
- ➔ enable our partners to address critical and emerging issues that intersect with their work.

Each organisation from the cohort was invited to apply for up to € 30, 000 throughout 2020. The application procedure involved a short project description, a recommendation from the secretariat, and an approval by a small committee of funders.

By the end of 2020, 7 out of the 9 grantee partners had applied and received the additional support under the Opportunities Fund. The overall additional grants amounted to about € 250,000.

As a direct consequence of the Covid-19 crisis, all grantee partners were also given the opportunity to extend their project deadlines at no-cost. Six projects have ended at the end of 2020 and 3 others will be wrapped up in 2021.

### Evaluation and Strategy renewal

In 2020, Civitates commissioned an **evaluation** to consider the performance of this line of work since its launch. The evaluator was furthermore tasked with issuing recommendations on the way forward for this sub-fund. The generally positive evaluation identified four key areas of success for the fund so far:

- ➔ the establishment of the fund
- ➔ the collaboration among grantees

- ➔ the flexibility of the fund
- ➔ the timing of the grants and the administration of the grants.

It also identified 3 key challenges which were related to the short-term nature of the grants, the need for greater focus and scale, and the Covid-19 crisis.

Civitates commissioned a **policy brief** outlining the upcoming policy developments and opportunities at the EU level relevant to Civitates' work in the digital field. The working group and the cohort of grantees discussed the policy brief, the evaluation, its recommendations as well as the way forward in an online meeting in October 2020.

Following the input gathered from partner foundations, the secretariat, supported by an expert, ran a consultation process with a selected group of grantees. The insights gathered from this consultation were then presented in an '**Options paper**', which outlined the different paths this line of work could take in the next three years. The 'Options paper' was presented to the working group for discussion in January 2021.

### Funding Plus

Unable to organise in-person gatherings, Civitates convened the grantee partners online in May 2020. The group discussed the implications of the pandemic on the digital public sphere and the trends, challenges, and opportunities in this space. Some time was also devoted to peer-exchanges among the cohort members where four grantees presented their projects or proposals for the Opportunities fund and received feedback and advice from their peers. There were also dedicated expert talk sessions.

The event was designed and moderated by professional external facilitators and tailor-made for this specific cohort of grantees. Still, online meetings cannot fully replace offline interaction – a point expressed by several grantees

In addition to the convenings, grantee partners also applied for and received small amounts (up to €5000) for learning initiatives. These small grants were aimed at addressing learning and capacity building needs and included:

- ➔ media and public speaking training,
- ➔ a public affairs diploma course for a team member to get insight into the process of policy formation and ways to strategically leverage public-facing campaigns,
- ➔ a course on how public affairs relate to PR and public communication, and the reputational context public affairs operate in.

## ● Outcomes

### Outcome 1: *new insights*

Throughout 2020, the cohort of grantees has continued their work on analysing and exposing issues impacting the digital public sphere. Our grantees brought new insights into the challenges, explored solutions, and set the groundwork for evidence-based policy making.

For example, the **Oxford Internet Institute** finalised their study 'Visual Content Shared Over Twitter During the 2019 EU Parliamentary Election Campaign' which showed that:

- visuals originating from traditional political actors prevailed among Twitter conversations
- users shared substantial amounts of anti-European, populist, and, to a lesser extent, extremist images, though this content remained largely disjointed from the mainstream public debate
- political humour emerged as a vector for anti-establishment and Eurosceptic themes, especially in discussions critical of the European project.

Furthermore, through the Civitates grant, they also studied the relationship between junk news and disinformation and the online advertising ecosystem, showing how an overwhelming majority of junk news and disinformation domains rely on major advertising platforms to monetise their pages. Along the same lines, as a follow-up of the Civitates funded project, they have started looking into the advertising optimisation process of Facebook, which should contribute to the greater understanding of this issue and build on the existing insights.

The centre for the **Study of Democracy in Bulgaria** is currently wrapping up their project which is expected to provide sound and regionally comparative conclusions in the following respects:

- identifying country distinct as well as cross-country applicable similarities and differences in pro-Russian message dissemination about the main themes of anti-democratic narration (i.e., nationalist, anti-migrant, misogynist, and economically illiberal narratives),
- cataloguing the various activities for combatting disinformation that have (or have not) been addressed on a national level in the four countries the CSD is examining,
- comparing the prominence of the EU's Digital Services Act and Democracy Action Plan in domestic debates about media and technology.

**AlgorithmWatch** partnered with researchers at the University of Amsterdam to examine how platforms could give access to data for research purposes, thus overcoming potential privacy concerns. This resulted in a report that draws from existing legal frameworks in other domains in two different sectors: environmental protection and medical research.

AlgorithmWatch organised meetings with civil society representatives and European policymakers to share their results and insights. They also launched an advocacy campaign, #LeftOnRead, to shed light on some of the issues with voluntary transparency and data access frameworks, and to help explain why the status quo has failed to deliver meaningful transparency. Their campaign received wide press coverage in Germany and beyond.



*Access to accurate, reliable, and privacy-respecting platform data is critical for our work. We hope that this study will serve to strengthen the advocacy efforts of civil society actors who are committed to improving platform transparency and accountability.*

AlgorithmWatch

## Outcome 2: *new tools*

Several tools have been developed or upgraded by our grantee partners over 2020. These tools contribute to monitoring the challenges and exposing what is happening in the digital public sphere and helping civil society address these challenges.

- ➔ **BIRN** and Share foundation expanded their current monitoring of digital threats to Kosovo and Montenegro. Additional monitors have been trained in those countries and the violations are uploaded into the current database and on a live blog.
- ➔ **Who targets Me** ran a pilot project that joins the datasets of online political advertising from various platforms in one place. This resulted in an archive of political ad data related projects, where they are classifying projects according to their purpose and geography. They also launched a new service, Notify for the UK and US elections (and for the Dutch and German elections in 2021). This is designed to make it easier for journalists to cover online political advertising. It aims at removing the technical barrier journalists face when they try to access and interpret the platforms' political ad libraries. Each morning, it emails journalists a summary of online

advertising activity based on political actors and keywords they are interested in.

- ➔ **European Partnership for Democracy** is developing a policy knowledge tool that would allow organisations to visualise the impact of digital policies on the fundamental principles of democracy considering the numerous legislative proposals at the EU level. The tool will allow regulators to oversee who is funding what online. The project aims at strengthening European level policy that guarantees transparency in digital political advertising. This will be done through research and multi-stakeholder policy dialogue at the national and European level, followed by coalition-based monitoring and advocacy efforts towards an EU-level policy on digital political advertising transparency.

## Outcome 3: *active participation and collaboration around the EU legislative process*

The regulation of the digital public sphere is a priority on the EU Commission's legislative agenda and in 2020 a lot of important legislative proposals were presented. Proposals such as the **Digital Services Act**<sup>1</sup>, the **Digital Markets Act**<sup>2</sup>, the **European Democracy Action**



1 The Digital Services Act aims to ensure a safe and accountable online environment.

2 The Digital Markets Act aims to ensure fair and open digital markets.

3 The European Democracy Action Plan aims to promote free and fair elections.

4 The Data Governance Act aims to boost data sharing across sectors and EU countries

**Plan**<sup>3</sup>, or the **Data Governance Act**<sup>4</sup> have the potential to impact positively the functioning of the digital public sphere and address some of the challenges. All grantees have been able to contribute to the development of these legislative proposals with the findings from their Civitates funded projects. Through this process, we have seen several collaborative efforts or coalitions emerge among the grantee partners, including organisations outside of the cohort.

→ **EDRI** published its position paper '**Platform Regulation Done Rights**' in April 2020 as an attempt to support the European Commission in asking the right questions in its consultation on the Digital Services Act.

The European Partnership for Democracy drafted a **joint statement calling for transparency of advertising in upcoming EU policies**. A wide coalition of over 30 CSOs, including major digital rights organisations, signed the Roadmap and used it in their advocacy towards the European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act.

Several grantees have opened lines of communication and established recognition and legitimacy with key policymakers at the European level and their cabinets, among whom Commissioners Thierry Breton (Internal market), Vera Jourova (Values and Transparency), or Margaret Vestager (a Europe fit for the Digital Age).

As the evaluation report for this line of work pointed out:

*“Grantees have been well placed to take the findings from their work and use them as the basis for submissions to the consultations currently underway in this important area.”*

This is encouraging and it will be undoubtedly a focus area of our strategy moving forward.

## ● Lessons learned

### **Insight 1:** *there is a need for better communication*

It is not easy to communicate the implications the digital public sphere has on democracy. Such a challenge can have a direct impact on the

efficiency of civil society advocacy. There is a clear need for re-framing and improving the narratives so that civil society organisations working in the digital field can engage policymakers.

While some policymakers are very well-versed in the issues of the digital public sphere, there is a need to strengthen the communications about the work of civil society. It is necessary to also engage the general public and present to them in an understandable way the problems at hand as their opinion has the potential to shape policies. Our grantee partners are aware of the importance of communication and are already working on furthering their expertise in this field. **AlgorithmWatch**, for example, has been experimenting with attractive visuals in their advocacy work. The European Partnership for Democracy initiated training for their organisation and a group of CSOs on the use of hope-based communications in advocacy related to the Digital Services Act (DSA).

### **Insight 2:** *flexibility of funders is a must*

The field of technology evolves at a very fast pace and the flexibility of civil society and funders working on those issues is a must. The evaluation report pointed out that the simple application process that Civitates had put in place and the absence of overly tight reporting requirements and metrics are appreciated by the grantee partners. The availability of additional funding for opportunities that arise throughout the grant period and the light application and approval process associated with it have contributed significantly to the outcomes mentioned above and the general success of this sub-fund. In the words of our grantee **Who Targets Me**:

*“Civitates has been a well thought through funding programme and helpful partner. We are extremely grateful for your support. It has been the central pillar of our existence and work in 2019 and 2020.”*

It is important that Civitates keep this flexible nature in its future strategy.

### **Insight 3:** *the need for greater focus for impact*

To react adequately to the large number of disparate problems affecting the health of the digital public sphere, over the past 3 years Civitates has invested in a wide range of projects that cover different topics. Given the limited resources of Civitates, a more focused approach is needed for Civitates to have some measurable impact on the digital public sphere.

The legislative momentum at the EU level and in the EU countries to regulate technology, as well as the timeframe of the Civitates' strategy renewal present an opportunity for the funders collaborative to build on the lessons learned so far and be in line with the expectations and the needs of the field.

Furthermore, we should bear in mind that stakeholders who are more inclined to support the platforms when it comes to regulations are currently investing enormous amounts to push their agendas. It is essential for Civitates to better target its efforts.

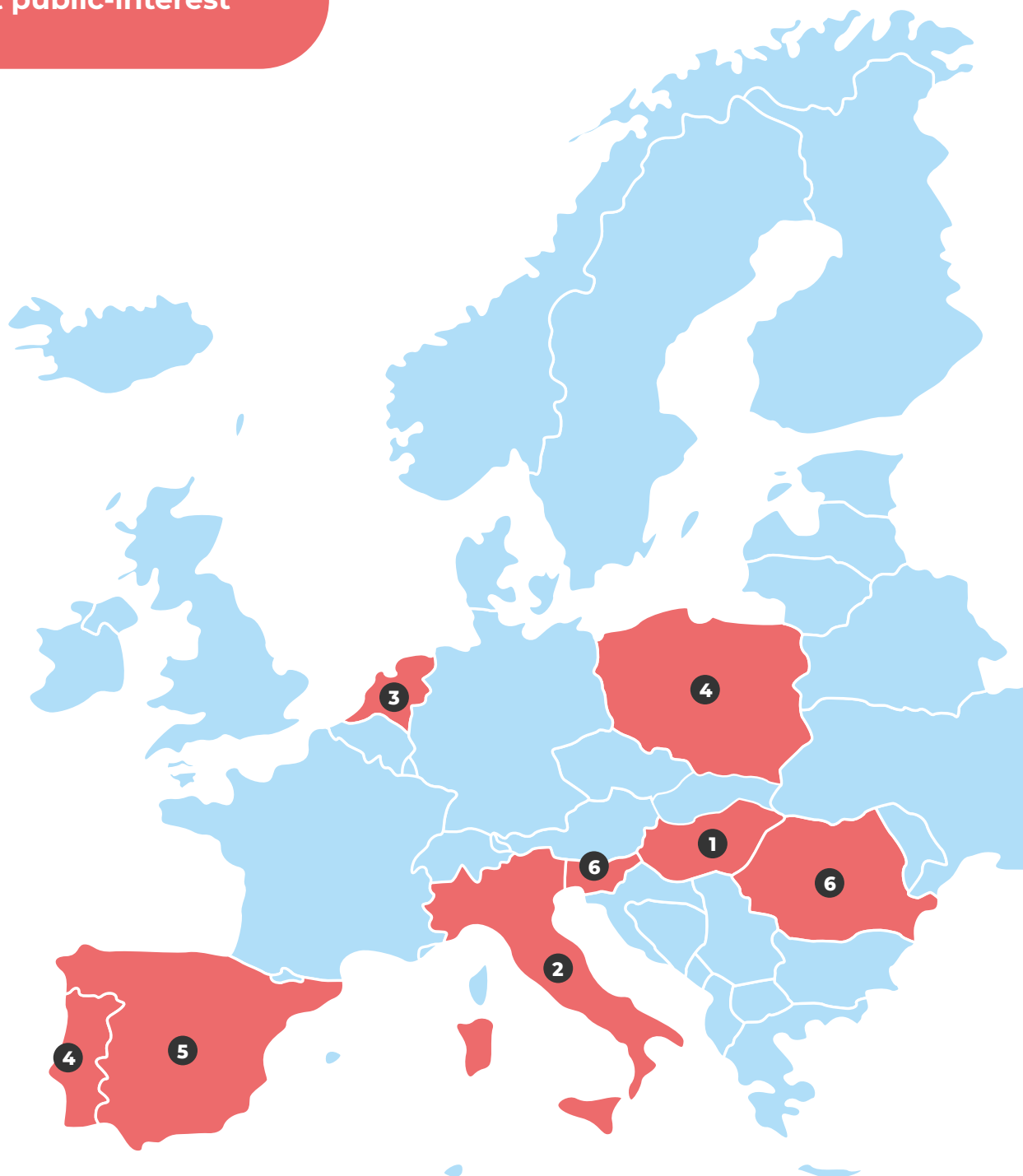
### ● **What's next**

2021 marks a new strategic phase for Civitates and this line of work. Throughout this year and over the next 3-5 years, we aim to contribute meaningfully to creating a healthy digital public sphere in Europe by building on the work accomplished so far and the lessons learned. The strategy of the sub-fund will be refined and will focus on two aspects:

- ➔ supporting advocacy for the regulation of the digital public sphere in a way that upholds fundamental rights and democratic principles, and
- ➔ building the field of civil society actors working towards a healthy digital public sphere.



### Objective 3: independent public-interest journalism



1 Magyar Jeti (444) Hungary  
Direkt36 Hungary

2 Investigative Reporting Project (IRPI)  
Italy

3 Stitching Bellingcat the Netherlands

Fundacja Pismo Poland

4 Foundation Centre for Civic Monitoring  
(OKO) Poland

4 Divergente Portugal

5 Civio Spain

6 Átlátszó Erdély Romania  
PressOne Romania

7 Pod črto Slovenia

## ● 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

### *A few numbers related to the selection process*

- ➔ **311 applications were received in July 2020.**
- ➔ **100 organisations were pre-selected by the Secretariat and examined by a group of external experts.**
- ➔ **50 of those were discussed by the selection committee.**
- ➔ **18 organisations were invited to submit a full proposal in October 2020.**
- ➔ **11 organisations received grants that started in January 2021.**

## *Grantmaking*

In March 2020, Civitates launched a call for proposals for funding independent public-interest journalism organisations. In response, we received 311 applications. Civitates particularly welcomed applications from organisations operating in contexts where:

- ➔ the market has failed to support independent journalism,
- ➔ media have been captured by state or non-state actors, or
- ➔ there has been a hostile legal environment for public-interest journalism.

After two phases of selection meetings and based on the evaluations and discussions with experts from the field, Civitates selected 11 organisations that we will be supporting for the next three years. The grants amount to around € 2,5 million and range from € 62,000 to € 350,000 for the whole grant period. The organisations were selected based on:

- ➔ their journalistic excellence
- ➔ the importance of their voices in the public sphere and
- ➔ a consideration of how they fit within Civitates' mission to support democracy and solidarity in Europe.

All selected organisations have democracy and solidarity in Europe at the heart of their journalistic work and are dedicated to seeking the truth. They tackle issues, prepare investigations, and expose unlawful activities in ways specific to their context, and are eager to exchange, and learn from one another.

## *Why core funding*

Independent, in-depth, public-interest journalism in Europe finds itself increasingly under pressure due to decreasing trust in media, a decline of media freedom and independence, and difficulties in sustaining itself financially. The field needs more multi-year core support related to the structural day-to-day costs of a newsroom to ensure organisational strengthening.

Experience from other journalism funders shows that supporting not-for-profit journalism organisations with core grants works particularly well. With Civitates' long-term support, we believe that our grantee partners will develop in a sustainable, resilient, and inter-connected way. As our grantee from Hungary, **Direkt36**, shares - the core support "[...] gives us flexibility and security. We can make longer plans, not just what will happen during the next six months." Our grantee partner from Spain, **Civio**, reflected that project funding does not always leave breathing space for a news organisation, because as Covid-19 has shown the news focus may change quickly and then the journalist needs to redirect their efforts.

Civitates' grants are meant to support the general operation of the selected organisations, as well as their organisational strengthening. We do not fund individual stories but complement such grants that already exist. Long-term financial support will allow the grantee partners to address the specific needs in their organisations – for some of them this entails hiring a dedicated person for fund-raising or community building; for others, it means putting processes in place; for still others, strengthening is directly related to ensuring digital security of their reporters and sources.

Civitates is committed to make this new model of collaborative journalism grantmaking a success and to ensure not just the survival, but the growth of independent public-interest journalism in Europe.



## ● Outcomes

### Outcome 1: *diverse cohort*

In this line of work, we wanted to have a cohort of organisations that differ and complement each other so that they can benefit best from future exchanges and embark together on a journey of growth and support. Civitates managed to reach this objective and will be supporting organisations that differ not only in size and experience but also in the way they address shared challenges.

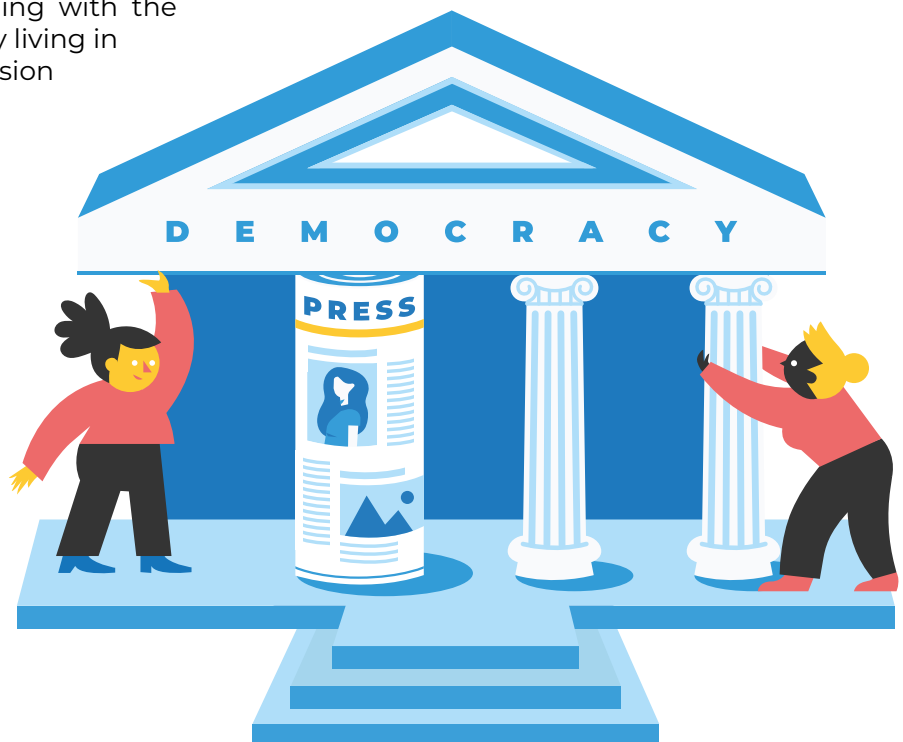
- The two organisations Civitates will be supporting in Hungary – **444** and **Direkt 36** – differ in size and focus, at the same time they have been long-term collaborators. While 444 operates with a big team and covers mostly public affairs, Direkt 36 has a team of 7 dedicated investigative journalists and focuses on complex and sensitive topics.
- In Poland, Civitates also supports two organisations that differ in terms of their format and focus. **OKO.press** is a fast-paced news website, and **Pismo** is a monthly magazine that issues in print, digital, and audio and focuses on long pieces. Both share the goal of promoting democratic values, rule of law, human rights, equality, and transparency of public life.
- The two organisations Civitates supports in Romania serve different audience groups and are equally important in the public discourse. **PressOne** is an investigative outlet that concentrates on social issues and solution journalism while fighting disinformation and fake news. **Átlátszó Erdély** is a 4-people newsroom engaging with the 1,2-million Hungarian community living in Transylvania. Their common mission is to contribute to a transparent, accountable, and democratic society while making public expenditures more visible and exposing abuses of power by public officials.
- Our grantee partner in Slovenia, **Pod črto**, is an independent and non-profit media outlet focusing on investigative reporting, data journalism, and in-depth stories. The news organisation covers stories of major importance for a more transparent functioning of the democratic system.
- Civitates has expanded its presence in Europe with its support to organisations

based in Spain (**Civio**), Portugal (**Divergente**), and the Netherlands (**Bellingcat**). The three organisations are unique in their focus and use of tools. While Bellingcat is an international collective of researchers and citizen journalists using verifiable digital information to investigate its topics, Civio approaches its investigations with a mixed team of journalists and tech experts. Divergente's strength is narrative journalism – a powerful tool to scrutinise power by portraying contemporary social and public-interest issues that are underrepresented.

- Our grantee partner in Italy, **Investigative reporting project (IRPI)**, is a journalistic initiative that leads investigations and collaborated with other European like-minded investigative publications.

They aim to establish a safer environment for freelancers dealing with issues such as corruption and organised crime across Europe.

Our grantees do not limit their journalism to solely reporting but take an active part in the civil society sector through collaborating with CSOs, following up on legislative measures, taking part in protests, and lobbying for access to information. With the mission at heart to improve democracy in their own countries, our partners share that collaboration with colleagues from different media organisations, NGOs, local activists, universities, and scholars is key. In the words of our grantee partner from Spain, Civio,



*“Shedding light on government misbehaviour is a prerequisite for civil society to coordinate and push together to fix it.”*

### **Outcome 2:** *raised awareness for the need to support independent journalism*

On one hand, more foundations are interested in supporting the vital role that independent and reliable journalism plays in democracies, serving as a platform for debate, and reporting on governmental and corporate (in)actions. On the other hand, however, and despite this burgeoning interest, donors still commit a tiny fraction to the European journalism sector. The total amount of philanthropic funding available for media worldwide has been estimated at 1,3 billion dollars, with only 6% of that amount flowing to Europe. Moreover, the field is siloed: few funders that take an ecosystem view, focusing instead on specific elements, countries, or challenges.

Civitates is committed to engage new funders in the field of independent public-interest journalism. In that respect, Civitates – together with one of its partner foundations - published an article in the philanthropy magazine Alliance titled Independent journalism is essential to democracy and focused on the need for more philanthropic support to the field.

Civitates also participated in a webinar organised by Ariadne titled ‘On supporting the vital role of trusted journalism in a world on fire’. Speakers from the Civitates foundation partners and beyond shared their lessons learned and explained why there is a need for more funders to enter the journalism field. The panelists communicated practical tools for less experienced foundations in this field and explained how even non-journalism funders can make a difference to journalism.

Civitates together with other journalism funders was also invited by the European Commission (DG Connect) to participate in an informal, open brainstorming discussion about funding in the European media field. The goal of the session was to:

- ➔ map key support activities for news media
- ➔ identify key investment needs of the sector
- ➔ help outline how EU programmes could benefit the sector in terms of finance and support services without overlapping already existing programmes

### **Outcome 3:** *new funders to the field*

Civitates aims to encourage funders who are currently not supporting journalism to do so by providing an easy entry for funders to pool funding in this field. Five new funders have joined this line of work since its inception in 2019 – a growth that demonstrates that donor support to European journalism is increasingly recognised in the philanthropic sector.

The funders within this sub-fund are diverse in their expertise – some of them are experienced in funding journalism, others are new to the venture. Still, all of them have shown a great will to learn, exchange and test new grounds and Civitates offers the perfect space to do so.

## ● **Lessons learned**

### **Insight 1:** *thinking at a cohort level eases a selection*

Civitates received an overwhelming number of applications to its call for proposals and after a couple of pre-selection rounds, expert evaluations and several meetings, the final cohort portfolio of 11 organisations took shape.

Selections like these are never easy and there is a risk that discussions could be led by the individual applications, rather than by the overall cohort we would like to create. To avoid this and to facilitate the selection process, the secretariat circulated a guiding document that painted a picture of what the cohort might roughly look like. The document served as a mere suggestion and as a tool to ensure that everyone agreed with the final cohort Civitates imagined. Thinking of a cohort rather than of individual organisations helped the selection committee reach consensus and made the online discussions easier. In addition, a meeting only for funders was organised that further unified opinions and helped focus the discussion with the experts.

### **Insight 2:** *grantees are eager to collaborate*

As set out in the strategy, the network effect is an essential element of this sub-fund. This means that grantees are expected to play an active role in the Funding Plus activities, through which Civitates will provide capacity development and peer exchange opportunities to its grantees.

The grantees have different experiences and learnings to share. While some of them are well-versed in fund-raising, others have successfully created a community of citizen contributors, still

others have participated in diverse investigative networks of journalists or have

*“hard-won insights into survival in [...] a hostile environment toward independent media,”*

as one of the grantee partners shared. All this experience is a good setting basis for the cohort to grow together towards achieving resilience.

### **Insight 3:** *a need to attract more funders to the field*

There is a clear need for more core funding for independent public-interest journalism: the sheer number of applications our call attracted is proof for that. Grantees have shared that long-term funding allows them to take the time investigations require, dive deep into a subject, and report on issues that matter to their communities. Independent journalism is crucial to democracy and as the field finds itself under governmental and financial pressure, it is important that Civitates dedicate effort to attracting and inspiring more actors to engage and support organisations on a multi-year basis.

## ● **What's next**

As of early 2021, all grantee partners will undergo an organisational assessment with Deutsche Welle Akademie that has developed the V(iability)-Sprint. The V-Sprint is a 2.5-day long, fast-paced, interactive facilitated assessment especially designed for media outlets wishing to explore and validate their viability, as well as increase their resilience. It will allow participants to readjust their strategy and react to changes in their political, legal, and socio-economic environment, also because of the current Covid-19 crisis.

The secretariat has organised individual calls to get to know the grantees and we will plan the first grantee get-together for May/June 2021. The secretariat will be also developing the monitoring and evaluation framework for this sub-fund as well as a Funding plus approach based on our partners needs.

## Objective 4: a robust funder collaborative

### ● Our goal

Civitates wants to reinforce the capacity of philanthropy to respond to long-term threats and to strengthen democracy in Europe by establishing a robust funder collaborative.

### ● What we did

The pandemic has been a stress test for our communities. Still, we could see that our partner foundations have remained committed throughout the year and have actively contributed to Civitates' progress, strategic development, and consolidation of operations.

As the whole world moved online, so did Civitates. We held our Steering Committee meetings and strategy discussions online and continued to engage with funders and stakeholders.

### ● Outcomes

#### **Outcome 1:** *Civitates structure has been strengthened*

In terms of governance, the composition of the executive committee, which is based on

rotation, was renewed with two foundation partners volunteering to be part of it and two stepping down. At the same time, the roles and the responsibilities of the partners have been clearly defined allowing foundations to join with different engagement levels. This approach makes it possible for foundations to be involved according to their time capacity and interest.

In line with the growth strategy adopted at the end of 2019, the foundations reaffirmed their commitment to the collaborative and the partnership agreements have been renewed for the next five years. The secretariat together with NEF has worked on several aspects to further support the organisation and the structure of Civitates through implementing:

- a more thorough due diligence process,
- an approach to mitigating banking risks,
- an approach to safeguarding.

The secretariat was strengthened by an additional team member and a new fund manager has assumed her role as of January 2021.

The overall Civitates budget has grown with five new foundations joining the collaborative and ten partners increasing their contributions. In 2020 we saw an increase of about € 1,1 million in our yearly budget. This is very encouraging and gives us confidence that Civitates can fulfill its mission and react to the needs of our grantees and support them in the best way possible.



## **Outcome 2: stronger together**

According to our annual survey, foundation partners are keen to being part of Civitates for different reasons.

For some, it has a symbolic value and sends the right message about European democracy and solidarity. In the words of one of our foundation partners:

***“Europe is struggling these days, so initiatives that demonstrate solidarity and bring European society together, not only at the institutional level, are crucial.”***

Another foundation partner explained that:

***“It’s important to send a joint signal as funders to the world about the importance of the topics we work on for Europe democratic fabric.”***

Funders also shared that the collaboration within Civitates allows them to work on topics their foundations may not necessarily deal with, at the same time, it also creates a safety net. As one funder clarified:

***“It helps to be part of a group when addressing issues that can be sensitive, when your main topic as a foundation is not necessarily the defense of the rule of law or fundamental rights. You feel safer to do so through a collaborative fund, it mitigates the risk.”***

For donors new to philanthropy, being part of a collaborative makes a difference as *“it is also of great value to rely on a group that has more experience and legitimacy.”* Another one complemented saying that for the grantees it is also important to be supported by a strong collaborative as *“it is powerful, and it asserts their credibility”*.

## **Outcome 3: better connection to the field**

Participating in Civitates allows funders to deepen their knowledge and be updated about developments in their fields of interest. One funder shared that *“taking part in the discussions with the grantees and experts in the field is very valuable to build our knowledge and inform our work on the topic”*.

While some funders are already working extensively everywhere in Europe, others have more focus on some specific countries/regions. Through Civitates, they can easily broaden their geographical reach and sometimes also create bridges between local and other European stakeholders. As a foundation member elaborated:

***“Participating in Civitates is a way for us to disseminate the learnings in our country, where CSOs have sometimes difficulties connecting to their European counterparts.”***

Through Civitates, funders can identify new players that might become potential future partners for their foundation to support directly at a later stage, when they have grown and strengthened thanks to Civitates initial support.

## **● Lessons learned**

### **Insight 1: more direct contact with the cohorts of grantees**

The funders have shared their desire to have more interactions with the grantees.

We are hopeful that 2021 will allow grantee get-togethers in person to foster those interactions and to allow that grantees from all three sub-funds can meet too.

### **Insight 2: share experience among funders**

The first three years were crucial for Civitates to focus on building the basis for good collaboration. With operational mechanisms now in place, there will be more focus on strategic discussions among funders.

There has been will and interest among the funders to get familiar with the work of each of the foundations and have more opportunities for exchanges and sharing experience.

**Insight 3:** *desire to have more foundations on board*

Funders are eager to see new foundations joining. To attract more funders, Civitates will strengthen its external communication so that we can present the work of our joint efforts and of the grantees to the wider funders' community and share the value of a collaborative fund like Civitates.

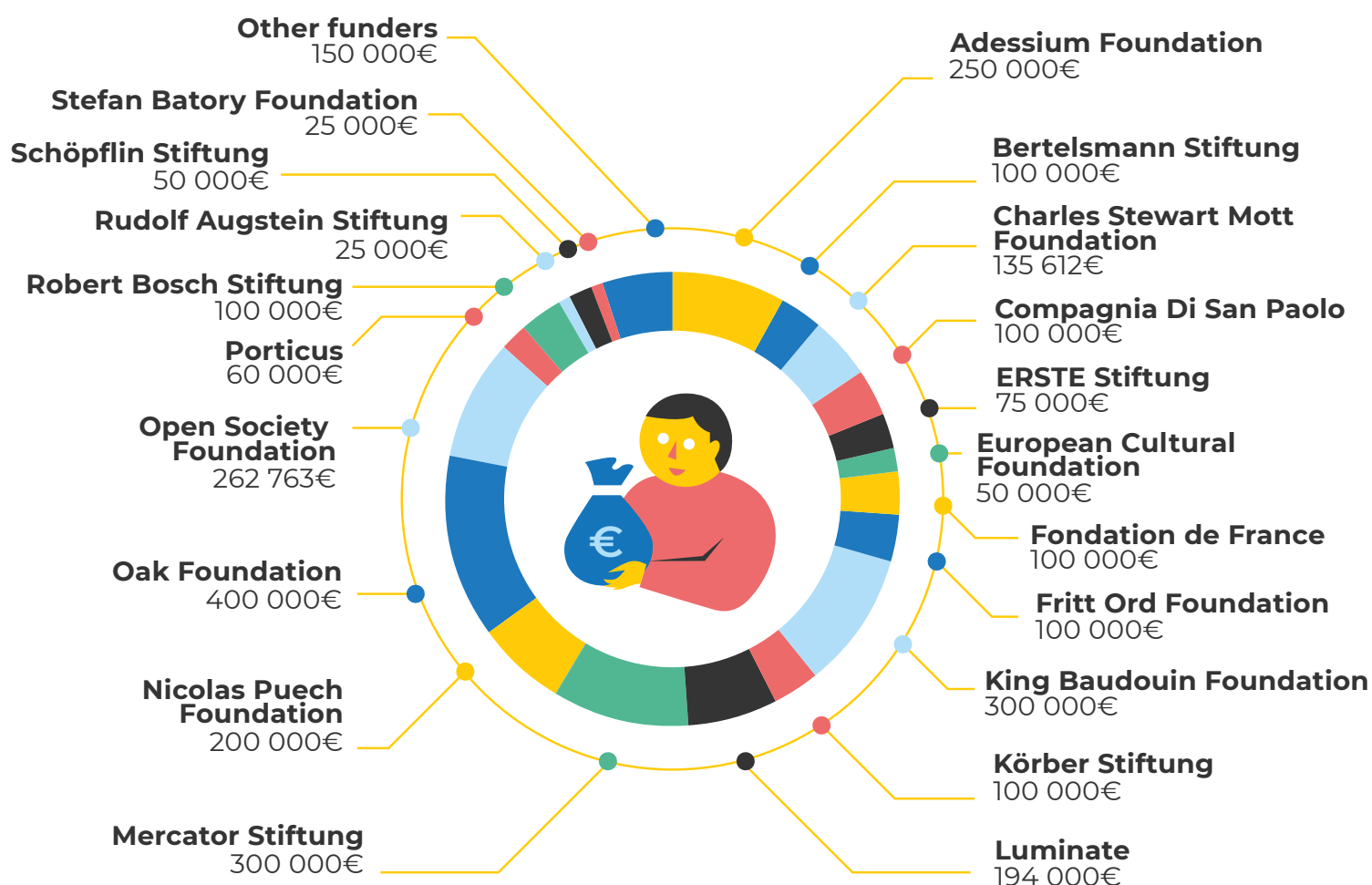
● **What's next**

The year ahead marks a new strategy period for Civitates as a whole, and especially for two of its lines of work dedicated to supporting a strong and resilient civil society and healthy digital media sphere. More focused strategies will be outlined, and new cohorts of grantees will be selected. The ambitious framework for funders' commitment for 5 years and refined external outreach as of 2021 will help us communicate our strong dedications to supporting democracy and solidarity in Europe and attract like-minded collaborators.

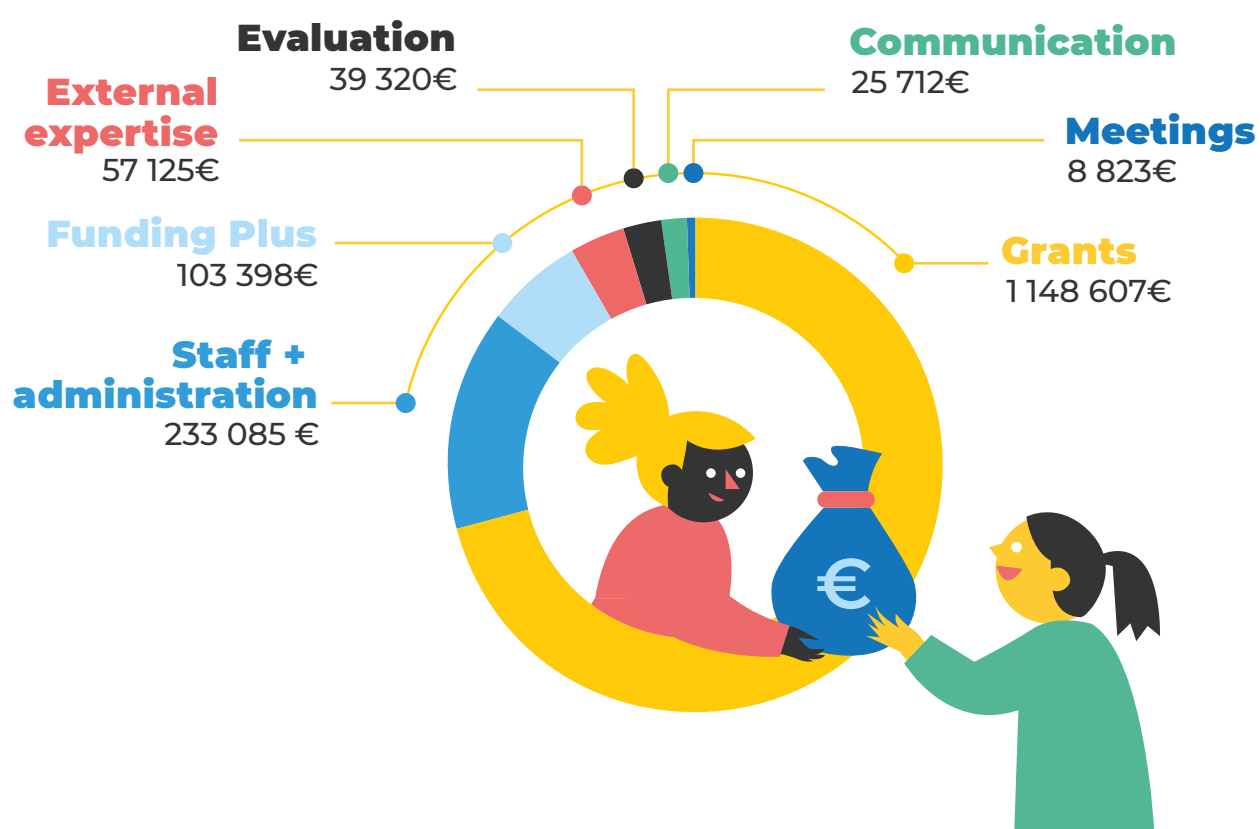


# Our Finances

## Income



# Expenses





# Our foundation partners

In 2020 the following organisations pooled funds together and collaborated as part of Civitates:



# Our grantee partners

## Sub-fund on strong and resilient civil society (period 2018-2021)

**Ravni BG coalition**, led by Bulgarian Fund for Women, Bulgaria – The coalition goal is to bring together and strengthen the capacity of a wide range of CSOs and media organisations throughout the country that address the shrinking civil space in Bulgaria. It comprises organisations working on gender equality, women's rights, human rights, youth empowerment, LGBTQ+ rights.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 139,018**

**Citizen Participation Forum (lead)**, Bulgaria – The coalition focuses on the sustainability of civil society actors by creating more vibrant partnerships between them and nurturing an overall environment that allows for effective work with the national and local institutions.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 136,300**

**NEON coalition**, led by Glopolis, Czech Republic – The coalition aims at creating a more effective cooperation mechanism across the civic sector in the Czech Republic by increasing the scope and the quality of networking, strengthening trust and solidarity between civil society actors, and enhancing their connection with the general public.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 150,750**

**Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD)**, Italy – The coalition develops positive narratives that portray the vital role civil society plays in upholding the public interest. It does so through building stronger and more resilient communities and improving the narrative about rights-based civil society to defend the civic space in Italy.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 174,379**

**Civic Organisations It works**, led by Klon/Jawor Association, Poland – The coalition's goal is to improve the perception of civil society organisations in Poland by developing and running a nationwide campaign that explains the role of civil society organizations and showcases the positive impact civil society has on people's lives.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 155,769**

**Open Spaces coalition**, led by Marom Klub Egysesület, Hungary – The goal of this coalition is to strengthen the activities of civil society in Hungary by providing physical space ("Open Spaces") for open and critical debates as well as independent cultural projects.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 145,700**

**Non-profit sector analysis association (NOSZA)**, Hungary – The coalition aims to strengthen local civic initiatives in various locations in Hungary; and their cooperation with local authorities to showcase the important role civil society plays in improving people's lives, especially with regards to the issue of energy poverty.

Grant amount for 2019-2020: **€ 99,700**

**Civilisation coalition**, led by Ökotárs, Hungary – The coalition aims to provide a platform through which civil society actors from all sectors (human rights, anti-corruption, women's rights, environment, and migration, etc) connect, work together, and defend one another with joint actions. The coalition focuses on expanding their reach to smaller groups working outside major urban centres.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 146,457**

**Peace Institute**, Slovenia – This coalition aims at countering threats and challenges to the watchdog role of civil society and journalists in Slovenia by strengthening their capacities for efficient responses and gaining public support.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 128,450**

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**Polish Robert Schumann Foundation**, Poland – The goal of this coalition is to strengthen and deepen pro-European attitudes in Poland as a safeguard against the shrinking space for civil society.

Grant amount for 2019-2020: **€ 80,000**

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**Tamtam NGOs coalition** – led by Resource Centre for Public Participation (CeRe), Romania– The coalition aims to raise awareness about the vital role of civil society and activism for democracy in Romania through communications campaign, legislative advocacy work, as well as a solidarity mechanism to support civil society organisations and activists, especially those that are the victim of attacks and abuse.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 154,310**

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**The Voice of Civic Organisations coalition**, led by Via Iuris, Slovakia – The coalition provides space for coordination and consolidation on key civil society issues while defending the right of CSOs to operate freely, to build consensus among them, and advocate for an enabling environment for civil society in Slovakia.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 163,660**

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**L.A coalition**, led by VoxPublic, France – The coalition provides civil society actors with practical tools to help them organise better, protect themselves from attacks, and ultimately increase the safeguarding of democratic space and fundamental rights in France.

Total grant amount since 2019: **€ 176,480**

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## Sub-fund on healthy digital public sphere (period 2019-2021)

**AlgorithmWatch (AW)**, Germany – They identify the negative effects intermediaries have on the public discourse and aims to preserve a public discourse that enables and supports the deliberative processes necessary for a democracy to function properly.

**Opportunities fund:** AlgorithmWatch commissioned a study aimed at evaluating and shedding light on how best practices in handling sensitive data for the public interest might be applied in the context of intermediary governance.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 202,041**

**Democracy Reporting International (DRI)**, Germany – They seek to significantly step up a real-time understanding of social media dynamics by providing a toolkit for social media monitoring in elections which is to be offered to observer organisations across the EU and beyond.

**Opportunities fund:** DRI proposed to address manipulated non-text media (images and video) as an emerging disinformation threat, by empowering civil society to understand and analyse these practices. Through this proposal, DRI will develop tailored tools and resources and bring these tools directly to interested organisations through training and further use of the Civitates funded toolkit.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 200,600**

**European Digital Rights (EDRi)**, Belgium – EDRi addresses the challenges of internet companies imposing arbitrary restrictions on content online as this approach is counterproductive for purported policy goals and violates basic principles of human rights.

**Opportunities fund:** EDRi sought additional funding to pressure decision-makers to put forward regulatory proposals that tackle the abuses of power and exploitative business models

that have weaved their way into the heart of the digital ecosystem.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 130,250**

**European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)**, Belgium – EPD aims to strengthen European level policy that guarantees transparency in digital political advertising.

**Opportunities fund:** Through their proposal, EPD coordinates a collective action of a group of civil society organisations around the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and develops a policy knowledge tool that would allow organisations to visualise the impact of digital policies on fundamental principles of democracy.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 148,000**

**The University of Oxford** – Oxford Internet Institute, the UK - OII researches the misinformation campaigns targeting Russian-speaking communities who live within Europe and provide regular consultations to European institutions and organisations on the wider ecosystem of misinformation.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 175,700**

**Who Targets Me**, the UK – Who Targets Me provides software tools for individuals to learn more about the ads they see, data and interpretation for journalists and researchers to report on trends and misuse, and recommendations for regulators.

**Opportunities fund:** Who Targets Me developed software that will join the datasets of online political advertising from various platforms in one place.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 176,000**

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**Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)**, Bosnia and Herzegovina – BIRN launched a Digital Monitoring database to improve the digital ecosystem. The database hosts cross-regional reports and five regional investigations, stakeholder meetings, and a final conference for promoting the cross-regional report.

**Opportunities fund:** With their project, BIRN provided accurate information about digital threats during the time of COVID-19 and determine who are the main actors that limit the rights and freedom in the digital environment.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€160,800**

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**Centre for the Study of Democracy**, Bulgaria –CSD aims at improving the digital information ecosystem by examining the differential challenge of and ability to tackle state-driven disinformation in Western and Central-Eastern Europe.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 116,500**

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**Panoptikon Foundation**, Poland – They investigate the scale and impact of political micro-targeting in Poland and how it is fed in the news and shapes the political agenda.

**Opportunities fund:** Panoptikon proposed to deepen their understanding and knowledge of the advertising optimisation process of Facebook and develop new policy positions or update their

current ones targeted at the EU institutions, mainly the European Parliament. The proposal also involved an element of cooperation and coordination with other civil society actors within the Civitates cohort of grantees and beyond.

Total amount granted since 2019: **€ 127,700**

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## Sub-fund on independent public-interest journalism (period 2021-2023)

**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: **€ 168,00**

**Stitching BellinCAT**, 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**



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Civitates is an initiative hosted by the Network  
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