

# Strategic Framework 2024-2028

April 2024

**Civitates is the European Democracy Fund.**

**It was established in 2018 as a donor pooled fund to defend and promote democracy in Europe. Since its inception, it has supported more than 50 organisations in 18 countries with a total amount of € 13 million.**

**The thematic priorities guiding Civitates' grant making are organised along three portfolios or "Sub Funds": 1- Civic Power 2- Tech and Democracy 3- Media**

**This strategy outlines the mission, vision, goals and priorities of Civitates between 2024 and 2028 and will guide its activities over this period.**

## Context

Democracy in Europe is under attack. Civic space is closing. Fundamental liberties, including the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, are being curtailed.

Using fear and hatred, populist leaders drive narratives that resonate with an increasing number of people, leading them to mistrust their democratic institutions and each other. Disinformation, social media, and disenchantment with "the system" fuels polarisation and exclusion that further undermine democratic processes.

Growing authoritarianism and extremism, and the concomitant rise of profound social and political division, threaten to weaken the foundations of European societies. Functioning democracies are contingent on pluralism, compromise and consensus. Polarisation is its antithesis.

Civitates seeks to address these challenges.

Our Sub Fund on Civic Power addresses the drivers of closing civic space. It affirms the legitimate role of civil society in our democratic structure and pushes back on efforts to demonise its critical watchdog functions.

Our Sub Fund on Tech and democracy examines the impact of technology on democratic practices and on the way information is spread and consumed online. In particular, it focuses on advancing EU tech regulations by supporting civil society engaged in addressing the harms of technology and promoting human-centered solutions.

Our Sub Fund on Media promotes informed citizenship through independent media, especially in those media contexts captured by partisan interests. Importantly, its work can also amplify the voice of civil society to hold power to account, especially when such voices are excluded from the mainstream press.

All three Sub Funds address the polarisation and division which undermine our democratic compact. Over the course of the next few years, Civitates will seek to cross fertilise expertise across all Sub Funds and where possible, foster natural synergies and partnerships to protect democracy in Europe.

## Our vision

Europe is home to thriving, inclusive and resilient societies that uphold democratic principles and in which all are able to participate.

## Our mission

Civitates is a collaborative philanthropic initiative that supports organisations to protect and promote civic space (offline and online) and the freedoms to assemble and associate and to enable access to trustworthy information and hold power to account.

## Our collective goals

1. To strengthen the ecosystem for and space in which independent civil society and media operate as a means to promote collective engagement in public life.
2. To foster a pluralistic public debate (online and offline), counter disinformation and address the impact of new technologies on democracy.
3. To act as a catalyst for effective private and public funding for democracy and civic space in Europe.

## Our values

**Solidarity:** by committing to multi-year, flexible partnerships, we act in solidarity with civil society organisations who resist democratic backsliding and closing civic space and with journalists who hold power to account and face threats as a consequence of their work.

**Collaborative spirit:** as philanthropic foundations, we strive to collaborate openly and strategically with each other and to support broad-based civil society coalitions for change to enhance collective success and learning.

**Openness:** we are open to new ways of addressing the root causes of democratic decline and we believe that experimentation led by civil society can produce unexpected and potentially game changing results for democracy and civic space.

## Civic Power

Civitates' Sub Fund for Civic Power addresses the root causes of closing civic space and empowers civil society to challenge and reverse these trends.



### What we have learned:

- When civil society groups act together through broad coalitions, they have the power to advance and protect civic space in countries where it is under threat.
- Closing civic space can easily go unnoticed. There is immense value in raising awareness of the issue and catalysing action across civil society in countries where the threats towards civic space are starting to emerge.
- Civil society needs to be resilient and have the skills and capacity to be able to look to the future, and anticipate challenges and opportunities for civic space to fulfill its vital role as a democratic counter power.
- Closing democratic and civic space often deteriorates over the long-term, subtly and incrementally; however, there are social and political events which offer the possibility to have significant impact.
- Elections, post-election contexts, emerging protest movements, political scandals are just examples of such events, where civil society can put democratic values and civic freedoms onto the agenda and mobilize public support. Younger

generations are important allies in broader mobilization for democratic values.

- The provision of long-term, flexible, core support for civil society organizations is vital in such a context as well as linking activists and organizations across different countries to learn, develop collaboration and build their capacity together.

## Strategic Goals:

### What we aim for?

European democracy is strengthened by an independent civil society powered with the resources, constituencies and capabilities to protect and expand civic space and mobilize political and public support for democratic principles, particularly at moments of emerging opportunity and threat.

### What we do?

We build the readiness and power of civil society in the EU to protect and expand civic and democratic space, particularly at key social and political moments. Civitates provides financial support, makes linkages, and enables learning so that civil society groups are prepared and able both to respond to emerging threats to civic space and also to shape these moments towards positive outcomes.

## Objectives:

### The Sub-Fund for Civic Power:

- **Empowers civil society in priority countries** across the EU to anticipate and shape the moments which can present opportunities and threats for civic space. Key strategies include the mobilization of broad and diverse **coalitions** of civil society and the public (including youth) towards support for democratic values and civic participation.
- **Connects civil society organizations across Europe** who are working to expand civic space and create spaces for them to learn from each other, develop collaboration, and build their capabilities.
- **Develops the resilience and sustainability** of activists and organizations so that they have the security and resources they need to defend civic rights and democratic freedoms.
- **Catalyses private and public funders** towards more effective support for civic and democratic space in Europe, including by sharing strategies, advocating for action and investment, contributing to overall efforts to track and monitor funding for civic space.

## Countries of Focus:

Civic space is threatened all over the continent and we tailor and focus our support on a number of

key countries. This includes countries from all the (1) different regions of the EU and (2) where there are warning signs that civic space is starting to be undermined as well as those where it is seriously at risk or fully closed. (3) We also prioritise countries where the necessary funding for civil society to protect civic space is limited. Priority countries are identified based on these criteria.

## Types of Partners:

Under the first objective, the Sub-Fund supports an anchor group in each focus country – groups leading or working with coalitions or who are able to mobilize and enable a broad and diverse range of civil society actors (including youth) to advance civic and democratic space. Partners under the other objectives include coalitions and other key organizations in the EU from outside these focus countries working to protect civic space in the EU, including pan-European advocacy organisations, former partners of Civitates and existing grantees of the other Sub-Funds.

## Tech & Democracy

Civitates' Sub Fund on Tech and Democracy focuses on the impact of technology on public discourse and democratic practices. Technology can either hinder or improve how quality information is consumed online, how decisions are made and more broadly how our democracies work.



## What we have learned:

- Technology does not work in silos: as generative AI models and applications are integrated in social media, search engines and other platforms and tools, there is a need to address tech legislation in a holistic way and understand how these laws interact with each other, what are the potential gaps and actionable provisions.

- While the recent tech regulation wave (2020-2024) was focused on the role of the European Union, national authorities will be critical in the enforcement phase. There is a need to strengthen the tech-focused civil society at national level so that they can lead the necessary advocacy, litigation and awareness raising work.
- While it is important to highlight the harms and risks that technology can pose, there is a need to move from a reactive approach to a proactive one by promoting alternatives for safe, predictable and trusted on-line platforms.
- Access to general support remains limited for tech-focused organisations that often have to rely on project funding provided by a few foundations that have made tech a core part of their strategies.
- Civil society in the tech and democracy field brings diverse expertise, with a strong track record on advocacy and watchdog functions. Campaigning skills, sectoral and technical expertise need to be strengthened across the field. There is a need for diversification, movement building and organisational strengthening.
- Coalitions and collaboration between tech-focused organisations and organisations bringing other topical expertise (e.g. election integrity, antiracism, protection of the environment etc) is still relatively weak yet essential to advance human centered regulations.

## Guiding Principles and Approaches

### Tech - A cross regulation approach

The Tech and Democracy Sub-fund supports civil society initiatives that, through the “defending and strengthening democracy” angle, contribute to the implementation and enforcement of EU tech regulations i.e. Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, Online Political Advertising, European Media Freedom Act, GDPR, AI Act etc. The sub-fund advances the objectives outlined below, in complementarity to our sister pooled fund the European AI & Society Fund.

### Democracy - What do we mean with democracy?

We focus on three areas in which technology can affect the quality of democratic processes and institutions:

1. **Public discourse**  
How tech design and features – as well as their (mis)use by state and private actors - distort the way information and content is distributed and consumed online  
*Illustrative issues: content moderation, disinformation, hate speech, smear campaigns, access to quality information on social networks and search engines etc.*
2. **Elections**  
The systemic problems in the online sphere that have an impact on elections and how we

can build more informed and less polarised debates

*Illustrative issues: online political advertising and microtargeting, external interferences and covert propaganda, election-related disinformation, voter registration, etc.*

### 3. **Everyday democracy**

The structural questions a) how democratic practices (beyond election times) are impacted by technology and b) how to make technology more democratic

*Illustrative issues: challenging tech monopolies, interoperability, data protection, automated decision-making, online participatory democracy, surveillance, etc.*

## Strategic Goals:

### What we aim for?

Technology serves and strengthens democracy.

### What we do?

Civitates provides financial support, creates connections, and enables learning so that civil society groups, researchers and technical partners can support the enforcement of legislation that addresses the systemic harms of technology and can participate in building safer and human-centric online spaces and technological solutions.

## Objectives:

### The Sub Fund for Tech and Democracy supports organisations that:

1. **Expose the direct harms of technology to democracy** in order to hold Big Tech to account and address the misuse of technology by public and private actors;
2. **Develop and promote solutions, alternatives, and positive narratives** to counter the dominant model of Big Tech and to make technology safer, trusted and human-centered;
3. **Address the challenges and opportunities of tech regulation enforcement at national level** especially through the establishment and the coordination of coalitions or networks.

## Countries of Focus

Civitates works across the 27 EU member states but, in order to increase its impact, focuses its work on a number of countries in which there are relevant opportunities, high risks of democratic decline and large funding gaps.

## Types of Partners

We support “movement-friendly”, tech-focused organisations as well as a broader range of organisations that can bring topical expertise in order to ensure successful enforcement of EU tech regulation at national level.

# Media

Civitates' Sub Fund on media promotes informed citizenship through independent media. It supports independent public interest journalism<sup>1</sup> in a context of rising disinformation and political polarization



## What we have learned

Independent public interest media is a vital pillar of democracy. It is crucial in combating disinformation and serving as a counterpower to political and corporate interests. Yet, media capture by vested interests is on the rise across Europe and independent outlets struggle to survive. Philanthropic funding can provide a lifeline, particularly in regions where civic space is restricted and media capture is high. Offering multi-year flexible core grants, combined with funding and support for organizational development, and a cohort approach to encourage peer-learning is the right approach to foster individual organizational and sector-wide resilience.

## Strategic Goals:

### What we aim for?

A viable, sustainable and diverse ecosystem of independent public-interest media organisations exists in Europe, ensuring and safeguarding reliable news and information, fostering robust public debate, and empowering a well-informed and active citizenry to challenge, strengthen, and improve democratic processes and institutions.

## What we do?

We build a viable and sustainable ecosystem of independent public interest media in key European countries through a trans-border “cohort” approach. Civitates provides financial support, catalyzes funding, facilitates connections, invests in capacities, and enables learning to ensure that cohort members are resilient in an increasingly restrictive and hostile operational environment. Civitates also fosters more public and private funding for independent public interest media. By strengthening the funding ecosystem, Civitates aims to protect media freedom and prevent further erosion of the space for democratic dissent and free expression.

## Objectives:

### The Sub Fund for Media:

1. Builds the sustainability of independent public interest media outlets in selected key countries to enable them to consolidate their financial and operational stability and ensure editorial independence.
2. Enhances the security and resilience of journalists and media outlets facing pressure or threats due to their reporting.
3. Fosters connections among outlets across Europe, creating space for peer-learning and collaboration, and building their capacity in areas where shared needs are identified.
4. Strengthens the ecosystem of public and private donors actively and significantly committed to supporting independent public interest media across Europe.

## Countries of Focus

Civitates' overarching geographic mandate encompasses all countries that are part of the European Union. Given limited resources, under the first objective three criteria guide our geographic priorities, recognizing that attacks on media freedom often coincide with broader declines in democratic freedoms: (1) where media capture and threats to media freedom is most prevalent, (2) where democratic deterioration is most severe, (3) where opportunities for funding are limited. We constantly monitor the state of media freedom (by partnering with media researchers and experts) and frequently revisit the list of our priority countries. Priority countries are specified in the regular calls for proposals and dependent on the available budget.

<sup>1</sup> Based on the review and refine process of the sub-fund working group, in this strategy concept note Civitates defines “public interest journalism” as follows: (1) serves the interests of society as a whole; (2) covers those issues that significantly shape the lives of everyone in society in such a way that it: informs the public on the issues that shape their lives, enables public debate and dialogue [on those issues], and/or holds those in power to account; commits to the pursuit of truth, and therefore; reports based on reliable and accurate, balanced and representative information, in accordance with the standards of the profession; is attentive to the needs of the public and intentional about the approach of the public; produces in-depth factual reporting e.g. through explanatory, constructive, investigative, solutions-oriented or engaged journalism; is made by actors who are free and independent of vested political, corporate or other private interests.

## Types of Partners

Civitates primarily supports independent public-interest media at the national level, aiming for self-reliance and sustainability, benefiting from Civitates' support as a temporary boost.

These organizations operate in countries where high levels of media capture have demonstrated implications for democratic deterioration coupled with limited funding opportunities. Civitates encourages applications from national independent public-interest media with strong connections and collaborations with independent local or regional media. Involvement in

international media networks and collaborations is also considered a plus. Grantees should operate on a not-for-profit basis (or reinvest profits in the business) and be on a clear growth path with a proven track record of at least 6 months of active coverage, striving for self-reliance and sustainability. Civitates uses a maturity model to identify grantees that are ready to transition out. Additional criteria concerning the specific position of outlets in their national context, their expertise and potential contribution to the cohort are also considered.

## How we work

We proactively look for opportunities and partners to receive funding. We generally do not accept unsolicited proposals. Open calls focused on specific objectives and geographies might be launched during the strategy cycle: information about open calls will be published on the [Civitates website](#) and actively disseminated through Civitates newsletter and other channels.

