

## Making online spaces safer, more trustworthy and inclusive

### Open call – Tech and Democracy

### February 2025

Civitates is launching an open call to support organisations that work to make **online spaces safer, more trustworthy and inclusive** by contributing to the efficient enforcement of EU tech regulations at national level.

This call focuses on **seven EU countries**: Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Romania, and the Netherlands.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Technology has completely transformed our relationship to information production, access and consumption. Social media platforms are influential spaces where societal questions are debated and where most people access the news. Search engines are the gateways through which we access information in a quick and convenient way on a daily basis.

While the original promise was to connect people and give unlimited access to knowledge, online platforms foster division and amplify content that is skewed, partial and leaning towards the extremes. Their ranking and recommender systems are designed to feed the economic models of tech companies by maximising engagement and pushing content even when misleading or false.

On top of this, Artificial Intelligence and Generative AI – especially as they are increasingly integrated into social media platforms and search engines - further increase the risks of producing and spreading content that is illegal or harmful (e.g. disinformation, AI-generated non-consensual imagery, etc.).

Only a handful of large tech companies control this market, thus influencing consumer behavior and elected officials: this can stifle competition, reduce innovation, and lead to monopolistic practices.

The result of all these issues is the more polarised and untrustworthy environment that we experience every day and more acutely so, ahead of and during election times. These are the moments where public discourse is particularly under stress as controlling and manipulating information and narratives - also through disinformation, propaganda, foreign and corporate interference - can be key for political wins.

#### *The role of regulation*

The **EU tech rulebook** (Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, General Data protection

Regulation - GDPR, Transparency and targeting of political advertising regulation, Artificial Intelligence Act, European Media Freedom Act etc.) attempts to address these issues by establishing transparency and accountability mechanisms for the tech industry, balancing free speech and freedom from harassment online, increasing the protection of online users and expanding citizens' rights.

However, to be properly enforced, it is necessary to harness strong political will from EU and national regulators, especially as the new US administration appears to be willing to counter any measure that can be perceived as a restriction on US tech businesses. At the same time, it is extremely important for our democracies that these regulations follow their intent of building better online environments and are not weaponised by EU or national institutions to silence communities or remove legitimate content: civil society has an important role in denouncing those practices, if and when they occur.

### *The importance of the national level*

The EU institutions - and particularly the European Commission - have been the primary focus in the advocacy efforts behind the development and adoption of regulations that are part of the "EU tech rulebook" and continue to have a primary role in its enforcement. However, Member States - intended as governments, national authorities and civil society - are also extremely important in the enforcement phase of tech regulations.

If this is obvious in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) - where the supervisory authority in the country of establishment of the platform leads enforcement efforts - this is also true for most of the other tech regulations where, at the very least, the national level acts as an essential supporting system to the work of the EU Commission.

Thanks to the DSA, for example, the Digital Services Coordinators (DSCs), beyond being directly responsible for a vast ecosystem of large, medium and small platforms, can act as the central hub for complaints by users and for data access by researchers, whatever is the size of the targeted platform. The European Board for Digital Services - composed of the Member States' Digital Services Coordinators and chaired by the European Commission - also works to ensure "the consistent application of the Digital Services Act within the European Union, for the benefit of all European citizens, and its society and economy".

To give another example, national authorities can also support the European Commission's enforcement efforts of the Digital Markets Act. In particular, national competition authorities, in different ways and depending on domestic legislation, can hear complaints about non-compliance issues and contribute to monitoring compliance and market investigations, by carrying out inspections, interviews, or by collecting and transferring information in their possession to the European Commission for a final decision.

With its work, civil society can contribute to hold Big Tech and public institutions to account, get a clearer understanding of online platforms and algorithmic system functioning, and build a new vision for safer and better online spaces. Civil Society also has the essential role of directly supporting individuals and communities in learning about their rights and how to exercise them. Moreover, although most of the EU tech legislation is directly applicable to the national level, we cannot discount the risk that national laws or diverse forms of state capture might limit the way safeguards and rights are upheld: civil society must monitor these risks and advocate for safeguards that further strengthen the framework that tech regulations put in place.

For civil society to be effective, new alliances will be needed among tech-focused organisations and others that work on broader issues such as election integrity, transparency, mental health, racial or gender discrimination, hate speech etc.

## **ABOUT THE CALL FOR PROPOSAL**

At the moment of its launch the **total budget** for this call is **€1,600,000**. This amount could increase before the final selection if more resources become available.

Under this call, Civitates will provide successful applicants with flexible, core support of **up to €160,000 over two years**. Civitates expects to fund up to ten organisations. However, this number might be adjusted depending on the number and quality of applications received and at the discretion of the Selection Committee.

The call for proposals is open to civil society organisations working in one or more of the following countries: Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Romania, and the Netherlands. These countries were identified as “**candidate priority countries**” for 2025 grantmaking based on a series of criteria including their relevance for European tech regulations, potential threats and opportunities, the state of civil society and accessibility of funding.

The Selection Committee will decide how to distribute the available resources considering the best applications, but also the potential for the creation of impactful national level cohorts i.e. funding more organisations in a country to address the challenges and opportunities they have identified. Therefore, out of the seven “candidate priority countries” we expect the final decision to focus on two to four countries to effectively become Civitates’ priority countries together with France and Ireland, which were prioritized during the last call for proposals (July 2024).

The open call follows a **two-steps approach** where applicants are asked to submit a concept note, a budget and documents about the organisation. Civitates will shortlist the most promising applications and invite a limited number of organisations to submit full proposals and send additional documentation.

## **APPLICATION process and guidelines**

### *Eligibility*

An organisation is eligible if it:

- is a registered non-profit organisation or can prove that its work has a non-profit nature and any profit from its activities are reinvested in the organisation;
- has a track record of working at national level in at least one of the candidate priority countries (Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Romania, and the Netherlands);
- brings expertise on tech and/or on topics relevant for public discourse (e.g. election integrity, transparency, mental health, racial or gender discrimination, hate speech etc.);

Legal registration and physical presence of the team in one of the priority countries is not a mandatory requirement.

Organisations that have a track record of working in more candidate priority countries can submit a single application elaborating their plans from a national and cross-national perspective. Organisations working in multiple countries will not be automatically preferred to organisations working in a single country.

Coalitions, networks or other groups of organisations can submit a single application, but they need to identify a lead applicant and elaborate their plans as a coalition and how members will individually contribute to the work.

### *Exclusion criteria:*

- Political party-affiliated organisations

### *Funding*

Applicants can request **up to €160,000 in core funding for two years**: this threshold also applies to applications from coalitions. Core funding can cover staff costs and operational expenses. In the case of coalitions or networks, it can cover the costs related to coordination and/or collective activities: funding might also be redistributed to coalition partners, following Network of European Foundations<sup>1</sup> rules on re-granting (see ANNEX 1).

### *Focus and scope*

Building on the [2024-2028 strategy](#), and the 2024 [open call focused on France and Ireland](#), the Tech and Democracy sub-fund aims at expanding the cohort of organisations

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<sup>1</sup> Civitates is an initiative hosted by the Network of European Foundations. More information on <https://www.nef-europe.org>

working on improving online public discourse and addressing how technology - especially on social media platforms, search engines and other relevant online spaces - mediates and changes the way information is produced, accessed, spread and consumed every day and in key moments for democracy, such as during elections.

In alignment with the sub-funds goals,<sup>2</sup> we particularly want to support organisations that can address the challenges and opportunities that EU tech regulation creates in order to counter harms to democracy and to build new solutions and alternatives.

The Digital Services Act (DSA), because of its goal of “ensuring a safe, predictable and trusted online environment” is considered central in addressing these issues. However, recognising that the different EU regulations (i.e. DMA, GDPR, AI Act etc.), interact with each other and in line with the commitment to core funding, applicants can include activities that are targeting other regulations and addressing the aforementioned issues. Applicants are also invited to reflect on how national level regulations might limit or facilitate the enforcement of the tech regulations they are focusing on.

Civitates welcomes a **variety of approaches and activities** from potential grantees. Below is a non-exhaustive list of examples:

- advocacy towards national level governments on the set-up of DSCs or other relevant national-level authorities;
- research, technical analysis and data collection for advocacy, campaigns and enforcement purposes;
- campaigning and public awareness raising activities to encourage users to enforce their rights under the DSA and other tech regulations;
- campaigning activities that target platforms and/or the European institutions for proper enforcement and better practices, considering the specific national context and issues;
- advocacy towards DSCs and national authorities to initiate investigations and include civil society representatives in the process;
- creating a pipeline of evidence to substantiate regulatory complaints and/or support strategic litigation;
- monitor the work of relevant national authority to identify, denounce and keep them accountable on any authoritarian use of the DSA and other EU

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

See Civitates 2024-2024 Strategy: <https://civitates-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Civitates-Strategie-2024-Short.pdf>

tech regulations;

- use the complaint mechanisms by individual or representative organisations to initiate judicial proceedings at Member State on illegal/harmful content or suspension, termination or restrictions to accounts;
- building up the trusted flaggers community;
- preparation of reports of national issues in ways in which they can be used by other regulatory or advocacy efforts at EU level, and/or at international and global level.
- research, campaigns and technical work aimed at building and promoting alternative models and solutions that are better aligned with the vision of safer and inclusive online spaces the DSA and other regulations lay out.

Applicants are invited to include only approaches they deem feasible considering their expertise, capacity, and assessment of the national and European context. A realistic and efficient use of the budget will be considered as part of the evaluation.

### ***Required documentation***

Applications should be submitted through the [Network of European Foundations \(NEF\) Optimy portal](#) and include the following documents:

- [Narrative proposal - concept note](#)
- [Simplified budget proposal](#)
- Financial report (income and expenditure) 2023, possibly audited
- Registration documentation (as a non for profit or as a for profit reinvesting their surplus into the company)
- CVs of leadership (up to three of the most important)
- Organizational budget for 2024

Shortlisted candidates will be informed via email by the Civitates team and will have to submit the following additional documents:

- Full narrative proposal
- Full budget proposal
- Due diligence questionnaire
- Last three official annual financial reports of the organisation (2022, 2023, 2024)

Please note additional documentation maybe asked from shortlisted candidates.

### ***Concept note***

The concept note will include three main sections

1. The context: an overview of opportunities and challenges in the target countries that are relevant for the scope of this open call

2. Your organisation: an overview of the applicant's goals, approaches and relevant successes
3. Your solution: the type of work the applicant wants to develop through the support of Civitates to address the challenges and opportunities identified

*Full application*

Shortlisted candidates will be asked to develop their concept notes by covering the completing the following sections

1. Context – Threats and Opportunities  
Applicants are asked to provide their assessment of the possible threats and opportunities in the target country-ies.
2. Your track record  
Applicants are asked to describe their track record in working in the target country-ies.
3. Your purpose, approach and scale  
Applicants are asked to elaborate on their approach, what they see as their unique contribution and how they will evaluate their work.
4. Partners and connections  
Applicants are asked to describe the strategic partners with whom they collaborate at national and European (if applicable) level and the stakeholders they are working with or will target.
5. Your needs  
Applicants are asked to explain how Civitates' contribution will help strengthen or expand their work.
6. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion  
Applicants are asked to elaborate on how they incorporate the values of diversity, equity and inclusion in their governance and their operations. While this section is not directly part of the evaluation criteria, we have included it to map a way forward as Civitates defines its own DEI approach to grantmaking

Following NEF's rules, applicants will also have to complete a due diligence questionnaire focused on the organisation's health and covering questions related to governance, team management and finances.

### *Language*

Due to internal constraints the application and reporting material need to be in English. Applicants who are not comfortable writing in English can develop the proposal in their own language and use a translating tool of their choice. In order to reduce misunderstandings, applicants that are using translation tools are invited to a) indicate in the application which translation tool they have used b) include the original text at the bottom of the application.

Note that project outputs (e.g. publications, reports, advocacy letters etc.) do not have to be written in English.

### *Application deadline*

The deadline for submitting applications is **14 March 2025 at 11:30 pm CET**.

On 26 February 2025, Civitates will host **a webinar** at 11 am to present the open call and to answer questions: prospective applicants can register through this [Zoom link](#).

On 27 February 2025, Civitates will host **a webinar** at 2 pm to present the open call and to answer questions: prospective applicants can register through this [Zoom link](#).

Please note that we will provide the same information during the two webinars. To allow as many organizations as possible to participate, please register for only one webinar.

A list of FAQs will be published on [Civitates website](#) to integrate these guidelines.

Questions regarding the application process can be directed to the following e-mail address: [secretariat@civitates-eu.org](mailto:secretariat@civitates-eu.org) with the following subject line: *SF2 Call 2025*.

### **SELECTION process**

Below we provide an overview of the evaluation and selection process for the open call.

Phase 1 - Concept notes (February - March 2025)

Applications that are submitted by the deadline, include all the necessary documentation and are considered eligible by the Civitates team (see above), will be evaluated by the Pre-selection committee made of the Civitates team and a group of external, independent evaluators with relevant geographic and thematic expertise. The Civitates team and external experts will evaluate applications based on the following criteria

- Contextual analysis: the organisation identifies relevant challenges and opportunities;

- Track record: the applicant has a strong track record of impactful work in the target country-ies;
- Relevance: the applicant proposes work that can effectively and positively address the challenges and opportunities identified.

Based on the review of the concept notes, the Pre-selection Committee will identify the most promising applicants that, by mid-April 2025, will be invited to the following stage of the selection process.

Phase 2 - Full application (April - July 2025)

We expect shortlisted candidates to submit the full application and all necessary documentation by 16 May 2025 (date TBC).

The full application will be evaluated by the Pre-selection Committee according to the following criteria

- Contextual analysis: the organisation has a strong understanding of the national level landscape and possible threats and opportunities in enforcement;
- Track record: the applicant has a strong track record of impactful work in the target country-ies;
- Relevance: the applicant deploys approaches that are realistic, impactful and relevant for the challenges and opportunities identified;
- Partnerships and target audience: the applicant identifies relevant partners and stakeholders to involve or target in their work;
- Budget: the planned budget and its items are relevant, balanced and reflect priorities of the organisation.

Information included in the due diligence questionnaire will also be used to write an assessment of the applicant's organisational health. As part of the process, applicants may be asked to join a call to complete the due diligence evaluation and clarify any doubt on the proposal that might have arisen in the reviewing phase.

The Pre-selection Committee will define the final list of candidates to be presented to the Selection Committee, made of representatives of Civitates' foundation partners and tasked to make the final decision on which organisations to award.

Once the Committee has made its final decisions, all the shortlisted candidates will be informed about the results. Before the grant is confirmed, the Committee might request clarifications, propose changes in the budget distribution or offer a different amount than the one requested by the applicant.

The grants are expected to start on 1 September 2025

## **REQUIREMENTS DURING THE GRANT PERIOD**



Grantees will submit annual financial and narrative progress reports one year after the start of the grant and a final report within 30 days after the end of the grant.

Additional opportunities for funding are highlighted in the Annex 2

## ANNEX1 - RE-GRANTING

In case of re-granting by the lead applicant to other organisations, the following three aspects need to be considered.

### *Memorandum of Understanding*

The Network of European Foundation requires a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the lead partner who will be disbursing the funds and the other partners for (re)grants of 15.000 EUR and above. In those cases lead applicants are expected to agree on a clear, detailed and well framed MoU with the other organisations in order to mitigate risks associated with partnerships.

The MoU should include:

- Rationale for the partnership;
- The roles and responsibilities of each partner (well detailed with complementarities, and former experience in working jointly if existing)
- Financial arrangements and budget breakdowns, including the payment schedule to each partner, the reporting requirements of each partner towards the lead partner, and the frequency of these reports.
- Provisions to resolve any conflicts that might arise during the partnership and legal avenues if necessary (e.g. arbitration, competent courts)

The MoU should be part of the grant agreement as an annex along with the proposal and budget.

The detailed MOU can be agreed upon between the moment the grant is approved and the signature of the grant agreement. It does not necessarily have to be part of the initial project proposal. NEF/Civitates can provide examples of MoU upon requests.

### *Budget*

The proposal budget should detail the amount that will be distributed to each organisation.

### *Financial Oversight by the lead partner*

In case of a re-granting of more than 30.000 EUR to a non-audited partner, a financial controller should be put in place to verify the use of the funds. However, if an organisation is equipped with a strong audited lead partner and well organised reporting through a strong MoU, then NEF and Civitates might not see the value of commissioning a separate audit for each organisation participating to the consortium (when they are not audited). This should be assessed in coordination with the NEF Senior Finance Manager.

## ANNEX 2 - ADDITIONAL FUNDING

### ***Funding+: Learning and wellness Initiative***

Selected grantees will be automatically eligible from January 2026 to get access to additional funding covering learning and wellness needs of the organisation. The current budget for each grantee is €5,000 in 2026 and might be renewed for the following year. During the grant period, grantees will identify how they would like to spend their budget and submit a request to the Senior Program Manager.

#### Learning

- Participation in conferences and workshops
- Organisation of workshops and conferences
- Organization of (joint) trainings (i.e. language courses)
- (Cross-country) exchanges
- (Cross-country) site visits
- (Joint) consultancy support
- Small-scale research
- Joint campaign/event
- Fundraising activities (i.e. CERV application)

#### Wellbeing

- Participation in conferences, courses, or workshops related to well-being (i.e. mental health first aid, trauma-informed approaches, security training)
- Mental resilience group course
- Team well-being audit
- Team retreat or event
- Access to mental health and burnout prevention support (i.e. help of mental health professionals)
- Crisis intervention
- Additional leave for staff members: (i.e. additional holidays)
- Improve diversity and inclusion (i.e. develop a DEI plan, unconscious bias training)

### ***Opportunity Fund***

The Opportunity Fund intends to address the needs of the national level field to work together through a series of smaller grants (€5,000 - €30,000). These grants are intended to strengthen the cohort in priority countries, kickstart work in other EU countries where the field is less developed, and seize specific opportunities.

Some examples of activities include:



- covering the costs of a coordinator for national level coalitions;
- funding strategy convenings;
- supporting targeted research (e.g. stakeholder mappings, technical analysis, media and comms landscape research);
- collective training on specific needs (e.g. legal and policy courses, technical workshops etc.).

The fund is on invitation only and grants are awarded on a rolling basis. For 2025 the initial budget of the fund is €150,000. Additional resources might be made available depending on the results of Civitates ongoing fundraising efforts.

Organisations that are selected to be part of the Civitates cohort can submit a request for additional funding by contacting the Senior Program Manager - Tech and Democracy after the approval of their core grant.