



Civitates

The European Democracy Fund



Forum Report

9-12 March 2026



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Introduction

The first-ever Civitates Forum took place from 9-12 March 2026 at the Concert Hall of Bruges (Belgium).

The event brought together 150 participants, including representatives from over 90 grantee partners and from over 30 foundations, for three days of strategic dialogue, exchange, and collective reflection. Day 1 (10th March) was dedicated exclusively to grantees from civil society, offering space for peer learning and shared sense-making. Day 2 (11th March) brought grantees and foundation partners together for a joint foresight exercise exploring the future of democracy in Europe, while Day 3 (12th March) was reserved for Civitates' General Assembly, attended only by foundation partners.

As Civitates' inaugural gathering of this scale, the Forum provided a dedicated space to examine the state of democracy in Europe and explore pathways for strengthening democratic resilience. The objectives of the Forum were to strengthen cross-sector and cross-border collaboration, generate shared insights and foresight on the future of democracy in Europe, and inform and align philanthropic strategies for greater collective impact.

Part I: Civil Society Forum

Tuesday 10th March

Fading trends and rising forces in Democracy

Collective Story Harvesting

This three-hour session formed the heart of Day 1, using storytelling and structured listening to surface collective intelligence across the grantee community. Nine stories—shared from lived experiences on the front lines of civil society—explored a wide spectrum of challenges and learning moments within Europe's democratic ecosystem. They covered themes such as defending civic freedoms under pressure, navigating state and non-state intimidation, responding to rapidly evolving digital threats, sustaining accountability and watchdog roles in shifting political environments, building resilient movements against rising authoritarianism, and finding creative ways to communicate complex investigative work to the public.

Participants stressed the value of coalition-building and collective action - especially in moments of crisis - alongside the challenge of sustaining collaboration, momentum, and wellbeing over time.

Participants listened through designated perspective lenses, which enabled deeper attention to the underlying dynamics of power, emotion, leadership, collaboration, change processes, and emergent signals across contexts. In the "Perspective Rooms," participants compared what their lens had revealed across different stories, allowing patterns, tensions, and shared questions to emerge. Returning to the original storytellers, groups shared these collective insights, enriching each narrative with a broader ecosystem perspective.



The stories revealed a shared landscape of shrinking civic space, rising intimidation, and rapidly evolving digital and political threats, yet also highlighted civil society's resilience, creativity, and capacity for adaptation. Common themes included the need to navigate complex power dynamics while preserving integrity, the emotional labour of activism, and the importance of reframing issues to broaden public understanding and support.

Across contexts, participants stressed the value of coalition-building and collective action—especially in moments of crisis—alongside the challenge of sustaining collaboration, momentum, and wellbeing over time. A recurring thread was the tension between ideals and real-world constraints, and the extent to which civil society can or should compromise on its values to build broader alliances.

Marketplace

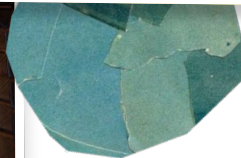
The Marketplace offered a series of simultaneous, grantee-led sessions designed to spark collaboration, share knowledge, and showcase innovative approaches. Sessions ranged from strategic themes—such as unlocking EU funding, strategic litigation, or navigating lobbying regulation—to workshops on audience trust, burnout prevention, artistic freedom, and early warning signs of rising authoritarianism.

Sense-making

The final session of the day focused on collective sense-making. Participants first worked in small groups, each assigned a topic—such as organisational resilience, narrative and communications strategies, or AI and digital security—and explored what is changing, what they should let go of, and what they should strengthen. After sharing their insights in plenary, sense-makers offered a synthesis of the day's discussions, highlighting emerging patterns, tensions, and key questions for the community moving forward.

Civil society (and their allies) must learn to critique the failures of liberal democracy honestly and constructively—without reinforcing the narratives of those seeking to dismantle it.

Key themes from the discussion groups included the need to navigate generational shifts—both in leadership and in how younger audiences engage with media—and a growing push to adopt citizen-centred definitions of impact. Participants highlighted increasing concern about financial sustainability, with organisations exploring public fundraising, even in sectors not traditionally oriented to it (such as the legal profession), as well as alternative financing such as ethical banking. Strengthening alliances across civil society, tech, and media was seen as essential, with dedicated fundraising needed for the work of coordination and coalition-building. There was a call to prioritise high-impact actions and let go of bureaucratic, low-value activities (grants with excessive requirements, press releases that go unread). There was also a general desire to divest from US tech, believing that encouraging citizens to shift to more ethical alternatives may be more effective than waiting for regulatory change.



Part II: Democracy Futures

Wednesday 11th March

Imagining the Future of European Democracy together

The purpose of this day was to bring together civil society organisations and philanthropic foundations to collectively envision the future. It aimed to create a space for reflection, dialogue, and collaboration, enabling participants to anticipate potential challenges, strengthen their preparedness as a community, and enhance our collective ability to shape and deliver the future we aspire to.

Central to the discussions were five scenarios for the future of democracy in Europe. These scenarios, developed by our partners Mercator Switzerland and Robert Bosch Foundation, served as a foundation for shared analysis and strategic thinking. By engaging with these diverse possible futures, participants were encouraged not only to reflect on emerging risks and opportunities but also to identify concrete pathways for joint action.

Global Perspectives Panel

The day started with a Global Perspectives Panel, which brought together voices from Russia, Türkiye, and the United States to reflect on the shifting global landscape for democracy, civic space, and human rights. Moderated by Antanina Maslyka (Article 19 Europe), the discussion featured Grigory Vaypan (Memorial Human Rights Defense Center, Russia), Murat Çelikkan (Truth Justice Memory Center, Türkiye), and Yordanos Eyoel (Keseb, US), each offering insights from their contexts.

The panel explored global patterns of democratic backsliding, showing how authoritarianism rarely arrives all at once but instead emerges through incremental erosion of institutions, norms, and public trust.

Speakers described how early warning signs in Russia and Türkiye—attacks on independent media, creation of “enemies,” manipulation of laws, weakening of the judiciary, and persecution of the wealthy funders of the political opposition—mirror trends now visible in parts of Europe and beyond. A key theme was the danger of strategic assumptions, such as believing young people will naturally support democracy or that strong constitutions alone equate to successful democracies; in reality, people judge systems by the material, emotional and psychological conditions they deliver.

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Speakers stressed that many opportunities to defend civic space are lost because democrats act too slowly—and that the “tipping point” is not a single moment but everyday inaction that allows autocracy to consolidate: “the tipping point [towards illiberalism / authoritarianism] is everyday”. They warned that Europe is now echoing worrying patterns: such as the adoption of foreign-agent laws, closing civic space, restrictions on media plurality and a temptation to appease authoritarian actors (rather than confront them early on).

The tipping point towards illiberalism is every day.

Despite this, the panel emphasised that the future is not predetermined.

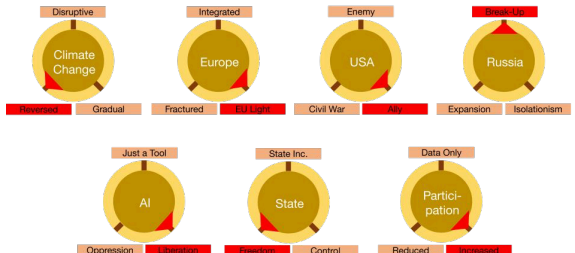
Transnational solidarity is essential, as authoritarian narratives are already being exported globally, while pro-democracy actors remain fragmented by borders and held back by ineffective narratives. Building broader and more unusual alliances, engaging diverse communities, and inviting younger generations to actively shape the future were highlighted as crucial strategies. The overarching message:

Foresight Scenarios

This session, led by David Hesse (Mercator Switzerland) and Mateja Horvat (Robert Bosch Foundation) introduced participants to foresight as a tool for anticipating future challenges and opportunities, strengthening organisational readiness, and revealing blind spots. Using the Scenario Amplifier: Europe 2040, participants worked in ten Scenario Rooms to explore two alternative futures each and “wind-tunnel”^[1] the Civitates funding strategy against them. The six selected scenarios (see Annex 1)—developed from grantee input, trend reports, and expert analysis—served as starting prompts for exploration, helping participants imagine how the next 15 years might unfold and identify what strategic adjustments could make Civitates more robust and future-ready.

Across the scenarios—whether shaped by competitive nationalism, emergency rule, or weakening democratic norms—participants noted that civil society may need to operate in far more hostile, fragmented, and resource-constrained environments, potentially going partially or fully underground. A consistent theme was the importance of supporting grassroots and hyperlocal organising, alongside strong investments in culture, creativity, and human intelligence as essential sources of democratic resilience when formal institutions falter.

The seven knobs represent seven key drivers of change. Each can be set to three positions—yielding 2,187 possible combinations. From these, we selected six specific configurations to create six foresight scenarios



Funding strategies would need to become far more flexible, discreet, and diversified, with support delivered not only through money but also through food, shelter, information, alternative currencies, safe havens, and secure communication channels independent of dominant tech platforms.

Many groups noted that existing regulatory frameworks may become irrelevant, requiring Civitates to focus on core issues (e.g., surveillance, tech concentration, civic rights) rather than on regulatory advocacy tied to institutions that may no longer have influence or exist.

Participants underscored the necessity of building peer-to-peer networks, strengthening ties beyond Europe—including with the Global South—and preparing alternative civic spaces, both digital and physical.

Another strong theme was the importance of transnational solidarity networks and cross-movement collaboration. Participants underscored the necessity of building peer-to-peer networks, strengthening ties beyond Europe—including with the Global South—and preparing alternative civic spaces, both digital and physical. Groups also highlighted the need to redefine and reclaim narratives around democracy, moving away from regulatory or bureaucratic approaches to more imaginative, participatory, and community-rooted models. Finally, there was a call for Civitates to maintain a role as a guardian of core civic values, even in deteriorating conditions, and to prepare for futures that require greater courage, adaptability, and creativity than current models allow.

Partnership lab

In this activity, grantees and funders anonymously filled in postcards reflecting on what works well in their partnership, where the challenges are, and how they can better support each other in the future. The postcards were collected and shuffled, after which participants formed small mixed teams and selected one or two postcards to discuss together, creating space for honest dialogue grounded in anonymous input.

Participants called for more aligned partnerships—where funders and grantees work side-by-side on opportunities such as EU funding, respond to the needs on the ground, and co-create task forces or coalitions for greater impact. Grantees stressed that the most productive moments of the Forum were those where they could speak openly with funders about strengthening their position and working collaboratively—from jointly identifying high-impact projects to pooling resources across multiple funders to reduce duplication and administrative burden. Some participants called for clearer, more specific short-term organisational goals, allowing funders to offer honest feedback on tactics and to align their grant-making with what organisations actually need.

The activity also surfaced strong appreciation from grantees for Civitates' light-touch reporting, alongside frustration with funders that keep heavy bureaucratic processes at the expense of effective collaboration. Sustainability emerged as a concern, with calls to focus on long-term organisational health, and funding models that help grantees leverage resources. Core funding remained a major theme—seen as essential yet still rare—prompting calls for funders to champion it more visibly, share case studies of success, and advocate for regulatory environments that support it.

Visioning Europe 2040

To close the foresight session, participants were invited to imagine a future where democracy is thriving in 2040 and to reflect on how Europe achieved it. In a live polling exercise, they responded in just a few words to a series of prompts—ranging from secure elections and renewed democratic participation to well-funded journalism, safeguarded free speech, and European unity. All contributions are now being analysed and will be included in a forth-coming report on democratic trends and recommendations emerging from the Forum.



Sense-making

Throughout the day, designated sense-makers from civil society and foundations collected and shared their insights.

They highlighted the need for organisational forms and new types of leadership that can withstand an unpredictable future. They urged participants to look beyond current structures and ask what would truly make their missions resilient—even if civil society organisations must evolve or take on entirely new forms.

This requires the sector to rethink its strategies, moving beyond human rights frameworks which no longer resonate, and finding messaging that reaches mainstream audiences.

Surveillance and consumption-driven narratives are becoming defining threats to freedom, often sold to citizens as individual choice. This requires the sector to rethink its strategies, moving beyond human rights frameworks which no longer resonate, and finding messaging that reaches mainstream audiences. They suggested becoming more targeted and ambitious—directly challenging major tech actors while simultaneously supporting alternatives such as cooperatives, analog community infrastructure, and resistance movements.

A strong theme was the duality of crisis and hope. While the foresight scenarios showed that people will continue organising even under extreme conditions, many participants privately expressed anxiety, fatigue, and uncertainty. Sense-makers stressed the importance of identifying “support points”—sources of hope and solidarity—to sustain activists and funders alike in this moment of indeterminacy.

On funding, there was strong agreement that more funding in the form of unrestricted grants is indispensable.



They also acknowledged rising pressures on funders themselves—from political attacks to regulatory risks—and called for funders to be braver, more subversive, and more willing to think big and take risks alongside grantees.

Another theme was the need to calibrate expectations: the goal in the coming years may not be reversing democratic decline outright, but delaying, disrupting, and preserving space for future renewal.

Sense-makers also emphasised the urgency of rethinking narratives about democracy itself, which in its current form is failing to inspire people—especially younger generations. Civil society must articulate a more compelling, hopeful future vision. At the same time, they warned against adopting the rhetoric of anti-democratic actors: democracy is not simply about elections or parties, but about the distribution of power, a principle at the heart of civil society's role.

The situation demands honest conversations about funding ambition, reach and scale to protect democratic institutions (such as the independence of media and the judiciary) and build resilient, cross-sectoral movements (grassroots organisers, intellectual leaders, etc.) through long-term, coordinated investments across Europe.

Annex I

Europe 2040: Six Scenarios

These scenarios were developed for the Civitates Forum 2026. They are meant to inspire and spark debate and do not reflect Civitates' official position.



1. Big Peace

Climate Change:	Reversed
Europe:	EU-Light
USA:	Transatlantic Partnership
Russia:	Isolationism
AI:	Liberation
State:	Freedom
Participation:	Increased

Europe breathes easier. Climate change has been largely reversed, transparent solar panels, tidal generators, and advanced biofuels power the European net-zero economy. Consumption is mindful, guided by ideals of circularity. A revitalised transatlantic partnership fosters innovation, while a demographically troubled Russia has turned inward. The era is dubbed **BIG PEACE**. The EU thrives as a 'confederation of nations', unified on defense, migration and climate, yet celebrating cultural and political diversity. A Euro-AI is provided as a state service to all citizens; it's a non-commercial tool that keeps users' data safe from companies and government. Advances in technology have led to reduced workweeks and universal basic income, still there is no shortage of meaningful labour due to demographic change. Carework is highly paid and valued. Digital democracy flourishes, empowering citizens through new forms of direct participation.



2. Booming Fortress

Climate Change:	Gradual
Europe:	Integration
USA:	Enemy
Russia:	Expansion
AI:	Just a tool
State:	Freedom
Participation:	Increased

Europe swelters. Heatwaves and floods are commonplace, driving massive state and private investment in green technology. A 'Green Boom' sparks innovation – carbon capture, resilient infrastructure, alternative energy – but the cost is immense. Abandoned by an increasingly authoritarian US and threatened by an expansionist Russia, Europe stands alone. Borders are fortified, immigration is strictly controlled and limited to a 'blue card' talent programme. European political integration has deepened: Europe has its own army now. Many decisions are made by technocrats (assisted by European-built AI). Yet, within this **BOOMING FORTRESS**, liberal values – rule of law, privacy, civil rights – are upheld. Participation and elections are alive, at least on local levels. Europe has become a fortress but refuses to compromise on its core principles.

Europe 2040: Six Scenarios

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3. Emergency Rule

Climate Change:	Disruptive
Europe:	Integration
USA:	Enemy
Russia:	Expansion
AI:	Oppressive
State:	Control
Participation:	Reduced

An eerie calm hangs over the fully integrated European Federation. Under the perpetual EMERGENCY RULE, a response to disruptive climate chaos and external threats, the state's control is absolute. An oppressive, pan-European AI is the key instrument of this control, managing daily life from energy rations to information access (which is heavily censored). Threatened by an expansionist Russia and a hostile Christian nationalist USA, the European Federation has both unified and turned inward. Decisions are taken by unelected emergency managers. Democratic participation has been paused for security reasons. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are suspended, anti-patriotic statements are punishable. The internet is state-controlled and fenced in by the Great Firewall of Europe. Much economic activity has shifted towards food, energy and arms production. Europe is unified and stable, but it has traded its freedoms for a heavily monitored security. The underground is buzzing.



4. Competitive Nationalism

Climate Change:	Disruptive
Europe:	Fragmentation
USA:	Ally
Russia:	Expansion
AI:	Oppressive
State:	Control
Participation:	Reduced

The European Union is no more. The continent has broken up into competing nation states, many of them ruled by hard-right, ultra-nationalist governments. Money from the solidly Christian nationalist U.S., but also from China and Russia have fueled Europe's break-up. Most European nations invest heavily in defense and self-sufficiency, treat dissent as subversive, and limit freedom of speech and civic participation. This curtailing of civic liberties is justified by the need to fence off climate migration from the South. Border controls and heavy policing have made international mobility difficult. Diplomacy and bureaucracy thrive. Russia has formulated a new "Warsaw Doctrine" and asserts its influence over much of Eastern Europe. AI tools from the U.S. and China dominate all over Europe.

Europe 2040: Six Scenarios

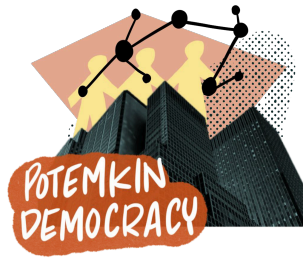
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5. New Middle Ages

Climate Change:	Disruptive
Europe:	Integration
USA:	Civil War
Russia:	Break-Up
AI:	Oppressive
State:	Control
Participation:	Reduced

The dream of a united Europe is gone. The continent and its nations have fragmented into a patchwork of competing city-states, a **NEW MIDDLE AGES** born from climate collapse and digital decay. Walled enclaves, ruled by tech-oligarchies, employ algorithmic surveillance tools to enforce control over scarce resources and a weary, disconnected populace. With the U.S. consumed by civil war and Russia being divided between China and India, there are no dominating superpowers left. Life in Europe is a hyperlocal struggle for survival, dictated by brutal inequality and competing autocrats. Democratic participation survives in local communities. The threat of physical violence has returned to everyday life in Europe.



6. Potemkin Democracy

Climate Change:	Gradual
Europe:	EU light
USA:	Ally
Russia:	Expansion
AI:	Oppressive
State:	State Inc.
Participation:	Data-Only

Most European nations are run like companies, governance follows market logic, and entrepreneurs are politicians. Democratic participation has been replaced by a 'data-based' democracy: Citizens 'vote' with every online click, purchase, and location ping. This firehose of data is processed by AI tools which are often owned by the ruling entrepreneurs. The state uses AI to nudge citizens' behavior to align with state-corporate objectives. The structures of democracy still exist - elections, parliaments - but as a facade, a Potemkin village where real decisions have been made by board rooms and algorithms.