



Civitates

The European Democracy Fund



Civitates

Annual Report 2025



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A word from our Chair

Stefan Schäfers



Three developments defined Civitates internally in 2025.

First, we continued to implement the strategy we have carefully built over the years—doing what we do best, but doing it even better. Second, we took significant decisions about our future governance. And third, we made major strides in expanding membership in the pooled fund, stepping outside our comfort zone and successfully engaging new partners. For this, Elisa Peter, Civitates' Director, and the entire team deserve warm congratulations.

This year also marked the beginning of a foresight process, exploring how the world around us might evolve and how Civitates should position itself in response.

In 2025, we were reminded of how quickly gains can be put at risk—for example, when the US administration challenged the EU's hard-won digital policies. Europe has so far stood firm in defence of its digital sovereignty, yet the pressures it faces are part of a broader pattern.

Governments and well-resourced, well-connected organisations are increasingly seeking to undermine the European project and our democratic systems.

To counter this, we must substantially step up our efforts, ensuring in particular that civil society and independent media have the resources they need to fulfil their indispensable roles

On a personal note, this is my final year as Chair of Civitates.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to all of you and to the team for such an enjoyable and productive collaboration. The foundations the team has laid over the years are exceptionally strong. Combined with their deep commitment, they give me great confidence that Civitates' future is bright—despite the uncertain times and growing challenges that lie ahead.

Vision, Mission, Goals

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.



Europe's wake-up call

There are signs that Europe's stable, mature democracies are starting to crack. Strengthening civil society will help restore them, writes Civitates' Director, Elisa Peter

Europe's democracies face a three-pronged attack: from an imperialistic Russia, whose war on Ukraine continues unabated, from a hyper-nationalistic United States, which is publicly attempting to subvert Europe's sovereignty in fundamental ways, and from autocratic governments within the EU itself.

My own European identity springs from a belief that we're happier and stronger together.

It was a belief forged at a time when we aspired to see beyond our national borders, and my coming of age coincided with the first Erasmus programme, which gave me the opportunity to travel to another country, discover another culture, learn a new language, and make friends from across Europe.

The world order that existed back then is crumbling. But we must not allow the values and institutions that underpin Europe's democracy to wither—and there are concrete ways we can keep them alive.



Warning signs

Civic energy strengthens society's resilience.

To create this energy, Europe must not only invest in its defence, but in public services, education and health. It must respect fundamental liberties; keep civic space open; ensure that factual sources of information can flourish. We may reach different conclusions, but if we have the same facts a dialogue is possible.

In 2025, however, some EU countries moved significantly in the other direction. Civus Monitor, a global platform tracking civic space, downgraded six European countries in its ratings: France, Germany and Italy were moved from "narrowed" to "obstructed", while outside the EU, Switzerland was moved from "open" to "narrowed".

These are among the warning signs that Western Europe's mature, stable democracies are starting to crack – and we ignore them at our peril. It's much easier to destroy the pillars of democracy than to build them.

It's much easier to destroy the pillars of democracy than to build them. //

Philanthropy can fill the gap

A way to mitigate potential future pitfalls is to try to anticipate them.

To this end, last November Civitates held a foresight exercise, exploring the trends that will shape European democracy in the coming decades, and how to defend it.

Yet, given the scale of the challenge, philanthropy is not acting with the speed and ambition required.

There is uncertainty over whether the EU will adequately fund civil society organisations in the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU's long-term budget, and we're already seeing organisations having to close, merge or drastically reduce their activities. We're also seeing the same pattern that's unfolded in Russia, Belarus and elsewhere: the funding shrinks before the legal attacks start. And if you have no money to defend yourself in the courts, that's the end.

The funding crisis afflicting Europe's civil society and independent media deepened dramatically in early 2025 when the US government shut down USAID. Civitates and other funders responded by mobilising an emergency fund to support those most at risk.

Inspiring hope

"Do not obey in advance", historian Timothy Snyder writes in his book, *On Tyranny*.

Snyder says that "most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given" as individuals anticipate what repressive governments want before they're even asked.

The chilling effect of this has been evident in the US, with some philanthropic foundations anticipating the administration's pushback on their programmes. While European philanthropy still has the space to manoeuvre and fund areas authoritarian leaders oppose, I worry that this window of opportunity may soon close.

As democracy around the globe recedes to its lowest levels since the mid-1980s, Europe must stand up for the values it's built on, including by preserving the room for dissent.

Resisting authoritarianism will need courage and imagination. We need to challenge our own assumptions on how we work; who we work with; the partnerships we build; the narratives we use to capture the public imagination and inspire hope.

If we can do that, our chances of arresting Europe's democratic decline will rise exponentially.

Democracy, civic space and press freedom:

The year in numbers

74%

of the world's population
now lives in autocracies

Source - [V-Dem Democracy Report 2026](#)

80

out of 198 countries have a
repressed or closed civic space,
where fundamental civil society
freedoms are curtailed

Source - [Civicus Monitor](#)

73

countries where journalists
were detained

Source - [Civicus Monitor](#)

7

EU member states are affected
by autocratisation

Source - [V-Dem Democracy Report
2026](#)

70%

of people with access to the
internet live in countries where
authorities deployed
progovernment commentators to
manipulate online discussions

Source - [Freedom House, Freedom
on the Net 2025](#)

54%

of people in Europe are concerned about their
ability to tell what is true from what is false
when it comes to news online

Source - [Reuters Institute,
Digital News Report 2025](#)



Civic Power

Map of Grantees - SF1

Core Grants

Civitates provides flexible, core support grants over two years to 'anchor' partners in priority countries.

- Bulgarian Fund for Women
- Resource Center for Public Participation
- Amnesty International Slovakia
- Civil College Foundation
- Fonds pour une Presse Libre
- Vox Public
- The National Federation of Polish NGOs
- Citizens Network Watchdog Poland
- A Sud - Ecologia e Cooperazione
- Amnesty International HU
- Bulgarian Center for Non profit law
- Ligue des droits de l'Homme
- ACCEPT Association
- VIA IURIS

Opportunity/ Emergency grants

Emergency grants are small project grants (up to €30,000) given by Civitates to organisations to take advantage of emerging social and political opportunities

- Democratiser la Politique

Project Grants

These project grants were distributed to actors in Austria for one year, to map the field and familiarise ourselves with the relevant actors.

- Austrian League for Human Rights
- Aufstehn.at - Verein zur Förderung zivilgesellschaftlicher Partizipation
- LEFÖ - Beratung, Bildung und Begleitung für Migrantinnen
- Amnesty International Österreich
- Kinderbüro Universität Wien gGmbH
- Documentation and Counseling Center Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism

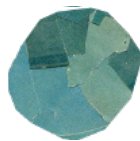
Introduction

In 2025 anti-NGO sentiment intensified in Europe and beyond. Attempts to delegitimise civil society gathered pace, manifesting themselves in various ways.

One example was the campaign to paint civil society as agents of foreign powers through laws targeting their overseas funding. There were attempts to initiate such legislation in Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary (see section on our Cross-Fund work for further details). The spread of a narrative depicting those struggling to protect democracy as enemies within, was one of the many fallouts from the sudden demise of USAID funding for European civil society organisations (CSOs), which pushed many organisations to the financial brink.

Across Europe, there were moves to limit civil society's power and influence, including in Germany, where a fraction of the parliament submitted an inquiry targeting NGOs, which involved 551 parliamentary questions on whether civil society groups which had received government funding were politically neutral.

Yet despite these inauspicious circumstances, our grantee partners continued to do inspiring, innovative and impactful work to protect democracy, as the stories below illustrate.



The Long Road to Redemocratisation

Undoing years of damage inflicted by autocratic governments is difficult, as Poland shows.

In 2025, the number of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries 'autocratising' rose from eight to 11. Meanwhile the level of democracy for the average citizen in Western Europe was lower than at any time in half a century.

The trend, however, is not all one way: following Poland's election in October 2023, there were widespread hopes for democratic renewal. Now, following the end of the 16-year rule of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party on 12 April, 2026, and the overwhelming victory of the Tisza party led by Péter Magyar, similar hopes are being raised there.

The voter turnout of 79.5% is Hungary's highest since the fall of the Soviet Union. "This landslide victory is not just a change of government, but a historic rejection of the most entrenched political system in the European Union (EU)," said Chatham House's Europe, Russia and Eurasia Director.

Restoring and resurrecting the pillars of democracy after years of damage presents formidable challenges.



Katarzyna Batko-Tołuć

Watchdog Poland
credit: Polina Georgescu

All too often funders leave, reasoning that their job is done when authoritarian governments are supplanted by those perceived as more liberal. And governments who in opposition appeared open to dialogue with civil society, are suddenly less accessible once in power.

Civil society lessons

Although the situations are not entirely analogous, the experience of Poland's civil society since the Law and Justice party was voted out of power in 2023, holds important lessons for their Hungarian counterparts.

Katarzyna Batko-Tołuć, co-founder of Civitates' grantee partner, Watchdog Poland, recalls the wave of optimism in the aftermath of her country's 2023 election: "There were huge expectations. The mood was very motivating."

Unlike in Hungary, where the opposition did not engage with civil society before the election, in Poland they did – and this continued in the early days of the new government. Batko-Tołuć said: "I remember in December 2023 we had an open meeting in the Ministry of Digitalisation, they allowed everybody to sign up and about a thousand people turned up, and they were very open to giving information."

Batko-Tołuć said: "I remember in December 2023 we had an open meeting in the Ministry of Digitalisation, they allowed everybody to sign up and about a thousand people turned up, and they were very open to giving information. We had a Minister for Civil Society who established several working groups working on different issues important for civil society - not in terms of the rule of law or reforming of the institutions - but reforming the law connected to civic activism and NGOs." Disappointment followed, however: "The problem was that they didn't follow up on this, and there is no political interest in our work."

These sentiments are echoed by Karolina Dreszer, President of another Civitates' grantee partner, the Board of the Polish Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations (OFOP), as well as her colleague Anna Grudzińska, OFOP's European Advocacy Programme.

"There was a lot of hope after the election and among NGOs about rebuilding the country," said Dreszer. "And there's big disappointment because the opposition were very supportive of civil society before the election. But now they have a lot of things on the agenda they see as more important. There are some ministries and decision-makers who are more cooperative, but generally speaking, there's still a lack of understanding of civil society's role in protecting democracy. We're trying to change this narrative, and we have to use this window of opportunity to prepare for the future, because we don't know what will happen in the next election [in 2027]."



**Karolina
Dreszer**
OFOP

Grudzińska added: "There was a huge package of different bills that civil society prepared before the [2023] elections that they put forward to all the opposition parties. The majority have not been acted on. There are still many persistent issues when it comes to restoring the rule of law in Poland, and we are far from solving them. This is why these matters require constant monitoring and vigilance on the part of civil society."

Civil society actors have remained visible across multiple forums, including special working groups with the former Minister for Civil Society. While there is disappointment that many proposals have yet to translate into concrete legislation, some progress has been made. New communication channels have opened that did not exist under the previous government, and a Standing Subcommittee on Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations is also operating, where civil society representatives strive to maintain an active presence. Working in coalition, they have achieved some modest successes. Adopted reforms that have advanced through parliamentary commissions include faster and simpler registration procedures for civil society organizations, the removal of costly audit requirements for public benefit organizations, and changes supporting members of NGO boards who serve in voluntary roles.

Democracy is a verb, not a noun

A significant difference in the political landscapes in Poland and Hungary, is that in the former, the Law and Justice party remained the most popular party in terms of votes after the election, and the country is run by a broad political coalition. In Hungary though, the opposition won a landslide in essentially a two-party contest.

This does not necessarily mean that Hungary's new government will create an enabling environment for civil society and independent media, but it does mean it will not face the same difficulties Poland's government has in pushing through its legislative agenda.

Many in Hungary, including our grantee partner [Civil College Foundation](#) (CCF), prepared diligently throughout 2025 for various post-election scenarios.

We will face a huge amount of work to rebuild democracy in the legal framework, in institutions and in the hearts of the people.



"We ran a campaign for clean elections as part of the ACT Coalition (with aHang, CKA, and TASZ, touring the country and supporting local groups and citizens with training and legal tools. We [also] did planning sessions and workshops assessing the probability of the different scenarios from the election and its potential consequences," said CCF's [Gáspár Bendegúz Tikasz](#).



Gáspár
Bendegúz
Tikász
CCF



Speaking on the eve of the election, Tikasz noted: "If the opposition wins with a majority, there's a big window of opportunity for us to push our agenda. But this will be the same country the next morning [after the election], so we will face a huge amount of work to rebuild democracy in the legal framework, in institutions and in the hearts of the people... In the last 16 years civic space in Hungary shrank in many ways."

In the immediate aftermath of the election, as jubilant scenes played out in Budapest following the end of Orbán's long reign, Tikasz said: "The elections were just the first step, the real work begins now. Civic control and the free press are still very needed as no political party has ever had such a strong political mandate in Hungary."

The paths towards redemocratisation in Poland and Hungary may present different challenges, but they share two things: the election of a new government is no time for funders to step back from supporting civil society and independent media, and democracy remains an active, ongoing process in need of constant vigilance. Or to put in another way, "**democracy is a verb not a noun**".

Solidarity in the face of authoritarian populism

Anti-democratic forces are gaining ground in France as crucial municipal and Presidential elections loom in 2026 and 2027. But independent media and civil society are rallying to protect the pillars of democracy.

We can see during our meetings that civil society is extremely dynamic



[VoxPublic](#) brings together French civil society groups to foster social and environmental justice, fight discrimination and promote the rule of law and civil liberties. [Laure Paradis](#), VoxPublic's mission manager, recounts how in 2025 they coordinated a wide range of civil society groups from all corners of France in common purposes.

"Over the past year we facilitated a network of around 150 organisations working on very different topics, either at local or national level.

It's an open, wide network and we created a safe space for them to share their expertise and experience. The goal is cross-sector collaboration, and to think about what tools organisations need if they're suffering attacks from different groups supporting authoritarian ideas and values – or whatever other challenges they are facing.



Laure
Paradis
VoxPublic



We have monthly online meetings where we share who is doing what and identify peoples' needs, as well as other longer, more strategic meetings.

France is entering a long period of elections, and within the network there are different working groups, with a smaller number of organisations being very active working on strategies for the elections. There are also other groups, such as one working on a media strategy for how to disseminate civil society's messages, and a group who created an ongoing training helping organisations identify their vulnerabilities and how to mitigate risks.

Civic space in France is shrinking - but French civil society is vibrant. There are many organisations promoting and defending democratic values everywhere. This is why it's important to not always look to create new projects, new tools, because they already exist most of the time. But we need to make sure that everyone is communicating and sharing. We can see during our meetings that civil society is extremely dynamic, even though it's more complicated because funding is decreasing, and there are some security issues - but civil society's energy is strong."

Le Fonds pour une Presse Libre (FPL) defends independent journalism and media pluralism in France. In 2025 FPL joined with international NGO Media Defence to establish the first legal aid fund of its kind in France, called Ripostes. The fund supports independent press targeted by clearly abusive or unfounded judicial or administrative proceedings: a growing problem in France. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) recently condemned France's extensive use of strategic lawsuits against public participation—known as SLAPPs—and the country ranks fifth in Europe for where they are most frequently used.

Within two weeks FPL and Media Defence reached their initial goal of raising EUR 100,000 in five days. Charlotte Clavreul, FPL's Executive Director, explains what happened:

"At a time when the media is struggling financially, press freedom is declining in France, and SLAPPs are to blame. Many independent media organisations asked us to support them. We work closely with Media Defence, whose mission is to defend and protect independent journalists around the world. So in 2025, we joined forces to set up a crowdsourced legal fund. We managed to collect €100,000 in two weeks. It was a great surprise.



Charlotte Clavreul
FPL



The goal of the fund is to support independent media against increasingly aggressive political and economic actors, who are striking at independent media's finances, and who aim to intimidate journalists

Since the fund was created in October 2025, we've helped five independent media outlets in their legal battles. We get requests for help every month and we've already spent 25% of the funds we've raised.

The goal of the fund is to support independent media against increasingly aggressive political and economic actors, who are striking at independent media's finances, and who aim to intimidate journalists. We want the fear to shift to the other side, so that they are held accountable, through for example, financial penalties or being made to publish court judgements on their websites."

Online petitions lead to real world change

Austrian civil society campaign organisation [#aufstehn](#) is showing how online mobilisation leads to real-world results. They help develop campaigns that link people and bring about change. By connecting people around shared concerns and turning digital support into coordinated action, [#aufstehn](#) has developed an approach that moves beyond petitioning towards sustained civic engagement. [#aufstehn](#) was supported by Civitates through a one-year project grant in 2025, alongside five other Austrian CSOs. [Flora Bachmann](#), [#aufstehn](#)'s senior campaigner, explains how online activism recently helped establish a desperately needed clinic for victims of gender-based violence.

"At [#aufstehn](#) we support individuals and organisations who start their own campaigns. In addition we help them build coalitions around issues so that they can join forces. They're the ones who know their issue best, and we're the experts in mobilising, and in the strategic side of campaigning. So by working together we can bring about change. [#aufstehn](#) has always been a digital-first organisation. Our activism relies on online tools petitions, social media, emails—that help us make collective voices visible at scale and impossible to ignore. We then build on that.



**Flora
Bachmann**
[#aufstehn](#)

credit: [#aufstehn](#)/
Stefanie Freynschlag

Petitions can help lower barriers of participation, because politics can often feel overwhelming. I grew up in a very small village, and what politicians in the capitals talked about always felt very far away. I didn't feel like I could be part of that conversation or voice my opinions. That feeling of distance is very dangerous for democracy, and petition platforms can help close that gap. They offer an accessible entry point into political participation. Petition platforms can also spark lasting civic engagement by helping users organise, connect, and evolve into active agents of local change.

One example of that is Didem Wenger, a lawyer. Her case reflects the broader issue of gender-based violence in society, particularly in light of Austria's [high](#) rate of femicides compared to other [European](#) countries. But what we don't have in every federal state are special clinics for survivors of gender-based violence. They are very important because there you can get the medical attention you need, and have specially trained staff that know how to secure forensic evidence and file police reports. Not enough evidence is being collected when people are treated in hospitals.

Didem started a [petition](#) on our platform in February last year demanding the establishment of a clinic for the survivors of violence in Upper Austria.

We tackled this on several levels. The first was online mobilisation. Up until today, more than 10,000 people have supported her petition. In parallel, the issue gained political traction when an urgent motion was filed in the Upper Austrian Parliament calling for the establishment of such a clinic.

The motion was initially rejected by governing parties claiming the system worked, while we countered with media efforts highlighting documented failures in order to spark the public debate. This generated significant media attention and helped shift the narrative around the issue. Then in May 2025, the Deputy Governor of Upper Austria announced that they would establish a clinic for the survivors of violence—although we are still making sure it is up to the standards required.”



Conclusion

“At a time when governments are trying to close civic space, working in coalitions can help keep it open. We’re stronger and more resilient together against common threats, whether SLAPPS, restrictive laws or funding constraints.

Civil society can mount stronger responses by drawing on our experience in very different areas, from LGBTQI to Roma rights, from culture to media – countering the divide-and-rule tactics adversaries regularly deploy.



Working collectively in solidarity can also mitigate risks and intimidation. Together we can share our diverse expertise and knowledge, foster solidarity, keep each other abreast of developing dangers through rapid information exchange, and conduct joint advocacies.”

Eszter Szücs

SENIOR PROGRAMME MANAGER FOR
CIVIC POWER AND MEDIA



Tech & Democracy

Map of Grantees - SF2

Core Grants

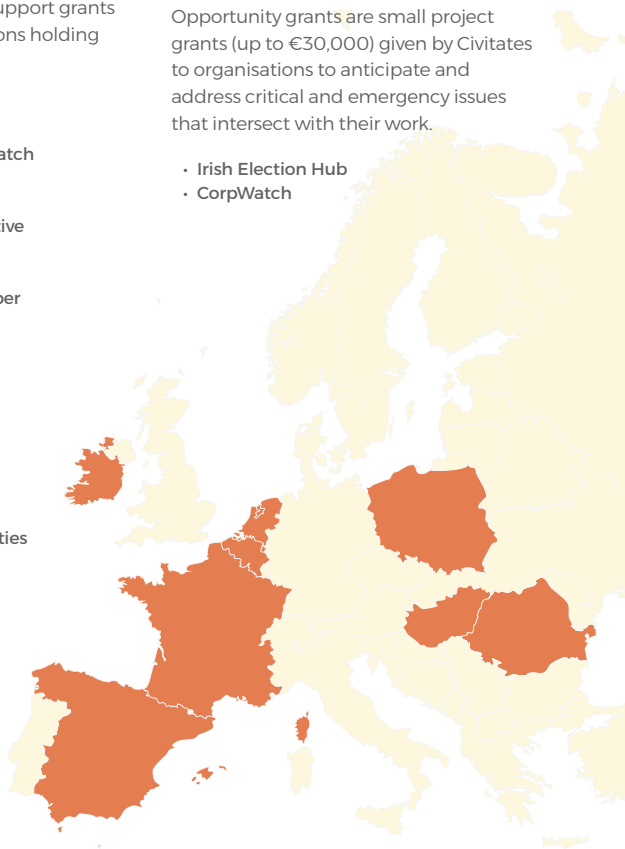
Civitates provides general support grants over two years to organisations holding Big Tech to account.

- Féministes contre le cyberharcèlement
- CEE Digital Democracy Watch
- Uplift - A People-Powered Community
- Hope and Courage Collective
- Point de Contact
- La Quadrature du Net
- Alia, associació de dones per la recerca i acció
- Wikimedia Europe
- PublicSpaces
- Expert Forum Association
- Panoptykon Foundation
- AI Forensics
- EU DisinfoLab
- ACCEPT Association
- Stichting "Article 19"
- Irish Council for Civil Liberties
- European Digital Rights - EDRI
- Bits of Freedom
- Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Trans, Bisexuales, Intersexuales y más (FELGTBI+)
- Hungarian Civil Liberties Union
- Fundación Maldita.es

Opportunity Grants

Opportunity grants are small project grants (up to €30,000) given by Civitates to organisations to anticipate and address critical and emergency issues that intersect with their work.

- Irish Election Hub
- CorpWatch



Introduction

2025 will be remembered as the year when Europe's tech regulations faced a twin threat: from big tech corporations, who are trying to resist independent oversight of their practices, and from the US administration, which threatened the EU with higher tariffs to pressure them to reduce the enforcement of the laws, in particular the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA).

As a result, Europe's groundbreaking attempt to rein in big tech's power reached something of a deadlock, as most of the EU adopted a wait and see approach. For civil society it was a year of regrouping and reorganising.

Yet within such a challenging context, including the European Commission's proposal to change the EU's digital legal framework through the Digital Omnibus, great successes have been achieved, including by Civitates' grantee partners, such as the first time a civil society organisation has used the law to force a platform to change its design (see p20).

It is also clear that public momentum for alternatives and the desire for tech sovereignty is growing. At the end of 2025, the European Commission fined X €120 million for breaching the DSA's transparency obligations: the first real action against a major platform. Meanwhile, other positive developments are in train: with national governments investigating X, as well as exploring ways to protect children from harmful online content.

Bits of Freedom: giving people the right to choose their social media feeds

In October 2025, the Dutch digital rights group Bits of Freedom won a significant **victory** in the long battle for people to reclaim control over what they view online.

Bits of Freedom filed a case in September against Meta for breaching the Digital Services Act (DSA) by not offering Instagram and Facebook users the option of choosing a feed not based on profiling; the first time that a CSO has legally forced a platform to change its design.

The Court of Justice in Amsterdam, where the case was heard, ruled that Meta had violated the DSA. The way that Meta designed its platforms, said the judge, constituted "a significant disruption of the autonomy of Facebook and Instagram users."

Meta subsequently lost their appeal against the decision and will face potentially increased penalties for non-compliance. The ruling's practical upshot is that Facebook and Instagram users in the Netherlands now have the freedom to choose what appears on their feeds, and the hope is that the case will encourage other EU Member States to follow suit.



Evelyn Austin
Bits of Freedom
credit: Juri Hiensch

Evelyn Austin, Bits of Freedom's Executive Director, traces how the case unfolded, and outlines their wider efforts to release tech companies' stranglehold over where we get our information and how we view the world.

"Bits of Freedom was founded in 1999 on the promise of the internet: the idea that it was going to redistribute power, that it would end gatekeepers, and allow everyone to have a voice.

There was a period when that was the overriding sentiment, and of course, the internet still brings a lot of good to a lot of people and empowers movements around the world. But as Bruce Schieier (a Board member of AccessNow) says: the powerful woke up to the power of the internet, and they have more power to amplify. So overall, at the moment, we're looking at corporate and government power that has grown far more than that of citizens. And we might soon see a marriage of big tech and Big Brother.

Our focus has always been the right to privacy and freedom of communication.

Because of their strong technical background, a lot of digital rights organisations at the time when we were founded realised the potential as well as the risks the internet held.

One thing that always really surprises me is how similar the topics are that Bits of Freedom works on now compared to then.

The focus on corporate surveillance and therefore government regulation [to curb it] has been the biggest shift: we went from [trusting that] the internet would self-regulate and was a place that governments should stay far away from, to now often looking to governments for more regulation.

Over the last decade or so, a lot of our work has been focused on the big tech platforms. We've been trying to regulate their data and content moderation and recommendation practices.

We went from [trusting that] the internet would self-regulate and was a place that governments should stay far away from, to now often looking to governments for more regulation.

We were thrilled when the DSA was introduced, even though we wanted more from the law than we ended up getting, we still think that it's a really helpful tool to break the power that these companies have over our societies.

Based on our experience with GDPR, the European privacy legislation that we also worked on, we realised that the companies the DSA aims to regulate probably weren't going to interpret the law—to put it nicely—the same way we would. Therefore it was important to stay vigilant and do our own research, looking into how they're designing their platforms and the content moderation, redress and complaint systems that the law requires them to have. Are they really working in the way that users need them to work?

The US's changing geo-political position with regards to Europe at the beginning of 2025 heightened the urgency to tackle this.

Manipulative design

One of the most exciting things that we thought the DSA offered was prohibiting manipulative design, and requiring very large platforms, if they offer an algorithmic recommendation system, to always offer one that's not based on profiling: meaning that it's not individualised, and based on the sometimes decade worth of data that these companies have collected on you.

The reason we thought these articles of the DSA [27, 38, 25] are so interesting is because they really have the chance to give some autonomy back to users, to increase their possibility of making informed choices and shaping their own information environments.





We were thinking especially about design measures that the tech companies have taken to increase time spent on their platforms, and to increase the likelihood that you share as much data as possible with them.

This is about controlling what content you see, rather than having Meta or Google decide based on what they think you will be most susceptible to, and of course, being guided by their own [commercial] interests and not yours - and definitely not democracy's.

So we filed a complaint against Meta under the DSA, because on Facebook and Instagram they sometimes offer this non-profiling algorithm, but there's no way for users to set it as their default option. Also, every time you would go to this different feed, you would lose essential functionality. So it seemed an obvious breach. And it was also very clear that Meta really wanted you to stay in the feed that it compiles for you.

In June 2025 our government fell and new elections were called for October. We thought that election time is as important as any for having control over your information diet and understanding where information is coming from. So we decided to go to court. We had the first hearing in September and the very positive ruling from the court in October.

Meta has now changed its platforms for users in the Netherlands, so on Facebook and Instagram, Dutch users can opt out of Meta's profiling—and addictive—feed.

Of course Meta also appealed, but withdrew all their substantive arguments a few days before the hearing.

Deeply ingrained

The Netherlands has been an easy country to be an NGO in compared to many others, but we aren't immune to pressure from the US.

In September, we were asked by the Dutch Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) to attend a meeting that they organised, where they brought together big tech and civil society to discuss election risks. Recently the US House of Representatives published a [report](#) referring to the meeting as an example of the EU governments and European NGOs trying to interfere with free speech and elections.

We've never really had to deal with really adversarial contexts, so this was kind of a wake-up call, and we know that organisations that work on the DSA are under scrutiny.

These companies have a huge hold on most of Europe through the grip that they have on our communications. Big tech is deeply ingrained in our societies: for instance, something like 70% of all municipalities in the Netherlands run almost solely on Microsoft, and our House of Parliament, police and hospitals all run on big tech infrastructure”

Irish civil society campaigns for healthier, safer online spaces

In November 2025, the European Commission unveiled its [European Democracy Shield](#). It aims to give the EU tools to protect its democracies against increasingly complex threats, including countering foreign information manipulation and interference in elections.

Three Irish organisations—The Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), Uplift, and Hope and Courage Collective (H&CC)—joined forces in September 2025 to campaign for the EU’s Democracy Shield to include turning off [social media recommender algorithms](#) by default.

So much of our lives are conducted online, and what we see there is dictated by all-powerful tech companies who keep us scrolling by feeding us streams of attention-grabbing polarising content. Instead of being dictated by posts from people, organisations and topics we follow, recommender algorithms allow tech companies to decide what shows up in our feeds. By switching them off by default, the three organisations argued, “we will return to a healthier, safer online space where our communities connect and share on our own terms.”

Together, they planned, organised and implemented various events and a day of action in Cork—the home county of EU Commissioner Michael McGrath, whose portfolio the Democracy Shield lies within. The organisations also collaborated on messaging on the dangers of recommender algorithms, and the need to dispense with them.


Massive pressure

Key actions included organising two days of action with staff and volunteers on the streets of Carrigaline (McGrath’s home town) engaging the public in conversations about Big Tech and recommender systems, and erecting billboards and posters; commissioning a public opinion poll on public views of social media algorithms, which showed, among other things, that 80% of people in Cork worry that harmful content may be pushed into social feeds. The campaign also collected signatures on postcards calling for recommender algorithms to be turned off, which were delivered to Commissioner McGrath’s office in Brussels.



In addition, ICCL met Commissioner McGrath to discuss the issue with him, and met with the teams of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and of Executive Vice President Virkunnen, to discuss legal tools that should be deployed in the Democracy Shield against recommender systems. ICCL also wrote several opinion pieces in *The Guardian* calling for the Democracy Shield to switch off recommender algorithms.

Siobhán O' Donoghue, Uplift's Executive Director, said: "With our partners ICCL and Hope and Courage Collective we created massive pressure, debate and visibility locally and nationally about how powerful tech companies are deciding for us what shows up in our feeds and built support for putting people back in charge of their own feed - and by switching off recommender algorithms by default, we return to a healthier, safer online space where communities connect and share on our own terms... The campaign has focused politicians' attention on the root cause of the problem and opened up vital discussion and follow-on actions, including how collectively we can test the Digital Services Act."

By switching off recommender algorithms by default, we return to a healthier, safer online space where communities connect and share on our own terms 

"[Ultimately] the Commissioner did not address algorithms in the Democracy Shield, but the campaign drew significant media attention," said Olga Cronin, senior policy officer at Enforce, ICCL's response to the global challenge to enforce digital rights.

Edel McGinley, Executive Director, Hope & Courage Collective, added: "The campaign helped shift understanding amongst policy makers in Ireland and across Europe, showing that protecting democracy is also about who has control over our shared online social spaces. It built momentum for changes that put people back in charge of their online environments and support healthier public conversation."



Cleaning up the web

Point de Contact is a French non-profit which enables internet users to easily and anonymously report potentially illegal or harmful online content. They are a bridge between the public, tech companies and the authorities. In 2025, they were awarded trusted flagger status by ARCOM, the French regulatory authority for audiovisual and digital communication, under the Digital Services Act (DSA). This means that Point de Contact are recognised as experts at detecting illegal online content, and the notices that they submit to the authorities must be treated as priority. Their work epitomises civil society's crucial role in cleaning up the internet and addressing the failures of tech platforms, who continue to make money off illegal content.

Point de Contact's work - including safeguarding children from online sexual exploitation - can take a heavy toll on the team's welfare, and they've benefitted from a Civitates' Learning and Wellbeing grant to help mitigate this. Director Alejandra Mariscal Lopez explains:

"Any user can report potentially illegal or harmful content through various reporting tools. These reports are then analysed by our legal advisers. The first step consists in assessing whether the reported content is illegal.



**Alejandra
Mariscal
Lopez**
Point de Contact

When it is confirmed to be illegal, the information is transmitted to the relevant authorities as well as to hosting providers. As a trusted flagger under the Digital Services Act (DSA), our reports are treated on a priority basis.

Given the nature of the content we deal with—often highly disturbing, particularly in cases involving child sexual exploitation material—exposure can be psychologically challenging. For this reason, the recruitment process for hotline analysts includes an interview with a psychologist, who assesses whether candidates have the interpersonal skills required to handle such content on a regular basis. In addition, a psychologist visits our offices once a month and holds individual sessions with each analyst. This ongoing support is essential to sustaining our team's ability to carry out this work.

Overall, our work is driven by a clear objective: contributing to a safer, more responsible, and genuinely inclusive online environment.

In 2025, the organisation received 122,317 reports from internet users and partners, of which 79,691 were processed. Due to the volume of reports, not all could be handled. Among the processed reports, 45,086 items of content were classified as illegal. Of the notifications sent to hosting providers, 92% concerned child sexual exploitation material. The remaining notifications related to cases of sexual violence involving adults, as well as hate speech and terrorism-related content. Sexual exploitation therefore represents a significant proportion of the reports we receive.

We are also observing a substantial increase in the number of reports received. This is partly due to our increased visibility as a trusted flagger under the DSA, as well as a more proactive communication strategy and a stronger presence on social media.

Overall, our work is driven by a clear objective: contributing to a safer, more responsible, and genuinely inclusive online environment.”

Conclusion

“In 2026 the EU and Member States need to step up, and find a way out of the stalemate in which landmark digital regulations championed by civil society - including the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, the AI Act, The European Media Freedom Act, Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising, the General Data Protection Regulation—face delayed and fragmented implementation and enforcement.



The past year has shown that enforcement is neither automatic nor guaranteed: it requires active pressure, legal creativity, and political vigilance across multiple arenas simultaneously.

One of the most significant developments has been the emergence of national courts as effective spaces for advancing platform accountability.”

Claudio Cesarano

SENIOR PROGRAMME MANAGER
FOR TECH AND DEMOCRACY



Media

Introduction

Economic headwinds and structural changes have upended traditional media's business model. Among the challenges public interest media face are peoples' rapidly changing news consumption patterns, shrinking grants and advertising revenues, and technological disruption from AI and elsewhere. In 2025 Europe's independent media was also hammered by the sudden end of USAID support.

But independent media are responding with ingenuity, creativity and innovation.

The grantee partners' stories below reveal - each in their own individual fashion - the novel ways journalists are finding to connect with audiences: from using multi-formats, to engaging audiences in person, and audience-centric storytelling strategies.

As a pillar of democracy which scrutinises power and keeps the public informed, independent journalism must be properly supported. The on-going negotiations on the EU's new seven year budget (the so-called Multi-annual Financial Framework or MFF) offer a chance to provide it. A thriving independent media leads to more secure societies.

Map of Grantees - SF3

Core Grants

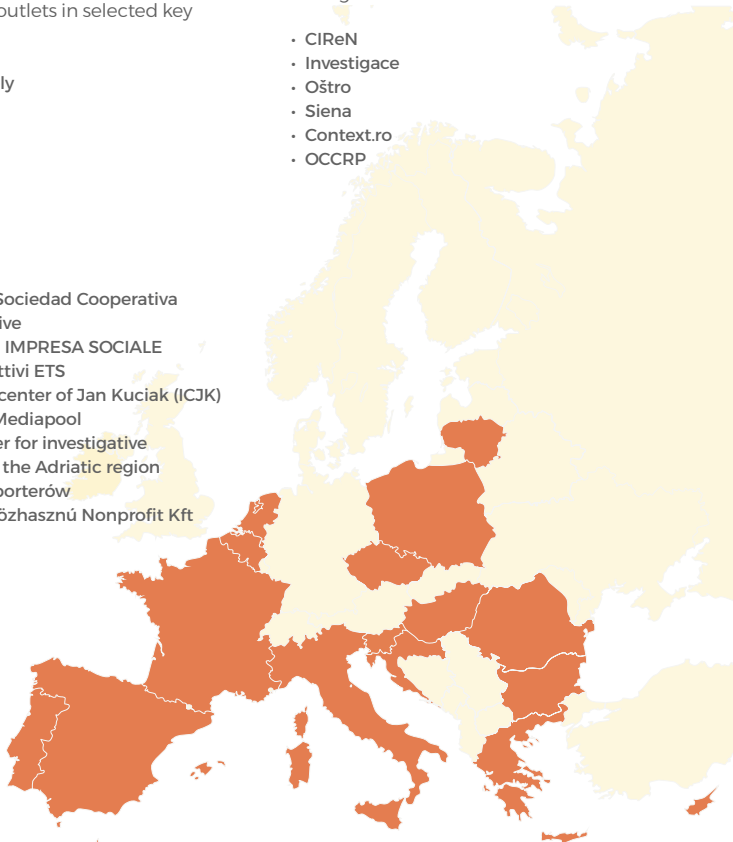
Civitates provides flexible, core support grants over two years to build the sustainability of independent public interest media outlets in selected key countries.

- Atlatzso Erdely
- Cívio
- Divergente
- Direkt36
- IRPI
- Pismo
- Pod Crto
- Press One
- Solomon
- MásPúblico, Sociedad Cooperativa
- FADA Collective
- FACTA S.R.L. - IMPRESA SOCIALE
- Cittadini Reattivi ETS
- Investigative center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK)
- Info Space - Mediapool
- Oštro, a center for investigative journalism in the Adriatic region
- Fundacja Reporterów
- atlatzso.hu Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft

Emergency Grantees

Civitates launched an emergency media fund to respond to drastic public funding cuts.

- CIREN
- Investigace
- Oštro
- Siena
- Context.ro
- OCCRP



IRPI Media: Shining a light in dark places

The [Investigative Reporting Project Italy](#) (IRPI) is the first centre of its kind in Italy. It specialises in long-term investigations, which often carry personal and legal risks. Since 2020, for instance, IRPI has faced ten SLAPPs, three civil litigations and seven criminal suits.

Despite these challenges, IRPI is thriving, with significant growth in their digital audiences in Italy and elsewhere. [Cecilia Anesi](#), IRPI co-founder and centre director, and [Lorenzo Bagnoli](#), co-chief editor, explain how they are innovating new ways to achieve their mission of giving people the information they need to make sense of the world.

Collaboration is key

Cecilia Anesi: We founded IRPI after some of us attended the Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Kyiv in 2012. We were just a bunch of freelancers, most of us very young. We realised that unlike other news organisations from around the world, no major Italian outlet had sent their journalists. So back in Italy we got together and created a non-profit organisation as a centre for investigative reporting, inspired by those that were present at the conference.



Lorenzo Bagnoli
IRPI



Cecilia Anesi
IRPI

We publish between two to four long form stories per week. They can be pure investigations or reportage. We have a team of 13 journalists, and collaborate with about 40 freelancers. We're part of the Global Investigative Journalism Network; a member centre of [OCCRP](#); and one of the founders of [Reference Circle](#), the circle of European independent media. In Italy, we also collaborate with local media or grassroots organisations doing community journalism. So we go from international to national: going to the hyper local community [level] and making them feel that their story, their struggle can be told, is just as important as major international investigations.

It's very important to be in a network where we can exchange information and stories, as well as knowledge and advice. That's one of the most important things: to not feel alone in this struggle.

Engaging audiences

Lorenzo Bagnoli: We try to learn from every story we publish. We focus on character driven stories; data driven journalism; sometimes we use pictures and try to immerse our readership into a specific context. But we always aim to be as respectful as we can to the context [of the stories].

CA: We've recently enhanced how we communicate our stories by studying our audience. For instance, we've seen a story go wild on Instagram and bring in a lot of young people to our website using narrative carousels [a social media post using a series of multiple swipeable images].

Cities for Rent is an award-winning cross-border collaboration involving journalists from 16 European countries investigating abusive practices in housing at a time when many people can't afford somewhere to live.

CA: [Cities for Rent] is not just an investigation, it's a tool for citizens to understand the social problems around housing that impact their lives.

LB: Cities for Rent started after a data harvest and was a collaboration with foreign colleagues into corporate landlords across Europe, and how public policies can be oriented by corporations.

After three years of investigation we felt that we had enough material to write a book about it, 'Città in affitto - Un requiem per il diritto all'abitare' ('City for rent - A requiem for the right to housing'), which has been published. Because there were many journalists involved, we chose not to by-line their names [in the book], but use a pseudonym: Gessi White [based on the historical figure of Jesse White]. She was a journalist who investigated the housing situation in Naples in the late 19th century. She had a vision of journalism as a way to educate people. This is something that we believe is still true.

Since 2012, IRPI has reported on Italian organised crime and their white-collar enablers, corrupt politicians, brokers and businessmen, in Italy and abroad, including in Slovakia with the journalist Jan Kuciak. Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were murdered in 2018. IRPI have continued working with fellow Civitates' grantee the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK), which was founded in response to Kuciak's murder.

CA: Once Jan was killed, we were put under police protection [although in the end, the police determined that his murder was not linked to this specific investigation]. We kept working on the story and one year after Jan was murdered, we published a follow up, and in 2025 published an update on the presence of the Calabrian mafia in Slovakia, which was one of the stories that Jan was working on. It's important to keep shining a light in these dark places.

Moving forward

LB: The fact that this industry [the media] is pretty broken gives us a kind of advantage and makes our work even more relevant because we can try to find potential alternatives [to the current media model].

This is the best job anyone could ask for. I'm still as passionate as I was on day one, even if it's pretty hard managing a media outlet these days. But if we want to have a better social environment, we need to communicate differently - and we need a better media than we currently have. That's what we are trying to create.

CA: It's not only a broken media system, it's a whole world that's broken. We've seen what happened in Gaza, what's happening in Ukraine. People's voices are silenced. They are so frustrated that they feel like they can't really change their life or the world. So what we're trying to do is to follow those voices. We're small, we can't follow all the voices.

If we want to have a better social environment, we need to communicate differently - and we need a better media than we currently have. That's what we are trying to create.



If they're suing you, it means that the story matters.

Sometimes you wonder - like when you're being sued - why do I do this? But then you keep going because you know that it's important. If they're suing you, it means that the story matters; that it's annoying somebody who's most likely stealing public money or doing something that negatively impacts on society.

We believe it's important because people need information and the tools to understand the world. If you're an international analyst or a policymaker, then maybe our investigations can wake you up and you can do better policy making. But if you're a housewife in the periphery of Naples, well, then maybe you can still do something useful for your neighbourhood if you read our story on climate change. That's why we keep doing it.



Valiant journalism in trying times

Direkt36's long-form reporting shows the popularity of compelling investigations exposing abuses of power.

There are various ways to measure the extraordinary success of *The Dynasty* ([A Dinasztia](#)), Direkt36's investigation into Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's inner circle's financial empire available for free in Hungarian with English subtitles on YouTube.

There's the industry recognition the documentary received, including the [Free Media Award](#), whose judges praised Direkt36 for their "valiant investigative journalism under exceedingly difficult circumstances", as well as its reception at international festivals. There's the 40% surge in subscribers Direkt36 attracted after the documentary's release, a significant boost to an outlet which survives in part through its membership model. There's the astonishing 4.1 million views *The Dynasty* has received on YouTube, a record for any journalistic work in Hungary, a country of 9.6 million people. All this points to a substantial public appetite for hard-hitting factual journalism delivered in a captivating way.



András Pethő
Direkt36

We were the targets of a pretty crazy, intense smear campaign



Another indicator of the documentary's success, ironically, is the reaction of those the film exposed and their supporters, who couldn't successfully discredit the documentary's evidence, so tried to besmirch its producers' reputations.

"We were the targets of a pretty crazy, intense smear campaign," says [András Pethő](#), who co-founded the independent Hungarian media outlet in 2014. "It started even before the film came out. It wasn't pleasant to hear all those crazy accusations which had no basis in fact, such as that we were part of a Ukrainian intelligence operation. But in hindsight it actually helped the film because it generated so much interest. It was free promotion... It was such a blatant lie that it was clear for a lot of people that it was a lame pre-emptive strike from the government."

Breaking out of the bubble

The Dynasty was released in February 2025, and documents how Orbán's family and associates amassed immense wealth since the 1990s through public contracts, government-linked loans, and other means of political influence. The documentary was released in a year before critical elections when a serious challenger emerged to the ruling Fidesz party, and they were no longer able to control the public narrative as before.

"We had no idea it was going to be such a huge success," says Pethő.

It was Direkt36's second major foray into long-form documentary, following their earlier film on the Hungarian state's failures to tackle the rising threat of hospital infections during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Pethő, like most of his colleagues, has a background in written journalism, but realised that Direkt36 needed to use different tools, such as films, podcasts and hosting live events outside Budapest, to break out of their bubble and reach new audiences.

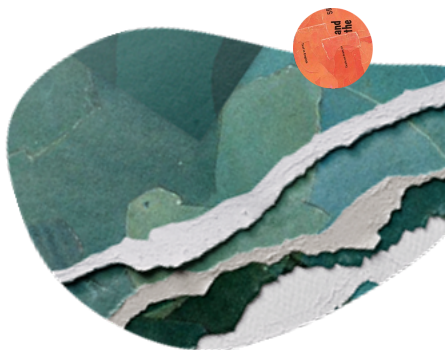
"This whole new line of work was the result of a lot of thinking inside the organisation," he says. "Four or five years ago, we started talking about what direction we should try to grow in. We could go horizontally or vertically.

This whole new line of work was the result of a lot of thinking inside the organisation //

In our case, horizontally would have meant publishing more frequently, maybe shorter pieces, perhaps setting up bureaus or having journalists in other geographic areas. Vertical growth is when you go even deeper, sticking to this long form storytelling, but in different ways." This was the path that Direkt36 chose. Making documentaries entailed teaming up with independent filmmakers.

"We have to make sure that whatever we produce as a documentary or podcast meets the quality standard that we set for ourselves. But on the other hand, we're not filmmakers and we don't really speak the visual language filmmakers do. So it's a genuine collaboration."

Whatever the medium, Direkt36's guiding principle remains the same. "We dig deep into a subject and tell stories nobody else does," says Pethő.



Revealing hidden truths

Algorithms increasingly shape news agendas. But [Divergente](#) is moving in the opposite direction by prioritising human connection and deep investigation—and finding new audiences as a result.

Divergente describe themselves as a digital publication with an analog team who write for people, not algorithms.

“We believe that nothing can replace contact with people. Getting out of our newsroom, seeing what’s happening around you and analysing with your own tools,” says [Sofia da Palma Rodrigues](#), who co-founded the Portuguese digital narrative journalism magazine in 2014. “A thousand likes on social media can’t replace sitting face to face with a person.”

Divergente’s groundbreaking podcast series, [Arsonist Country](#), exemplifies this philosophy.

Abandoned country

Over the past 12 years, Portugal has burned more than any other country in the EU: with an astonishing [16% of the territory](#) afflicted by fires. The environmental, economic and human costs are enormous. Climate change and the proliferation of eucalyptus plantations exacerbate fires’ spread, but the leading cause is arson.



The underlying factors driving vast numbers of people to start fires, however, were largely unexamined until, with painstaking care, Divergente set about revealing them.

Over two years they scoured police and court records, interviewed academics and people working in government, traversed the country, and interviewed hundreds of the arsonists.

“They told us their stories, explained their reasons,” says da Palma Rodrigues. “We found that this is much more than a story of fires. It’s a structural story of a country that doesn’t meet the needs of people who live in remote areas, who don’t have support for their psychological problems and may resort to destructive acts as a result.

So we told the story of an abandoned country where politics is not working.”

The six podcast series Arsonist Country was broadcast on various digital platforms, national and local radio, and published in the national press. It will also be further promoted through live events in 2026: the human connection at the heart of Divergente’s journalism is also central to how they disseminate it.

Human connection

“It’s really important to give attention to how we communicate our reporting. We publish our investigations digitally, but it’s important to be with people, to share what we discovered and get their perspectives and insights. You can’t do that exchange through screens,” explains Ana Pereira, who manages Divergente’s community activities and events, and much else.

Pereira organises collective sessions with audiences for each investigation, including debates and cinema screenings—particularly focusing on locations outside the big cities.

Arsonist Country has won awards, and prompted the authorities, in the form of the Agency for the Integrated Management of Rural Fires (AGIF), to finally recognise arson’s primary role in Portugal’s scorched landscapes.

A fresh approach to reporting

But as well as plaudits, the series also attracted a ferocious backlash, when a clip of da Palma Rodrigues giving a TV interview in which she said that rural people have been abandoned, and that consequently some of them were having mental health problems, was misleadingly edited and stripped of context.

She subsequently received thousands of insulting messages. In response she wrote back to each, linking to the full interview, and explaining their investigation and its findings step by step.

“It was very curious what happened [next],” she says. While some people refused to budge from their original complaints, many more apologised – and became paid Divergente subscribers. It was compelling evidence of the public’s appetite for original, informative journalism.

“There are still people who value the kind of work we do. In a world where the majority of media outlets are using AI for everything, there is space for a different type of journalism,” says da Palma Rodrigues.

“We manage to do it because we’re a very solid team who strongly believe in what we’re doing. It’s very difficult. If we’re still here it’s because all of us strongly believe that that’s the way—and if we lose the way we are doing things, we lose everything.”



Satire meets hard news

Greek non-profit media collective Solomon specialises in serious public interest investigations. Luben TV's forte is viral satirical social media content. On the surface their partnership seems unlikely. But in an age when more people get their news from social media and traditional media is struggling to reach new audiences, their innovative collaboration is already paying dividends, as Solomon's Lydia Emmanouilidou explains:

"Solomon's collaboration with Luben TV grew out of a shared recognition that hard-hitting investigative journalism and satire can complement each other in powerful ways. Luben is one of Greece's most widely followed media platforms [with 630,000 subscribers], with a huge and diverse audience that doesn't always overlap with the readership of traditional investigative outlets like ours.

While Luben had featured our findings in the past, we wanted to explore a more structured partnership. At the beginning of 2026, we launched a pilot collaboration, and so far two videos have been produced, adapting Solomon's findings and investigations into Luben's distinctive satirical format.

For us, the value is twofold. First, it allows our reporting to reach audiences who might never encounter it otherwise, significantly broadening the public impact of the work. Second, it helps make complex investigations more approachable and engaging, without compromising the underlying facts.

We see this as an exciting model for how independent journalism can experiment with new formats and partnerships to stay relevant and accessible."

Conclusion

"Journalists are finding new formats to connect with audiences. They have to be very creative to be seen and heard in the so-called attention economy, where algorithms dictate who sees what, and where social media can drown out all else. But as our grantee partners' stories above show they are succeeding, and reclaiming their connection with the public in various ways:

from using visual and multimedia storytelling, holding exhibitions, live events and installations (often outside the big cities) and publishing books. The formats may change, but their belief in careful, factual, public interest reporting remains."

Eszter Szücs

SENIOR PROGRAMME MANAGER
FOR CIVIC POWER AND MEDIA

Cross-Cutting Work

Civil society pushes back against foreign agents laws

Introduction

Some governments are trying to muzzle civil society and independent media by defining them as foreign agents—but civil society is resisting as popular support against these laws grows.

Foreign agent laws require civil society groups and not-for-profits to register as paid agents of foreign interests when they receive funding from abroad. Russia's 2012 foreign agents law [“established a dangerous blueprint”](#) for others to follow in Central and Eastern Europe, where attempts to try to implement similar laws have gathered pace.

According to [Human Rights Watch](#), foreign agents' laws are “a preferred instrument for authoritarians to extinguish critical voices, shield their rule from scrutiny, and strengthen their hold on power.” Foreign agent laws have been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights, the European Parliament, the Venice Commission and multiple United Nations (UN) experts (among others).

But what's it like being on the receiving end of them? And how are people pushing back?



Slovakia

Hungary

Bulgaria

Slovakia

In May 2025, Slovakia amended its law on non-profits, introducing disclosure rules and fines for NGOs receiving over €5,000 in foreign funding, labelled “organisations with foreign support”. After civil society backlash, key provisions were removed, and the Constitutional Court found the law incompatible with the Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.



Katarína Medľová

RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY TEAM,
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SLOVAKIA

“Along with other NGOs we did as much advocacy locally and internationally as we could [to stop the law]. I did research and interviews with human rights defenders while it was in effect, and the main impacts included their capacity to conduct their services, and the chilling effect of publishing donors’ details.”



Lukáš Diko

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF AND CHAIRMAN,
INVESTIGATIVE CENTRE OF JÁN KUČIAK (IČJK)

“One of the prerequisites of the foreign agents law was that every NGO had to report its donors. Luckily in the end this was not the case, but we prepared for it, including by discussing with lawyers how we could protect personal information. The journalist community has been trying to stay resilient against all this and to do our jobs as best as we can.”



Katarína Batková

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR VIA IURIS

“When [the law] was approved there was a lot of uncertainty and fear over complying with it. As a legal professional organisation we prepared manuals and organised ten workshops for more than 300 organisations. There were huge protests against the law, and we managed to push the government to withdraw part of the legislation before it was approved, specifically the provision labelling NGOs as foreign agents. We called it a Russian law, because it was inspired by Russia and against the constitution and EU law. The government publicly stated it wasn’t a Russian law, which meant the media started talking about it, which was good because we don’t want Russian laws in Slovakia because we are part of the European Union.”



Hungary

In May 2025 Hungary's government proposed a Transparency of Public Life law allowing it to monitor, penalise and potentially ban organisations receiving foreign funding, including donations or EU grants. The European Commission called on Hungary to withdraw it, and after waves of public protests, the government backed down and delayed voting on the bill.



Tamás Bodoky

EDITOR AND DIRECTOR OF ÁTLÁTSZÓ,
HUNGARY'S FIRST NON-PROFIT INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM OUTLET

"The government systematically targeted independent media and critical NGOs' financial sources. [The latest effort came] in early 2025 [with the Transparency of Public Life bill] which proposed that anyone sanctioned by the Sovereignty Protection Office, would lose the eligibility to receive foreign funds and even domestic tax contributions, which would leave a lot of organisations financially unviable. But there was a big opposition against this, and last June, the government postponed voting and the law did not come into effect."



credit: Balázs Pivarnyik

Dalma Dojesák

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
HUNGARIAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION (HCLU)

"Because of serious past attacks, civil society and the free press were able to show our value in society and to mobilise public opinion. We had learned that it's not enough to do good things. It's also necessary to be able to show people - our supporters mainly - how we change lives, how we change the law, society and how what we do is important and valuable to society.

So, for example, my organisation talked about the free legal aid that we provide to thousands of people yearly. And we were able to communicate our clients' individual stories over the years, and how their lives turned for the better. We were able to say to the hundreds of thousands of people who follow our work that if the government stops us from doing it, then these people will lose the benefits that we provide them. Their rights would be violated."

Bulgaria

In 2025, Bulgaria's parliament rejected the draft Foreign Agents Registration Bill (**FARB**), first proposed by the ultranationalist Vazrazhdane ("Revival") party. Under the law 'foreign agents' would be defined not only as organisations, but individuals receiving more than 1,000 leva (around €500) from abroad within five years - including funds from relatives working abroad. The rejection has not marked the end of the legislative process, which can be resumed.



Nadia Shabani

DIRECTOR,
THE BULGARIAN CENTRE FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (BCNL)

[BCNL] isn't just working at a legislative level, but capacity building in communities: it's not only about changing legislation, but mobilising people to push back against restrictions and be active in protecting the freedoms we already have.

In 2025, we spent a lot of time trying to stop attempts to restrict civic space, continuing the more defensive mode we've been in for a few years, rather than our normal role of being active agents of change and modernisation.

We started to organise and mobilise people to sign petitions. We see this as an opportunity: using the momentum we've built pushing against restrictive legislation and defending democracy for scaling up what we do.

My generation were considered the children of democracy, but now we have to protect it again."

Conclusion

Civil society resistance played a huge role in stopping foreign agents laws in **Slovakia** and **Bulgaria**, and helping them get postponed in **Hungary**, with Civitates' grantee partners to the fore.

Civil society organisations that have been able to mobilise public support, challenge legislation through courts, and communicate how their work benefits ordinary people have been better positioned to push back. Coordinated action, strategic influencing of public narratives and sustained international scrutiny remain effective pathways to defend civic space.

The EU Budget 2028-2034

Shaping the future of democracy in the EU

In July 2025, the European Commission unveiled its [proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\)](#). The EU's long-term budget, which will run from 2028 to 2034, will allocate nearly €2 trillion across policy priorities, shaping the future of democracy, competitiveness, and security in Europe for the next decade.

Within this framework, the proposed [AgoraEU programme](#), €8.6 billion, represents a major shift in how the EU supports the infrastructure which supports our democracies. By merging existing programmes—notably Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) and Creative Europe—AgoraEU brings together funding for civil society, independent media, and those working in the arts and culture into a single instrument. At a time of democratic backsliding, deep pressures on independent journalism, and rising disinformation, these negotiations' outcome will determine whether the EU invests meaningfully in organisations and individuals that uphold pluralism, accountability, and civic participation.

However, as political scepticism towards civil society and funding independent media grow, so too has the threat to the programme.

In response, Civitates launched the Future of Europe grant-making programme to strengthen coordinated advocacy around AgoraEU. It brings together a cross-sector cohort of organisations who are working to safeguard dedicated EU funding streams, strengthen advocacy at EU and national levels, and ensure coherent messaging. By working together across their different sectors, they aim to help protect AgoraEU's funding.

In 2025, the cohort included Civil Society Europe, Culture Action Europe, the European Civic Forum, the European Federation of Journalists, and the Centre for Sustainable Media. In 2026, it will expand to include digital-focused organisations, and those working at national-level in key Member States. This will strengthen the groups' capacity to address disinformation and influence negotiations in EU capital—and ultimately aim to ensure that at the end of the current negotiations, AgoraEU is a robust instrument which helps protect Europe's democratic resilience.



Learning, Well-being and Security

The resilience of organisations rests on people who are skilled, supported, and able to work safely. Through our Learning, Wellbeing and Security Initiative, Civitates invests directly in the individuals and teams at the heart of our grant-making, recognising that strong internal capacities, good mental health, and robust security practices are essential for sustaining those working on the frontlines of protecting democracy over the long-term.

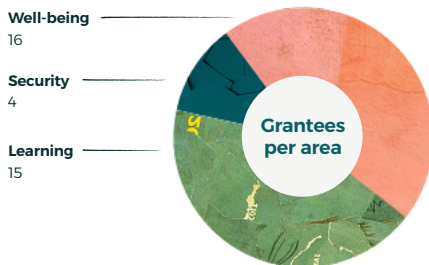
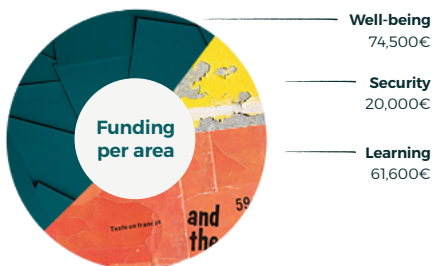
In 2025, Civitates provided up to €5,000 per eligible grantee to respond flexibly to our grantee partners' learning, wellbeing, and security needs.

These small grants enable organisations to strengthen skills and knowledge through training, exchanges, research, and joint learning initiatives; enhance wellbeing through mental health support, team retreats, resilience-building, and inclusive workplace practices; and improve security through audits, training, software and hardware, protocol development, and physical protection measures.

Together, these grants help organisations remain healthy, connected, and secure in increasingly challenging contexts. The following examples illustrate how grantees have used this support to build resilience in practice.

Key figures

€156,000
granted



Civio Strengthens Investigative Capacity at Dataharvest 2025 and Launches Team Wellbeing Initiative

"Civio used the Learning, Wellbeing and Security grant to bolster its investigative capabilities and newsroom wellbeing, beginning with participating in the European Investigative Journalism Conference – [Dataharvest 2025](#), one of Europe's leading gatherings for data-driven reporting.

Throughout the conference, Civio journalists took part in a wide range of practical technical sessions designed to enhance their investigative toolkit. Dataharvest also served as a hub for new collaborations. Civio established contact with several European media outlets previously outside its network, sparking early discussions around potential cross-border investigations on topics of shared public interest.

The second component of the grant supported an internal wellbeing programme designed collaboratively by Civio's 10-member team. Rather than imposing a standard solution, we gave each of our ten staff members up to €300 to spend on whatever supported their health best (therapy, physiotherapy, pilates, nutrition counselling, mindfulness, or anything in between). Within that shared framework, each person had full freedom to choose, supported by a simple and confidential reimbursement system that kept the focus on people, not paperwork.

The impact was real and immediate. But beyond individual benefits, something shifted culturally: conversations about health became normal, even welcome. As a team, we became more aware of how much these things matter and, crucially, that Civio was genuinely behind us in taking care of ourselves.

Together, the conference participation and wellbeing programme represent a dual investment in professional excellence and newsroom resilience."



Civilizáció Coalition Invests in Community Wellbeing

The Civilizáció coalition, led by Amnesty International Hungary, used the Civitates Learning, Wellbeing and Security grant to launch a two-part initiative, combining a year-end community gathering with targeted wellbeing assistance for partners involved in the Civitates-funded Resist LAB project.

On 9 December, nearly 100 representatives from civil society organisations attended an informal end-of-year meet-up at a local venue. Designed to bring members closer together and facilitate planning for 2026, the evening centered on a keynote address by political analyst Zoltán Lakner, and a community dinner. Organisers describe the event as one of the most energising moments of the year, strengthening personal and organisational ties within the network.

Alongside the central event, the coalition distributed wellbeing vouchers of €290 to member organisations, enabling them to address practical needs rarely covered by traditional funding, such as team-building; improvements to office environments; and mental health support.

These efforts have helped maintain the operational resilience of member organisations while reinforcing the broader mission of the Civilizáció coalition. As Hungary moved towards the 2026 elections, strengthening these internal bonds was seen as essential to ensuring the coalition can respond collectively and effectively to political developments.



AI Forensics Strengthens Data Security Practices and GDPR Readiness

AI Forensics used the Learning, Wellbeing and Security grants to launch a major upskilling initiative focused on strengthening internal security culture and ensuring that data protection is embedded in every stage of its investigative work. As the organisation increasingly handles sensitive datasets and conducts high-risk algorithmic audits, the goal was to place GDPR compliance and operational security at the centre of its research processes.

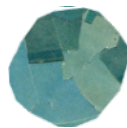
The programme was built around two complementary learning tracks. The first focused on advanced training addressing challenges unique to AI Forensics—such as large-scale data scraping, algorithmic auditing and navigating mixed legal roles across different investigations.

The second track provided organisation-wide training to improve staff awareness, decision-making and day-to-day security practices.

The initiative has already brought important changes. It clarified when AI Forensics acts as a data controller—for its own research—and when it operates as a processor for partners such as public institutions. This distinction now shapes how projects are planned, contracted and implemented. The organisation also strengthened its governance and documentation practices. A wider cultural shift is underway as well. Staff now have a clearer understanding of how everyday choices affect organisational safety, reducing uncertainty and stress around handling sensitive material.

Crucially, AI Forensics emphasises that its commitment to data protection goes beyond legal compliance. The aim is to embed responsible habits into everyday work, ensuring that the team makes informed, ethical decisions at every step of high-impact investigations.





Institutional Development

Civitates: our year in numbers

€1.2

million was raised through our emergency media funding initiative to support six independent public-interest media outlets facing financial hardship following the USAID funding cuts with 3 years grants (2025-2028).

€375

thousand committed to one-year grants supporting five organisations advocating for a strong Agora EU, a programme to support media, culture, and civil society, in the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034.

113

grant applications were received across our open and closed calls

€3.9

million engaged for 2 years grants across all our sub-funds.

37

new grantee partners (civil society organisations and media outlets) following our open and closed call in 2025.

36

foundation partners at the end of the year.

25%

increase in our income in 2025. Our 2025-2027 grant-making budget increased through 10 new foundations joining Civitates.

Growing in diversity

In 2025 Civitates continued to evolve to meet the growing threats to Europe's democracies.

Our budget increased to its highest ever level. This was partly because we introduced an emergency media fund to support our grantees most at risk from USAID cuts, and partly thanks to the new foundation partners who joined us.

Civitates began as a coalition of predominantly Western and Northern European foundations; it has since evolved into a truly pan-European network, uniting partners from across the continent in a shared commitment to safeguarding democracy.

Last year we welcomed ten new foundations, bringing the total number to 36. These were: **PKO Bank Polski Foundation** (Poland), **Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation** (Portugal), **the Edmond de Rothschild Family Foundation** (Switzerland), **the Evens Foundation** (Belgium), **Flora Fund** (Italy), **Reva & David Logan Foundation** (US), **Stichting Democratie & Media** (Netherlands), **Tree House Giving** (Austria), **Zeit Stiftung Bucerius** (Germany) - who joined as part of the media emergency fund and **Zennström Philanthropies** (UK). Many of these are family foundations. We also welcomed an individual from Czechia.



Strengthening our governance

As Civitates continues to grow, we are adapting our governance to ensure it remains fit-for-purpose. To better reflect the diversity of our foundation partners and strengthen inclusivity, we are expanding our executive committee from four to seven members.

We have also created the role of Chairs to guide the working groups for our three sub-funds. These Chairs sit on the expanded Executive Committee and are tasked with fostering synergies among the three sub funds; strengthening the working groups' input into Committee deliberations; and ensuring that Committee decisions are effectively integrated into the working groups' work.

To raise our collective ambition, we have increased the minimal annual contribution from foundation partners to €100 K. At the same time, smaller foundations—whose contributions and participation remain vital—continue to play an important role, collectively accounting for 18% of our overall budget.

In 2026 our chair Stefan Schäfers will step down. Stefan has been with us from the start, so this will mark a huge generational shift in terms of our governance. In 2025 we started preparing for this transition. We are grateful for Stefan's wise counsel, steadfast guidance and support through the years.

Foresight exercises

We held two in-person Steering Committee Meetings in 2025.

The first was in Warsaw, our birthplace in 2018, where we were hosted by the Stefan Batory Foundation and the EFC Foundation. It was great to be back there to reflect on our past and future, and delve into Poland's redemocratisation challenges and lessons, hearing directly from a broad range of civil society groups and media organisations.



Our second Steering Committee Meeting was held in Athens, the cradle of democracy, where we were hosted by the Bodossaki Foundation. We visited the [Ancient Agora](#), which inspired the group to then engage in our first foresight exercise, looking at the future of democracy in the EU for the next 20 years. That was guided by Mercator Switzerland and the Robert Bosch Foundation, who both have in-house foresight teams.

We hope that this cycle of foresight exercises will inform Civitates' direction of travel, and help us navigate volatile times: giving us the space to ask ourselves what we need to do differently today in order to realise the future we want, and to be better prepared and resilient for less palatable times.

New team members

Our intention is not to grow our team, but to make sure it's fit for purpose so that as the number of foundations and grantee partners we work with expands—and hopefully our budgets—we have the capacity to deliver. We finalised the recruitment process for the impact and learning manager, a new role which will help us become more of a learning platform for the foundation and the grantee partners, and we welcomed Maria Guerra Arias in January 2026. We also welcomed Monika Ramos in early 2025 as a part-time programme and grants officer, who is providing invaluable support.

Crystal Logan, the Reva & David Logan Foundation



Crystal Logan

CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
REVA & DAVID LOGAN
FOUNDATION

"I came to Civitates after a reference from another involved foundation. I met Elisa [Peter] and realised that Civitates might be a useful resource to inform our own grantmaking in Europe, where we've been independently funding for a long time.

Another important reason for joining is to be able to tap into the deep knowledge of government funding and the philanthropic ecosystem across Europe. It's so useful to have access to the collective wisdom of the many and varied participants. For example, we're just about to give our first grant in Hungary; we could not have done it without the help of those partners with special local insights.

We've funded journalism long enough to know it can be a risky business and we don't mind taking the risks. As I've said before, I believe that the courage of journalists deserves our courage in return.

Crystal Logan, as co-Executive Director, oversees the journalism portfolio at the Reva & David Logan Foundation. Here she explains why they became a Civitates' foundation partner, what she hopes to bring and what she hopes to gain.

I believe that the courage of journalists deserves our courage in return

However, it's understandable that many foundations are risk averse in this political climate, which is completely valid. Funding through a pooled fund creates a filter and a buffer, making it a safer, and more palatable way of funding.

Being outspoken is really important when we're in funding circles: not trying to please your colleagues by just saying yes and going along for the ride. Creating critical conversations and debates is something that I hope that I can contribute to.

I hope that our experience as global funders, as well as funders in the arts and social justice, can contribute to candid, informed conversations and effective grantmaking."

Putting our grant-making commitments into practice

What does it mean to be a good grantmaker? In their book Modern Grantmaking, Gemma Bull and Tom Steinberg argue that responsible funders should be driven by human-centred design—paying close attention to those who seek their grants, learning from them continuously, and making their lives easier rather than harder. At Civitates, this is not a philosophy we admire from a distance. It is one we are actively trying to live up to.

Our 2025 grant-making cycle was shaped directly by feedback gathered from applicants following our 2024 open calls. Here is what we did—and why, writes Samuel Sigere.

A two-step process

True to our public commitment after the 2024 calls, we introduced a two-step process for our core funding: a short concept note first, and a full proposal only for those shortlisted. For civil society organisations and independent media already stretched thin, a lengthy application is a barrier in itself—a concept note lowers that threshold. We complemented this with dedicated webinars for shortlisted applicants. But we know there is more to do: 57% of applicants needed more than five full days to complete a proposal. Simplifying our forms further remains a priority.



Reaching organisations outside our circles

Diversity of applicants starts with diversity of outreach—and our 2024 survey made clear we had more work to do. In 2025, we mobilised our network of funders, grantees and partners to amplify our open calls. For our Media and Tech & Democracy portfolios, two thirds of applicants at both stages were applying to Civitates for the first time. In Italy, this connected us with organisations that had never previously been on our radar. But reach is only part of the picture: for many organisations, applying in English remains a real obstacle, and we are actively exploring how to reduce that barrier further.

Fairer due diligence

We acted on applicants' feedback that our due diligence requirements were disproportionate, making the process more proportionate to the size and track record of each organisation. We worked with the Network of European Foundations, our host, to tailor our due diligence processes to the size of the organisations.

Yet our 2025 Italy call was a reminder of how much further we need to go. As one applicant put it, our questionnaire still felt better suited to large, well-established associations than to the grassroots organisations we said we were looking for.

Sharing the decision

We deepened our participatory grant-making model by involving national experts and former grantees directly in the evaluation of proposals and decision-making process. Their knowledge of local civic spaces, political realities and organisational landscapes complements the expertise of our foundation partners and the Civitates team in ways that no internal process alone can replicate. Decisions about who receives funding are better when those closest to the work are genuinely involved in shaping them.

Beyond the grant

Grants matter—but they are rarely enough on their own. In 2025, we brought new grantees together to learn from one another and forge connections across borders—in Pécs for our Civic Power portfolio, in Athens for Media, and in Ljubljana for Tech & Democracy. In an increasingly hostile environment for civil society and independent media, solidarity is a necessity.

These gatherings laid the groundwork for the first Civitates Forum in 2026, our most ambitious effort yet to build a community of practice across our network. Security is part of that resilience too. We added it to our learning and wellbeing programme, complemented by an additional €5,000 flexible grant for all core-funded partners to spend as they see fit. When the space for civil society shrinks, the least a funder can do is help its partners stand firm.

Our 2025 cycle was built on listening and acting. As Bull and Steinberg put it, good grant-making is "the opposite of doing a job once and then ticking it off as 'done.'" We are not done—but we hope we are moving in the right direction.

Samuel Sigure

PROGRAMME MANAGER



Perspectives on our grant-making

In January 2025, Civitates launched an open call for proposals for independent media outlets in Hungary, Poland, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria and Croatia.



credit: Anne van Zantwijk

Andrea Simonca

PROGRAMME OFFICER
LIMELIGHT FOUNDATION

"When I heard that Civitates was planning a call for proposals, I reached out to the programme team to volunteer to be part of it.

At Limelight, we purposefully don't work with open calls. Instead, we identify organisations through research, local expertise, and ongoing dialogue in the field, which allows us to fund with focus, knowledge, and intention.

For me, joining the selection committee was a chance to experience a different way of grant-making, and it felt good to contribute Limelight's experience while also learning from others. I was involved in reviewing applications across two rounds with media experts and funders who are part of the media sub-fund.

One thing that really stood out was the collaborative nature of the process. It was lovely to work with people who I'd known in other contexts, but in a completely new way; and also work with media experts bringing contextual knowledge, and funders who focused on sustainability, strategy, and long-term impact.

In keeping with Civitates' aim to be a learning hub for philanthropic professionals, the process drew on the expertise of foundations as well as civil society experts. Among the benefits of engaging in a pooled fund is that it can create a pipeline of potential grantees for the foundations who take part.

Andrea Simonca, Programme Officer at the leading journalism fund, Limelight Foundation, reflects on her experiences as a member of the selection committee.

Hearing different perspectives and different voices in the same space, all focussed on a shared goal, made the process really grounded.

Something else I enjoyed was discovering initiatives I didn't know about. Although I was already familiar with some of the applicants, many were new to me. The applicants were geographically diverse, working in different contexts on different issues and doing impressive work.

The call also specifically focused on outlets becoming more sustainable, both organisationally and financially. A pleasant surprise was organisations' creativity in facing their challenges. Many were very honest about their vulnerabilities, which showed maturity and self-awareness.

Even very strong journalism can't survive without having organisational and financial stability behind it. At Limelight—just like Civitates—we care a lot about this long-term stability. So, it was encouraging seeing applicants prioritise it quite clearly in their submissions."

Antonella Napolitano is an independent researcher and policy analyst focusing on technology's impact on society and human rights.



Antonella Napolitano

SENIOR RESEARCH & POLICY
EXPERT (TECH & HUMAN
RIGHTS, MIGRATION)

"It was my first time working in a structured process for grant-making and I enjoyed it. I brought my international experience as well as my knowledge of Italy's civil society. I looked at between 30 and 40 applications. There was a lot of preparation involved.

I was surprised by the applicants' diversity - with the exception of the lack of those working on women's rights. The call was very wide and didn't have any specific theme, but it was glaring that there weren't any focused on women, and we made some hypotheses why this was - which was a useful learning process.

We had small grassroots organisations and very big Italian chapters of international ones. It was a really wide range. We had interesting conversations about how to balance the project funding,

She works with public interest journalism newsrooms and human rights organisations, advising them on strategy and impact. In 2025 she was part of the selection committee on a call for proposals for protecting and expanding civic space in Italy.

which was a maximum of €30,000 to selected grantees, and what impact it would have on them, weighing up all the different factors.

It was also interesting to talk about 'risk appetite' from a funding perspective, because that's something that comes up often in civil society organisations where you have a proposal that has more innovative elements, but maybe a funder is not willing to take a risk.

For me it was interesting to see funders' perspective, but also I liked that they were open to listen to me and to the other evaluators who have the contextual knowledge they might lack. I think it was a very equal level of expertise. There wasn't the idea that 'We are the funders, we know better because we're used to doing this.'"

Civitates would like to extend our warmest thanks to Andrea, Antonella, and all evaluators for their time and insights to making the process a success.

We also thank the Network of European Foundations for its support throughout our selection processes. We strive to be a learning platform, actively applying lessons to improve our practices. A key takeaway is the need to ensure that our grant-making processes encourage a diverse pool of applicants,

that reflects Europe's diversity, including organisations supporting women, LGBTQIA+ communities, migrants, people with disabilities, and others.

Going forward, we will review our call design and language, outreach channels, and funding models to ensure these groups are aware of our calls, feel confident applying, and are supported throughout the process.



Beyond the Headlines

The compelling case for more philanthropic funding for independent media

Rigorous, fact-finding journalism is a pre-requisite for a well-informed society. When it's threatened—as it is in Europe—so is democracy. The question of how we can protect independent, public interest journalism in the face of broken business models, censorship and legal threats, is therefore increasingly urgent.

In September 2025, Civitates offered concrete solutions in our report [Beyond the Headlines](#). Introducing it, [Eliot Higgins](#), founder of our grantee partner [Bellingcat](#), wrote that the report details the “stark realities” of the crisis,

and “more importantly... a clear and proven path forward... We are at the point where the survival of public interest journalism cannot be left to market forces alone.”

The report advocates for substantially more philanthropic funding for public interest journalism in Europe: making a powerful case for why philanthropic funders are uniquely positioned to provide the long-term, financial and moral support needed to strengthen media business models, produce high-quality journalism for a wider audience, and protect reporters against mounting pressures.



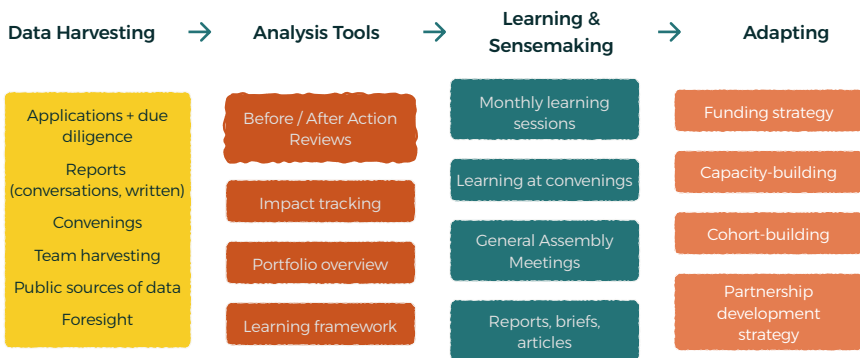
Strengthening Impact and Learning at Civitates

In 2025, Civitates significantly strengthened its approach to Impact and Learning (I&L), laying the foundations for a unified system to better demonstrate and improve the impact of our grantmaking. This work reflects a strategic shift: embedding learning from the outset, reducing the reporting burden on grantees, and using evidence to inform decisions and tell meaningful stories of change.

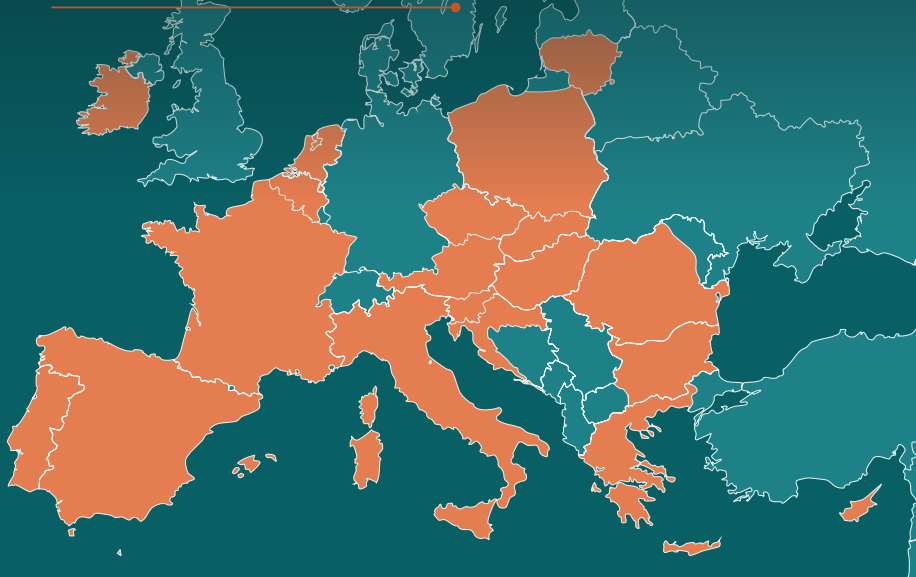
Over the past two years, we have worked closely with an external consultant, [Marta Arranz](#), to design and pilot core elements of our I&L framework. Key achievements included streamlining reporting by replacing mid-term written reports with conversational check-ins, and developing shared tools to track portfolio composition, organisational development, and progress toward strategic objectives across sub-funds.

These tools—now ready for piloting—bring together data from applications, reports, convenings, and available public sources, complemented by structured reflection through learning spaces. They enable portfolio-level learning around key questions on the health and composition of the portfolio, grantees’ capacity to anticipate and adapt, the depth and quality of collaboration and peer learning, and the broader factors influencing funding for democracy.

With the appointment of Maria Guerra-Arias as a dedicated Impact and Learning Manager, we are entering 2026 focused on consolidation, foresight, and collective reflection—ensuring learning actively shapes future funding and partnerships.



Map of grantees

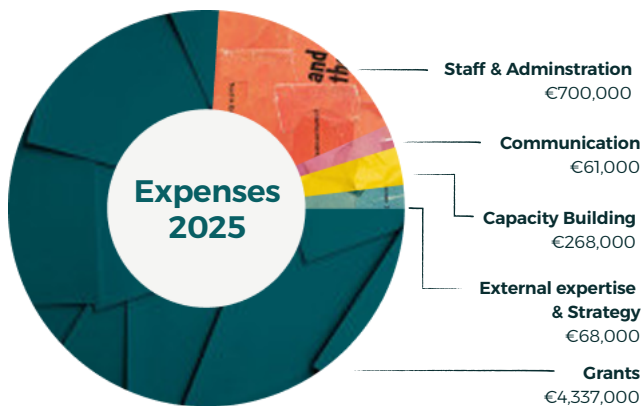
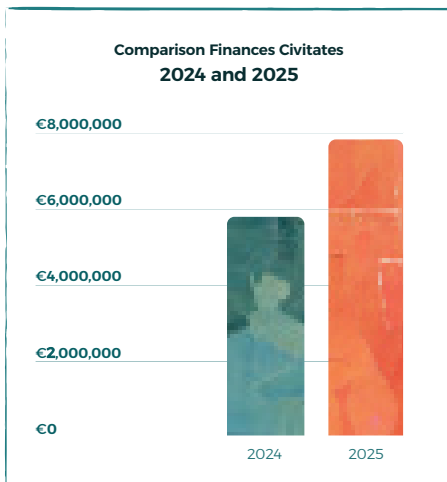


- Bulgarian Fund for Women
- Resource Center for Public Participation
- Amnesty International Slovakia
- Civil College Foundation
- Fonds pour une presse libre
- Vox Public
- The National Federation of Polish NGOs
- Citizens Network Watchdog Poland
- A Sud - Ecologia e Cooperazione
- Amnesty International HU
- Bulgarian Center for Non profit law
- Ligue des droits de l'Homme
- ACCEPT Association
- VIA IURIS
- Democratiser la Politique
- Austrian League for Human Rights
- Aufstehn.at - Verein zur Förderung zivilgesellschaftlicher Partizipation
- LEFO - Beratung, Bildung und Begleitung für Migrantinnen
- Amnesty International Österreich
- Kinderbüro Universität Wien gCmbH
- Documentation and Counseling Center Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism

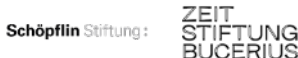
- Féministes contre le cyberharcèlement
- CEE Digital Democracy Watch
- Uplift - A People-Powered Community
- Hope and Courage Collective
- Point de Contact
- La Quadrature du Net
- Alia, associació de dones per la recerca i acció
- Wikimedia Europe
- PublicSpaces
- Expert Forum Association
- Panoptikon Foundation
- AI Forensics
- EU DisinfoLab
- Stichting "Article 19"
- Irish Council for Civil Liberties
- European Digital Rights - EDRI
- Bits of Freedom
- Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Trans, Bisexuales, Intersexuales y más (FELGTBI+)
- Hungarian Civil Liberties Union
- Fundación Maldita.es
- Irish Election Hub
- CorpWatch

- Atlatszo Erdely
- Civio
- Divergente
- Direkt36
- IRPI
- Pismo
- Pod Crto
- Press One
- Solomon
- MásPúblico, Sociedad Cooperativa
- FADA Collective
- FACTA S.R.L. - IMPRESA SOCIALE
- Cittadini Reattivi ETS
- Investigative center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK)
- Info Space - Mediapool
- Oštro - Croatia
- Fundacja Reporterów
- atlatszo.hu Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft.
- ClReN
- Investigace
- Oštro - Slovenia
- Siena
- Context.ro
- OCCRP

Finances








Our Foundation Partners












Annex

Civitates' grantees 2025-2027







Civic Power - Europe

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Agility Squad (Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law Foundation)	2 years	A-Squad unites 11 organizations, including six CSOs and five cross-sectoral partners, combining diverse expertise in human rights, environmental protection, social inclusion, and civic advocacy. It includes marginalized community representation and leverages skills in sociology, communications, and IT. By integrating these perspectives, the alliance delivers a coordinated, strategic response to threats against civic space, fostering resilience and promoting sustainable, inclusive civic engagement throughout Bulgaria.
	Aufstehn.at - Verein zur Förderung zivilgesellschaftlicher Partizipation	2 years	Aufstehn.at is amplifying grassroots participation across Austria through its petition platform, mein.aufstehn.at. The platform supports local, regional, and national initiatives advocating for democracy, human rights, and social justice, while tackling the rise of extremism. By empowering individuals and organisations to design and conduct impactful campaigns, Aufstehn.at connects movements and amplifies voices for democratic values, ensuring that civic space remains vibrant and accessible to all.
	Civilisation Coalition (Amnesty International) -	2 years	The Civilisation Coalition is an informal network of 41 Hungarian CSOs united to defend civic space and liberal democratic values. It fosters strategic collaboration, information sharing, and solidarity amid growing threats to civil society. Covering human rights, rule of law, environmental protection, housing, anti-corruption, Roma inclusion, and refugee rights, the coalition is led by Amnesty International Hungary, with member organizations actively participating in project implementation and advocacy efforts.
	Equal Faces: Coalition against Racial Bias in the neighbourhoods (Ligue des droits de l'Homme)	2 years	The coalition unites the Ligue des droits de l'Homme, focused on combating rights violations, and the Fédération des centres socioculturels, which engages with youth in working-class neighborhoods. Observing that these young people face heightened racial discrimination and police harassment, the coalition aims to prevent rights infringements, document abuses, and raise public awareness, especially amid rising far-right ideologies and societal bias, thereby supporting greater civic participation and protection of vulnerable communities.
	The Anti-Discrimination Coalition/RESPECT Platform (ACCEPT Association) -	2 years	The collaboration between the Anti-Discrimination Coalition and Platform RESPECT unites decades of human rights advocacy in Romania. The Anti-Discrimination Coalition, founded in 2000 with 19 NGOs, has shaped anti-discrimination laws and promoted equality for minorities. Platform RESPECT, established in 2017, focuses on LGBT, sexual, and reproductive rights, notably opposing the 2018 anti-LGBT referendum. Together, they safeguard civic space and protect vulnerable communities against discriminatory agendas.
	The Civic Platform for Democracy (Via Iuris)	2 years	The Civic Platform for Democracy is a coalition of 68 member organizations and 5 observers, dedicated to strengthening civic society and democracy in Slovakia. The platform represents a wide range of civil society organizations, which collaborate regionally to tackle democratic challenges and increase their collective impact. The coalition is currently transitioning from an informal group to a formal entity, with a newly defined legal structure.






Civic Power - Italy

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	ARCI APS	1 year	ARCI APS, founded in 1957, is one of Italy's largest independent civil society organizations, uniting over one million members through thousands of associations. It promotes inclusive communities via grassroots activism, solidarity, and cultural engagement. Working on human rights, migration, education, environment, and social justice, ARCI implements national and international projects and plays a leading advocacy role in European networks, partnering with UNHCR, ministries, and civil society organizations.
	A Sud - Ecologia e Cooperazione	1 year	Since 2003, A Sud has advanced environmental and climate justice by linking social rights with civic participation. As co-founder of the "In Difesa di" network, it supports human rights defenders and eco-activists facing repression, offering legal and organizational assistance and collaborating internationally to strengthen protections and resist shrinking civic space.
	The Good Lobby Italia	1 year	The Good Lobby, founded in Brussels (2015) and active in Italy since 2019, strengthens civil society engagement and promotes laws protecting democracy and civic space. Through campaigns, SLAPPs advocacy, strategic litigation, workshops, and communication networks, it equips citizens, journalists, and organizations to defend collective rights and democratic integrity.
	info.nodes	1 year	info.nodes, founded by journalists and activists, advances civil society and media innovation in Italy. Focusing on social and climate justice, human rights, and free speech, it produces investigations, organizes events and training, and partners with organizations like ActionAid. Projects include cross-border reporting, AI and human rights exhibitions, and journalist incubators.
	StraLi	1 year	StraLi is an independent Italian non-profit specializing in strategic litigation to defend fundamental rights. It addresses digital rights, detention and health, freedom of expression, and business and human rights, collaborating with NGOs, universities, and international partners through legal advocacy, research, workshops, and court interventions to protect civil liberties.
	Pro Bono Italia ETS	1 year	Pro Bono Italia ETS promotes human rights in Italy by connecting CSOs and disadvantaged individuals with pro bono lawyers. Handling 250 annual cases via a digital platform, it supports detainees, Roma, LGBTQI, refugees, and migrants, while offering workshops and leveraging international networks to strengthen civic space and sustainable impact.
	Fantapolitica	1 year	Fantapolitica, Italy's only youth-led political empowerment organization, supports under-30s—especially women, racialized, queer, working-class, and Southern communities—to influence politics. Through training, mentoring, and platforms like CivicGrid, it engages 90+ social justice groups, mentors young changemakers, and advances climate, housing, gender, and wealth justice.
	soc. coop. Pot in Pot	1 year	Pot in Pot, a non-profit cooperative in Basilicata, Italy, promotes active citizenship, inclusive education, and social innovation through participatory learning, gamification, and co-creation. Its projects engage children, youth, and communities in civic engagement, digital wellbeing, and soft skills development, offering initiatives like urban games, theatre-based NEET programs, and nationwide educational tools.
	Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione - ASGI APS	1 year	ASGI protects the rights of migrants, focusing on asylum, freedom of movement, and fundamental rights violations in Italy and Europe. Through strategic litigation, monitoring borders and detention facilities, and Euro-Mediterranean projects—including in Limine—it implements 22 national initiatives in 2025, collaborating with national and international partners to strengthen advocacy and impact.

Tech & Democracy








Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	ACCEPT Association	2 years	ACCEPT is Romania's leading LGBT+ rights organization, working since 1996 to combat discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes through strategic litigation and advocacy as well as legal aid and psychological support to victims. The organization played a key role in decriminalizing homosexuality, securing Romania's first anti-discrimination law, and winning landmark European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) cases that advanced LGBT+ rights. ACCEPT leads Bucharest Pride and award-winning public campaigns like #ComeOutWithMe and Protect All Families.
	Allia - Donestech - Fembloc	2 years	Allia is a non-profit organization promoting the rights and well-being of women and individuals from diverse sexual, gender, racial, and functional backgrounds through audiovisual documentaries and creative projects. Donestech was founded in 2006 as a cyberfeminist collective embedded in Allia. It critically examines gender dynamics in Information, Communication, and Relationship Technologies (ICRT). Through research, advocacy, and systemic change, ALIA/Donestech advance gender equality in the digital sphere. Its multidisciplinary team of 12 experts-including developers, technologists, designers, lawyers, and psychologists-works to create a more inclusive and equitable technological landscape. Inside ALIA/Donestech a specific team operates Fembloc, a feminist helpline, supporting victims of gender-based violence.
	Bits of freedom	2 years	Founded in the Netherlands in 1999, for over two decades Bits of Freedom's mission has been to shape the internet in support of an open and just society. They believe that a strong democratic rule of law is essential for a society built on freedom and equality. They combine legal, technical and political work with public communication and community engagement: their team includes lawyers, technical researchers, campaigners and action researchers. Their work is both at national and EU level.
	CEE Digital Democracy Watch	2 years	CEE Digital Democracy Watch, founded in 2024, provides decision makers with expertise at the intersection of digital regulation and freedom of expression in modern democracies, monitors the elections in the online sphere and champions establishment of robust, independent oversight frameworks grounded in European legislation. They do so through policy processes within Poland (especially with the Ministry of Digital Affairs), the European Union, the OECD, and the G20.
	Expert Forum Association in coalition with Apt	2 years	Expert Forum (EFOR) is a Bucharest-based think tank specialised in administration reform, public sector integrity, anti-corruption, and combating disinformation. EFOR enhances Romania's electoral integrity through independent observation, research, and advocacy. Flagship initiatives like <i>VotCorectro</i> and <i>BaniPartidelor.ro</i> promote transparency in elections and political financing. EFOR is also working on digital governance and online transparency, analyzing disinformation networks and regulatory challenges in the digital space. It actively engages in policy debates on platform accountability, contributing research on algorithmic amplification, content moderation, and the risks of online manipulation.
	Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Trans, Bisexuales, Intersesuales y más (FELGTBI+)	2 years	The FELGTBI+ (Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Trans, Bisexuales, Intersesuales y más) is the leading organization in Spain advocating for the rights of the LGBTBI+ community. Established to defend equality and promote social inclusion, FELGTBI+ works to eliminate discrimination, violence, and hate speech against individuals based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. The organization unites diverse LGBTBI+ groups and individuals across Spain, providing support, resources, and guidance. Through legal and policy advocacy, public awareness campaigns, and community-based actions, FELGTBI+ strives to create a more equitable society where all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, can live freely and safely.

Tech & Democracy



Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Hungarian Civil Liberties Union in coalition with K-Monitor	2 years	The Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU) is a leading human rights NGO in Hungary, working since 1994 to defend civil liberties and promote the rule of law. The organization provides free legal aid, strategic litigation, advocacy, and public awareness campaigns to protect fundamental rights, including freedom of speech, privacy, and digital rights. HCLU has been at the forefront of legal battles against government overreach, censorship, and surveillance, and has played a key role in defending press freedom and challenging restrictive laws. It also engages in election transparency efforts, and access to information cases.
	Maldita.es	2 years	Maldita.es (or Maldita) is a non-profit foundation dedicated to public interest journalism, combating misinformation, and promoting news integrity. It operates as an independent media outlet in Spain committed to fact-checking, research, and civic empowerment. With a collaborative approach, it engages with the public through innovative formats and technology, and audience participation. Maldita is a verified signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and a founding member of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCNSN), making it a key player in the fight against disinformation in Spanish communities. It strengthens media resilience and informs public debate, contributing to a more democratic society.
	Panoptikon Foundation	2 years	Panoptikon Foundation was founded in 2009 with a mission to protect human rights and agency in the context of growing surveillance and intrusive information technologies. They work on national and European level. Through research, litigation and strategic communication they expose risks related to commercial and public surveillance. They keep track of new legislation that regulates technology, develop human-centric solutions, advocate for them and test them in practice.
	PublicSpaces	2 years	The PublicSpaces foundation is a coalition of public organisations and civic society organisations in public media, cultural heritage, education, healthcare, festivals, museums, and municipalities, working together to reclaim the internet as a force for the common good. The mission of PublicSpaces is to support a digital public ecosystem that operates on public values rather than on models of surveillance capitalism. PublicSpaces promotes a digital ecosystem that is (i) decentralized and federated, (ii) plural in purpose, (iii) self-governing, and (iv) compatible with and complementary to existing networks.
	Stichting Article 19	2 years	Stichting ARTICLE 19 (ARTICLE 19 Europe) is a leading voice in the defence of freedom of expression and access to information across Europe and Central Asia. As a regional office of the global freedom of expression organisation ARTICLE 19, it shapes the conversation and develop pioneering responses to emerging and longstanding threats at the intersection of fundamental rights, technology, and policies. They push back against censorship online and offline, and safeguard independent media, and civic space, while promoting community resistance against abuses of power.

In both the EU and globally, one of their priorities is to ensure that tech regulations are enforced in ways that uphold fundamental rights and democratic principles.





Media

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Atlatszo Non-profit Ltd	2 years	Atlatszo.hu is Hungary's first nonprofit investigative newsroom, founded in 2011 to promote transparency, accountability, and press freedom. It is well-known for its strong track record of investigations on public spending, state capture, and systemic corruption. Over the years it has grown into leading Hungarian investigative outlet despite frequent threats, administrative harassment and smear campaigns by government-loyalist media and authorities.
	Cittadini Reattivi ETS	2 years	Cittadini is a public interest journalism organization, known for its independence, community-driven model, and focus on environmental and anti-corruption issues. It has opened public databases, trained citizens and journalists, and launched FOIA4Italy campaign, which helped pass the Freedom of Information Act. With over 100 investigations and projects, it collaborates with media, universities, NGOs, and European networks to strengthen transparency and accountability.
	CLIMÁTICA (MásPúblico, Sociedad Cooperativa)	2 years	Más Público is a democratic, non-profit media cooperative built on collective intelligence, solidarity, and member participation. Through a co-ownership buy-in model, it fosters collaborative governance and accessibility, including plans for democratic pricing for students. Its outlet, CLIMÁTICA, advances climate literacy with 4,000+ articles, a podcast, and magazines, exposing greenwashing and fossil fuel lobbying. Recognized for coverage like the 2024 DANA storm, it partners internationally with outlets such as Carbon Brief and Grist.
	FACTA	2 years	FACTA is a niche non-profit digital magazine and media organization with a focused commitment to producing high-quality, science-based investigative journalism bridging the gap between science and society. FACTA produces specialized content on urgent environmental, health, and climate issues affecting communities often overlooked by mainstream media, publishing in both Italian and English to reach a broader market.
	FADA Collective	2 years	Founded in 2019 by nine Italian investigative journalists and formally registered in 2022, FADA addresses the lack of space for critical thinking and underreported stories in Italy. Its award-winning investigations focus on urgent issues such as the climate crisis, migration, border policies, food systems, social movements, and accountability of state and private actors. Frequently published in Italian and international outlets, FADA often works through cross-border collaborations linking local and global realities.
	Fundacja Reporterów	2 years	Founded in 2010 by award-winning investigative journalists, Fundacja Reporterów responds to the democracy backslide and growing disinformation in Poland and Central Europe by providing high-quality, data-driven reporting. It publishes two non-profit, investigative outlets: vqquare.org (a cross-border English-language platform covering Central and Eastern Europe) and frontstory.pl (Polish-language investigative magazine), along with additional journalistic formats, such as newsletters (Goulash, Sled2) and a podcast (Podcast Śledczy).
	Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak	2 years	Founded in 2018 after journalist Ján Kuciak's murder, the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak (ICJK) is a leading Slovak investigative journalism organization. It investigates corruption, organized crime, money laundering, disinformation, environmental crimes, and terrorism, including exposing a political deepfake. Collaborating with national outlets and international projects like Dubai Unlocked and Russian Asset Tracker, ICJK is a member of networks such as OCCRP, GIJN, and VSquare.org, earning multiple awards and influencing legal actions and political resignations.



Media

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Mediapool (Info Space Foundation)	2 years	The Info Space Foundation, a Bulgarian non-profit founded in 2001, promotes independent journalism and civil society values. Its flagship project, Mediapool.bg, Bulgaria's first online news outlet, delivers high-quality reporting and investigative journalism on politics, business, energy, society, and culture. Mediapool participates in international initiatives like PULSE and MediaWise, has collaborated on digital media projects, and earned the Journalism Trust Initiative certification, with investigations such as toxic air exposure prompting public and governmental responses.
	Ostro, Center for investigative journalism in the Adriatic region - Croatia	2 years	Ostro HR, founded in 2021 during the Pandora Papers, is transitioning into full independence from its Slovenian parent. A small but dynamic investigative and data journalism team, its impactful investigations expose corruption, organized crime, environmental harm, and disinformation, including Russian-linked ownership in Croatian real estate. Active in global projects like Russian Asset Tracker and Cyprus Confidential, Ostro belongs to OCCRP and GJIN networks.






Media - Emergency Appeal

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Context.ro	3 years	Context.ro is an independent investigative journalism NGO in Romania, exposing corruption, organized crime, foreign influence, and disinformation. Using experienced reporters and AI-powered fact-checking, it has performed over 150,000 checks on TikTok and expanded during the 2024-25 presidential election, publishing 31 articles on disinformation around Călin Georgescu's victory. Despite its impact, a sudden USAID/NED funding freeze cut 40% of its budget, threatening vital operations.
	Cyprus Investigative Reporting Network CIREN	3 years	CIREN, founded by Greek and Turkish Cypriot journalists, is a pioneering investigative journalism organization exposing interconnected corruption across Cyprus. Established independently in 2024 with OCCRP support, it unites journalists from divided communities to produce impactful, cross-community investigations covering the entire island. Recognized for its important role, CIREN faced challenges after abrupt U.S. funding cuts in January 2025, which forced some downsizing and scaling back of operations.
	Investigace	3 years	Investigace.cz, based in Prague, is an investigative journalism outlet exposing organized crime, offshore finance abuses, and foreign influence. Collaborating with OCCRP and ICJ, it contributed to the Pandora Papers, revealing undeclared assets of former Czech PM Andrej Babiš, who subsequently targeted the outlet. In February 2025, abrupt U.S. funding cuts, covering 18% of its budget, forced austerity measures, including salary freezes and project cancellations, while the organization seeks alternative funding to continue its impactful reporting.
	Investigative journalism center Siena	3 years	Siena.it, launched in 2019, is Lithuania's only media outlet fully dedicated to investigative journalism. A member of OCCRP and GJIN, it collaborates on major cross-border investigations with ICJ. Despite its youth, Siena has uncovered fraud, corruption, and money laundering, recovering over €650,000 in fines and influencing political accountability, including PM Gintautas Paluckas' resignation. The abrupt loss of U.S. government funding has seriously impacted its financial stability, threatening its capacity for high-impact reporting.

Media - Emergency Appeal

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Organised Crime and anti-Corruption Project	3 years	OCCRP, founded in 2007 with 201 full-time staff, is a global investigative journalism network exposing high-level corruption, organized crime, and tax evasion. It publishes cross-border investigations like Dubai Unlocked and NarcoFiles, provides member centers with training, legal support, editorial guidance, and tech tools, and develops platforms such as Aleph and Confluence. OCCRP also partners with activists, lawyers, and researchers to ensure uncovered evidence is used to fight global crime and corruption.
	Oštro, Center for investigative journalism in the Adriatic region - Slovenia	3 years	Oštro, Slovenia's leading independent investigative journalism center, produces high-quality investigations on systemic injustice, corruption, environmental harm, and public accountability in Slovenia and the Adriatic region. Known for investigative rigor and contextual depth, it partners with regional and international networks like OCCRP, ICIJ, and BIRN to cover transnational issues. Supported by European and global funders, Oštro faces financial challenges after recent U.S. funding cuts but remains the country's most established investigative outlet.

Future of Europe

Logo	Organisation	Grant Duration	Work Programme
	Culture Action Europe	1 year	Culture Action Europe (CAE) is the major European network of cultural organizations, artists, and policymakers that advocates for culture to be a central part of public and decision-making processes.
	Civil Society Europe	1 year	Civil Society Europe is the coordination of civil society organizations (CSOs) at the EU level, representing millions of people across the continent. Its mission is to advocate for CSOs, facilitate dialogue between organizations and EU policymakers, and strengthen civic space and participation in decision-making. The organization was founded to create a united voice for CSOs on key issues like fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law.
	European Federation of Journalists	1 year	The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) is the largest organization of journalists in Europe, representing over 320,000 journalists in 70 organizations across 44 countries. Based in Brussels, it was founded in 1994 to defend the social and professional rights of journalists and promote freedom of expression. The EFJ fights for decent work, journalistic independence, and public service values across all media sectors, advocating for journalists' rights and safety.
	European Civic Forum	1 year	The European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs that works to protect civic space, promote civic participation, and foster civil dialogue for a more democratic, equal, and solidary Europe. Founded in 2005, the organization works to build civil society's ownership of Europe through alliance building, collective thinking, and joint campaigning.
	Center for Sustainable Media	1 year	The Center for Sustainable Media is a think tank and consultancy working to improve the financial sustainability of independent newsrooms in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. It partners with digital publishers, media funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders to advance the long-term viability of independent journalism. Through its advocacy, the Center promotes equitable media funding policies and innovative financing models.

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Civitates

The European Democracy Fund

secretariat@civitates-eu.org

