



Civitates

The European Democracy Fund

The Future of Democracy in Europe

Insights from civil society, media and
philanthropy on renewing democracy



October 2026

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The future starts with what we do today



Why this report matters now

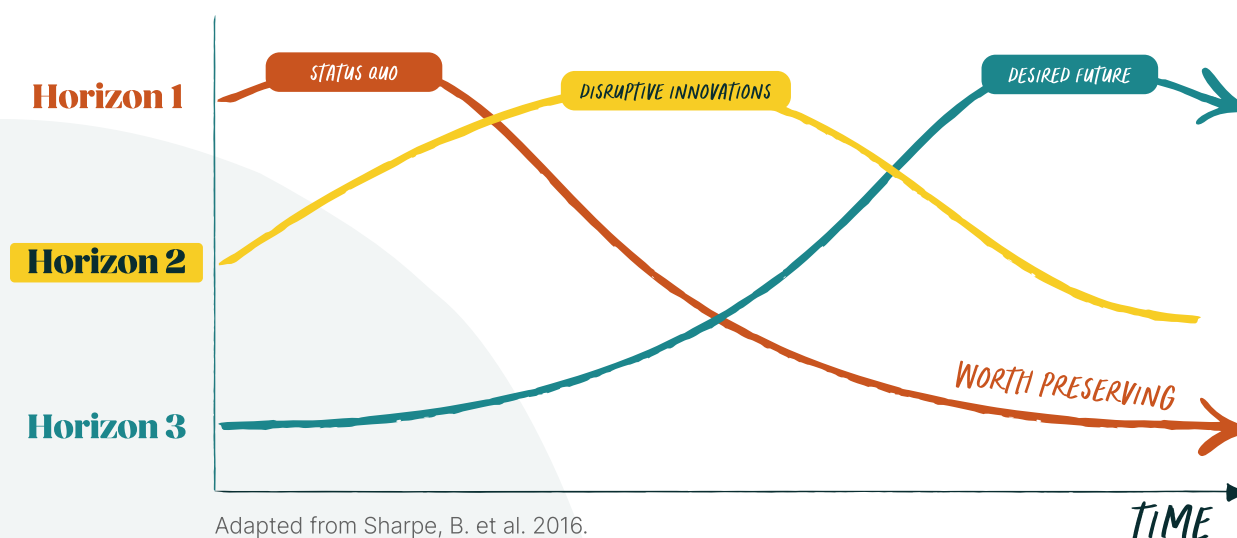
Democracy in Europe is under sustained pressure. Civic space is shrinking, and practices once seen as illiberal, such as surveillance and foreign-agent laws, are becoming normal. The people and organisations who defend democracy are feeling this most directly. Civil society, independent media and digital-rights organisations face declining public trust, financial pressure, legal harassment, security threats and burnout, all at once. Major cuts in public aid from the United States and other donors have made things harder still, leaving a large gap in both funding and leadership. Yet the challenge is not only external. Across the field, there is a widely shared sense that old assumptions and familiar ways of working are no longer producing the progress needed.

The window for action is still open, but it is closing. Countries that have gone through democratic decline offer a clear lesson: pro-democracy actors often failed to protect civic space while they still could, and later wished they had acted sooner and more boldly. Once restrictive and authoritarian practices take hold, each day makes them harder to reverse. That is why the tipping point is not a single moment somewhere in the future. In effect, it is every day. The field needs to look beyond the crisis in front of it and prepare for less predictable futures, acting more boldly and in a more coordinated way than before.

About this report

This report brings together the views of civil society leaders, journalists, digital-rights experts and funders gathered at the Civitates General Assembly (Athens, October 2025) and the Civitates Forum (Bruges, March 2026). It draws on plenary discussions, in-depth interviews, story harvesting, live polling, collective sense-making and foresight exercises, and reflects the knowledge of people working directly on democracy's front lines. Throughout, it uses a "three horizons" framing:¹ Horizon 1 is the present system and its decline, Horizon 2 is the transition in which established models stop working and new ones are tested, and Horizon 3 is the future we want.

Three Horizons Model



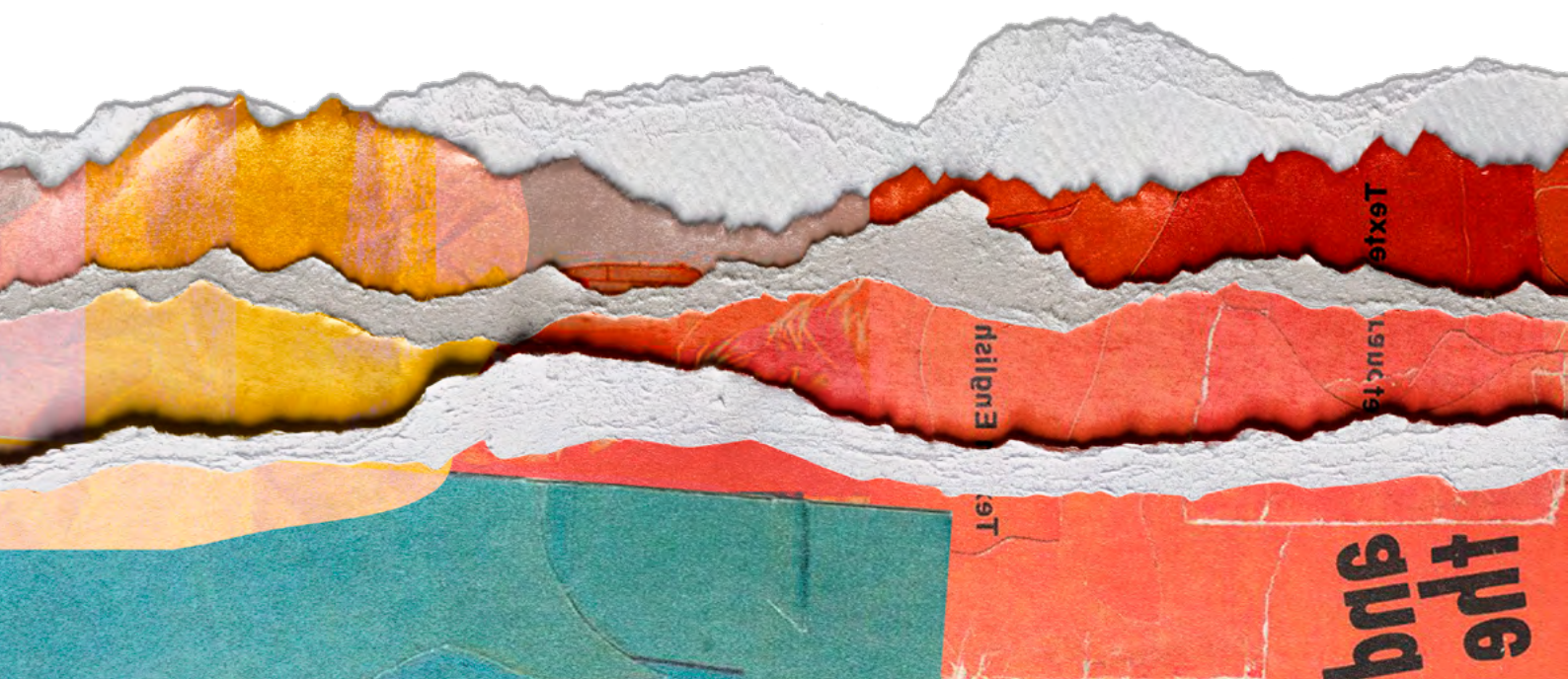
This report looks first at the present (Horizon 1), then at the future we want (Horizon 3), and only then at the transition between them (Horizon 2), as the path forward only makes sense once the destination is clear.

The report aims to help civil society and funders think beyond the immediate crisis facing liberal democracies and to encourage a shared discussion about the democracy we want to build. It is intended to support better preparation for several possible futures, to offer practical recommendations for how civil society and philanthropy can better meet the moment, and to strengthen collaboration between the people and organisations working towards democratic renewal.

Findings for democracy's future

These findings emerged from the conversations behind this report and shape the recommendations for civil society and funders that follow.

- **Defending democracy is not enough: we also need to renew it.** The field needs a clearer and more compelling vision of the democracy it wants to build.
- **Democratic renewal must begin with listening.** Civil society needs to understand people's genuine concerns and reconnect democracy with their everyday lives.
- **No organisation or sector can meet these challenges alone.** Civil society and funders need deeper collaboration and broader coalitions, including with unfamiliar allies.
- **Civil society and philanthropy both need to change how they work.** Greater flexibility, resilience, shared power and willingness to experiment will be essential.
- **We need to prepare for several possible futures.** Foresight can help the field anticipate change, make better decisions now and remain effective under different conditions.



Horizon 1

Every day is a tipping point

Democracy under pressure

Across Europe, democracy is being eroded gradually, through the capture of institutions rather than sudden collapse. Anti-democratic actors co-opt democratic language and electoral legitimacy to narrow the space for pluralism and civil society from the inside, including by taking control of the judiciary. The major democracy indexes agree on this trend: the V-Dem Institute finds that the share of the world's population living in liberal democracies is at its lowest in fifty years,² and Freedom House has recorded twenty consecutive years of declining global freedom.³

Authoritarian tactics and narratives are also spreading across borders, helped by new technology and money from powerful backers. Foreign-agent laws are a clear example, with versions of the same model now proposed or adopted in several European countries. These ideas take hold across the political spectrum: well-meaning actors reach for the same tools to protect Europe from authoritarian threats, yet measures that cut against the rule of law tend to hit the wrong targets and deepen division. Meanwhile, a logic of permanent emergency and securitisation is shaping debate and policy. Protest is increasingly criminalised, with peaceful civil disobedience met by criminal charges and new restrictions justified on grounds of public order and national security.⁴

Pressure on the people defending democracy

Civil society organisations and independent media face many of the same tactics: strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), surveillance, security threats, smear campaigns and political pressure. Recorded SLAPP cases across Europe have climbed into the thousands,⁵ journalists increasingly have to assume they are under surveillance, and in several countries public broadcasters face direct political attack. All this comes as technology platforms and disinformation are reshaping public debate, weakening people's ability to communicate across differences and undermining the business model that independent media depend on.

These pressures come at a high cost, just as resources are shrinking. Defending against lawsuits, audits and security threats takes money and time that funders do not always account for. The loss of bilateral funding from the United States and other public donors has put further strain on the field.⁶ More organisations now compete for a smaller pool of support. But the strain is not only financial: the human and emotional cost is just as significant. Constant pressure and overlapping crises produce anxiety, exhaustion, burnout and cynicism, and many organisations now spend a growing share of their time simply protecting their ability to operate.

Democracy is losing its connection to people's lives

Alongside the pressure on institutions and the people defending them, democracy is losing ground with the public itself. Many people feel unheard and unable to influence the decisions that shape their lives: only around a third of EU

citizens say they trust their national government.⁷ For many, democracy seems to have little to say about the things that matter most to them, such as housing, jobs, security and the cost of living. Authoritarian movements have stepped into that gap. They are gaining support partly because they respond to genuine concerns, even when their answers are dangerous or exclusionary. Their message is often built on grievance, casting other groups as the enemy and deepening polarisation. Well-resourced anti-gender movements have gone further, turning gender itself into a mobilising fault line. We also can't assume the next generation will push back: recent elections show significant youth support for authoritarian-leaning parties.⁸

2027 is shaping up to be a stress test, with closely contested elections expected in France, Germany, Poland and Italy, whose outcomes could reshape the direction of the EU project.

Why action cannot wait

These pressures are intensifying and increasingly interconnected. 2027 is shaping up to be a stress test, with closely contested elections expected in France, Germany, Poland and Italy, whose outcomes could reshape the direction of the EU project. Waiting until democratic space closes further will only make action harder. We need to examine not only what is going wrong, but what we are trying to build and how we might get there.

Horizon 3

Democracy needs a story that people can believe in

Defending democracy is not enough

Horizon 1 describes a system in decline. Horizon 3 asks what we want in its place, and on one point participants agreed: the old model is no longer working, and the institutions of representative democracy have never worked as well as claimed. Most believe democracy needs to be renewed, but the field does not yet have a clear, shared picture of what that renewal should produce. As one participant put it, the field is, in effect, trying to sell people a model with many failings, “reheating a frozen dish they didn’t want in the first place.”

That does not mean abandoning existing institutions. Defending them remains necessary, but it cannot be the whole answer, and it should not be uncritical. Systems are ultimately judged by the conditions they deliver, so democracy must be judged partly by whether it improves people’s lives and gives them meaningful influence. The difficulty is how to criticise what has not worked without feeding anti-democratic narratives. Yet an honest, shared critique could also help build bridges across the political spectrum.



The current situation is serious, but it is not inevitable.

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Democracy must speak to people’s lives

While a complete shared vision does not yet exist, the more hopeful narrative that emerged rests on a set of principles. A renewed democracy should:

- protect equity, pluralism, freedom, human rights and the rule of law;
- give people meaningful influence over the decisions that shape their everyday lives, such as housing, jobs and the cost of living, which EU citizens name as a top priority;⁹
- support the integrity of the information ecosystem through trustworthy and independent journalism;
- tackle growing inequality and the imbalances of economic and political power that weaken democratic institutions;
- involve young people directly in shaping the future, rather than treating them as its recipients;
- keep human agency at the centre of technology;
- strengthen relationships across communities, generations and borders;
- remain open and connected to the wider world rather than turning inward.

Build the vision *with* people, not for them

Developing this vision must itself be participatory. Civil society and funders should not define democracy's future without the people who will live in it, and should involve the public, including young people, in reimagining democracy itself. As one interviewee put it:

"No state or constituency is born democratic. You become it. And as long as we are questioning it, struggling for it, trying to live it in different ways, to reinvent it, it's alive."

Turning these principles into a concrete, compelling picture of the future, one that resonates with citizens and can compete with the certainties offered by anti-democratic movements, is unfinished work, which requires a broader public conversation.



What kind of democracy are we asking people to believe in?

Horizon 2

Shape change, do not just respond to it

Between the present and the future

Horizon 2 is the uncertain space between the present system and the future we want: the zone of transition and disruption in which established approaches stop working and new ones are tested. Some of these new approaches prop up the old system; others point to something genuinely new. The path will not be linear, and there is no single model for change: what works in one national context may not work in another. Many of the moves described in this report sit in this space: they help the field cross from the old system to the new, while defending what still works and holding a clear picture of the long-term goal.

We need to do things differently

Moving through this transition will require civil society and funders alike to hold their values steady while adapting their strategies and narratives. Participants pointed to a set of shifts:

- moving from reacting to events towards anticipating change;
- experimenting with new approaches and learning from failure;
- building resilience before crises occur, not after;
- embracing flexibility, agility and trust;
- developing wider coalitions around concrete shared goals;
- listening more closely to the public and testing new narratives;
- sharing power, risk and decision-making;
- investing in systemic collaboration and the infrastructure that sustains it.

None of these shifts requires abandoning existing work. The task is to defend what still functions while creating room to test what could replace what does not.

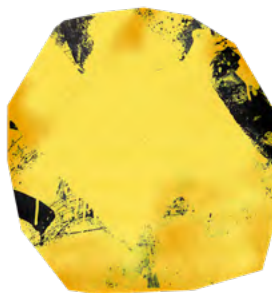
Prepare for several possible futures

Foresight is a structured way of exploring how the future might unfold, so that organisations can prepare for a range of possibilities rather than bet on one. It helps them test their assumptions and notice where “weak signals” are turning into real change. Beginning at the 2025 General Assembly and continuing at the 2026 Forum, Civitates’ partners explored six possible futures for Europe in 2040. These were developed from grantee input, trend reports and expert analysis, and partners then stress-tested the Civitates funding strategy against them.

The scenarios span a wide range. At one end, Europe becomes more united and prosperous: climate change is brought under control, technology serves the public good and citizens gain new ways to take part directly in decisions. Others imagine a Europe that has turned inward, protecting its core freedoms behind fortified borders while handing more decisions to technocrats. The harder scenarios describe a continent under permanent emergency rule, the break-up of the EU into competing nationalist states or walled city-states, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) used as an instrument of surveillance and control. In another, the institutions of democracy survive only as a façade, while real decisions are made by corporate interests and algorithms. Across several of these futures, democratic participation retreats to the local level and civic freedoms are traded for security or stability. These scenarios were designed to inspire and spark debate, and do not reflect Civitates’ official position. For a full list of the scenarios, see the **Civitates Forum Report** on our website.

Working through these scenarios helps identify actions that would be valuable across several possible futures. Support for independent media and investigative journalism as well as grassroots organising, for example, was seen as important under every scenario. Other actions stood out for the harder futures: secure and alternative communication channels, community radio, which is comparatively resilient, and alternative forms of finance. Several scenarios also raised the possibility that the EU itself could weaken or break apart, a question the field has only begun to address.

We cannot know which future will emerge, but we can become better prepared for more than one.



Signs of hope: Democratic renewal is already taking shape

Participation rooted in people's lives

Despite the pressures described in this report, there are real signs that democracy is renewing itself, often from the grassroots and outside formal institutions. New forms of activism, more networked, more local and less formal, are rising and in some cases taking the place of traditional NGOs. The wave of housing-rights protests across Spain¹⁰ and Portugal¹¹ is a clear recent example of movements connecting democratic participation to people's most immediate concerns. Citizens' assemblies, town halls and deliberative processes are creating more meaningful forms of participation than one-off consultations, and older mechanisms such as faith-based groups, neighbourhood associations, meet-ups, cooperatives, unions and shared civic spaces are helping to build social cohesion, solidarity and local participation from the ground up. Newer, informal tools such as local WhatsApp groups are doing the same, often connecting neighbours who would not otherwise meet.

New alliances are crossing old boundaries

Collaboration was by far the strongest theme of the Civitates Forum, and the clearest sign that a new way of working is emerging from the failures of the old. Shared threats are pushing civil society organisations to look beyond their own countries and work together. Where civic space is shrinking, the old line between journalists and activists is fading, as the two join forces to protect sources and whistle-blowers and to slow the spread of disinformation. The results are visible: investigative journalism in Europe is flourishing, largely because more of it now happens through cross-border and cross-disciplinary networks.

The circle of concern is widening too. Worry about democratic decline is no longer confined to the usual actors. It is reaching business, academia, youth groups and faith-based organisations, opening the door to a much broader set of allies.



A renewed democracy does not need to be invented entirely from scratch. Parts of it are already emerging.

Independent media is reinventing itself

New media formats are reaching people who were previously out of reach: citizen journalism rooted in community spaces, podcasts, documentaries and short-form video aimed at younger audiences. This matters because social media and video are now among the most-used sources of news.¹² Engaging with values-aligned influencers is also emerging as an effective way to reach new audiences. Solutions journalism and “pop-up newsrooms”, which spend time in a place to understand it, are helping outlets reconnect with communities. Outlets are also finding new ways to sustain themselves, experimenting with new revenue models and more direct relationships with supporters. In Romania, small independent outlets have created a shared platform to attract advertisers to their combined audience, earning much more than any could alone.

Pushback on harmful tech

Pressure is also building on the technology that shapes public debate. Citizens are becoming more aware of how commercial platforms and AI affect their wellbeing and public debate: across the EU, around two-thirds of people are concerned about disinformation, online hate speech, misleading AI-generated content and the protection of their personal data, and many want the EU to do more to protect them.¹³ Courts are beginning to act on these concerns: a Dutch court recently required Meta to respect users' choice of a non-profiling feed.¹⁴ Scepticism of United States-based technology is growing, along with real interest in human-centred alternatives. For the first time, many media outlets are seriously considering platforms outside the dominant technology companies.

Recommendations for civil society

Strategies civil society organisations recommended for adapting to a changing environment.

Anticipate change and focus on what works

When pressures are constant and conditions change quickly, it is easy for the urgent to crowd out the important. Many organisations spend much of their energy responding to the latest attack or crisis. Participants urged a shift from reactive to proactive approaches, recognising that there are multiple paths to change and no one-size-fits-all model. What makes this shift possible is a long-term vision, or “north star”, that guides organisations through difficult choices while allowing tactics to evolve. Positions on complex issues (e.g. organisational adoption of AI, reliance on dominant tech platforms, compromise in coalitions, closeness to politics and the public sector) may need to change over time. It is acceptable to take time to reassess them and to adapt the narrative along the way, as long as organisations remain true to their values.

Planning ahead also means seeing the wider picture. Threats to civic space, media freedom and digital rights increasingly overlap, so intersectional approaches that work across different areas of focus are becoming essential. Organisations should build their skills in systems thinking and identify missing expertise and capacity early, so they can either source it or collectivise it rather than stretch existing teams.

A proactive approach also calls for a sharper focus on impact rather than activity for its own sake. That means questioning collective actions that absorb time and energy without clear results (for example: traditional press releases that reach fewer people in a more decentralised media environment, or bureaucracy-heavy coalition procedures). At the same time, organisations should be realistic about their role: they can help create small tipping points, but they cannot control everything.

Invest in resilience and security

Financial resilience starts with a simple recognition: philanthropy alone will not be enough. Like the media sector before it, civil society will need new revenue models. The most promising is building closer connections with constituencies, which is both a fundraising strategy and a source of resilience, since it reduces dependency on grant money. Supporters are often more willing to give than organisations expect, as long as the ask is clear and simple. Framing matters too: some organisations have found that presenting their work in terms of justice and the rule of law, which protect everyone’s rights and assets, resonates with a wider range of supporters. Beyond individual giving, public subsidies can support partial professionalisation, while shared back-office services, partnerships and mergers can reduce costs.

Resilience also depends on being prepared for attacks. Internal legal expertise, security planning and scenario preparedness all strengthen an organisation’s autonomy. The aim is to assess risk carefully without withdrawing or complying in advance. In Timothy Snyder’s words, “never obey in advance”: test the limits and reframe the narrative.

Finally, resilience is built by people and through experience. Leaders need to nurture the next generation of strong, accountable leaders. Adversity itself can also be a source of strength: common struggles build resilience, obstacles can become opportunities for learning and innovation, and attacks can mobilise supporters.

Make wellbeing and joy part of resilience

Sustaining the people behind the work matters as much as sustaining the organisations. In a period of deep uncertainty, participants asked who gives hope to those who give hope to others, and stressed the need for points of support within and across organisations. Staff wellbeing, regular check-ins, access to therapeutic counselling, and shared physical spaces should therefore be treated as essential infrastructure, not optional extras. Coming together in person matters: events such as the Civitates Forum ease isolation and strengthen



networks. Finally, celebrating victories and finding joy in activism, protest and the strength that comes from numbers is itself a form of resilience.

Listen before trying to persuade

To drive change, civil society first needs to understand how it lost ground and why anti-democratic narratives resonate. That starts with listening. Leaders were urged to pay closer attention to the arguments gaining traction outside their own bubble, and to engage those who disagree rather than treat them as opponents. This takes courage and openness to criticism. Deep canvassing, built on longer, open conversations with people who hold different views, was seen as one promising method.

Listening also means being present. Many NGOs operate in a “global nowhere”, while populists return to their constituencies. Civil society needs to do the same, through engaging with both traditional and new constituencies in novel ways (including through pop culture, gaming communities, fashion/lifestyle, sports, etc.) to better understand people’s hopes and concerns. Participants acknowledged a sense of entitlement within parts of the movement: the right to act on behalf of society has to be earned by being useful to it. Earning that right takes time, especially with those who feel the system does not represent them, such as young people, low-paid workers and racialised communities. This process has to move at what one participant called “the speed of trust.”

What civil society learns from listening should then shape how it communicates. Anti-democratic forces rely on emotion, so pro-democracy messages need to combine evidence with trust, openness, pride, joy and lived experience. The same applies to rights-based language, which no longer carries the traction it once did: talking about rights in the abstract is less persuasive than showing what they mean in people’s lives. Participants recommended testing messages with different constituencies, focusing on the “moveable middle”, and adapting to generational change in how people consume information — for example through trusted social media influencers.

Build coalitions beyond the usual circles

Those undermining democracy are already organised, funded and working together across borders, while its defenders too often remain divided along national and sectoral lines. Closing that gap through collaboration across countries and disciplines is now urgent. Early mapping helps identify which actors matter, including non-traditional allies inside and beyond the sector. But these relationships need to exist before a key moment arrives, not be built in a rush once it does.

Coalitions work best around one concrete shared goal, not complete agreement. As one interviewee put it: “Effective coalitions are made of people who disagree on great many things, and maybe agree on that one important thing, and I think that’s fine.” Disagreements and ethical boundaries should be settled at the start, and structures kept light enough to act quickly. Coalitions should also recognise the differences within them: often three or four core organisations carry the coordination, some partners have no paid staff, and power dynamics need to be named openly. Trust grows from simply spending time together and from avoiding unnecessary criticism of peers who take different approaches.

Coalitions also need a wider set of tactics. Advocacy, lobbying and litigation are no longer enough on their own: a court victory makes little difference without public support and enforcement. They need to be combined with local organising, public engagement and new types of non-violent civic action.

Recommendations for funders

What grantees and funders recommended for philanthropy.

Fund for the long term, and share power



The clearest ask from grantees was to make core, long-term funding the primary form of support, with project funding as a complement. This is generational work, and funders need the patience to stay the course over ten to thirty years rather than expect results within a single grant cycle. Those who already provide core funding should make the case for it publicly. Where some jurisdictions restrict cross-border core funding, funders should find ways to work around this, including through pooled funds. Alongside long-term support, funders should keep the ability to offer rapid-response support in a crisis, and contingency or cash-flow support when grants are delayed.

How funding is given matters as much as how much. Grantees consistently asked for simpler applications and reporting, and for check-ins in place of written reports, which also reduces the security risks that detailed reporting can create. Expectations of impact need to be realistic too. In a hostile environment, helping an organisation stay safe and hold the line may be a real measure of success, and impact should be defined by funders and grantees together, around how the work benefits citizens.

Above all, grantees asked funders to share power, the area they most often flagged as missing. This means setting priorities with partners, moving towards participatory grant-making, and carrying out regular needs assessments so that funders respond to real gaps rather than organisations bending themselves to fit funder priorities. It also means being more reachable, with feedback processes, regular contact and shared spaces for strategy. And it means honesty about a difficult truth: genuine exchange is hard in a relationship marked by dependency and a power imbalance, and that difficulty needs to be unpacked rather than glossed over. As one interviewee summed it up, “trust is the best investment.”

Invest in security, wellbeing and resilience

As the attacks on civil society and media grow, security has become a basic condition for the work, not an extra. Funders should provide funding and training for legal, digital, physical and psychological security. That includes retaining lawyers or arranging pro bono support, carrying out legal reviews with new grantees and helping organisations prepare for attacks. The people doing the work need support too: funders should resource staff wellbeing, including access to counselling, and the convening spaces that reduce isolation. Finally, funders can help grantees become more sustainable by using money to bring in more money: supporting fundraising, matching funds raised from audiences, backing income-generating models such as property that provides rental income, and funding shared back-office services and mergers.

Take a systems view, with a clear direction

The pressures on democracy are interconnected, so no single grant or organisation can address them alone. Funders should take a systems approach, looking at all layers of the work at once: the enabling environment, the sector, the constituencies organisations engage, and the organisations and individuals themselves. No funder can cover all of this, so it means coordinating more at field level, with each funder focusing on what it does best and all of them funding together the infrastructure the field needs.

Just as civil society needs a “north star”, funders need a clear long-term direction that lets their strategies adapt as conditions change. That direction starts with being clear about what they stand for. Defending or renewing democracy cannot remain an abstract or assumed position: it needs clearer definition, stronger narratives and concrete ways to act. Within that direction, strategies should be agile and tailored to national

contexts. This depends on understanding those contexts far better, by visiting organisations, listening to grantees' frontline experience and perhaps convening a rotating advisory group of field experts. Foresight can help too, by showing where conditions may be heading before they arrive.

Fund collaboration, and collaborate as funders

Coalitions do not form or last on goodwill alone. For funders, the message was clear: coalitions need to be resourced, not assumed. Coordination and knowledge-sharing are “invisible” work that takes real time and money, and often a few core organisations hold a coalition together. Funders can pay for that role, support forums and in-person events, map who is doing what to find synergies and reduce duplication, and provide mobility grants, micro-grants and stipends for joint work.

Collaboration also needs to reach beyond the traditional democracy sector, because many democratic challenges cannot be solved through NGOs and philanthropy alone. This includes the private sector, whose role participants described as largely missing from the field's discussions.

The same logic applies to funders themselves. The resources behind anti-democratic movements far outstrip those supporting democracy: anti-gender movements in Europe received more than a billion dollars over recent years,¹⁵ and individual wealthy backers are investing heavily in authoritarian politics.¹⁶ Funders need to work more closely with one another and bring new resources into the field, so that the scale of the response begins to match the scale of the threat.

Move resources closer to communities

Much of the democratic renewal described in this report is happening locally, yet funding rarely reaches it. Funders should support a broader and more diverse set of actors, including movements, informal groups, journalists, researchers, community-based organisations and cultural actors, from the arts to pop culture, gaming and lifestyle, and put more money into grassroots and locally led work. Sub-grants are one way to reach small communities and rural areas. Another is support for offline forms of engagement, such as unions, cooperatives, youth, sports and scouting clubs, faith-based organisations and physical gathering spaces, which help rebuild the social fabric and counter loneliness and radicalisation.

A wider set of partners also makes funding more resilient. If NGOs come under greater pressure or become harder to register, funders will need to work with other kinds of actors, such as less formally organised civil society, social enterprises, think tanks and academic institutions.

Playing it safe is itself a risk

In uncertain times, caution can feel like the responsible choice. But when no one knows where the solutions will come from, holding back carries risks of its own. A strong message to funders was to be bolder and to create space for experimentation: test small-scale models, learn from them and scale what works, accepting that experiments that “fail” still produce valuable learning.

Being bolder also means sharing risk. If funders ask grantees to do difficult work, they should not expect civil society to carry the risk alone, and they should stand alongside grantees visibly, not only with money.

Participants pointed to areas where bolder funding could make a difference. One is stronger public narratives, including message-testing across countries and support for culture, which can shift attitudes with fewer resources than advocacy. Closely linked is civic education on democracy, media literacy, critical thinking and human rights, which helps people recognise and resist anti-democratic narratives in the first place. Another is technology, where funders can back a two-track approach: strong enforcement of existing regulation as a short-term bridge and, over the longer term, new players with alternative designs, business models and

recommender systems. A final area is leadership, where funders were asked to open the pool to more radical voices.

Being bolder also means sharing risk. If funders ask grantees to do difficult work, they should not expect civil society to carry the risk alone, and they should stand alongside grantees visibly, not only with money.

Finally, funders should prepare for futures in which institutions may fail, learning from human rights, feminist and LGBTQI+ funders who already support groups in closed and dangerous settings. This includes experimenting with alternative finance, secure communication channels, community radio and printed media, and hyper-local organising. In the hardest futures, support may need to include exile funding, relocation for activists and journalists, and resources for political prisoners.

A shared agenda: The future starts with what we do today

Five priorities for action

These priorities draw together the findings and recommendations of this report into a shared agenda for civil society and funders:

- 1. Define the destination.** Develop a clearer, more compelling vision of the democracy we want, shaped together with the people who will live in it. This means being honest about where liberal democracy has not delivered, and setting out what renewal would change in people's lives.
- 2. Listen and reconnect.** Understand people's concerns and rebuild the relationship between civil society and the public, going back to constituencies and connecting democracy to housing, jobs, security and the cost of living.
- 3. Collaborate beyond familiar boundaries.** Work across sectors, countries and divides around concrete shared goals, resourcing collaboration as real work and building coalitions before crises rather than during them.
- 4. Change how we work.** Civil society and funders both need to work more flexibly and share power, risk and decision-making. For funders, this means long-term core support and a willingness to experiment. For civil society, it means planning ahead, investing in resilience and focusing on impact.
- 5. Prepare for several futures.** Make decisions now that strengthen resilience across different scenarios, through foresight, security and investment in alternative infrastructure should conditions deteriorate.



The future is uncertain, but it is not fixed

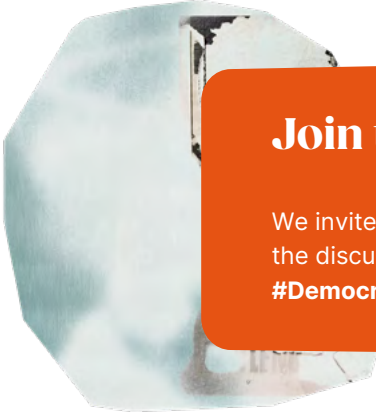
The picture that emerges from this process is sobering but not hopeless. The present system is under real strain, but the same crisis is producing genuine movement: more collaboration, more willingness to question old models, and a growing recognition that the field needs both to defend what still works and to build something better.

Civil society cannot renew democracy alone, and funders cannot support renewal effectively without listening to frontline organisations. Collaboration must become a relationship between funders and civil society, not only between organisations within each field.

The strongest recommendations in this report, to fund more flexibly, invest in resilience and security, share power, back collaboration and take considered risks, do not depend on knowing exactly how the next fifteen years will unfold. They are the moves that make civil society and its funders more robust across a range of futures – and they can be enacted now. The vision of the democracy we want still needs to be built out, and several hard tensions remain open: whether to fix democracy or reinvent it; how to balance values and pragmatism in building broader coalitions; how close civil society and philanthropy can get to politicians and the public sector before they are too close; and how the field should prepare for a future in which the EU itself weakens. These are not reasons to wait.

The future is uncertain, but it is not fixed. The choices made now will shape the democratic possibilities available later. As the Civitates Forum repeatedly stressed, the time to act is now, while it is still possible to shape which future arrives.

Civitates will draw on these findings in its own strategy refresh, and hopes they will be equally useful to other funders and to the organisations working on democracy's front lines.



Join the conversation:



We invite everyone working for democratic renewal in Europe to continue the discussion and share ideas, questions and examples of what works using **#DemocracyFutures**.

Notes

¹ Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A. and Fazey, I. 'Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation'. Ecology and Society 21(2):47. June 2016. The paper sets out the Three Horizons approach, which helps groups work with complex problems and uncertain futures. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol21/iss2/art47/>

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