

(RE)BUILDING DEMOCRACY⁴

COOPERATION WITHOUT BORDERS



18-19.06.2025.



PÉCS
HUNGARY

CONFERENCE REPORT

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COOPERATION WITHOUT BORDERS

border /'bɔːdə/ *noun* a line separating two countries, administrative divisions, or other areas

Borders can disconnect countries, sectors, stakeholders, social groups, information bubbles. In (Re)Building Democracy⁴ **we cross these borders and discuss together how different actors can cooperate in strengthening civil society to increase the resilience of democracies** in the CEE region.

(Re)Building Democracy has been a meeting point for organisations, experts, researchers and donors dealing with the development of the civil sector since 2022. **It is our conviction, backed up by international research that a strong, resilient, well-functioning democracy is based on a strong, independent civil sector.** Capacities are reducing and dependency increases as we move into the countryside, towards smaller, grassroots organisations. Therefore every year we keep a special focus on strengthening civil society in the countryside and that's why we gather outside of the capital.



OPENING SPEECH

by Ragnar Almqvist, Ambassador of Ireland

Ambassador Ragnar Almqvist of Ireland opened his speech by reflecting on the cultural and historical links between Ireland and Hungary.

The Ambassador then shared Ireland's journey toward equality, from a time when homosexuality was criminalized to the landmark marriage equality referendum, the first in the world passed by popular vote. Almqvist expressed concern over Hungary's recent "Child Protection" laws, which risk restricting Pride events and LGBTIQ+ freedoms under the guise of protecting children. Drawing from Ireland's own history of institutional abuse, he stressed that **stigma and censorship do not protect children**, and that open, inclusive societies are safer and stronger.

The speech also connected these struggles to broader European and international values. Almqvist reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to democracy, rule of law, civil society, and multilateralism, as well as its solidarity with Ukraine and advocacy for a peaceful two-state solution in the Middle East.

Finally, he looked ahead to Ireland's upcoming EU Council Presidency, recalling its role in welcoming Hungary to the EU and emphasizing that national pride and European identity can coexist. He closed by saluting the "patriots" of both nations—past and present—who walk the difficult path toward freedom, equality, and justice, confident that the *"arc of the moral universe bends toward justice."*



EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

– on the results and experiences of ongoing civil capacity building programmes

The first round of CERV Citizens Values projects are coming to an end as well as the USAID Central Europe program and NED funds. Besides Civitates 'Protect and Expand Civic Space in Europe' program will produce first experiences at the time. The participants worked in three groups to discuss the experiences of three major support programs (CIVITATES, CERV, USAID).

Several recent grants were also discussed. Among the good practices mentioned was the CIVITATES programme, which was a very important form of support for ngo's and ngo networks in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary. **Smaller associations had the possibility to connect with larger organisations and share cooperation.** It was identified as a challenge that smaller, grassroots organisations have a low level of capacity and knowledge to think about change at EU level.

Regarding the CERV programme, it has reached young and rural NGOs well, but that intermediate, grant-giving organisations often have to be creative to get enough good quality applicants to apply for the programme. The situation of informal groups was specifically mentioned, to reach them is challenging. According to grant providers, **it is not easy to make informal groups understand the EU perspective**, as the needs of local groups are often far from this.

In most cases, however, there was an improvement in motivation and change, with a tangible expression of solidarity in the various support programmes. There was a lot of feedback from beneficiaries that networking was very important.

They particularly highlighted how important it was that the intervention grant was an open call. However, the immediate surge in interest was a challenge.

On USAID, many promising projects and communities have been lost because of the suspension of funding. The EU has not taken over the space of the USAID. Certainly the US has lost a lot of trust and specific organisations such as NDI, NED, IRI have lost local networks, years of work. Smaller and watchdog organisations have been particularly hard hit by the freeze in funding.

It was a positive experience that existing networks could survive the crisis, very important in-country and EU things came out of it. They could get not only motivation but also strength and will to fight.



CERV



Target Group:

- *Rural, small, and young NGOs; mainly in smaller settlements.*
- *Aim: Build capacity for formal groups with local impact.*

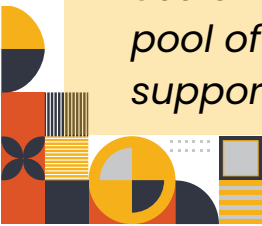
Key Approaches:

- *Call for proposals focused on real needs and local dimensions.*
- *Use of mentors and a pool of experts to support grantees.*

Results:

- *Shift in attitudes toward local NGOs and issues.*
- *Strengthened community support and networking.*
- *Increased organizational and strategic skills among participants.*

Challenges:

- *Small organizations need long-term support and better visibility.*
 - *Hard to maintain motivation and capacity without financial continuity.*
 - *Importance of showing tangible results to stakeholders.*
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USAID

Key Points:

- *Focus on localization and democracy funds.*
- *Lessons learned*
 - *Some networks can survive on their own*
 - *Importance of physical spaces.*
- *US role vs. EU role*
 - *EU is not always filling gaps left by the US.*
 - *Watchdog and election integrity projects need continuity.*

Concerns:

- *US funding is shrinking
→ Need other sources (EU, local states).*
 - *Risk of cutting the budget significantly without sustainable alternatives.*
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CIVITATES

Focus Areas:

- Capacity building for civil society and grassroots organizations.
- Advocacy in Brussels and creating communication channels.
- Democracy framework and coalition-building among NGOs.

Challenges:

- Shifting focus toward long-term sustainability and safe spaces for solidarity.
- Maintaining broad coalitions across countries
- Need for intersectionality and diversity in coalitions.

Opportunities:

- Strengthening the voice of civil society in EU institutions.
- Promoting rule of law impact by connecting different organizations.

Overall Insights

All three initiatives share a core focus on strengthening small NGOs, coalitions, and local democracy, yet they continue to face persistent challenges around financial sustainability and visibility. Mentorship, advocacy, and coalition-building emerge as recurring strategies, while international support from actors such as the US and EU remains essential. At the same time, **the long-term survival of these initiatives ultimately depends on localization and capacity-building.**

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU COMMISSION

– about financial support to civil society

OSF's withdrawal from Europe not just left a big void in the existing funding structures but also affected other donors. The diverse group of (Re)Building democracy gives us a chance to analyse the situation from several different perspectives. During the workshop, we will discuss the outcomes of the consultation process of the budget for the next 7 years and European Democracy Shield. The participants were divided into three groups to find answers to the question of how to develop a strategy for the EU's relationship with civil society organisations. (What issues and themes should be included in the strategy? / What commitments and actions we would like to see? / How can/should we participate the process?)

A comprehensive strategy should incorporate several key issues and themes. It is crucial to establish an effective EU mechanism for sanctions that specifically targets individuals rather than entire countries. **This should be complemented by robust support and funding for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), accompanied by thorough monitoring and evaluation.** Human rights protection is paramount, encompassing awareness-raising initiatives and direct support for CSOs working in this field.

Furthermore, the strategy should emphasize stronger involvement within the implementing bodies of the EU, ensuring a clear understanding of when and how to address problems to avoid overlaps and duplication of efforts. The work undertaken should primarily be cross-disciplinary. Advocacy, campaigning, and various activities should be central to the strategy, always respecting a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down imposition.



Financial sustainability for CSOs is critical; they should not be dependent on just one grant or source of funding. The strategy must also include automatic protection mechanisms for individuals who are at risk. Budgetary adjustments are necessary to include Civil Society (CS) for CSOs and other relevant organizations. Regular follow-ups on Rule of Law reports are essential. Regarding focus areas, there should be a less explicit mention of specific areas, instead creating a mechanism to monitor where particular attention is most appropriate. Finally, a thorough evaluation of national legislation should be a continuous component of the strategy.

To ensure that civil society organizations (CSOs) can continue to play their essential role in democracy and community development, we call for the following commitments and actions:

Increase Funding for CSOs:

Allocate larger budgets to support the sustainability and growth of civil society organizations.

Simplify and Flexible

Funding: Streamline financial mechanisms and allow CSOs more flexibility in how resources are allocated and spent.

Recognize Initiative

Groups: Officially acknowledge informal initiative groups as part of civil society, making them eligible for financial and institutional support.

Strengthen EU Preventive Action:

Implement proactive measures, including diplomatic pressure where necessary, to safeguard civil space in member states.

Provide Emergency

Support: Establish emergency funds and low-interest loans to help CSOs respond effectively to crises or sudden challenges.

By implementing these measures, decision-makers can empower civil society to remain resilient, independent, and impactful in defending democratic values.

To effectively participate in the process, we should focus on engagement through several key avenues. **This involves fostering strong cooperation with other actors, including semi-formal citizen-led initiatives and broader civic movements.** A fundamental step is to establish a clear definition of what Civil Society is and who will be in focus, ensuring clarity in our approach.

It's crucial to include civil society in the planning phase, extending beyond just NGOs to encompass a wider range of topics and stakeholders. Participation should involve all levels of civil society, from grassroots movements to national bodies, in the planning of needs, deliberation, and decision-making processes. Establishing clear contact points that facilitate regional visits and greater involvement, especially in monitoring, would be beneficial.

Furthermore, **it is important to establish a timely response mechanism to address emerging issues efficiently.** Defining and promoting "civic education" is another vital component, alongside developing clear guidelines for Civil Society on existing structures and participation development. Leveraging successful structures, such as those from the EU-youth engagement policy, can provide valuable frameworks.

The strategy should also include an annual "rebuilding democracy conference" organized by the EU. Finally, a key recommendation is to embed Civil Society at parliamentary, ministerial, and regional levels, ensuring their consistent voice and input in governance. All these efforts ultimately contribute to strengthening community engagement for democracy.



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- a popular approach

In the past years more and more leadership development programmes have been launched. What can these programmes give to the individual and the organisation? Are they already having an impact on the civil society in our countries?

The conversation provides a comprehensive overview of leadership development programs aimed at strengthening civic engagement, human rights advocacy, and transnational collaboration in Europe. Three key programs are discussed: the Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe (RARE) initiative, the Obama Foundation Leaders: Europe Program, and the CEU Democracy Institute Leadership Academy (DILA). Each program contributes to cultivating ethical, resilient, and networked leaders, though with varying methodologies, focus areas, and delivery models.

Leadership development in this context is not confined to high-ranking officials but extends to activists, civil servants, and community organizers driving meaningful social change. Programs emphasize equipping participants with policy advocacy skills, strategic management capabilities, and values-based leadership practices.



RARE: originated from the recognition that Central and Eastern European human rights defenders were underrepresented in EU-level advocacy. It provides a series of in-person “camps” focusing on policy brief writing, communications, strategic management, and organizational risk assessment. Its in-person model fosters deep interpersonal trust and cross-border collaboration.

Obama Foundation

Leaders: Europe adopts a predominantly virtual format, leveraging accessibility and diversity across the continent. It grounds its curriculum in ten core leadership values—including courage, empathy, and accountability—while integrating regionally relevant themes such as climate change, the war in Ukraine, and democratic resilience.

DILA: combines academic and practical learning, including advocacy simulations, campaign planning, and peer-to-peer learning exercises, with the goal of nurturing change-makers across public, private, and civil society sectors.

EACH PROGRAM STRIKES A BALANCE BETWEEN PERSONAL LEADERSHIP GROWTH AND BROADER SOCIETAL IMPACT. WHILE THE OBAMA FOUNDATION PROGRAM PRIORITIZES VALUES-DRIVEN INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT, RARE EMPHASIZES COLLECTIVE CAPACITY-BUILDING FOR EU POLICY ENGAGEMENT. DILA POSITIONS ITSELF AS A HYBRID MODEL WITH SIMULATIONS AND PEER-LEARNING AS CORE COMPONENTS.



Community Building and Alumni Networks

A recurring theme is the strategic importance of community building. Participants form cross-border and cross-sector networks that often outlive the programs themselves. Alumni networks facilitate collaboration, peer learning, and transnational advocacy efforts.

RARE alumni frequently co-develop policy briefs, support each other during national crises (e.g., Hungarian legislative challenges), and extend knowledge within their organizations.

Obama Leaders benefit from the “Hive” online platform and thematic communities of practice, alongside regional reunions and mentorship opportunities.

DILA maintains connections through online seminars and selective alumni engagement, though funding limitations pose challenges for sustained, structured alumni activities.

All three programs recognize that alumni engagement is a high-value, yet resource-intensive endeavor. Funding for post-program initiatives remains a critical gap, even as informal networks thrive organically.



Impact Measurement and Challenges

Impact assessment in leadership development is inherently complex. Direct measurement of societal outcomes is challenging, and many programs rely on qualitative indicators, network mapping, and anecdotal success stories.

Key impact examples include:

- The My Voice My Choice European Citizens Initiative on abortion rights, accelerated by transnational alumni collaboration.
- Alumnis in significant roles, such as undersecretaries of state, vice mayors, and policy advisors, thereby amplifying civil society's voice in formal governance.
- Strengthened cross-European advocacy capacity, evidenced by joint campaigns, shared policy briefs, and increased presence in Brussels decision-making spaces.

Programs also acknowledge critical challenges, including participant burnout, the scarcity of organizational management skills in NGOs, and the need to foster collective – not just individual – leadership. Participants emphasized the importance of well-being practices, safe organizational cultures, and sustainable team-building to prevent attrition and maintain long-term impact.



Digital and Geopolitical Considerations

Given the digitalization of political and civic life, programs are incorporating online advocacy strategies, social media engagement, and digital policy awareness. They also operate within a complex geopolitical landscape. For U.S.-based initiatives, like the Obama Foundation program, navigating perceptions shaped by American domestic politics underscores the need for a values-based, nonpartisan approach to transatlantic leadership building.

Leadership development programs for European civil society and human rights defenders are essential investments in democratic resilience, transnational cooperation, and sustainable social change. While each program differs in delivery—RARE’s in-person intensives, the Obama Foundation’s virtual model, and DILA’s hybrid approach—all share a commitment to:

1. Equipping participants with strategic, values-driven leadership skills;
2. Fostering resilient networks that amplify collective advocacy;
3. Building organizational and personal capacity to sustain impact in challenging civic environments.

Future priorities include deepening alumni engagement, formalizing impact measurement frameworks, integrating well-being and collective leadership into curricula, and expanding digital competency. These steps will ensure that the next generation of European leaders is both empowered and connected to drive meaningful societal transformation.



SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

– for reaching out from our bubble: good practices

We collected a couple of successful campaigns from different countries and try to identify the key components which can be adapted. We also speak about the challenges and learn from the mistakes.

The foundation of successful engagement lies in a strategic, iterative approach. We initiate our efforts with modest, localized actions, recognizing that these small steps are the most effective means of building momentum and ultimately reaching a broad audience. The core principle here is empowerment: by providing individuals with the necessary assistance and direction to organize themselves, we foster an environment where they not only adopt these tools but also adapt them to their unique contexts, leading to organic growth and sustained impact. Crucially, the selection of a specific, resonant theme is paramount, as it serves as the connective tissue that draws people in and fosters a sense of shared purpose.

As experts in the field have emphasized, it is a misallocation of resources to expend effort on individuals who exhibit no initial interest in the subject matter or the broader "camel business," as the saying goes. A more efficacious strategy dictates concentrating efforts on those who are already receptive. In these instances, the energy invested is not merely rewarded, but often amplified, creating a ripple effect. These receptive individuals are the prime targets for new campaigns and initiatives, as they represent the fertile ground where invested effort can truly flourish.



Betraying public trust by making commitments that cannot be fulfilled is detrimental to long-term credibility and engagement. Integrity in action is as important as the message itself. Observing and adapting best practices from others who demonstrate strong engagement can significantly accelerate our own progress and impact.

Finally, the strategic importance of community funding campaigns cannot be overstated. Beyond their immediate utility for communication, campaigning, and fundraising, these initiatives serve a profound purpose in fostering and solidifying community bonds. They transform passive audiences into active participants, uniting individuals around a common cause and strengthening the collective fabric.



BUSINESS&DEMOCRACY

– How and with what content could we fill the S in ESG?

ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) is unstoppably approaching, providing a gateway for CSOs to the corporate sector. Lessons learned so far suggest that environmental aspects are much more prominent in ESG than social ones. What can we do to change this? What are the challenges for companies to act for democracy? How can we encourage business-civil partnerships? A word café with invited experts.

The ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) regulation is reshaping the way companies interact with society. While environmental and governance aspects have received significant attention, the “S” – social responsibility – remains overlooked in many corporate strategies. This gap presents a unique opportunity for civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage with the corporate sector, build meaningful partnerships, and advance democratic values.

The session focused on three interlinked topics:

1. Philanthropy as a bridge between CSOs and businesses
2. Investments into society and strengthening the “S” in ESG
3. Strategies to “sell” ESG projects to companies to create mutual value



1. Philanthropy as a Catalyst for Partnerships

Philanthropy can serve as a crucial entry point for business–civil partnerships, particularly when framed as a mutually beneficial collaboration rather than one-sided charity. Participants emphasized that CSOs and companies often share overlapping values but lack sufficient understanding of each other’s strategic goals and operational constraints.

Successful collaboration begins with mutual recognition and trust-building

CSOs must clearly articulate their goals and ethical boundaries while understanding corporate motivations.	Companies should recognize that CSO services and expertise carry value and should not expect them to work for free
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Key practices for building sustainable partnerships include:

Businesses can offer more than financial support, including knowledge sharing, campaign participation, and visibility for CSOs. Equally, NGOs can help companies address real challenges, from employee engagement to social credibility, while maintaining their ethical integrity.

Measuring the “S” in ESG: CSOs must demonstrate that social initiatives can be assessed through concrete indicators, enhancing credibility and accountability.	Caution and due diligence: Both sides must conduct thorough research before forming partnerships to avoid political risks and reputational harm.
Translating social impact into corporate language: NGOs must frame causes in a way that resonates with corporate interests and aligns with business objectives.	Leveraging environmental entry points: Since environmental issues are more familiar to companies, they can serve as a stepping stone to broader social and governance engagement.



2. Investing in Society: Strengthening the “S” in ESG

The social pillar of ESG offers a structured pathway for businesses to invest in democracy and societal well-being, but it requires courage and careful navigation. Both companies and CSOs must understand that social engagement carries political sensitivity and reputational risks, especially in polarized environments.

Key insights from the discussion included:

Measuring the “S” in ESG: CSOs must demonstrate that social initiatives can be assessed through concrete indicators, enhancing credibility and accountability.	Caution and due diligence: Both sides must conduct thorough research before forming partnerships to avoid political risks and reputational harm.
Translating social impact into corporate language: NGOs must frame causes in a way that resonates with corporate interests and aligns with business objectives.	Leveraging environmental entry points: Since environmental issues are more familiar to companies, they can serve as a stepping stone to broader social and governance engagement.

Participants also noted that integrating the social dimension into ESG can positively affect a company’s HR strategy, supply chain management, and employee satisfaction, making societal investment a competitive advantage.



3. Selling ESG Projects to Companies

A recurring theme was the need for CSOs to actively “sell” ESG projects to businesses by demonstrating how collaboration helps them meet ESG obligations and create tangible value.

Strategies include:

Highlighting added value and larger societal impact, moving beyond compliance to proactive contribution	Demonstrating potential tax incentives or reputational benefits tied to ESG alignment
Positioning NGOs as qualified and trustworthy partners capable of providing intermediary services and visibility support	Emphasizing that ESG engagement can improve client trust, consumer loyalty, and employee motivation

Participants also reflected on a critical tension: while ESG initiatives can increase the sense of security for NGOs by diversifying resources, they also require NGOs to remain vigilant about preserving independence and ethical standards.



PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY IN THE CEE REGION SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY

In some aspects the countries of the CEE region are very similar, but there are some interesting differences. Like in the case of private philanthropy supporting democracy, which is an existing phenomenon in the Czech Republic or Poland, while a few hundred kilometres down the road in Hungary it is almost unheard of. What are the basis of these differences? What are the key challenges for philanthropists to step-up for democracy or rule of law? How can we change this?

The landscape of private philanthropy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is as diverse as the region itself. While the countries share certain historical and political similarities, their philanthropic traditions and attitudes toward supporting democracy reveal notable differences. In the Czech Republic and Poland, private philanthropy for democratic initiatives is a visible and functioning phenomenon, whereas in Hungary such engagement is almost nonexistent. These disparities raise critical questions: What underpins these differences? What challenges prevent philanthropists from stepping forward to defend democracy and the rule of law? And, perhaps most importantly, what can be done to encourage greater philanthropic involvement in the democratic space?

Private philanthropy has the potential to play a transformative role in the protection and advancement of democratic institutions. In many contexts, large companies express interest in providing targeted grants with clearly defined objectives and measurable outcomes. This approach aligns with the risk-averse nature of corporate giving, which prioritizes accountability and clarity.



CSOs, by contrast, have a unique capacity for experimentation and innovation. Free from the market pressures of the private sector and the bureaucratic limitations of the public sector, CSOs can explore creative approaches to social and political challenges. For donors, this flexibility is particularly attractive: supporting CSOs allows them to engage in progressive or even radical initiatives without direct exposure to political risk.

Corporate donors are especially motivated to support organizations that act as drivers of social change. Partnerships with innovative, proactive, and visible NGOs not only fulfill corporate social responsibility objectives but also enhance the public image of businesses as contributors to positive societal transformation. Across the region, there is a broad recognition that investing in democratic capacity and civic engagement can help reduce polarisation by strengthening the social fabric and promoting dialogue.

However, the intensity of polarisation varies. At the same time, polarisation can also act as a catalyst: it provides a compelling case for recruiting new donors while also encouraging previously inactive philanthropists to re-engage..

A critical element in mobilizing private philanthropy for democracy lies in the role of intermediary organizations. By managing funds, ensuring accountability, and reducing the administrative burden on smaller CSOs, intermediaries create a secure and functional ecosystem for philanthropic engagement.



In addition, they often facilitate direct connections between donors and beneficiaries. These interactions are vital for building trust and fostering long-term partnerships. Without well-functioning intermediary structures, philanthropic contributions risk becoming concentrated in a small number of established NGOs, leaving innovative or informal initiatives underfunded despite their potential to drive meaningful democratic change.

NGOs must take a more proactive role in securing private philanthropic support. Donors are unlikely to initiate partnerships independently; civil society organizations need to actively network, present compelling cases for support, and demonstrate both credibility and impact.

Conclusion: private philanthropy for democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is at a crossroads. The region exhibits both promise and gaps: vibrant donor engagement in countries like the Czech Republic and Poland contrasts sharply with the limited traditions of philanthropic support for democracy in Hungary. Overcoming these disparities will require a multifaceted approach, including stronger intermediary networks, targeted donor outreach, and a civil society that embraces its role as a driver of innovation and change.

By fostering proactive engagement and creating secure channels for private giving, the CEE region can unlock the transformative potential of philanthropy. In doing so, it can build a more resilient democratic ecosystem—one that not only withstands polarisation but actively works to reduce it.



THE DONOR PERSPECTIVE

We can say now that (Re)Building democracy conference traditionally close with the donor panel. We examine the state of funding in the region. Discussing if there is any cooperation between donors. Thinking together how we can start dialogue between donors and intermediaries. Finding the role of private donors supporting NGO advocacy towards the EU for future funding.

The first half of 2025 has not been easy for donor organizations or the broader civil society sector. Stakeholders entered the year with a cautious awareness that the new U.S. presidential administration might bring challenges to international democracy support. Many donors had attempted to prepare contingency plans in advance. However, the sudden and severe USAID funding outage exceeded expectations and created a shockwave across the sector. Not only was the scale of the reduction unexpected, but the timing left little room for mitigation. Donor organizations worked to respond quickly, driven by their unwavering commitment to a democratic and resilient Europe, but the disruption highlighted the fragility of the funding ecosystem.

Intermediary Organizations: A Dual Vulnerability

The discussion also highlighted the unique position of intermediary organizations

These organizations see themselves closer to CSOs in their openness, agility, and understanding of local needs.

Yet, they remain fully dependent on donor grants, which makes them equally vulnerable to funding shocks.

Their dual role provides a strategic advantage for identifying solutions, as they can perceive the challenges from both ends of the funding chain and help initiate collaborative responses.



Shared Challenges Across Europe

Participants agreed that Central and Eastern European (CEE) NGOs and Western European NGOs now face strikingly similar difficulties:

Shrinking donor support and growing competition for limited funds.

Increasing reliance on fragmented or short-term project funding.

Mounting political pressures and the erosion of civic space in several countries.

Interestingly, Western European actors are actively learning from the resilience strategies developed in the CEE region, where organizations have long faced restrictive environments and uncertain funding landscapes.

Systemic Risks in the Funding Ecosystem

The withdrawal of a major donor creates a domino effect in the ecosystem. Remaining donors face immense pressure to stabilize the sector, but their capacity is limited. This results in:

Overstretching of existing donor programs to “save” essential organizations.

Delays in decision-making, as donors reassess priorities.

A risk of critical service and advocacy gaps if local CSOs collapse.



The number of active donors has been declining for years, and the current environment accelerates this trend. For CSOs, this signals a strategic shift is necessary

They must build cross-border and national networks to share resources and knowledge.

Collaborative initiatives can reduce duplication and strengthen advocacy.

A diversified funding base is increasingly vital, but private donations alone are insufficient to meet the current shortfalls.

The Case for Public Philanthropy and Urgent Intervention

The discussions concluded that public philanthropy and government-supported mechanisms must step in to prevent the erosion of the sector.

Waiting is no longer an option: several countries already face emergency conditions where CSOs are at risk of closure.

The collapse of donor organizations or philanthropic intermediaries would have a cascading effect, leaving civic ecosystems without both funding and advocacy support.

This moment calls for innovative mechanisms, such as public-private co-financing, EU-backed emergency funds, and recognition of informal initiatives as eligible for financial support.

Without coordinated action, the risk is not only to individual organizations but to the very infrastructure of European civil society and philanthropy, which underpins democracy, human rights, and community resilience.



HAVE ANY COMMENT? FELL FREE TO SHARE!

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(17) – 18 – 19 JUNE 2026

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