

ARIADNE FORECAST

2026

Strategic Orientations
for Philanthropy
in Uncertain Times

PHILANTHROPY

JUSTICE

RIGHTS

DEMOCRACY

CIVIC SPACE

About Ariadne

Ariadne is Europe's leading philanthropy network for social change and human rights, bringing together 115 foundations and philanthropists across more than 20 countries. Driven by the belief that collaboration brings greater change and that together we can achieve more, Ariadne fosters trusted spaces for exchange, learning and active collaboration - spaces that help social change philanthropy stay responsive, inclusive, and bold.

Ariadne is hosted under Global Dialogue, a registered charity (1122052) and limited company (5775827) in the UK, which promotes human rights and social change by supporting innovative and collaborative philanthropy.

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Introduction

This year's Forecast Brief marks an evolution in Ariadne's approach to forecasting and strategic reflection. In response to member feedback and to a rapidly shifting political environment across Europe and beyond, Ariadne has chosen to produce a **strategic and action-oriented publication**. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive overview of trends, **this brief seeks to support philanthropy to navigate an increasingly volatile operating environment and identify concrete priorities for action.**

Throughout this brief, the term philanthropy is used as a broad umbrella encompassing the **diversity and richness of the sector**: from foundations to pooled funds and philanthropic intermediaries, from individual philanthropists to family offices. While philanthropic actors differ significantly in scale, governance structures, risk appetite, legal frameworks and operating models, many of the challenges and questions explored in this publication cut across the sector. The reflections presented here should therefore be read as strategic considerations rather than universal prescriptions, recognising the diversity of philanthropic approaches, and contexts.

Across Europe and internationally, democratic norms are being contested, civic space is shrinking, and authoritarian and exclusionary politics are becoming mainstreamed. While these dynamics are not new,

several observers have highlighted the extent to which their speed, normalisation and geographic reach have intensified in recent years. **These shifts are not only affecting civil society organisations and the communities they support; they are also reshaping philanthropy's own operating environment.** The narrowing of civic space increasingly entails a narrowing of philanthropic space itself: including through legal and regulatory scrutiny, reputational pressure, restrictions on advocacy, and sometimes on funding. This growing scrutiny is, along other consequences, leading to self-censorship among both civil society and philanthropy.

At the same time, philanthropy is operating in a context marked by overlapping crises and accelerating change: wars and geopolitical instability, disinformation, AI-driven technological disruption, climate pressures, democratic backsliding, mistrust and widening social

inequalities. And this is happening against a backdrop of substantial public funding cuts directly constraining philanthropy's ability to respond strategically. What is more, even where philanthropic funding remains stable or increases, many organisations face a growing gap between available resources and rising demand.

In this context, we have chosen to focus for this edition on resilience: not only organisational resilience, but also ecosystem resilience, democratic resilience, and philanthropy's own capacity to act strategically under pressure and uncertainty to keep supporting civil society. **The central question underpinning this brief is therefore not simply what may happen next, but how philanthropy prepares, adapts, coordinates, and responds across possible futures.**

The narrowing of civic space increasingly entails a narrowing of philanthropic space itself

This publication draws on a series of workshops, survey responses, strategic exchanges and conversations held throughout the first half of 2026. It identifies recurring signals, concerns, tensions, and strategic orientations emerging across different contexts. While the pace and direction of political, social, technological, climate and geopolitical shifts remain inherently uncertain, the reflections presented here are informed by scenario-planning exercises looking ahead over the next decade. Rather than offering predictions, **the brief seeks to identify structural dynamics and strategic questions likely to remain relevant across a range of possible futures.**

The sections that follow:

- outline the broader operating environment shaping civil society and philanthropy;
- synthesise key themes and risks identified by participants across countries;
- explore the capacities philanthropy may need to strengthen in the coming years;
- and propose practical strategic orientations for funders seeking to support rights, justice, democracy and long-term social change in uncertain and complex conditions.

This year's publication speaks to Ariadne's wider strategic reflection and is embedded in its *2026 European Initiative on Rights and Democratic Resilience* to **build stronger collective intelligence, coordination, and resilience** in the years ahead. We hope this brief contributes not only to analysis, but also to practical conversations, experimentation, and action in the philanthropic sector.

Defining resilience

For the purposes of this brief, **resilience** refers to **the capacity of individuals, groups, organisations, and ecosystems to anticipate, adapt and respond to disruption while continuing to pursue their core mission and values.** It is therefore not simply about withstanding shocks or returning to a previous state, but about **maintaining the ability to organise, learn, collaborate and act effectively under changing conditions.** Resilience also involves the **capacity to emerge from periods of disruption with renewed insight, strengthened relationships, and enhanced ability to advance long-term goals.**



Methodology

This Forecast Brief draws on a combination of qualitative foresight exercises, strategic workshops, survey responses and ongoing sector analysis conducted by the Ariadne team throughout the first half of 2026. The publication builds primarily on three convenings held in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, bringing together over 80 participants from philanthropy, in conversation with civil society representatives and researchers working across social change, human rights and democracy-related issues.

The France and Germany workshops incorporated structured scenario-planning exercises exploring possible political, social and philanthropic trajectories over the next decade, while the UK workshop focused on philanthropy's strategic role and preparedness in a shifting environment. The brief also draws on online survey responses from 37 participants, discussions held during Ariadne's 2026 Annual Reconnect in Bologna, ongoing exchanges with members and partners, and wider sector research on philanthropy, civic space and democratic trends. The process engaged approximately 130 actors in the philanthropic sector. Answers and inputs have all been anonymised.

Rather than seeking predictive certainty, the approach aimed to identify recurring patterns, shared concerns and emerging strategic priorities across contexts. The findings are therefore not intended as statistically representative, but as a qualitative snapshot of how philanthropic actors are currently interpreting and responding to rapidly evolving conditions. Likewise, the orientations presented in the final section should be understood as strategic directions for reflection and adaptation rather than prescriptive recommendations, which funders may draw on and adapt according to their own contexts, mandates and ambitions.

Strategic

Designed to support short and long-term thinking in an uncertain environment

Collective

Built from the experience of European philanthropy

Forward-looking

Scenario planning over a 10-year horizon

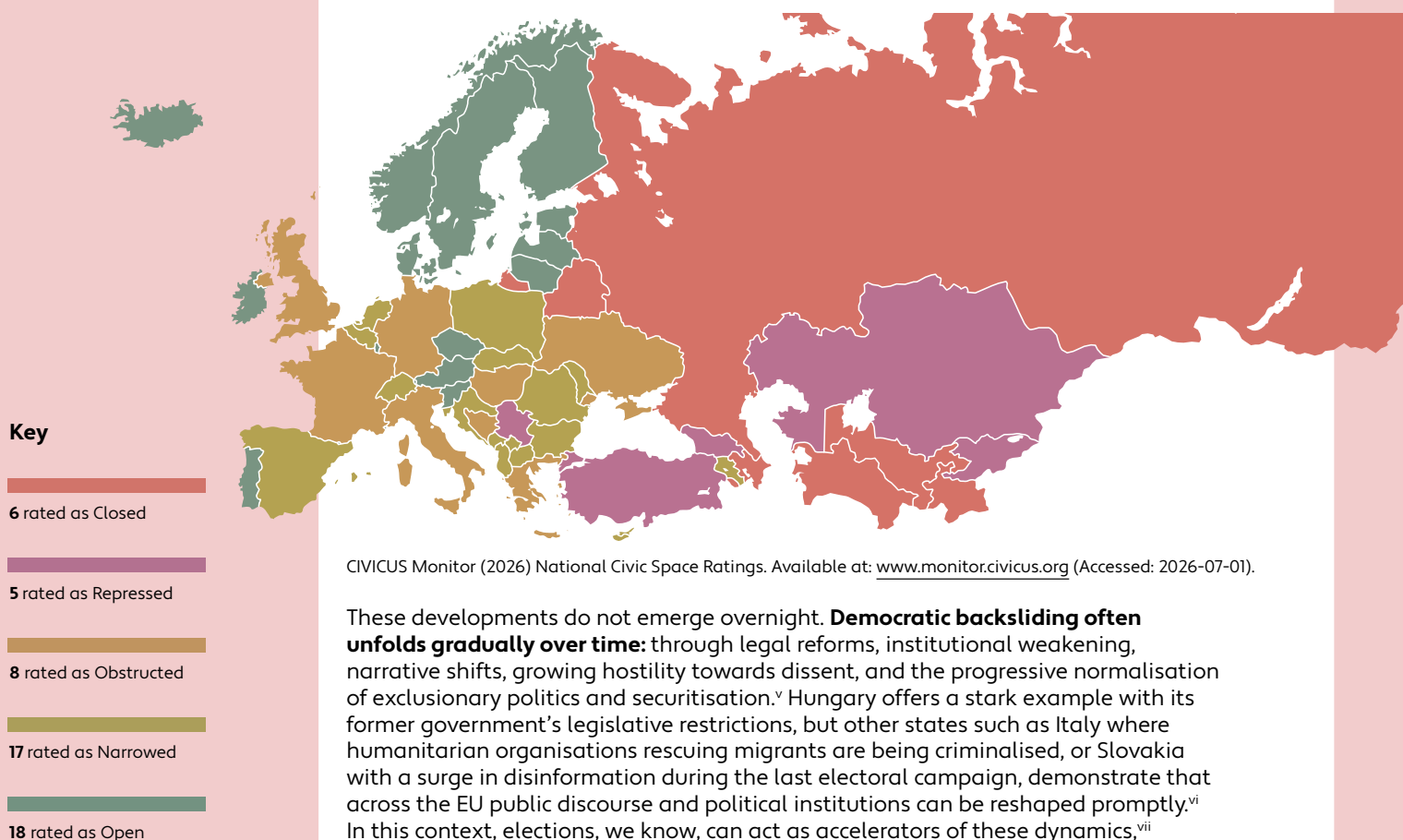
Action-oriented

Focused on practical orientations

The operating context for civil society and philanthropy

Across Europe and beyond, **the civic and political environment in which civil society and philanthropy operate is undergoing significant transformation.** According to the CIVICUS Monitor,ⁱ only 19 of 54 countries in Wider Europe are currently classified as having 'open' civic space, while several countries previously considered stable democracies have experienced notable deterioration in recent years.

In 2023 France and Germany were downgraded to 'narrowed' following restrictions on protest and the targeting of environmental activists, joining countries like Belgium, Croatia or The Netherlands. The UK, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia are now classified as 'obstructed', with the UK downgraded in 2023 following anti-protest laws and surveillance of campaigners, and Bosnia and Serbia due to smear campaigns, legal threats and foreign agent laws.ⁱⁱ Belarus and Turkey remain 'closed' and 'repressed'. In the last year, numerous countries considered 'open' have seen increasing infringements on freedom of expression and association.ⁱⁱⁱ Other countries throughout Europe continue to experience legal pressure on civil society, media capture, political intimidation, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms.^{iv}



At the same time, human rights organisations, journalists, social justice actors and activists across thematic areas of work face legal restrictions, public attacks and financial pressure. In several countries, organisations working on migration, gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, anti-racism, climate justice or democratic accountability are portrayed as politically suspect, anti-national, illegitimate or threats to national security or interest.^{viii}

Throughout Europe, anti-democratic, anti-gender and anti-social justice actors are also benefiting from substantial financial investment and sophisticated infrastructures capable of shaping public narratives, influencing policy debates and amplifying disinformation. Between 2019 and 2023 it is estimated that over US \$1.18 billion were invested in Europe in anti-gender and anti-democratic actors and initiatives.^{ix}

Importantly, **many of these dynamics are not new.** Across parts of Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, the Caucasus but also Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, civil society actors and funders have navigated political capture, shrinking civic space and institutional erosion for years, sometimes decades.^x As similar pressures become more visible in Western Europe and Northern America,^{xi} **learning from contexts where strategies of resistance, adaptation and long-term resilience already exist becomes key.**^{xii}

The ‘authoritarian playbook’

While political and institutional contexts differ significantly, recurring dynamics can be observed across democratic backsliding processes. These dynamics often operate cumulatively rather than in isolation and contribute to reshaping democratic norms, civic participation and the conditions under which civil society and philanthropy operate.

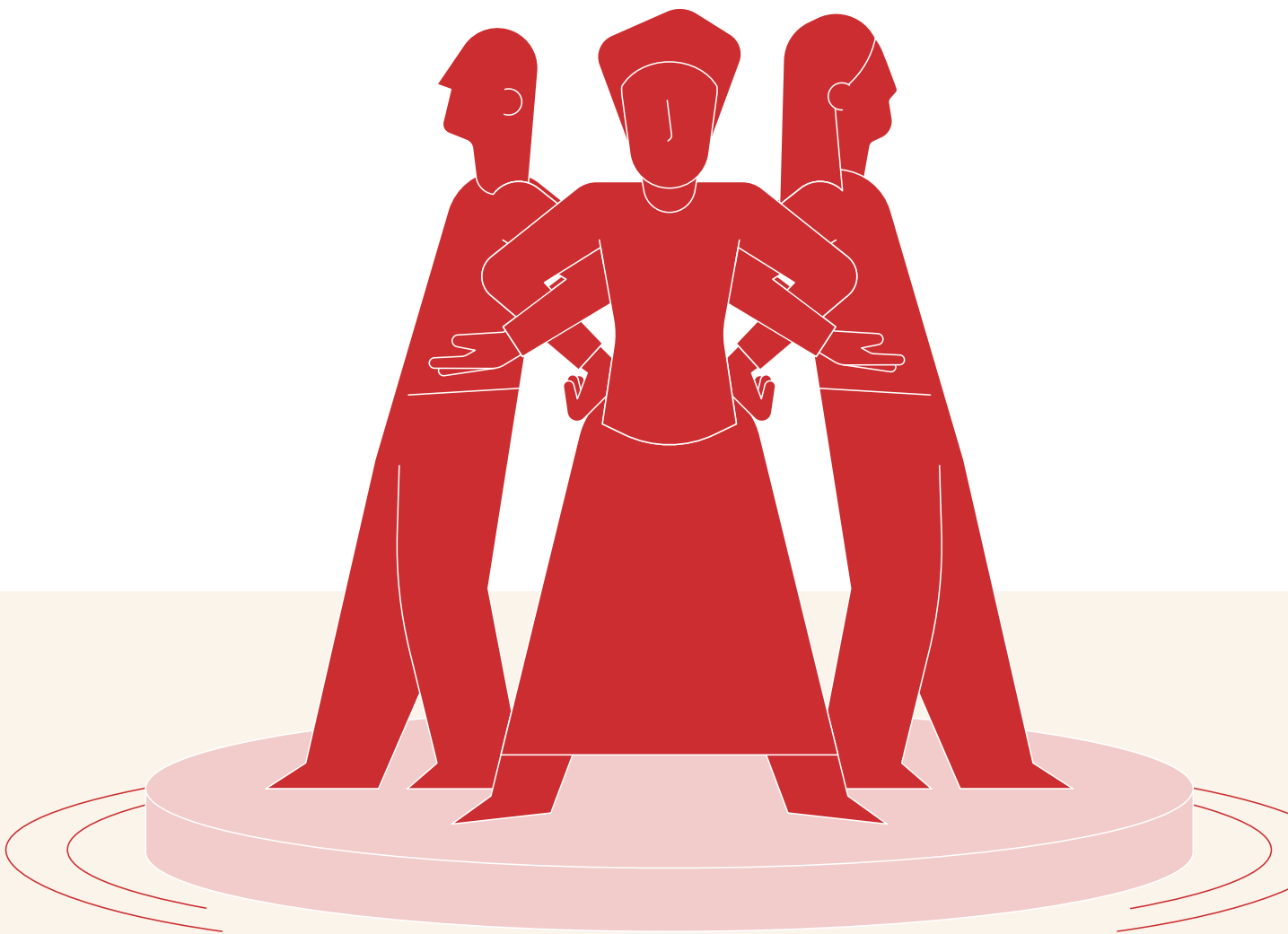
Key elements frequently include:

- **Legal, regulatory and administrative pressure** including the instrumentalisation of transparency principles, reporting, registration or compliance requirements to restrict protest rights, advocacy, funding flows or civil society operations;
- **Institutional capture or weakening**, including pressures on the judiciary, independent media and oversight bodies;
- **Narrative, discursive and delegitimation strategies** framing activists, minorities, rights organisations, independent media and philanthropic actors as threats to national cohesion, security or public order; accusations of political interference, foreign influence or lack of democratic legitimacy;
- **Selective enforcement and intimidation**, ranging from Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and administrative harassment to targeted public and at times physical attacks;
- **Technological acceleration**, including disinformation, surveillance and algorithmic amplification of divisive or anti-democratic narratives;
- **Co-optation and ecosystem reshaping**, including the cultivation of government-aligned civil society organisations, media platforms and public voices to weaken or displace independent actors and democratic participation.

These shifts are reshaping the environment for civil society organisations and movements, and therefore their responses.^{xiii} They are also reshaping philanthropy's own ability to operate. **The narrowing of civic space increasingly entails a narrowing of philanthropic space itself.**^{xiv} Legal and regulatory scrutiny, attacks on advocacy, reputational pressure, debates around political neutrality, restrictions on funding and growing self-censorship all affect philanthropy's room for manoeuvre and capacity to respond strategically.

This is unfolding at a moment already marked by global overlapping pressures. It is also happening against a backdrop of substantial funding cuts within the public sector, tightening budgets and constraining philanthropy's ability to respond.^{xv} Together, these dynamics are contributing to a more volatile and uncertain operating environment.

Yet **this moment also presents an important strategic challenge -and opportunity- for social change and human rights philanthropy.** If civic space and pluralism are increasingly under pressure, philanthropy's role can no longer be understood only at the level of individual organisations or grantmaking portfolios. Questions of **coordination, long-term resilience, strategic foresight, risk appetite, narrative power and collective action** are becoming central to how philanthropy positions itself within a rapidly changing landscape.



Philanthropy and democratic futures: signals, risks and possibilities

Across the national workshops held in the first part of 2026 and survey responses received, several recurring themes emerged regarding democratic resilience, civic space and philanthropy's operating environment over the next decade. While national contexts differ, participants identified overlapping political, societal, technological and institutional pressures likely to shape the work of civil society and philanthropy in the years ahead.

Survey respondents in France, Germany and the United Kingdom were invited to reflect on **five forward-looking questions**:

- Looking ahead 10 years, what are the three most significant threats that could shape the operating environment for civil society and philanthropy?
- What are up to three 'wild cards' that could dramatically change the civil society sector or affect democratic resilience, positively or negatively?
- What are the most important opportunities or shifts that could fundamentally improve conditions for civil society and democratic resilience over the next decade?
- Which of the trends or developments identified are beyond philanthropy's influence, and why?
- What capacity must philanthropy urgently strengthen to remain effective across different futures?^{xvi}

Major findings from the questionnaire are unpacked in the following pages. The reflections presented here are not exhaustive and do not seek to predict the future. Rather, they highlight recurring signals, concerns and strategic tensions. Participants were often candid about the scale of the challenges facing civil society and philanthropy. As a result, many of the findings presented below inevitably focus on risks, pressures and areas of concern.

However, the purpose of this exercise is not to encourage fatalism. Rather, it starts from the premise that **understanding challenges is a prerequisite for effective action**. The workshops themselves highlighted not only vulnerabilities, but also existing strengths: **growing collaboration across the sector, emerging practices of resilience and adaptation, accumulated experience from contexts that have long navigated democratic strain, and a willingness to experiment creatively** with new approaches. The reflections that follow should therefore be read not only as a diagnosis of current pressures, but also as a contribution to strategic thinking and collective action in the years ahead.

Key Threats

Respondents identified the following as the most significant threats to civil society and philanthropy's operating environment over the next decade, ordered by frequency of mention:

- Democratic erosion, rise of authoritarianism and the closing of civic space
- Loss of trust in institutions and democratic politics
- Increasingly restrictive regulatory and fiscal environments for CSOs and philanthropy
- Loss of trust in philanthropic sector
- Wars
- Climate change
- AI growth without regulatory frameworks
- Disinformation
- Inequalities

Democratic erosion is described as structural

Cross-cutting findings: across all contexts, respondents expressed concern that **democratic erosion is becoming structural rather than episodic**. The rise and mainstreaming of far-right and exclusionary politics, shrinking civic space, attacks on democratic institutions and declining public trust emerged repeatedly as defining risks for the coming decade.

FR

Participants highlighted concerns around the potential electoral victory of the far right in 2027, reductions in public funding for social justice and equality-related work, and mounting pressure on organisations working on migration, gender equality, anti-racism and democratic rights. Wider concerns also included media capture, mounting inequalities and the societal impacts of AI-driven disinformation.

DE

Respondents pointed to the rise of the far right and nationalist politics, legal reforms potentially affecting nonprofit status and advocacy rights for CSOs and funders alike, disinformation, climate pressures and growing militarisation linked to wider geopolitical instability. Participants also stressed concerns around democratic disengagement, affordability crises in particular in relation to housing, and declining trust in institutions.

UK

Respondents identified mounting authoritarian tendencies, the fear of a far-right victory at the 2029 general elections, regulatory pressure on civil society and philanthropy, attacks on democratic accountability, anti-rights funding infrastructures and the mainstreaming of exclusionary narratives as central risks. Concerns regarding social fragmentation, institutional distrust and the influence of unregulated technological platforms and media ecosystems were also stressed.

Implications: overall, concerns centred not only on the possibility of electoral victories by far-right actors, but also on the gradual normalisation of exclusionary ideas beyond electoral cycles. Elections were frequently perceived as accelerators capable of rapidly reshaping political and institutional environments. More broadly, these findings suggest that **protecting the enabling conditions for civil society and philanthropy to operate** - including civic space, democratic participation, independent institutions and public trust - may become an increasingly important priority for philanthropy in the years ahead.

Philanthropy's role in a context of greater vulnerability

Cross-cutting findings: while respondents across all three contexts expressed growing concern regarding legal and regulatory restrictions, attacks on advocacy, reputational pressure and the delegitimisation of philanthropic organisations supporting rights, justice and democracy-related work, discussions repeatedly returned to a broader question: **what role can philanthropy play in a period of democratic strain and increasing uncertainty?**

Participants recognised that philanthropy alone cannot prevent major political or systemic shifts. Yet many also stressed its distinctive capacity to provide long-term support, flexibility, convening power and strategic resources that can help societies respond, adapt and organise collectively. As a result, questions of systems change, long-term resilience and collective capacity emerged as increasingly central to philanthropy's role. Respondents also referred to growing self-censorship within both civil society and philanthropy, particularly in contexts where political hostility, funding pressure or legal uncertainty are intensifying.

FR

Participants discussed fears of reductions in fiscal incentives for philanthropy, public narratives portraying progressive foundations as suspect, and philanthropy becoming overwhelmed by cuts in public funding for social justice work. Several respondents also referred to the greater political scrutiny directed at philanthropy, including recent debates surrounding the French Senate commission examining the role, influence and regulation of philanthropic actors. Whilst initially established to examine anti-rights philanthropy, the commission's work is now perceived as extending to the whole philanthropic sector.^{xvii}

DE

In a not dissimilar way, numerous respondents raised concerns around possible reforms to nonprofit and charitable status frameworks, restrictions on advocacy rights and the instrumentalisation of arguments around 'political neutrality' arguments to silence critical voices or discourage engagement.

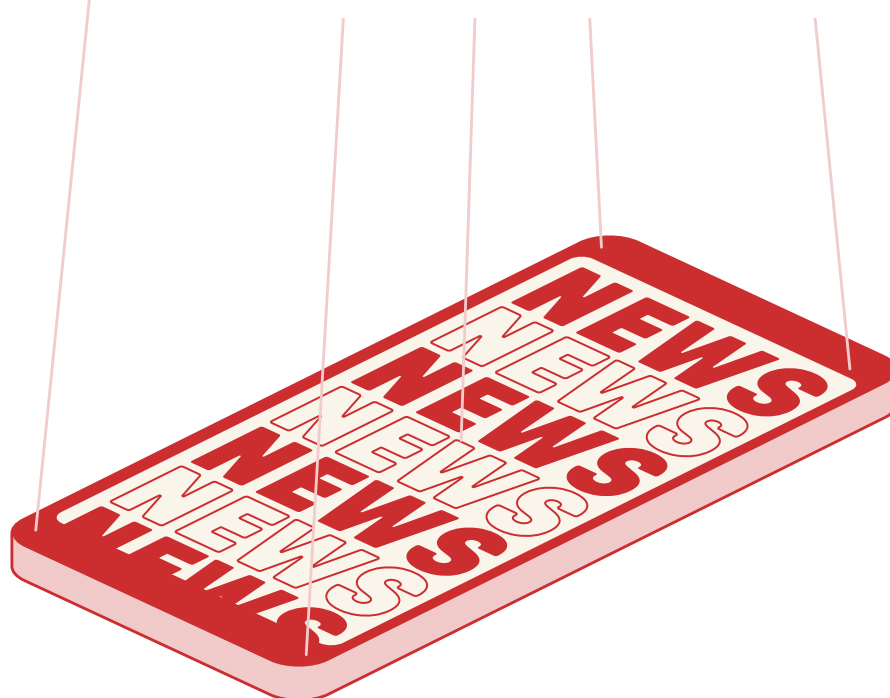
UK

Respondents also highlighted fears of greater regulatory scrutiny, reputational attacks on foundations, and a broader retreat towards 'safer' or less politically sensitive funding approaches or topics. Participants also raised concerns that philanthropy's bureaucratic pace and fragmented approaches may leave the sector insufficiently prepared to respond to rapid democratic deterioration.

Implications: At a moment when democratic institutions, public funding and civic freedoms are under pressure, **philanthropy occupies a distinctive position.** Because of its very nature, it can provide resources, flexibility, long-term support but also convening power that many other actors are unable to offer. Understanding how this role may evolve under changing conditions is crucial.

At the same time, narratives, independent media and democratic communication infrastructures were identified as important areas for philanthropic investment. Respondents overall stressed the **need to support more positive democratic narratives, alternative media ecosystems, civic education and long-term efforts to counter divisive discourses and exclusionary politics**. Several respondents also highlighted the importance of supporting technological literacy, ethical and autonomous digital infrastructures, and civil society's ability to respond strategically to the growing influence of large technology platforms.

Implications: participants across countries repeatedly returned to the importance of rebuilding collective visions of democratic futures. Respondents referred to the need for stronger public conversations around social justice, solidarity, ecological transition, democratic participation and shared visions for societal models. Numerous participants stressed that **democratic resilience cannot rely solely on defensive responses to authoritarianism, but also requires credible, hopeful and collective alternatives** capable of mobilising broader constituencies.



Democratic resilience is generating new forms of mobilisation and possibility

Cross-cutting findings: While many participants expressed deep concern regarding democratic erosion, shrinking civic space and social divisions, they also identified emerging opportunities capable of strengthening democratic resilience over the coming decade. Across contexts, participants pointed to the **potential for renewed civic engagement, stronger democratic coalitions and greater public demand for social justice, participation and collective protection**. Several respondents highlighted growing mobilisation among younger generations, particularly around climate, equality and democratic issues, as well as stronger awareness of the need to defend democratic institutions and civic freedoms.

FR

Participants referred to the possibility of deeper public debates around social justice, inheritance, taxation and the future 'social contract', alongside stronger cooperation among movements and sectors along systems change lenses. Several respondents also stressed the importance of rebuilding collective trust and investing in forms of mobilisation rooted in local realities and communities.

DE

Respondents highlighted opportunities linked to stronger European solidarity, democratic innovation, youth engagement and the potential emergence of more robust legal protections for civil society and democratic participation. Rebuilding social cohesion, strengthening democratic education and supporting long-term alliances between civil society, progressive economic actors and wider constituencies were also mentioned.

UK

Participants identified opportunities linked to new democratic narratives, community robustness, progressive political engagement nationally and locally. Several respondents stressed the importance of civic participation and renewed public investment in local democratic infrastructure.

Implications: these findings speak to the need to **strengthen public conversations around solidarity, participation, ecological transition, democratic accountability and overall, developing shared visions for the future**. Democratic resilience appears not only as a matter of organisational protection or defensive response, but also as the capacity to articulate credible, collective and future-oriented alternatives capable of mobilising broader constituencies across widening social, political and economic divides.



Coordination, resilience and clarity as strategic pathways

Cross-cutting findings: respondents repeatedly returned to the **need for stronger coordination, coalition-building, collective intelligence and long-term resilience within philanthropy**. They stressed the importance of strengthening collaboration among foundations, supporting ecosystem infrastructure and moving beyond fragmented or reactive approaches to grantmaking. Flexible funding, strategic foresight, risk assessment, pooled funding mechanisms and preparedness for moments of democratic disruption were all identified as increasingly important capacities.

FR

respondents emphasised the need to invest resources and time in coordination in the philanthropic sector, and resilience trainings for civil society organisations. Building alliances beyond philanthropy with other key actors supporting the '*intérêt général*' (public good) was also repeatedly stressed, including with the policy sector and research.

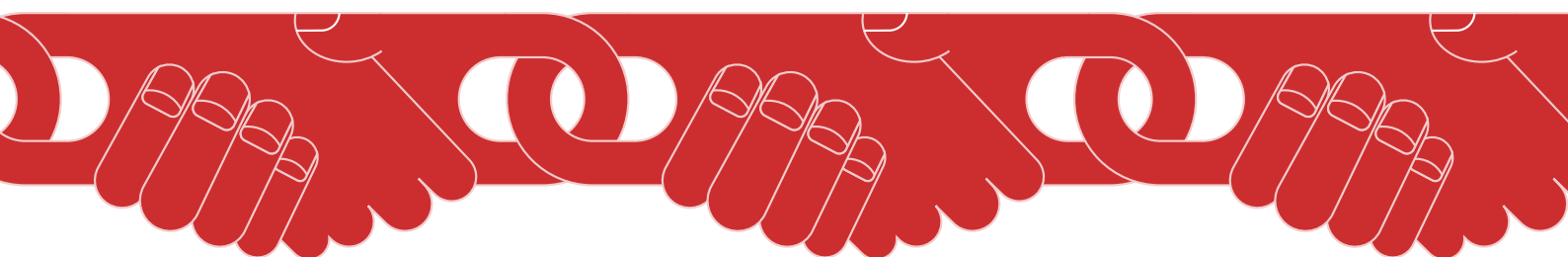
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participants stressed the need for greater agility, more flexible funding approaches, stronger collective support for advocacy and a willingness to fund politically contested issues linked to democratic space and rights protection. Just as for France, and even if the German context differs importantly from the previous one in terms of philanthropic status and relationship with politics, the point was made repeatedly that philanthropy can build even stronger connections with allies within the policy sector to influence deeper change.

UK

Respondents highlighted the need for philanthropy to become a clearer ally to civil society organisations, strengthen collective strategising, clarify its civic role and develop greater confidence in engaging with political questions affecting democratic resilience.

Implications: These findings suggest that resilience is not only an attribute of individual organisations, but of the wider philanthropic ecosystem, and beyond. **Strengthening collective capacity,** coordination and preparedness may therefore become a critical condition for philanthropy's ability to support rights, justice and democratic resilience in the years ahead.



Strategic orientations for philanthropy

The reflections collected this year do not point towards a single philanthropic response, nor a uniform understanding of philanthropy's role. Contexts, mandates, legal frameworks and organisational cultures differ significantly throughout Europe, shaping both the pressures organisations face and strategies available.

As part of the workshops and scenario-planning exercises, participants were invited not only to identify risks and opportunities, but also to reflect on possible responses across different futures. Discussions also distinguished between **short, medium and long-term priorities over 10 years** depending on political trajectories, institutional capacities and levels of democratic strain. This section brings together recurring strategic orientations that emerged transversally. What appears urgent in one environment may still seem anticipatory in another.

The orientations below therefore do not constitute a prescriptive agenda or a linear roadmap. Rather, they are intended as a **source of reflection and inspiration that organisations may draw on, adapt or challenge according to their own missions, thematic focus, capacities and ambitions**. Importantly, these orientations do not seek to identify which thematic issues philanthropy should prioritise. Social change and human rights philanthropy funds across a wide range of areas - from climate justice and migration to gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, from human rights defenders to democracy and tech - and those priorities will continue to differ based on organisations and contexts.

Instead, the reflections gathered throughout this process point towards a different set of questions: **what infrastructures, capacities and conditions may be needed to enable civil society, movements and philanthropy itself to remain effective in an increasingly volatile environment?**

As a result, the orientations below focus less on thematic priorities and more on resilience, preparedness, coordination and the wider ecosystems that underpin rights-based work and social change efforts. They are organised along three interconnected dimensions:

- **what philanthropy resources**, focusing on democratic infrastructure, civic resilience and narrative capacity instead of specific issue-areas;
- **how philanthropy operates**, including questions of trust, flexible funding, coordination, foresight and risk;
- and **philanthropy's wider role in society**, including its relationship to democratic ecosystems, public discourse and enabling environments for the sector and for civil society.

Across all three dimensions, a recurring theme emerges: resilience requires not only financial resources, but also stronger coordination, long-term thinking, institutional adaptability and collective strategic capacity.

Resilience requires not only financial resources, but also stronger coordination, long-term thinking, institutional adaptability and collective strategic capacity

Resourcing

Across contexts, a recurring message emerged clearly: philanthropy will need to resource looking at the wider infrastructures that allow participation, civil society's resilience, robustness and collective organising to endure under pressure.

Defining Resourcing

For the purposes of this brief, resourcing is understood as a broader concept than grant-making, encompassing the financial, relational, intellectual and institutional support that enables organisations, movements, communities and groups to pursue their missions and strengthen their resilience over time.

Protecting civic actors and infrastructures

As legal pressure, public hostility and political divisiveness intensify, philanthropy may need to invest in the **resilience and sustainability of civil society** actors themselves.

This includes:

- legal protection and strategic litigation;
- digital and physical security;
- well-being as well as exhaustion and burn-out prevention;
- back office support including human resources, budgeting and financial planning;
- long-term infrastructure such as autonomous organising spaces, community infrastructure and property ownership.

Several participants stressed the importance of **reinforcing organisational resilience ahead of moments of disruption such as electoral cycles rather than reactively, once crises emerge.**

Strengthening ecosystems and collective organising

As social change efforts face complex and interconnected challenges, philanthropy may need to invest not only in individual organisations, but also in the **ecosystems and collective infrastructures** that sustain action over time.

Priority areas identified include:

- community organising and capacity-building;
- coalition-building across movements and organisations;
- movement infrastructure and networks;
- local and community-rooted initiatives;
- advocacy capacity and joint advocacy efforts.

Participants also stressed that **democratic resilience can no longer be approached through isolated thematic silos. Climate, migration, gender justice, anti-racism, technology, peacebuilding and social cohesion all intersect, within similar democratic pressures.**

Investing in narratives, information and technological robustness

In a context of growing disinformation and mistrust, supporting alternative, hope-based narratives, models and healthier information ecosystems is becoming a key area of philanthropic engagement, including:

- positive, democratic, right-based narratives and collective visions of the future;
- online and off-line independent and alternative media ecosystems;
- counter-disinformation strategies;
- ethical and autonomous digital infrastructures;
- AI-related literacy and tech trainings for civil society organisations and funders alike;
- low-tech cultural and educational work strengthening democratic consciousness and participation.

Several respondents highlighted the importance of **investing in democratic imagination and youth engagement** rather than relying solely on reactive responses to authoritarianism and divisive discourses.

How philanthropy operates

Across contexts, the discussions pointed to a common conclusion: in a period marked by democratic strain, shrinking civic space and greater uncertainty, **how philanthropy operates may become as important as what it funds.**

**How philanthropy operates
may become as important
as what it funds**

Trust and flexibility

Identified priorities include:

- long-term and flexible funding;
- participatory grant-making mechanisms;
- reduced bureaucratic processes during application and reporting phases;
- faster disbursement mechanisms;
- exploration of alternative funding mechanisms capable of supporting actors operating in constrained environments;
- learning from and building partnerships with actors that have direct experience supporting communities and movements in complex or constrained environments, including women's funds, participatory funds and other intermediaries deploying trust-based and risk-tolerant approaches to grantmaking;
- clarity and communication in grantee-funder relationship and processes involved.

Several respondents noted that periods of democratic strain or conflict often generate greater institutional caution precisely when flexibility and rapid response become most necessary.

From reactive to proactive philanthropy

As political and social shifts unfold at speed, philanthropy may need to **strengthen its capacity to anticipate disruption rather than respond only once crises unfold.**

This includes:

- combining emergency funding mechanisms with longer-term planning horizons;
- scenario planning and strategic foresight to prepare for possible futures;
- election preparedness;
- sustained investment in the narratives, cultural infrastructures and civic imagination needed to advance inclusive, democratic and rights-based visions for society;
- reflection on the sector's resilience across different political futures.

Several respondents also stressed the importance of learning from contexts where civil society and philanthropy have operated or operate under shrinking civic space and democratic erosion for extended periods.

Risk and positioning

As civic space rapidly shrinks and both civil society and philanthropy come under greater scrutiny, funders may need to clarify their risk appetite and positioning, both internally and publicly. In all three contexts, discussions suggested that **understanding risk is not primarily about reducing exposure, but about maintaining the ability to act strategically and support grantees under changing conditions.**

Priority areas include:

- assessing risk appetite more systematically, including developing clear frameworks to evaluate risks associated with funding, advocacy and public engagement to avoid shifting risks to grantees;
- internally clarifying what approaches to public positioning, advocacy or strategic discretion are possible or desirable, taking into account organisational mandates, funding models and national contexts;
- strengthening understanding of legal and regulatory frameworks particularly regarding advocacy, political activity and civic participation;
- preparing collectively for more legal, political and reputational scrutiny directed at both civil society and philanthropic actors;
- leveraging collaborative funding approaches, including pooled funds, intermediaries and other collective regranting mechanisms, to strengthen resilience, distribute risk and support work that may be difficult for individual actors to fund alone.

Several discussions highlighted the need to move beyond traditional understandings of ‘neutrality’. In contexts where democratic norms, civic freedoms and fundamental rights are being contested, organisations may need to reflect more explicitly on **the relationship between their values, funding practices and public positioning**. Rather than retreating into less contested areas of work, respondents repeatedly stressed the importance of developing the confidence, legal understanding and institutional preparedness required to continue supporting rights, justice and democracy-related work effectively.

Philanthropy and the ecosystems of social change

Across contexts, discussions repeatedly returned to questions surrounding philanthropy's wider role within democratic ecosystems. While approaches differ depending on mandates, legal frameworks and organisational cultures, philanthropy can no longer be understood solely as a technical funding mechanism detached from wider social and political realities. **Decisions about what to fund, how to fund and with whom to engage inevitably shape the kind of society philanthropy helps build.** As democratic strain intensifies and civic space shrinks, questions concerning philanthropy's civic role, its contribution to social change and the responsibilities that accompany its influence are becoming central to philanthropic practice.

Collective intelligence and coordination

As political, social and economic pressures become interconnected and transnational, philanthropy may need to invest more deliberately in collective intelligence, shared learning and strategic coordination in the years ahead.

Priority areas identified in this direction include:

- engaging in shared learning and strategic dialogue;
- strengthening collective analysis and monitoring of civic space and democratic trends, risks and opportunities;
- mapping gaps, overlaps and complementarities in the ecosystem;
- strengthening coordination at local, national and European levels;
- learning from contexts where civil society and philanthropy have already operated under shrinking civic space, democratic erosion and conflict;
- investing in permanent infrastructures for collective learning, knowledge sharing and strategic exchange.

Coordination was not framed as requiring full alignment, but rather greater strategic awareness of **where collective action can strengthen resilience, reduce duplication and increase long-term leverage**.



Adopting a systemic and ecosystem approach

Philanthropy does not operate in a vacuum and, while stronger coordination within the sector is key, achieving meaningful change requires understanding the wider ecosystems in which philanthropy operates. This includes understanding who other actors are, how they influence social, political and economic outcomes, and where opportunities exist for collaboration despite differing mandates, interests or perspectives.

Priority areas include:

- understanding how social, political and economic pressures interact across sectors and issues;
- mapping wider ecosystems of actors, influence, incentives and power;
- strengthening as appropriate dialogue between philanthropy, civil society, research, policy actors and affected communities;
- identifying opportunities for collaboration across sectors, movements and disciplines;
- developing a stronger understanding of how different actors frame and tackle social challenges, social change and the public good in different contexts.

Overall, participants repeatedly stressed that shrinking civic space, democratic distrust, disinformation, inequality, climate pressures, exclusionary politics and conflict reinforce one another. This points towards more systemic approaches capable of connecting human rights, social justice, democracy, peace and social cohesion efforts rather than addressing them in isolation.

Supporting enabling environments for civil society and philanthropy

As civic and philanthropic space come under growing pressure, funders may need to engage in **protecting the conditions that enable both civil society and philanthropy to operate effectively**. Legal and regulatory frameworks differ across countries - in some contexts they affect civil society and philanthropy through similar mechanisms, while in others through distinct ones. Still, shrinking civic space is increasingly paralleled by shrinking philanthropic space. As scrutiny, restrictions and challenges to legitimacy affect both sectors, protecting enabling environments is key.

Priority areas include:

- supporting or engaging in policy and regulatory advocacy affecting philanthropy's ability to operate effectively;
- supporting or engaging in policy and regulatory advocacy linked to civic space and rule of law;
- strengthening communication capacities and preparedness in response to growing scrutiny and reputational challenges directed at philanthropy;
- preparing collectively for legal, political and reputational challenges directed at both civil society organisations and philanthropic actors.

Several discussions highlighted that **maintaining enabling environments is no longer a peripheral concern, but a fundamental condition** for philanthropy's ability to support human rights, social justice and long-term social change.

A final word



The reflections gathered throughout this process do not point towards a single future, nor a single philanthropic response. Contexts, risks and capacities differ across Europe. Yet, one message emerged consistently: **the operating environment for civil society and philanthropy is becoming more volatile, politically contested and interconnected.**

At the same time, participants also pointed to **mobilisation, solidarity, collective learning and democratic innovation across communities, movements, individuals and institutions.** The challenge ahead is therefore not only reactive, but also **creative**, and **forward-looking**. While approaches will necessarily differ depending on organisational priorities, mandates, capacities, risk appetites and contexts, a transversal question is emerging: how can philanthropy strengthen resilience, coordination and long-term capacity in ways that enable societies not only to navigate uncertainty, but also to learn, adapt and help create the conditions for open, inclusive and democratic societies to thrive?

I hope this brief contributes to those ongoing reflections. As the Ariadne network continues to evolve its own strategy and role within the European landscape and beyond, we hope this publication can serve not as a fixed roadmap, but as a **tool for reflection, coordination and action** in a rapidly changing context.

The challenges ahead are significant. But so too are the relationships, infrastructures and capacities that already exist to respond collectively.

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Endnotes

- i** <https://monitor.civicus.org/>
- ii** <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/spread-of-foreign-agent-laws-in-eastern-europe-pose-increasing-threats-to-civil-society/>
- iii** <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-ECF.pdf>
- iv** https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem_Institute_Democracy_Report_2026_lowres.pdf
- v** <https://fra.europa.eu/pt/news/2025/fra-statement-recent-developments-affecting-civil-society-and-fundamental-rights>
- vi** <https://www.liberties.eu/f/wtaqq>
- vii** Bermeo, Nancy (2016). *On Democratic Backsliding*. Journal of Democracy: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/607612>
- viii** <https://publications.civicus.org/publications/2026-state-of-civil-society-report/>
- ix** <https://www.epfweb.org/node/1147>
- x** https://drive.google.com/file/d/16ium9r_F6qVngrUmrVK9Y-YTm9tNvn6U/view
- xi** <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/unite-in-advance-philanthropy-coalition-launches-solidarity-campaign/>
- xii** D-Hub has recently developed an anti-authoritarian toolkit based on lessons learnt across the globe: <https://antiauthoritarian.com/>
- xiii** <https://civic-futures.org/the-security-playbook/>
- xiv** Philea regularly updates country profiles and legislations directly pointing at this tendency: <https://philea.eu/how-we-can-help/policy-and-advocacy/analysing-the-legal-environment-for-philanthropy-in-europe/>
- xv** <https://www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Funding-at-a-Crossroads-HRFN-Sept-2025.pdf>
- xvi** The Ariadne team is particularly grateful to Mateja Horvat and Lejla Pilica (Robert Bosch Stiftung) for their help in the elaboration of these questions.
- xvii** The work of the French Senate Commission is public. Up-to-date developments are available online: <https://www.senat.fr/travaux-parlementaires/structures-temporaires/commissions-denquete/commission-denquete-sur-les-mecanismes-de-financement-des-politiques-publiques-par-des-organismes-societes-ou-fondations-de-droit-prive-et-des-risques-en-matiere-dinfluence-dabsence-de-transparence-financiere-et-dentrave-au-fonctionnement-de-la-democratie.html>

