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PROTEUS 2026:

Who Defends Democracy When Democracy Backslides?

Ljubljana messages

Guidelines for policymakers, NGOs and civil society

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About PROTEUS

Since January 2023, the PROTEUS project, led by the Transatlantic Foundation, supported and strengthened the capacities of civil society actors in eight Central European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, in cooperation with eight national implementation partners: Sofia Platform, CERANEO, Via Foundation, Power of Humanity, Shipyard, CeRe, PDCS, and SLOGA, respectively.

This document was prepared on the basis of a joint reflection by participants at the final event of the PROTEUS project, held in Ljubljana in September 2026. The central theme of the event was the question: ***Who defends democracy when democracy backslides?*** The following speakers presented their views: Irena Joveva, Member of the European Parliament, Daniel Hegedüs, Regional Director for Central Europe at the Transatlantic Foundation, Helena Milinković, Journalist and representative of journalists' unions at public broadcaster RTV, Simon Delakorda, Director of the Institute for Electronic Participation INePa, and Dušan Stojanović, Member of the National Assembly from the Freedom Movement.

In the closing part of the event, participants explored democratic decline and shrinking civic space, the role of civil society in defending democratic values, and the exclusion of NGOs in peripheral and rural areas.

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Introduction

The Ljubljana Messages bring together the conclusions of participants at the Proteus event "Who defends democracy when democracy backslides?".

Participants' discussions turned to three areas: how democracy is declining and civic space narrowing across the region, the distinct part civil society, including smaller local organisations, plays in upholding democratic values, and the barriers facing NGOs in peripheral and rural areas, along with the consequences of this exclusion and the scope for self-organisation.

This document distils those discussions into concrete messages. It is addressed to policymakers and funders, who shape the conditions in which civil society works, and to NGOs and wider civil society, who carry much of the day-to-day work of defending democratic values.

Concept: PROTEUS event participants
Author: Sašo Kronegger
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Key messages

(1) Recognize civil society as a essential partner, not a threat.

(2) *Reform funding models so that support reaches every level, including small and rural organisations.*

(3) Bridge the urban–rural divide through bottom-up inclusion.

(4) *Protect public discourse and the democratic information space.*

(5) *Use innovation, digitalisation and shared learning to widen participation.*

(6) *Civil society: respond, connect, tell the story and share what works.*

Where we stand

Participants pointed to a set of trends that, taken together, describe a shrinking space for civil society and a weakening of democratic culture.

Signs of democratic decline.

Hate speech is rising and is being normalised by the system; more and more people are afraid to voice their real opinions on controversial issues; polarisation and intolerance are growing (one participant spoke of a "post-COVID syndrome"); and the quality of public information is falling. Decision-making bodies also lack diversity. The trend is not uniform: it varies from country to country, through different mixes of threats, hate speech and manipulation.

Pressure on civil society.

Methods differ between countries, from defunding and threats to administrative controls, but the overall direction is towards more subtle, indirect pressure. Authorities systematically damage the reputation of local and national NGOs, leaving communities feeling that civil society is not on their side. Funding for organisations working on controversial issues is very limited.

An under-estimated danger.

Public passivity ("nothing can be done") and unfamiliarity with what civil society does make it easier to erode civic space without resistance.

A divide between centre and periphery.

Support for civil society remains concentrated in capitals and larger cities. Rural NGOs are mostly confined to service delivery, while policy advocacy is done by urban NGOs, and the local know-how of grassroots groups is often ignored.

Messages to decision makers

1. Recognise civil society as an essential partner, not a threat.

NGOs are not the enemy. They ask uncomfortable questions because they want to build better solutions.

• Acknowledge what civil society does. NGOs hold governments accountable, monitor elections, resist democratic backsliding, educate citizens, build social solidarity and give a voice to citizens and minority communities. They are a line of defence for democracy.

• Do not treat legitimate engagement as a threat. Civic engagement is often perceived as a danger precisely because it produces real change. Democracy is a win-win: *without the freedom to speak out, everyone loses.*

• Respect independence. Civil society needs a functioning democratic framework and must be able to operate above party-political ideology.

• Provide tools, support and guidance, and create more space for NGO development.

2. Reform funding models to reach all levels.

Funding must follow the real needs of communities, not only the capacity to write applications.

• Provide core and flexible funding. Funders should listen more deeply to the issues people face, be more open to complexity and flexible in approach, and dedicate more time and core funding, especially to organisations working on controversial issues.

• Stop reputational attacks. Decision-makers and local authorities should stop spreading falsehoods and stereotypes about civil society (for example, labelling activists as lazy or as agents of Soros) and stop undermining the reputation of local NGOs.

• Enable grassroots access. Open funding to non-registered entities, such as groups of young people from rural areas who have agency. Combine microgrants with long-term support to grow community-based organisations sustainably.

• Prioritise small organisations from small towns, and shift funding away from its concentration in capitals.

• Increase EU funding for art and culture, which would raise capacity in all areas.

3. Bridge the urban–rural divide through bottom-up inclusion

Exclusion of peripheral areas reduces opportunities and agency, and it erodes trust in democracy and institutions.

• Move from top-down to bottom-up. Strengthen local communities by sharing the knowledge and patterns of self-organisation.

• Broaden the definition of periphery. Periphery is not only geographical; it is also educational and socio-economic. Inclusion is needed at all levels.

• Value local knowledge. Local and grassroots NGOs have relevant know-how that is often ignored. Give them the context and resources to influence policy, rather than limiting them to service delivery.

• Keep dialogue open, between authorities and residents and between urban and rural populations, whose needs can differ so much that mutual understanding becomes difficult.

• Address the consequences. In excluded areas people face weaker social services, fewer chances to break out of poverty, less agency and a stronger sense of exclusion. Creating more small opportunities for growth, together with training for local stakeholders to use them well, is one practical response.

4. Protect public discourse and the democratic information space

Democracy relies on quality information and on people who feel safe to speak.

• Regulate digital political content. Consider measures such as a ban on political advertising in short-video formats.

• Stop reputational attacks. Decision-makers and local authorities should stop spreading falsehoods and stereotypes about civil society (for example, labelling activists as lazy or as agents of Soros) and stop undermining the reputation of local NGOs.

• Counter hate speech and its normalisation, so that people are no longer afraid to share their real opinions on controversial issues.

• Support human-centred storytelling. Stories of real people bring light to difficult topics and show ordinary people how democratic values work in practice and shape everyday life.

• Build diversity into decision-making and public forums, including at conferences such as this one, because diverse perspectives lead to better solutions.

5. Use innovation, digitalisation and shared learning

Democratic processes must remain open and continuous, even in times of crisis.

• Use digital participation tools (for example, remote voting) to ensure the continuity of democratic processes and to include vulnerable groups such as older people, people with disabilities and isolated populations, including in times of war or natural hazards. This applies nationally, at EU level and internationally.

• Encourage networking and dialogue on best practices, so that local groups can connect with larger organisations that have louder voices and more capacity.

• Scale local successes. Support mechanisms that let solutions found in one community be replicated in others, for example through "caravans" of good practice or associations of municipalities that grow over time into organisations capable of carrying local experience upwards.

Messages to NGO's and civil society

Civil society has a unique role in protecting democratic values, and with it a shared responsibility.

• React to "anomalies" with an immediate response and a thoughtful approach.

• Collaborate and advocate together. Smaller organisations should connect with larger ones that have more capacity and a louder voice; larger organisations should use that voice for the benefit of the whole sector.

• Show democracy in practice. Make democratic values tangible for ordinary people and explain how they affect everyday life.

• Share what works. Address issues at local level, then turn the solutions into best practices that can be replicated in other communities or shared internationally.

• Prepare communities for crisis. Every community should have a leader whom people trust when a crisis comes. Local NGOs are often the first responders precisely because they are not slowed down by bureaucracy.

• Stay independent and inclusive. Remain above party-political ideology and respect the dignity of every human being: all different, all equal.

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"Without the freedom to speak out, we all lose."