

Saving Liberal Democracy in Europe

Options for support to civil society and media



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Saving Liberal Democracy in Europe

Options of support for civil society and media

The brief below examines several institutional options for civil society and independent media support, based on a research on democratization and foreign assistance to Romania over the past 35 years, with a slight regional perspective (Three Decades of Civil Society: the Ups and Downs of Promoting Democracy in Romania, available at <https://expertforum.ro/en/three-decades-of-civil-society/>). The finalization of our report in late 2024 and early 2025 coincided with momentous changes in foreign policy from the US towards Europe and Russia, major shifts in US assistance for democratization globally, as well as radical developments concerning the rise of the far right populism not only in Romania, but also across the entire European continent. Some of the recommendations we developed with Romania in focus under the new set of circumstances can be scaled up at European level. Pan-European actions focused on support to civil society and independent media are needed to preserve and strengthen liberal democracy in Europe in general. We note there is a new momentum in European discussions concerning how the EU could step in to compensate for US virtually abandoning its traditional stewardship on matters of democratization via assistance to civil society and media, both inside the EU and in its immediate neighborhood (Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership). The Romanian experience with democratization in the past 35 years, where support from US and EU has been vital and probably the key driver, provides a starting point to discern what has worked and what has been less successful. Most importantly, it provides insights into how foreign assistance – from funding of civil society to conditionality-pushed reforms in the administration – could lead to the emergence of sustainable liberal democratic institutions, strongly anchored in local realities and practices, and resilient to the anti-liberal current today.

To summarize the results of our research, though Romania's path to liberal democracy in the past 35 years has been long and winding, the country achieved an incredible transformation from a totalitarian dictatorship to a pluralistic, economically prosperous, and free state, enjoying the rights and liberties of a full member of EU and NATO in just one generation. This transformation depended critically on external circumstances, primarily the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of US as the globally uncontested leader of the liberal democratic camp at the end of the Cold War. The progress was however also conditional on the growth of internal actors, from a diverse civil society to a thriving private sector, which contributed to anchoring the transformation by building local "buy-in" for the "Western" style of life - not only in terms of economic prosperity, but also values and institutions. Joining NATO and EU was conditional on significant reforms and institutional convergence. This opened up the space for civil society and media, and created valuable entry points for various groups in society to demand accountability. This civil society benefitted enormously from a relatively limited external support, financial and know-how, without which its development would have been questionable. Over time though, as in the wider region,

ensuring the sustainability of civil society and independent media remained a critical challenge largely unresolved - both in terms of growing favorable local constituencies willing to fight to protect their vital role in a pluralistic society, and in building a solid, diversified, home-grown financial base.

Despite achievements in the transition to a liberal democracy, significant backsliding occurred in the past decade as the country got increasingly in sync with global developments. These global shifts towards illiberalism combined in Romania with unresolved challenges stemming from the early phases of transition, such as a sense of incomplete justice that simmered into growing resentment. The global shift away from liberal democracy occurred particularly because of the revitalization of global competition for power from Russia and China; but also because society took the gains of democracy for granted. In Romania, the illiberal shift found fertile ground also because older ills persisted, such as patronage politics and post-communist elite continuity, only reinforced by the availability of increasing spoils from the country's unprecedented growth. The fragility of Romania's young democracy soon became apparent. The illiberal drift in Romania, first emerging from purely opportunistic reasons, such as politicians not willing to pay for crimes or to abandon entrenched corrupt, clientelistic practices, was thus turbo-charged by the recent global illiberal tide. As Russia, with renewed imperial ambitions, has been waging a global hybrid war seeking to change the world order and undermine liberal democracy for at least the past decade, and China following suit, countries across the globe fell one after another into illiberal, hybrid or autocratic regimes. The recent fall of US leadership in this latter camp could be the ultimate blow to liberal democracy as we know it - unless supporters of liberal democracy find a way to unite in a sustained effort to undo the tide. Romania's fledgling democracy is in at least the same danger as any other country, and the vulnerabilities of its own civil society (low local support from constituency and funding) compound to the problem.

Romania met the peak of the global crisis of liberal democracy in early 2025 with a shaky, deeply unpopular, clientelistic government; a profoundly incompetent political leadership, perpetuated through decades of clientelism and promotion by patronage; and a considerable share of the political establishment following the worst in international trends for opportunistic reasons or hidden complicity with Russian interests. On the other hand, Romania's population continues to have low levels of social capital, low trust in institutions, and low critical thinking, being particularly vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda even in comparison with other EU peers. In December 2024, a candidate with little visibility was on the brink of winning the presidential elections organizing a massive, combined campaign of social media propaganda and offline mobilization of various groups, including fringe and far right radicals. For the first time in its post-Communist history, Romania cancelled presidential elections - also a first in the EU. The move, perhaps justified to avoid an extremist to gain power and form a radical government, also starkly revealed the dark consequences of generalized institutional failure coupled with the desire of entrenched elites to cling to power and the incompleteness of reforms which should have anchored the country on a liberal democratic path. During late 2024 elections, Romania's institutions failed to contain massive interference in elections, which certainly originated in part in Russia, but was also eagerly pursued by domestic mainstream parties seeking convenient competitors.

China and MAGA may also have had some inputs, and in early 2025 extremist politicians are openly promoted by the MAGA faction in the new US administration. Romanian institutions in charge with the integrity of elections failed to monitor campaign funding, and to combat extremism in the public space. It is unclear how much of the result is because the leadership of secret services, Permanent Electoral Authority, fiscal authorities, regulatory watchdogs were incompetent or outright treasonous, and for two months after the cancellation of elections nobody gave a plausible explanation to a public justifiably angry at the situation. A re-run of the presidential elections was scheduled for May 2025. Until then, despite their popularity being at historical lows, the very same key political actors against which the electorate mobilized to vote remained in power and formed a new government. The electorate's anger was bound to increase as long as no adequate answers are given for why the elections had to be cancelled, and there was an immense risk that the May 2025 elections would not yield better results precisely for these reasons. To compound to the problem, actors close to MAGA actively lobbied for the extremist candidate and put additional pressures on Romanian authorities. The final result of the elections, with a moderate candidate making a surprise win in a very contested second round, was due to mobilization, partly in a backlash against populism not very different from the cases of Germany, Canada or Australia.

Thus, there was still hope: as a reaction to the perceived interference of US leadership, and following the results of the German elections in February 2025, a part of the establishment and of the society shows timid signs of a swing back to a pro-European position, which will also likely shape the Parliamentary majority. After about two months of business-as-usual following the cancellation of elections in December, the incumbent president resigned (fearing an imminent impeachment); the head of the Permanent Electoral Authority was dismissed by Parliament; and criminal investigations were launched concerning the Russian and far-right support for the extremist candidate Georgescu. There were also incipient signals that a part of the business community feels the threat and would be willing to put efforts and perhaps funding into support for some media and civil society, understanding the stakes.

As explained in the report, the travails of civil society in Romania since 1990 underscores both its resilience and the critical role of international assistance in fostering liberal democracy. The recent challenges of emerging illiberal politics in the region, social polarization, and resource constraints call for a reimagined approach to external support in concert with the promotion of democracy. Some lessons from the past three decades can be now distilled in order to design more targeted recommendations for effective assistance, aiming to ensure the sustainability and impact of civil society in Romania's future. More immediately, the shutdown of US support for liberal democracy (and the US' rapid transformation into a disruptive actor aimed at weakening the European democracies) requires a thorough rethinking of how to best target resources still available in the liberal democratic "camp", which is also critical to avoid that other malignant players, such as China or Russia, fill in the void.

1. Immediate urgency: compensate for departure of US funding in key areas

As explained above, the US shut down all its financial aid in support of democratization across the globe at the end of January 2025 and showed ominous signs of switching sides to authoritarianism. Virtually all civil society organizations working on now “hot” topics essential to bring clarity in today’s crisis, such as monitoring of elections integrity, disinformation, human rights and hate speech, independent investigative media outlets, were largely dependent on US funding, precisely because these were topics perceived as “adversarial” to the government and avoided by almost all other donors (who prefer the “cooperative-with-government” approaches). The shutdown of US funding - coupled with a lull of funding from other donors, such as Norway grants - highlighted sharply the dependence of all these organizations on US soft power and financial support, at a time when they would be most needed to fight for access to information, fight against disinformation, and promotion of liberal democracy. As the shutdown meant also payment defaults on already performed activities, many organizations faced an acute cash crunch, affecting precisely those providing the essential evidence of foreign malign influence in the recent elections, expected to be repeated in the re-run of the elections in May. These organizations are also rather small, and risked outright bankruptcy in the immediate term, finding themselves unable to pay staff and essential utilities. There is **little awareness of the urgency among other donors**, particularly because even US donors were unprepared for the situation and initially expected a temporary freeze or partial reduction of the support, giving mixed messages to their staff, to grantees and to others in the donor community. Also explained above, various EU players are eager to follow US in reducing support for civil society and media, whether they seek favors with the new US administration (e.g. UK’s announced cut of foreign aid); for internal crackdown of civil society (Hungary, Slovakia); or because they cannot (or do not wish to) distinguish between “good foreign aid” vs malign influence (Germany). A few immediate actions should be undertaken to ensure that such organizations are able to continue investigations concerning foreign interference and manipulation of electoral rules, precisely as 2025 is a year of elections in several countries. There is also a risk that US actors in the MAGA faction may go further than simply pushing for the US to abandon democratization efforts and join authoritarians instead, actively supporting wannabe dictators in Europe in the crackdown on dissent and civil society, possibly providing funding, disinformation support and know-how to organizations that fight liberal democracy.

- **International partners (EU, embassies of European states):** Understand the immediate political and geopolitical risk of US withdrawal from the support of liberal democracy globally, but particularly in countries like Romania, with young and immature democratic institutions. There is a major risk that malevolent actors, in particular Russia and China, will **fill in the vacuum**, supporting different types of “civil society” organizations and actors, such as the “offline” grassroots movements and networks that emerged in Georgescu’s campaign in November 2024, some more

resembling organized crime or paramilitary groups, and now revealed by criminal investigations. US outright collusion and active support for illiberalism is not to be excluded, meaning that Romania's remaining international partners should be prepared to support civil society activists and independent journalists with prompt legal aid and other forms of protection as the need may arise (from public positions to safe havens).

- **Donors (private donors, embassies, EU, possibly also US donors apart from the federal government):** Make (your own) list with the few civil society and media outlets worth supporting as emergency. In Romania one could start with the handful of organizations and media outlets which provided the body of evidence concerning institutional failures and massive influence campaign during the November-December 2024 elections. All of these are at risk of immediate termination of activities. The US (in grants from US embassy / DoS, NED, to NGOs and independent investigative media) was de facto the only donor in 2025 for such activities in Romania, as Norway grants were also finalized in 2024, and funding from the next cycle would probably be available only in 2-3 years – assuming they would not be blocked altogether by an illiberal government. Other donors such as the EU or Civitates or private foundations, e.g. Calouste Gulbenkian, do indeed continue to provide funding, but follow their usual calendar for new calls. There is little to provide a “bridge” between the US default on ongoing projects and unlikely funding in the future, on one hand, and the availability of grants from other donors, on the other hand, meaning that recipient organizations could face months of no funding for staff and utilities, despite the urgency of doing their work in advance of elections and immediately after. During this period they are additionally demotivated as they became target to slander and threats (e.g. angry tweets from Elon Musk, dedicated shows by Joe Rogan, youtube/TikTok slandering sessions by local influencers - all of which could lead *in extremis* to physical violence). The list of organizations in trouble is in fact readily available given the very public and broadly viralized threats by extremists against “Soros agents” and the like. Discuss with these organizations immediate needs to ensure continuity at least beyond the May elections, so that there is critical capacity to provide early warnings, information and policy advice to combat massive electoral manipulation.
- **Donors:** As Romania's government will oscillate in the next few years between a pro-Russian autocracy or a pro-European, but corrupt and clientelistic imperfect democracy, the more appropriate approach for the changing circumstances is rather the old American “contrarian-to-government” than the European “cooperative-with-power”. This requires a deeper rethinking of approaches to civil society and media support. For example, donors tend to favor “large coalitions of NGOs” working on a particular topic. This is consistent with the idea that such broad coalitions also cooperate with governments in various institutionalized government-NGO consultative formats. However, for donor support this strategy is not working simply because NGOs with similar profile also bitterly compete for increasingly limited

resources - hence all such coalitions are brittle and unsustainable. It is also good to stimulate competition between organizations because **pluralism** of views and different research perspectives shed better light on the social and political developments, avoiding also discourse capture by any particular interest. The approach of the EU to provide non-competitively large funding to “umbrella organizations” (e.g. uncompetitive grants to disinformation network of hubs EDMO, to large consortia for elections, large grants to organizations to deal with subgranting) only increases the risk that startup organizations on new topics or NGOs which may have competence but not the right connections are excluded from funding. As explained above, this practice has been long favored because of convenience (much easier to subcontract large intermediaries to deal with the “problem” in bulk). But it favors immobilism, lacks flexibility in times of crisis, over-centralizes, and limits competition for quality, particularly from smaller and less connected organizations which may actually have much better expertise on highly unusual topics that become relevant every new day. The EC and other donors must take full responsibility for support of democratization in the EU and in neighboring countries by organizing directly tenders and competitive calls, as well as smaller grants to get as much competition of ideas and projects as possible. Instead of “horizontal integration” (large coalitions of organizations which exclude possible competitors), it would make much more sense to favor competition between “vertically integrated” capabilities (smaller grants given competitively to many “clusters” of complementary expertise and critical skills). There is valuable experience from US donors on exactly this type of approach and which may be tapped into, precisely as at least a part of the former staff of such donors would seek new employment.

- As examples of “vertical integration” for the critical topic of elections in Romania in May 2025: fighting disinformation and election manipulation would benefit rather from the creation of several “vertical” coalitions (comprising a watchdog, a investigative media, a few bloggers/influencers, which have complementary skills - monitoring of disinformation, preparing response, disseminating and explaining to the public, proposing policy solutions) to compete among each others and provide different angles and results to the same problem; rather than attempting to create mono-skill mega-coalitions, such as just for election observation completely decoupled from the other components concerning information space or funding of political competitors.
- Managing competitive grants to multiple recipients: Contrary to what may be expected, the EC and other donors can **immediately** build this capacity by rapidly building on the infrastructure and staff of US former donor organizations. It is urgent to do so to avoid that this infrastructure and its know-how disappear altogether. The EC could rapidly support the establishment of a **donor platform** hiring immediately the former staff of USAID and NED, as well as also other US aid people. This action is critically

urgent, as former USAID staff and potentially staff from other organizations – NED, NDI, NRI etc., including those based in Washington, have been effectively laid off and many would be most willing to take up a new job, including relocation in Europe. Such people have the skills, the know-how, and the in-depth knowledge of beneficiaries of organizations formerly supported by US in the region at large, inside the EU and in EU's neighborhood (Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership). They also share the determination and liberal democratic values to provide effective support to civil society organizations and independent media. Such key human resources would also be comfortable to implement the former US approach to identify and support “contrarian-to-government” organizations and actors, enhancing pluralism and competition. Given their experience in regional matters, they may also bridge the lack of specific knowledge of EU donors, which have traditionally focused rather exclusively on outside the EU's borders.

2. Medium- and longer-term strategization: define realistic goals for preservation of democracy

The experience of Romanian civil society highlights the need for achievable, context-specific objectives in democratization. Transitioning to liberal democracy is a complex, long-term process, easily reversible, and efforts should acknowledge that limited financial support over short durations cannot achieve systemic change. Instead, the international partners and domestic promoters of democracy, beyond the immediate urgency for the next 6 months, should focus on pressuring both the government with conditionality to reduce the clientelism and on long-term support for pluralism via civil society and independent media.

- **International partners (EU, other Western potential donors):** In direct relation to governments, adopt realistic benchmarks by setting clear, phased goals for democratic development, aligned with local contexts and capacities.
 - Given that Romania faces significant macroeconomic imbalances (a budget deficit of almost 9% in 2024, inflation of over 7%, modest economic growth), both EU (by its Excessive Deficit Procedure and EU funds) and IMF¹ have an entry point to put renewed conditionality for substantive administration reforms. As the experience in the 2011-2013 EU/WB/IMF program shows, conditionalities work best when strongly aligned among Romania's external partners, e.g. all donors could successfully push for corporate governance of SOEs or sectorial reforms in energy or transport, curbing also some of the more egregious corruption practices in a state-owned electricity generator. This time around, given the unfolding crisis, pressure should be targeted at: renewing judicial reforms, cleaning up the state of people in key positions

¹ IMF, WB may also be quite weakened if the US decides to withdraw, however, the US share is just over 16%, though it is the largest single contributor.

which have connections with Russia or with groups undermining the Constitutional order, as well as softer conditions, such as enforcing procurement rules that limit the country's exposure to critical dependencies on goods and services from potential adversaries (Russia, China, but now also US). As could be seen from the recent developments, from the electoral campaign of last year to this year's criminal investigations, there is a part of the Romanian administration which is willing to fight "for the good cause", while another faction, almost of equal force, still populates important parts of the state, and the two are rather balanced. The new reformist president may tip the balance, but external checks and conditionality would significantly bolster the commitment of the politicians in Parliament or Government. Providing a decisive package of conditionality would support and embolden the reformists, while weakening the others, as was the experience in the past.

- Provide additional support, including with visibility and facilitating know-how transfer, for reformist areas of the public administration. For example, some local administrations are relatively well governed. They can be further supported to become a model for others, including the central government, by a combination of funding and knowledge transfer from peers (e.g. reformist townhalls across Europe). There are also certain parts of the central administration which may be more reformist than others. Focus initially on establishing transparent governance practices in local administrations, gradually scaling efforts to national institutions, as conditionality.
- **Donors:** After the urgent rearrangement of existing financial support and recovery of institutional setup for grant-giving, focus on areas which would provide a sustainable, locally-grounded civil society and independent media. Several areas of interventions could be:
 - Reach out directly to the business community and the public, together with visible figures from NGOs and independent media, in a campaign to raise awareness directly on the benefits of liberal democracy and why supporting such independent players is beneficial for the stability of the business environment and the welfare of the general public.
 - As some potential donors may be afraid, as explained above, to associate with initiatives for good governance, anticorruption, anti-disinformation that could be politically-sensitive, provide and encourage the option of a funding mechanism that would put "distance" between donors and recipients and proper accountability designs. A very simple option would be to attract funding to existing respectable and well-governed donor intermediaries, e.g. Civitates at EU level or FDSC in Romania, which are "vetted" by the major institutional donors for integrity of values and procedures for grants. Another option could be the revitalization of the Partnership for Transparency Fund, a US-based organization based on a World Bank trust fund managing grant programs,

which has invested significant efforts into understanding the local environments in countries in which it is a donor. Using such specialized intermediaries with significant local knowledge, additional resources can be pooled with existing donors, leveraging impact. At the same time, these intermediary organizations fund both “contrarian” civic initiatives and independent media, on one hand, and broader humanitarian, social, educational, environmental initiatives, on the other hand. Thus, the private sector donors are better “shielded” from accusations, threats, slanders by authoritarian politicians or extremist political forces, being more comfortable to contribute financial support. At a bigger, European scale, covering EU, Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, there may be several options to set up an overarching institutional setup to take over US experience and leverage EU funding – either via a new organizational structure, detailed in Box 2 below, or reshaping existing institutions to meet new roles and challenges, as in Annex 2. Overall, it is essential to invest in developing in-depth knowledge of local conditions and consolidate trusted organizations which would manage/intermediate funding programs based on priorities relevant to the beneficiary country or countries.

- In the work with individual NGOs and media outlets on the ground, prioritize institutional resilience by investing in building robust administrative and organizational frameworks for NGOs, including governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and financial planning. Regular evaluations and capacity-building programs can ensure organizations adapt to changing needs. These can be both conditions for grants and requirements to dedicate a part of the funding for the development of these structures. Such support could be given either directly by donors or intermediary organizations, as well as by dedicated structures, e.g. reviving initiatives like CENTRAS. Donors should thus also work with grantees to strengthen the link between NGOs and local constituencies, which has been particularly difficult in the local context, for cultural and historical reasons. It will require significant more effort than just requiring organizations to demonstrate “sustainability” in grant application forms and may involve hands-on, long term working together on the ground directly with the NGOs in building such constituencies.
- **Donors and international partners:** Beyond the immediate readjustment needs, a more realistic, incremental approach to democratization is needed. As illustrated in the report, instead of announcing broad democratization goals that are unachievable with the level of funding realistically available, as well as rapidly shifting in the new geopolitical landscape, it may make more sense to invest in incremental change by emphasizing progress over perfection, recognizing that societal transformations require sustained efforts. For instance, for individual projects or programs, specific milestones should be set as success (or insuccess) indicators, such as increasing civic participation by x% within a five-year period or reducing corruption perceptions in

targeted regions. This may help fine tune also expectations and plan for future interventions, both in relation to NGOs and with respective governments.

- **Donors:** Ask the right questions and start from the right assumptions, including on “sustainability”, in assessing the effectiveness of grants to civil society and independent media. For example, the assumptions that media or watchdogs can become financially sustainable is unrealistic if the model of business is “funding for protection” (oligarchs funding TVs or news outlets to gain protection from the law or settle scores with adversaries; watchdogs getting public budget funding to “close their eyes”). This is more evident than ever even in the US. Sometimes, the question that should be asked may simply be “is it better with or without our funding”. This means acknowledging that a **permanent** but smaller funding targeted at the right actions or simply providing a lifeline for a handful of organizations to keep a country from slipping into illiberalism may be a better solution for the donor’s ultimate democratization goals than a short-term larger funding of a project, on the assumption that it should become financially self-sustainable at the end of the project, regardless of who would continue the funding and for what purpose. The selection of such organizations and projects for potentially permanent (or long-term) small support must be however periodically reviewed, to ensure that those organizations and projects maintain the correct direction.
- **Donors:** Invest in building a constituency for and with the grantees, anchoring them in local legitimacy. This is inextricably linked with the development of the donor’s (intermediary) local knowledge and is a long-term process that may not necessarily be successful. During the duration of the grant, transfer knowledge from the donor’s experiences either at home (e.g. US), or from other countries where the donor operates, on building a local constituency (individuals, businesses). This may be particularly difficult for organizations that work in highly sensitive areas such as anticorruption, human rights or watchdogs, as local constituencies may be wary of associating themselves with organizations that are critical with the government, fearing pressures or retaliation, for which a “dissociation strategy” may be more appropriate. However, if this effort is carefully tailored at local conditions, taking also the best practices from elsewhere adapted locally, and undertaken over a longer period of time, it is likely to have at least a partial success. Also, as mentioned above, the revitalization of initiatives such as CENTRAS could support the development of civil society capacity, both for new organizations and for established ones. In particular for watchdogs, think tanks, independent media, a combined strategy should be pursued. On one hand, to seek out and convince private sector donors and individuals to contribute directly to support organizations fighting for liberal democracy, if they are not afraid of associating with such causes. This would also bolster the beneficiary organizations and give them courage and legitimacy that they are backed also strongly by a local constituency. On the other hand, for those potential donors which are afraid, it may make sense to provide the alternative of contributing to pooled resources, as mentioned above. It is true that civil society

organizations and independent media have failed in building sustainability and local constituencies, despite repeated calls from donors to do so over the past three decades. But having fresh in mind the little resistance that even the US think tanks, universities, quality media, or political opposition are capable to mount in face of continuous onslaught from powerful illiberal players, the expectations that their Romanian counterparts could resist any better may be overly optimistic. Not only illiberal players from Europe should learn from the US MAGA, it is time also for believers in liberal democracy in Europe and from across the Atlantic to rally around the flag.

Global ambitions: the Endowment for Liberal Democracy

As the geopolitical storm of 2024/2025 pressures all defenders of liberal democracy across the globe to reassess the situation - mainly, that the new US administration is abandoning the camp of established liberal democracies and joins autocracies - there is a case for a more concerted approach. To support non-state actors - primarily independent civil society and media - a solution would be to set up an institutional vehicle to pool resources and efforts for all liberal-minded players, including Americans disappointed by the direction in which the US is going. An ambitious solution could be the setup of an Endowment for Liberal Democracy. Alternative options, based on transforming existing organizations, are compared in Annex 2. This would largely streamline some of the recommendations above, which were written with Romania in mind, at a higher level (EU / liberal democratic West). The “flexibility-first” approach we propose is not radically new. Some key aspects are already being attempted in the political space, e.g. the “coalitions of the willing”, imagined to avoid political deadlocks by working effectively with partners sharing common values for as long as they do, in ever morphing structures.

Purpose & mission of the new organization: revitalize liberal democracy facing unprecedented attacks

How it could work:

- Governance: Board formed of top intellectuals with exquisite international profile and who are clearly associated in the public opinion with unwavering support for liberal democracy (e.g. figures like Anne Applebaum, Timothy Snyder, Francis Fukuyama, Daron Acemoglu etc.). ELD would be a Foundation specifically designed to support financially liberal democracy activities.
- Offices: established in several European countries which remain highly committed to liberal & democratic values. Initially ELD should be set up at least in 3-4 countries, with the possibility to expand to new locations. Such countries could be, for example, Germany, Belgium, France, UK, Ukraine. The organization must be flexible enough to allow, by decision of the Board, that offices, people and funds be **swiftly relocated** from a country to another in case the respective countries deviate from liberal democratic norms, avoiding damage to beneficiaries of support. This flexibility should not have any implications for the eligibility of beneficiaries of the support

(beneficiaries from “deviating” countries, think Hungary, should continue to receive financial support, potentially even more so, as they face new threats from their own governments). In other words, an independent human rights group or media outlet would continue to receive support regardless of whether the government of the country in which it operates becomes hostile, and regardless of whether the ELD office from that country had to be moved to another country; on the contrary, the NGO should even be supported more, including with legal defense, relocation services if needed etc. This flexibility is essential to thwart targeting by illiberals and disruption in ELD’s operation.

- Initial activity: provide minimal survival / bridge funding for a few key NGOs and independent media which used to be US grantees in the region. Provide immediate legal assistance for organizations under legal threats in their respective countries; and support for urgent relocation, in case of security threats. Such cases can be identified by interviewing former USAID, NED, DoS etc. grant officers, but any visible and credible organization in the entire region, from Ukraine to Hungary, is a sure match and a sure previous recipient of US funding without which it may face immediate or mid-term survival challenges. There will be a transitional period in which the ELD keeps afloat a few such organizations and prepares its own funding strategy for the future. After that, funding would be given later based on competitive calls, similar to formerly USAID, DoS, EU/Norway, OSI and other donors. The underlying idea is that in time, ELD can become also the vehicle by which donors from the liberal democratic camp (people, businesses, governments) channel their efforts to fight illiberalism and extremism, filling in the void left by US. The priorities for future calls, depending also on funding that would become available for ELD, should be established by the Board. ELD must have transparent reporting to the public and its donors - protecting only highly sensitive information, such as identity for dissidents or beneficiaries that are at high personal risk, such cases must be well justified.
- “Seed” funding: start with initial donations from EU and/or a few prominent donors of strong positive reputation - e.g. people like Bill Browder, Alex Soros etc., preferably 10-15 initial donors. Donors could be actively sought for by the Board or vetted by the Board, as they will also be key to shaping the “image” of ELD and lend it credibility for the future. It is better to have a diversified batch to avoid individual targeting and suspicions of “X’s network”.
- Additional funding: organize donation options for small individual donors and advertise. This would also provide a sense of purpose to those who want to act in support of liberal democracy and do not know how. If EU is a key donor and partner, this will attract more credibility for new donors, as well as project immediately a positive image of EU as the new leader of the democratic world, by taking over the US role in promoting democracy in the area of civil society and independent media. Every donation exceeding a certain amount, particularly from private donors, must be vetted by the Board before being accepted into the organization.

- **Staffing:** there is a cohort of highly motivated former staff of US grant managers who are out of jobs (USAID, possibly NED, NDI, NRI etc., but also older initiatives such as PTF). Positions would be available for a few of such staff willing to relocate to European countries. This staff from former US organizations have a critical advantage over competitors: relative flexibility and adaptability, plus local knowledge. As we explained in the report, US official (federal) donors have been criticized in the past for red tape, conflicting objectives, and aloofness from local context. The major advantage of US, however, is that these donors have been consistently under a process of critical scrutiny and reassessment, a process that should also be imitated by European donors (EU, Norway). In time, they became significantly more flexible and adaptable. Today, there is simply no comparison between US and EU donors in terms of bureaucracy and administrative burden, with US being perceived as significantly more reasonable to work with and content-, not process-oriented (as any beneficiary of both can confirm). As also explained, US donors have been more invested in the idea of supporting “contrarian” (as opposed to “cooperative”) civil society voices. This is precisely the needed mindset for the current situation, in which more governments become hostile to liberal democracy, free speech, diversity, rule of law and rights, and when the European idea of benevolent governments cooperating with civil society for the public welfare is going outright bankrupt in countries that are now grossly deviating from liberal democracy.
- **Growth:** right now, supporters of liberal democracy - and perhaps most dramatically those from the US itself - feel an urgent impulse to “do something”, but do not know what. Setting up ELD, potentially boosting it with EU support, and “marketing” it as a defense mechanism against the illiberal drift may provide a sense of purpose and joint action to fight back that not only civil society and independent media need, but prospective donors as well. Our experience at EFOR in late 2024 and early 2025 was an unprecedented energy from local stakeholders (businesses and individuals) to support our work, as they realized the threat of illiberalism around the presidential elections. This type of energy is felt also elsewhere and has to be channelled and prioritized to where it is needed most, and a vehicle such as ELD could provide precisely the right type of motivation. ELD will necessarily start small - as a small endowment, perhaps with a few hundred thousand USD, providing emergency limited support to a few NGOs so they survive the US funding gap. However, it has the potential for growth if it gradually manages to coalesce a critical mass of supporters in a few countries. This is why it is essential to place ELD under highly reputable figures of global renown. The opportunity to support ELD should be open to those who want to associate with the values of liberal democracy. A potential important source for financial support could be from “the other US”, the non-MAGA Americans, businesses, “blue” states who oppose the current US administration’s policy and are shocked at the country’s withdrawal as global leader of the free world, aligning itself more with dictators, bullies and aggressors. Amounts can be given also by EU, European states and other institutional donors who share the same values (and who

could benefit the experience of former USAID/US donor staff in terms of identifying priorities in a world that is conflictual not cooperative, as well as in terms of flexibility of funding and support to beneficiaries). ELD would also be significantly boosted if EU takes a stewardship role from the beginning to position itself as the promotor of democratization and free press replacing the US.

- Reputational advantage: countries in which the ELD will have offices de facto get a sort of “endorsement” as being liberal democratic by the simple fact that the ELD will operate from their jurisdictions. As the organization and its reputation grow, such endorsement will be meaningful, both for ELD and for these states. It will inspire also greater political unity. If EU contributes, it will also create a strong positive association between EU and virtues of liberal democracy directly in member states, bringing EU closer to citizens directly.
- Geographical coverage: ELD should start and focus its activities in Europe. The continent is under unprecedented threat from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and from the combined efforts of authoritarian regimes (Russia, China, now MAGA-US) to dismantle liberal democracy, divide EU unity, and promote anti-values that explicitly undermine the foundations of post World War II international order, such as “might makes right”. Also, Europe in the broader sense (EU plus countries like UK, Ukraine, Moldova, minus Russian-controlled regimes such as Hungary or Slovakia) is the only remaining bulwark against the unprecedented aggression from Russia, both military and hybrid.
- Decentralized approach: while ELD would start as a “top down” idea (a group of intellectuals and donors combine to start an organization with a limited amount of money to save what can be saved), it can only grow to scale by “bottom up” efforts. This means that local offices should attract local leaders, intellectuals and credible figures, to be associated with the local ELD branches apart from the grant managing staff (former USAID etc.). Such figures (modern day Lech Walesas or Vaclav Havels) could act as honorary local members, support reputationally the ELD, giving a form of local “stewardship” or buy-in from local stakeholders in liberal democracy - while attracting visibility and local funding. As mentioned above, it is possibly for the first time that a “bottom-up” mobilization of local resources and constituencies, long expected by donors of their recipients in the 35 years of assistance for democratization, can actually happen. People are simply furious and energized, acutely feel the threat to their normal lives, as a reaction to the mobilization of the illiberal camp on social networks and mindless mobs. However, to avoid the emergence of characters which later on turn against liberal democracy (let’s call them modern day Viktor Orbans), each of these figures has to be vetted by ELD’s Board before associating with the ELD local branch, and they can be removed by the Board from this position if they at some point change allegiances joining the illiberal camp. However, it should be clear from the beginning that funding would not necessarily go to one’s own country, or exclusively there: ELD will have to prioritize projects across

Europe, possibly allocating more funds to Ukraine or Hungary though donations may come also from Germany or France. If local donors prefer certain local organizations, they can donate directly without ELD's intermediation.

- **Unified vision:** Precisely because funding does not necessarily follow the country of donors, ELD must support a universal / pan-European, liberal democratic vision, fully compatible with the image the EU seeks to project on a global scale. As explained above, it should channel efforts of those who consider the threat as being beyond a single country - allowing ELD to prioritize across the continent. It should not compete with donors which want to support a particular organization in a particular country, as the scope is different. However, this approach can be a particular strength for ELD: to build a stronger sense of European identity and shared European values, across national borders. Such solidarity is needed now more than ever. A key shortcoming of the EU has been that it was not very apt at “selling” its key strengths: the Copenhagen criteria, nor could it overcome the political pressures from “anti-federalists” in each member state. The Copenhagen criteria however underpin the very fundament of the EU. ELD can support building a common European identity / European citizenship precisely by funding initiatives bolstering these values.
- **Collaboration:** ELD can also consult and collaborate with other grant managers at local level, e.g. FDSC-type of organizations which have local expertise and can give reference about which organizations are credible on each topic. However, unlike Foundations for civil society which deal with EU/Norway grants, ELD must be focused specifically on “hard” topics essential for the preservation and promotion of liberal democracy: civil society think tanks and watchdogs, independent credible media, human rights groups.

3. Address resource gaps in sensitive areas

Certain critical domains, such as investigative journalism, watchdog organizations, think tanks or in-depth civic education remain underfunded due to perceived risks or lack of immediate donor appeal. To bridge these gaps, in addition to the mechanisms illustrated above, which may face collective action dilemmas, the points below highlight actions that can be undertaken individually:

- **Donors:** Support underfunded causes by establishing dedicated funding streams for areas like judicial oversight, anti-corruption, and media independence, identifying the critical areas which become relevant as the situation changes. For example, create a grant program specifically for investigative media outlets to uncover public sector irregularities; or for a particular threat of disinformation campaign ahead of elections. These areas complement the broader initiatives illustrated above and should provide **fast response** to a particular crisis that may arise. For such an approach to work, one needs to ensure that the capacity of organizations is first of all available, that is,

sustained long term (via mechanisms explained in points 1-2 above); and secondly that the crises are promptly identified. For this, either donors or the intermediate organizations should have a dedicated unit to monitor the situation on the ground - e.g. political crises - and be allowed to allocate immediately small funding for a fast response to organizations capable of producing the adequate response (e.g. investigation; innovative information campaign; pre-bunking etc.).

- **Donors, including international partners / embassies:** Mitigate risks by providing protections for grantees facing retaliation from illiberal actors, including legal aid for SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) cases and the establishment of an international legal defense fund. This can be done either by donors themselves having a dedicated amount for legal aid; or by introducing the mechanism in pooled donor platforms, e.g. FDSC, CIVITATES or others.
- **Donors:** Expand flexible funding by developing grant mechanisms allowing rapid disbursement of small to medium-sized amounts for emergent needs. This should be done by each donor immediately, and the support could later be pooled with others in mechanisms as those described above, if the collective action dilemmas can be overcome. Implementing simplified application processes can enable grassroots organizations to access these resources without excessive bureaucracy. Prioritize simplicity over fancy novelties (such as online integrated management or reporting platforms that never work properly and waste everybody's time) and reverse application phases (simplified project selection based on the action's relevance and track record, with status and eligibility documentation required in the second step).

4. Prioritize critical thinking over mere mass mobilization

In an age dominated by misinformation and social media-fueled polarization, fostering critical thinking is essential to counteract destructive mobilization efforts driven by populism or propaganda. Beyond the actions needed to respond to immediate challenges, in the long run efforts must be made to limit the effectiveness of violent mobilization fuelled by disinformation. The two major intervention areas are critical thinking and loneliness. Key actions which can be undertaken by individual actors independently and without broader coordination may include:

- **Donors:** Enhance civic education at every level by grant programs with a view to shift focus from basic civic engagement to deepening public understanding of liberal democracy's principles. Incorporate modules on rights, responsibilities, and governance mechanisms into school curricula and adult education programs. Prioritize non-standard, attractive forms of civic education which can be easily customized for various target audiences.
 - How? Organize an open project call for educational projects, based on project concepts. Organize in-depth discussions with the most promising projects,

tailor funding to match the best projects' achievable goals. Favor "vertical integration" (mix of skills), where needed. Protect "copyright of ideas", particularly for projects where there is track record of successful implementation, including networks and trust developed with the end-beneficiaries of the educational programs. Organizations proposing a project concept should not fear that their idea is simply "stolen" to see that funding is given by the donor to other organizations to implement their project idea. Donors should also invest efforts in monitoring the actual impact on the ground - e.g. by visiting the projects supported, which can be also a highly satisfactory experience, beyond its informational value.

- **Donors:** Promote media literacy by developing grant programs for national campaigns that equip citizens with tools to discern credible information from manipulation. Encourage partnerships with credible educational institutions, based on their track record, and with the local media to deliver workshops and online courses.
 - How? Launch competitive project calls for media literacy projects, favoring "vertical integration" (small consortia made of organizations with different skills). One could devise two "streams": larger amounts for "established" projects (continuation of projects that have proven their effectiveness, with real impact) and smaller amounts for "pilots" (allowing new ideas to come up and be tested in real world conditions). As above, monitoring the real impact is essential: instead of focusing on hypothetical "macro" impacts on paper from the beginning, having real "micro" impacts could allow for prioritization of what really works and later scale up.
- **Donors:** Promote project calls that encourage constructive dialogue by supporting initiatives that bridge societal divides, such as town halls, moderated debates, and cross-community workshops. These platforms can foster inclusive discourse on democracy and governance. Experiment with deprogramming²: the process of helping individuals unlearn or critically reevaluate beliefs and attitudes shaped by exposure to extremist ideologies, disinformation, or manipulative propaganda.
 - How? Research indicates that a key mechanism for "blind mobilization" is loneliness, perhaps more important than failed critical thinking. People join "sects" for emotional, not rational beliefs, satisfying a need to belong to a group to which they must prove loyalty. During the pandemic, social media has been a substitute for social contact, favoring "bubbles of opinion" and online radicalization. To combat this, it is essential to bring people together, in physical meetings, and encourage community building, patience to listen to different points of view, and empathy. Donors can launch calls which favor local community discussions and joint activities in the benefit of the community - e.g. for simple things like cleaning up garbage in a nearby forest.

² <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalization-violent-extremism.html>

It is precisely the “offline” that leveraged Georgescu’s support, and the response should be symmetric. Critically, the community meetings and joint activities should be **organized locally by people deeply committed to liberal democratic values** and trusted in the community. The criteria for giving funding for such community work should be first to “vet” local organizers that they are aligned with the values of the donor.

- Additional initiatives can include providing direct services for communities via trusted community members, while ensuring that these community members are fully aligned with liberal democratic values (e.g., paralegal support for disadvantaged groups, social services for hard-to-reach beneficiaries etc.). Various innovative ways of promoting cross-functional

5. Reconcile free expression with democratic responsibility

The proliferation of social media has decoupled free expression from democratic values, enabling hate speech, propaganda, and anti-democratic movements. As explained in the report, from the perspective of the reader, hate speech and disinformation is available for free, whereas real, evidence-based reporting is often behind a paywall. To address this paradox:

- **European Commission** (via national implementing authorities for legal acts such as the DSA): Promote responsibility on digital platforms and create local capacity to hold them accountable, using existing instruments (such as the DSA). This includes advocacy for regulations that balance free speech with accountability, targeting online hate speech and misinformation. Partner with tech advocacy groups who act in the public interest to monitor and flag out systematic manipulation campaigns and try to address their root causes (instead of merely performing factchecking post-factum). Accelerate enforcement and consider more radical options in case the platforms fail to comply with regulations or actively engage in promoting disinformation ahead of elections (as it happened with X and the open support from Elon Musk and US administration for AfD ahead of elections in Germany).
- **Donors:** Foster digital literacy by launching comprehensive programs to educate users on ethical online behavior and the societal impact of digital misinformation. Where possible, these could include partnerships with social media platforms to provide tutorials on content verification. More aggressively, build a comprehensive “fight back” agenda, designing support for active promotion of pro-liberal democracy content, in a manner that can become viral.
 - How? Large institutional donors (e.g. “specialized” ones on disinformation, like the private foundation Calouste Gulbenkian) should coordinate with the EC in a “stick-and-carrot” strategy: social platforms willing to enforce DSA regulations and to significantly enhance transparency of content promotion

algorithms, as well as to eliminate hate speech, disinformation, illegal political advertising etc., and who are engaging constantly with EC and other European stakeholders, are encouraged to engage with researchers and media investigators for content verification, monitoring of suspicious traffic and other potentially illegal activities. Grants / financial support should be available for these researchers, whereas the social networks willing to engage gain reputation benefits. Social networks who continue to violate the interest of the EU consumer should be fined or even shut down, *in extremis* (they could appeal in courts). Given the recent cases of interference of US in elections inside the EU there is a window of opportunity to adopt this strategy now. EU consumers would appreciate “fair” social media in a similar manner in which “fair trade” products are popular - but particularly now, as the boycott against Tesla is gaining EU-wide momentum, indicating that EU citizens have had enough of precisely this type of manipulation.

- **Donors:** Support independent media by investing in investigative journalism and alternative media outlets that uphold democratic norms and counteract extremist narratives. Funding for regional and local media outlets can also help ensure diverse voices are heard.
 - How? Launch competitive calls or even small direct grants to regional media outlets.
- **Donors and EC:** Be prepared to address situations where the government itself or various political leaders are key disseminators of manipulative and polarizing narratives, whether overtly or through subtle dog-whistling aimed at specific segments of the population. The EU in particular appears visibly uncomfortable addressing situations involving leaders who engage in double talk, by presenting one narrative in Brussels while delivering a completely different (and often irresponsible) message to their domestic supporters. To shield itself from pressures exerted by member states, the Commission could consider adopting arm’s-length mechanisms.
 - For example, as illustrated above in points 1 and 2, it might partner with other major Western donors to create larger pooled funds dedicated to supporting pro-democracy interventions that would otherwise be regarded as “too political to address directly.” This would allow the EU to support critical democratic initiatives while maintaining a degree of separation from politically sensitive decisions about civil society assistance in member states with illiberal tendencies. Just as the private sector donors would keep their distance from perceptions of direct connection or interference, pooling resources would give also the EC the same advantage.
 - Very importantly: funding should be proportional with the degree of illiberalism in a country. One of the big dilemmas for the past decade has been what to do about illiberalism and authoritarian tendencies in individual member states, which now derails to a significant extent the collective

decision in the EU. The strategy to deal with this critical weakness is twofold: to create “coalitions of the willing”, from governmental decision to pooling of resources, but also intensify the fight against illiberalism and authoritarian tendencies by funding opposing forces, civil society, independent media and undermining the dictators’ powers from within. It is impractical (and not legally easy) to kick out Hungary from the EU, as this would cut off Romania, Bulgaria and Greece from the rest of the Union. A more ambitious strategy would be to fight Orban’s regime on several fronts, from supporting opposition, preparing packages of personal sanctions and economic restrictions against various companies supporting the regime, interdictions for planes to cross the aerial space of neighboring countries etc. in an innovative way to harass the dictator until Hungary returns to meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Finding the best strategy requires though inside knowledge and in-depth thought-through strategies, for which Hungarian media and independent organizations are vital. These organizations must be supported with priority, both against harassment inside Hungary, and financial hardship after the closure of US aid. A similar strategy may be critically important for Romania in the years to come, as the country may slide into a similar authoritarian illiberal regime despite the relief after the recent presidential elections.

6. Rethink funding models for sustainability

Traditional donor approaches often emphasize large, one-time grant programs, creating dependency and limiting long-term impact. This is particularly characteristic of the EU, which often, for bureaucratic reasons and to avoid reputational risks, prefers to deliver large assistance packages through contracts with major implementing organizations. Instead, funding from individual donors should:

- **Donors:** Emphasize continuity by prioritizing smaller but consistent funding streams to enable sustained operations and strategic planning.
 - For example, implement annual operational grants for established NGOs to cover basic costs like staff salaries and infrastructure. This would also ensure a minimal survival of organizations in periods of “drought” from other donors.
 - Introduce baseload funding by providing foundational support to key NGOs working in priority areas like human rights, public accountability, and media independence. Baseload funding ensures stability while organizations focus on achieving impact. Such organizations must be selected and evaluated based on existing track records, results, and reputation in the international non-profit community.
 - As mentioned above, it is also vital to create emergency response funds, for instance by establishing rapid-response mechanisms for civil society to address critical threats, such as judicial backsliding or repression of investigative journalists. These funds should be accessible within weeks of a

request. To reinforce the recommendation in point 2, a good combination is “core funding” (permanent baseload support and operational costs) to maintain capacity, and ad hoc crisis response funds, to provide quick deliverables when needs arise. Very importantly, the organizations must be reviewed periodically to ensure that they continue to follow the original mission, are the most efficient use for the funds, and have impact.

7. Strengthen civic engagement at the local level

The weakening of civil society in local communities outside the capital or other major cities poses a significant challenge. Local governments often operate within entrenched clientelistic networks, leveraging central allocations and patronage systems to consolidate power. This dynamic undermines independent civic activism, investigative journalism, and public accountability at the municipal level. To counteract this trend, targeted interventions are needed:

- **Donors:** Encourage local watchdog organizations by providing specific funding and training for NGOs and civic groups focused on monitoring local governance. These organizations should be equipped with tools to track municipal budgets, procurement processes, and policy implementation. Regular training sessions on transparency laws and data analysis can empower these groups to act effectively as watchdogs.
- **Donors:** Support grassroots investigative journalism with grant programs for regional and local media outlets, particularly investigative journalists covering municipal governance. These grants could cover operational costs, such as travel expenses, access to public records, and legal support for cases of harassment or intimidation. Collaborating with national and international media to amplify local stories can also increase visibility and impact.
- **Donors:** Promote local civic education initiatives such as programs to educate residents about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Civic education campaigns should focus on demystifying municipal processes, encouraging public participation in town hall meetings, and fostering a culture of accountability. Unconventional, creative and cost-effective methods to make technical aspects of local governance and budgeting accessible to ordinary citizens must be supported in the long run; schools and community centers can serve as hubs for such initiatives. In conjunction with point (3) above, support techniques like the Deliberative Polling® to engage members of a local community in informed discussions about sensitive or complex issues of governance.
- **Donors:** Foster partnerships between national advocacy groups and local organizations to share resources, expertise, and strategies. Regional hubs or networks can provide logistical and moral support, enabling smaller organizations to sustain their efforts.

- **Donors:** Encourage “vertical integration” of projects that combine the capacity of national or EU-wide organizations for specific topics aligned with liberal democracy promotion (e.g. anti-disinformation, anti-corruption, European values, human rights, etc.) and local organizations who can provide on the ground access to local communities. Organizations at national or EU level could also help facilitate exchanges of experience between other local organizations with which they can collaborate.
- **Local governments, in partnership with donors supporting civil society:** Support the expansion of participatory budgeting in relevant formats and based on the available international experience (with ups and downs): mechanisms that give citizens a direct role in municipal budget allocation. Participatory budgeting initiatives increase transparency and empower communities to prioritize projects that align with local needs.

8. Bolster advocacy for liberal values

In an increasingly polarized environment, civil society must effectively communicate the benefits of liberal democracy to counter illiberal narratives. Support for such initiatives make take various forms:

- **Donors and EC:** Fund positive messaging campaigns, by highlighting the tangible successes of democratic governance, human rights, and EU integration. Utilize storytelling methods to illustrate how reforms have improved citizens’ lives.
 - **How?** The EC should reconsider the budgets currently used for various information campaigns and transfer the amount in a common pool of resources with other donors, opening competition for the most innovative and unconventional ideas possible for an outright information war defending liberal democracy. Decentralizing and crowdsourcing communication has a highly successful precedent in Ukraine during war, when numerous PR agencies, volunteers etc. contributed to impress the entire world with the inspirational story of Ukrainian resistance. Resources are needed to ensure not only the creation of content, but also dissemination in unconventional and innovative ways. The pool of resources, if managed by grant managers with experience with civil society and solid reputation, can be used to support organizations that are fully aligned with liberal democratic values. Collaborations and idea sharing with Ukrainian organizations could also be encouraged (by making Ukrainian organizations eligible to the call and encouraging partnerships with other NGOs inside the EU).
- **Donors, EC, embassies:** Leverage respected public figures, academics, and cultural icons to advocate for democratic principles; such figures could give credibility to the funding mechanism itself, see the Box on ELD governance. Engage social media influencers to reach younger audiences effectively, or various other segments of the public. To accomplish this, work with reputable organizations who understand online

advertising and the local market, but in the same time have proved adherence to democratic values and the public interest, and do not just pursue commercial profit.

- **Donors, EC:** Invest in good storytelling, i.e. compelling narratives to connect abstract values with everyday experiences, fostering emotional resonance with liberal democracy. Documentaries, podcasts, and short films can serve as effective mediums.
- **Donors:** Focus on regions, communities and professional groups particularly vulnerable to Kremlin's toxic narratives. Help capable Romanian organizations foster cross-border collaborations with civil society actors in countries facing similar challenges, such as Ukraine and Moldova.

9. Forge stronger international partnerships

While local ownership is vital, international collaboration remains crucial for sustaining civil society in the face of domestic challenges. Recommendations include:

- **Donors via intermediary organizations managing multiple-donor funds:** Strengthen transnational networks by facilitating exchanges between Romanian NGOs and counterparts in other democracies to share best practices and resources. Create regional hubs for collaboration on common issues, through bottom-up initiatives: civic activists themselves should choose their partners, preferably based on a track record of working together.
- **Donors and EC:** Designate as priority the regional cooperation by promoting initiatives that address common challenges in Eastern Europe, fostering solidarity against illiberalism. Joint campaigns on issues like media freedom can have a greater regional impact.
- **International partners** (e.g. IMF, WB, EC, in macroeconomic stabilization programs expected in 2025 and onwards): Maintain conditionality targeting the public authorities and support local watchdog groups able to monitor and report on the progress in democratic reforms, ensuring accountability for donor investments.

10. Encourage adaptive capacity and innovation

As Romania's political and social context evolves, civil society must remain agile and innovative to stay effective. To support this:

- **Donors and intermediary organizations:** Invest in capacity building by supporting NGOs in enhancing their resilience through practical measures. These could include providing access to new technologies, offering cybersecurity training and support, ensuring availability of legal advice when needed, and funding essential services like audit and accounting support. Additionally, addressing various administrative costs, which are often overlooked or programmatically excluded by donors, can significantly strengthen NGOs' operational stability and long-term sustainability. It

would also free valuable staff time in small organizations which can be used more productively for the core activities.

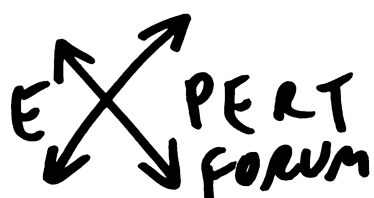
- **Donors:** Foster experimentation by supporting pilot projects that test new approaches to civic engagement, advocacy, and service delivery. Use feedback to refine and scale successful initiatives.
- **Donors and intermediary organizations:** Incorporate feedback loops by ensuring ongoing assessment and learning from both successes and failures to refine strategies. Publish lessons learned to benefit the broader civil society ecosystem.

The future of civil society in Romania depends on sustained, strategic, and innovative support that addresses both historical challenges and emerging threats. By adopting such recommendations, international and domestic actors can ensure that Romanian civil society remains a vibrant, resilient force for liberal democracy, capable of navigating an increasingly complex and polarized landscape. Strengthening the foundational pillars of civic engagement, institutional accountability, and grassroots support will safeguard the progress achieved and set the stage for a more inclusive and democratic future.

ANNEX. ALTERNATIVES FOR A EU TAKEOVER OF US ROLE IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY VIA CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA



The challenge	To ensure EU takeover of dismantled US support for democratization via funding of civil society and media, making use of the significantly higher US expertise on the topic compared to current EU funding. US funded independent / "contrarian" civil society, such as think tanks providing alternative/opposing positions to government; watchdogs holding governments accountable; and independent media acting as a check on power and anchor for democracy EU preferred to endorse "broad coalitions" of civil society collaborating with governments in various formal cooperation formats (e.g., formal social-economic consultation committees in EU and national governments), assuming all governments fully respect civil society and media, and welcome any policy input from outside. Since all governments are assumed 100% aligned with Copenhagen criteria, the EC saw relatively little use for EU funding of civil society and media inside EU itself (some funding for EaP and WB) For existing direct EC funding, very little experience for competitive calls and almost no knowledge of local civil society and media, particularly inside EU. For convenience, EU prefers mega-grants to self-governed mega-coalitions or organizations (in "restricted calls", directly and non-competitively). This limits competition, uses EU funds suboptimally, creates incentives for self-selection, and forecloses access to grants for newcomers. A takeover of grant-giving capacity from US grant managers would significantly enhance the expertise for prioritization and allocation of EU funds for democratization.			
	Endowment for Liberal Democracy (ELD)	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)	European Endowment for Democracy (EED)	The Transatlantic Foundation
Status	To be established as new foundation	Existing intergovernmental organization, global	Independent EU foundation focused on EaP, WB and rest-of-world	Existing EU Foundation (since 2011) focused on Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Western Balkans
Governance	New board to be established from international public intellectuals known for support of liberal democracy (e.g. Snyder, Applebaum etc.)	Council of member states, Steering Committee, Finance & Audit Committee, Board of advisors, Secretariat. Existing office in Brussels focused on EU/EaP/WB	EED Board of governors (42): representatives of EU member states, UK, Norway, EEAS, civil society; Executive committee (civil society experts);	TF's Board of Trustees
Changes to governance	The structure will be established new (no existing restrictions)	Requires special mandate for Brussels office to become a de facto foundation / grantmaking organization apart from existing mandate; requires statutory change to be able to manage grants for civil society and media.	Would need top-up activity for Secretariat, within existing mandate and statute	Manages grants currently and has capacity to expand.
Statement & visibility of action	The composition of the board signals clearly the new role of Europe as the new leader of the free world (and support for liberal democracy by assistance to civil society and media, taking over from US)	Would require a strong statement of support from public intellectuals (Snyder, Applebaum etc.) to signal clearly the new role of Europe as new leader of the free world (and support for liberal democracy by assistance to civil society and media, taking over from US). These could be coopted in an informal support structure (e.g. like a panel of endorsers)	Would require a strong statement of support from public intellectuals (Snyder, Applebaum etc.) to signal clearly the new role of Europe as new leader of the free world (and support for liberal democracy by assistance to civil society and media, taking over from US)	Would require a strong statement of support from public intellectuals (Snyder, Applebaum etc.) to signal clearly the new role of Europe as new leader of the free world (and support for liberal democracy by assistance to civil society and media, taking over from US)
Mission	Promotion of liberal democracy by support for civil society and media	Currently: advocacy, capacity, facilitation of dialogue, policy analysis (no specific grant-making). Would require statutory amendment to include new mission - promotion of liberal democracy by support for civil society and media	Support for civil society & media for a pluralistic, democratic political system - no mission change needed	TF works on transatlantic issues by developing innovative policy ideas, convening leaders on issues and empowering civil society in the EU and its neighbours. TF looks to a future where empowered leaders and robust civil societies drive innovative policy solutions and research, creating a more just, equitable, and prosperous world.
Funding	First phase: would require an initial EU endowment (50-100 mil EUR?) to continue ongoing civil society and media projects financed before by US. Second phase: raise funding (from EU, from US private donors & supporters of liberal democracy worldwide) for future competitive calls for civil society and media	The funding would be a top-up of existing funds, just as if it were a "new organization". May require statutory / procedural changes to include additional options for funding sources, e.g. private donors. First phase: would require an initial EU endowment (50-100 mil EUR?) to continue ongoing civil society and media projects financed before by US. Second phase: raise funding for future competitive calls for civil society and media - from EU, from US private donors & supporters of liberal democracy worldwide	The funding would be a top-up of existing funds, just as if it were a "new organization". May require procedural changes to allow for additional funding sources (e.g. ability to fundraise from private donors). First phase: would require an initial EU endowment (50-100 mil EUR?) to continue ongoing civil society and media projects financed before by US. Second phase: raise funding for future competitive calls for civil society and media - from EU, from US private donors & supporters of liberal democracy	Funding primarily from restricted EU grants, and some private donors. No statutory changes are needed to pursue additional funding.
Risks of political interference	Establish offices in 3-4 EU countries (Germany, France, Poland etc) allowing for quick transfer of funds and staff to "safe" places in case of democratic backsliding of individual EU member states	Intergovernmental, meaning some risk of negative interference from governments that go illiberal. Chairship is relevant (currently Switzerland): some chairing countries may be more reform-minded than others. However, relative autonomy of executive staff from political influence of council; Board of advisors also provides guarantees against potential egregious political pressures. As IDEA is global (not only EU-focused), this has the advantage of Council & Steering Committee being less vulnerable to potential illiberal drifts in individual European countries; but also the disadvantage that IDEA would be less inclined to shift radically to a significantly increased presence in Europe.	More focus on Europe than IDEA and experience with grant management in EaP / WB countries. Lower risk of political interference because of intermediary layer of Executive committee made up of civil society experts.	TF has 6 associated offices around Europe it could leverage and representation to another 3 countries. TF is well versed in "deadling" with sensitive and restrictive areas and still manages to distribute fundign to the beneficiaries.
Staffing	To be staffed primarily from former US grant management staff, offered job in new organization in Brussels / 3-4 other capitals (e.g. from Berlin, Paris, Warsaw, Prague etc)	Would require a top-up activity for Brussels office, with a top-up funding from EU, and staffing from US grant management staff. IDEA has no experience of grant-giving overall, requires the hiring of former staff with direct knowledge of US grantees	Would require a top-up activity with a top-up funding from EU, and staffing from US grant management staff. EED has experience of grant-giving, but not outside WB/EaP (no experience in EU member states). Requires the hiring of former staff with direct knowledge of US grantees	Staffing capacity exists. If more substantial amounts are to be distributed, internal re-alignment may be needed.
Decentralization and local sustainability	Offices in 3-4 countries provide "safe havens" for the organization in case more EU countries become illiberal, endangering the survival of ELD. Each office should also attract local public figures ("modern day Lech Walesas or Vaclav Havels"), mobilizing local funding sources; building local buy-in for democratic values; but also providing valuable input for priorities for specific local	Limited options, given that IDEA is centralized and would require Brussels office to take over the task. Could consider some local informal endorsement actions (e.g. Lech Walesas and Vaclav Havels as local "ambassadors" of IDEA)	Limited options, given that EED is centralized in Brussels. Could consider some local informal endorsement actions (e.g. Lech Walesas and Vaclav Havels as local "ambassadors" of EED)	TF has 6 associated offices around Europe it could leverage and representation to another 3 countries. TF prioritises local, national and regional outreach and has extensive network starting at grassroots, cities, cross-borded and regional.



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