



CEE Digital
Democracy Watch



DIGITAL RIGHTS AT THE CORE:

rethinking Europe's
resilience



The current conversation on the priorities for the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034 centers overwhelmingly on strategic defense and technological competitiveness, urgent priorities that no one disputes.



But resilience built without citizen engagement is fragile. It lacks the connective tissue that holds societies together during crises: informed citizens, trusted institutions, and the civic organizations that bridge the gap between governments and communities.



With major threats now emerging from the digital sphere, it is crucial to refocus the debate on democratic resilience and social cohesion as integral components of European security.



We present the main findings from the Warsaw expert seminar, which brought together government and civil society stakeholders from across the CEE region to discuss the principles needed for the upcoming budget to meet these goals.

CONTEXT OVERVIEW:

Poland supports the Commission's MFF 2028-2034 proposal in Council discussions, which is anticipated to meet with resistance in the European Parliament and downward pressure on overall funding. Security, the main priority of the Polish Presidency of the EU Council, remains the primary pan-European concern, uniting Member States regardless of their budget status. Its meaning has broadened considerably, encompassing strategic defence, crisis response, and investments in sovereignty across domains including cybersecurity and space industry.

As the competitiveness agenda takes the lead, it translates both to technological innovation and implementation of already existing solutions. Many Polish SMEs lack fundamental digital tools, a major bottleneck for national digital transformation. In the discussions around that topic, digital sovereignty and digital resilience are also interpreted as competitiveness issues, rather than democratic ones. Additional recognized priorities include delivering scaled-up support for Poland's underdeveloped regions closer to the eastern border as a top-up on core Polish budget and operational risks associated with the proposed consolidation of funding instruments and "national pockets".

The government recognizes civil society's instrumental role in delivering the European responsible tech agenda and appears supportive of the European Democracy Shield as a funding mechanism. Funding for independent media is elevated to a position of foreign policy priority. Eastern Partnership and Russian/Ukrainian-language outlets are seen as crucial tools for countering disinformation and supporting civic —

space. While civic resilience is valued by policymakers, it sits behind hard defence and innovation priorities.

At the same time, civil society organizations are expected to act as rapid responders to emergencies, from climate-related disasters and the war in Ukraine to refugee crises and pandemics. As one donor put it, "This is how we understand democratic resilience worth supporting", praising civil society's crisis solidarity actions. This reveals that resilience is often framed more as response than capacity-building. Too often, underfunded organizations are forced into reactive mode, which stops them from doing the preventive work that would reduce future crises.

Digital rights organizations are similarly overwhelmed by the growing scope of their work, especially with the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and the complex societal impacts of technology. The European Commission expects these NGOs to deliver key research and to serve as the backbone of policy enforcement. Meanwhile, Polish NGOs remain below the EU average in their use of EU funds. Structural barriers include high co-financing requirements, the large scale of grant programmes designed for larger Western European organizations, and difficulties in building international partnerships.

KEY TAKEAWAYS ON FUNDING DIRECTIONS:

1

As U.S. development budgets recede, expectations grow for the EU to fill the void, yet without corresponding increases in capacity-building support for the NGOs now serving as frontline crisis responders. Disinformation emerges as a central challenge, identified by 60% of civil society organizations¹, requiring sustained investment in media literacy, fact-checking infrastructure, and independent journalism.

2

Organizations focused on democracy and rule of law feel sidelined by technology-centric funding priorities. Even digital rights NGOs struggle to keep up with expanding needs, as neither democracy nor digital rights work receives adequate support.

3

Direct funding for NGOs and local authorities, independent of rule-of-law conditionality, emerges as a top concern given Poland's uncertain political landscape. Without such safeguards, civil society capacity could be dismantled precisely when democratic resilience is most needed.

4

NGOs call for maintaining programs such as CERV at least at their current funding levels and for reducing co-financing requirements to better reflect local contexts. Transitioning to multi-year core funding instead of project-based grants and establishing binding targets for direct NGO and local authority funding would help ensure sustained and effective long-term work.

¹ *Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych 2024*, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, 2025, access: <https://fakty.ngo.pl/raporty/kondycja-organizacji-pozarzadowych-2024-bkj>

CALL TO ACTION:

CEE Digital Democracy Watch calls for a Multiannual Financial Framework that delivers on Europe's democratic, digital, and civic potential.



Security must be grounded in citizen participation and trust. Building shared responsibility between institutions, communities, and individuals is key to durable resilience.



The digital transition should be recognised as both a right and a necessity. Innovation must drive inclusion and ensure that no region or citizen is left behind. This means both securing solid funding for programs such as AgoraEU and Creative Europe and ensuring digital rights clauses in the Competitiveness Fund.



EU funding should strengthen the crisis response capacity of NGOs while investing in prevention and long-term cooperation. Civil society needs tools to act proactively, not only in emergencies.



Protecting the rule of law requires accessible and direct funding streams. Stable support must allow NGOs and local authorities to operate independently, even amid political uncertainty.



Decision-making processes should embed meaningful participation at every stage. Regional, sectoral, and community actors need to be included so that EU priorities reflect Europe's full diversity.

NEXT STEPS:



Sharing these findings with Members of the European Parliament from the BUDG Committee, European Council and representatives of the European Commission.

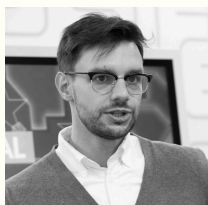


Engaging with NGOs from across the EU to gather additional evidence and perspectives on funding barriers and opportunities.



Maintaining an open platform for dialogue among participants and interested stakeholders to ensure continuity and follow-up on recommendations.

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