



GLOBAL
SOCIETY
FOUNDATION

The Civic Trust Architecture

A Framework for European
Democratic Resilience

White Paper No. 1

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globalsocietyfoundation.org

Executive Summary

This white paper presents the Civic Trust Architecture, the Global Society Foundation's five-pillar framework for strengthening European democracy and, with it, its support for democracy worldwide.

The problem

Figure 1. The scale of Europe's participation gap.

92%

of EU citizens want their voices better taken into account by institutions

64%

of young Europeans did not vote in the 2024 European Parliament elections

38%

of the world's democratic downturns in 2024 were in European countries

- The **public sphere is captured**: private corporations have built the infrastructure of political life and information ecosystems for the profit of a few, instead of public values.
- Engagement with and support for democracy is decreasing among young Europeans because the **means of participation are unadapted and inaccessible**.
- Civic technology is growing as a solution to reinvigorate European democracy; however, efforts are **fragmented and disjointed**, leading to unrealised collective potential.

Five pillars for a European Civic Trust Architecture

The Civic Trust Architecture is integral to the long-term goals pursued by the Global Society Foundation in research and development of democratic innovation, starting in Europe, with global application in view.

Figure 2. The five pillars of the Civic Trust Architecture.



- I. Modern Institutions:** multilingual, mobile-first civic technology for mass participation in permanent participatory and deliberative processes of policy-making and community-building.
- II. Scientific Impact Measurement:** open-source, validated democratic resilience framework, used widely across civic tech for joint standards, trackable progress, and evidence-based programmes.
- III. Open Infrastructure:** a transparent European tech stack running on open, decentralised protocols, scaled to compete with centralised alternatives but without compromising privacy and autonomy.
- IV. Digital Literacy:** civic and media competencies fused into one digital learning framework, distributed across society through cultural and gamified media.
- V. Public-Benefit Model:** patient capital and locked purpose, so that infrastructure held as a commons sustains itself and rewards measured public benefit.

The Global Society Foundation

We are a global democracy ecosystem builder at the intersection of research, education, and practice.

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- **Subscribe:** follow for updates at globalsocietybulletin.substack.com
- **Partner:** universities, policy-makers, NGOs can pilot our impact measurement tool and civic platform
- **Fund:** we are fundraising to support the development of open and free tools

Coming soon

Democratic Resilience Instrument — EDDY Vienna, Sept 2026
Civic platform closed beta — January 2027

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Introduction

Democracy is facing extraordinary challenges worldwide. Europe, previously recording the highest democratic performance of any world region, is now experiencing democratic decline. With the global majority facing increasing pressure from authoritarian regimes, it is of the utmost importance that Europe remains a fierce defender of democracy on the global stage. It is critical for its credibility, relevance, and sovereignty. And yet, Europe is struggling with its own democracy. It struggles to address the disconnect and distrust between the different parts of its society, especially between citizens and public institutions. Democratic infrastructure is simply not meeting public demand for participation, representation, and alignment.

In this White Paper No. 1, the Global Society Foundation assesses the root causes behind this predicament, as well as the gaps in the solutions designed to address them. Then, to fill these gaps, it sets out a long-term vision of democratic infrastructure and proposes practical solutions for policy-makers, technologists, and civil society.

The public sphere is being captured

Democracies rely on a well informed public sphere to debate the organisation of their societies. However, the Information and Communication Technology infrastructure that enables much of these debates has been **captured by a few corporations**. The platforms that now function as the *de facto* framework of the European public sphere, from Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), Google, and TikTok to OpenAI and Anthropic, do not carry the public interest at their core. Recent trials have found¹ Meta and YouTube liable for building intentionally addictive platforms that visibly harm their users. And yet, they still perform a very clearly public role: providing the technology and organising structure of many political debates and campaigns, and delivering most of the information citizens consume about current affairs. They fill a gap that public institutions have not been able to address: making it easy to participate in societal life.

Simultaneously, the threats that these platforms carry are escalating. In January 2026, an inter-disciplinary group of scientists warned² about “AI swarms”—fleets of coordinated AI agents—representing a structurally new threat to democracy because they create **synthetic consensus**: the illusion that everyone already believes what the operator wants them to believe. This is much harder to detect than bot operations. A survey of nine Western countries conducted in 2025 found³ that **disinformation** is seen as the leading threat to democracy, with citizens themselves identifying civic education and regulation as the top countermeasures.

The information environments in which Europeans form political opinions are controlled by actors whose incentives are structurally misaligned with democratic participation. Commercial platforms, once dominant, are self-reinforcing: the longer public-benefit alternatives are absent, the harder they become to build.

Democratic participation has hit a wall

Simultaneously, the democratic **participation gap** is widening at a measurable pace globally and in Europe. International IDEA reports⁴ that 94 countries (54 per cent of all countries assessed) suffered a decline in at least one factor of democratic performance in 2024 relative to five years earlier. European countries accounted for 38% of this global democratic downturn. In 2024, only 36 per cent of Europeans aged 15 to 24 voted in the European Parliament elections, down from 42 per cent in 2019, with the single most cited⁵ reason being not disillusionment or logistical barriers, but simple **lack of interest** in politics.

1 BBC News. Meta and YouTube found liable over addictive platform design. [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-67890123)

2 Science (2026). AI swarms as a structural threat to democracy. [science.org](https://www.science.org)

3 Ipsos (2025). *The State of Democracy 2025*. [ipsos.com](https://www.ipsos.com)

4 International IDEA (2025). *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move*. [idea.int](https://www.idea.int)

5 Council of Europe (2025). *Young People's Participation in the 2024 European Elections*. [coe.int](https://www.coe.int)

OECD data shows⁶ that 53 per cent of people worldwide believe that their political system does not allow people like them to have a say. In the EU, 92% of citizens want⁷ their voices to be better taken into account by institutions. The EU's decisions on digital markets, artificial intelligence, environmental standards, or consumer protection are made through processes that have no continuous civic participation infrastructure equivalent to those that sometimes exist at municipal or national levels. The Conference on the Future of Europe concluded in 2022 with 49 proposals. It demonstrated⁸ that transnational deliberative democracy is institutionally possible, but delivered it to the wrong people—a pro-European, highly educated minority—through a process so poorly designed that even those participants could not name the institutions they were deliberating about.

Democratic infrastructure, in Europe and beyond, is simply **ill-adapted to modern reality**. EU citizens are not interested in European democracy because it is not made interesting to them. Despite continued efforts to make EU democracy more participatory, it remains inaccessible and ineffective in communicating its importance. Each successive EU legislative cycle that proceeds without closing this gap compounds on a deficit that becomes harder to reverse.

Solutions

To address this downturn, participatory and deliberative democratic innovations have flourished worldwide. Among them, citizen assemblies have become a popular solution to foster belonging and mutual understanding. However, they are costly, scale with difficulty, and remain reserved to a section of the population that is confident, capable, and willing to participate physically in those events. They are also often happening in isolation from one another, thereby missing the opportunity to compound their lessons and effectiveness. To complement these initiatives, technological solutions are needed: they are cost-efficient, scale easily, facilitate cross-border collaboration, and enable participation from very diverse segments of society.

Civic technology, a growing sector

Civic technology, digital tools that allow citizens to participate in democracy and politics, has grown as a fully-fledged sector of the economy, especially in Europe. International IDEA reports⁹ that the European civic tech market is expected to reach **EUR 500 million by 2028**. Civic tech enhances transparency of decision-making, supports public participation and consultation, facilitates deliberation and assemblies, and keeps policy-makers accountable to citizens.

In November 2025, the European Commission released its joint communication “European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies¹⁰” which sets the ground for coordinated action to tackle information integrity, boost societal resilience and citizens’ engagement, and strengthen democratic institutions and free and independent media. As a result, the European Centre for Democratic Resilience¹¹ was established, through which EU institutions, member states, and civil society can come together to detect and respond to threats to democracy. Furthermore, a European Civic Tech Hub¹² has been proposed to provide deployment support, procurement guidance, interoperability standards, a shared measurement framework, as well as development guidelines.

⁶ OECD. *Trust in Government* (indicator). oecd.org

⁷ European Union (2021). *Special Eurobarometer 517: Future of Europe*. europa.eu

⁸ European University Institute. *Evaluation of the Conference on the Future of Europe*. cadmus.eui.eu

⁹ International IDEA. *Democracy Technologies in Europe*. idea.int

¹⁰ European Commission and High Representative (2025). *European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies*. Joint Communication JOIN(2025) 791. eur-lex.europa.eu

¹¹ European Commission. *European Centre for Democratic Resilience*. commission.europa.eu

¹² Make.org (2026). *European Civic Tech Hub*. White Paper. make.org

Missed opportunities

European initiatives aiming to bolster democratic participation and strengthen its public sphere have been criticised¹³ because they offer soft solutions to the hard problems they seek to tackle: coordinated, large-scale disinformation campaigns, dependence on foreign information technology, growing public distrust, and dissatisfaction with democracy. If Europe is serious about being a global defender of democracy, the efforts should be proportionate to the gargantuan size of the task. To generate this substantial impact, civic technology must be developed and adopted rapidly. However, the sector suffers from two core challenges.

1) A fragmented participation layer

Civic technology is increasingly deployed at the local and national levels, in partnership with municipalities and national governments, which have the capacity to swiftly organise and follow-up on participatory initiatives. However, they **operate in silos** and often replicate efforts without the coordination needed to turn hundreds of local experiments into cumulative knowledge, or into participation at the scale that European decisions now demand. Civic tech is **not adopted at the level of the European Union** for the matters it has competence over. The solutions proposed by the EU to fill this gap—the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Citizen Panels, and the Have Your Say platform—have had mixed results¹⁴. Yet, the responses to European problems are increasingly being shaped at the supranational level, as illustrated by the Digital Services Act and AI Act, two unprecedented pieces of legislation with far-reaching consequences for Europeans. European democratic infrastructure has not followed the digitalisation and internationalisation of the public sphere; it must urgently adapt to European citizens' digital, transnational reality.

2) A disjointed economic model

The private sector is indispensable to spearhead the modernisation of democratic solutions. It has the economic incentives to innovate and grow massively. However, when it comes to providing public goods, such as democratic infrastructure, they **lack the moral incentives** that would make them trustworthy in the public eye and genuinely geared towards public interest. In contrast, non-profit organisations have the credibility to produce public-benefit solutions that can gain public trust, but they very often **lack the financial resources and stability** necessary to do so at a scale that can generate meaningful impact. At the same time, private and public-facing organisations operate on **distinct standards** and reporting targets, based on different understandings of what makes societies democratically resilient. This disjointed model is curbing the potential impact of civic technology on European society. It is crucial to sew it up so that the diverse parts of its machinery can work together and realise their collective potential.

Our role

The Global Society Foundation is an ecosystem builder at the intersection of democracy research, education, and practice. The diagnosis in this White Paper No. 1 is our *raison d'être*: we believe in a world where everyone can contribute to positive change, starting within the European Union, global leader in supranational democratic governance. To empower individuals and organisations to bridge the gap between citizens and their democratic governance, we aim to foster partnerships with civil society organisations, public institutions, and participatory and deliberative democracy initiatives, building the infrastructure they need to scale while strengthening public trust.

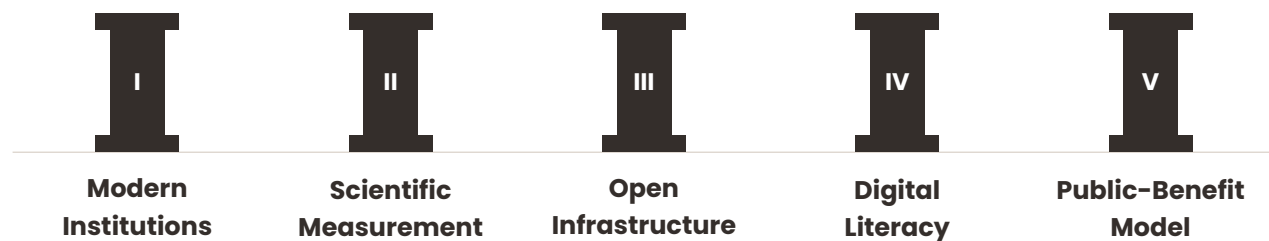
¹³ Jacques Delors Centre. *The European Democracy Shield: Papering Over the Cracks*. delorscentre.eu

¹⁴ European Politics and Society (2025). tandfonline.com

Five Pillars for a European Civic Trust Infrastructure

The following pillars form the bedrock of the Global Society Foundation's approach to democratic infrastructure. They articulate the conditions that any serious investment in European civic technology must meet, tackling the structural problems identified above across **five dimensions: institutions, joint standards, technology, education, and sustainability**. They constitute what we call the Civic Trust Architecture: a coherent and interdependent system in which democratic infrastructure rises with public trust.

Figure 2. The five pillars of the Civic Trust Architecture.



1). Modern institutions for participation in European democracy

For: EU citizens and policy-makers (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the EU)

Democracy scholars and advocates have made proposals for permanent participatory mechanisms in European politics, including a permanent Citizens' Chamber¹⁵ populated by randomly selected citizens drawn by sortition, convening one or more thematic Citizens Panels each year. The key word here is permanent. Only **permanent participatory institutions** can provide the infrastructure that makes civic life accessible to everyone. However, institutional design alone will not close the widening participation gap. Democratic institutions are only as effective as the means that allow people to join them. Reaching Europeans at scale, across geographic and socioeconomic lines, requires **multilingual, mobile-first technology** that is pleasant, easy, and credible. AI and automation bring the promise of increased societal coordination and efficiency. Public-interest, decentralised technology provides the layer needed to make it transparent and trustworthy. Human-centred design makes it accessible, inclusive, and social. Combined with strategic communications that meet users exactly where they are, it facilitates mass adoption through community-building around the issues people care about.

2). A shared measurement framework for democratic resilience

For: European Civic Tech Hub, research institutions, civic technology practitioners

Civic technology without impact measurement is unaccountable by design. A **common measurement framework** for democratic resilience must be adopted as a tool for assessing the effect of civic tech across Europe. This framework should be developed in partnership with researchers and civic technology practitioners, rooted in a multi-disciplinary, scientific understanding of democratic resilience, and using democratic theory and empirical data about society from the context in which it is to be applied, starting with Europe. This framework should be continuously and collaboratively refined and expanded. It should be published under open access terms, generating longitudinal data that persists beyond individual project cycles and allows for comparative analysis of civic tech impact across time and space. These shared standards will unlock **evidence-based resource allocation at scale**, thereby optimising and boosting the development of civic technology for public interest in Europe and beyond.

¹⁵ Alemanno, A. (2022). *Towards a Permanent Citizens' Participatory Mechanism in the EU*. SSRN. ssrn.com

3). An open European tech stack

For: entrepreneurs and investors, technologists, EU policy-makers (DMA), civil society

Decentralised platforms built on open protocols such as ActivityPub and the AT Protocol allow for an interoperable web structure where no single actor controls the flow of information, and users can move between applications without losing their network or data. Running on these protocols, the Fediverse (including Mastodon and PeerTube) and the Atmosphere (including Eurosky and Mu) demonstrate that such innovations are possible and viable in the EU. What they require to compete with centralised alternatives is **sustained investment** and **user mass**. Initiatives like Rebuild¹⁶ and PublicSpaces¹⁷, connecting entrepreneurs, scientists, and technologists building the next generation of European platforms, show that the ecosystem already exists. What is necessary at this stage is **coordination** between technologists, EU policy-makers, and civil society.

4). A European media and civic literacy system

For: education ministries, European Commission (AVMSD review), EU-funded platform providers

Two competencies are fundamental to European democratic infrastructure: **civic literacy**, the capacity to engage, advocate, and hold institutions accountable, anchored in the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture¹⁸; and **media literacy**, the capacity to evaluate information critically and resist manipulation, with a legal basis under Article 33a of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Both are often treated as belonging to schools and childhood, when information manipulation and interference affect every age. The two must therefore be fused into one competency framework delivered across the life course, through **cultural and gamified initiatives** that maximise learning outcomes through community and role-playing. Publicly funded platforms should carry this delivery, tied to the shared measurement framework above, so literacy becomes a traceable input into democratic resilience.

5). A public-benefit model for civic tech

For: EU policy-makers, impact investors and philanthropic funders, civic technology providers

The sustainability of European democratic infrastructure depends on **patient capital**, investment that accepts long horizons and capped returns in exchange for public value, and **locked purpose**, governance that makes public benefit legally irreversible, through steward-ownership and asset-lock structures. Capital and credibility are habitually treated as belonging to different sectors, when democratic infrastructure requires both inside the same industry. They must therefore be fused into a single public-benefit model with a clear division of labour: public-benefit organisations own the infrastructure, the data, and the standards, as a commons that cannot be enclosed; private firms build on that layer, running operations, owning client relationships, and advocating for the sector. Commercial revenue then sustains the commons it depends on, ending grant-dependency. Economic incentives must be tied to public-benefit outcomes: returns, contracts, and reinvestment conditioned on measured contribution to democratic resilience rather than on usage or growth alone. Providers should report against a shared measurement framework so that capital flows toward what demonstrably works.

¹⁶ Rebuild. rebuild.net

¹⁷ PublicSpaces. publicspaces.net

¹⁸ Council of Europe. *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*. coe.int

What's next

The five pillars set out in this paper constitute what the Global Society Foundation calls the Civic Trust Architecture: a complex system in which modern institutions for democratic participation, shared measurement standards, sovereign digital infrastructure, lifelong learning, and a sustainable public-benefit model are designed as complementary parts of modern democratic society. The Global Society Foundation's role is to help assemble the conditions under which we and others can contribute to building this infrastructure. With this in mind:

1. We are developing the **Democratic Resilience Instrument (DRI)** as the scientific skeleton for joint measurement standards in civic technology (to be presented at the EDDY annual conference in Vienna, 21–22 September 2026).
2. We are building a **civic platform** to empower and reconnect citizens and their representatives in the EU, in collaboration with students from the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University, providing technical and research expertise for the launch of a closed beta version in early 2027.

We invite interested funders, researchers, and institutions to contact us for collaboration and joint pilot testing.

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