

# Revitalizing Europe:

## Civil Society and Civic Engagement as New Democratic Infrastructure

by **Vedran Džihic**

In times of turmoil and crisis, there is one currency more important than the others – hope. There is perhaps no better point of departure for seeking hope today than returning to the moral and political vocabulary of the former dissident, writer, civic activist and later president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. Havel's life and work were built around the conviction that freedom, dignity, and truth in politics are never granted once and for all by institutions alone. Rather, they must be continuously

reclaimed, defended, and reimagined through the active engagement of citizens willing to act, to organize, and to resist even in moments when success seems improbable or distant. Havel's notion of hope is not a naïve one. It is not a hope as optimism that things will necessarily turn out well, but as the certainty that something is worth doing regardless of how it turns out. His notion of hope is the one that captures profoundly what is politically at stake in Europe's present moment of democratic uncertainty, exhaustion, and all types of contestations.

### Structural Crisis of Democracy

What Europe faces today is not simply a passing political turbulence, nor merely a temporary crisis of representation that can be managed through technocratic adjustment or pragmatic reforms. Neither can it be managed by another cycle of institutional fine-tuning on the EU level or at the national level in member and candidate countries. It is rather a deeper and more structural crisis of democratic meaning, democratic legitimacy, and also democratic imagination unfolding in front of our

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eyes. Europe's current crisis unfolds under specific circumstances. In the majority of the EU member states, formal democratic institutions continue to function, elections continue to be held, parliaments continue to legislate, and governments continue to govern. Yet, large parts of society increasingly experience democracy itself as distant, procedural, emotionally empty, and incapable of generating either trust or belief in a common political future. In some other cases – like in Georgia and Serbia today and Hungary until the recent regime change – formal and procedural aspects of democracy are in place, yet countries are run by autocrats who offensively obscure democracy and use various forms of repression against their citizens. Citizens across the continent often do not reject democracy as a principle. What many reject is a version of democracy that appears managerial rather than transformative, reactive rather than visionary, and transactional rather than capable of inspiring collective belonging, solidarity, and hope. Despite the loss of Orbán's Fidesz in the recent elections in Hungary, we do not know which political forces profit the most. It might well be authoritarian forces inside and outside of Europe and its societies – far-right populist and nationalist forces who promise the return to a glorious past that never existed or a retrotopia with authoritarian brush strokes.

## Civil Society as Democracies' Essential Infrastructure

While democratic backsliding, shrinking civic spaces, the normalization of exclusionary nationalism, foreign

interference, disinformation, and the authoritarian temptation have become defining features of Europe's political landscape, one crucial insight has become unavoidable: democracies under pressure cannot be defended by state institutions alone. Neither can they be renewed solely through electoral competition or elite bargains. They require something broader, deeper, and more socially rooted – a whole-of-society democratic response in which civil society and civic engagement are understood not as decorative additions to an otherwise functioning democratic order, but rather as one of democracy's most essential infrastructures. These civil structures should be understood as the living arena in which democratic habits are learned, solidarities are forged, institutions are challenged, and political imagination is kept alive.

This understanding was once deeply embedded in Europe's democratic transformations, particularly in the East. There the great emancipatory movements of the late twentieth century demonstrated that democracy is rarely born from institutions alone, but rather from civic agency. From the civic courage of dissidents in communist Central Europe to the mobilizing force of Solidarność in Poland, courageous collective organisation and the willingness of ordinary citizens to become political subjects rather than passive objects of power was shown. Civil society was then understood as the school of democracy in the deepest sense, as a space where citizens learned responsibility, plurality, and action. It was a space where freedom became practice rather than abstraction, anchored

within a public realm understood as a space of contestation and beginning.

Yet over time, both in the East and West of Europe, something of this foundational understanding faded. In parts of post-communist Europe, particularly in my home region of the Western Balkans, civil society became increasingly professionalized, NGO-ized and donor-driven. It became often detached from wider social mobilization, performing indispensable work on rights, inclusion, accountability, and democratic reform, but frequently losing some of its transformative political energy as expertise replaced movement-building and project cycles replaced deeper civic enmeshment. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, civil society became normalized as part of democratic equilibrium. It became an indispensable but largely institutionalized component of checks and balances, welfare provision, solidarity, and moral advocacy, embodied by organizations such as Caritas here in Austria, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, trade unions, churches, local associations, and countless grassroots initiatives that quietly sustained democratic social life. Civil society became, in a sense, normal – important, respected, but politically somewhat domesticated.

## Authoritarian Turn Unites Civic Forces Across Europe

The current authoritarian turn has changed that equation fundamentally for those countries that took it. These are precisely the countries where civic activists face the most legal harassment, personal risk, and systematic

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Novi Sad, Vojvodina, Serbia,  
5 September 2025:  
Student protests against  
government corruption.

repression. Yet, one of the most revealing features of contemporary illiberal and authoritarian politics is precisely that it recognizes the political power of civil society more clearly than many liberals have done for decades. From Viktor Orbán’s and Aleksandar Vučić’s systematic attacks on independent NGOs, universities, artists, and journalists; to the culture-war assaults of the Alternative for Germany against so-called “left-liberal elites”; from the rhetoric of the FPÖ in Austria against “politically correct civil society”; to the broader anti-pluralist political repertoire associated with Donald Trump; what we witness is not merely hostility toward isolated organizations, but a deeper struggle over who constitutes “the people,” whose voices count, and which forms of civic organization are deemed legitimate. Authoritarian actors do not merely seek to weaken independent civic forces. They increasingly seek to build their own counter-civil societies embodied in nationalist

networks, culture-war organizations, pseudo-grassroots mobilizations, and moral communities built around exclusion, resentment, and the dangerous fantasy of a homogeneous notion of “our people” allegedly threatened by liberal pluralism and migration.

And yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in response to this pressure that Europe witnesses a remarkable and politically consequential re-politicization of civil society. This is a new civic awakening that suggests democratic energy is increasingly emerging from below – from movements, initiatives, protest networks, local solidarities, and newly mobilized citizens determined to resist democratic erosion. This civic courage under the conditions of the authoritarian turn is truly inspiring. It is the bravery, creativity and perseverance of so many civic actors and initiatives in countries like Serbia and Georgia, or previously Hungary, that inspires and unites civic forces in still

stable but contested democracies in the rest of the EU states. A new and broader civic horizon uniting European “West” and “East” is emerging.

### Resilience, Solidarity, and the Defense of Democracy through Civic Engagement

In Hungary, where over 16 years Orbán’s long project of illiberal state capture transformed institutions, media, and large parts of the political sphere, civic resistance continued to fight. This resistance provided moments of collective democratic courage, not least when public space itself became contested terrain – as demonstrated by mass mobilizations around Budapest Pride last year. While I underline the notion of civil society as a safeguard of democracy, the Hungarian case illustrates that dense civic networks can also facilitate democratic backsliding. The right-wing Civic Circles Movement mobilized broad segments of the educated middle

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class and helped consolidate Orbán's political hegemony, demonstrating how “uncivil society” can strengthen illiberal and exclusionary politics rather than liberal democratic norms. This is why we cannot claim that Péter Magyar's victory is a straightforward result of civic engagement against Fidesz authoritarian rule. What we certainly can argue is that the spirit of resistance, criticism and insistence on facts and truth by so many civic forces – despite the dense “uncivil society” networks – in Hungary contributed to the fertile ground for political change in Hungary. Political change has not yet come to Serbia, but student movements since November 1st 2024, previous broad environmental protests against destructive mining projects (Rio Tinto) and countless acts of resistance against Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian and corrupt grip on power have created new and broader democratic coalitions. Coalitions that connect ecological justice, anti-clintelism, and demands for rule of law and accountable government, showing how resistance can unite very different segments of society around the defense of the common good. In Georgia, repeated mass mobilizations in defense of civic freedoms and against authoritarian drift have demonstrated the resilience of democratic aspiration even under intense political pressure and repression. While the situation in Georgia remains unchanged and the government keeps the repressive and authoritarian grip on the whole society, civic courage and engagement have not evaporated and are still there. In Poland, which saw a democratic change in 2023, women's protests, civic alliances, and broad democratic mobilization played a crucial role in resisting the authoritarian capture pursued by Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS. Polish civil society and various grassroots organizations and actions continue contributing to the still difficult and protracted process of democratic recovery. In the end, this is unimaginable without social energy organized beyond party structures. In Slovakia under Fico, artists, intellectuals, and

cultural workers resisting attempts at political control over public institutions have defended precisely those autonomous spaces in which democratic plurality breathes. Looking more toward so-called “old members” of the EU such as Austria and Germany, there are many cases of broad civic mobilizations against remigration fantasies, far-right normalization, and exclusionary nationalism. Every single act of civic engagement contributes to resilience, solidarity, and the defense of democracy. After the US' obvious authoritarian turn, we saw various moments of new civic coalitions standing up against authoritarian presidentialism, against the hollowing out of institutions, and in defense of constitutional democracy and rights.

## European Infrastructure of Trust

What unites these very different cases – be it in democratic states or in those that can be characterized as competitive autocracies – is not ideological uniformity, but something more fundamental: the redefinition and rediscovery of civic agency. Hannah Arendt's insight that politics begins wherever human beings act together in plurality, whenever they leave private isolation and enter the public realm as speaking and acting citizens capable of initiating something new, reminds us of the power lying in the human capacity for new beginnings and action. Arendt's notion of miracle, which emerged when people come together and act together for some higher good, is what vibrant civic spaces and acts of engagement preserve. They keep the notion of possibility, of alternatives to abusive forms of power, and of human dignity alive.

Europe's democratic renewal requires a new civic horizon rooted in active hope, in political imagination, in empathy and solidarity, and in the conviction that democracy must again become something lived, practiced, and emotionally meaningful. I argue that civil society and civic engagement are not merely one democratic sector

among many but that they represent the core democratic infrastructure, probably needed more today than ever in Europe since the end of the Second World War. If Europe is to resist democratic exhaustion and authoritarian temptation, it will have to rediscover what Havel knew, what Arendt taught, and what countless citizens across the continent are demonstrating every day: that freedom survives only where citizens act together, where plurality is defended, where solidarity is practiced, and where hope becomes political action. Those engaged citizens are new teachers in the school of democracy; they create an infrastructure of trust, build the arena of resistance, and by doing so give birth to political imagination without which European democracy cannot become believable again.

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