EUROPEAN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION INITIATIVE

Common Ground

Community foundations and the infrastructure of local democratic resilience



A snapshot of ECFI's learnings across Europe

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Key messages

01

Across Europe, community foundations are seeing two connected developments: support for divisive politics is hardening within their communities, while their own donor and volunteer bases are quietly thinning. These are not simply shifts in public mood. Organised anti-democratic actors are exploiting real grievances created by institutional withdrawal and sharing strategies across borders, while civil society remains far less connected. The pressure travels faster than the knowledge of how to respond.

02

Civic health is eroding even before this shows up in elections: the relationships, places and shared experiences through which people participate in and shape community life. Community foundations help sustain this relational infrastructure. By supporting healthy local information ecosystems, maintaining open and accessible places of encounter, and enabling difficult conversations to lead to participation and action, they turn local knowledge and trust into collective agency. It takes time and commitment to build and protect this infrastructure and it is difficult to replace once weakened.

03

Fulfilling this role requires more than assumed neutrality. Community foundations need to offer patient and catalytic capital, treat facilitation as a core skill, secure access to the spaces on which their work depends, and build stronger connections through which experience can travel across borders. Trust cannot be built quickly, but learning can—and must—move faster than the pressures communities face.

Preface

This report draws together what ECFI has learned about local democratic resilience through three strands of work: a three-day gathering of Community Foundation Movement Leaders in Piemonte in October 2025, who reconvened in Edinburgh in June 2026; two meetings of our Foresight Group; and three linked webinars under the heading Holding Ground in Times of Shrinking Space, with contributors from community foundations and partner organisations across Europe.

This report deliberately avoids easy recommendations and serves primarily as a starting point for thinking about the role of community foundations in protecting democratic values and principles at the local level. It sets out what we are hearing from the field, and the larger patterns those accounts point to. It looks at what community foundations are up against, which an abstract framing of polarisation and shrinking space does not capture, and which is better understood as a strategic and organised backlash against open societies. And it asks what community foundations can specifically contribute to local democratic resilience: the value they add that other institutions cannot, and the limits of what this work can reach.

Kathrin Dombrowski
Coordinating Director, ECFI
October 2026



Hamburg's Longest Table for Democracy, Diversity and Social Cohesion, June 2025.
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I. Different places, same pressures

> Community foundations across Europe work in localities with little in common. Their accounts of what is happening to democratic life in those places converge to a degree that surprised the people giving them.

In October 2025 our first cohort of European CF Movement Leaders spent three days together in San Sebastiano da Po, a village in Piemonte. ECFI had convened them around a single question: what does local democratic resilience mean for community foundations? The field had named this theme, in consultations before the meeting, as the most pressing challenge it faces.

The participants came from very different localities – rural and urban, from Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, Germany and the United Kingdom – and from community foundations that differ sharply in size, reach and maturity. Yet each recognised the others' accounts. The democratic ground is shifting beneath these communities, and the civic fabric that holds them together is wearing thin.

Community foundations feel this three times over: as place-based funders and programme implementers, as organisations that are increasingly themselves targets, and as people who belong to the communities they serve.



Community foundation leaders at ECFI's Resilience Retreat in San Sebastiano da Po, October 2025.

II. How the pressures manifest locally

The field's accounts describe two developments at once: support hardens around divisive politics in the community, and, more quietly, the foundation's own base of donors and volunteers begins to thin.

What the field is seeing in its communities...

Support grows for actors that push a divisive agenda, most often organised around opposition to migration, and local politics harden around it. Mainstream parties, including at municipal level, adopt those positions, and arguments that were recently the preserve of outliers move to the centre of local debate. Racist and xenophobic language becomes ordinary, and people who stand up for diversity and mutual respect meet intimidation, sometimes overt and more often subtle.

In the United Kingdom, flags are displayed as territorial markers. Northern Ireland has seen several racist riots, fuelled by targeted disinformation. In many localities in eastern Germany, the far-right AfD has become adept at dominating public space, and political opponents and civil society organisations are intimidated openly or by implication. Rather than espousing an inclusive understanding of community in which everyone belongs, right-wing populists are fuelling prejudice and discrimination and questioning the right of migrants, LGBTQ people and other groups—for example, people living with disabilities in the case of the AfD—to belong fully to their local communities.

These are local observations, but they track well-documented European trends. The Council of Europe's anti-racism commission reported in May 2026 that hate speech has reached alarming levels across Europe and is increasingly trivialised, that xenophobic discourse now appears in mainstream political debate as well as online, and that hate speech left unchallenged can fuel hate-motivated violence.[1] Support for democratic values among young people is a further concern: the AfD's victory in the September 2026 state election in Saxony-Anhalt was underpinned by strong support among young voters.

... and what it is seeing in its own base

The second movement is rarely named aloud, and a foundation can be some way into it before it notices. In confidential conversations, leaders describe donors pushing back on particular issues, migration above all. Volunteers become reluctant to join certain kinds of project. Civic engagement is harder to mobilise. Almost none of this is announced: people do not resign in protest, they decline the next invitation or never come forward in the first place. The base narrows quietly on both sides, among those who fund the work and among those who carry it out, at the moment the work matters most.

A narrower base means greater exposure, and here too the pattern is wider than the field. The Council of Europe records that people and organisations taking a public stand against racist and anti-LGBTQ hate speech, among them elected representatives, judges and civil society actors, have themselves been threatened, with a chilling effect on their willingness to speak.[2] Community foundations, which have not traditionally taken an activist stance, are beginning to find themselves inside that pattern. A foundation that takes a position now may have to do so with fewer people behind it, shrinking resources, and fewer allies prepared to be visible alongside it.

In some countries, notably Serbia, community foundations face direct threats, intimidation and smear campaigns. Foundations in Western Europe have also been targeted online and have taken staff names off their websites or increased security at the events they host. Colleagues have raised concerns about their own safety and their ability to continue their work. Partners and staff are depleted, a problem philanthropy has acknowledged for more than a decade without developing the means to address it.

The national frame around local work

The effects are sharpest locally, but much of the pressure originates nationally, and community foundations in several countries are already organising alongside other civil society organisations in response. In Germany, mainstream political debate (prompted by a targeted anti-civil society campaign emanating from the far-right) has questioned the public-benefit status and political neutrality of civil society organisations, and foundations are part of the broader coalition warning where this leads. In Hungary, more than a decade of restriction stifled the development of independent civil society; the change of government in April 2026 is one of the few positive signals on the continent. Elsewhere in Europe, governments and governing parties in Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Czechia have enacted, advanced or proposed foreign-agent-style legislation, although its status and legal effect vary considerably across these countries.[3]

None of these measures is aimed at community foundations in particular; their effect is to constrain the conditions in which civil society operates and the enabling environment on which community foundations depend to do their work well.

III. Why we need to understand what the strategy looks like from the other side

> What community foundations encounter locally is the local surface of a strategy that is deliberate, resourced and connected across borders, and that pursues civic ground as the route to political power.

We often talk about these pressures as if they were simply happening: the climate has changed, the tide has turned. It is important to take this analysis further: when we speak about "shrinking civic space", what are the forces encroaching on it? A key point to consider here is that much of what community foundations encounter locally is the expression of a strategy that is deliberate, resourced and pursued across Europe by broadly similar means.

An AfD strategy paper from March 2026, Verankerung in der Fläche – Die AfD erobert die Dörfer (roughly translated as "Establishing a Grassroots Presence – The AfD Captures the Rural Areas"), illustrates how this works.[4] It sets out a programme of permanent presence in rural areas: candidacies for parish and municipal councils, presence in clubs and voluntary associations, and the party's own meeting places – not sterile offices, the paper specifies, but multifunctional centres in former pubs, discotheques and wine estates.

Its central figure is the Kümmerer, the person who takes care of things. Where a youth club has closed, the local AfD-linked activist organises the football tournament. Where a bus route has been withdrawn, he or she drives the pensioners to their appointments. The care offered is real, and the politics arrive with it.

The strategy rests on an accurate reading of what has happened to many places. Research on emigration in Sweden finds that the municipalities losing people, above all the young and the working-age, show the sharpest movement towards the radical right.[5] Philea's democracy briefer frames this structural explanation as an iceberg: anti-immigration sentiment is the visible tip, and the causes sit below the waterline in unmet needs, unheard emotions and systemic failure.[6] Seen from a locality, most of that structure is invisible. What is visible locally is institutional withdrawal – the closed post office, the lack of public transport, the shuttered youth club, the local paper shutting down. There are legitimate grievances underneath the surface which must be seen and addressed. They are amplified and misdirected, not invented by the radical right.

What is organised locally is not developed locally. Funding, strategy documents, narrative frames and legislative templates move through networks that investigative reporting and comparative research have documented in some detail, and a tactic proven in one country appears in another within months.[7] Digital platforms provide the connective tissue, linking a specific local grievance to narratives circulating internationally and reaching audiences – young men above all

– that local civil society struggles to reach at all. The foreign-agent legislation described above is the same infrastructure operating on the legal layer: a portable instrument that travels between governments faster than any response to it. [8]

The actors behind this backlash are networked at every level, from the transnational to the parish. Civil society often is not. A community foundation meets the local expression of an international repertoire with local resources, local knowledge and, in most cases, no way of learning what worked in a comparable place two countries away. Building those connections, and enabling learning to travel along them, is a substantial part of why ECFI works on this issue at all.

One further factor operates above the local level entirely. Radical-right actors can exert the most influence through the willingness of mainstream parties to adopt their positions and frames. Accommodation confers the legitimacy that local presence alone cannot deliver, and it is decided in national party rooms rather than in communities. It marks a limit on what any local institution can be expected to achieve.

The logic across all of this is one of filling vacuums. It goes where institutions have withdrawn, where trust has eroded, where services have stopped arriving, where the experience of being attended to and having a say has become scarce, and it supplies that experience with a politics attached.

The terrain it seeks is civic: the associations, halls, festivals, youth centres and small offices through which a place organises its common life.

That terrain is not empty. It is where community foundations have spent decades building social capital – the relationships, the trust, the shared experiences which hold a community together. Where that relational infrastructure is thick, there is less vacuum to fill; where it has thinned, the ground is open. What that infrastructure can protect, and what is needed to protect it, is the question the rest of this report takes up.

The terrain it seeks is civic.
Where that relational infrastructure is thick, there is less vacuum to fill; where it has thinned, the ground is open.

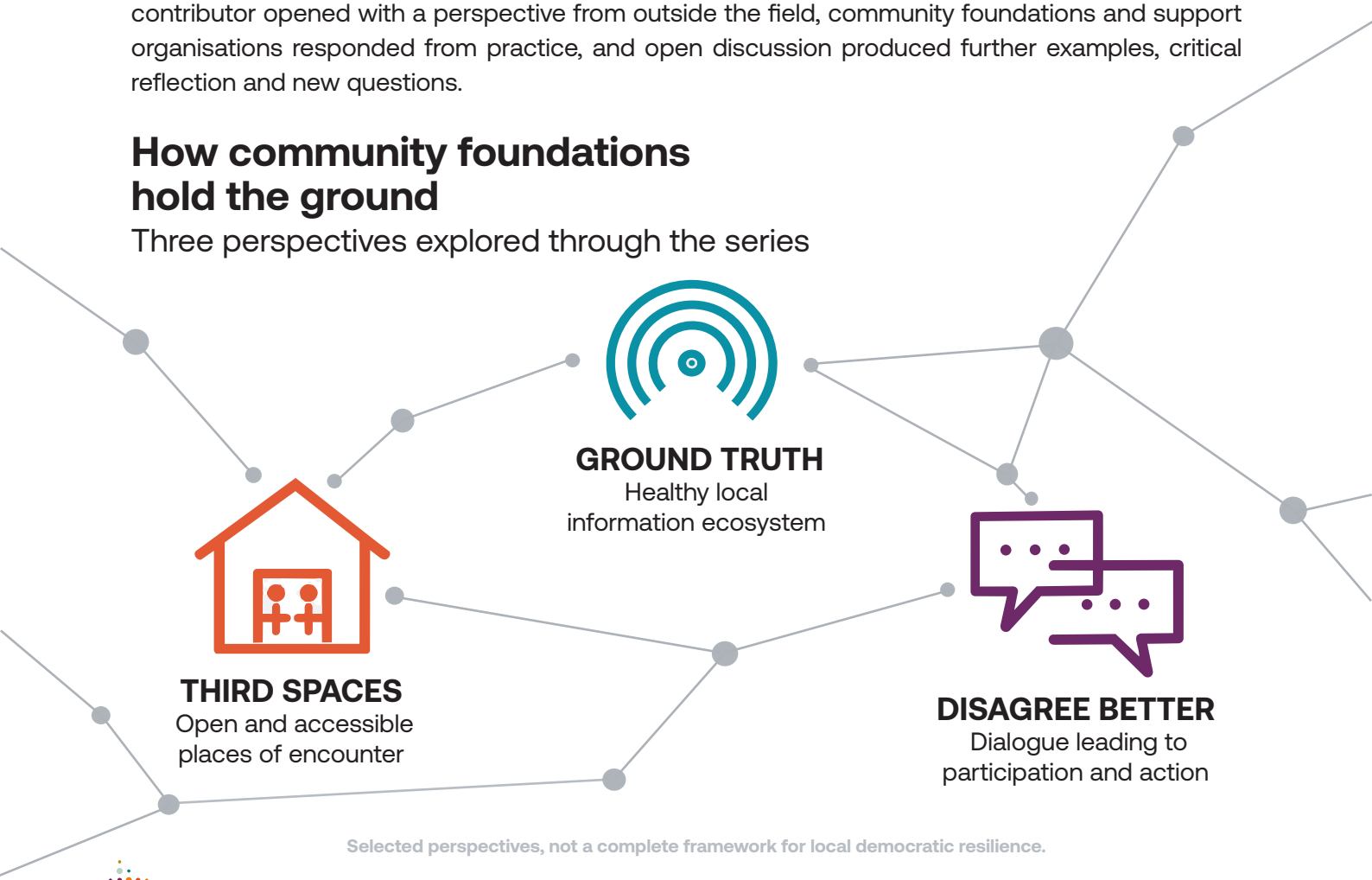
IV. What is true, where we meet, how we disagree — three sessions on what community foundations bring

The preceding sections describe a contest on civic ground. Between April and June 2026, ECFI ran three linked webinars under the title Holding Ground in Times of Shrinking Space to build on the Movement Leaders' discussions and to work throughwhat the gradual capture of civic ground by anti-democratic actors asks of community foundations in practice.

Each session unwrapped a different dimension. "Ground Truth" looked at community foundations inside their local information ecosystems. "Third Spaces" asked how they can restore places of encounter. "Disagree Better" considered how conflict becomes conversation. In each, an external contributor opened with a perspective from outside the field, community foundations and support organisations responded from practice, and open discussion produced further examples, critical reflection and new questions.

How community foundations hold the ground

Three perspectives explored through the series



Selected perspectives, not a complete framework for local democratic resilience.

Ground Truth: Community foundations on the local frontline of disinformation

> Disinformation is commonly treated as a content problem. The session relocated it: to the health of the system through which a community informs itself, and to the relationships that allow disinformation and misinformation to be challenged effectively.

It is hard to argue constructively with someone who disputes the facts. A shared account of what happened, and a common commitment to establishing it, is the precondition for dialogue. Disinformation works against that precondition, whether by spreading false claims or by flooding the zone until sense-making is abandoned. The effect either way is mistrust, and people driven further into echo chambers where their world view is confirmed rather than tested. Deliberately propagated falsehoods, often targeted at minorities already regarded with suspicion, have fuelled intimidation, violence and large-scale rioting, as in the United Kingdom in 2024.

The first contribution shifted the frame: from the information circulating in a community to the system through which a community informs



Equity in Action supports grassroots responses to hate and misinformation across Northern Ireland.
© Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

itself. Jonathan Heawood, Executive Director of the Public Interest News Foundation, calls that system the local information ecosystem. A healthy one is diverse, interconnected, sustainable and engaged with the place it serves. A local newspaper is one node among many, alongside the pub, the football club, the mosque and the person who talks to their neighbours. Global platforms, national media and government pump information in from outside; in a weak ecosystem this is never corroborated against local experience, nothing flows back out, and the community ends up informed about itself entirely by external sources.

Community foundations have a part in the health of that ecosystem. As local infrastructure organisations they are already connected to most of its nodes, and Heawood set out four support roles a foundation might take on, each with different implications for what it commits to: incubate, accelerate, catalyse and evaluate. Local journalism remains central, provided the news is demonstrably local, with reporters visible in the places they cover and residents involved in producing it. The traditional business model has largely collapsed, and no single funder can replace it: what pioneering local news providers need is catalytic and patient capital rather than subsidy.

The discussion added the second relocation: from the quality of information to the quality of relationships. Facts still matter, but corrections do not travel by themselves. A correction from outside a community is easily dismissed; the same correction from someone with a visible stake in the place is heard. That is a question of trust rather than content, and it is the part of the problem community foundations are positioned to work on.

The stakes are not abstract. Disinformation circulating within hours of the Southport killings in 2024, including false claims about the perpetrator's identity, was a direct trigger for riots across the United Kingdom, and a comparable dynamic preceded the violence in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, in 2025. The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland answered in four steps: a public statement, a convening of more than two hundred participants, a funding response through the Equity in Action fund weighted towards projects addressing mis- and disinformation, and Stronger Together, a programme built on commissioned research into the root causes of the violence.

Roisin Wood, Chief Executive of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, was unambiguous about the decision to speak publicly. Silence amounts to consent to those who intend to say a great deal. Speaking is easier for an organisation with 47 years of history and a board oriented to social justice — but she questioned whether any community foundation can stay neutral when basic rights are evidently under attack in its own locality. The four-step response also points to something that ran through all three sessions: information, convening and dialogue can be distinguished conceptually, but an effective response addresses them together.

Ulrike Rühlmann of Philanthropy for All, the youngest of Germany's three community foundation support organisations, described a different route. Faktenfonds, a partnership with the investigative journalism network CORRECTIV, offers grants of up to €5,000 to community foundations holding the Alliance's

quality seal, for local fact-checking and counter-disinformation work.9 Uptake has so far been modest, which she linked to a question of identity rather than capability: many community foundations already do this work, under the labels of cohesion, media literacy or education, without recognising themselves as actors in an information ecosystem at all.

A perspective from Romania changed the shape of the problem. In much of Central and Eastern Europe, disinformation is not chiefly a homegrown product of platform dynamics and local division. It is an instrument of directed hybrid and cognitive warfare: coordinated, externally resourced and aimed at specific localities, with the intention of destabilising civil society and altering electoral outcomes. And community foundations are not bystanders to it — they are becoming targets, through smear operations against civil society organisations as part of the closing of civic space.

The discussion to that point had assumed the foundation stands outside the problem and responds to it. Where the foundation is the object of the campaign, that assumption does not hold, and the question is not only how to repair the community's shared ground but how to survive on it. Any account of this work that claims to be European has to hold both.



From left to right: "Real or fake? Often difficult to tell online"; "In a good mood, well informed"; and "Establishing the facts together". Bürgerstiftung Halle's Gut gelaunt durchs Netz quiz helped participants recognise misinformation and verify online sources.

© Bürgerstiftung Halle / Linda Müller

Third Spaces: How community foundations can put encounters back on the map

The settings in which people encounter others unlike themselves are fewer than they were. The community foundation field's answer is less about building new places than about recognising, and then holding, the ones that already exist.

The term third place comes from Ray Oldenburg, who used it for the informal public settings that are neither home nor work: i.e. cafés, pubs, parks, community centres, post offices. What defines them is not the activity but the conditions. They are neutral ground, which anyone may enter and leave without playing host. They level status. Conversation is the main thing that happens in them. Oldenburg's argument was that such places are where habits of public association form, and that a society which neglects them weakens its own democratic capacity.[10]

Across many European communities there are fewer such places than there were. Village halls and youth centres close for lack of municipal funding, often justified by low use — itself frequently the result of neglect, or of a failure to imagine what would make a space worth entering. As the previous section described, that vacancy is an opportunity for anti-democratic actors, who supply meeting places of their own: the sports club, the stall at the summer fair. Community foundations and their local partners are among the few actors positioned to hold this ground instead.

The places largely already exist...

Ania Rok of the European Cultural Foundation manages the Europe Challenge, which works with public libraries across Council of Europe countries. She opened not by proposing that community foundations build such places, but by pointing out that Europe already has around 67,000 of them.[11] She prefers the term infrastructure, because it signals that libraries belong to everyone, and that communities have both a right and a responsibility to shape them. Her central proposition followed: libraries and community foundations are natural allies — both local infrastructure organisations, both committed for the long term, both working on democratic resilience whether or not they name it that way. That such partnerships remain uncommon has less to do with any mismatch than with unfamiliarity. Projects nominally about something else – a book club in Lisbon, a specialist collection in Malmö – turn out to be about learning to build relationships with people unlike oneself.

Ulrike Reichart, head of the Alliance of German Community Foundations, brought the first systematic picture of what the field actually runs. In a survey by the Alliance earlier this year – preliminary, and not representative – roughly a third of respondents operate a third place, some more than one, with a further group planning or interested.[12] The overwhelming majority are permanent physical spaces, and almost all

depend on volunteers, wholly or alongside a small professional staff. It is neither a marginal activity within the field nor a well-resourced one. The Alliance's working definition is broader than Oldenburg's, taking in temporary activity, public areas, pop-up and repair cafés, on the criterion that a place must be open, easily accessible and low-threshold, with no obligation to consume.

Her example was Community Foundation Meißen, in a small and politically polarised town near Dresden, which mobilised residents around restoring the Jahnhalle, a monument and a source of local pride, through volunteer work and fundraising involving citizens and local businesses. Nobody in Meißen described this as democratic work, but everyone in the town could connect to a shared stake in the place, and people with sharply different political opinions worked alongside each other and talked well while doing so. What the project produced was what Reichart called Selbstwirksamkeit – a sense of agency, the experienced capacity to change something about one's own surroundings.

The form such places take is almost entirely open. Hamburg's central library extended its opening into Sundays, when closed shops leave the inner city dead, and removed shelves to make room for people simply to be there – which matters for anyone without space at home. Stuttgart is planning a third place in an abandoned department store, and already runs Café Kränzchen in two of the city's cemeteries, where sixty volunteers set out tables each week in season and serve coffee to whoever is passing; the conversations run from bereavement to the closure of local bank branches.[13] In Naples, a priest gave over the back rooms of his church to the community foundation to run boxing training for young men who were angry and had not had an easy start. The common thread is not the type of building but the conditions: open, low-threshold, no obligation to consume, and recognisably the community's own.

... but a building is not yet a third place

Two contributions addressed durability. Jasna Jašarević, Director of Tuzla Community Foundation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, described Agora in Tuzla, which ran for seventeen years as a community centre and no longer exists, because the building belonged to a private company that took it back. Giacomo Pinaffo, Secretary General of Fondazione di Comunità di Messina, reached the same conclusion from the other direction, explaining why his foundation deliberately owns its assets: a building held under municipal management contract brings the intermediation of a public authority, and with it political influence over whom the foundation may address and engage. Ownership, he was clear, carries a heavy financial cost.

Pinaffo also distinguished hardware from software. Beauty matters, and attractive infrastructure is not a superficial concern. But the software is equally essential: the right opportunities with the right people, facilitators to trigger the gathering, and step-by-step engagement that becomes autonomous once what he called the synapses between community actors have been recreated. A building plus sustained facilitation, over years, becomes a third place. A building on its own does not.

Disagree Better: How community foundations can turn conflict into conversation

> The willingness to hold difficult conversations and the ability to hold them well are different capacities, and the field has more of the first than of the second. The session was about closing that gap – and about where dialogue leads.

Nataliya Novakova, Executive Director of the Civil Society Forum, proposed that real conversation has to happen between people, personally, and most plausibly at community level. Polarisation runs through established democracies of every kind, with opinions moving away from the middle and becoming less accepting of nuance, as the discourse around immigration, Ukraine, the Middle East, the pandemic and social security demonstrates. She also directed a criticism at civil society itself: progressive organisations are frequently poor at engaging people with divergent views, and tend to treat more conservative people who reject some progressive positions as less educated – a degrading response to political disagreement.

Putting people with divergent views in one room frequently produces more mutual blame than understanding. Approaching such conversations as neutral space ignores the pain and history of discrimination some participants carry, which itself prevents open communication. These are not reasons to avoid the work; they are reasons to do it with method. The art of hosting treats facilitation as a form of leadership that community leaders can learn, rather than the preserve of external professionals. Deep democracy builds on the proposition that the voices hardest to hear often carry what the group most needs to know, and that disagreement is information to work with rather than a problem to resolve; it has been used in Catalan and Spanish dialogues, and in Roma inclusion work in Hungary and Slovakia. Non-violent communication shifts a conversation from positions to needs, applied in post-war Bosnia between Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Catholic communities and in German integration courses. Systems thinking moves attention from individual behaviour to the patterns underneath. Working with trauma runs across all of these.[14]

Mia Weselmann of Bürgerstiftung Hamburg described what this looks like in a city that appears, from outside, not to have the problem. Hamburg returned low far-right results in early 2025, but district-level analysis shows people grouping along socioeconomic lines and along origin, with two concentrations of AfD support in the periphery. The foundation's campaign, relaunched on the premise that democracy involves more than voting, is called UND, the German word for "and", chosen because it appears to carry no content while in fact connecting whatever precedes it to whatever follows. The associated fund targets local democracy projects in the two identified areas, and works with groups the far right's own

strategy identifies as receptive: first-time voters, young men, and Russlanddeutsche, ethnic German repatriates from the former Soviet Union.

Two of Weselmann's observations go beyond Hamburg. Places where populist parties are already strong are not lost: people working in regions others write off told her that conditions are heavy but civil society there is robust, with many small, active groups – and making the situation appear already decided, so that others give up, is itself part of the strategy. And the baseline is stronger than the headlines suggest: more than 90 per cent of Germans regard democracy as the right form of government and want to continue living in one.[15] The conclusion she drew is the operative one: the distinction that matters is between the functionaries and representatives of far-right parties and the people who vote for them, and it is with the voters that dialogue should be established.

Sonia Constantin, Programme Manager at the Romanian Federation of Community Foundations, described the same targeting logic at national scale. Romania's context is stark: a far-right candidate took first place in the first round of the 2024 presidential election, pushed hard by TikTok campaigning from a position under the radar, and the entire electoral process was subsequently annulled by the Constitutional Court.[16] Authorities communicate poorly and frame democracy weakly, which leaves the ground open, and young people vote less than others. The Federation is launching a national civic engagement, civic education and media literacy programme for young people in rural and small urban communities – the first of its kind in Romania, coordinated centrally and implemented by five community foundations. Before designing anything, the Federation interviewed organisations already working in



The Talking Together project helps young people express their views, listen to others and discuss difficult issues across differences.
© BürgerStiftung Hamburg / Anne Ackermann

these fields, to learn which methodologies had been tested and what community foundations might encounter that studies would not show. Constantin explained that research is embedded from the start, with the explicit aim of establishing which methods work and how far the findings travel.

Prompted by an account of dialogue with convicted paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, a discussant put the question the field returns to most often: what common values does meaningful dialogue require, how far can bridges reach, and where are the limits, given that the risk to a community foundation increases the further it goes towards the political extremes?

The answer that emerged was about gradation. In most environments, broadening the range of conversation does not require going anywhere near the extreme: there are several degrees before it that the progressive agenda already fails to cover, and that is where to begin. For a community foundation new to the work, starting with the movable middle is not a lesser version of the task but the way experience, facilitation skill and local credibility are built, at manageable risk. Longer bridges become possible once a foundation knows it can hold the shorter ones. Constantin answered through targeting: electoral maps show villages already heavily radicalised, while other rural communities face such pressing needs of access, education and sanitation that civic education cannot land at all. The Federation's decision for the first edition was to work in the middle – communities at serious risk but not yet fully radicalised, and not in extreme poverty.

The conversation cannot be an end in itself. It needs safety and space, and it needs to lead to agency: a real opportunity for people to shape their local context. Being heard matters, but it matters far more when being heard changes something. Dialogue that produces understanding and no capacity to act teaches participants that talking is where local matters end – closer to a demonstration of powerlessness than a remedy for it. The requirement is a follow-on: a decision the participants influence, a resource they help direct, a change in the place they can point to afterwards.

The conversation cannot be an end in itself.
Being heard matters, but it matters far more when being heard changes something.

V. Holding the ground

Community foundations hold relational infrastructure built over decades – slow to build, costly to maintain, very hard to replace once lost. What it can protect, and what it needs in order to protect it, are the questions the field now has to work on together.

If the pressures are held in common, what has been tried in one place holds learning for others – but only if mechanisms exist to carry it across borders, and at present the pressure travels faster than the experience. Two accounts as different as post-conflict Northern Ireland and rural Romania converged on the same proposition: start with the movable middle, and build shorter bridges before longer ones. That convergence is the case in miniature for the strategic direction ECFI has set for the coming period: building the European local-to-local connections along which such experience travels.

Holding the ground requires stepping beyond assumed neutrality and re-articulating the role: nodes in a functioning local information ecosystem, holders and hosts of third places, convenors of conversation across political disagreement. The assets are already held. Long-standing presence. Trust built over decades that cannot be bought or assembled at speed, at a time when trust in institutions is eroding everywhere else. Independence from government, at a moment when that independence is being legislated against. A standing web of relationships across the schools, the clubs, the congregations, the libraries, the local papers where one survives. This is the social capital of a place made durable – relational infrastructure: slow to build, costly to maintain, invisible while it functions, and very hard to replace once lost. Democratic resilience is not manufactured at the point of crisis and cannot be supplied from above once the ground has shifted. Where the infrastructure holds, a locality can absorb a shock, argue about it, and remain a community afterwards. That is what it protects: not the outcome of any election, but the conditions under which a place can still disagree with itself and act on what it decides.

None of the three sessions turned out to be about democracy as subject matter. Disinformation resolved into the health of a local information ecosystem, and beneath that into whether a correction comes from someone with a visible stake in the place. Third places worked when they were about the building, the coffee or the boxing, and produced a sense of personal agency as a by-product. Dialogue worked when it led somewhere: a decision the participants influenced, a resource they helped direct. The democratic effect followed from something concrete and local, and the capacity that produced it was relational rather than topical.

This is the specific contribution of community foundations, and few other local institutions are positioned to make it. It is not self-sustaining. The sessions were clear about what it needs: patient and catalytic capital rather than subsidy;

facilitation treated as a skill to be learned rather than an attribute foundations are assumed to possess; secure tenure of the spaces the work depends on; and connection to what comparable places have already tried. None of that is beyond the sector's reach, and all of it is cheaper now than the alternative later. Whether the ground holds will depend on whether funders, support organisations and community foundations' own boards come to see relational infrastructure as something to build and maintain before it is needed, rather than something to reconstruct once it has failed.

Trust takes time

Trust cannot be built at speed, but learning can travel faster than it currently does.



The Center for democracy and social innovation CIVICA provides a new space in Tuzla where civil society organisations and citizens can meet, collaborate and develop initiatives.
© Tuzla Community Foundation

Acknowledgements

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For 'Ground Truth', Jonathan Heawood of the Public Interest News Foundation introduced the concept of local information ecosystems and the different roles foundations can play in supporting independent local journalism. Roisin Wood of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland shared the foundation's response to misinformation, hate and community violence, while Ulrike Rühlmann of Stiften für alle e.V. presented the Faktenfonds and reflected on how community foundations can recognise and develop their role in countering disinformation.

For 'Third Spaces', Ania Rok of the European Cultural Foundation explored the potential of libraries as shared civic infrastructure and natural partners for community foundations. Ulrike Reichart of the Bündnis der Bürgerstiftungen Deutschlands presented emerging evidence about the spaces operated by German community foundations. Jasna Jašarević of the Tuzla Community Foundation and Giacomo Pinaffo of Fondazione Me.S.S.In.A. contributed contrasting experiences of access to, ownership of and long-term responsibility for community spaces.

For 'Disagree Better', Nataliya Novakova of the Civil Society Forum challenged civil society to engage more seriously and respectfully with people holding divergent views. Mia Weselmann of BürgerStiftung Hamburg shared the foundation's work to support local democratic engagement and reach communities where support for divisive politics is growing. Sonia Constantin of the Romanian Federation of Community Foundations presented its emerging national programme for civic engagement, civic education and media literacy among young people in rural areas and smaller towns.

We also thank the Community Foundation Movement Leaders who participated in the meetings in Piemonte and Edinburgh, the members of ECFI's Foresight Group, and everyone who joined the webinars and contributed examples, questions and critical perspectives. Their openness about the pressures facing their communities—and about their own uncertainties, experiments and emerging responses—made this publication possible.

Endnotes

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About ECFI

ECFI is an initiative committed to strengthening and promoting the community foundation movement across Europe. Hosted by the German Association of Foundations (Bundesverband Deutscher Stiftungen), ECFI works to support more than 850 community foundations and 38 community foundation support organisations (CFSOs) across 29 countries, as well as with a wider range of partners in the philanthropic, academic, and civil society ecosystem.

ECFI's approach centres on empowering and supporting those working in the community foundation field - both community foundations themselves and the national and regional support organisations that serve them. It adds value by providing a European dimension to their work: facilitating cross-border learning and exchange, building and sharing knowledge about the field, strengthening leadership and organisational resilience, and increasing the visibility of community foundations among funders, policymakers, and the broader philanthropy sector.

ECFI pursues this through three mutually reinforcing areas of work: peer learning and capability building, through study visits, thematic meetings, leadership retreats, and youth engagement programmes; research and knowledge development, through the European Atlas of community foundations, biennial State of the Field reports, action research, and an open Knowledge Centre; and communications and relationship building, connecting the European field with international networks and helping community foundations to develop a collective voice at the European level.

ECFI's current thematic priorities are the following: democratic resilience, organisational resilience, ecological sustainability, youth engagement, and emergency preparedness. Its learning spaces and knowledge products are largely open and free of charge, ensuring access for organisations at every stage of development.

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