



# STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

*Tools, Experiences and Policy Lessons*

A Conference Paper from the ProVote International Event

Skopje, North Macedonia · 28 April 2026

Hotel Stone Bridge

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## Introduction

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On 28 April 2026, more than 80 practitioners, local government representatives, civil society actors, researchers, and young people gathered at the Hotel Stone Bridge in Skopje for an international conference titled Strengthening Local Democratic Resilience. Organised by ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy within the framework of the ProVote project, the event brought together partners from Belgium, Romania, France, Germany, Spain, Greece, Italy, Poland and North Macedonia for a full day of exchanges, case studies, and debate.

The conference was deliberately positioned in Skopje, making it the first ProVote international event to take place outside the European Union. This choice was itself a statement: democratic resilience is a challenge shared across a wider European space, and the Western Balkans with its distinct history, its ongoing EU accession aspirations, and its vibrant civil society has indispensable experience to contribute to this conversation.

This paper summarizes the key arguments, case studies, and debates from the day. It is addressed to practitioners, local government officials, civil society organisations, policymakers, and anyone interested in understanding what it means in concrete, practical terms to build resilient local democracy in today's volatile environment.

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## 1. Why Local? Framing the Challenge

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The conference opened with a framing that set the tone for the entire day. ALDA welcomed participants with a core conviction that runs through all of its work: that strong local democracy is the foundation of resilient societies. Marta Sys, Member of the ALDA Governing Board and representative of the Merkury Foundation from Poland, reinforced this from her own experience, stressing that democracy begins at the bottom through local consultation, participation, and the everyday connections between citizens and their institutions. The underlying question was simple: if democracy is built locally, its resilience must be built locally too.

*"We believe that local democracy starts at the bottom, through local consultation, participation, and supporting citizens and municipalities. We try to make people more connected with the local authorities, more aware of their rights, and more involved in local activities."*

Maria Kanellopoulou, First Counsellor, Head of Section – Economic Issues, Institution-Building, Cross-Border Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of North Macedonia, reinforced this framing from a geopolitical standpoint. Today's democratic pressures are real and multi-dimensional: disinformation campaigns targeting municipal decision-making, cyberattacks on public institutions, foreign interference in electoral processes, and the erosion of media pluralism, especially at the local level where resources are thinnest. Yet the response, she argued, cannot only be top-down:

*"Democracy cannot survive without strong institutions, but it cannot survive without free citizens, civil society, free media, the scientific community, and academics who act as watchdogs."*

The EU's Democracy Shield initiative launched to strengthen information integrity and protect democratic processes both within and beyond EU borders reflects precisely this dual approach: reinforcing institutions while building societal resilience from the ground up.

From ALDA's perspective, articulated across multiple interventions, the local level is not just where problems manifest, it is where solutions become possible. Local democracy is a space of resilience: concrete problems, closer relationships, more visible consequences. Even in contexts where national politics is polarised or civic space is shrinking, there is often still room to act at the local level, to create dialogue, connect citizens with institutions, and practice democracy in ways that are meaningful and safe.

### The Central Argument

- Democratic resilience is built locally, through everyday practices of participation, dialogue, and trust.
- Institutional frameworks are necessary but insufficient – they depend on active citizens, vibrant civil society, and strong community connections.
- The local level is where democracy becomes tangible, where people experience it directly, and where trust can be built or lost.
- Investing in local democratic resilience is therefore an investment in the foundations of democracy itself.

## 2. Tools and Case Studies: Democracy in Practice

The heart of the conference was a rich exchange of experiences from across Europe and beyond. What follows is a synthesis of the tools, approaches, and examples that emerged.

### 2.1. Local Democratic Resilience through ALDA's Experience

#### 2.1.1. Lessons from Western Balkans

Katica Janeva, Director of ALDA's Balkans Office, presented ALDA's approach to building local democratic resilience an approach grounded not in top-down reform but in the everyday work of communities. Her central message was straightforward: ALDA does not seek to change national politics or confront authoritarian regimes. Its work is focused at the local level, supporting communities that want to introduce positive democratic change, however small.

A core principle running through all of ALDA's work is multi-stakeholder cooperation. Civil society organisations supported by ALDA are required to work closely with local communities and to actively involve citizens in all activities. Inclusive participation is not an optional add-on – it is the condition for democratic resilience to take root. When citizens are brought into processes that affect them, they develop the capacity not only to participate but to sustain and defend democratic practices over time.

In the Western Balkans, ALDA currently implements the BOOST programme, supporting around 67 grassroots projects across the region. These initiatives are deliberately small in scale and flexible by design rooted in community needs, responsive to local realities, and focused on building lasting connections between civil society and local institutions. Support takes the form of financial assistance, capacity building, and expertise, enabling local actors to put democratic instruments and tools into practice.

ALDA's work in the region also extends to peacebuilding and reconciliation, with projects that engage young people through cultural expression and cultural heritage as ways to articulate their understanding of peace, democracy, and identity. These initiatives reflect a conviction that democratic resilience is not only about institutions and processes, it is also about how communities understand themselves and relate to one another across lines of difference.

It was also acknowledged that current challenges are evident: civic participation is declining, especially among young people, and engagement methods must adapt to changing social realities. Digital tools offer new opportunities to connect citizens with democratic processes, but they require deliberate effort and adaptation. Democracy, she reminded participants, cannot be taken for granted. It must be practiced actively, repeatedly, and in every space where communities come together.

### 2.1.2. ALDA's Global Experience: Lessons from Africa

Giulia Sostero, ALDA's Head of Unit for Africa, Southwest Asia and Turkey, presented findings from ALDA's work beyond Europe, developed within the framework of the WYDE programme for Team Europe Democracy's Local Governance Working Group. The findings confirm that the principles underpinning local democratic resilience are not Europe-specific.

Three case studies were highlighted:

<b>Uganda, Kenya &amp; Zambia</b>	Over 1,000 young people were engaged through digital tools to identify local issues and hold politicians accountable. The project demonstrated the power of youth-centred approaches even in resource-constrained settings.
<b>Cameroon</b>	Despite operating in a 'Not Free' civic space, a project reached over 10,000 beneficiaries and strengthened neighbourhood-level governance structures – evidence that local engagement can continue even in highly constrained environments.
<b>Tanzania</b>	An information campaign on biometric voter registration reached nearly 88,000 people, demonstrating that electoral cycles can serve as entry points for deeper and more sustained civic engagement.

A key insight from this work: democratic resilience and strategic investment are mutually reinforcing. The EU's Global Gateway Initiative, for example, is most effective where local democracy is healthy and local democracy is strengthened by the conditions that strategic investment creates. This symbiosis should inform how international support programmes are designed.

### 2.2. The ProVote Risk Triangle: Evidence from Six Countries

Nicolas Reynès of Partenalia presented findings from the ProVote project's own research: questionnaire responses from 254 participants across Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Romania, and Spain. The research identified a 'risk triangle' that threatens local democracies across different national contexts.

<p><b>Disinformation</b></p> <p>Most prominent challenge; significantly influences public opinion and electoral behaviour in Romania, Spain, Greece, Belgium, France</p>	<p><b>Institutional Distrust</b></p> <p>Low trust in institutions and electoral processes, particularly strong in Spain and Belgium</p>	<p><b>Political Polarisation</b></p> <p>Widespread; especially intense in Germany, Belgium and France, exacerbating social fragmentation</p>
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The research found important variation across countries. Romania shows high civic willingness but lacks structured local response mechanisms. Spain (Jaén) demonstrates strong participation potential constrained by weak local capacities. Germany exhibits robust civic engagement but significant polarisation and uneven local preparedness. Belgium and France, while aware of risks, show weaker resilience due to limited local mechanisms and declining turnout.

The common thread is striking: citizens are generally willing to engage, but their participation is constrained by insufficient local structures and fragmented responses to challenges like disinformation.

### 2.3. Torredembarra: Recovery from Institutional Crisis (Spain)

Vale Pino Lara of the Provincial Council of Tarragona presented a compelling case study in democratic recovery. In 2014, the municipality of Torredembarra in Catalonia faced near-collapse: institutional dysfunction was so severe that state intervention was considered. The local authority's response was to shift from routine governance to what might be called 'democratic survival mode.'

Between 2014 and 2019, Torredembarra implemented a 'New Model of Government' built around three pillars: financial stabilisation; transparency and democratic values; and sustainable long-term investment. The result was a transition from crisis to stability that produced a stronger and more resilient local democracy than had existed before the crisis. The case study demonstrates that institutional crisis, while devastating, can also create the conditions for deeper reform – and that the commitment to democratic values must be the foundation of recovery.

## 2.4. Belgium's G1000 and Liège 2030: Learning Democracy in Practice

Emmanouela Tzani of RegioDev drew on Belgium's complex multi-level political system to illustrate how institutional complexity can actually foster democratic engagement. Belgium's three regions and three language communities require continuous power-sharing and compromise – creating a culture in which local authorities have strong autonomy and genuine influence.

Two initiatives stood out. The G1000 citizen deliberation process – in which randomly selected citizens are brought together to deliberate on complex public issues – demonstrated the transformative potential of inclusive dialogue in shaping public decision-making. The Liège 2030 project, meanwhile, showed how local governments can engage residents in long-term strategic planning, building a participatory culture that outlasts individual projects. The Belgian experience suggests that 'learning democracy in practice' – active participation in real decisions with real consequences – is among the most powerful tools for building resilient democratic culture.

## 2.5. Youth Work as Democratic Education: Hannover's Regionsjugendring

Regina Gehlich of the Regionsjugendring Hannover (RJR), a federation of youth organisations in Lower Saxony, presented a model of youth participation rooted in the principle of 'learning by doing.' RJR's approach is built on three elements: youth autonomy and self-governance; inclusive decision-making in which those affected by decisions participate in making them; and voluntary engagement outside formal education systems.

The evidence of impact is compelling. Young people who participate in RJR structures develop stronger self-efficacy, leadership and organisational skills, and direct experience of collective democratic decision-making. RJR's key lessons for scaling this approach: long-term commitment is essential (democracy cannot be learned through one-off interventions); participation formats must continuously adapt to remain accessible; and youth workers play a critical role in balancing safeguarding with youth autonomy.

## 2.6. Romania's 2024 Presidential Election: A Warning and a Lesson

Ionela Stoian of UNCJR presented what may be the most dramatic example from the conference: Romania's experience of the 2024 presidential election annulment – the first in EU history – due to foreign interference and disinformation. Manipulation through social media (particularly TikTok) and cyberattacks exposed serious vulnerabilities in Romania's democratic infrastructure.

Yet the case is not simply a story of failure. Romania's institutions identified the threats, acted decisively, and triggered European-level responses. This demonstrated resilience too – the capacity to detect manipulation, respond, and preserve democratic legitimacy even under attack.

The key lesson from Romania concerns the local dimension of what appeared to be a national crisis. Weak local communication channels had enabled disinformation to spread rapidly. The absence of early warning systems and clear protocols at local level created the conditions that malign actors exploited. Stoian concluded with four practical priorities for local actors:

### Lessons from Romania for Local Authorities

- Translate EU democratic resilience tools into practical guidance for municipal and local government actors.
- Strengthen local communication – transparent, consistent, and accessible – as the first defence against disinformation.

- Engage civil society at the grassroots level as active partners in democratic resilience.
- Develop early warning systems that can detect and respond to disinformation before it spreads.

### 2.7. Jaén: Youth Engagement and the Urban-Rural Divide

Antonio Luis Castillo Palomino and Jonatan Cruz from the Diputación Provincial de Jaén presented the Spanish province's experience of combining regulatory framework, EU funding, and community engagement to strengthen local democracy. Through Urban-Rural Agendas, municipalities in the province have accessed EU funding and developed participatory strategies tailored to local needs.

The RAÍZ-JAÉN programme specifically engages youth in local decision-making – a critical priority given that young people are simultaneously the most likely to disengage from formal democratic processes and the most affected by long-term policy decisions. Digital training initiatives complemented this work, addressing the digital divide and supporting inclusive participation in an increasingly online public sphere.

## 3. The North Macedonia Dimension: Disinformation, Trust, and Youth

The afternoon sessions of the conference focused specifically on North Macedonia's experience of the tensions between disinformation, institutional trust, and democratic participation. The insights from this section were among the most vivid and direct of the day, grounded in local expertise and live data.

### 3.1. The Scale of the Challenge: Public Opinion Data

Dimitar Nikolovski of Eurothink presented findings from a 2023 Eurometer survey examining how North Macedonian citizens access and perceive political information, with a particular focus on EU accession. Several findings stand out:

Finding	Significance
Internet now primary source of political information, surpassing TV for the first time	Marks a fundamental shift in the information environment; social media now dominant pathway to public opinion
Social media used by over 90% of online users	Highest vulnerability to algorithmically amplified disinformation
17% of citizens show no interest in EU integration	A significant gap in civic engagement on North Macedonia's most consequential long-term policy process
31.7% would not engage with any information source – including EU experts – to learn about EU accession	Indicates profound disengagement; fertile ground for unchecked misinformation
85% receive information through personal contacts (friends and family)	Informal networks facilitate rapid spread of unverified content
65% recognise disinformation as serious, but 40% cannot identify fake news	Awareness without competence – a dangerous gap that media literacy must address

### 3.2. Fact-Checking as Civic Education

Filip Stojanovski of Metamorphosis, operators of North Macedonia's Truth Meter (Vistinomer) fact-checking service since 2011, offered a compelling account of how fact-checking functions as a tool of civic education rather than simply a media practice.

Truth Meter's dual mandate accountability of public officials, and combating disinformation in media and online spaces makes it a practical instrument for democratic resilience. Before elections, fact-checkers verify candidates' promises against outcomes. During political controversies, they provide citizens with verified information. In this way, they support the basic precondition of democratic participation: an informed citizenry.

Stojanovski offered an important conceptual clarification: the primary goal of political disinformation is not to make people believe false things, but to make them stop believing anything at all. Apathy – withdrawal from political life – is the intended outcome. This analysis, drawing on academic work on Kremlin propaganda, reframes the task of counter-disinformation work: it is not simply about correcting false information, but about re-engaging citizens who have been deliberately driven to despair.

North Macedonia participates in both the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network, embedding local work in regional and European frameworks. This connectivity matters: disinformation does not respect borders, and neither should the response.

### 3.3. Local Government Under Pressure: The Karpoš Experience

Robert Jankulovski of the Municipality of Karpoš provided a frank account of the challenges faced by local authorities in the disinformation environment. His central argument was characteristically direct: the problem begins within institutions, not only outside them.

A significant driver of public mistrust, he argued, is the persistent gap between what citizens expect of local government and what local government is actually empowered to do. During election campaigns, candidates routinely make promises that exceed municipal jurisdiction and citizens, unaware of the legal division of competencies between municipalities, cities, and national government, hold local officials responsible when these promises are not delivered. This expectation gap is not merely an administrative problem; it is a democratic vulnerability that disinformation actors readily exploit.

*"We have to educate the candidates. We have to educate the people so that they know what the local authorities are. Nobody can say Christmas wishes during the elections and then do nothing."*

Karpoš's response combines institutional transparency (using only verified official channels for public communication, combating fake profiles and bots), internal capacity-building (ensuring municipal staff understand their own responsibilities), and community education (including digital literacy training for elderly residents).

The announcement during the conference of a new Youth Centre in Karpoš designed to create structured spaces for young people to engage with local governance represents a practical step toward addressing the youth engagement deficit that ran through many discussions of the day.

### 3.4. Youth Participation: Both Victims and Agents

Zoran Ilieski of Coalition SEGA brought the discussion of youth back to first principles. Democracy, he insisted, cannot be discussed without youth participation and youth participation cannot be achieved through tokenism or one-off consultations. It requires structural changes to how institutions engage with young people from the earliest stages of their lives.

SEGA's 20 years of experience working with schools across North Macedonia produced a telling observation: when asked whether students participate in school governance, teachers and directors typically say yes. When asked for examples, they cite decisions about where to go on a school trip.

This is not participation. It is the appearance of participation and it teaches young people that their voice makes no difference.

Real participation, Ilieski argued, requires changing the educational system itself – integrating civic education not as an abstract subject but as a lived practice within schools. It also requires legislative change: North Macedonia's Law for Youth Participation, adopted after a decade of civil society advocacy, creates legal spaces for young people to engage in local and national policy. But legislation without implementation is meaningless, as audience members from the NGO HERA powerfully noted.

The conference discussion around youth participation was enlivened by direct interventions from young people in the audience, who challenged panellists about the gap between institutional rhetoric and lived experience. A young resident of Karpoš challenged the municipal representative on unmet promises. Another suggested that open conferences and candidate debates accessible to young people regardless of party affiliation would do more to engage her generation than any formal consultation process. These interventions were themselves a form of democratic resilience in action.

### 3.5. Foreign Propaganda and the 'Democratic Fatigue' Trap

Zlatko Simonovski of Estima offered a reality-checking account of the current disinformation landscape in Southeast Europe. Key dimensions he highlighted:

- An estimated 70% of people in North Macedonia are vulnerable to fake news – reflecting chronically low media literacy levels.
- Disinformation is most effective in emotionally sensitive domains: health (vaccine misinformation reducing immunisation rates), security (false threat narratives generating fear), and politics (narratives portraying all politicians as equally corrupt, generating apathy).
- The deliberate creation of 'democratic fatigue' – the perception that democratic processes are slow, inefficient, and incapable of solving real problems – makes authoritarian alternatives appear more appealing.
- Artificial intelligence and digital ecosystems are creating new vulnerabilities: deepfakes, synthetic content, and algorithmic filter bubbles that reinforce existing biases and limit exposure to diverse perspectives.

Simonovski's conclusion was appropriately sobering: awareness of disinformation may plateau, but its production and spread continues to grow. Closing this gap requires long-term investment in education, institutional trust, and individual responsibility – and a recognition that fighting disinformation is both a collective and a personal effort.

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## 4. Workshop: From Fake News to Civic Trust – What Can We Do Locally?

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The afternoon included an interactive workshop delivered by Metamorphosis, the organisation behind North Macedonia's Truth Meter fact-checking service. The session was structured around a simple but demanding question: given everything we know about disinformation and its effects on democratic participation, what can local actors actually do?

The workshop introduced participants to a conceptual framework for understanding information disorder, distinguishing between three distinct phenomena that are often conflated in public debate: misinformation (inaccurate information spread without deliberate intent to deceive), disinformation (deliberately misleading content created and shared to cause harm), and malinformation (genuine, factually accurate information used in ways designed to cause harm). Understanding these distinctions matters for designing appropriate responses – the tools needed to counter accidental misinformation are different from those needed to counter deliberate disinformation campaigns.

Particular attention was given to the role of conspiracy mindsets in amplifying susceptibility to false narratives. Data from North Macedonia illustrated the prevalence of such beliefs, especially in relation to global events, COVID-19, and vaccination. Participants explored how these mindsets are not simply a matter of individual credulity but are cultivated and exploited by disinformation actors who understand psychological vulnerabilities.

The workshop also addressed the origins and geography of disinformation. In smaller countries such as those in the Western Balkans, disinformation often originates from external sources – foreign actors with strategic interests in sowing division and distrust. In larger countries, domestic production of disinformation is more prevalent. Common narratives across both contexts include attacks on the EU and European institutions, culture war content, disinformation about the war in Ukraine, anti-vaccine material, financial scams, and climate disinformation, alongside locally specific political narratives. Participants were invited to identify examples from their own national and local contexts.

A central message of the workshop was practical: fact-checking and media literacy are not abstract virtues but learnable skills that communities can develop and embed in local institutions. Participants were introduced to relevant regional and European initiatives and platforms that support verification efforts, including the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network. The workshop concluded with a discussion of how these tools can be embedded in local governance, education, and civil society work – building long-term societal resilience rather than responding reactively to individual disinformation episodes.

### Key Takeaways from the Workshop

- Distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation – each requires different responses and interventions.
- Conspiracy mindsets increase susceptibility to false narratives and must be addressed through long-term education, not just fact correction.
- Local actors – schools, libraries, NGOs, municipalities – are essential partners in building community-level resilience to disinformation.
- Fact-checking services and media literacy programmes work best when embedded in ongoing community structures, not delivered as one-off campaigns.
- Cross-border networks such as the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans provide essential support and solidarity for local actors facing shared threats.

## 5. Democracy in the Cityscape: The Skopje Walk

The conference closed with a distinctive and thought-provoking component: a guided Democratic Resilience Walk through central Skopje. Participants visited sites that embody the contested, layered, and resilient history of democratic culture in North Macedonia.

The Skopje 2014 Monuments – the monumental national identity project that transformed the capital's centre – invited reflection on how public space and political narratives interact: whose history is honoured, whose is erased, and what the built environment says about democratic self-understanding. The sites of the Colourful Revolution, in which protesters threw paint at state buildings in 2016 to protest wiretapping and government corruption, offered a vivid reminder that civic mobilisation can be both joyful and powerful. The Go Guskam GTC citizen movement, the Woman Fighter Park with its memory of democratic values, Macedonia Square as a gathering space, and the Old Bazaar as a symbol of cultural pluralism and community resilience rounded out a walk that connected the conference's themes to the living fabric of the city.

The walk was not merely a cultural interlude. It was a pedagogical experience, demonstrating that democratic resilience is inscribed in places, memories, and civic practices, and that understanding local democracy requires understanding local history.

## 6. Policy Conclusions and Recommendations

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The conversations, case studies, and debates of 28 April 2026 generated a rich set of insights for policymakers, practitioners, and civil society. What follows are the key conclusions.

### 6.1. Invest in Local Structures, Not Just National Policies

Democratic resilience frameworks, from the EU Democracy Shield to national action plans on disinformation are valuable but insufficient if they are not translated into practical tools and resources for local authorities and civil society organisations. Evidence from Romania, Spain, North Macedonia, and Germany consistently shows that the quality of local response mechanisms determines whether EU-level frameworks have real impact. Funding, technical support, and capacity-building must reach municipalities and community organisations, not only national ministries.

### 6.2. Build Long-Term Media Literacy, Not Short-Term Campaigns

The data from North Macedonia is illustrative of a broader pattern: high awareness of disinformation coexists with low confidence in detecting it. Awareness campaigns are necessary but insufficient. What is needed is a structural investment in media literacy – integrated into school curricula, supported by accessible community resources, and designed for different age groups and contexts. The approach of Metamorphosis, which combines fact-checking with media literacy education for civil society organisations, offers a model worth replicating.

### 6.3. Youth Engagement Requires Structural Change, Not Tokenism

Young people are not apathetic. They are structurally excluded. The evidence from multiple contexts in this conference – from North Macedonia's school governance gap, to Germany's RJR model, to Spain's RAÍZ-JAÉN programme – consistently shows that when young people are given genuine opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them, they do. The challenge is to create those opportunities systematically. This means reforming school governance, implementing youth participation laws, ensuring youth councils have real influence, and funding youth organisations that enable the 'learning by doing' experience that builds democratic competence.

### 6.4. Address the Jurisdiction Gap

Across multiple national contexts, a recurring obstacle to democratic resilience is the gap between what citizens expect of local government and what local government is legally and practically empowered to do. This gap generates frustration, erodes trust, and creates vulnerability to disinformation. The solution requires both supply-side change (clearer public communication about institutional competencies) and demand-side change (civic education that helps citizens understand the architecture of governance). Local authorities should invest in accessible public communication about what they can and cannot do – and why.

### 6.5. Build Cross-Border Networks for Shared Learning

The ProVote project itself embodies this recommendation: a cross-border network of organisations sharing experiences, evidence, and methods for building democratic resilience. The conference demonstrated the value of this model. Organisations from Belgium, Romania, Spain, Germany, Greece, and North Macedonia learned from each other's experiences in ways that would not have been possible without a structured framework for exchange. Funders – European and national – should prioritise such networks, and should support the Western Balkans' integration into European democratic resilience infrastructure.

### 6.6. Recognise and Resource Civil Society as a Democratic Infrastructure

Civil society organisations, fact-checkers, youth organisations, community groups, NGOs working on civic education are not supplementary to democracy. They are part of its infrastructure. The

conference repeatedly demonstrated how organisations like Coalition SEGA, Metamorphosis, HERA, RJR Hannover, and ALDA itself are doing work that no government can or should do alone. They serve as bridges between citizens and institutions, early warning systems for democratic threats, and laboratories for democratic innovation. Sustainable, multi-year funding for civil society – particularly at local level – is an essential investment in democratic resilience.

## 6.7. Make Democracy Worth Participating In

Underlying all of these recommendations is a more fundamental challenge: democracy must demonstrate its responsiveness in order to earn participation. Citizens who see their concerns addressed, their voices reflected in decisions, and their local institutions accountable and transparent are more likely to participate and more resilient to disinformation and cynicism. The goal is not simply to increase formal participation metrics; it is to build democratic systems that genuinely deliver, and that citizens therefore have reason to trust and defend.

### Summary of Key Recommendations

- Translate EU-level democratic resilience frameworks into practical guidance and resources for municipalities and local civil society.
- Invest in long-term, structural media literacy education integrated into school curricula and community programmes.
- Implement youth participation laws with real resources and genuine influence for youth councils and forums.
- Develop clear public communication about institutional competencies at local, city, and national level to close the jurisdiction gap.
- Build and fund cross-border networks for democratic resilience learning that include Western Balkans organisations.
- Provide sustainable, multi-year funding for civil society as a core component of democratic infrastructure.
- Design local governance processes that visibly respond to citizen input, building the trust that underpins participation.

## Conclusion: Democracy Is a Living Practice

The conference in Skopje on 28 April 2026 brought together people who share a commitment to a simple but demanding proposition: that democracy is not a system that, once established, runs itself. It is a practice that must be continuously cultivated, defended, and renewed above all at the local level, where it becomes visible and tangible in citizens' daily lives.

What the day made clear is that the threats to democracy are real and evolving from disinformation and foreign interference to declining participation and institutional distrust. But so too are the responses. Across Europe and beyond, organisations, municipalities, and communities are finding ways to rebuild trust, engage citizens, and create the conditions in which democratic culture can flourish. The diversity of approaches presented in Skopje, from youth work in Germany to citizen deliberation in Belgium, from fact-checking in North Macedonia to grassroots empowerment across the Western Balkans, is itself a source of resilience.

*"Democracy survives where it is lived, where it is shared, and where it is practiced."*

That is both the lesson and the challenge that this conference leaves with all of us.

## About ALDA

ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy – has been working to promote local democracy, citizen participation, and cooperation between local authorities and civil society for over 25 years. With roots in the Balkans dating to 1993 and a network of over 300 member organisations across Europe, Africa, and Asia, ALDA believes that strong local democracy is the foundation of resilient societies.

## About the ProVote Project

ProVote is a two-year project funded through the EU's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme. ProVote is a European initiative designed to spark greater citizen engagement and participation in EU democracy, with a special focus on groups that are often underrepresented – young people, women, marginalised communities, and EU mobile citizens. The project brings together a diverse partnership of civil society organisations and local authorities from eight countries: Greece, Spain, France, Belgium, Romania, Italy, North Macedonia, and Germany.

The project's activities centre on 16 events – 14 international and 2 local – hosted across the partner countries, where participants will share experiences, identify challenges, and co-create practical solutions to boost democratic participation. Each international event will welcome around 55 participants, including representatives from NGOs, local authorities, educators, and active citizens, while local workshops will target smaller groups of practitioners. In total, ProVote expects to directly involve over 2,000 people and reach more than 500,000 indirectly through communication and dissemination.

At the heart of ProVote is the Citizens' Engagement Academy, an innovative online platform that will remain freely accessible for at least three years after the project ends. This Academy will host training modules, best practices, and resources on civic engagement, media literacy, and countering disinformation. Partners will embed the Academy into their ongoing training and outreach, ensuring its continued use and relevance.

## Disclaimer

*This project is organized within the framework of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme of the European Union. The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission.*

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