Position Paper

LOCAL DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE AND GLOBAL GATEWAY INITIATIVE

SYNERGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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[1] Full texts of the experts' contribution are present (property) of the Local Democracy School library

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper consolidates insights from the outcome and observations of the work done by ALDA – *The European Association for Local Democracy* – throughout 30 years in support to local democracy and local citizens engagement. It reports on exchanges on practices on going with partners and members since 2023 during the implementation of the programme WYDE Youth and Women Empowerment and on six case studies proposed by members of ALDA. The paper is also fully embedded in the collective work produced by Team Europe Democracy, especially the working group, focusing on local governance.

The research aims at understanding how democratic practices are possible at the local level, even in case of shrinking space for civil society and in democratic drawbacks. It highlights how the local level represents a space of democratic resilience and gives recommendations about how to support this effort, for the sake of European values, in line with the Global Gateway Initiative. It also indicates how the GGI could be a leverage of democracy, when adopting a localisation of its strategies and implementation.

Democracy is, together with economic and strategic relevance, one of the key added values of the European model. By examining these diverse elements, the aim is to test key assumptions guiding current approaches, identify patterns, and develop actionable recommendations, especially in interacting and creating synergies with the Global Gateway Initiative[2].

In these challenging times, building on our experience and inputs from our members and partners we are convinced that **building resilience in democracy must be strengthened locally** despite the political and financial threats to it. We wanted to investigate further our assumptions that the localised and value-based approach would have been a real asset for the EU international and global policies, **including the framework of the Global Gateway strategy**. To this purpose, ALDA worked concretely with our members and partners, and we checked our initiative assumptions, deriving from our experience.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1. State of Democracy

Democracy is undergoing significant stress across numerous countries, challenged not only by authoritarian trends but also by internal fragmentation and external pressures. Within this global scenario, European support for democracy encounters numerous obstacles: from physical and political inaccessibility in conflict-affected areas to growing threats to the safety and legitimacy of local partners. In several contexts, particularly where fragility is pronounced, longstanding and trustworthy interlocutors such as local authorities have been suspended or replaced by entities that are often under strict national control and devoid of real democratic legitimacy and autonomy.

The degree of democratic erosion varies across regions[3]:

- In **Sub-Saharan Africa**, democracy shows considerable disparity. Mauritius ranks as the most democratic country on the continent with a score of 8.14 (2023), whereas Burundi sits at the other end of the spectrum with a mere 2.13.
- In **Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus**, democracy is undermined by entrenched authoritarian regimes such as Belarus (2.48) and Azerbaijan (2.65) and today by worrying scenarios in Georgia.
- **Central America** has witnessed substantial democratic backsliding, with authoritarianism gaining ground in Nicaragua (2.66) and Venezuela (2.76).

In these fragile and often repressive environments, local democratic communities—municipalities, grassroots organisations, youth movements, women's associations, and public and civic actors — are indispensable. They provide the foundations of democratic resilience and social cohesion.

2.2 Local Democratic Resilience

Democratic resilience refers to the ability of democratic institutions and communities at the local and national level to withstand and adapt to internal and external pressures—such as economic crises, disinformation, or authoritarian tendencies—while maintaining core democratic principles like participation, transparency, and accountability.

As Wolfgang Merkel defines it, democratic resilience is "the capacity of a democratic regime to absorb external challenges and internal stressors and to dynamically adapt without falling into regime change or damaging democracy's defining principles" (Merkel, 2023)[1]. At the local level, this concept emphasizes how municipal governments, civil society and citizens sustain democratic practices: transparency, accountability, participation, even when national politics are unfavourable.

[3] https://d1qqtien6gys07.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report-11-15.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com, *Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index*

[4] Merkel, W. (2023). What is democratic resilience and how can we strengthen it? (Policy Brief No. 169). Toda Peace Institute.https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-169_what-is- democratic-resilience_merkel.pdf

Local democratic resilience involves robust local institutions (e.g. elected councils, independent media), active civic engagement and adaptive capacity to respond to crises or repression while still maintaining democratic norms. In environments of democratic backsliding, localities can serve as "vectors of democratic values," providing spaces where opposition and civic activism endure despite an illiberal central regime. Representatives of the academic sphere and practitioners underscore several **components of local democratic resilience.**

- First, **institutional autonomy and capacity** at the local level is crucial: municipalities need legal authority, resources and democratic mandates to respond to citizens' needs. Where local governments enjoy fiscal sustainability and deliberative powers, they can better uphold rule of law and accountability in their communities[5].
- Second, **civic participation and social capital** strengthen resilience: engaged citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs) and community groups act as watchdogs and problem-solvers, helping local democracy "bounce back" from shocks.
- Finally, **networking and support** play a role: linking local actors in broader networks (national or transnational) allows exchange of best practices and external support when domestic conditions deteriorate.

International frameworks recognise that decentralisation (the transfer of power "from central governments to the people") can be a democratic turning point. By bringing governance closer to citizens, decentralisation (when paired with accountability mechanisms) is seen as a way to increase government responsiveness and build resilience against authoritarian centralisation[6].

2.3. Global Gateway Initiative

The Global Gateway Initiative, launched by the European Union, is a €300 billion strategy aimed at building sustainable, high-quality infrastructure and partnerships worldwide. It promotes trusted connectivity in sectors such as digital, energy, transport, health, and education, while upholding EU values like democracy, human rights, and good governance. "The European model of trusted connectivity… is long-term and in line with EU's interests and values: rule of law, human rights and international norms and standards" (European Commission, 2021[7])

The **Global Gateway Initiative** represents the key strategic framework for future EU external actions. Although driven by large-scale investments in infrastructure, digital transformation, energy, health, education, and climate resilience, its overarching principles should emphasis:

- **The rule of law and institutional transparency**
- **Equal and respectful partnerships**
- **Environmental and economic sustainability**
- **Secure and inclusive infrastructures**
- **Enabling environments for impactful local participation**

[5] Clara Volintiru (2021), "Local Democratic Resilience in East-Central Europe," German Marshall Fund Policy Paper
[6] ALDA Europe (2022), "Placing local initiatives and decentralisation at the heart of the democratic process in the Eastern Partnership," News Release
[7] European Commission. (2021). Global Gateway: Up to €300 billion for the European Union's strategy to boost sustainable links around the world. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

To operationalise these principles effectively, it is imperative to embed them within **local governance frameworks and involve local actors as co-creators and co-implementers of change.**

Unlike purely economic foreign aid, Global Gateway explicitly integrates democratic governance and accountability into its projects. As EU officials have noted, *"civil society and local authorities are crucial partners"* in ensuring Global Gateway investments meet people's needs and adhere to high standards of transparency and accountability. In fact, a dedicated *Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform* has been created to involve local stakeholders in the design and monitoring of Global Gateway projects.

3. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

3.1 Assumptions

ALDA, its members and partners are implementing programmes on local democracy and citizens engagement at the local level. It bases its knowledge on 30 years of experience and more than 500 projects implemented. Some of the research and capitalization documents, on which ALDA based its assumptions for the research are:

- Local Democracy Will Save Democracy
- A Wealth of Expertise – Toolkit for Local Authorities
- Stories of Democratic Resilience
- 30 years of local democracy

Local democracy - with local authorities and/or their possible articulation in dialogue with local civil society - offers spaces where innovation, participation, and leadership—especially with youth and women— can be nurtured and protected. These actors are often excluded from national politics but play **transformative roles within their communities**. Their involvement in local governance ensures more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable development outcomes.

Local action is possible and allows the resilience of democracy, because it offers
- spaces of action less polarised
- spaces and means for engagement to different groups of citizens, even more marginalised
- means of dialogue and solution-oriented proposals

All of this keeps alive the flame of democracy.

The overarching vision of ALDA is **to build and sustain resilient local democratic communities** that can thrive in fragile, volatile, difficult and often repressive contexts.

We assumed that those actions can be the appropriate approach to democratic resilience:

- **Conflict-sensitive and participatory approaches**: Create safe platforms for dialogue and collaboration between local civil society actors, municipalities, and external partners.

- **Flexible and inclusive granting schemes**: Support youth and women-led organisations through small and medium grants. Encourage cooperation with local authorities on specific community priorities such as education, environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and civic participation.
- **Capacity-building and empowerment**: Provide structured training programmes, peer learning exchanges, and community workshops aimed at strengthening both the institutional capacities of local authorities and the organisational capacities of civil society.
- **Mentorship and support for regranting**: Assist intermediary organisations in regranting EU funds at the local level, fostering inclusive governance and representation of marginalised groups.
- **Building multi-level partnerships**: Foster synergies between local, regional, national, and international actors. Promote decentralised cooperation as a vector for experience-sharing and collective problem-solving.
- **Intentionally to avoid confrontational or externally imposed regime change.**
- **To embrace a pragmatic and community-driven model of democratic resilience**, where practices of participation, accountability, and trust-building become embedded in the social and institutional fabric.

3.2 Research roadmap
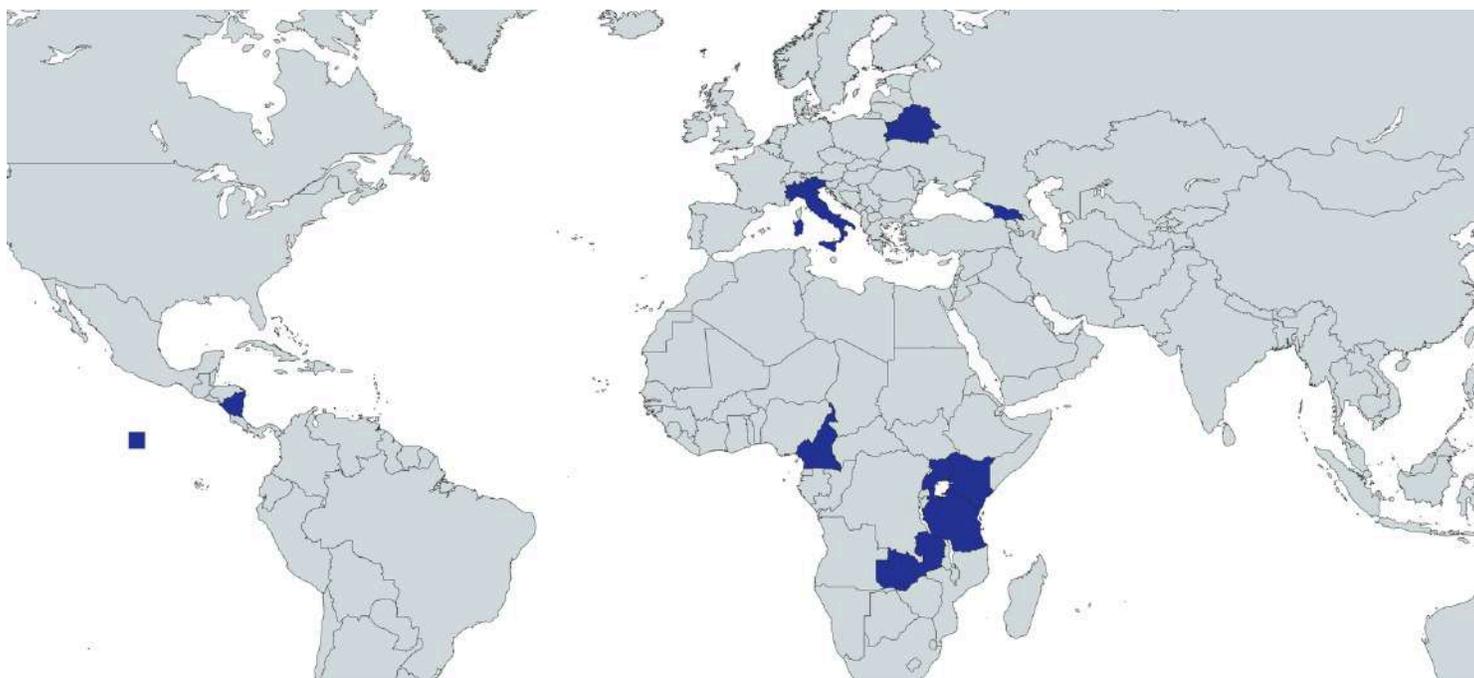
Image 1: Countries where consultations and discussions for the Position Paper took place (2024–2025).

Our assumptions were discussed in several meetings in 2024 and 2025, with partners of the democracy support community, and developed in Team Europe Democracy Seminars and Lab as well as in the implementation of the programme WYDE, Women and Youth. This paper builds on the experience, partnerships, and dialogue facilitated by ALDA in cooperation with TED partners and other international networks such as EPD, Platforma/CEMR, and IOPD/UCLG.

Key milestones in the roadmap of consultation included:

- **FIDEPA Forum, Cotonou (August 2024):** Co-organised with IOPD Africa and UCLG, this event connected grassroots actors and international institutions. Participating local organisations included Social Watch, the Scouts, ABDC, and youth/women's associations. *(Concluded)*
- **Webinar on Local Democratic Resilience (October 2024):** Hosted by TED WG2 with ALDA, Platforma, UCLG, and UNDP. Discussions focused on best practices and operational strategies for fragile contexts. *(Concluded)*
- **World Urban Forum, Cairo (November 2024):** Presentation of a guide on participatory budgeting in Senegal. Highlighted the intersection of urban governance, citizen engagement, and democratic innovation.
- **OECD Global Forum on Trust and Democracy (October 2024, Milan)**
- **World Development Forum (November 2024, Bogotá)**
- **Team Europe Democracy Workshop (January 2024, Dakar):** Organised by International IDEA and DG INTPA, this regional event examined civic engagement approaches in West Africa and the Sahel.
- **Local Community Engagement Event (Q1 2025):** Planned to showcase democratic resilience practices from fragile and conflict-affected states.
- **Webinar with EU Delegations:** A cross-regional dialogue between EU Delegation officials and ALDA-funded grassroots organisations.
- **WYDE Civic Engagement Mission (February 2025, Tanzania):** Co-organised with the Kofi Annan Foundation to support youth-led democratic initiatives in East Africa.
- **Democratic Governance Workshop (April 2025, Senegal):** A major regional event with 19 organisations and 7 Senegalese municipalities under the WYDE Civic Engagement programme. Co-hosted by OIDP Africa and ALDA.

In spring 2025, a group of researchers has been working on some case studies. The researchers are part of the Scientific Committee of the Local Democracy School 2025 :

- **Mrs. Valbona Karakaçi**, *Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi"*
- **Mr. Denys Tkachov**, *PhD thesis at Université de Limoges*
- **Mrs. Cana Tülüş Türk**, *Senior Specialist at Istanbul Policy Center and a lecturer in Comparative Politics at Okan and Medipol Universities.*

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Key learning points

Findings from ongoing consultations across regions and stakeholders affirm a strong consensus: **local democratic resilience is not merely desirable but essentialfor the EU's continued engagement in difficult, fragile and semi-authoritarian contexts.** The roadmap demonstrates a solid and growing commitment across regions to **locally anchored, democratically inspired, and context-aware actions.** These initiatives lay the groundwork for more inclusive, peaceful, and resilient societies.
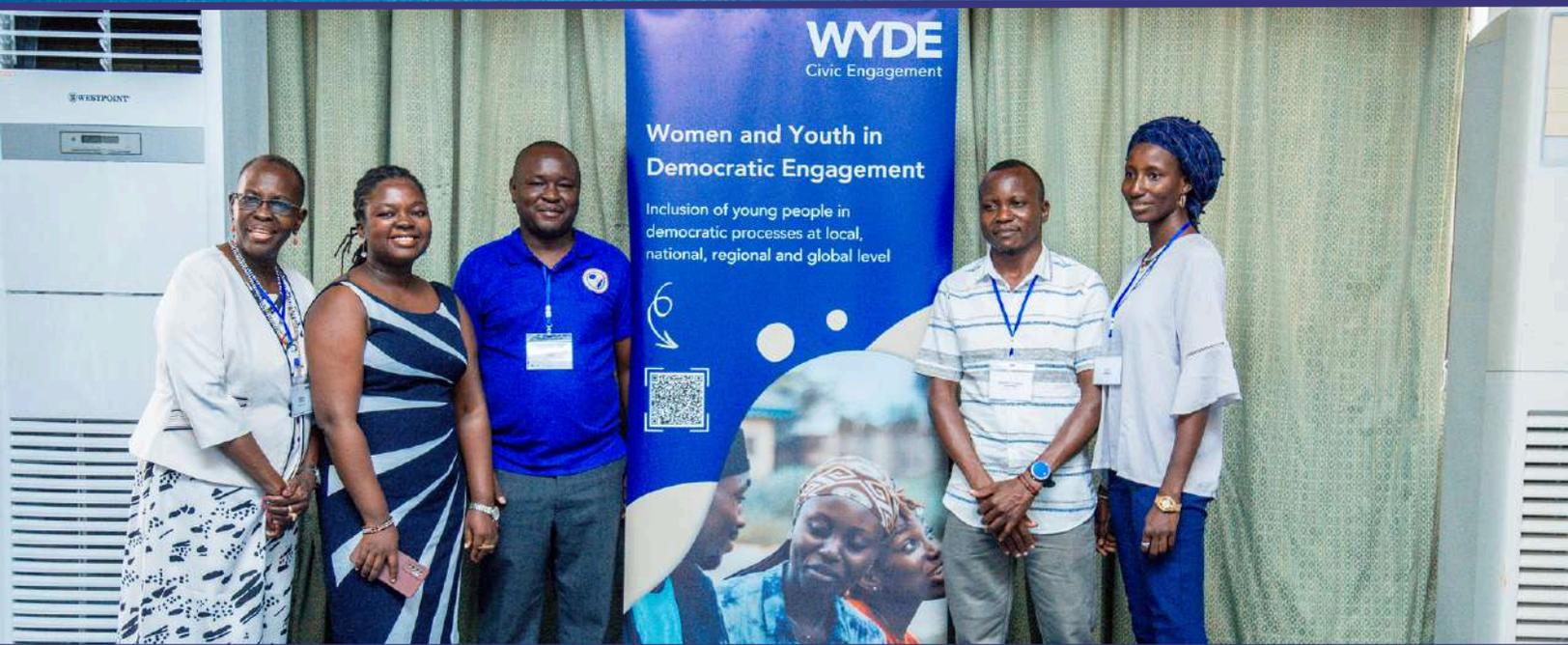
The experiences and case study demonstrate how locally rooted initiatives can foster lasting democratic resilience. In contexts characterised by fragility, limited civic space, and scarce resources, these initiatives have shown that even small efforts can lead to enduring change.

Key insights include:

- Inclusive, well-functioning local democratic institutions are drivers of good governance, peace, and sustainable development.
- Rebuilding and reinforcing the **social contract** at the local level is critical for community trust and national cohesion.
- EU investment strategies must prioritise **co-creation and locally relevant partnerships.**
- Success in fragile environments depends on:
  o **Clear and adaptable operational principles**
  o **Shared learning from previous experiences**
  o **Realistic and participatory planning**
  o **Continuous monitoring and locally responsive feedback mechanisms**

Local democratic governance is more than an administrative layer—it is a space for:

- **Civic engagement and representation**
- **Social resilience and inclusive service delivery**
- **Democratic learning and experimentation**

4.2. Synergies Between Democratic Resilience and the Global Gateway Initiative

Democratic resilience and the Global Gateway Initiative are deeply interconnected, each reinforcing the other in meaningful and strategic ways. At its core, democratic resilience refers to the capacity of communities and institutions to uphold democratic values, practices, and governance structures in the face of internal and external challenges.

While Global Gateway Initiative's primary focus is on global connectivity and strategic partnerships, **the initiative is also a powerful vehicle for promoting democratic values and good governance.**

Why does such synergy matter?

The intersection of national and local democratic resilience and the European Union's Global Gateway Initiative is not just a policy alignment—it's a strategic imperative. This synergy reflects the EU's commitment to promoting democratic values through global infrastructure investments, while empowering democratic institutions to deliver sustainable, inclusive development.

- **EU Foreign Policy Priority**: The Global Gateway Initiative is a cornerstone of the EU's foreign policy, designed to extend Europe's influence through value-driven partnerships. By aligning. infrastructure investments with democratic principles—such as transparency, accountability, and civic participation—the EU ensures that its global engagements reinforce its foundational

values. This approach distinguishes the EU from other global actors by embedding governance reform into the very fabric of development cooperation.

- **Sustainable Development**: Democratic resilience at the local level is essential for sustainable development. When communities have strong institutions and inclusive governance, infrastructure projects are more likely to succeed and serve public needs effectively. The Global Gateway Initiative links governance reform with tangible improvements in services, infrastructure, and connectivity—creating a feedback loop where democratic practices enhance development outcomes, and vice versa.

- **Geopolitical Relevance**: In an increasingly contested global landscape, the Global Gateway offers a transparent, values-based alternative to non-democratic models of infrastructure investment. By supporting democratic institutions and civic engagement, the EU counters authoritarian influence and fosters long-term stability. Democratic resilience becomes a strategic asset— not only for domestic governance but also for safeguarding sovereignty and resisting external pressures.

These two agendas (Democratic Resilience and Global Gate Way) are mutually reinforcing:

- Democratic Resilience provides the stable, accountable and capable environment required for sustainable infrastructure investments.
- Global Gateway projects strengthen local and national institutions, empower citizens, and promote inclusive growth by providing financial and technical resources.

Democratic Resilience contributes Global Gateway Success	Global Gateway strengthens Democratic Resilience
Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement	Financial and Technical Resources
Democratic Accountability	Strengthened Local and National Institutions
Social Cohesion and Stability	Empowerment of Civil Society
Capacity Building	Inclusive Development

A virtuous cycle emerges when resilient democracies host value-driven global investments.

For the EU/Global Gateway Implementation

- Embed democracy benchmarks in project agreements
- Ensure open contacting and citiyen participation mechanisms
- Support local media and civic education alongside infrastructure

For Local Governments and Civil Society

- Use Global Gateway projects as entry points for governance reforms
- Build cross-sector coalition for oversight and advocacy
- Share local lessons with EU institutions to refine global strategies

Image 2

Leveraging this synergy can advance stability, prosperity, and democratic integrity—both locally and globally. Democratic resilience and the Global Gateway initiative mutually benefit each other through enhanced engagement, accountability, capacity building, and institutional strengthening.

While democratic resilience contributes to the effective implementation and sustainability of

5. MULTI-LEVEL STRATEGY FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Across the globe, democracy is facing a profound test. Once considered stable and self-reinforcing, democratic systems are now showing signs of fragility—both at the national level, where institutions are being hollowed out, and at the local level, where communities struggle to maintain civic engagement and trust.

In How Democracies Die, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018)[8] argue that the collapse of democracy is no longer marked by dramatic coups or violent takeovers. Instead, it often unfolds gradually, legally, and imperceptibly, led by elected leaders who exploit democratic institutions to dismantle them from within.

Historically, democracies fell through force—military coups, martial law, or the suspension of constitutions. These events were visible and dramatic, often triggering immediate international condemnation. Although democratic collapse remains a threat in certain regions, particularly

[8] Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). How democracies die. Crown Publishing Group.

where efforts to restore democratic governance must be accompanied by conflict-sensitive approaches, such occurrences have become less frequent in the 21st century. Instead, a more prevalent phenomenon is the emergence of "competitive authoritarianism," a term coined by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way[9] to describe hybrid regimes in which democratic institutions formally persist but are strategically manipulated to consolidate and perpetuate incumbent power.

Today, democracies more often die at the hands of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who use the very institutions that brought them to power to undermine democracy. This process is subtle and legal, making it harder for citizens to recognize and resist. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018)[10] argue that "democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy – gradually, subtly, and even legally – to kill it" (p. 8).

Citizens continue to vote, courts remain open, and newspapers still publish—but the democratic core is eroded. Because there is no single moment of collapse, many people fail to recognize the danger until it's too late.

According to the V-Dem Institute[11], the world has entered a new phase of autocratization. For the first time in over two decades, autocracies outnumber democracies. Liberal democracies have declined to levels last seen in 2009, and democratic erosion is now affecting not only fragile states but also established democracies (Nord et al., 2025).

International IDEA's Democracy Tracker confirms this trend, showing that 45 countries are experiencing democratic decline, while only 19 are improving. The erosion is often legal, gradual, and confusing, making it difficult for citizens to recognise when democracy is truly under threat (International IDEA, 2024).[12]

At the national level, democracy depends on the strength of institutions—parliaments, courts, electoral commissions, and media. But these institutions are increasingly vulnerable to elite capture and politicisation, legal manipulation under the guise of reform, polarisation that undermines consensus and cooperation.

The ResCap Index shows that while some democracies maintain strong institutional frameworks, they often lack the norms of restraint and tolerance that protect against authoritarian drift (Croissant & Lott, 2024).[13]

[9] Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A. Way. "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism." Journal of Democracy, vol. 13 no. 2, 2002, p. 51-65. Project MUSE, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026.
[10] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, How Democracies Die (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018), 8.
[11] Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
[12] International IDEA. (2024). Democracy Tracker. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/democracy-tracker
[13] Croissant, A., & Lott, L. (2024). Democratic resilience in the twenty-first century: Search for an analytical framework and explorative analysis (Working Paper Series 2024:149). V-Dem Institute. https://v-dem.net/media/publications/WP_149.pdf

In contrast, local democracy is often more adaptive and community-driven. International IDEA's research highlights that local democratic resilience can act as a buffer when national institutions falter. However, it faces its own challenges. Despite the challenges, local democracy remains a critical site of innovation and resistance, especially in contexts where national democracy is in retreat (International IDEA, 2017)[14]

According to the V-Dem Institute and other policy reviews, resilience capacity differs by level: national systems rely on institutional robustness, while local systems depend on community engagement and adaptability (Croissant & Lott, 2024)[15]

The difference between local democratic resilience and national democratic resilience lies primarily in their scale, actors, and mechanisms of response and adaptation:

Dimension	Local Democratic Resilience	National Democratic Resilience
Focus	Community engagement, local	Community engagement, local
Strengths	Responsive, inclusive, adaptive	Systemic, coordinated, policy-Driven
Challenges	Limited resources, fragmentation	Vulnerable to elite capture, slow adaptation
Measurement Tools	Social Cohesion Compass, Democratic Resilience Index, IDEA Democracy Tracker	ResCap Index, V-Dem datasets

Fig 1. Focus of intervention to strengthen democratic resilience and proposed indexes to measure its effectiveness

Democracy's survival requires a multi-level strategy:

- National institutions must uphold the rule of law, protect democratic norms, and resist authoritarian drift.
- Local actors—municipalities, civil society, and communities—must engage citizens, foster inclusion, and build trust.

When these levels work together, sharing lessons, coordinating reforms, and reinforcing each other, democracy becomes more resilient. But when they drift apart, the system becomes brittle, and the risk of authoritarianism grows.

[14] International IDEA. (2017). The global state of democracy: Exploring democracy's resilience. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-democracy-exploring-democracys-resilience
[15] Croissant, A., & Lott, L. (2024). Democratic resilience in the twenty-first century: Search for an analytical framework and explorative analysis (Working Paper Series 2024:149). V-Dem Institute. https://v-dem.net/media/publications/WP_149.pdf

Local Resilience	Versus	National resilience
Informs national policy with grassroots realities		Provide legal and institutional frameworks
Builds democratic culture from the ground up		Ensures systemic protection of democratic norms
Act as a buffer when national institutions falter		Support and scale successful local initiatives

Fig 2. How national and local level can work together to strengthen democratic resilience by building on the strengths of multilevel governance

The narrative of local democratic engagement gains additional complexity when examined alongside the arguments presented, for example, in The Myth of Democratic Resilience[1]. The article challenges the assumption that democratic institutions inherently possess the capacity to withstand authoritarian pressures. Instead, **it argues that resilience must be cultivated through deliberate and sustained efforts. This perspective aligns with the emphasis on long-term civic capacity building in local governance.**

Moreover, the article criticizes the overreliance on formal democratic structures, noting that institutional design alone cannot guarantee democratic outcomes. **This resonates with findings from local engagement practices, where informal mechanisms and culturally sensitive approaches often prove more effective than formal national-level interventions.** It also cautions against superficial engagement, reminding external actors that procedural compliance is not equivalent to genuine democratic commitment. This concern was echoed by ALDA practitioners – interviews by the experts during the research - who stressed the need to avoid overt political language to safeguard local partners: "We do not talk about democracy or elections… we use tools, not the political vocabulary."

The article ultimately **advocates for understanding resilience as a dynamic process rather than a static condition.** This complements practitioners' emphasis **that working at the local level requires significant time—often 10 to 20 years—to build meaningful democratic resilience.**

[16] Matías Bianchi , Nic Cheeseman , Jennifer Cyr, Journal of Democracy, Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 36, Number 3, July 2025
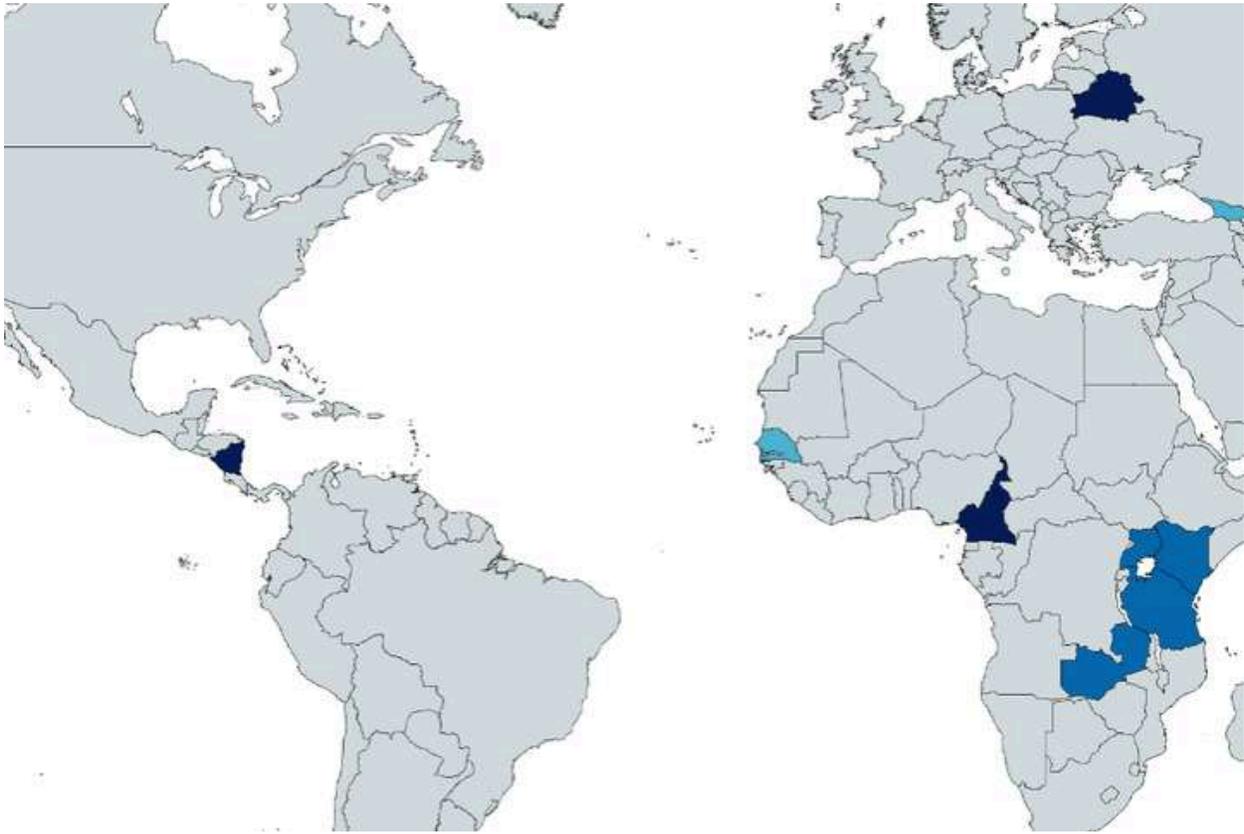
6. CASE STUDIES[17]

Image 3: Locations of case studies illustrating local democratic resilience, classified by civic space context (2024–2025).

6.1 Our space – Uganda, participation from Kenya and Zambia

Implemented by **Hope 4 Life Uganda**, with civil society groups in Kenya and Zambia, **Our Space Project's** theme is active citizenship. It aims to promote **inclusive youth civic participation in those countries, empower CSOs, enhance coordination among youth and women-led groups and facilitate joint initiatives and peer-to-peer learning in marginalised communities.** It fosters regional cooperation, joint advocacy, and capacity-building for youth and policy engagement, promoting effective youth participation.

Our Space is supported by the European Association of Local Democracy (ALDA) through the Youth Participation in Public Affairs program of the EU, Women and Youth in Democratic Engagement Civic Engagement (WYDE Civic Engagement), which is funded by the European Union. The work carried out through the WYDE Civic Engagement program is a strategic initiative aimed at empowering youth and fostering civic participation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The initial project encompasses three key actions: an inception meeting with 108 young participants directly engaged, coordination meetings with implementers, and a regional convening attended by 30 participants, with an additional 146 reached indirectly through peer learning. Moreover, to sustain the activities, a WhatsApp group and weekly check-ins were introduced for ongoing coordination. **In all three lots, the project reached more than a thousand beneficiaries.**

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According to the project implementors, mechanisms for youth engagement—from rights-based CSOs advocating for marginalised groups to access to civic education—are often undeveloped at the outset. Therefore, identifying and defining problems was the primary step. This requires local-level capacity building—through training, joint platforms for articulating and discussing issues—and collaboration among individuals, CSOs, and decision-makers to develop policy responses and local initiatives.

The project successfully took the following steps: It first brought together young people and allowed them to identify their own issues. Despite limited civic space and restricted rights, it created a platform that genuinely gave young people a voice. Menya points out that there is a "knowledge gap." Menya indicates that one of the key methodologies to adopt as a kind of innovation was to adopt online strategy campaigns, with most engagement taking place online[1].

"Because you cannot hold events in Uganda and Kenya at that amount of money. So that's what we said. We can design a project that is two hybrid, where we have 60-70% online and we have only 30% physical activities run in specific countries. I think that worked well."

Remarkably, they achieved all this through a straightforward methodology: mobilising youth through village dialogues, storytelling sessions, and workshops on citizen rights and responsibilities; most activities took place via online platforms and minimal budgets.
It is essential to highlight that the gender balance of attendants is given special importance throughout the project. Their deep ownership of the initiative is a testament to its success.
Through these partnerships, **the project achieved its first objectives—strengthening youth-led civic engagement across Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia, and enhancing collaboration between youth CSOs and policymakers.** The third objective, facilitating joint initiatives and peer-to-peer learning in marginalised communities, has been launched and is currently ongoing.

All of this was achieved with a modest subgrant, beginning with €10,000 for a single-applicant project in the first lot, followed by €20,000 for projects involving at least two partners in the

[18] In establishing the platform, the project partnered with numerous local actors during its inception phase, including: Church of Uganda; Kampala Local Government (Uganda); Luuka District Local Government (Uganda); Lusaka County (Zambia); Makerere University and Makerere University Business School (Uganda); Kyambogo University (Uganda); and the Ministry of Youth (Kenya). Nairobi City County Government (Kenya) supported periodic convenings. Key NGO partners included SEATIN Uganda; Uganda Women's Network (UWONET); Civil Society Advocacy Groups (CSBAG); Akina Maama Wa'Africa; Girls Forum International; Youth Alive; Action Aid Uganda; Future Leaders Initiative & Youth Initiative Uganda; Women for Women International & Dream Support Uganda; SAWA Online Radio & Concern for the Girl Child; Youth Advocates Zambia; and Out of Street Foundation. Responding to Hope 4 Life Uganda's invitation, these organisations formed a collaboration and coordination group, enabling access to hard-to-reach individuals.

second lot, and €30,000 for projects with a minimum of three partners from at least two different countries in the third lot. Guided by ALDA, the implementers adopted digital tools to find joint solutions, effectively discovering SCRUM-like methodologies without formal knowledge. **Weekly alignment meetings, held via a WhatsApp group, continue every Thursday.**

As a note, the implementers faced **financial difficulty during the implementation phase, because of the devaluation of the Ugandan currency.** Cities of Hope, one of the partner institutions in Kenya, resolved this challenge by partnering with the Canada Mathare Foundation to support the regional periodic convening

As the collective resilience of civil society grows, the opportunities for positive change expand. This is especially true for the critical roles played by individuals and various groups, such as women's organisations, youth initiatives, and local associations.

This process is anchored in five interlinked elements that have proven crucial to the project's success: ownership, consistent follow-up, problem-solving in the face of challenges, strengthened collaborations, and sustained communication. These elements ensure that participation goes beyond a one-off engagement, evolving instead into a long-term, self-reinforcing process.

Ownership — Consistent follow-up — Problem-solving in the face of challenges — Strengthened collaborations — Sustained communication
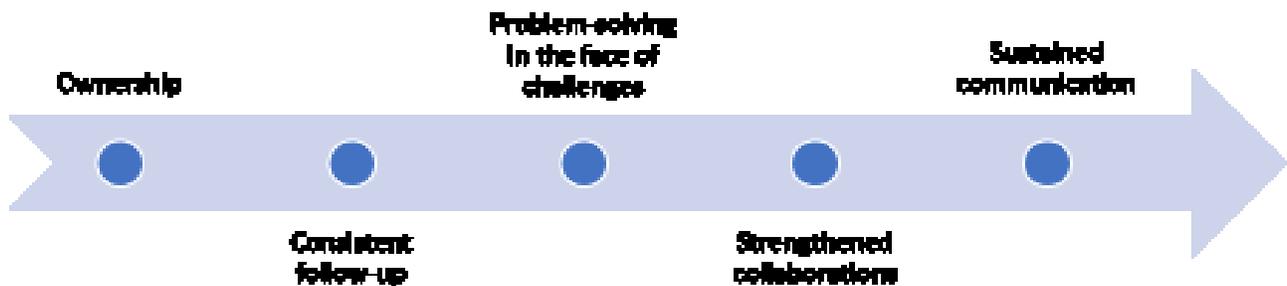
To answer today's polycrisis, we need a pragmatic, context-sensitive, community-driven model of democratic resilience. "Good practices" often begin at the local level, because local initiatives spark enthusiasm—they resonate with people, leading to stronger ownership and sustained engagement.

The project serves as a valuable tool for understanding how local democratic resilience manifests in different contexts. Support from WYDE Civic Engagement and the EU fund is crucial for this process. It is essential to implement a continuous strategy to not only sustain this success but also to expand it. There is significant potential for democratic resilience, and the EU should remain involved to strengthen its core principles. Enhancing this resilience at the local level is a priority for the EU's active engagement.

As a result, Hope 4 Life has diversified and broadened its areas of focus, now encompassing women's mental health and electoral processes—demonstrating a clear spillover impact beyond the project's initial scope.

Effective collaboration between local authorities and civil society is crucial for sustaining and amplifying these outcomes.

The partnership with the Nairobi City County government is a prime example. Such collaboration fosters advocacy efforts that provide actionable solutions to local administrators and decision-makers, while ensuring that persistent issues are addressed through the engagement of new partners. Menya says: "*Everyone that we engage with, especially decision makers, we are asking ourselves, yes, the project is good, but how can we make sure that we sustain it? That's why I think when we ended phase one, we started, you know, still mobilising and lobbying for partnerships, memorandum of understanding.*" Recent initiatives with key institutions—such as the Canada Mathare Foundation, Pamoja Youth Initiative in Nairobi, disability-led CSOs through Women Crusade, Luuka District local government, Girls Pride in Zambia, and the Zambian Ministry of Youth—further strengthen project sustainability and broaden its long-term impact.

Building democracy, solidarity, and peace from the ground up is especially impactful when it emerges from disadvantaged groups. One of the key benefits of engaging at the local level is the ability to reach out to young people living in informal settlements such as the Mukuru and Kibera slums. It's essential to recognise the achievements of partner organisations that effectively connect with even the hardest-to-reach youth.

6.2. VoiceYouthFem Project, Cameroon

In Cameroon, civil society operates in a highly constrained environment shaped by political centralisation, long-standing authoritarian rule, and recurrent security crises. Ranked as "Not Free" in the Freedom in the World 2025, the country faces severe restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Civic actors, particularly women-led and youth-led initiatives, encounter legal and bureaucratic obstacles, as well as harassment and intimidation, when addressing sensitive issues such as governance, rights, and peacebuilding. In this fragile context, empowering local civil society—especially women's and youth organisations—is vital to safeguarding civic participation, fostering inclusive dialogue, and sustaining democratic resilience at the community level.

Yaoundé IV, one of the seven districts of Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé, presents a distinctive socio-political and administrative environment. Unlike the central districts where governmental institutions and international organisations are concentrated, Yaoundé IV is predominantly residential, with pockets of semi-urban and peri-urban areas. It is home to a diverse population, including a significant number of young people and internally displaced persons from conflict-affected regions of Cameroon. The district faces structural challenges such as limited access to public services, infrastructure deficits, and relatively high unemployment rates among youth.

However, it also offers fertile ground for grassroots civic engagement, as local associations, community-based organisations, and faith-based groups are active in addressing social needs.

The #VoiceYouthFem project (VYF) has stepped in precisely at the gap in participation in the city, igniting a bottom-up transformation grounded in legal frameworks. Association HUMANEES summed up the significance of the project in two simple words: "***lasting change***." Inclusion and capacity building have been the keywords. The project began by involving citizens in identifying needs, priorities, aspirations, and challenges, then working together to find solutions. Through a wide-reaching community awareness campaign and targeted schools, the VYF expanded the understanding of civic engagement at the grassroots. Beyond that, it equipped local leaders and municipal actors with capacity-building training to strengthen governance from within. With a focus on equitable representation and tangible community outcomes, it demonstrates a model of governance that can become a model in other contexts. Through its initiatives and programs, the VYF has not only sparked change but also built the momentum to sustain it and becomeing, "*an innovative and inspiring initiative for inclusive local governance*" that has **reshaped the local democratic space.**

The objective is to contribute to social inclusion and local development in Yaoundé IV by strengthening the participation of young people, "***to unlock the potential of young people and women who are members of Neighbourhood Committees***," referred to as Comités de Development de Quartier (CdQ). **While stating the young people as beneficiaries, they also include the marginalised, persons with disabilities and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in local governance. The VYF reached over 10,000 direct beneficiaries and 44,360 indirectly.**

The project's foundation was established through inclusive planning processes involving key actors from the local governance ecosystem. This process produced an Operational Plan and a Project Charter, jointly developed to serve as strategic guides for implementation. Second, a Citizen Forum for Participatory Diagnosis was held in Yaoundé IV, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders, including youth, women, persons with disabilities, CdQ members, and local authorities. The participants discussed youth participation and the role of community development committees in their communes. This forum facilitated the identification of local priorities such as waste management, insecurity, neighbourhood disputes, and urban deforestation. Additionally, it documented citizens' expectations and barriers to participation. Bertrand said that "***the committees received tools to manage better because they needed to know how to report information from the neighbourhoods to the communes.***" Participants collaborated to create practical solutions to be integrated into CdQ action plans, fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

Although debates at times revealed intergenerational tensions, a constructive environment was maintained, resulting in a joint action plan from municipal and neighbourhood committees to strengthen local governance. A community awareness campaign combined with school-based activities reached more than 9,600 students in four schools and generated over 67,000 impressions through social and traditional media. Activities included the creation of student-led civic clubs, democratic elections for club leadership, debates, and events on democracy and local participation—helping young people connect democratic principles to everyday life.

The fourth initiative was a structured two-day training program aimed at strengthening the technical and civic competencies of CdQ members. Targeted capacity-building workshops enhanced the skills of over 100 CdQ members and community leaders in areas such as inclusive leadership, participatory governance, citizen communication, and community facilitation. **These workshops clarified the roles of CdQ members under Decree No. 147/A/MINDDEVEL** and aimed at addressing the operational needs of local actors, enhancing their ability to mobilise communities effectively.

The VoiceYouthFem Citizen Engagement Competition served as a strategic platform to stimulate grassroots innovation.

Although only seven proposals were received, fewer than initially anticipated, their substantive quality and thematic diversity surpassed expectations. Submitted projects addressed key challenges such as sanitation, waste transformation, and eco-infrastructure. Bertrand mentioned that "*It should be noted that neighbourhood committees do not have budgets, so providing them with support in materials was very beneficial and motivating. Even the mayor asked us to provide more to foster healthy competition in their neighbourhoods.*" All seven initiatives were publicly recognised and equipped with targeted implementation materials during an official award ceremony. Concrete local initiatives included the relaunch of the "Clean Tuesday" program in seven neighbourhoods and the distribution of equipment to support urban cleanliness. A dedicated monitoring unit tracked field activities, adapted strategies to local challenges, and documented best practices for replication in other municipalities.

Recognising the complexity of local governance, the project mobilised a wide network of institutional and community-based stakeholders. The Municipality of Yaoundé IV was a key partner, facilitating access to CdQ members, mobilising community representatives, and co-organising activities such as capacity-building workshops and public awareness campaigns.

Partnerships also extended to secondary schools under the Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC), traditional leadership bodies, and the National Volunteer Program. Four schools actively participated, hosting debates, quizzes, and civic education sessions for over 3,000 students—promoting democratic values and social responsibility at a formative stage.

The project prioritised transparency and replication through multi-channel communication, a consistent visual identity, and national media engagement. Lessons learned were systematically documented, ensuring the initiative could serve as a reference model. The preparation of a follow-up proposal, Civic Legacy, reflects the project's forward-looking vision to sustain impact beyond its immediate duration.

In practical terms, 22 CdQ members, representing over one-third of the municipality, were mobilised, and 87 participants (62 men, 25 women, three persons with disabilities) took part in the inaugural Citizen Forum. Governance and leadership training reached 52 young leaders (26 men, 26 women, one person with a disability), while seven CdQ initiatives received logistical support to launch tangible community actions, including the revival of the Clean Tuesday campaign. Youth engagement expanded through sensitisation campaigns in four secondary

schools, reaching 9,668 students, complemented by digital outreach that generated 67,077 impressions, 48,400 video views, and 15,722 direct interactions.

Beyond numbers, the initiative fostered structural and relational change. Institutionalised dialogue between CdQ members and the Yaoundé IV City Council created new channels for participatory governance, while the co-created municipal action plan now serves as a shared roadmap for inclusive decision-making. HUMANEES' addition to the municipality's official association registry further legitimised its role as a civic actor. The project revitalised community leadership, particularly among youth, and strengthened social cohesion through collective actions that restored a sense of belonging and civic initiative. **National visibility, international recognition (e.g., World Forum for Democracy submission, ALDA partnership), and stronger CSO networks reinforced its contribution to expanding civic space in a constrained environment.**

Implementation was not without obstacles: administrative delays linked to Humanees' re-registration, lack of a formal municipal partnership agreement, inconsistent participant selection, and underrepresentation of some marginalised groups. These were mitigated through procedural simplification, proactive stakeholder dialogue, and flexible communication. The experience highlights the need for adaptable project design, inclusive engagement strategies, and strong institutional coordination, key lessons for future efforts to embed participatory governance and build resilient civic ecosystems.

In political settings where democratic consolidation remains delicate, developing a democratic culture at both the individual and community levels is a complex yet vital task. Linz and Stepan (1996) observe that although behavioural, attitudinal, and structural consolidation are all difficult, internalising democratic norms is arguably the most challenging step. Through its six interconnected components, the VYF project aimed to bolster democratic awareness, participation, and accountability among youth, women, CdQ members, students, and the wider public. **By combining capacity-building, participatory forums, and tangible community initiatives, the project made sure that democratic values were not only understood but also actively practised.**

Established within the framework of Cameroon's decentralisation policy, the project was not an external or temporary initiative but an officially recognised mechanism within the national governance structure. By working through CdQ bodies, already mandated to represent citizens and influence municipal priorities, the VYF ensured its results were both procedurally legitimate and institutionally relevant.

The project centred on local ownership. The Citizen Forum in Yaoundé IV enabled participants to identify priorities—including waste management, urban deforestation, and youth participation—and co-develop solutions to be incorporated into CdQ action plans. These collaborative efforts fostered shared responsibility, empowerment, and a sense of ownership among participants. The resulting municipal action plan now acts as a guiding roadmap for inclusive governance at the neighbourhood level.

Through structured workshops, school-based clubs, and training programs, the project enhanced civic, leadership, and technical skills. Four schools hosted education clubs, enabling nearly 10,000 students to engage in democratic participation through elections, debates, and community projects. Over 100 CdQ members and local leaders improved their competencies in inclusive leadership, participatory governance, citizen communication, and community facilitation, bridging knowledge gaps and fostering peer-led learning networks

The project's impact continues to resonate beyond its formal conclusion. Bertrand observed that both participants and organisers have been actively sharing the project's methods and results through new initiatives. **Notably, the Council of Europe selected the project for presentation at the 13th World Forum for Democracy in Strasbourg (5–7 November 2025), where Bertrand will serve as the Project Manager.** Similarly, a young beneficiary of the project was chosen by the **Youth Democracy Cohort to represent the VYS at the 9th Open Government Partnership Global Summit in Spain (6–10 October 2025).**

6.3 Local democratic resilience in Belarus

Local democratic resilience could be a theoretical lens through which we examine Belarus: it is about how local governance and civic life can survive, adapt, and potentially counteract authoritarian constraints.

Belarus is one of six countries in the European Union's **Eastern Partnership (EaP)**, alongside Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Launched in 2009, the EaP initiative aims to strengthen political and economic ties between these post-Soviet states and the EU, with a focus on reforms, good governance and civic engagement. Within this regional context, trends in local governance and civic participation vary widely. Several EaP countries have pursued decentralization reforms and local democracy improvements in the past decade: most notably Ukraine's ambitious local self-government reforms after 2014 and efforts in Georgia and Armenia to empower municipalities. By contrast, Belarus stands out as a **comparative outlier** with its highly centralized, authoritarian governance. It remains the **only EaP country that has not signed the Council of Europe's *European Charter of Local Self-Government*** [19]. This signals the unwillingness of Minsk to commit to European norms on local democracy, whereas all its EaP peers have adopted those standards.

Belarus and Azerbaijan, however, represent the other end of the spectrum in the EaP – both are highly centralized under strong presidencies, with minimal genuine local self-government[20]. In these two cases, regional and local bodies have very little authority, are chronically underfunded, and remain entirely dependent on the national executive[21]. Freedom House's Nations in Transit assessments reflect this disparity: Belarus scores only 1.25 out of 7 on Local Democratic Governance (the lowest in the region), compared to Armenia (2.25) or Moldova (2.5) which have made modest progress[22]. Similarly, indices of decentralization show Belarus lagging far behind its neighbours in citizen influence on local decisions and transparency of local authorities.

[19] Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (2020), "Decentralisation and Local Self-government in Eastern Partnership Countries," Policy Paper
[20] Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (2020), "Decentralisation and Local Self-government in Eastern Partnership Countries," Policy Paper
[21] Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (2020), "Decentralisation and Local Self-government in Eastern Partnership Countries," Policy Paper
[22] Freedom House (2024), "Nations in transit", Report

Despite the bleak official landscape**, Belarus harbours latent democratic potential at the local level – evident in the persistence of civil society efforts, informal civic initiatives, and support from international partners.**

Historically, Belarusian civil society has played a key role in advocating for local governance reforms and community engagement. Lev Sapieha Foundation, founded in the early 1990s, was a cornerstone of these efforts: for decades it provided expertise on local self-government, trained local councillors, and pushed for legislative improvements to increase local autonomy. Even after its forced closure in 2021, many of its experts and partners continued working in new forms (often from exile) – for instance, preparing draft laws on local self-government and developing educational curricula on local democracy. This indicates a resilient core of **expertise and commitment** to local democratic principles within Belarusian society, even if it currently operates under the radar.

Local civic initiatives have also manifested in times of crisis, revealing community solidarity and self-organisation capacity. During the 2020 protest movement, for example, neighbourhoods in cities like Minsk, Hrodna and Brest formed spontaneous local councils and chat groups to coordinate peaceful demonstrations and mutual aid. Protesters famously decentralised their gatherings – moving from central squares to multiple district-level marches – which a Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute analysis noted was a shift toward more "*dispersed protests… in cities other than the capital*", a contrast to earlier years[23]. This grassroots mobilisation showed that citizens across many localities were willing to engage in collective action for democratic change, effectively creating ad hoc local civic platforms. Likewise, when COVID-19 struck, **volunteer groups and NGOs stepped up** to support local communities (delivering medical supplies, disseminating health information) while the government was in denial. Observers highlighted that volunteers in Belarus became *decisive* in helping communities weather the pandemic's challenges. Such experiences demonstrate a reservoir of **civic capacity and social capital** that can underpin local democratic resilience: even when formal structures are unresponsive, Belarusians have organised at the local level to solve problems and press for change.

International actors have actively sought to **foster this civic capacity and democratic potential** in Belarus at the local level. The European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) is a notable example. Since 2009, ALDA has supported Belarusian civil society and local initiatives through a series of projects aimed at strengthening citizen participation and local governance. Early on, ALDA partnered with local NGOs (Lev Sapieha Foundation and others) on the **REACT project** (2009), building organisational skills for community groups. This was followed by the multi-year **TANDEM projects** ("Cooperation for Citizens' Participation and Community Development in Belarus"), which ran through the 2010s. TANDEM focused on empowering local CSOs and informal community groups while fostering their cooperation with municipal authorities.

It organised seminars and trainings in various Belarusian towns on good governance practices, participatory strategic planning, and citizens' rights. Over nearly a decade (2012–2020), the TANDEM program achieved significant grassroots outcomes: it promoted active citizen

[23] Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2025), Democracy Report 2025, selected data on Belarus (Liberal Democracy Index and classification as "closed autocracy")

involvement in local decision-making and built the capacity of local actors to implement community projects. Notably, TANDEM introduced **innovative participatory tools** like local budget planning exercises and encouraged joint initiatives between authorities and CSOs. These efforts contributed to a more inclusive and resilient local governance framework in the areas touched by the project - small islands of participatory governance within the authoritarian system. Building on TANDEM's success, ALDA launched the **SPREAD project** (Sustainable Partnership for Reinforcement of Active Development) to further support local communities' engagement with authorities, and the **CHOICE initiative** to involve civil society in cultural heritage projects across Belarus and the region. Through these programs, ALDA and its partners invested in what can be termed the "**democratic infrastructure**" of Belarusian localities: skills, trust, and networks that endure even as formal politics deteriorates. Indeed, over 15 years ALDA implemented projects in Belarus – a substantial contribution to grassroots democracy efforts.

Thanks to such international support and local ingenuity, there have been modest **openings at the local level**. For example, interview testimony from Belarusian experts notes that by 2023, because of long advocacy, authorities for the first time introduced a legal provision for **co-funding local civic projects from the state budget**. Under this new scheme, small grants were offered on a competitive basis to initiatives jointly proposed by NGOs and local governments. While such programs remain tightly controlled and cannot substitute for genuine political decentralisation, they demonstrate an important principle: **engaged citizens and responsive local officials can find common ground** on practical issues (service delivery, local development) even within an authoritarian context. Each successful community project or participatory budgeting exercise not only solves a local issue but also trains both citizens and bureaucrats in the habits of cooperation and accountability, laying groundwork for future democratic governance.

Looking ahead, exiled Belarusian pro-democracy actors and international organisations are exploring ways to keep local democratic aspirations alive. ALDA, for instance, has announced plans to establish a **Local Democracy Agency for Belarus** (likely based in a neighbouring country) to continue supporting Belarusian communities and municipalities in exile or in informal networks. Belarusian diaspora groups have also formed councils and initiatives abroad (for example, city committees of democratic Belarusian exiles) to simulate local self-government and prepare for a transition. All these efforts speak to a **persistent civic spirit** that persists among Belarusians. In sum, while the regime has crippled formal local democracy, the foundations of resilience (civic skills, local initiative and international solidarity) remain in evidence. History shows that these latent capacities can become the building blocks of a rapid democratic revival if political conditions change, as happened in other post-authoritarian societies.

Importantly, the EU's engagement on this front is framed by its newer global strategies, notably the **Global Gateway initiative**. Launched in late 2021, the **Global Gateway** is the EU's flagship strategy for investing in infrastructure and sustainable development worldwide, conceived as a values-driven alternative to authoritarian powers' influence[24].

[23] Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2025), Democracy Report 2025, selected data on Belarus (Liberal Democracy Index and classification as "closed autocracy")

[24] European Commission (2025), "Global Gateway initiative"

Unlike purely economic foreign aid, Global Gateway explicitly integrates democratic governance and accountability into its projects. As EU officials have noted, *"civil society and local authorities are crucial partners"* in ensuring Global Gateway investments meet people's needs and adhere to high standards of transparency and accountability. In fact, a dedicated *Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform* has been created to involve local stakeholders in the design and monitoring of Global Gateway projects[25]. This approach aligns with the EU's strategic objective of strengthening resilience and good governance in partner countries.

Supporting local democracy in Belarus fits squarely within this paradigm: it helps ensure that when the EU invests in the Eastern Partnership region (for instance, in connectivity, climate adaptation or public health projects), those investments will be sustainable and beneficial to ordinary people, not captured by autocratic elites. Even though Belarus is not currently an active recipient of EU development aid due to political conditions, the EU has signaled that a *democratic Belarus* would be eligible for significant economic support and integration. This vision includes robust local governance. For example, the EU's High Representative has hinted at a comprehensive plan ("EU offer") for a future democratic Belarus that would involve local communities in reconstruction and reforms[26].

The **EU Neighbourhood Policy** and Eastern Partnership platform also highlight local governance as a priority. Under the EaP's multilateral cooperation, programs like *"Mayors for Economic Growth"* and *"EU4Local Governance"* have operated (though Belarus' official participation was limited). These initiatives illustrate the EU's understanding that democratic stability grows from the bottom up. The **Global Gateway** strategy reinforces this by backing infrastructure and digital projects that require community buy-in and oversight. For instance, any EU-backed connectivity project in the region would incorporate consultations with local authorities and civil society to ensure transparency[27]. In Global Gateway's list of flagship projects, the EU has begun including metrics on governance, such as impact on human rights and political freedoms, alongside economic outcomes[28]. This represents a fusion of development aims with democratic values.

In practical terms, the EU's support for local democracy in Belarus (mostly indirect due to the regime's stance) aligns with strategic interests in a stable, resilient Eastern Europe. A Belarus with empowered local governments and engaged citizens would be less likely to be a source of regional instability or a foothold for external authoritarian influence. This is why even within pan-European forums, Belarusian democratic representatives are encouraged to engage on local governance issues – for example, Belarusian cities' exiled mayors or activists have been given observer roles in the EU's Committee of the Regions and the Council of Europe's Congress of Local Authorities (Belarus had an observer status via the Lev Sapieha Foundation since 1994) [45]. Such gestures keep Belarus connected to European norms at the local level. Moreover, under Global Gateway and the EU's post-2020 recovery initiatives, there is an understanding that **investing in people and communities** yields long-term dividends in democracy. For Belarus, this means the pro-democracy NGOs and local initiatives surviving in exile can access support

[25] European Commission (Oct 2024), "Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform – Second Plenary," DG INTPA News
[26] The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (2025), "The European Offer for Democratic Belarus: A Strategic Agenda for the EU"
[27] European Commission (Oct 2024), "Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform – Second Plenary," DG INTPA News
[28] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025) "European Democracy Support Annual Review 2024"

and continue their work, so that whenever political change comes, there is capacity on the ground to rebuild democratic local institutions.

In conclusion, **local democratic resilience in Belarus** is not only a domestic concern but a subject of international strategy. The theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that resilient local democracy (empowered councils, active civic groups, accountable local leaders) is a bulwark against authoritarian entrenchment. In the Eastern Partnership context, Belarus's lack of local democracy is an anomaly that the EU and other actors hope can be corrected in time. Despite today's authoritarian constraints, the **foundations for local democratic resilience remain in the form of committed civil society and past cooperative projects.** Nurturing these through continued engagement is both a value-based goal and a strategic investment for the EU: it aligns with the *Global Gateway's* vision of sustainable, people-centric development and with the EU Neighbourhood Policy's aim of a secure, democratic eastern neighbourhood. The support to Belarusian local democracy through knowledge transfer, funding and political backing serves the dual purpose of helping the Belarusian people now (by keeping civic space alive) and paving the way for a future democratic transition grounded in empowered local communities.

6.4 Local Democratic Resilience and Municipal Cooperation in Nicaragua

Nicaragua's modern framework for decentralisation took shape in the late 1980s and 1990s, establishing municipalities as autonomous units of government. The 1987 Constitution (Art. 177) and the **Ley de Municipios** (Law 40 of 1988) enshrined political, administrative and financial autonomy for municipal governments[29][30].These laws granted municipalities broad competencies over local socio-economic development and service delivery, with authority to manage local affairs "*under their own responsibility… for the benefit of their inhabitants,*" within the bounds of national law [31][32]. In practice, however, genuine autonomy evolved gradually. A major reform in 1997 (Law 261) updated the Municipal Law, expanding local responsibilities and formally creating participatory bodies such as Comités de Desarrollo Municipal (CDMs) to advise on development plans[33]. The decentralisation drive was bolstered by subsequent legislation in the early 2000s: **a Law of Budget Regime for Municipalities** (Law 376, 2003) standardised municipal budgeting, the **Law of Citizen Participation** (Law 475, 2003) institutionalised mechanisms for public input and **the Law of Municipal Transfers** (Law 466, 2003) inaugurated a system of fiscal transfers from central government to municipalities[34]. Together, these reforms reflected a national consensus that empowering local governments would strengthen democracy and improve service delivery. Notably, a 2006 National Decentralisation Policy underlined that local authorities should be "promoters of human development" and partners in poverty reduction, framing decentralisation as key to a "*new national alliance*" for development[35].

[29] Justia Nicaragua :: Nacionales > Decretos Ejecutivos > Política Nacional De Descentralización Orientada Al Desarrollo Local :: Ley de Nicaragua
[30] OCDE/UCLG (2022) 2022 Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.
[31] LEY - 40 - Y - 261 Ley de Municipios y Sus Reformas
[32] OCDE/UCLG (2022) 2022 Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.
[33] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009
[34] OCDE/UCLG (2022) 2022 Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment
[35] Política Nacional De Descentralización Orientada Al Desarrollo Local :: Ley de Nicaragua

Fiscal decentralisation was a cornerstone of these reforms. Law 466 (2003) committed the central government to gradually increase budgetary transfers to municipalities each year, aiming to reach a fixed percentage of national revenues. This predictable funding was meant to redress the historical underfunding of local governments. Indeed, prior to the 2000s, most municipalities had extremely limited revenues – local tax bases were weak and central support minimal, leaving many local needs unmet. By the late 2000s, transfers had grown significantly (eventually targeting 10% of the national budget), greatly augmenting municipal resources[36]. However, a *2013 reform* (Law 850) to the transfers regime introduced new central controls: it required municipalities to dedicate 22.5% of transferred funds to national priority sectors like health, education, environment and WASH – areas traditionally under central government responsibility. This "fiscal neutrality" measure effectively earmarked a chunk of local budgets for centrally determined uses, limiting municipal spending discretion. Moreover, an earlier reform in 2012 (Law 792) had dramatically increased the number of municipal councilors (tripling some council sizes) without providing new revenue sources. The result was higher administrative costs that strained local finances and somewhat reduced the **de facto** autonomy of councils. These examples illustrate a recurring tension in Nicaragua's decentralisation: while the legal framework has steadily broadened municipal authority and resources since the 1990s, central government has at times recalibrated the rules – through mandates and fiscal strings – in ways that decentralise influence or impose additional burdens on local governments[37].

Institutionally, Nicaragua established support bodies to accompany decentralisation. **The Instituto Nicaragüense de Fomento Municipal** (INIFOM), created in 1990, serves as a municipal development institute to provide technical assistance and channel central support to local governments[38]. In the early 2000s, donors and the national government also promoted participatory planning at the local level. Many municipalities adopted *cabildos abiertos* (open town hall meetings) and participatory budgeting exercises to involve citizens in allocating resources, as mandated by the 2003 Citizen Participation Law. By the mid-2000s, it was common for outgoing municipal administrations to present multi-year investment plans – developed with community input – to incoming authorities. This practice was reinforced by law and supported by NGOs, which helped communities prepare needs assessments and development proposals in a bottom-up process[39]. In essence, Nicaragua entered the late 2000s with a relatively robust local governance framework on paper: elected councils and mayors in 153 municipalities, a legal mandate for citizen participation and a growing flow of fiscal resources to the local level. Donor agencies regarded Nicaraguan decentralization – along with broader state modernization – as crucial for democracy and development, aligning their poverty reduction programs with the new municipal empowerment policies. Indeed, the national development plans of that era made decentralization a cross-cutting theme, viewing strong local governments as instrumental to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) initiative targets[40].

[36] Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació (2014) "LIGADOS A NICARAGUA. Cooperación municipalista en Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas y San Lucas 2000-2012"
[37] OCDE/UCLG (2022) 2022 Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.
[38] OCDE/UCLG (2022) 2022 Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.
[39] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009
[40] Política Nacional De Descentralización Orientada Al Desarrollo Local :: Ley de Nicaragua

International Municipal Cooperation: Local Development in Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas and San Lucas

Nicaragua's decentralization opened space not only for domestic civic engagement but also for international **municipal cooperation** – partnerships in which foreign local governments support Nicaraguan municipalities directly. A prominent example has been the long-term cooperation between Spanish local government consortia (the *Fons de solidaritat* of the Balearic Islands) and a cluster of rural municipalities in the department of Madriz, namely **Telpaneca, Totogalpa**, **Las Sabanas** and **San Lucas**. These four municipalities, situated in Nicaragua's impoverished dry corridor, began collaborating in 2000 to jointly tackle post-Hurricane Mitch reconstruction and chronic poverty challenges, building a shared methodology around municipal co-financing, community contributions and 'learning-by-doing' implementation. Recognising that "*isolated efforts*" were ineffective, local leaders and community organisations in the area opted to **unite efforts and resources across municipalities**. They formed a coalition to attract external aid and coordinate development interventions regionally, overcoming the mistrust and political polarisation that initially hampered inter-municipal relations[41]. This local initiative coincided with Spanish municipal solidarity programs seeking reliable on-the-ground partners. By 2007, the **Fons Mallorquí** (later joined by the Menorquí and Pitiús funds from other Balearic Islands) had established a formal joint program with the four Madriz municipalities, channeling international funding **directly to local authorities** for agreed development projects[42]. To manage this, the municipalities created the **Unidad de Concertación y Cooperación Municipalista** (UCOM) – a technical coordination unit that would design and execute projects on behalf of the municipal consortium. UCOM was structured to bridge the political and technical domains: municipal mayors and councils set priorities and retained decision-making power, while UCOM's professional staff handled project implementation and donor relations. This horizontal partnership model (municipalities pooling resources, with a joint technical secretariat) became a hallmark of the "*cooperación municipalista*" approach in Nicaragua. Notably, it kept cooperation **aligned with local plans and national norms** – projects had to be part of the municipal investment plans and comply with Nicaraguan laws – while also meeting the accountability standards of the foreign donors[43].

Over 2000-2012 and in subsequent phases up to 2022, this Spanish–Nicaraguan municipalist cooperation delivered concrete impacts in Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas and San Lucas. **Basic infrastructure and services improved significantly**: the partnership funded rural water systems, sanitation projects and community-run potable water committees (CAPS), bringing clean water to thousands of families. It supported low-cost housing programs (often through autoconstrucción, or self-build schemes) to reduce the housing deficit for vulnerable households. Small off-grid renewable energy projects (e.g. solar panels) were introduced in remote communities and farm-to-market roads were rehabilitated, improving **mobility and access** in this mountainous region. Education was another focus: schools were repaired and

[41] Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació (2014) "LIGADOS A NICARAGUA. Cooperación municipalista en Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas y San Lucas 2000-2012"
[42] Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació (2014) "LIGADOS A NICARAGUA. Cooperación municipalista en Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas y San Lucas 2000-2012"
[43] Último 101023 Informe final Evaluación Cooperación municipalista UCOM Fons Illes Balears

equipped, teachers received training and *hermanamientos* (twinning) between Nicaraguan and Balearic schools promoted cultural exchange. The program also invested in **local economic development,** funding micro-entrepreneurship and agricultural initiatives. Notably, a *subvención retornable* (revolving seed fund) scheme was created to provide capital to small businesses – with UCOM managing a system of grants that beneficiaries repay in part, allowing the fund to support new entrepreneurs in cycles. According to an independent evaluation, many participants in these entrepreneurship projects achieved *"important personal and business empowerment,"* expanding their vision and planning new ventures. Across sectors, local stakeholders report tangible improvements in living conditions: access to safe water, decent housing, education quality and livelihoods all saw measurable gains, contributing to the fulfillment of basic rights (to water, housing, education, health, etc.) in these communities[44].

Beyond material outputs, the municipalist cooperation had a durable **institutional impact** on local governance. It deliberately integrated **capacity-building and institutional strengthening** components into projects. Municipal staff received technical training and worked alongside UCOM's team, learning project management, participatory planning and results-based monitoring. All four municipalities improved their administrative systems – for example, establishing transparent procurement committees and joint evaluation boards to oversee project funds. This not only ensured accountability for the donor money, but also left municipalities with better financial management practices for the future. The cooperation's emphasis on **gender equality** (a cross-cutting theme) sensitised local officials to incorporate gender perspectives in municipal activities, resulting in more inclusive policies and women's participation in local decision-making. Importantly, the projects strengthened horizontal and vertical coordination: municipalities learned to work together (as a consortium) and also improved coordination with departmental and national authorities. For instance, water projects were done in concert with the national water utility and health ministry, roads with the road maintenance fund (FOMAV), etc., creating synergies between local and central investments. By aligning municipal projects with national plans and the Sustainable Development Goals, the program garnered political support at higher levels and ensured sustainability. Indeed, the evaluation noted that all projects were vetted in community assemblies and coordinated with the relevant line ministries or agencies, indicating strong local ownership and legitimacy. In summary, the experience in Telpaneca and neighboring towns shows how international city-to-city cooperation, when well-coordinated, can bolster local democratic resilience: it delivered essential services in an equitable way, built local capacity and fostered citizen participation (through community committees and assemblies involved in project design and oversight)[45]. This model of aid – working through municipal governments rather than around them – helped to reinforce the decentralization framework during the 2000s, even as other pressures, discussed next, began to mount on Nicaragua's local democracy.

Challenges to Local Democratic Governance Under the Current Regime

Over the past 15 years, Nicaragua's **local democratic governance** has faced increasing challenges due to the centralizing tendencies of the national regime. Since President Daniel

[44] Último 101023 Informe final Evaluación Cooperación municipalista UCOM Fons Illes Balears
[45] Último 101023 Informe final Evaluación Cooperación municipalista UCOM Fons Illes Balears

Ortega's return to power in 2007, the ruling party (FSLN) has systematically tightened control over municipalities, often in open contradiction to the spirit of autonomy and participation enshrined in the law. One major development was the creation of parallel structures for citizen involvement, known as **Consejos del Poder Ciudadano (CPC)** and later Gabinetes at municipal and departmental levels. In principle, these were promoted as organs of "direct democracy." In practice, however, they became partisan instruments that **undermined the legally mandated Municipal Development Committees (CDMs)** and other pluralistic forums. Under the guidance of the President's wife, Rosario Murillo, the government from 2007 onward replaced or usurped the CDMs with Sandinista-controlled CPCs – committees whose membership was orchestrated by FSLN party operatives (e.g. municipal political secretaries) and whose role was to mobilise support for government programs and monitor local affairs in line with ruling party interests. An analysis by a Nicaraguan civil society network noted that *"the trend in FSLN-governed municipalities is to consult only with the CPCs,"* excluding other community actors, while even in opposition-led councils there was a risk of mirroring this partisan exclusivity. The imposition of CPCs effectively diluted genuine civic participation, as these bodies lacked the broad-based, consultative character that the law envisioned for citizen involvement. Indeed, unlike the CDMs – which by law should be plural and include various civil society and community representatives – the CPC/Gabinetes were vertically integrated party organs. Local observers described them as *"para-state entities"* that not only displaced legitimate participatory channels but were sometimes used to intimidate or surveil dissidents. In Managua, for example, CPC-aligned groups even took on para-policing roles against opposition voices. This re-centralization of participation under party auspices has eroded the accountability of municipal authorities to the wider public, since a narrow group (loyal to the ruling party) claims to speak for citizens. Many residents unaffiliated with the FSLN simply disengaged; surveys found that politically non-aligned citizens were far less likely to attend town hall meetings or CPC gatherings, perceiving them as biased and unresponsive[46]. Ultimately, the emergence of CPCs exemplifies how **democratic local institutions were hollowed out**: legally they still exist, but functionally the participatory space has been monopolised by the ruling clique.

Another challenge has been the **politicisation of municipal administration** and finance, especially for those few municipalities governed by opposition parties in recent years. After 2012, the FSLN gained control of the vast majority of Nicaragua's 153 municipalities, leaving only a couple dozen in the hands of Liberals or other opposition groups. These opposition-led councils became targets of pressure. The central government leveraged the **municipal transfer system as a tool of political control**, at times violating the spirit if not the letter of the law. For instance, in 2022, 18 municipalities were still nominally run by opposition mayors – yet they were "punished" with severely reduced or delayed budget transfers. **Data showed that 95.7% of total transfer funds** that year were allocated to FSLN-held councils, with only 4.3% to the opposition-held ones. In some cases, opposition mayors received no disbursements for months into the fiscal year, crippling their ability to execute projects and basic services. An opposition official in the town of Yalí in mid-2022 lamented that the populace understood the situation: *"they know the mayor's office isn't given the transfers, we have no money and cannot carry out projects"*. Independent analysts note that such financial strangulation blatantly conflicts with the **Ley de Transferencias (466)** and have labeled it a deliberate strategy: *"the reduction in*

[46] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009

municipal transfers is part of the political control exercised by the Ortega–Murillo regime," in the words of economist *Enrique Sáenz*[47]. Central government also reportedly instructed bilateral aid agencies not to work directly with opposition municipalities, but only through central channels, further isolating those local governments[48].

These pressures culminated in a **de facto abolition of local political pluralism** by late 2022. In July 2022, police and Sandinista party cadres **forcibly seized five opposition-led city halls** (including Yalí), installing unelected FSLN authorities in their place. Then, municipal elections in November 2022 were tightly orchestrated after the banning of the main opposition party; the ruling FSLN won every single mayoralty in what was widely deemed a sham process. As *the Los Angeles Times reported*, this sweep completed the Sandinista party's *"control of all the country's 153 municipalities in elections that critics called unfair."*[49] Local councils are now uniformly dominated by the ruling party, eliminating one of the last institutional footholds of opposition in Nicaragua's governance. This one-party dominance at the local level has grave implications for democratic resilience. With no political competition, **downward accountability** is further weakened – councilors answer primarily to the party hierarchy rather than a rival local electorate. Moreover, the Ortega regime's broader crackdown on civic space has decimated the independent civil society organisations that often partnered with municipalities on social programs. Since 2018, authorities have shuttered over 2,000 NGOs (including development and transparency organisations) and dozens of independent media outlets[50], thereby silencing voices that advocated locally for government accountability and social audits.

In sum, under the current centralised regime, **Nicaragua's municipal autonomy exists largely in form but not in substance.** The constitutional and legal provisions for local self-government and citizen participation have been overridden by political practices: parallel party structures (CPCs) dictate local priorities, fiscal levers reward or punish councils based on loyalty and any semblance of electoral choice at the municipal level has vanished. This adverse context poses a direct challenge to **local democratic resilience** – the ability of communities and local institutions to uphold democratic practices and respond to citizens' needs despite authoritarian pressure. Municipal officials who once embraced participatory budgeting and transparency now operate under directives to prioritise partisan initiatives (like central government social programs distributed through party networks) and to restrict public oversight. For example, while the law obliges councils to hold open sessions and share information, over half of local civil society representatives surveyed in 2009 did not even know when council meetings occurred. In many cases, only party militants or allies are informed and allowed to attend, turning what should be public forums into one-party gatherings. Even some formal requirements, like conducting annual town hall accountability sessions (cabildos), have been sidelined or performed perfunctorily – often announced last-minute or at inconvenient times to limit genuine public attendance[51]. The net effect is a hollowing out of accountability mechanisms at the local level. The traditions of citizen oversight and pluralistic dialogue that had begun to take root in the 1990s–2000s are now severely eroded. This regression

[49] Los Angeles Times (2022) "Sandinistas complete their political domination of Nicaragua following local elections"
[50] Los Angeles Times (2022) "Sandinistas complete their political domination of Nicaragua following local elections"
[51] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009 32

underscores that institutional frameworks alone are not enough – democratic resilience ultimately relies on political will and societal demand for participation, which in Nicaragua are being systematically suppressed.

In June 2025, authorities terminated UCOM's ability to operate as a municipal cooperation unit but the partners intend to continue at the local level through aligned organisations despite the centralising turn.

Civic Participation, Accountability and Territorial Equity in Sustainable Local Development

The Nicaraguan case vividly demonstrates why **civic participation, accountability and territorial equity** are vital pillars of sustainable local development. In theory and practice, local governance is most effective when citizens have channels to voice needs, when officials are answerable for their decisions and when resources are distributed fairly across territories. First, **civic participation** at the local level (through town hall meetings, development committees, community associations, etc.) is linked to better project outcomes and service delivery. When residents are involved in identifying priorities – for example, formulating a municipal investment plan or monitoring a public works project – the interventions tend to be more relevant and better maintained. In the Madriz municipal program, community participation was key to success: water committees and parent-teacher associations took ownership of new facilities, helping ensure their long-term upkeep[52]. More broadly, scholars of development note that municipalities are the *"space where democracy can become most participatory,"* given the proximity of elected officials to the people. Nicaragua's own experience in the 2000s showed that where participatory planning was embraced, local governments became more responsive – for instance, multi-year municipal plans created with "***good citizen consultation***" led to projects that matched what communities actually prioritised (water access, rural roads, etc.), thereby boosting public trust[53]. Participation spaces deliberately mixed top-down (institutional) and bottom-up (community) channels, anchoring decisions in assemblies and sectoral councils.

Conversely, as seen in the 2010s, when participation is reduced to partisan tokenism (CPC meetings of acolytes) or when citizens feel their input will be ignored, they disengage – and local policies risk becoming misaligned with actual community needs. Indeed, development practitioners warn that "*a food security or infrastructure project without citizen participation will not be an integral development project.*"[54] In other words, true sustainable development requires that communities are not just beneficiaries but active co-creators of local solutions. This kind of participation builds local capacity and social capital, making development gains more resilient over time.

Second, **accountability mechanisms** are crucial at the municipal level to sustain good governance and public confidence. Accountability means that local officials transparently report on their actions and finances and that there are checks and balances (through audits, council oversight and citizen feedback) to prevent mismanagement. In Nicaragua's decentralisation framework, several accountability tools were instituted – from mandatory

[52] Último 101023 Informe final Evaluación Cooperación municipalista UCOM Fons Illes Balears
[53] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009
[54] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009 33

public budget hearings to the requirement that outgoing mayors hand over detailed accounts and plans to their successors[55]. Where these were implemented, they improved governance. For example, many municipalities set up *Contralorías Sociales* (social oversight committees) or worked closely with local civil society watchdogs to ensure funds were spent correctly. The earlier-cited Envío study found a positive perception in many towns that **NGOs and civic groups contributed to local development** and indeed a majority of councilors (64%) said they were willing to collaborate with NGOs on service delivery. However, tellingly, **only 13%** of councilors in that survey mentioned citizen participation as an area for collaboration – revealing a persistent reluctance by some local authorities to be scrutinised by the public. This indicates that building a culture of accountability is an ongoing challenge. Yet it remains essential: without it, corruption or clientelism can flourish and public resources may be captured by elites. The equity of service delivery also suffers when there's no accountability, as favouritism (e.g. serving only ruling party supporters) can go unchecked[56]. By contrast, where councils have kept processes open – announcing meetings, inviting all community sectors to cabildos and allowing independent observers – they have maintained higher legitimacy even amid national turmoil. In short, accountability at the local level anchors democratic resilience, ensuring that even if national governance erodes, there are still islands of transparency and rule of law in community life. This is aligned with the principle of "**good governance and transparency**" that international frameworks (such as the EU's new strategies) uphold as fundamental for development[57].

Lastly, **territorial equity** is a critical consideration for sustainable development in a country with deep regional disparities. Nicaragua's rural regions (like the western mountains and the Caribbean coast) have long lagged in infrastructure and services compared to Managua and a few urban centers. Decentralization was partly aimed at addressing this by empowering local authorities in poorer areas to drive their own development. The municipal transfer system itself had an equalization formula – smaller, poorer municipalities received relatively larger per-capita shares to level the playing field[58]. True territorial equity means that people's access to basic services and opportunities does not depend solely on their place of birth. In the context of local governance, pursuing territorial equity involves **targeting investments to the most marginalised communities** and balancing resources among neighbourhoods and villages within a municipality. The case of Telpaneca and its neighbours is illustrative: those municipalities mobilised extra resources (via the Spanish cooperation) precisely because national funding was insufficient for their high levels of need [59]. They then allocated a significant portion of project funds to remote rural communities, for example, extending water systems to outlying villages that previously had none[60]. This kind of deliberate focus on poorer territories helped reduce gaps in access. Territorial equity is also tied to social cohesion and conflict prevention. If local governments ensure that previously neglected groups (e.g. indigenous communities, or rural farmers in the dry corridor) receive attention and public investment, it can mitigate grievances and strengthen citizens' identification with their municipality and country. On the other hand, stark inequities can fuel migration to cities or even social unrest. In Nicaragua, where 47% of the

[55] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009
[56] Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009
[57] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway
[58] Expediente Público (2022) "Transferencias municipales: Otra forma de control político a las alcaldías"
[59] Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació (2014) "LIGADOS A NICARAGUA. Cooperación municipalista en Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas y San Lucas 2000-2012"
[60] Último 101023 Informe final Evaluación Cooperación municipalista UCOM Fons Illes Balears

population was living in poverty as of 2019 and many rural young people feel compelled to migrate for lack of opportunities[61], equitable local development is not just a moral imperative but a practical one to sustain the country's human capital. Sustainable development, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda that Nicaragua formally supports, explicitly calls for reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and achieving universal access to services (SDGs 1 through 6). Strengthening municipal capacity to deliver broadly and fairly across all corners of their territory is one of the most direct ways to make progress on those goals.

In conclusion, **resilient local democracy in Nicaragua (and elsewhere) depends on empowering citizens, enforcing accountability and ensuring equitable development.** These elements reinforce each other: active citizen participation boosts accountability and together they push local governments to distribute resources in a fair manner. The deterioration of these elements in Nicaragua's current political context serves as a warning. Yet, they also represent pillars to rebuild upon, should a more enabling environment for local governance return. This is where international actors can play a strategic role, as discussed next.

The EU Global Gateway: A Strategic Frame for Future Cooperation

Looking ahead, the European Union's Global Gateway initiative provides a relevant strategic framework that could align with the needs and potential of local governance in Nicaragua – especially in a future scenario where democratic norms are re-established. Launched in 2021, the Global Gateway is the EU's flagship strategy for overseas infrastructure and development investment, with a pledge to mobilise up to €300 billion globally by 2027 for "*sustainable and high-quality projects*" that reflect European values and partner countries' needs. Notably, the Global Gateway emphasises principles that resonate strongly with the situation of Nicaraguan municipalities: **democratic values, good governance, transparency, equal partnerships, green and inclusive development.** These principles mirror the very elements of local democratic resilience discussed above. For example, the Global Gateway explicitly aims to build "*trusted connections*" that are "*long-term and in line with the EU's interests and values: rule of law, human rights and international norms*"[62]. In practice, this means EU-supported projects should uphold transparency, involve local stakeholders and strengthen institutional integrity – precisely what Nicaragua's local governments will require to recover from years of authoritarian centralisation.

Under the Global Gateway, the EU is looking to invest in sectors like **digital connectivity**, **green energy, transport, health and education** in partner countries[63]. All these sectors have local dimensions and would benefit from municipal involvement. For instance, extending broadband or renewable energy to underserved rural areas necessitates working with local authorities for permits, community engagement and maintenance. In Nicaragua, municipalities could be natural partners to implement **climate adaptation and resilient infrastructure projects**, given their on-the-ground knowledge of local vulnerabilities (e.g. drought management in the dry corridor, hurricane response on the Caribbean coast). Indeed, the EU's current cooperation priorities in Nicaragua already include *environment & climate change adaptation and sustainable economic growth*, with a focus on community resilience, inclusive water

[62] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway
[63] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway

management and green value chains[64]. These align with municipal competencies in water/sanitation, local economic development and disaster risk reduction. A Global Gateway approach could scale up support in these areas while insisting on **safeguards for transparency and inclusion**. For example, any major EU-funded infrastructure (say, a water treatment plant or solar micro-grid) could incorporate requirements for citizen consultation (much like previous EU projects did via local mesas de concertación). Furthermore, the Global Gateway's commitment to "*equal partnerships*" and "*mutual accountability*" suggests the EU would seek to engage not just the central government but also local communities and authorities in planning and oversight. This could help ensure that benefits reach the grassroots and are not captured by central patronage networks. In an authoritarian context, of course, engaging municipalities directly is challenging – as the current Nicaraguan government has been wary of any external support that bypasses central control. However, the Global Gateway, being a "**Team Europe**" effort (pooling EU institutions, member states and development banks), might have the flexibility to work through creative channels. This could include regional associations of municipalities, or international NGOs and private sector actors that partner with local governments on project execution. The emphasis is on "**value-based, transparent investment**", which in countries like Nicaragua could mean stringent anti-corruption measures, open procurement and community monitoring of projects[65].

A future alignment of Nicaragua with the Global Gateway would likely require political changes – a return to rule of law and acceptance of decentralized governance.

If and when that occurs, Nicaragua's municipalities could become key loci for deploying Global Gateway funds in ways that immediately benefit people and rebuild democratic norms. For example, a Global Gateway program to expand rural solar energy in Central America could choose pilot sites in Nicaragua's under-served municipalities, implemented in coordination with those local governments and civil society. **The Latin America and Caribbean Global Gateway** already envisions over €45 billion of investments, with EU leaders highlighting partnerships for sustainable growth in the region[66]. Ensuring that a share of those investments empower municipal structures (through capacity-building and direct financing of local projects) would be consistent with both EU priorities and the needs on the ground in Nicaragua. It is worth noting that even during the recent difficult years, European donors have maintained some support at the local level (for instance, EU member state agencies quietly continued community development work in certain municipalities). Building on that, the Global Gateway could provide a more strategic and large-scale re-engagement, coupling **infrastructure with institutional support**. For instance, upgrading a municipal water system under Global Gateway funding could come with training for the municipal water unit and revival of citizen water committees – reviving participatory practices with a fresh injection of resources and legitimacy. By tying investments to reforms (e.g. requiring that a municipal anticorruption policy is in place, or that women and marginalised groups are represented in project committees), the EU can nudge local governance in a positive direction, consistent with its 6 guiding principles (democracy, transparency, etc)[67]

[64] European Commission (2025) - International Partnerships - Nicaragua
[65] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway
[66] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway
[67] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway

In conclusion, while Nicaragua's current regime poses obstacles, the **EU Global Gateway strategy** offers a hopeful framework for the future. It aligns closely with the ideal attributes of **sustainable local development** – inclusiveness, accountability and long-term sustainability – and it explicitly seeks to operate on those principles globally. For Nicaragua, reconnecting with international partners through such a values-driven initiative could help restore the damage done to local democratic institutions. A scenario in which municipalities once again have the autonomy to represent their citizens, bolstered by international cooperation that insists on transparency and community benefit, would greatly enhance local resilience. The Global Gateway's promise of "**sustainable and trusted connections that work for people and the planet**"[68] could thus serve as a guiding light for policymakers and stakeholders looking to align Nicaragua's local governance with global best practices and the needs of its people. By situating municipal development within this larger strategic vision, the groundwork can be laid for re-democratizing local spaces and ensuring that local governments are engines of equitable, sustainable development in the years to come[69].

6.5 Electoral autocracies and democratic backsliding in Tanzania and Georgia

In the contemporary global landscape, democracy faces unprecedented challenges, with many nations experiencing significant democratic backsliding. Among these, Tanzania and Georgia stand out as emblematic cases of autocratisation, each reflecting distinct regional dynamics and political trajectories. While both countries were once considered promising democracies, recent developments have placed them firmly within the category of electoral autocracies, as defined by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute.

Tanzania, situated in Sub-Saharan Africa, has been undergoing a steady process of autocratization since 2014. Once praised for its relative political stability and multiparty elections, the country has seen a systematic erosion of democratic norms. Media freedom has been curtailed, civil society space has narrowed, and opposition voices have been increasingly suppressed. The ruling party's dominance over electoral processes and institutions has undermined the integrity of elections, contributing to Tanzania's classification as an electoral autocracy. Despite regional efforts to promote democratic governance, Tanzania's trajectory remains troubling, with no clear signs of reversal. Georgia, on the other hand, represents a more abrupt democratic decline. Following a period of democratization in the early 2010s, the country entered a bell-turn autocratization episode beginning in 2017, culminating in its reclassification as an electoral autocracy in 2024. The 2024 elections were marked by widespread irregularities, media bias, and government efforts to delegitimize opposition parties.

[68] European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway
[69] Política Nacional De Descentralización Orientada Al Desarrollo Local :: Ley de Nicaragua
OCDE/UCLG (2022) 2022 Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.LEY - 40 - Y - 261 Ley de Municipios y Sus Reformas, Revista mensual de análisis de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (2009). ¿Qué pasa en los municipios, qué pasa con los CPC, número 311, 10.2009
Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació (2014) "LIGADOS A NICARAGUA. Cooperación municipalista en Telpaneca, Totogalpa, Las Sabanas y San Lucas 2000-2012"
Último 101023 Informe final Evaluación Cooperación municipalista UCOM Fons Illes Balears Expediente Público (2022) "Transferencias municipales: Otra forma de control político a las alcaldías"
Los Angeles Times (2022) "Sandinistas complete their political domination of Nicaragua following local elections"
European Commission (2025) - Global Gateway
European Commission (2025) - International Partnerships - Nicaragua
European Investment Bank (2025) "The EIB and the European Commission announce a more flexible guarantee of €5 billion to boost global investments"

Civil society actors and protesters faced increasing repression, and the introduction of a controversial "foreign agents" law further signalled the government's intent to consolidate power. International observers, including the European Parliament, have expressed grave concerns about the state of democracy in Georgia, halting its EU integration process. Together, Tanzania and Georgia illustrate the multifaceted nature of democratic decline across different regions. Their experiences underscore the importance of safeguarding electoral integrity, media freedom, and civil society participation as foundational pillars of democratic resilience including local democracy.

Comparative insides on effective local democratic resilience practices

The **Biometric Voter Registration Campaign in Tanzania** and **the Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government initiative in Georgia** both represent powerful examples of **grassroots civic engagement**. While they operate in vastly different political and social contexts, they share a common goal: **empowering citizens—especially youth, women, and marginalized groups—to participate meaningfully in democratic processes.**

Case Study (Tanzania)

In early 2024, Action for Democratic Governance (A4DG), with support from the WYDE Civic Engagement program and EU partners, launched a six-month Biometric Voter Registration Campaign in Kilwa District, Tanzania. The initiative aimed to boost civic awareness and voter participation among youth, women, and people with disabilities ahead of the 2024 local elections and the 2025 general elections.

Through a mix of multimedia campaigns, roadshows, school outreach, and youth cafes, the project reached over 87,000 people—33,139 directly and 54,613 indirectly. Despite delays in funding and government accreditation, the campaign successfully mobilized first-time voters, fostered youth representation in local decision-making, and built strong partnerships with civil society, media, and government institutions.
One of the most notable outcomes was the formation of the Kilwa Youth Working Group, which secured youth representation in district planning meetings. The project also helped reduce misinformation around the biometric voter registration process and inspired young voters like Zuhra and Shaibu to participate in the democratic process for the first time.

In **Tanzania**, the campaign was a time-bound initiative (March to October 2024) led by Action for Democratic Governance (A4DG) in the Kilwa District. It focused on preparing citizens for the upcoming Local Government Authority and General Elections through voter education. Using innovative outreach methods such as roadshows, mobile civic cafes, and media campaigns, the project reached over 87,000 people. It sparked **behavioural change** among first-time voters and led to the formation of a youth working group with representation in district planning—an important step toward inclusive governance.

In contrast, **Georgia's initiative**, led by the Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Georgia, is a long-term effort that began in 2006. Operating in the Imereti region, it responds to national democra-

tic backsliding by strengthening local governance and civic participation. Through the Imereti Regional Hub and participatory tools like citizen assemblies and budgeting, the project has built **resilient democratic practices at the local level**. It has empowered civil society organisations and fostered trust between citizens and local authorities, even amid political instability.

Case Study 2 (Georgia)

In the face of democratic backsliding in Georgia, marked by restrictive laws and shrinking civic space, local actors have emerged as key defenders of democratic values. Since 2006, the Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Georgia, in partnership with ALDA Europe, has worked to empower civil society and promote inclusive governance at the grassroots level.

A cornerstone of this effort is the Imereti Regional Hub for Civil Society Development, which provides capacity building, fosters dialogue between citizens and local authorities, and strengthens civil society's role in local governance. Complementing this, the project "Increasing the Quality of Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government" has introduced participatory tools such as public consultations, citizen assemblies, and participatory budgeting.

These initiatives have reached diverse communities, especially youth, women, and marginalised groups, enabling them to actively shape local policies. Despite national-level challenges, the work of LDA Georgia demonstrates that democratic resilience can be cultivated locally through sustained civic engagement, transparency, and inclusive decision-making.

Despite their **differences in duration, scope, and immediate objectives**, both projects demonstrate the transformative power of civic engagement. They highlight how local initiatives —whether focused on elections or long-term governance—can foster inclusion, build trust, and strengthen democratic resilience from the ground up. The following table represents a comparison of the two case studies:

Aspect	Tanzania – Biometric Voter Registration Campaign	Georgia – Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government
Location	Kilwa District, Lindi Region	Imereti Region
Duration	March 1 – October 30, 2024 (time-bound)	Ongoing since 2006 (long-term)
Implementing Organization	Action for Democratic Governance (A4DG)	Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Georgia
Focus Area	Voter education and civic awareness for upcoming elections	Strengthening local governance and democratic resilience

Target Outcome	Preparedness for 2024 LGA and 2025 General Elections	Long-term civic engagement and participatory governance
Tools Used	Media campaigns, roadshows, mobile cafes, school outreach	Participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, public consultations
Scale of Reach	87,782 people (direct + indirect)	Multi-municipality engagement, qualitative impact focus
Challenges	Financial delays, accreditation issues, bureaucratic hurdles	Political instability, shrinking civic space, capacity needs

Learnings from "What both Projects Have in Common?

- **Civic Engagement Focus**: Both initiatives aim to empower citizens—especially youth, women, and marginalised groups—to participate actively in democratic processes.
- **Partnership with ALDA Europe**: ALDA plays a key role in supporting both projects through the WYDE Civic Engagement framework.
- **Grassroots Empowerment**: Each case emphasises bottom-up approaches to strengthening democracy, whether through voter education or participatory governance.
- **Youth and Women Inclusion**: Youth and Women are central to both projects, with tangible outcomes like youth representation in decision-making bodies. Special attention to marginalised groups.
- **Adoptive Strategies**: Both initiatives faced obstacles related to bureaucracy and political environments, requiring adaptive strategies.
- **Build Success Stories**: Each project has led to meaningful civic outcomes—youth representation in Tanzania and participatory governance models in Georgia.

Typologies of local democratic resilience

Both the Tanzania and Georgia case studies emerged from distinct political and social contexts, yet each leveraged strategic entry points and tailored support strategies to foster civic engagement and democratic resilience.

In Tanzania, the context was shaped by the upcoming 2024 Local Government Authority elections and the 2025 General Elections. The urgency of electoral preparedness, combined with limited civic awareness among youth, women, and people with disabilities, created a **clear strategic entry point: voter education**. The Biometric Voter Registration Campaign capitalised on this moment by deploying **dynamic outreach tools**—roadshows, mobile civic cafes, and media campaigns—to reach over 87,000 individuals. The **support strategy** focused on mass communication, youth mobilisation, and partnerships with local institutions to build civic knowledge and motivation for electoral participation.

Strategic entry point	Voter education
Transformative tools	Roadshows, mobile civic cafes, and media campaigns
Support strategy	Mass communication, youth (and women) mobilization, and partnerships with local institutions to build civic knowledge and motivation for electoral participation.
Impact vs time	Time-bound (elections)

In contrast, Georgia faced a more entrenched challenge: democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space due to restrictive legislation. The **strategic entry point** here was the local governance level, where civic actors still had room to operate. The initiative "Increasing the Quality of Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government" used this space to build long-term democratic resilience through participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, public consultations. **Support strategies** included capacity building for local authorities, participatory planning, and the creation of platforms like the Imereti Regional Hub for CSO Development. These tools enabled sustained citizen involvement (youth and women), especially among marginalised groups, and helped preserve civic trust despite national-level instability.

Strategic entry point	Local governance level, where civic actors still had room to operate
Transformative tools	Participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, public consultations
Support strategy	Capacity building for local authorities, participatory planning, and the creation of platforms like the Imereti Regional Hub for CSO Development
Impact vs time	Systemic and long term

While Tanzania's approach was **time-bound** and election-focused, Georgia's was **systemic and long-term. Yet both initiatives shared a commitment to inclusive participation, youth engagement, and strategic partnerships (multistakeholder cooperation)**. They demonstrate how understanding the local context allows for the identification of effective entry points—whether electoral moments or governance gaps—and how tailored support strategies can empower communities to shape their democratic futures.

Based on the two case studies—**Tanzania's Biometric Voter Registration Campaign and Georgia's Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government—we can identify typologies of local democratic resilience** in fragile and transitional contexts.

In transitional or post-authoritarian settings where democratic institutions are evolving, elections serve as strategic entry points for civic engagement. Tanzania's case illustrates how voter registration and civic education can be leveraged to mobilise youth, women, and marginalised groups. The support strategy focused on mass outreach—roadshows, media campaigns, and school engagement—to build awareness and readiness for participation.

This typology is characterised by:

- Time-bound interventions linked to electoral cycles
- High reliance on media and public mobilisation
- Rapid behavioural change and civic activation

In contexts where democratic backsliding threatens civic space, local governance becomes a strategic entry point for resilience. Georgia's initiative demonstrates how long-term investment in participatory governance—through citizen assemblies, budgeting, and civil society platforms—can sustain democratic practices even under national pressure. The support strategy emphasised capacity building, institutional partnerships, and inclusive decision-making.

This typology is marked by:

- Long-term, systemic engagement
- Focus on institutional resilience and civic trust
- Empowerment of local actors and civil society
-

Despite their differences, both typologies share foundational elements:

- Community-centered approaches that prioritise inclusion and local ownership
- Youth and women engagement as a catalyst for democratic renewal
- Strategic partnerships with local institutions and international networks (e.g., ALDA Europe)
- Adaptability to political constraints, whether through media outreach or governance and CSO platforms

Biometric Voter Registration Campaign – WYDE Program (A4DG) - Tanzania	**Increasing the Quality of Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government -** Georgia
Location: Kilwa District, Lindi Region, Tanzania **Duration**: March 1 – October 30, 2024 **Implementing Organisation**: Action for *Democratic Governance (A4DG)* **Partners:** Alda Europe, European Partnership for Democracy, People in Need, Albarmet, Kilwa District Council, ActionAid Tanzania, TUJIWAKI, KIYODI	**Location:** Imereti Region, Georgia **Duration:** Ongoing since 2006 **Implementing Organization:** Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Georgia **Partners:** ALDA Europe, Imereti Regional Hub, Local Municipalities, Civil Society Organisations
Overview The Biometric Voter Registration Campaign, implemented under the WYDE Civic Engagement program, aimed to enhance civic and voter education among **youth, women, and people with disabilities** in preparation for Tanzania's 2024 Local Government Authority (LGA) elections and the 2025 General Elections.	**Overview** The initiative aims to strengthen democratic resilience in Georgia amid national-level democratic backsliding. Through the WYDE Civic Engagement framework, LDA Georgia **promotes inclusive governance, civic participation, and local decision-making**, especially in the face of restrictive legislation and reduced civic space.
Key Activities 1. Production of civic education videos and election guideline clips 2. Dissemination of voter education materials 3. Roadshows and mobile civic education cafes 4. Youth engagement through school outreach and student cafes 5. Media campaigns via radio, TV, and social media	**Key Activities** 1. Imereti Regional Hub for Civil Society Development: A platform coordinated by LDA Georgia and ALDA to support civil society across multiple municipalities. 2. Project: "Increasing the Quality of Citizen Involvement in Local Self-Government": 3. Training for local authorities and community representatives 4. Facilitation of public consultations and citizen assemblies 5. Promotion of participatory budgeting and local development strategies 6. Advocacy for transparency and accountability in municipal governance

Reach and Impact 1. **Direct beneficiaries**: 33,139 individuals (17,068 male, 16,071 female) 2. **Indirect beneficiaries**: 54,613 individuals via media outreach 3. **Total reached**: 87,782 people 4. Significant **behavioral changes** observed in youth, women, first-time voters, and people with disabilities regarding **civic participation**.	**Outreach and Impact** 1. Inclusion of youth, women, and marginalised groups in **civic processes** 1. Strengthened **dialogue between citizens and local authorities**. 2. Enhanced **participatory practices** in multiple municipalities. 3. Civil society organisations empowered to influence local governance.
Achievements 1. Formation of the Kilwa *Youth Working Group* with representation in local decision-making 2. Increased *civic awareness* among first-time voters 3. Strengthened *partnerships with local institutions and media* 4. Enhanced *trust and collaboration with government authorities*	**Achievements** 1. Sustained *citizen involvement in local policy-making*. 2. Increased *capacity of local actors to manage democratic challenges*. 3. Development of *inclusive decision-making tools and practices*. 4. Preservation of *civic trust and social cohesion* at the local level. 5. Recognition of LDA Georgia as a *central platform for democratic governance*
Challenges - Delays in *financial disbursement* and voter education accreditation - Limited *project coverage* due to high public demand *Bureaucratic hurdles* from regulatory bodies	**Challenges** *National political instability* affecting civil society operations - Need for *continuous support* and capacity building under pressure. - Shrinking national civic space due to *restrictive legislation* - Need for continuous support and capacity building under pressure
Success Story Youth engagement led to the establishment of a *youth representative in district planning meetings*. First-time voters expressed motivation and readiness to participate in the upcoming elections, showcasing the *project's influence on civic empowerment*.	**Success Stories** The Imereti Regional Hub has become a *model for regional cooperation and civil society development*. Participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies have *empowered communities to influence local governance*. Youth, women and marginalised groups have taken active roles in decision-making, showcasing the *resilience of grassroots democracy* in Georgia.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the challenging environments in which it operates, local engagement remains the most feasible and impactful entry point for democratic transformation. The EU and its partners must adopt **a multi-stakeholder and multi-level approach**, recognising the interdependence of civic, governmental, and international actors.

7.1 To democracy support community and institutions

The six cases provide valuable evidence to challenge and refine prevailing assumptions. Future strategies should embed this learning process to ensure interventions remain relevant, resilient, and impactful. Democratic transformation in fragile contexts will not be achieved through blueprints or external templates. It will be realised through **locally rooted, incrementally built, and community-owned processes** that prioritise participation, inclusion, and mutual accountability.

Those would be recommendations to the Democracy Support Community:

- **Empower local and grassroots actors** through inclusive funding mechanisms, capacity-building, and mentorship. Democracy and dialogue must be **practiced** and not only understood. Support small-scale interventions that have the potential for high visibility and tangible outcomes, recognising the multiplier effect of even modest resources. Prioritise locally rooted initiatives that enable communities to identify issues and co-develop solutions
- **Promote co-design and co-ownership** of initiatives, ensuring that local communities have a decisive voice in programme development, while fostering the sense of ownership and bottom-up approach
- **Promote dialogue and cooperation with local public institutions, when possible, to practice dialogue and continue trust cooperation** Local authorities but also representatives of national institutions, schools and other public institutions. Strengthen CSO networks and local partnerships to maintain engagement and preserve institutional memory beyond project lifecycles.
- **Foster inclusive participation**, especially for youth, women, informal civic groups, and diaspora communities
- **Foster youth and local communities' capacities to engage and remain in dialogue in a public space**
- **Promote transnational and cross border projects and cooperation**
- **Engage national governments pragmatically and non-confrontationally**, maintaining diplomatic access while reinforcing local autonomy.
- **Leverage digital technologies** to enable safe participation, particularly in restricted civic spaces.
- **Establish and maintain safe spaces for dialogue**—physical and virtual—where communities can express dissent, formulate visions, and negotiate solutions.
- **Be ready for flexibility and adjustments**

- Invest in inclusive capacity-building, focusing on youth, women, marginalised groups, and decision-makers-in-training to ensure a long-lasting democratic impact.
- **Encourage replicable models** that can be adapted in various geographical and socio-political settings.
- **Maintain long-term engagement strategies** that connect participation to genuine community improvements, fostering trust and a democratic culture
- **Recognise the value of intermediary structures** such as Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs), which act as vital connectors between civil society and governance institutions.

7.2 To practitioners

Interventions could be aligned with the levels of civic space identified. The evidence suggests that we should focus on areas where civic space remains available or partially open, deprioritising contexts where engagement carries high risks and limited impact. In line with this, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Still Available Space (scores 1–3): Prioritise strategic engagement.
- Limited Space (score 4): Focus on resilience strengthening.
- Closed Space (—): Deprioritise due to limited viability.

Countries with Available Space (Prioritise strategic engagement)	Countries with Limited Space (Focus on resilience strengthening.)
- Support democratic legitimacy by advocating for electoral integrity. - Build local council and grassroots CSO capacity to counter authoritarian trends. - Avoid reinforcing flawed democratic processes through misguided pressure on opposition parties. - Act as a bridge between local realities and EU or international policymaking.	- Revitalise civil society by supporting genuine, constituency-based organisations. - Promote participatory decision-making and transparency in local governance. - Facilitate civic education and strengthen community oversight mechanisms. - Build public trust in democracy as a viable alternative to autocracy.

Fig 4. Prioritising Engagement and Resilience by Country Context: Strategic Focus on Available and Limited Spaces, with limitation of Closed Spaces Where Local Engagement is Neutralised

Additional elements:

- **Identifying needs and addressing knowledge gaps:**

At both micro and meso levels, critical issues and community needs are often poorly understood or completely unarticulated. Both projects highlight a "knowledge gap", which can be addressed through targeted training, awareness-raising, and participatory learning initiatives. Understanding these needs is oessential for effective civic engagement and locally relevant solutions. This should be the first step in drafting the actions.

- **Strategic support is crucial:**

In contexts of limited resources and high needs, even modest support, whether financial, technical, or logistical, can produce remarkable results. When communities are provided with the necessary tools and recognition to act, synergies develop, transforming engagement into visible and sustainable outcomes.

- **Investing in individuals, especially the marginalised:**

Democratic culture depends on accessible participation mechanisms. Supporting young people, especially those who have been previously excluded or marginalised (for example, youth living in slums or IDPs), is a strategic investment. By building their capacity to participate in governance, these young individuals can eventually shift from being merely "governed" to becoming "governing," thereby shaping the future of their communities and strengthening national democratic resilience.

- **Leveraging local potential:**

Local actors have a remarkable ability to identify issues and co-develop solutions that are suitable for their context. The projects showed that challenges will always occur, but local stakeholders, supported through organised collaboration, have the skills and flexibility to respond effectively. Partnerships formed by implementing organisations are long-lasting rather than one-time, improving sustainability and local ownership.

- **Civil society as a resilient partner:**

Although civil society is often viewed as weak in fragile contexts, both projects demonstrate that CSOs and grassroots groups are resilient, resourceful, and capable of filling gaps in public service delivery. Support enhances their visibility, prestige, and capacity, allowing them to sustain engagement beyond the formal project period.

- **The role of intermediary platforms:**

Both projects emphasise the importance of intermediary platforms—such as CdQ bodies, youth councils, and CSO networks—that serve as connectors between local communities and governance institutions. These platforms enable dialogue, coordinate initiatives, and lend legitimacy, ensuring that community voices are heard while solutions stay contextually appropriate. Intermediaries also play a crucial role in maintaining engagement, bridging the gap between grassroots participation and formal decision-making structures.

- **Replicable models for broader impact:**

Although both projects were implemented in specific contexts, the models developed are transferable and adaptable across regions, even beyond Africa. This odemonstrates that locally rooted initiatives can inform broader strategies for participatory, inclusive governance.

- **Building Democratic Resilience:**

Core contributions to democratic resilience include:
  - Fostering inclusivity and participation at all levels
  - Building capacity among citizens and local institutions
  - Strengthening bottom-up democratic practices
  - Transforming perceptions of local governance over time

- **Leveraging Digital Tools:**

Both projects effectively utilised digital platforms for coordination, training, and civic engagement. This demonstrates not only technical ability but also the adaptability of local actors in responding to changing contexts and opportunities.

7.3 To enhance Democratic Resilience through the Global Gateway Initiative

The Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) is rooted in democratic values, transparency, and equal partnerships. Its democratic dimension often receives less attention than its connectivity investments, yet this is precisely where it interlinks with **local democratic resilience**. Taken together, these insights underline **that Global Gateway can serve as a vehicle for democratic resilience—especially when tailored to local contexts and civic realities.**

Local democratic resilience and the Global Gateway initiative mutually benefit each other through enhanced engagement, accountability, capacity building, and institutional strengthening. While resilient local democracies contribute to the effective implementation and sustainability of Global Gateway projects, the support and investments from the initiative foster an environment conducive to further strengthening democratic processes at the local level. This synergy enhances overall governance, promotes stability, and ultimately leads to sustainable development outcomes that align with both local and global goals.

How does local democratic resilience contribute to the Global Gateway Initiative?

1. Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement
 - **Local Input on Projects**: Resilient local democracies encourage active community engagement in decision-making processes. This local input ensures that Global Gateway projects are more relevant and effectively address community needs.
 - **Public Participation and Transparency:** Engaging citizens in governance fosters transparency and accountability, aligning with Global Gateway's goals of promoting high governance standards

2. Democratic Accountability
 - **Strengthened Oversight Mechanisms**: Local democratic resilience fosters robust oversight systems that hold local and national governments accountable for the implementation of Global Gateway projects. This ensures that investments are used effectively and as intended.
 - **Citizen Empowerment**: Active citizen: participation can create an environment of accountability where local authorities are more responsive to community needs, thus improving the effectiveness of development projects.

3. Financial and Technical Resources
 - **Investment in Infrastructure:** Global Gateway provides financial resources for critical infrastructure projects that enhance service delivery, which helps local governments meet citizens' needs, thus reinforcing public trust in democratic institutions.
 - **Capacity Development Support**: The initiative often includes technical assistance and training

for local and national governments, further building their capacity to operate effectively and transparently.

4. Strengthened Local Institutions
 - **Promotion of Good Governance Standards**: By prioritising investment in projects that adhere to governance standards, Global Gateway helps strengthen local institutions, which is vital for fostering resilient democracies.
 - **Frameworks for Collaboration**: The initiative encourages the establishment of partnerships between authorities, civil society, and the private sector, enhancing collaborative governance that supports democratic resilience.

5 . Social Cohesion and Stability
 - **Building Trust**: Resilient democracies often promote social cohesion and trust among community members, which is crucial for successful project implementation. Communities that work together can more effectively mobilise support for Global Gateway initiatives.
 - **Conflict Prevention**: Strong institutions and community engagement help mitigate social tensions that could arise during the implementation of large projects. This stability is beneficial for both local governance and Global Gateway's overall objectives.

6. Capacity Building
 - **Skill Development**: Local democratic resilience involves training local leaders and community members, enhancing their skills in governance and project management, which ultimately benefits Global Gateway initiatives by creating a more informed and capable local workforce.
 - **Institutional Strength**: As local governance structures strengthen through resilience strategies, they become more equipped to partner effectively with Global Gateway, ensuring that projects align with local priorities

How is local democratic resilience strengthened by the Global Gateway Initiative?

1. Financial and Technical Resources
 - **Investment in Infrastructure**: Global Gateway provides financial resources for critical infrastructure projects that enhance service delivery, which helps local governments meet citizens' needs, thus reinforcing public trust in democratic institutions.
 - **Capacity Development Support**: The initiative often includes technical assistance and training for local and national governments, further building their capacity to operate effectively and transparently.

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 - **Frameworks for Collaboration**: The initiative encourages the establishment of partnerships between authorities, civil society, and the private sector, enhancing collaborative governance

3. Empowerment of Civil Society

- **Support for Local Organisations**: Global Gateway initiatives may provide funding
and support for civil society organisations that advocate for democratic practices and hold
local governments accountable.
 - **Facilitation of Public Discourse**: By promoting dialogue and engagement between civil society
and local government, these initiatives enhance democratic practices and broaden
participation.

4. Inclusive Development
 - **Addressing Inequalities**: Global Gateway's focus on sustainable development and inclusion
ensure that marginalised communities have a voice in decision-making, thereby reinforcing the
democratic principle of representation.
 - **Community Resilience**: Projects that improve social services and economic opportunities
contribute to the overall resilience of communities, creating a basis for thriving democracies
that can adapt to challenges.

8. CONCLUSION

Building on the assumption that the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) and Democracy are mutually reinforcing, and drawing on the strengths of multilevel governance, ALDA and the democracy support community should position its interventions locally and from the bottom up, with a specific focus on civil liberties and democratic rules. By acting with agility in the remaining spaces between governance levels, we can counter autocratic tendencies and ensure that GGI incentives take root in a sustainable way, ultimately strengthening democratic societies.

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November 2025