ECON
European Community Organizing Network

ANNUAL DONOR FORUM 2026 • PUBLIC REPORT & KEY TAKEAWAYS

From Shock to Strategy: Donors and Organizers Re-shaping Funding for Democracy

A synthesis of insights, case studies, and strategic recommendations from community organizers and movement-aligned funders across Europe.

Date: 21 October 2026 | **Convened by:** European Community Organizing Network (ECON)

01 Executive Summary & Forum Overview

Bringing together European community organizers, civil society networks, and funders to move from crisis defense to long-term strategy.

Marking its 10th anniversary as a registered European network of 28 progressive community organizing groups across 14 countries, the European Community Organizing Network (ECON) convened its annual Donor Forum on 21 October 2026 under the theme **"From Shock to Strategy: Donors and Organizers Re-shaping Funding for Democracy."** Moderated by ECON's Alex Voronov and Aliz, the forum gathered community organizers, national and European networks, participatory intermediaries, and philanthropic partners to examine how civil society can overcome acute political and financial shocks and build durable, democratic people power.

CENTRAL TAKEAWAY OF THE 2026 DONOR FORUM

Across Europe, grassroots movements and civil society organizations face a fundamental mismatch between what creates lasting systemic change and what traditional philanthropy typically funds. While funders often favor **short-term, single-issue projects with rapid, quantifiable outputs**, community organizing requires **long-term relational and institutional infrastructure**: core staff, community-owned spaces, leadership education, network weaving, policy advocacy, legal defense, and collective care.

Funding activities without funding the organizations, relationships, and networks behind them leaves democratic infrastructure fragile precisely when authoritarian and economic shocks are intensifying.

02 Keynote Highlights: Moving From Shock to Strategy

Core reflections from Martin Avila, Executive Director of ECON, on building connected collective power across Europe.

- **1. Collective Power Over Advocacy-on-Behalf:** While ECON's members span diverse national contexts and traditions, they share one foundational conviction: lasting democratic change does not come from advocating on behalf of communities, but from **people themselves developing relationships, leadership, and collective power** to shape the decisions affecting their lives. Entering its second decade, ECON defines its mission as **"organizing those who organize"**—connecting local organizations into a European movement capable of exercising collective power.
- **2. Breaking Out of Perpetual Crisis Mode:** Alongside macro crises of war, climate breakdown, and economic inequality, civil society leaders across Europe are experiencing deeply personal shocks: restrictive new legislation targeting NGOs, sudden withdrawal of donor funds, and intimidation, harassment, or violence against colleagues. While immediate defensive reactions—protecting staff and finding emergency survival funds—are necessary,

remaining trapped in perpetual crisis response leaves movements with no time or capacity to organize for the future.

- **3. From Shock to Strategy in Action — Lessons from Serbia:** Europe is witnessing not only democratic backsliding, but also extraordinary civic mobilization—including the end of Viktor Orbán's 16-year rule in Hungary and a historic national movement in **Serbia**. Following the Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse nearly two years ago that killed 16 people, initial grief and outrage over attacks on peaceful vigils evolved into a disciplined, long-term strategy. University students walked hundreds of kilometers between towns to build deep community trust beyond campuses, forged broad alliances, and established democratic decision-making assemblies (**plenums**) that selected an independent candidate list to contest Serbia's parliamentary elections.
- **4. Three Strategic Questions for Civil Society and Philanthropy:** Moving from shock to strategy demands shared reflection across the ecosystem:
  • **For Civil Society:** Are we investing enough in leadership development, cross-movement alliances, and power analysis—or are we competing for scarce resources and defending our institutions in isolation?
  • **For Funders:** Are we providing the patient, flexible, multi-year support needed to build relationships and institutions whose impact may take years to become visible?
  • **For All Actors:** Are we centering our resources and decision-making on those most marginalized, exploited, and persecuted—**not as passive beneficiaries, but as organizers, leaders, and decision-makers exercising new power**?

03 Panel 1: Community Organizers' Perspectives — Key Points & Outcomes

Insights from Dina Marunko (Institute Respublica, Ukraine), Maroš Chmelík (CKO, Slovakia), and Seamus Farrell (CATU, Ireland), facilitated by Aliz Pocsuvalszki (ECON).

Three community organizing organizations operating in vastly different political and economic realities shared how they have navigated recent funding shocks and what structural shifts they need from donors:

Organization	Mission & Scale	Primary Funding & Political Shocks	Resilience Strategy
Institute Respublica (Ukraine) **Dina Marunko, Board Member**	Nearly 30 years strengthening local democracy and civic participation. Engaged **100+ communities across 20 regions** (2015–2025), supporting ~1,000 local initiatives, 22 mini-grants, and 11,000 psychological consultations (reaching ~11M people).	The sudden suspension of U.S.-funded programs eliminated **~50% of the organization's budget**, forcing painful reductions in regional presence alongside daily wartime disruptions (shelling, staff displacement, and 48-hour power blackouts).	Diversifying international and private foundation partnerships; prioritizing core community needs; utilizing backup power stations and remote/multi-role staffing.
Center for Community Organizing / CKO (Slovakia) **Maroš Chmelík, Executive Director**	Founded in 1999; builds local leadership and community resilience against extremism and authoritarianism, anchored by the **"Not In Our Town"** civic initiative launched in 2013.	Grew from near-closure in 2013 (€30k budget, 3 part-time staff) to a stable **€250k–€300k annual budget**, but now faces **targeted state audits and political intimidation** under a Slovak government resolution against NGOs.	Focusing on long-term programs rather than short-term project pitches; maintaining **7 to 10 diverse funding sources** simultaneously so no single donor exit causes collapse.
Community Action Tenants Union / CATU (Ireland) **Seamus Farrell, Regional**	All-island tenants' and community union (Republic of Ireland & Northern Ireland) organizing on housing, public	Avoided donor shocks through member self-financing, but faces **heavy grant paperwork**, rising urban rents for meeting	Built a democratic dues model: grew from **30 members (2019) to 2,500 members paying €5–**

Organizer	space, environmental links, and **anti-racist / anti-sectarian solidarity**.	spaces, and funder preference for narrow policy wins over deep community infrastructure.	**€10/month**, generating **~€300,000/year** and covering **80–90% of budget** independently.

Key Outcomes: Five Changes Organizers Need from Donors

- **1. Multi-Year Partnerships with Space to Think (The Volkswagen Foundation Model):** Organizers stressed that relationship-building cannot be reduced to a one-minute pitch or a 12-month output table. CKO shared a best-practice partnership with the **Volkswagen Foundation in Slovakia**, which committed **four years of funding** to train 100 local organizers and explicitly allowed CKO to use **Year 1 to slow down, conduct research, read, and build relationships** without pressure to deliver immediate quantitative numbers.
- **2. Funding Legal Defense, Audit Protection & Mental Health:** When governments target civil society with politically motivated audits and harassment (as in Slovakia today), organizations are forced to divert massive capacity into compliance and defense. Donors must fund **legal services, audit defense, and psychological support** to keep teams resilient.
- **3. Radical Flexibility & Simplified Procedures in Crisis Contexts:** In wartime Ukraine, constant shelling, blackouts, and staff displacement mean timelines and budget lines must adapt rapidly. Simpler, faster grant applications and trust-based timeline extensions are essential to prevent burnout and sustain regional teams.
- **4. Targeted Infrastructure Grants (Dual-Speed Funds, Educators & Community-Owned Spaces):** CATU highlighted four high-leverage areas where grants can complement grassroots membership dues: **(a) rapid-response funds** for sudden community standoffs alongside slow base-building funds; **(b) paid political education coordinators and facilitators**; **(c) back-office admin and match-fundraising staff**; and **(d) capital investments allowing communities to purchase and collectively own physical organizing spaces** amid soaring European rents.
- **5. Bridging the Gap Beyond Impersonal Portals via Regional Intermediaries:** During the Q&A, participants noted that while some private foundations engage in open partnership dialogue, large institutional donors (such as EU institutions) and foundations relying strictly on impersonal online portals remain inaccessible to grassroots groups. To bridge this gap for smaller local communities, CKO and partners in **Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria** are developing a **regional community-organizing intermediary model** to connect major foundations directly with local grassroots initiatives.

04 Panel 2: Donors & Intermediary Perspectives — Key Points & Outcomes

Insights from Philippa Parmar (Safe Passage Fund) and Maria Alejandra Escalante (Collective Abundance), facilitated by Alex Voronov (ECON).

Representing movement-born, participatory intermediary funds, Safe Passage Fund (supporting grassroots migrant justice across Europe) and Collective Abundance (resourcing grassroots climate justice in Southern and Eastern Europe) shared how they shift power and navigate a contracting philanthropic landscape:

- **Shifting Decision-Making Power to Frontline Movements: Safe Passage Fund**—born in 2019 out of a €1M+ solidarity crowdfunding campaign following the arrest of sea-rescue captain Carola Rackete in Italy—places grant decisions in the hands of an **all-women* Activist Council** with lived experience of migration and displacement, providing flexible general operating grants of up to €10,000 in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and the Balkans. **Collective Abundance**, run by lifelong organizers, combines individual core grants for marginalized communities (Roma, youth, women, racialized groups) with **shared collective funding pots across country coalitions of 10–15 groups in Spain, Poland, and Greece** to catalyze cross-movement alliances.
- **Confronting Shrinking Portfolios & Severe Grassroots Underfunding:** Despite escalating border violence, criminalization of solidarity workers, and the restrictive EU Common European Asylum System (CEAS) Pact, **migration receives only 5% of global human rights funding—of which just 6% reaches women's**

movements and only 1% supports grassroots organizing. Following U.S. aid cuts and foundation sunsetting, many funders have merged dedicated migration funds into broad "belonging and democratic renewal" portfolios, shrinking available resources and forcing grassroots groups into heightened competition.

- **Responding with Core Support, Risk Absorption & Philanthropic Organizing:** When Safe Passage Fund shifted entirely to unrestricted general operating grants, the share of grantees spending their funds on **core survival costs (salaries, rent, honorariums) rose from 65% in 2024 to 91% in 2025**. Both intermediaries emphasized replacing heavy written reporting with verbal check-ins, providing rapid-response and travel funds, **absorbing state surveillance and legal risks on behalf of frontline grantees**, and organizing both institutional donors and individual wealth holders to challenge boardroom gatekeeping.

05 Breakout Room Synthesis: Cross-Cutting Themes & Takeaways

Consolidated findings from four parallel breakout discussions connecting local, national, and European organizers and funders.

Across four facilitated breakout rooms, participants examined what is easy versus hard to fund, how funding structures affect movement autonomy, and how to re-shape the ecosystem. Four cross-cutting themes emerged:

- **1. The Project-Cycle Trap & Democratic Distrust (Group 1):** High-profile campaigns and short-term projects with predictable deliverables are far easier to fund than multi-year trust-building, tactical pivots, and community spaces. Crucially, participants warned of what happens **after a short-term project ends**: when funding stops and organizers are forced to leave a community after months of relationship-building, **it erodes not only trust in civil society, but citizens' faith in collective action and democracy.** To counter activist burnout, participants also advocated for **"positive organizing"**—mobilizing communities around hope and shared vision rather than solely against threats.
- **2. Undervalued Infrastructure & The "Funding Paradox" (Group 2):** Organizations across diverse fields—including **Institute Respublica** (wartime democratic consultations and veteran integration in Ukraine), **GOC Alumni Network** (connecting 450 organizers across Central/Eastern Europe), **ECOLISE** (community-led climate sustainability and Brussels advocacy), and **Saplinq** (LGBTI+ rights in Slovakia, where only ~5% of overall funding reaches LGBTI+ work)—face a shared structural gap. Donors treat **network weaving, member coordination, and EU policy advocacy** (where single-organization attribution for passing a directive is impossible) as overhead rather than core impact. This creates a **"funding paradox"**: networks that lack capacity to run extra activities feel forced to invent and promise new project deliverables in grant applications just to survive, causing severe overstretch.
- **3. Reframing Organizing as Societal Resilience Infrastructure (Group 3):** Particularly in countries along Europe's eastern border where security and defense dominate public discourse, community organizing can be boldly reframed as a **vital investment in societal resilience**—building the social cohesion and local democratic structures societies need to withstand crises and external threats. Participants also called for building coalitions **"outside our own bubble,"** unlocking funding for **non-violent direct action (NVDA)**, and creating a **shared network database of aligned funders and creative non-grant revenue models**.
- **4. Overcoming Capitalist Competition Through Movement-Owned Wealth (Group 4):** Participants named **capitalism** as the root system linking shrinking civic space, extreme wealth inequality, and violent border regimes. Yet movements face a painful internal contradiction: **operating inside a capitalist fundraising market where organizations compete against peers for scarce grants and media attention.** Echoing the plenary panels, participants emphasized that movements must **own their own productive assets, physical spaces, and financial infrastructure** to achieve genuine autonomy and end decades of fundraising frustration.

06 Conclusion & Strategic Roadmap

Four actionable shifts to move European community organizing and philanthropy from defensive shock response to long-term strategy.

The 2026 ECON Donor Forum underscored that while European civil society faces acute financial and political pressures, grassroots movements are demonstrating remarkable strategic capacity. Turning these moments of mobilization into durable democratic power requires four coordinated shifts across organizers, intermediaries, and funders:

Strategic Pillar	Priority Actions for Funders, Intermediaries & Organizers
1. Invest in Multi-Year Core & Relational Infrastructure	Shift from 12-month project deliverables to **4+ year core partnerships** that allow dedicated time for research, reflection, and relationship-building, and recognize **network weaving, cross-border translation, leadership education, and policy advocacy** as core impact.
2. Resource Holistic Resilience, Legal Defense & Care	Protect movements facing state intimidation, surveillance, and crisis conditions by embedding **legal defense, state-audit compliance, psychosocial support, conflict mediation, and rapid-response funds** directly into grantmaking.
3. Build Movement-Owned Wealth & Dues Autonomy	Reduce philanthropic dependency and inter-organizational competition by co-investing in **community-owned physical spaces, cooperative housing, match-funded membership dues infrastructure** (such as CATU's model), and alternative income generation.
4. Channel Resources Through Participatory & Regional Intermediaries	Bridge the gap between large institutional donors and local grassroots groups by expanding **movement-governed intermediaries**—such as Safe Passage Fund, Collective Abundance, and emerging Central & Eastern European organizing intermediaries—placing affected communities at the center of decision-making.

About ECON: The European Community Organizing Network (ECON) is a network of progressive organizations, groups, and movements engaged in community organizing across Europe toward social and environmental justice—empowering communities to build people power, solidarity, and democratic participation.