

The Big Pivot: Competing for Civic Space in an Uncertain World

The outlook for civic space over the next five years is sobering. The primary threat is not only just overt repression, but a quiet, systematic dismantling of the legitimacy of civic actors and their global support networks. To stay competitive, civil society must move beyond mere resilience and go on offense; the response must be targeted, strategic, and designed to directly contest authoritarian power.

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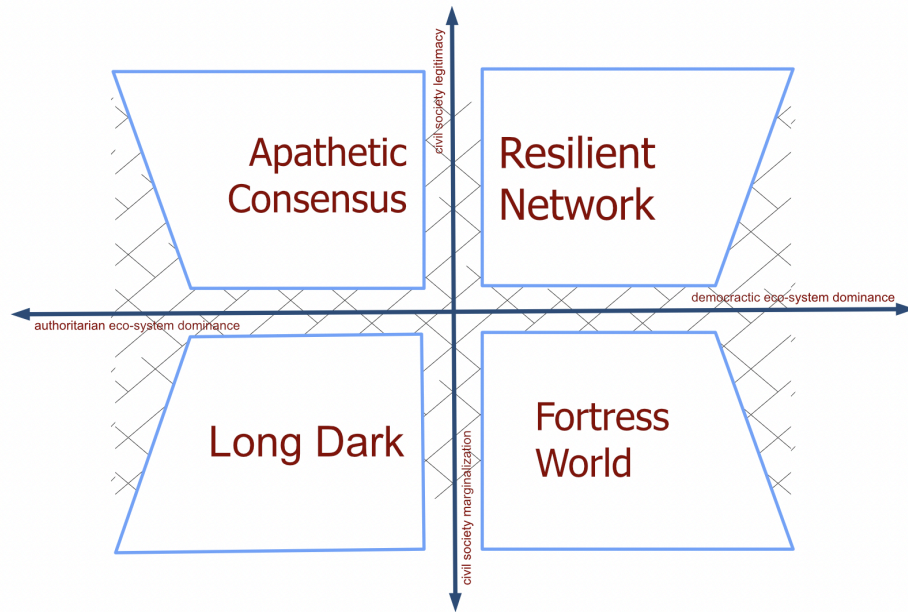
Executive Summary

Globally, civic space at the start of 2026 is characterized by strategic uncertainty. The once-stable international framework that saw democratic nations consistently oppose authoritarian crackdowns has weakened, leaving civil society to grapple with how to allocate limited resources and set priorities.

Based on the theory of critical uncertainties, two global dynamics emerge:

- Whether civil society is broadly recognized as legitimate by the state, political actors, and the public, or systematically marginalized and subjected to relentless delegitimization campaigns.
- Whether pro-democracy actors will build effective transnational coalitions, or authoritarian actors will expand their global reach faster than democracies can respond.

These two uncertainties define the 2026-2031 global framework for civic



space. Their interaction produces four radically different futures:

1. **The Resilient Network (15% probability of happening):** Civil society retains legitimacy across legal, public, and political spheres while global pro-democracy coalitions hold
2. **The Apathetic Consensus (30% of probability):** Pro-democracy coalitions function internationally, but civil society loses domestic legitimacy
3. **Fortress World (30% of probability):** Civil society retains domestic legitimacy, but international pro-democracy systems collapse.
4. **The Long Dark (25% of probability):** Civil society loses legitimacy across all spheres while authoritarian actors dominate globally

While no single scenario is likely, it is clear that civic space will face significant and continuous challenges over the next five years, fueled by a worrying reality:

Authoritarian actors have effectively figured out how to outmaneuver civil

society. Scenario analysis indicates that even in the Resilient Network scenario, where conditions for civic space are most favorable, civil society strategies are predominantly ineffective against authoritarian tactics. Their strategies sometimes work, though authoritarian counteractions are also effective.

In less desirable scenarios, civil society strategies challenging authoritarianism become reliably ineffective -countered by authoritarian responses that are routine, tested, and almost certain to succeed. At the same time, authoritarian tactics, especially those that are "invisible" and rely on ideology or big tech, appear to be predominantly effective across all scenarios.

This asymmetry is due to authoritarian tactics being built for quick action without needing agreement, political approval, or extensive coordination. The most effective authoritarian tactics leave no evidence, create no martyrs, and appear as coincidences instead of planned attacks. Four evolving authoritarian tactics to watch are:

- **Algorithmic Pacification:** Social media platforms quietly hide dissent to manufacture a false sense of government support.
- **Institutional Mimicry:** States manufacture subservient NGOs and "victim" groups to crowd out real activists and justify repressive laws.
- **Strategic Dehumanization:** Branding civil society as a threat to erode public empathy and normalize state violence.
- **Administrative Sludge:** Using AI and bureaucracy to freeze finances and block services, increasing the cost of activism and making organizational survival impossible.

Moving on up

The strategic implications for civil society over the next five years are somewhat counterintuitive. Authoritarian regimes need reliable results. If a repressive tactic does not work all of the time, it is seen as a weakness, not a win. Civil society operates under different standards- even a tactic that works some of the time can be considered a success.

Changing the balance in favor of civil society requires not only a shift in the operating context but also a pivot from a defensive to an offensive strategy. Six tactics are relevant for changing this balance across all four possible futures:

1. **Rebuild legitimacy** by investing in social ties with political actors, faith communities, business associations, and other groups that retain public trust.
2. **Diffuse social norms** that enable civic space through pop culture, entertainment, and sports, reaching people who would not otherwise engage with civil society.

3. **Challenge authoritarian power** through political means, and move beyond advocacy (asking power to change) and toward contesting power (altering the political math for those in charge).
4. **Exploit disunity** by using the inherent mistrust, contradictions, and conflicting national interests of authoritarian actors, and amplifying failures that break the "stability bargain."
5. **Invest in shared infrastructure** among civil society, donors, and other allies, including the creation of specialized rapid-response teams that can offer advice and support to organizations within days, not weeks.
6. **Decentralize decision-making** to local actors with community ties, who can work discreetly and build alliances across a wide range of groups, including allies within the authoritarian structure itself.

Under current circumstances, civil society cannot prevail over the next five years, and maybe it does not need to. It needs to be competitive enough to challenge authoritarian control, so that when the operating environment becomes more favorable or opportunities arise, it is ready to seize them instead of being pushed out.



A word on the methodology:

This brief is a scenario analysis, not a prediction. It does not claim that negative scenarios will occur. The methodology combines critical uncertainties theory, country-specific research across five contexts, and Monte Carlo simulations (1.36 million iterations) to assess the likelihood of each scenario and the probability of success for authoritarian tactics and civil society strategies.

The Context

Globally, civic space enters 2026 defined by strategic uncertainty. The stable international framework in which democratic nations, with near-consistency, once opposed authoritarian crackdowns has eroded, leaving civil society to face a growing wave of authoritarianism without the guaranteed support of its usual allies.

The strategic uncertainty facing civil society worldwide is being compounded by a "Great Funding Withdrawal," as the 2025 termination of US governmental support for civil society, along with severe aid cuts from European donors, has effectively destabilized civil society networks globally. This retreat is accelerated by a shift among democratic nations toward hard geopolitical calculations that prioritize national security and economic interests even more than human rights, all while the US repositioned itself from a reliable ally of civil society to an opponent of the values that civil society stands for.

As authoritarian regimes proliferate in international relations, democratic actors are becoming increasingly inward-looking. Rather than supporting the expansion of civic space abroad, they are choosing a defensive crouch, focused on "safeguarding the home front" against internal polarization and foreign interference. No one seems to be spared; even historically stable democratic nations are seeing the foundations of their civic space crack.

This resource, attention, and solidarity vacuum is actively being filled by a global authoritarian ecosystem in which state actors, ideological networks, and

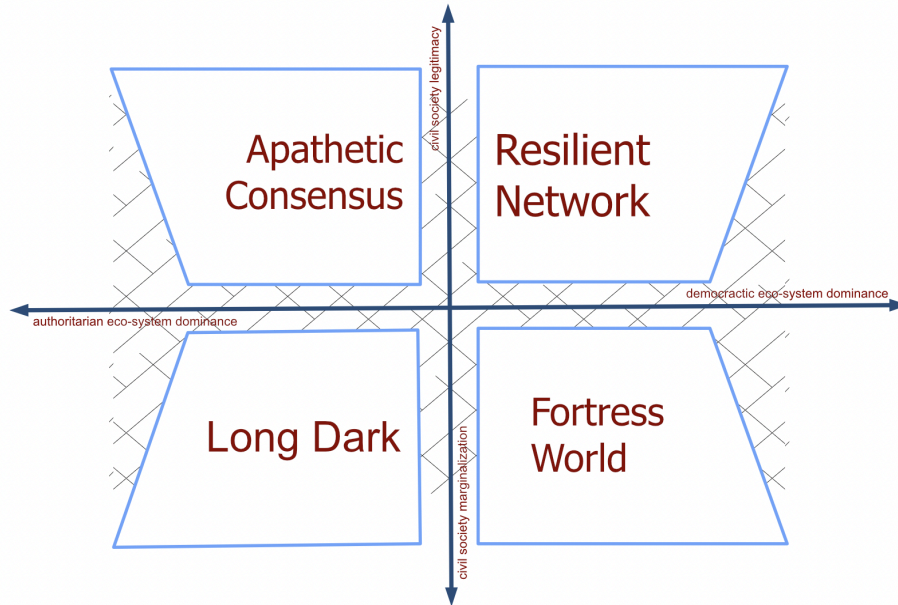
commercial entities, including "big tech," collaborate to dismantle, surveil, and repress civic space globally.

Four Futures for Civic Space

As we analyzed these disparate trends, two global-scale dynamics that transcend national borders started to emerge: First, whether civil society is broadly recognized as legitimate and necessary by the state, political actors, and the public, or systematically marginalized, deprived of legal protection, and subjected to relentless "culture war" and "anti-civil society" narratives. Second, whether pro-democracy actors (states, civil society, and remaining international institutions) will build effective transnational coalitions, or whether authoritarian actors will expand their global reach.

These two uncertainties define this 2026-2031 global framework for civic space. Their interaction produces four radically different futures, each demanding distinct strategies. In practice, this period will likely not fit a single scenario perfectly. Instead, one scenario is expected to emerge as the dominant global dynamic, while aspects of others may persist in specific regions. Once established, this global trajectory is likely to remain stable over a five-year horizon; sudden shifts between these futures are less likely without a significant, unpredictable systemic event.

Each scenario is summarized below. Annex 2 provides a fuller picture: what each future means for democracy, civil society, donors, and protection groups.



The Resilient Network:

Civil society retains legitimacy while pro-democracy coalitions hold

Civil society is widely seen as a legitimate force both at home and abroad. Even in less-than-perfect democracies, courts offer real procedural protections. Most people view civil society as working for the public good, not for foreign interests or elites. Political actors, including those with illiberal views, challenge civil society through political channels rather than seeking to eliminate it. At the same time, pro-democracy coalitions across borders remain strong, upholding international norms and adding outside pressure that boosts domestic legitimacy. Still, legitimacy is not the same everywhere. Some authoritarian countries remain, and young democracies are still vulnerable. Overall, though, the main global trend supports the growth of civic space rather than its restriction.

Civil society moves from just surviving to growing. With a strong base of

legitimacy across legal, public, and political spheres, civic groups can participate directly in governance and policy-making. International networks operate openly. In restrictive countries, civil society challenges authoritarian governments with the support and protection from international democratic partners. The main focus now is on increasing impact and stopping any loss of progress, rather than just defending against threats.

Fortress World:

Civil society retains legitimacy, but international systems collapse

Domestic civic legitimacy is generally strong in legal, public, and political areas in most democracies, but this strength is uneven. Courts are mostly independent, people in stable democracies tend to trust civic groups, and political rivals compete rather than try to remove civil society. In contrast, in young and developing democracies, political leaders, even those who claim to support democracy, often have little patience for civil society, seeing it as

driven by elites or as a political obstacle. This weakness is often hidden by a surface appearance of stability. At the same time, the international system is breaking down. Authoritarian countries now control many multilateral forums, spread their legal models and surveillance tools, and set up financial networks that avoid sanctions. These states also carry out repression across borders, even in democracies.

A serious divide is developing. Groups in stable democracies still work well, but are becoming more isolated from the rest of the world. In young democracies, organizations face two problems at once: they lack strong support at home and are losing protection from international systems. Working together across borders is now harder because authoritarian ideas are changing international law. Civil society still has support from the public and courts in many places, but it is losing the international support that once helped turn that legitimacy into real action.

Apathetic Consensus:

Civic legitimacy collapses while the global pro-democracy ecosystem holds

Pro-democracy coalitions still work well across borders, and international norms are partly holding up. However, in both authoritarian states and young democracies, civil society is losing legitimacy across legal, public, and political spheres. Legal systems are either used against civic groups or cannot be trusted. Public opinion is shaped against these groups through ongoing ideological and commercial efforts, such as using algorithms to distract, spreading dehumanizing

messages, and creating fake grassroots organizations. Politicians from all sides, even in developing democracies, often see civil society as foreign or an elite project that matters little to most people. Even in authoritarian countries, where civil society once gained trust by standing up to corrupt leaders, long-term ideological campaigns have weakened that trust. The public support that once protected activists from state violence can no longer be counted on.

Civil society still has support from international groups, but it is losing acceptance at home across legal, public, and political spheres. While international protection is available, it cannot replace the trust of local communities, which is now at risk. As a result, civil society groups often have to go underground or hide their work by focusing on areas like public health, city planning, consumer rights, or the environment. Groups that stay visible often come to be seen as partisan, losing the neutral reputation that once helped them build broad alliances. Even in authoritarian countries, the old advantage of being seen as fighting for ordinary people against the government is no longer dependable.

The Long Dark:

Civic legitimacy collapses while authoritarian actors dominate globally

Civil society is losing legitimacy in authoritarian states, young democracies, and even established democracies that are backsliding. Legal systems are often used against civil society or taken over. People, influenced by ongoing online manipulation and dehumanization campaigns, no longer believe civil

society works for them. Political leaders of all types, from authoritarian regimes to illiberal parties and even centrist governments that focus on trade over human rights, see civil society as a problem. The public's trust in civil society, once strong in authoritarian countries because it was seen as defending ordinary people, has also faded. At the same time, authoritarian actors are expanding their influence globally. State, ideological, and commercial interests now work together more quickly than democracies can respond. International organizations are controlled, financial networks avoid sanctions, and cross-border repression happens even in democracies.

In most places, independent civil society has been almost completely wiped out. Losing legitimacy is even more damaging than direct repression, because it means civil society cannot recover even if there are brief chances

for change. The public trust and political support needed for a comeback are gone. What remains moves into exile, forms diaspora networks, or operates secretly within non-political areas. The main focus now is to keep organizational knowledge alive, protect important people, and maintain basic connections in case new opportunities arise.

No single outcome is currently inevitable. The probability distribution is fragmented, with our two leading scenarios, Apathetic Consensus and Fortress World, tied at 30% probability each. While no specific scenario is guaranteed, when we categorize scenarios by the outcomes of critical uncertainties, the overall probability that civic space will be significantly challenged increases to 85%. Therefore, while a total collapse of civic space is improbable, the dominant strategic challenge continues to be the trend toward authoritarian consolidation of control over civic space.

The difference between these scenarios isn't just about probability; it's about what's still possible.

Even in the Resilient Network scenario, where civil society maintains legitimacy and pro-democracy coalitions are strong, strategies are predominantly ineffective against authoritarian tactics; they sometimes succeed, but countermeasures often work.

Moving to the Apathetic Consensus or Fortress World, civil society strategies that challenge authoritarian control over civic space become reliably ineffective. This may sound technical, but it's a game-changer: authoritarian responses are routine, tested, and almost always successful.

In the Long Dark, most strategies aren't just failing; they're becoming counterproductive. The pattern is clear: each step downward not only reduces success but eliminates entire categories of strategy. What might work in the Resilient Network can become dangerous in the Long Dark.

The Starting Point

Civil society and its allies face a strategic challenge that no single scenario fully describes. The main goal is to work toward the Resilient Network scenario while also building the resilience needed to survive the Long Dark scenario. It is just as important, though, to prevent the two intermediate scenarios (Fortress World and The Apathetic Consensus) from consolidating. Both of these undermine the legitimacy on which civil society relies across all three domains, and both can lead toward The Long Dark even without a major authoritarian shift. This core strategy applies universally, but

each scenario requires a different focus on timing and resources.

- **In The Resilient Network**, the main focus is on taking action. Since civic legitimacy is strong across the legal, public, and political spheres, and pro-democracy groups are working effectively, resources should shift from defense to expanding civic space. This means supporting civil society in places that remain authoritarian, using international institutions to pressure authoritarian actors, and working more closely with the business and tech sectors to stop harmful influence before it weakens the conditions that make this scenario possible.
- **In Fortress World**, the main goal is to move and protect infrastructure. Domestic legitimacy is partly holding, but international systems are breaking down. Resources should go toward strengthening funding and operations outside compromised international channels, supporting legal defense against transnational repression, and building coalitions with unlikely allies, such as conservative civic groups, diaspora networks, and faith communities whose legitimacy remains strong as international civil society faces pressure.
- **In The Apathetic Consensus**, the main focus is rebuilding legitimacy. Pro-democracy groups still work together internationally, but civil society has lost its base of support at home in public and political areas. Resources should go to campaigns that shape social norms, highlight failures of authoritarian governments, and place civic organizing within neutral sectors that

people still trust. Strategic lawsuits and international cooperation are still important, but they need to be redesigned to avoid feeding the perception of foreign interference, which is worsening the loss of legitimacy.

- **In The Long Dark**, the main goal is survival and keeping things going. Independent civil society is almost gone in most places. Resources should focus on low-profile, decentralized grassroots organizing, programs run from outside the country, emergency protection, and careful documentation of abuses for future accountability. The aim is not to win right now, but to maintain enough networks and knowledge so that democratic movements can return when there is a chance.

What Civil Society Is Currently Doing

In all these scenarios, civil society and its allies are actively challenging authoritarians in closing civic space in several ways. Transnational advocacy networks build support across borders, expose repression, and speak up for imprisoned defenders in international institutions that still work. Legal networks take on strategic lawsuits to challenge restrictive laws, set international standards, and put pressure on businesses and governments that enable repression. They are moving beyond just defending individuals to targeting the bigger systems that close civic space.

Social movements are building wider coalitions that connect struggles—climate, gender, labor, and democracy activists. This creates pressure on governments and companies that a

single-issue human rights group could not achieve alone. Civil society groups in countries that have recently democratized are mentoring and supporting those still facing repression, turning their own experiences into valuable lessons for others.

What Needs to Accelerate

Building on these efforts, several strategic changes have started, but need to move much faster:

- Shifting from short-term projects to longer-term plans with flexible, trust-based funding. This lets local organizations adjust their strategies as needed, instead of following fixed donor plans.
- Moving from protecting individual defenders and activists to building networks for collective protection. These networks should have shared

early-warning systems, distributed leadership, and community resilience that can withstand the loss of any one member.

- Changing from only reacting with legal defense to taking proactive legal action. This means targeting those who enable repression, such as surveillance tech vendors, financial facilitators, and platform companies, in democratic countries where legal action can still make a difference.
- Switching from formal reports to communication strategies that rebuild public trust. This includes fighting disinformation and dehumanization through cultural channels, trusted community voices, and campaigns that reach people who have already been turned against civil society by authoritarian actors.

The Trap of the Traditional Civil Society Approach

Civil society strategies are often less effective because they rely on complex coordination, slow, resource-intensive implementation, and cautious donor policies. These donors usually direct resources toward visible, institutional repression, while overlooking the ideological and commercial tactics that cause the most harm. Civil society appears to be losing ground even when it seems to be making progress. This is not because authoritarian actors are more intelligent, but because their tactics are built for quick action without needing agreement, political approval, or coordination among many people. The most effective authoritarian tactics, such as algorithmic pacification, strategic dehumanization, and institutional mimicry, are hard to detect. They leave no evidence, create no martyrs, and seem like natural public

opinion instead of a planned attack. Most importantly, these tactics directly attack the base of legitimacy by eroding public trust, taking over courts, and making civil society seem politically toxic before defenders and movements realize what is happening. The bigger issue is structural. Civil society uses scattered strategies that authoritarian actors can easily avoid one by one. Most resources go toward tools meant to fight visible, institutional repression, like foreign agent laws and disinformation. Meanwhile, the tactics that weaken civil society's legitimacy with the public, courts, and political leaders work quietly and go unnoticed. As a result, civil society is preparing for old threats, building defenses against tactics that no longer matter, and losing the public support that once made those defenses effective.

- Investing in unlikely allies whose public and political legitimacy is still strong, where civil society has weakened. These include faith communities, environmental groups, consumer protection organizations, and local business associations.

What We're Up Against

Authoritarian actors are likely to work hard to achieve the Long Dark and block the Resilient Network scenario. Using their current set of strategies, they will try to shape outcomes by expanding the reach of their global ecosystem.

Authoritarian states will step up the export of legal templates like "foreign agent" laws and surveillance technology. Radical "grassroots movements" and online subcultures will spread "anti-civil society" narratives to influence and undermine support for civil society and activism. Commercial actors will pressure Western governments to relax rules on surveillance technology and platform moderation, and to deregulate the tech industry, all in the name of "innovation."

At the same time, authoritarian actors will try to weaken scenarios they see as threats, especially the Resilient Network. They will label all pro-civil society support as "foreign interference" or "regime change." They will use transnational repression to disrupt civil society groups by targeting important members. These actors will also push for rules and norms that weaken basic human rights and set dangerous precedents, making it harder for civil society and their allies to operate safely, legitimately, and legally, even in democracies.

Authoritarian tactics, especially those that are "invisible" and rely on ideology or commerce, often succeed because they are easy to scale, quick, and hard to track.

Annex 3 provides a full analysis of authoritarian tactics across institutional, ideological, and commercial dimensions, including the top five most dangerous interventions identified through Monte Carlo simulation.

Here are some authoritarian tactics to watch:

- **Algorithmic Pacification:** Tech companies that support authoritarian interests manipulate recommendation algorithms and LLM chatbots to quietly marginalize dissenting voices and make civil society look out of touch. Unlike open censorship, which can create martyrs, this approach feels like natural public opinion or personal choice, making it hard to notice or fight.
- **Institutional Mimicry:** State-funded fake NGOs fill international spaces, drown out independent voices, and legitimize regimes. Meanwhile, "patriotic philanthropy" laws cut off resources for real civil society organizations. Regimes also create fake "grassroots" groups, such as "victimized parents," who claim harm from NGOs. These manufactured victims give regimes a moral excuse for crackdowns.
- **Strategic Dehumanization:** This tactic involves systematically labeling defenders as "terrorists," "groomers," or "foreign agents." The goal is not to prove they are criminals, but to reduce public empathy. As a result, when the state uses violence against

civil society organizations, the public does not protest. This approach also encourages radical grassroots movements and online subcultures to harass activists for "fun."

- **Criminal Alliances:** Authoritarian states work with organized crime and private security groups to target defenders. This strategy hides political repression behind what looks like random criminal violence, allowing the state to act with complete impunity.
- **The Parallel Authoritarian Infrastructure:** Autocrats have built a global system that enables them to evade international accountability. Organizations such as SCO and BRICS+ serve as "authoritarian innovation and coordination hubs." This ecosystem offers ready-made repression technology, financial networks that can avoid sanctions, and alternative international systems to challenge human rights laws.

Moving on up

The structural advantages that help authoritarian systems, speed, scalability, low coordination costs, and invisibility, cannot be removed. These features are built into how these systems work. Changing the odds would require major shifts in the underlying conditions, not just better strategies. This could mean the collapse of the authoritarian ecosystem (for example, a regime change in Russia), full cooperation from the tech sector (including developing technology that makes surveillance difficult), or perfect political alignment among all democratic actors, where everyone agrees on priorities, resources

are matched, and there is no bureaucratic friction.

Although authoritarian actors often appear to work together smoothly to suppress dissent, history shows that these regimes usually have deep mistrust due to conflicting national interests. One could argue that an authoritarian ecosystem is nothing more than a marketplace where authoritarian actors independently purchase the same repressive tools and happen to produce coordinated-looking outcomes without actually coordinating. This means there may be new opportunities to leverage this mistrust and lack of "checkpoints" and disrupt the global authoritarian ecosystem.

Authoritarian regimes and civil society groups rely on different standards for success. Civil society and its allies often operate in tough situations, so even a tactic that works 30% of the time is

The next five years are not just a timeline, but a narrowing of strategic choices and the ability to pivot to offense.



considered a success. In contrast, authoritarian regimes need reliable results. If a repressive tactic works only 60% of the time, it is seen as a weakness, not a win. This difference means that civil society does not need to be perfect, but competitive enough to keep challenging authoritarian control.

As a result, civil society may lose most battles but can keep challenging authoritarian strategies long enough for bigger changes to happen. When rare, unexpected events occur, civil society and democratic movements will be ready to take advantage of them rather than be wiped out.

We should be doing this stuff no matter what

Becoming competitive is not about one big breakthrough. In an ideal world, everything would improve at once: donors would give much more, governments would agree on priorities, civil society groups would build capacity, technology would advance, and authoritarian actors would face setbacks. In reality, progress comes from focused, strategic effort rather than waiting for dramatic change. The starting point needs to shift: strategies should focus on the legitimacy problem, not just repression. Civil society is not only losing its ability to operate, but also the public trust, legal protection, and political tolerance that make its work possible.

Six tactics that are relevant in all four possible futures, no matter which one becomes most dominant:

1. **Rebuild legitimacy by investing in social ties:** The most overlooked strategic priority is to rebuild civil society's legitimacy across three key

areas: legal, public, and political. This is not just a matter of better messaging. It requires real investment in the social ties and institutional connections that authoritarian campaigns try to break down. It also demands a change in civil society's attitude from confrontation to engagement. This means working with groups whose public and political legitimacy remains strong, even as civil society has weakened. These include faith communities, environmental groups, local business associations, sports and cultural leaders, moderate regime officials, and conservative civic actors who value the rule of law, even if they do not share liberal views. These groups are not replacements for civil society, but they serve as important bridges for legitimacy that civil society can no longer ignore.

2. **Diffuse social norms that enable civic space:** The most effective authoritarian tactics work because they do not appear political. Strategic dehumanization spreads in places like sports fan forums and gaming communities. Civil society can use a similar approach in the opposite direction by weaving democratic norms, civic legitimacy, and human rights values into cultural products, consumer movements, entertainment, sports, and faith communities. This helps reach people who would not otherwise engage with civil society programs. This approach is not about manipulation; it is about connecting with people where they already are, and rebuilding public empathy for civic actors and human rights defenders

Six strategies that are relevant in all four possible futures, no matter which one becomes most dominant:

- **Invest in Social Ties:** Rebuild legitimacy with the public, political actors, and faith communities
- **Diffuse Social Norms:** Use pop culture and sports to reach the unengaged.
- **Contest Power Directly:** Move from advocacy to altering political math.
- **Exploit Contradictions:** Document and amplify authoritarian governance failures.
- **Build Shared Infrastructure:** Launch rapid-response teams and "democracy tech."
- **Decentralize Decision-Making:** Empower local actors with real community ties.



through storytelling, cultural production, and trusted community voices rather than through civil society's own advocacy channels.

3. **Challenge power through political means:** Civil society needs to move beyond "advocacy" (asking power to change) and toward contesting power directly (altering the political math for those in charge). This means making it more costly for politicians to attack civic space than to tolerate it. It requires building coalitions that can deliver or withhold votes, supporting candidates who defend civic space, and making the defense of civil society a condition for political support rather than an afterthought. In many contexts, civil society has become too removed from political contestation, treating politics as something to influence from the outside rather than something to participate in directly.
4. **Exploiting authoritarian internal contradictions:** There is not enough focus on directly challenging authoritarian legitimacy on its own terms. These regimes often justify restricting civic space by promising their people stability, economic growth, and effective governance in exchange for less political freedom. But this deal is breaking down.

Corruption is hurting public services, economic mismanagement is causing visible inequality, and governance failures are piling up, including infrastructure problems, poor handling of public health crises, and unfulfilled development promises. Civil society and its allies should document and highlight these failures, not just as human rights issues but as signs of poor governance. Like this, it addresses the real concerns of people who may not care about democracy but do care about basic services and fairness.

5. **Invest in shared infrastructure:** The authoritarian ecosystem works well because its state, ideological, and commercial components support one another more quickly than democratic actors can respond. To keep up, democracy needs its own integrated ecosystem, not just separate projects, but a truly connected network where funders, tech developers, legal experts, grassroots groups, and unexpected allies share information and deploy strategic responses. This includes specialized rapid-response teams that can offer advice and support to organizations facing attacks or new opportunities within days, not weeks.

It also includes "democracy tech cooperatives" where civil society groups jointly own and manage the digital tools they use, and legal teams that take proactive action against surveillance companies and those who help fund repression. The goal is to match the speed and integration of authoritarian coordination.

6. **Decentralize decision-making to local actors with community ties:** Success is more likely when those defending civil society, not donors, control the strategy. The loss of legitimacy is worst where large, bureaucratic international NGO programs are most visible and can be seen as foreign interference. Decentralizing is not just a better way to operate; it also helps combat delegitimization by ensuring that people with real community ties have both the resources and the power to decide. Local actors can work discreetly and build alliances across a wide range of groups, including with allies within the authoritarian actors themselves, moderate officials, disillusioned insiders, and others who may not publicly oppose the regime but can provide information, slow down repressive measures, or create openings. Speed and savviness are more important than size.

What does this all mean?

The outlook for civic space over the next five years is sobering. Moving forward will require more than one change; it calls for transformation on several levels. Civil society needs to restore its basic legitimacy, which authoritarian campaigns have steadily undermined. At

the same time, it should adopt the strengths that make authoritarian tactics effective, such as speed, decentralization, authenticity, and cultural influence.

These changes are not possible with the current ways of working. Donors need to let go of control, not just to be generous, but also because donor-controlled strategies can damage legitimacy. Policymakers and international NGOs should accept that coordination will not be perfect, since aiming for perfection only slows down democratic responses. Foundations should support grassroots experiments, even if they are messy and sometimes fail, instead of only funding neat institutional projects, which are easier targets for authoritarian attacks. The whole sector also needs to invest in unexpected partners, like conservative groups, artists, and businesses, because they still have legitimacy where civil society has lost it.

Under current circumstances, civil society will not prevail over the next five years, and it does not need to. It needs to become competitive enough to challenge authoritarian control, so that when the operating environment becomes more favorable or opportunities arise, it is ready to seize them instead of being pushed out.

Ultimately, the way to overcome the current wave of authoritarian dominance is to stay resilient, be innovative, and experiment our way out.

Food for Thought

The following questions represent critical gaps where this brief provides a framework but not solutions. They're organized around three strategic

challenges that will determine whether civil society enters 2032 from a position of weakened viability or organizational collapse. These aren't abstract policy debates, they're practical questions that require answers within 12-18 months if the strategic shifts outlined here are to have any chance of implementation.

Some questions challenge core assumptions in this analysis (e.g., is authoritarian coordination real or illusory?). Others demand operational specificity that this brief lacks (e.g., what does a "democratic innovation hub" actually look like?). Still others require long-term strategic thinking that most organizations aren't structurally equipped to undertake.

Ecosystem & Infrastructure

- What are strategic interventions that could change the trajectory of these scenarios?
- What steps should donors and policymakers from democratic nations take to create a fairer playing field?
- What would it take to build a democratic "3D counter-ecosystem" that matches the integration and speed of authoritarian state-ideological-commercial collaboration?
- What would a "democratic innovation hub" look like, one that matches the function of SCO/BRICS+ as authoritarian coordination mechanisms?
- How can we create funding mechanisms that reward innovation and experimentation rather than predetermined, hypothetical, and usually not achievable outcomes?

Offensive vs. Defensive Strategy

- What would an "offensive" civic space strategy look like, one that actively opens space rather than

defensively protecting what exists?

- Do authoritarians actually collaborate, or is the "3D ecosystem" just a marketplace where they independently buy the same repressive tools?
- Are strategies to disrupt a marketplace different from strategies to fight an alliance?
- What "breach" initiatives could we support in authoritarian states that exploit the regime's weaknesses and/or narrow windows of opportunity before they close?
- What counter-tactics can disrupt the 72-77% success rate of ideological and commercial authoritarian strategies?
- How can we reinforce social norms (going beyond narrative campaigns) to counter "strategic dehumanization" campaigns before they erode public empathy for civil society?
- What horizontal peer support networks could function without top-down coordination requirements?

Long-Term Competition

- What does "winning" look like when shifted from a 5-year project to a 20-year strategy?
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- What specific organizational practices would enable civil society to "remain competitive long enough for system-level changes to create openings"?
- How do we position democratic movements to exploit Black Swan events when they occur, rather than having already been eliminated before opportunities arise?

Annexes

Annex 1: A word on methodology and process

It is important to state clearly what this strategy brief is and is not. It is not a prediction that the Long Dark scenario will occur with high probability. It is a structural analysis showing that if current strategic dynamics continue, then scenarios favoring authoritarianism become more probable.

This brief was prepared using scenario analysis based on the theory of critical uncertainties and Monte Carlo simulation. Scenario analysis maps the boundaries of possibility by identifying "critical uncertainties", forces that are both highly uncertain and highly consequential. We began with country-specific analyses across five diverse contexts: some facing extreme partisan polarization, others navigating restrictive legislation enforcement, others experiencing civil conflict and resistance fragmentation, and others confronting economic pressure on democratic institutions.

We then ran Monte Carlo simulations, testing each authoritarian tactic and civil society strategy across all four scenarios and weighting the results by each scenario's probability. Each tactic/strategy was simulated 10,000 times per scenario, producing 1.36 million iterations. The probability of success for each intervention was calculated by modeling the likelihood of implementation, coordination requirements, resource availability, and political will under each scenario's specific conditions.

Finally, to avoid creating a false sense of scientific certainty by using percentages, we ranked strategies, tactics, and activities based on the following criteria:

- Reliably Effective (80–100%): A "standard operating procedure." It almost always works.
- Predominantly Effective (60–79%): The default tactic. It usually works, though defenses exist.
- Contested / Variable (40–59%): The "Battleground." Success depends entirely on context (e.g. leadership quality, external pressure) rather than the tactic itself.
- Predominantly Ineffective (20–39%): The default tactic. It sometimes works, though counteractions are effective
- Reliably Ineffective (0–19%): Used out of habit or ideology, but statistically proven to fail.

Annex 2: Detailed Scenario Descriptions

Scenario 1: The Resilient Network (15% probability)

Civil society retains legitimacy while pro-democracy coalitions hold

- **What's happening:** The world experiences something like a "democratic renewal," though it is not universal. Social polarization eases in major powers, allowing for the rebuilding of civic dialogue and the isolation of remaining authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian coordination fractures as democratic cohesion increases. Effective technology governance frameworks are implemented globally, forcing platforms to enforce accountability standards even in non-democratic markets.
- **What it means for democracy and human rights:** A kind of civic renaissance occurs, but with a sharp divide. While 15-20 countries transition away from authoritarianism, those that remain face intense international pressure. International human rights mechanisms are reformed and respected, allowing them to effectively sanction violators in remaining closed societies. The universality of human rights is re-established, delegitimizing "cultural sovereignty" arguments used by dictators.
- **What it means for civil society:** In open spaces, civil society groups participate directly in governance and policy-making. In remaining authoritarian settings, civil society is no longer isolated; it benefits from strong, protected cross-border support. Newly successful social movements from transitioning countries act as mentors and logistical hubs for counterparts in closed states. Cross-movement coalitions (climate, gender, democracy) use their influence in open markets to pressure regimes and corporations operating in closed civic spaces.
- **What it means for protection organizations:** As global protection demands decrease, support organizations concentrate resources on remaining authoritarian enclaves. The focus shifts from defensive evacuation to "offensive protection": proactively using strengthened international courts to prosecute perpetrators of repression. Support organizations facilitate "South-South" solidarity, where defenders from recently democratized states provide secure operating bases and strategic guidance to those still under repression.
- **What it means for donors:** Donors use the more secure global environment to take higher risks in remaining autocracies. Funding pivots from general emergency support to targeted "breach" initiatives: financing underground information corridors, satellite internet access, and strike funds for labor actions in closed states. Donors establish "transition funds" ready to deploy immediately when authoritarian fractures appear. Investment focuses on maintaining connections between exiled diasporas and internal resistance networks.

Scenario 2: Fortress World (30% probability)

Civil society retains legitimacy, but international systems collapse

- **What's happening:** The world fractures into hostile blocs. Domestic civic legitimacy is generally strong in stable democracies, courts are mostly independent, people tend to trust civic groups, and political rivals compete

rather than try to eliminate civil society. But the international system is breaking down. Authoritarian countries now control many multilateral forums, spread their legal models and surveillance tools, and set up financial networks that avoid sanctions. Legal systems and regulatory frameworks are openly weaponized by all sides. The international pro-democracy ecosystem operates on a "wartime" footing.

- **What it means for democracy and human rights:** Politics devolves into a zero-sum battle. Human rights protections become conditional; fundamental rights for perceived political opponents are suspended or ignored in the name of "protecting democracy" from existential threats. The concept of neutral, non-partisan civil society becomes hard to maintain.
- **What it means for civil society:** Groups in stable democracies still work well but are becoming isolated from the rest of the world. In young democracies, organizations face two problems at once: they lack strong support at home and are losing protection from international systems. Civil society groups are forced to align with political blocs to survive, effectively becoming partisan actors. "Neutral" organizations are viewed with suspicion by both sides.
- **What it means for protection organizations:** Protection challenges become extreme as human rights defenders are labeled "enemy combatants" or "traitors" by state and non-state actors. A critical new role emerges: mediating within the pro-democracy coalition to prevent internal fractures between progressives and centrists. Support organizations must navigate a world where exile no longer guarantees safety.
- **What it means for donors:** Donors are forced to abandon neutrality and make high-risk, partisan-aligned investments to prevent total democratic collapse. Donor anonymity and encrypted funding channels become essential to protect grantees from being labeled as enemies by opposing political factions.

Scenario 3: The Apathetic Consensus (30% probability)

Civic legitimacy collapses while international systems hold

- **What's happening:** The global order stabilizes around illiberal norms. Societies in both democratic and authoritarian states depolarize, not through renewed dialogue, but through disengagement and a preference for economic predictability. The authoritarian ecosystem successfully markets "security" and "efficiency" as superior to messy democratic processes. Surveillance technology becomes a standard, accepted public utility in exchange for reduced crime and frictionless services. Pro-democracy coalitions still function internationally, but civil society has lost its domestic base across legal, public, and political spheres.
- **What it means for democracy and human rights:** Democratic norms lose intrinsic value, replaced by performance-based legitimacy. Human rights are viewed by the public as secondary to safety and convenience. The definition of "good governance" shifts from "rights-respecting" to "efficient service delivery," isolating defenders who prioritize civil liberties as out of touch or disruptive.
- **What it means for civil society:** Human rights defenders face a crisis of relevance rather than survival. Overt repression is rare because it is unnecessary; instead,

civil society organizations are starved of funds and ignored by apathetic publics. Activists cannot operate through traditional confrontation. To survive, organizations must adopt "stealth" tactics, disguising civic organizing within "apolitical" frameworks such as urban planning, public health, or consumer protection. Advocacy is effectively privatized or pushed into niche online spaces.

- **What it means for protection organizations:** Protection networks shift focus from physical extraction to "digital shielding" against ubiquitous, commercial-grade surveillance. Global NGOs shift from moral shaming (which falls flat) to "competence attacks", exposing the corruption, inefficiency, and safety failures hidden behind the authoritarian "stability" narrative.
- **What it means for donors:** Donors adapt to a high-surveillance, low-impact environment by abandoning "branded" democracy programming. Donors fund legal and investigative work in democratic jurisdictions to target Western technology firms and "facilitator" industries (PR, legal) that build and maintain the authoritarian surveillance state. Investment moves to pop culture and gaming to bypass apathy and reconnect rights concepts to daily life.

Scenario 4: The Long Dark (25% probability)

Civic legitimacy collapses while authoritarian actors dominate globally

What's happening: The world enters a period of "Digital Authoritarian Lock-In." Polarization within societies is exploited by a cohesive authoritarian ecosystem of state, ideological, and commercial actors. Legal weaponization, specifically the "foreign agent" model, becomes the global norm, while digital surveillance becomes total and commercially available. Civil society is losing legitimacy in authoritarian states, young democracies, and even established democracies that are backsliding. State, ideological, and commercial interests work together more quickly than democracies can respond. International organizations are controlled, financial networks avoid sanctions, and cross-border repression happens even in democracies.

What it means for democracy and human rights: Liberal democracies decline to approximately 15-20 "holdout" countries. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights becomes effectively defunct as a normative standard. Mass atrocities and crackdowns proceed without meaningful international response, as the authoritarian bloc shields perpetrators from accountability.

What it means for civil society: Independent civil society is effectively eliminated in most of the world. Organizations face three outcomes: co-optation into state-controlled fake NGOs, forced closure, or movement entirely underground. Foreign funding is criminalized, carrying lengthy prison sentences. Operational capacity is restricted to exile and diaspora networks, which become the sole remaining custodians of civic memory. Losing legitimacy is even more damaging than direct repression, because it means civil society cannot recover even if there are brief chances for change.

What it means for protection organizations: Protection mechanisms fail to meet demand as defender killings and disappearances skyrocket. Transnational repression

becomes routine, meaning exile no longer guarantees safety; activists face digital harassment, rendition, or physical attack even in host countries. Support organizations are forced to triage, shifting resources entirely to "life-support" for a small fraction of high-profile defenders. Protection focuses on "digital shielding" and counter-surveillance to prevent total network liquidation.

What it means for donors: Traditional democracy support becomes impossible or counterproductive. Donors are forced to choose between total withdrawal or using clandestine, illegal channels (cryptocurrency, informal value transfer) to move funds that are entirely focused on humanitarian aid and basic survival support (e.g., stipends for families of political prisoners).

Annex 3: Full Analysis of Adversarial Tactics

These three dimensions don't operate independently; they reinforce systematically. States provide legal frameworks and impunity; ideological networks provide social justification and grassroots harassment; commercial actors provide surveillance infrastructure and algorithmic control. Together, they create a self-reinforcing authoritarian system where each dimension amplifies the others' effectiveness.

Institutional Dimension:

- "Authoritarianism-as-a-Service": All-in-one governance packages (surveillance tech, legal templates, economic investment, digital currency) making repression a turnkey solution
- Sanctions Evasion Networks: Parallel financial systems (BRICS+ payment gateways), facilitator states, and shell companies bypassing democratic pressure
- Judicial Forum-Shopping: Using BRICS+/SCO bodies and captured courts to issue counter-warrants and challenge UN mechanisms, creating "normative conflict."
- Weaponized Bureaucracy (AI "Sludge"): AI systems creating administrative barriers that freeze CSO registrations, permits, and bank accounts for minor paperwork errors
- Institutional Mimicry (GONGOs): State-funded fake NGOs flood multilateral spaces, dilute independent voices, and legitimize regimes while "patriotic philanthropy" laws starve real CSOs
- Criminal Alliances: Partnering with organized crime and private security firms for harassment and assassination of defenders, especially in extractive zones

Ideological Dimension:

- Strategic Labeling: Framing HRDs as "foreign agents," "groomers," "terrorist sympathizers" to strip moral standing and eliminate public empathy when violence occurs
- Gamification of Repression: Mobilizing online subcultures (Discord, Telegram, sports fans) to harass activists for "fun," decentralizing repression as organic "trolling."

- Weaponizing "Anti-Colonialism": Funding fake progressive movements and astroturfing to frame human rights as "Western interference," splitting progressive coalitions
- Sophisticated Platform Lobbying: Arguing in DC/Brussels that "foreign agent" laws mirror US FARA or that censorship fights "hate speech," co-opting democratic language
- Financial Capture ("Dark Money" Lawfare): Funding domestic far-right movements, culture war CSOs, and legal challenges to dismantle oversight bodies and capture legal systems within democracies

Commercial Dimension:

- "Algorithmic Pacification": Benevolent-seeming recommendation algorithms subtly manipulate information flows to suppress dissent, reduce friction, and portray HRDs as alien threats
- Platform-Level Co-optation: Pressuring tech companies to embed censorship and surveillance directly into core architecture as a market access condition
- AI-Driven Disinformation: Deploying deepfakes and fabricated evidence to discredit activists and sow internal distrust in pro-democracy coalitions
- The "Liar's Dividend": Exploiting deepfake existence to dismiss real evidence of abuses as "fake," evading accountability through manufactured uncertainty

Top 5 Most Dangerous Adversarial Interventions

For each tactic and strategy, we ran 10,000 simulations across these four scenarios, weighted by probability. The result: 1.36 million simulated iterations, revealing which approaches are most likely to succeed and which are doomed to fail regardless of how much effort or resources are invested.

- Algorithmic Pacification (77.5%) - Invisible manipulation, nearly impossible to detect
- Administrative Sludge (73.4%) - Weaponized bureaucracy freezing CSO operations
- Liar's Dividend (72.8%) - Deepfakes enable denial of real evidence
- Platform Co-optation (71.4%) - Censorship embedded in tech architecture
- AI Disinformation (71.1%) - Fabricated evidence to discredit activists

When we analyze the simulation results for authoritarian tactics, a pattern emerges immediately: these tactics succeed at remarkably high rates across all scenarios. The top authoritarian tactic: Algorithmic Pacification, the invisible manipulation of information flows through recommendation algorithms, succeeds 77.5% of the time when weighted across all four scenarios. Even in the best-case scenario for democracy (Resilient Network), this tactic still succeeds 72% of the time.

When we disaggregate authoritarian tactics by dimension, the Commercial dimension, tactics enabled by technology and platform companies, outperforms Institutional (state coordination) and Ideological (narrative warfare) tactics across every scenario. Commercial tactics dominate because they are invisible to users and difficult for investigators to document, easy to scale up infinitely at near-zero

marginal cost, and because regulation moves slowly while technology evolves rapidly.

This authoritarian advantage is not because authoritarian actors are smarter or better resourced. It is because authoritarian tactics are structurally designed for rapid deployment without requiring consensus, political approval, or coordination across multiple actors.