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From New York to Nairobi: Strengthening Solidarity and Reimagining Democracy

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A message from CIVICUS Secretary General, Mandeep Tiwana

Dear CIVICUS members, partners and allies

I'm writing to you amid the busyness and final preparations for our [International Civil Society Week](#) in Bangkok from November 1–5. We've had overwhelming interest in the event, which promises to be a celebration of civil society's resilience in the face of a concerted pushback against what we stand for. We will make sure to share key highlights for those who can't be physically present.

As we enter the final stretch of the year, I am deeply inspired by the courage and creativity of civil society colleagues around the world. The past two months have provided powerful reminders of the importance of solidarity and inclusivity in civil society approaches to democracy, peacebuilding, and global governance. I was privileged to represent CIVICUS at several key spaces, from the [UN General Assembly](#) in New York to the [Athens Democracy Forum](#) and the [Peace Connect](#) gathering in Nairobi. Each reinforced how vital our collective efforts are in this moment of global uncertainty and transition.

Engaging for People-Centric Multilateralism at UNGA

The 80th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) with its theme of 'Better together: 80 years and more for peace, development and human rights,' provides an opportunity to reiterate our demand to boldly reimagine the multilateral system.

meet 21st century challenges. At a roundtable on *Democracy and Multilateralism*, convened by [Club de Madrid](#) and [International IDEA](#), we highlighted the urgency of needing to shift from a flawed state-centric model of global governance to a people-centric model. We emphasized that meaningful reforms such as establishing a UN Parliamentary Assembly, a UN Citizens' Initiative, and a UN Envoy for Civil Society are essential to move the UN closer to people.

We also drew attention to the growing influence of billionaire wealth and corporate power over democratic governance. Almost every country is in the thrall of the obscenely wealthy due to the tight overlap between political and economic elites. Those who care about democracy need to speak out about the impacts of neoliberal economic policies and the concerted push towards privatization over the last two decades, which has led to capture of states by oligarchs who own vast swathes of the media and tech landscape.

At the same time, it's essential that we compellingly and courageously challenge top-down models of governance, such as those promoted by China, Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates, that seek to delink democracy and civic freedoms from development.

A highlight of our UNGA engagements was reconnecting with members and allies at the New York Hub *Meet and Greet*. Although, we saw fewer civil society colleagues at UNGA this year due to funding constraints and rabid politics, we were honoured to be joined by the leadership of Amnesty International, Crisis Action, Greenpeace, Oxfam International and others with whom we share the commitment to advancing peace, justice, equality and sustainability around the world.

Reimagining Democracy at the Athens Democracy Forum

Representing CIVICUS at the [Athens Democracy Forum](#) offered an opportunity to reflect on the promise and paradox of democracy. While it was humbling to be in what's referred to as the "birthplace of democracy," a question that popped up was whether the process of deliberation and consultation ever went beyond privileged men in ancient Greece, and if we can we call a system a democracy if it effectively excludes a significant proportion of the population, including women and excluded minorities.

The Forum provided a valuable space to engage with a diverse range of actors, many outside traditional civil society circles, and to challenge dominant narratives about democracy and international affairs in a non-judgmental but persuasive

manner. It was also heartening to meet a few CIVICUS members and partners for whom the alliance and the secretariat remain an anchor.

Among the Forum's most moving moments was the presentation of the [Athens Democracy Award](#) to courageous Israeli journalist, Gideon Levy, who has spent a lifetime documenting the impacts of his government's occupation and now genocide. He dedicated his award to the brave and intrepid journalists in Gaza risking their lives to share the truth. The event also featured powerful insights from Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Maria Ressa, and inspiring young leaders, including a former member of CIVICUS' [Youth Action Team](#), Namitai Kwekweza.

At the NGO Showcase put together by the [Lumina Foundation](#), we highlighted the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), [Lens](#) and [State of Civil Society Reports](#). We shared that our responses to authoritarianism should be strategic by making concerted efforts to get our messages out to publics whether through mainstream media or digital means. Moreover, we are looking to continuously connect with brave individuals and new types of movements leading positive change.

Building Solidarity at Peace Connect in Nairobi

Alongside a few CIVICUS colleagues, I had the opportunity to join the [Peace Connect](#) gathering in Nairobi in mid-October. It was a deeply grounding experience that brought together peacebuilders, community activists, and civil society supporters from across the world.

The gathering modelled values we can all learn from: care, listening and inclusion. With art, poetry and music woven throughout the programme, participants were invited to focus on healing and our shared humanity. This is especially poignant as several people came directly from war zones and other challenging environments.

Conversations highlighted the need to link struggles for justice globally, from Palestine to Cameroon, the DRC, Myanmar, Sudan, Ukraine and beyond, and to recognise the interconnected nature of oppression and resistance. Moreover, in a rapidly changing multipolar post-truth world some of our notions of what constitutes the majority and minority worlds, the oppressor and the oppressed, rights respecting societies and otherwise need to be examined and tested amid existing layers of complexity. Our responses, too, need to be nuanced and non-binary.

As we move forward, our will to challenge orthodoxies, deepen solidarity across borders and make space for empathy and imagination in how we engage, advocate and act, remains strong. The upcoming [International Civil Society Week \(ICSW 2025\)](#), taking place from 1 to 5 November in Bangkok, Thailand, will be an important

opportunity to strengthen our connections, celebrate collective achievements and chart pathways for people-centered change.

In solidarity,

Mandeep Tiwana

[desk of the secretary general](#)

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