The School FOR MORAL AMBITION

Explaining our plan for developing a Democratic Resilience Fellowship

The problem

Across Europe, democratic institutions are under sustained, systematic pressure. Authoritarian playbook tactics — like packing courts with loyalists, changing election rules to favor incumbents, threatening politicians, pressuring independent media and defunding civil society — are active, well-funded, and spreading. Global democracy has fallen to 1978 levels. As V-Dem reports, fifteen European countries are in active democratic decline, seven of which are in the EU. The organizations defending against these attacks are often small, under-resourced, and isolated from one another. The talent pipeline into this work is thin.

Who we are

The School for Moral Ambition (SMA), co-founded by Rutger Bregman, is a non-profit that redirects talent to where it matters most. We have a community with 25,000 sign-ups ready to do work that matters. We run fellowship programs that match people — with exactly the skills that are needed — to civil society organizations working on the world's most pressing problems. Our fellows join those organizations with the capacity to contribute from day one, strengthening them from the inside.

We carry the cost: SMA recruits, selects, trains and *pays* fellows. Partner organizations gain skilled professionals without bearing the financial burden. We're donation-funded. After their fellowship, 80 percent of our fellows continue working in the cause area.

We have run two editions of fellowships in the food transition and tobacco control. In both, we've seen what happens when the right person lands in the right organization at the right time: bottlenecks break, ambitions grow, and impact compounds.

After two years of figuring out how we can help, we're now confident enough to apply this model to the cause that underpins all other causes: the defense of our democratic institutions.

What we're building

A democracy program with a fellowship at its core — that funnels skilled professionals to civil society organizations doing the frontline work of defending democratic institutions across Europe. We want a lack of hands to no longer be a bottleneck in keeping our democracies safe.

We have partnered with independent prioritization and impact-evaluation research institution Power for Democracies, who will inform our choices of where added talent can make the biggest difference: which countries, which tactics, which organizations. We place fellows only where the evidence points.

The choices we've already made

- **Add capacity to what works.** A growing research field is producing increasingly clear evidence on what works *most effective* in strengthening democracies. We focus on adding capacity to the organizations already doing this work, guided by that evidence base.
- **Begin in Europe.** SMA currently has the strongest access to talent in Europe. That's where we start, but we intend to grow beyond.
- **Strengthen institutions.** Per euro spent, the highest untapped potential lies in helping scale existing civil society organizations that make democratic institutions more resilient against authoritarian attacks. That's where the evidence base is strongest and where additional talent moves the needle most.

These choices mean we currently think our added value lies less in civic education, public-opinion campaigning, ideological politics, or democratic system-innovation.

Where we are

Phase 1 — Research & Discovery (now – summer 2026)

Priority research (Power for Democracies)
A systematic study across countries to identify civil society organizations defending democratic institutions in four to be determined priority countries— and to understand which tactics, in these contexts, produce most effective results. This determines where we place our first cohort.

Knowledge base & network (SMA)
While P4Dem maps the landscape, we study the science, learn how tactics are deployed, and meet the people doing the work; building the network and knowledge base that will shape our partnerships and our community programming.

Phase 2 — Program Development & Fundraising (August – December 2026)
We translate our research into concrete community activation and fellowship design. In parallel, we build the funding coalition to launch.

Phase 3 — Launch (2027)
Democracy becomes SMA's fourth cause area. Community activation starts immediately. The fellowship — our flagship product — recruitment starts in April 2027, and starts in September.

Share what you know

We're in the phase where your input matters most, if we want to get it right: *What should we be reading? Who should we be talking to? Which networks and gatherings should we be part of? What's the single most important thing for SMA to do or avoid entering this cause?*

We've created a short form where you can point us to reading, people, networks, or anything else you think we should know. It takes two minutes. If you would like to offer 30 minutes of your time for us to meet, please let us know in the form and we'll get in touch. **➜ Give input.**

We appreciate your help! - **Barend Bos, Head of Democracy Program Development**