

Redistributive Imaginaries:

How do digital platforms shape meanings and practices of redistribution in Europe's mixed economies of welfare?

redigim

About REDIGIM

Redistributive Imaginaries: Digitalization, culture and prosocial contribution (2022-25) is a collaborative research and knowledge exchange project delivered by a consortium of five universities located in the UK, Finland, Germany, Spain and Switzerland. The project investigates meanings and practices of redistribution in the context of the digitalization and platformization of voluntary transfer. REDIGIM is supported by national research funding agencies under the CHANSE ERA-NET Co-fund programme.

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Visualization

A visualization of the project's findings, designed and built by Oliver Smith, is available on our website: <https://redigim.arts.ac.uk/imaginaries/>

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Summary

Welfare states are a key mechanism of redistribution through which economic resources pooled via the tax system can be reallocated for the broader public good. In a mixed economy of welfare, redistribution practices are increasingly dispersed through civil society. In the context of public spending constraint, civil society organizations look to digital tools and platforms to help them generate funds from individual donors.

Digital tools and platforms are framed as neutral intermediaries, yet they play an active role in shaping mixed economies of welfare. Digital platforms structure and curate the cause marketplace, contributing to the dynamic construction of welfare gaps, and channelling resources to certain initiatives over others. Overall, digital platforms promote more horizontal, less vertical, and therefore less progressive modes of redistribution.

Civil society initiatives work with an assemblage of digital tools, and they do so in routine, competent and resourceful ways. The digitalization of fundraising generates significant digital labour for civil society organizations, and leads to complex negotiations and discontents. Civil society initiatives use digital tools in ways that reflect dominant norms and intended use, but also to experiment with alternative forms of social organization.

Redistributive imaginaries are collective, common-sense understandings of redistribution. Dominant redistributive imaginaries foreground and privilege practices that operate at the nexus of civil society and the market, while a narrative of welfare state decline is embedded as common sense. Claims about the affordances and advantages of the digital shift tend to align with market-oriented visions of welfare provision.

In mixed economies of welfare, there is a powerful interconnection between taxation and donation. Redistributive imaginaries have implications for the future of **European welfare states** and systems of progressive taxation.

Introduction

The redistributive conjuncture

In the context of global wealth inequality, questions about how economic resources might be shared differently have never been more relevant. These questions are raised in various ways: in Europe, significant energy has been committed to the cause of tax justice, and to the organisation of progressive political demands around the call for wealth taxes. Europe's welfare states feature in these demands as potential beneficiaries: wealth taxes could raise billions to fund public services, restore social infrastructure and rebuild welfare support systems.

Redistribution is considered a core function of taxation (Tax Justice Network 2025), and this function is dependent on the welfare state system. Taxation curbs inequalities between individuals and groups and raises revenue to fund public services. Welfare states are, then, a key redistributive mechanism through which economic resources pooled via the tax system can be reallocated for the broader public good.

This is one story that is told about social democratic welfare states. But there is another story to tell which complicates the relationship between the state, welfare provision and redistribution. On this account, welfare systems are — and have always been — more complex systems that are sustained by state institutions and public finance, but also by actors and institutions in civil society, and by forms of voluntary transfer such as charity, philanthropy and mutual aid. The term 'mixed economy of welfare' (Powell 2019) describes this dispersal of welfare provision through a range of social practices and institutions beyond the state, incorporating voluntary, informal, and market actors.

In the neoliberal era, the redistributive uses of public spending have been severely constrained (Cooper 2024). In Europe as in the US and other global contexts, governments and policy makers have sought to restrict spending on welfare, and have encouraged voluntary, informal and market actors to assume a greater role in the provision of welfare. These tendencies were exacerbated in the years following the global financial crisis of 2007-8. Across Europe, governments sought to reduce budget deficits through the pursuit of economic austerity. In the 2020s, voluntary sector organizations continue to strive to fill gaps in the 'tattered social safety net' (Barford and Gray 2022), and to raise the funds to do so. The COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis had a significant impact on charitable income, with one UK survey reporting that the value of donations fell by more than half in 2022 (Benefact Group 2022).

Redistribution

We approach redistribution as a practice of pooling and reallocating resources. In the social democratic welfare states of the post-war era, this practice is associated with state-organized systems of taxation and the welfare state. In a 'mixed economy' of welfare, and in a political conjuncture of public spending constraint, redistribution practices are increasingly dispersed through civil society, activating mechanisms of voluntary transfer such as mutual aid, charity and philanthropy.

The digital shift

In this challenging context, significant hope has been invested in the ‘digital shift’ (GoodHub 2024), or the capacity of digital tools and platforms to enable voluntary sector organizations to meet these economic challenges. Emerging in the wake of the 2007-08 global financial crisis, in an era dominated by ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicsek 2017), crowdfunding has come to be viewed as an exemplary digital fundraising practice, with its promise to engage donors, foster a sense of community, and expedite rapid, flexible donations. Payment apps such as PayPal or Switzerland’s TWINT have been widely assimilated into fundraising practices, as have contactless payment devices and donation boxes. Social media platforms are equally vital, providing a platform to circulate ‘emotional content’ with the power to elicit donations (RaiseNow 2025).

A sense of the urgency of digital transformation for the voluntary sector intensified during the pandemic, and it was at the same time a context for experimentation with the use of digital tools and platforms to support forms of welfare provision delivered by grassroots, ‘mutual aid’ groups. Crowdfunding gained an even greater profile, and was used in the UK to facilitate charitable fundraising ‘for the NHS’. These developments are not without controversy: fuelled by concerns raised in the US context, where ‘welfare crowdfunding’ has become normalized (Schneiderhan and Lukk 2023; Kenworthy 2024), critical voices in Europe have begun to consider the implications of crowdfunding for welfare states and systems of progressive taxation (Stewart et al. 2022; Radovanovic et al. 2024).



Image credit: ‘Tap London donation point’, 2024, UAL | Photograph: Rebecca Bramall

Redistribution and the social production of meaning

The social production of meaning about socio-economic practices is often overlooked. In a rush to attend to ‘real’, material issues, we can ignore important questions about how that subject has been constructed as a topic of interest, by whom, and under what conditions. John Clarke (2014) points out that we ‘encounter the economy through stories, accounts, and images’. Signifying practices organize our interactions with ‘the economy’ and every aspect of our economic lives (Moor 2021): going to work or to the shops, paying taxes, taking out insurance, or making a donation. In this sense, ‘economies

are imagined'. As Clarke explains, this is 'not to deny that economic relationships, processes, practices exist — but to insist that our relationship to them is mediated'.

In order to understand redistribution in the current conjuncture and its future trajectory, we argue that it is essential to interrogate the social production of its meanings. We use the term **redistributive imaginaries** to refer to the collective, common-sense understandings that people draw on when they navigate opportunities to contribute, donate and share economic resources with others (Jessop 2010; Bramall and Oliva). These collective understandings underpin and give meaning to redistributive practices. As they are part of everyday thinking, everyone — from policy makers and tech innovators to community organizers, taxpayers and donors — participates in their activation and extension.

Given the significant social and economic developments we have described — from neoliberal austerity to the rise of digital platforms — we argue that it is vital to set aside long-established definitions of redistribution which focus solely on the welfare state. We need instead to consider that collective sense-making about redistribution may be taking place through different practices, mechanisms, and institutions. We regard civil society as a critical locus of meaning-making about redistribution. In the current conjuncture, in the context of platform capitalism, this sector has become the site of intense ideological investment and discursive struggle.

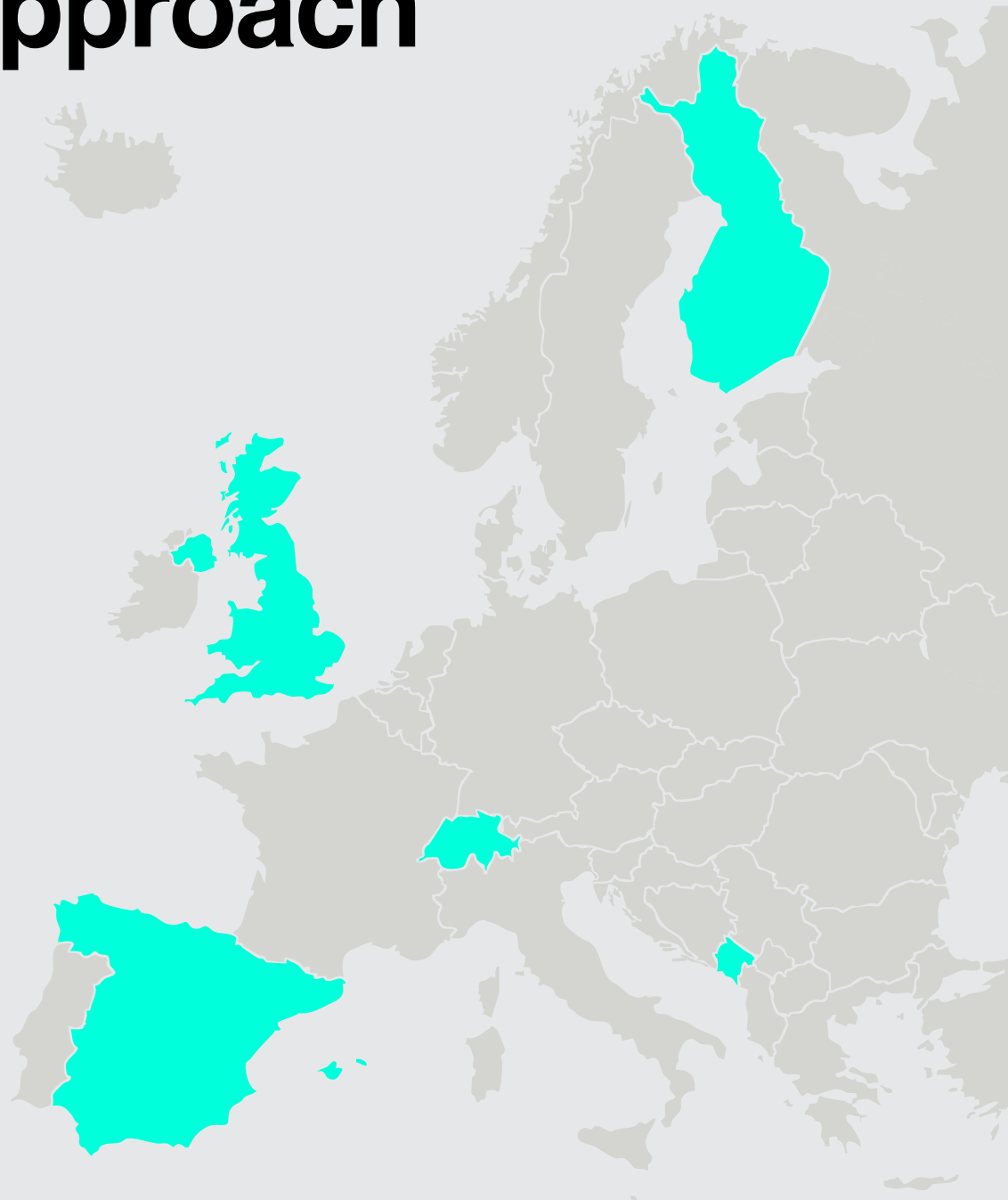
Imaginaries

Collective, common-sense understandings of the relationship between economic contribution and social solidarity. A focus on imaginaries is not a retreat from the discussion of material issues. It is a means of drawing attention to the role of culture, representation and ideology in organizing lived experiences, constructing expectations, and establishing responsibilities. In turn, these ways of envisaging the world make certain material outcomes and futures more or less possible.

Redistributive imaginaries

REDIGIM intervenes in this complex, wide-ranging set of developments through a focus on the interface between civil society, digitalization, and visions of future welfare provision. The aim of the project is to identify and interrogate the overarching systems of meaning that people use to make sense of redistribution and their broader social worlds, and the role that digital tools and platforms are playing in shaping those systems of meaning. We set out to examine emerging practices, and to find out how the digitalization of voluntary transfer for welfare provision is shaping dominant and emerging ways of understanding redistribution. While we have generated significant research findings at the national level, the focus of this report is on project-level outcomes, and on the implications of dominant redistributive imaginaries for the future of welfare provision in Europe.

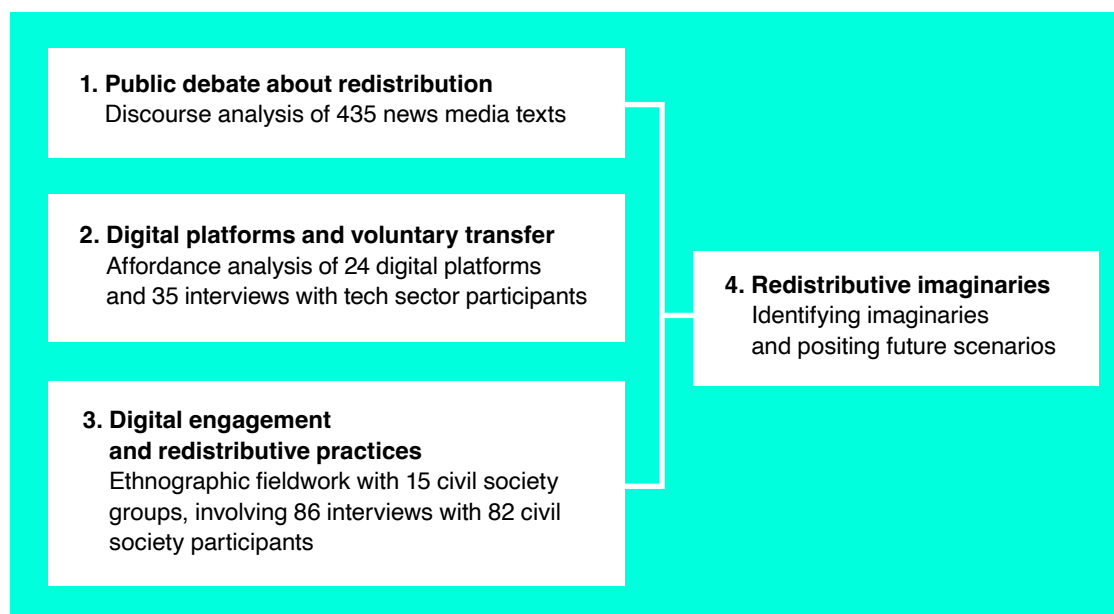
Research approach



We conducted research in five European countries with different cultural and political traditions, welfare systems and approaches to social provision: Finland, Spain, Switzerland, Montenegro, and the United Kingdom. Our sample included two countries in the EU, one in the European Economic Area, one EU candidate nation, and one former member state.

Research design

We designed a **qualitative mixed methods** approach that would provide multiple entry points into dominant redistributive imaginaries and the infrastructures that support them. We followed a shared research design, conducting research in each country and undertaking comparative analysis as a collective. We examined **three key sites** in which social meaning about redistribution in civil society is produced.



Public debate about redistribution

In our first work phase we investigated values attributed to the digital in public debate about redistribution, via a **discourse analysis** of newspaper articles. We examined the emergence and shape of debates about state and civil society-led redistribution, the relationship between those debates and ‘crisis’ events, and common-sense redistribution discourses. An initial corpus of 2,656 newspaper articles published between February 2020 and December 2022 was drawn from 28 newspapers across the political spectrum. We mapped phases of intensified debate about redistribution and examined how agentic relations of redistribution were constructed. We then conducted a detailed qualitative analysis of a smaller corpus of 435 articles, focusing on two periods of intensified debate per country, of which one period was the COVID-19 pandemic. This sample included representations of centralized, state-managed redistribution and of civil society-led redistribution.

Digital platforms and voluntary transfer

In the second phase, we carried out an **affordance analysis** of 24 digital platforms, tools and interfaces designed to facilitate voluntary transfer for welfare and/or broader social outcomes. The sample included global and national and for-profit and non-profit crowdfunding platforms, payment apps and interfaces, a social media app, and stand-alone organizational websites. We also **interviewed** 35 professionals responsible for those tools

and platforms to understand how they construe the role of these digital infrastructures in meeting welfare and social needs. We refer to these professionals as **tech participants**: the majority work in the tech sector, although some work in NGOs, foundations, and other civil society organizations.

Table 1: Sample of digital tools and platforms

Country	Platform name	Type	Sector
All	GoFundMe	Crowdfunding platform	For-profit
UK	Spacehive	Crowdfunding platform	For-profit
	WeAre8	Social media app	For-profit
	TAP London	Contactless donation interface	Non-profit
	JustGiving	Crowdfunding platform	For-profit
	Open Collective	Open finance platform	For-profit
	Greater Change	Website	Non-profit
Switzerland	wemakeit	Crowdfunding platform	For-profit
	Twint	Payment app	For-profit
	Glückskette	Website	Non-profit
	Crowdify	Crowdfunding platform	For-profit
	Ting	Website and platform	Non-profit
Spain	Goteo	Crowdfunding platform	Non-profit
	Migranodearena	Crowdfunding platform	Non-profit
	Bizum.help	Payment app	Non-profit
	Teaming	Crowdfunding platform	Non-profit
Finland	Mesenaatti.me	Crowdfunding platform	For-profit
	The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare	Website	Non-profit
	Veteraanit.fi	Website	Non-profit
	Giving what we can	Website	Non-profit
Montenegro	Budi Human	Website	Non-profit
	Pristanište	Website	Non-profit
	Volonteri	Website	Non-profit
	Help Each Other	Crowdfunding platform	Non-profit
	Ima ljudi	Website	Non-profit

Digital engagement and redistributive practices in civil society

In the third phase, we carried out **ethnographic fieldwork** with 15 civil society initiatives — three per country. We selected a range of initiatives engaged in addressing gaps in welfare provision, including a diversity of organizational forms, political orientations, goals, and levels of digital capacity, literacy and engagement within our sample. Our methods comprised thematic interviews and discussions with five or more people per initiative, participant observation in meetings and events held by these initiatives, and digital ethnography. We interviewed 82 people in total, who we refer to as **civil society participants**. We sought to understand how these actors use and make sense of digital platforms and tools in the context of their redistributive practices.

Table 2: Ethnographic fieldwork groups

Group	Welfare Gap	Beneficiaries	Group Description	Key digital tools for redistributive practice
CH1	Temporary basic income	Members	Collective Wallet initiative	Bespoke multi-purpose platform
CH2	Basic needs and mobility	Refugees and asylum seekers	Anti-racist activism and humanitarian support network	Website and administrative software
CH3	Basic expenditures	Women and families in poverty	Regional charity	Social media
FI1	Diverse causes	Diverse beneficiaries, mainly in the global South	Local student chapter of global charity movement	Global donations platform
FI2	Children's welfare	Children and families	Local branch of national charity organisation	Social media and app for administering services
FI3	Basic needs in food, clothing, technology	Civilians and soldiers in wartime	Local Ukrainian aid group	Messaging apps and social media advertising
MN1	Urgent healthcare	People in poverty	National-level charity initiative	Bespoke fundraising website and social media
MN2	Basic needs	People in poverty	TV show-based fundraising	Social media
MN3	Basic goods and healthcare	People in poverty	Local aid group	Bespoke fundraising website and social media
SP1	Support for staying and succeeding in school	Working-class young women and girls	Small urban charity initiative	Crowdfunding platform and social media
SP2	Educational activities and emotional support	Children in foster care centres	Charity organisation in large cities	Crowdfunding platform and social media
SP3	Life support and care	Animals	Local animal welfare charity	Crowdfunding platform and social media

Group	Welfare Gap	Beneficiaries	Group Description	Key digital tools for redistributive practice
UK1	Spaces for play, arts and education	Children and their carers	Self-help community initiative	Crowdfunding platform and social media
UK2	Counselling and basic goods	Refugees and asylum seekers	Local charity	Website and social media
UK3	Basic needs	Neighbourhood people in poverty including refugees	Mutual aid	Open finance platform

Synthesizing redistributive imaginaries

In our final work phase we synthesized our data to draw together key findings from the research and identify dominant redistributive imaginaries, which we present in this report.

Digital redistributive practices in civil society

We analysed redistributive practices in civil society in five distinct national contexts. In each setting we found strong evidence of the impact of the digital shift. At the same time, regulatory and other factors mean that civil society initiatives have access to different kinds of digital tools and platforms.

Digital tools and platforms: mapping diversity

Our affordance analysis of 24 digital tools and platforms constitutes a provisional mapping of the diversity of digital interfaces available to civil society groups in the five countries. We draw attention here to some of the key distinctions we noted.

Evidence of the **platformization** of digital fundraising was strongest in the UK, Spain and Switzerland, and limited in Finland and Montenegro. **Regulation** plays an important role in shaping the availability and operation of US-based crowdfunding platforms, in particular. In Finland there are very strict regulations relating to money collection that favour reward-based, rather than donation-based crowdfunding, limiting its use for welfare and social causes. Montenegro's various forms of exclusion from digital infrastructures make it difficult to participate in global donation systems. At the time of our research, Montenegro was not part of the Single Euro Payments Area (it joined in October 2025). Online banking was not widespread, and its residents could not receive PayPal payments. These forms of exclusion from European **financial infrastructures** directly shape the donation initiatives we studied: donation via SMS is used extensively, and NGOs and foundations have built bespoke proprietary crowdfunding-like platforms to support their own fundraising activities. In the UK, US-based platforms are used extensively alongside nationally-developed technologies, interfaces and apps. Digital innovation is dynamic, and several of the tech interventions we analysed were in a state of start-up, flux, or relaunch. In Switzerland and Spain, globally dominant FinTech platforms play only a minor role, with alternative, nationally-developed platforms and interfaces — such as the payment app TWINT — taking their place.

Another dividing line is the **profit-making status** of the companies that develop and operate these technologies. Bespoke websites channel funds directly to the foundation or charity that operates them, but they still rely on third party payment processors such as Stripe and PayPal. In the UK, left-leaning mutual aid groups tend to seek out the US platform Open Collective, which is a for-profit company linked to a non-profit foundation. By using the non-profit community interest group Social Change Nest as a 'fiscal host', they are able to raise and distribute funds without a bank account. This dividing line points to key questions relating to the political economy of digital fundraising and the marketization of civil society and the voluntary sector.

As we discuss in more detail later in the report, these diverse tools have different affordances. An important distinction to draw out is between the **donation types** that these interfaces elicit, which include: a one-off donation for a specific cause (e.g. contactless payment devices run by Tap London), platforms that are designed to run time-limited, albeit possibly recurring, campaigns (the majority of the crowdfunding platforms), and interfaces that enable recurring, e.g. monthly, donations (proprietary websites, Teaming, and Open Collective).

These tools and platforms also initiate, promote and navigate different **relationships with the (welfare) state**. Tech participants often made a connection between the existence of their platforms and **public spending cuts** or limited public resources. In Spain, for example, the founding narratives of Migranodearena, Teaming and Goteo, as told by their representatives, are strongly linked to the post-2008 crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of the platforms we studied (Goteo, Spacehive, Tap London, wemakeit) play a role in brokering **partnerships** between local government authorities and community groups or donors.

Finally, these digital tools and platforms interact with the welfare state via the **tax system**. In Spain, the crowdfunding platforms most popular with civil society initiatives — Migranodearena, Teaming and Goteo — are legally constituted as non-profit foundations, which allows them to benefit from tax deductions and exemptions. Many of the platforms we studied favour and promote **tax incentives** for digital donations, which are seen as a vital lever to increase revenues. These incentives, offered in all five national settings, essentially reduce the tax revenue available to the state, favouring an approach where citizens direct money (through tax breaks) to the causes they prefer.

Digital redistributive practices in civil society

While the depth of digital engagement varied considerably, each of the 15 civil society groups we studied engaged with digital tools and platforms as part of their redistributive initiatives, and considered it routine practice to do so.

A diversity of tools and platforms are in use in the five national settings. Digital tools and platforms played a fundamental role in the **founding** of certain initiatives, particularly those linked to mutual aid actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Switzerland's Ting community. Other initiatives we studied were well-established, and were evidently working through the implications of the digital shift. We saw routine use of office software such as Zoom, Teams, and Slack and apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp or Signal for internal **communication and coordination**. For many groups, it is normal and unremarkable that their members are spatially dispersed and collaborate remotely. External communication with wider publics is managed through social media platforms, including Instagram, X and Facebook. Digital tools and platforms are also used to support **interactions with beneficiaries** and to administer **financial activities**, including online banking and accounting through Excel or Google spreadsheets. In some more established or professionalized organizations, integrated database and payments systems are in use, but most of the initiatives we studied draw on an assemblage of software programs, digital services and platforms. We saw varying degrees of digitalization: several initiatives continue to use **cash payments** as part of the overall system for managing financial transactions, but others do not handle cash at all.

The digital shift poses distinct challenges for groups whose aims are controversial in their local context, such as support for refugees and undocumented individuals. The imperative to be 'visible' on social media — which we discuss in more depth later in the report — can imply **risks** to those beneficiaries, and must therefore be carefully navigated by the initiatives in question.

Most of the initiatives we studied outside of Finland and Montenegro (where regulations and restrictions apply) had at least tried out **crowdfunding**. For two initiatives, including one led by a minoritized group, this funding mechanism played a crucial role in their development. We saw that crowdfunding permitted groups to allocate funds more autonomously, independent of the regulations that typically come with grants awarded by public bodies or foundations. Yet this finance mechanism has its own **rules and limitations**: while some initiatives had managed to raise funds successfully, they found that it was hard to repeat that success, and that it was impossible to raise funds to cover structural (rent, labour) costs. We saw that few groups succeeded in expanding their donor base significantly through crowdfunding. As a result, several initiatives were redirecting their

energies to social media platforms with donations functions, or to other tools such as digital newsletters. That said, groups continue to use crowdfunding to raise funds for well-defined, specific campaigns. It is part of their fundraising repertoire and can be seen as one of several marketing tools, rather than as a means of raising substantial income.

While we did not identify any initiatives that were successful in using digital tools and platforms to secure sustainable revenues, the most promising cases drew extensively on existing and broader **social infrastructures**, including institutional arrangements, public buildings, community knowledge and expertise. These initiatives were using digital tools and platforms of their own design, or those designed by non-profitmaking tech organizations specifically for initiatives of their type, size, and level of formality.

We did not seek to quantify the voluntary transfers received by these initiatives via digital platforms, nor do we have a means of evaluating the redistributive effect (in wealth inequality terms) of these infrastructures. Yet our analysis indicates a distinction between two general **modes of redistribution**. Some initiatives appear to achieve a modest vertical redistribution of resources from middle and upper middle-class donors to the poorest in society (and, in one case, the global poor). Other initiatives practice what we recognize as a more horizontal mode of redistribution, which largely takes place within a social milieu — local communities, people with shared ideals — among people who have many attributes in common but whose needs and resources are (perhaps only temporarily) unequal. We found no initiatives that succeeded in organizing redistribution in a manner that was consistently progressive in terms of achieving a larger contribution from higher income earners.

Civil society initiatives work with an assemblage of digital tools, and they do so in routine, competent and resourceful ways. They tend to make instrumental and **pragmatic use** of digital tools, to accept their necessity and to concede their worth. However, their use of digital technology also leads to complex negotiations and ambiguities. In many different ways, we saw and heard participants express frustration with digital tools and platforms, as well as more substantial opposition to digital practices and ideologies.

Making sense of redistribution: discourses and imaginaries

How do civil society actors make sense of their redistributive practices? How do they understand those practices in relation to broader redistributive mechanisms — such as taxation and the welfare state?

Redistributive debate in Europe

Civil society initiatives engage in practices of redistribution in specific cultural, institutional and discursive contexts. In order to identify how civil society actors make sense of redistribution and themselves as redistributive actors, it is necessary to locate those frameworks of understanding in broader public debate. As set out in our research approach, we evaluated public debates about redistribution through a discourse analysis of news media texts published between February 2020 and December 2022. Our sample included texts that represent civil society initiatives as well as state-centred redistributive mechanisms, enabling us to interrogate how those initiatives are configured within broader public debates. We also analysed the meanings and values attributed to digital tools and platforms in these debates.

The five national contexts have markedly different redistributive traditions and **welfare state types**, which were inflected in the legitimating norms mobilized in these debates. In Switzerland, for example, a tax initiative was opposed by invoking the country's low-tax tradition: 'because we have always done it this way'. At the same time, we found certain common features in redistributive debate across the five countries.

As might be expected, public discourse about redistribution continues to be articulated to debate about taxation, for example in the form of reporting on tax avoidance 'scandals' and in coverage of proposals for tax reforms, including wealth taxes. Routine events related to public economy, such as government budget planning, can also stimulate debates about redistribution. More significantly, we found that public debate about redistribution intensifies in relation to **crisis events** which create both an urgent need for redistribution and greater distributional tension. In the period we examined, debate about redistribution was sparked by the COVID-19 crisis and the Ukraine war, but also by the impacts of a natural catastrophe, the La Palma volcano eruption, and by global protest against racial injustice, in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. We found that crisis events provide opportunities for the expression of more radical demands about redistribution, but these demands tend to be neutralized through their treatment in mainstream news media texts (Paylor et al.).

Our close analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic provided deeper insights into the positioning of civil society initiatives within redistributive debate. The pandemic has been understood as a moment in which European citizens were exposed to 'heightened redistributive capacity' on the part of the welfare state (Ares et al. 2021). It was also a moment in which significant energies were invested in civil society initiatives, ranging from philanthropic actions — footballers making large charitable donations, for example — to grassroots, mutual aid-type endeavours. These concurrent but distinct scales of redistributive activity were the object of intense **ideological investment** during the pandemic, and we saw how the redistributive capacities of the welfare state were constructed in relation to those of civil society, and vice versa. For example, civil society organizations were often constructed as more efficient and agile, and as possessing the expertise to deliver more targeted support, in contrast to the protracted, bureaucratic response of state actors. We noted an emerging preference for redistributive initiatives to adopt or be evaluated by **market logics**: welfare needs cannot be satisfied by state actors and mechanisms alone, and so the mixed economy of welfare should ideally involve a diverse range of actors with distinct capacities and strengths.

Overall, we found that debate about redistribution conducted in news media texts tends to focus on solving urgent, and typically local or national, social problems, rather than tackling underlying societal drivers of those problems, such as wealth inequality. As civil society and market actors take on a larger role in mixed economies of welfare, horizontal practices of voluntary redistribution between citizens become a more central organizing principle, while vertical redistribution (or transfer of wealth between different socio-economic groups), which can really only be effectively enacted through ‘coerced’ contribution, i.e. taxation, takes on a more marginal position. Voluntary contribution is increasingly validated as a legitimate alternative to taxation: for example, large charitable donations by Spanish corporations were framed as equivalent to wealth taxes. We can say that the orientation of public debate in Europe about redistribution is ‘affirmative’ rather than ‘transformative’ (Fraser 1997): it is centrally concerned with mitigating economic disadvantage while maintaining the existing political-economic structure, rather than with the transformation of that underlying structure.

The digital in redistributive debate

Our analysis of news media texts also revealed how representations of digital tools and platforms become connected to debate about redistribution. We found that meanings of the digital were produced largely in relation to redistributive initiatives in civil society, such as the launch of a charitable fundraising campaign or the efforts of communities to organize support for those in need. We noted a prevailing common sense regarding the organization, delivery and oversight of the digital technological capabilities and infrastructure that support voluntary transfer. Big Tech (Birch and Bronson 2022) — a name for US-based multinational technology corporations — plays an enormous role in delivering this technological capacity, and is framed in **positive or neutral**, ‘taken for granted’ terms.

By contrast, when state-led redistributive mechanisms were linked to digitalization projects, the framing tended to be negative, typically representing them as flawed, insufficient, or failing. In these contexts, we found left-political values articulated only rarely in concerns about digital exclusion or the digital ‘divide’ — that is, the concern that the digitalization of redistributive practices such as contactless donation points could produce new inequalities and inequities of access. We therefore identified a tendency for digitalization to be articulated to a market-liberal critique of the welfare state and state-led enterprise, and to the endorsement of the (growing) role of civil society actors in mixed economies of welfare.

Dominant redistributive imaginaries in civil society

These frameworks of meaning, prevalent in redistributive debate across Europe, provide a context for understanding how civil society actors make sense of redistribution and of themselves as redistributive actors, and how they conceive of the role of digital platforms in their redistributive practices. Here we draw on our research from all three phases of the project, including our fieldwork in civil society. Through the synthesis of our data, we identified seven dominant imaginaries that organize how people understand and practice redistribution. We characterize these imaginaries and their central tenets as follows:

Community empowerment

People are naturally inclined to help, and they want to donate to causes that will improve the lives of people in their communities. Voluntary giving helps to reinforce social bonds, creating more resilient communities. Digital innovation unlocks latent potential by activating communities and helping them to ‘get going’.

Pragmatic competition

It’s a tough and competitive world. Public resources are limited, and social initiatives must compete for the attention of potential donors and funders. Digital platforms enable small social initiatives to raise their public profile, but survival in this cause marketplace takes significant effort and expertise.

Welfare complementarity

Market and civil society actors play an essential role in the mixed economy of welfare, working alongside state actors to ensure that social needs are met. Digital platforms and tools provide an infrastructure that helps actors in the mixed economy of welfare to achieve complementarity.

Welfare consumerism

Citizens pay taxes, but they also want to choose where their money goes and donate to the causes they care about. Charitable giving enables individuals to participate in important decisions about how social need should be met. Digital tools and platforms make it easier for people to express their preferences.

Welfare state enhancement

In an ideal world, charities wouldn’t exist. Social needs aren’t being met, and charities are forced to provide temporary relief. But it isn’t enough — only the state has the capacity to deal with problems of this scale. Tax reform could provide the funds to deliver better welfare provision for everyone.

Welfare solutionism

We should take a problem-solving approach to social issues. There is enough money to go around, but support is not always calibrated to those who really need it. An evidence-based approach will optimize the resources available. Digital technological innovation helps us to overcome obstacles to positive social intervention.

Welfare transnationalism

The distribution of wealth is globally unequal, and prosperity in rich nations is conditional on poverty and extraction in the global South. Nation states are an obstacle to the fair redistribution of resources. Digital tools and platforms make it possible for support to cross borders.

These imaginaries are dominant in the sense that we tracked them across the majority of the five national settings we analysed. With some important exceptions, they are mobilised by both of the participant groups we researched. We traced **welfare consumerism** largely in the discourse of tech participants, while **welfare transnationalism** and **welfare state enhancement** are mobilized mainly by civil society participants. **Welfare complementarity** is the key imaginary adopted by both participant groups.

How do digital platforms shape redistributive imaginaries?

Digital tools and platforms shape and organize redistributive imaginaries in two ways: ideologically and materially.

Digital ideologies

Ways of thinking about redistribution are shaped by digital ideologies. Digital tools and platforms contribute to the production of social meaning about care, social protection and welfare through the causes they profile, the texts and images that appear in their graphic interfaces, and the socio-technical features that organize interactions between different users. The widespread adoption of digital tools in the voluntary sector brings civil society actors into closer contact with these ideas and values.

Ideas about the digital play a central and organizing role in all but one of the redistributive imaginaries we identified. Researchers have argued that **tech-solutionism** — or the impulse to ‘fix’ problems with technology (Morozov 2013) — has become widely diffused from the corporate tech world into other sectors. We found evidence of the assimilation of tech-solutionist ideas into frameworks for understanding redistribution practices. These ideas clearly emanate from the tech sector: whether they work in for-profit or non-profit organizations, digitalization is perceived by research participants from this sector as desirable and inevitable, and is linked to optimistic and even utopian visions of a better society and future in the context of a frictionless, ‘cashless’ society (Scott 2022). Broadening access to technological solutions (via, for example, the provision of digital payment services to charities) is seen as a critical priority, and the self-image of the tech sector is that it serves as an active agent of change, helping civil society organizations to ‘modernize’. These ideas are particularly concentrated in the **welfare solutionism** imaginary, but they are also diffused across other redistributive imaginaries.

We identified another overarching narrative about the digital that we describe as the **digital maturity** paradigm. Often used to describe an organization’s digital readiness (NCVO 2019), we found this frame applied at several scales. At a local level, research participants from many initiatives expressed concerns that their organization risked ‘lagging behind’, because they perceived their digital capacities — measured for example by the intensity of their social media engagement — to be deficient. Here, digital capacities were compared to those of other organizations — both in the voluntary and private/corporate sector — who use the same digital tools and platforms. The frame of digital maturity also applied at the scale of international comparison. Viewed through a Euro-centric lens, Montenegro’s position in Europe — along with other Balkans nations — is regarded as ‘peripheral’. Research participants in Montenegro tend to evaluate digitalization efforts through a lens that measures their own country against an ideal of progress which is imagined to be realized in the European ‘centre’. This evolutionary frame is regularly reinforced by European institutions.

Digital materialities

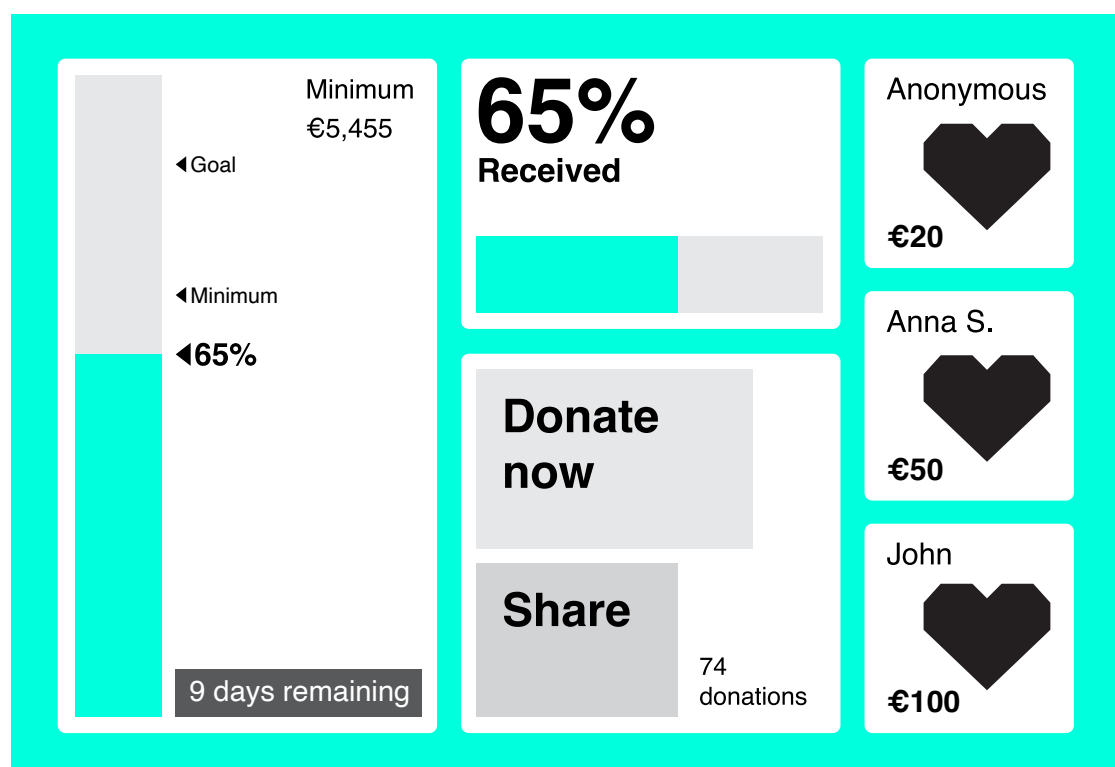
Digital tools and platforms also materially underpin certain ways of thinking about redistribution. They prompt actors to carry out certain tasks, to adopt certain practices, and to organize welfare provision in particular ways. Ways of thinking about redistribution are shaped by the **affordances** of the digital, and by **material digital infrastructures**.

Across the digital platforms, tools and interfaces in our sample, we found a set of standardized features heavily influenced by other successful digital sectors such as e-commerce, gaming and social media. We found that even when platforms are designed and managed by non-profits, their interfaces and affordances tend to mimic those of US-owned, profit-making platforms like GoFundMe. These features foster particular ways of approaching and understanding the specific practice of donation to social causes, but also wider mixed economies of welfare.

Donors and beneficiaries

Digital platforms and tools consolidate the donor as a particularly privileged subject position in the socio-economic relations that structure charitable fundraising. For example, many platforms and websites invite **donors** to engage with social causes via a digital 'catalogue' of initiatives seeking support. Donors scroll through options, filter them by category, and select one to support, much like browsing for a product in an online store. The familiar act of 'adding to cart' or 'tapping to buy' is replaced by an action (often represented by a heart icon) to choose and donate to a cause you 'care about' (Ege and Ottovay). The dominant frame of 'choice' positions the donor as a sovereign consumer whose decisions directly inform the delivery of welfare provision: which causes are the most important; which initiatives are the most compelling.

Image credit: 'Crowdfunding platform graphic', 2025, UAL | Production: Creative team, Communications



The imperatives of digital fundraising also shape the subject position of the ultimate **beneficiaries** of online donation — those framed as urgently in need of welfare interventions. Digital fundraising and crowdfunding are visual practices, requiring fundraisers to portray those in need as ‘worthy’ in ways that often promote affective regimes of suffering and pity. While some tech participants spoke of efforts to counter these representational regimes, we tracked these imperatives in the affordances of many of the tools and platforms in our sample. We also noted that civil society participants had thoroughly assimilated the rules of this game. Yet as we will discuss later, actors in civil society don’t accept these imperatives willingly, and they create substantial ethical dilemmas for initiatives that support beneficiaries who don’t fit the mould of the ‘worthy’ recipient of aid, or cannot be portrayed according to the regimes imposed by digital platforms.

“If you want to do a successful social project, you have to combine children, refugees and animals. Refugees less. But children, sick children, animals. That goes to the heart.”
— Platform spokesperson

Welfare causes and welfare gaps

Welfare crowdfunding and digital fundraising also operate in relation to so-called ‘gaps’ in the welfare safety net. This relationship is, on the one hand, reflective: the rise of charitable fundraising in relation to certain types of social need can be understood as symptomatic of gaps in welfare state provision. We found that the relationship is also more dynamic: digital affordances, such as the consumerist catalogue templates we described above, actively shape how **welfare gaps** are understood and imagined, and contribute to the material allocation of resources to certain causes and initiatives over others. This formative role was largely unrecognized by our research participants, who tend to regard digital infrastructures as **neutral platforms** that offer every initiative the opportunity to promote itself. Tech participants also tended to think about welfare gaps in terms of visibility and promotion: their platforms enable civil society actors to publicize needs, causes and beneficiaries that the state is unable to reach, and so digital tools promote a **complementary** mixed economy of welfare provision.

While this tendency for platforms to actively shape collective understanding of existing and emerging welfare gaps is certainly a cause for concern, it also points to the potential for digital platforms to highlight new or overlooked **areas of need** (e.g. gender affirming surgery, special educational needs, animal welfare), and to facilitate and support the democratic deliberation of social needs and welfare provision (Elstub 2006). We suspect that it is this (currently highly circumscribed) democratizing potential that makes digital fundraising attractive to organizations and initiatives whose beneficiaries have been systematically excluded from welfare state and established voluntary sector priorities.

Welfare intermediaries

The digital shift also has significant implications for **welfare intermediaries**. Even within the constraints of our sample, the social relations that intermediate donations and welfare provision in Europe are revealed to be extremely complex. Groups of people of various sizes, and of varying degrees of formality, come together to address social needs. In seeking funds from private donors, they take on an intermediary role in the management and reallocation of those voluntary donations. In accounts of value exchange in economic anthropology, redistribution is defined by ‘pooling’, or the practice of collection and redivision (Sahlins 1972). In welfare states, the node or ‘social centre’ where resources are pooled and redirected is primarily assumed by a centralizing authority like the state. But in mixed economies of welfare, many different types of organization take on this role.

We tracked several ways in which this intermediary role, and practices of intermediation more widely, are shaped by digital tools and platforms. Digital platforms actively invite very small, **informal groups** of people — or even individuals — to nominate themselves as a social node that will assume responsibility for the pooling and reallocation of resources to support welfare needs. Intermediaries assume **responsibility** for an economic resource that may be aggregated from the donations of many individual donors. This money comes with strings attached: intermediaries must fulfil donors’ expectation — raised in part by platform marketing discourse — that their money will ‘make a difference’.

They must also meet the demands of platforms to deliver **transparency**, which is framed as an entitlement that follows from voluntary contribution. It is legitimate, in other words, for donors to be able to track ‘where their money goes’. Digital tools and platforms promise to enhance scrutiny of the flow of money from the donor to the intermediary, and onwards to the intended beneficiary. In practice, ‘transparency’ requires significant input from intermediaries to keep donors informed about how ‘their money’ has been spent. In these ways, digital platforms and tools play a powerful and underestimated role in **setting the rules** for how intermediaries manage their redistributive practices. We saw in our fieldwork how intermediaries internalize these rules, demands and expectations.

“Because we are all using the same platform and everything is there for people to see, it also helps [us to be] very transparent with how much money we are getting, where it is going, how it is being distributed and things like that.”

— Voluntary initiative member

Logics of digital marketing pervade platform-based fundraising and exert a distinct pressure on intermediaries, who are increasingly expected to possess entrepreneurial and promotional skills and digital marketing expertise. The imperative to **increase visibility** is a significant component of the imaginary of **pragmatic competition**, in which civil society organizations must strive to raise the profile of their work. Some groups assimilate the promise that digital platforms will increase their visibility and secure their income (Oliva et al.) and fully commit themselves to playing the social media game as well as they can. Others are more suspicious of this promise but perceive that they have little choice but to conform to these marketing logics.

“Where we should make improvements is our visibility on social media. [Donors] react to ads that they see by chance [...] You need to be in the right place at the right time.”
— Voluntary sector organization representative

Finally, we found widespread evidence that the digital shift has created additional **digital labour** for civil society organizations, both large and small. Digital fundraising requires intermediaries to engage donors (by creating compelling texts and attention-grabbing images), maintain their community (by publishing regular updates), and leverage external tools like social media to publicize their initiative and attract more donors. We saw that small organizations in particular lacked in-house capacity, and were constantly looking for new staff or volunteers with digital marketing expertise or familiarity with the latest social media apps and trends. In our fieldwork, we saw how this work is enmeshed in **gendered labour arrangements**: an overwhelming majority of the digital labour arising from fundraising imperatives was performed by women, often working in an unpaid capacity.

Platform intermediation

Digital tools and platforms also shape collective understanding of their own role in intermediating voluntary transfers for social causes. Above all, crowdfunding platforms, websites and payment apps present themselves, through their marketing discourses and affordances, as **neutral intermediaries** that simply ‘connect’ donors with welfare initiatives that need their support. Indeed, the claim of crowdfunding platforms is that they will **disintermediate** charitable giving (MacQuillin et al. 2023), enabling donors to bypass traditional charities. However, we found powerful evidence of the multiple ways in which digital tools and platforms actively reintermediate voluntary transfer according to their own interests.

While the vision of a **competitive cause marketplace** is often presented as an objective, common-sense description of the world in which voluntary sector organizations are operating, it is clear from our research that digital platforms actively promote competitive relations, not least through the provision of the marketplace in which initiatives must compete for visibility and for funds. Platform affordances, such as the quantification of success measures and the use of **gamification** mechanisms (fundraising goals, time limits, leaderboards, badges and ranking systems) underpin this way of thinking. Far from being neutral platforms, these websites actively structure and curate the cause marketplace, through the selection, showcasing, and validation of certain initiatives over others. Platform organizations often take on the role of agents of digital ‘modernization’, providing training to non-profits in digital marketing and tool usage or brokering partnerships with local government and businesses.

A significant element of the tech sector’s marketing offer to civil society fundraisers is that digital tools and platforms will enable voluntary sector organizations to benefit from the **aggregation** of many very small contributions. Digital platforms consolidate and promise to enhance the impact of these ‘micro donations’, proposing (to donors) that it is possible to bring about meaningful change ‘for the price of a coffee’, and (to civil society organizations) that aggregated micro donations can compensate for the loss of other revenue streams. Claims about the transformative impact or ‘power’ of aggregated donations are undoubtedly overstated, and yet they have become widely accepted in everyday thinking.

Where digital platforms are managed by profit-making companies, the alignment of an aggregative approach with platforms' **economic interests** is obvious. One of the key features of the platform economy is the capacity of platforms to generate 'network effects' (Srnicsek 2017): users are encouraged to 'share' with their networks to attract new users. Many of the interfaces we analysed charge users fees, or 'direct rents' (Langley and Leyshon 2017), for using the platform's services, and associated third party processors such as Stripe, PayPal and Twint also benefit from this eco-system of money transfer.

"People often say, 'I alone can't make a difference'. [...] But if they only knew how important one euro is — if everyone contributed just that small amount, the impact would be huge."
— Voluntary sector organization representative

Crowdfunding websites tend to be designed in ways that mirror aspects of social media, incorporating, for example, the option to 'react' (click a 'heart' symbol), comment and share. We found that these affordances tend to be underused, suggesting that users do not spend very much time on these sites. These platforms nonetheless retain the potential to generate indirect rents based on the value of user data, thanks to their interconnection with social media platforms. Through our discourse analysis of news media texts, we were able to locate these platforms in broader **digital redistributive infrastructures** — incorporating both social media and publishing platforms — and to understand their central role in organising such systems. News stories about fundraising initiatives (particularly prevalent during the pandemic) invariably incorporate links to crowdfunding websites, establishing a digital conduit that directs money towards particular redistributive outcomes, via digital platforms (Paylor and Bramall).

In promoting aggregative, mass participation, the marketing rhetoric and material infrastructure of digital platforms also promote more **horizontal**, less vertical, and therefore less progressive modes of redistribution: in other words, it is not in the interests of digital platforms to facilitate a smaller number of more substantial donations from a more wealthy cohort of donors.

Envisioning future welfare provision

The digitalization and platformization of welfare fundraising also shapes the ways in which welfare provision in the future is imagined. We traced two overarching, intertwined visions: a vision of welfare state decline, and a vision of democratization. A drive for deeper digitalization of civil society and its fundraising and welfare practices underpins both of these overarching narratives.

We were struck by the embedded, common-sense nature of the narrative of **welfare state decline** in our research participants' imaginaries of redistribution. While the form of expression of this narrative varies in different welfare state and national contexts, the state is widely understood to lack the capacity to be responsible for 'all' social needs. This assumption supports a vision of a mixed economy of welfare rebalanced towards civil society and private sector actors. It is really only in the imaginary of **welfare state enhancement** that this narrative is challenged.

This overriding vision of decline is countered by a more positive vision, in which digital tools and platforms play a significant role. The claim that digitalization can deliver or enhance **democratization** is widespread in our data and tends to organize visions of how mixed economies of welfare might work in the future. ‘Democracy’ and ‘democratization’ do not have a consistent meaning, and participants with diverse political outlooks used these terms to refer to different practices and processes. In the next section we point to attempts by one platform to activate participatory and deliberative forms of democracy, but we found that the vision of democratization articulated in dominant redistributive imaginaries was more often organized by **logics of consumer choice** and market relations.

“The whole framework and notion of what we’ve done is to create a more democratic solution where people are heard by their wallets.”

— Crowdfunding platform manager

The concept of democratization is often used by tech representatives to describe how platforms operate, but what they are really describing is a broadening of access to funds, aligning with platforms’ claim to make it easier for small causes to access funding and for any individual to become a donor. This meaning of democratization is aligned with platforms’ prioritization of donor empowerment and choice, which blends the rhetoric of consumer sovereignty with gestures towards social change. Democratic decision-making is conceived here as the freedom to choose which welfare initiative to support, and in so doing to influence the cause marketplace: to be ‘heard’ via one’s wallet. Taking into account the profit-making interests of many proponents of these democracy claims, we suggest that the vision of the mixed economy expressed through claims of increasing participation and broadening access is in fact a vision of a deeper privatization and neoliberal **marketization** of the mixed economy of welfare.

Discontents, resistances, and alternative imaginaries

How do research participants' ways of thinking about redistribution deviate from dominant imaginaries? What kinds of frictions, discontents, and forms of resistance emerge?

Resisting welfare state retrenchment

Thus far we have focused on dominant redistributive imaginaries and the role of digitalization and platformization in shaping and underpinning those imaginaries. It is however important to address the many significant and diverse ways in which our research participants' ways of understanding their initiatives, and their location in broader systems of redistribution and welfare, deviate considerably from these dominant imaginaries.

While we identified a high degree of consensus around the vision of a welfare state in irrevocable decline, and of a dynamic mixed economy of welfare in which civil society and private actors would take up more of the slack, this vision was not endorsed by all. The **welfare state enhancement** imaginary is organized around a desire for a restored, expanded or enhanced welfare state. This imaginary can be characterized as social democratic in orientation, and it tends to contest prevailing common sense about the mixed economy of welfare. In this imaginary, the mixed economy is seen to have become unbalanced, with too much responsibility falling on civil society and the informal provision of welfare.

“We fill gaps because the state is not taking responsibility. I don't think that's actually our job. But we can't wait for the state to organize things, we have to help people now. [...] When all these services are no longer needed, then the world will be in order.”

— Voluntary sector organization representative

What is particularly interesting about this imaginary is that it contains little or no reference to digital platforms, tools or solutions. This is not to suggest that European public debate lacks ideas, proposals and policies about the **digitalization of welfare states**, including progressive ideas that would align with the **welfare state enhancement** imaginary. But when actors engaged in voluntary initiatives reflect on the redistributive capacities of the state, digital tools and solutions don't seem salient. As we saw in our analysis of redistributive debate in Europe, digitalization as a positive development is almost invariably discursively associated with private and civil society initiatives.

Alternative and oppositional positions

We found no other widespread, developed, and consistently articulated redistributive imaginary that challenged the prevailing optimism about civil society's capacity to meet emergent welfare needs. That said, the redistributive imaginaries we identified are not rigid in terms of their politics and accommodate a range of different political orientations and commitments. For example, at the heart of the **community empowerment** imaginary is the notion that the scale of the 'community' can foster qualitatively different social relations than those cultivated by the state. This idea is shared by individuals across the political spectrum, from civic conservatives to communitarian anarchists.

“We live in a capitalist state. We live in a state with a growing economy. We live in a state where inequalities are embedded and inherent in our society. That's why I believe that building strong communities is a vital complement. Collaboration between the public and private sectors is a key two-way path — not only so that the government, which cannot reach

or fund everything, can rely on the support of the community to extend its reach, but also so that these communities can thrive and occupy spaces that the state alone cannot reach.”
— Crowdfunding platform manager

Several of the groups we studied emerged out of local histories of activism, where they have experienced success and failure. For these groups, especially those that seek to transcend conventional charitable modes of engagement, digital tools are seen as the most **promising tools** available — tools that may help them overcome barriers to realizing their political goals. These experiences of activism seem to enhance groups’ capacity to navigate and choose between the digital tools and platforms that are available to them. For example, a mutual aid group selected a crowdfunding platform with an **open source ethos** that aligned most closely with their needs and political preferences. Activists that failed to gain a majority for a local universal basic income instead set up a voluntary scheme implemented through a bespoke digital platform.

“For me personally, this is a part of prefigurative politics for a world where we don’t have a state and where we help each other out and make use of the abundant resources that there are, that just are being diverted off to a very small group of people.”
— Voluntary initiative member

Ideas about the digital can play a role in fostering alternative and oppositional ways of thinking about redistribution, particularly when they are activated in groups with experience of activism, and had experienced both success and failure. A spokesperson for a commons-based tech initiative told us that they viewed their crowdfunding platform as a ‘Trojan horse’ to introduce new participatory public budgeting. Here, digital tools and platforms are envisaged as a means of experimenting with deliberative democracy and **alternative forms of social organization**. Other groups were clearly using mainstream, profit-making platforms to initiate projects that sought to mitigate or challenge harms caused by the state, including the **exclusion of minoritized subjects** from the right to access welfare support (Lewis 2000).

Everyday discontents

Our research design enabled us to document not only the thoughts about redistribution and digitalization that civil society participants expressed to us, but also how they used digital tools in practice. Through our fieldwork we identified many different frictions, discontents, and forms of resistance to the expectations and demands that follow from the digital shift in civil society.

In a general sense, the orientation of the civil society participants towards digital tools and platforms is one of practicality and realism. Working with an assemblage of digital tools, they tend to make instrumental and **pragmatic use** of digital tools, to accept their necessity and to concede their worth. As a result of this practical orientation, digital tools and platforms aren’t always used exactly as they were designed and intended to be used. We found multiple instances of **work-arounds and adaptations** that were elaborated as part of the delivery of specific initiatives.

We were not surprised to find that tech participants tended to mobilize tech-solutionist ideas with enthusiasm, and to adopt more readily a market-liberal orientation towards the challenge of meeting welfare needs. Some civil society participants could also be classed as digital enthusiasts, convinced by the capacities of digital technologies to resolve the challenges faced by the sector. But on the whole, we found that the majority are neither digital enthusiasts nor digital dissenters. Their orientation can instead be described as one of ‘**disaffected consent**’ (Gilbert 2015) to the imperatives of the digital shift, and of reluctant acceptance of rules set by others (tech companies, funders, and society at large).

More negative affects of reluctance, disaffection and disillusionment were provoked by specific imperatives of the digital shift. As we have already noted, the digital shift has created significant additional digital labour for civil society organizations. In the groups we studied, there was a constant **sense of insufficiency**, of ‘not doing enough’, of being ‘behind’, and of not having the right expertise. Here, the imperative to be visible loomed large, with many groups worrying that they would never attract levels of online attention that would satisfy their concerns about future revenues and the sustainability of their organization. While doing crowdfunding has become common sense in those countries where it is available, we identified widespread **disillusionment** amongst research participants who had tried to use it.

Relatedly, many participants expressed concerns about the rapid pace of digital change and the risk that some citizens might be **excluded** from online donation practices. Meanwhile, some research participants speaking to us on behalf of platforms complained that civil society organizations were **resistant to change** and had a limited ability to adapt to the entrepreneurial logics of digital fundraising.

We carried out interviews during a period in which many progressive users of X, including organizations such as Greenpeace (Helbig 2025), were deleting their accounts. Our civil society participants accepted the imperative for their initiative to be present on social media platforms, but expressed scepticism and unease about the **increasing toxicity**, political power and explicitly right-wing orientation of X and other digital platforms. The **fees and charges** extracted by platforms for providing the digital infrastructure for fundraising were also a source of friction, with some participants regarding them as excessive or even immoral. One participant reported with frustration that 9% of a funding pot had to be returned to the platform in fees.

“It’s hard when you think someone’s given their last £5 or they’re just giving a little bit, and then you don’t even get all of that towards the project.”

— Civil society participant

“We’re also on X, but since ethically I don’t... well, I don’t really like any social network, but especially X. So we’re also considering, should we leave? We’re not having any real impact there, and we don’t even have the time to do advocacy. Maybe before, with X or Twitter, we did. But honestly, I think that network isn’t really for our audience any more.”

— Civil society participant

These affects, discontents and diverse political articulations remind us that dominant redistributive imaginaries are not unified, stable entities: they are contingent frameworks of understanding that are constantly being tested and elaborated, and can be transformed through the incorporation of new experiences and political demands.

Conclusion



Image credit: 'Lantern painting', 2024, UAL | Photograph: Rebecca Bramall

Key findings

In a 'mixed economy' of welfare, redistribution practices are increasingly dispersed through civil society. **Public debate in Europe** about redistribution is centrally concerned with mitigating economic disadvantage, rather than with the transformation of political-economic structures. Meanings of the digital are produced largely in relation to redistributive initiatives in civil society. It is accepted as common sense that multinational tech corporations play a central role in the delivery of digital technological capabilities and infrastructure. Overall, although with some significant exceptions, digitalization tends to be articulated to a market-liberal critique of the welfare state and state-led enterprise, and to an endorsement of the role of civil society and private sector actors in mixed economies of welfare.

Digital platforms tend to present themselves as neutral intermediaries while actively shaping mixed economies of welfare. Digital tools and platforms structure and curate the cause marketplace, contributing to the dynamic construction of welfare gaps, and to the channelling of resources to certain initiatives over others. Relatively small, informal groups are invited to assume responsibility for the pooling and reallocation of resources. The aggregative model of digital platforms aligns with the rent-seeking approach of profit-making, US-based crowdfunding platforms. This model does not support redistribution practices that would tackle wealth inequality or contribute to the transformation of underlying political-economic structures. Overall, digital platforms promote more horizontal, less vertical, and therefore less progressive modes of redistribution.

The impact of the digital shift on **European civil society** is extensive but uneven: national and European-level regulations are a key factor in delimiting platformization. Civil society initiatives work with an assemblage of digital tools, and they do so in routine, competent and resourceful ways. The digitalization of fundraising generates significant digital labour for civil society organizations, and leads to complex negotiations and discontents. Civil society initiatives use digital tools in ways that reflect dominant norms and intended use, but also to experiment with alternative forms of social organization. Digital platforms can sustain democratic deliberation and decision-making about the allocation of resources, and can be used to initiate projects that mitigate or challenge harms caused by the state, including the exclusion of minoritized subjects, and to support beneficiaries who have been systematically excluded from welfare state and established voluntary sector priorities.

Redistributive imaginaries are collective, common-sense understandings of redistribution. Dominant redistributive imaginaries are shaped by digital ideologies, affordances and material infrastructures, and civil society is a critical locus of mean-making about redistribution. We identified seven dominant redistributive imaginaries.

Key tendencies are apparent. Dominant redistributive imaginaries foreground and privilege practices that operate at the nexus of civil society and the market, while a narrative of welfare state decline is embedded as common sense. Positive values of the digital are deeply embedded in redistributive imaginaries that contest social-democratic regimes of redistribution. These imaginaries consolidate an emerging common sense about the role of private and civil sector actors in mixed economies of welfare. An imaginary of **welfare state enhancement** nonetheless remains powerful, contesting the narrative of welfare state decline. Digital tools and solutions have limited salience in this imaginary.

Tech-solutionist ideas have been widely assimilated into redistributive imaginaries, as have claims that digital platforms democratize fundraising and increase participation. Democratic decision-making is widely reimagined according to market logics as the freedom for donors to choose which welfare initiative to support. Claims about the affordances and advantages of the digital shift tend to align with market-oriented visions of welfare provision.

Dominant redistributive imaginaries accommodate a range of different political orientations and commitments. Ideas about the digital can play a role in alternative and oppositional ways of thinking about redistribution, particularly when they are activated in groups with experience of activism or marginalization. Redistributive imaginaries reflect and promote different views about the appropriate balance between civil society, market and state actors in the mixed economy of welfare, but there is significant consensus around the aspiration for welfare provision to be better resourced, and for needs to be met in a **fair and equitable** manner. There is also a widespread desire for increased public debate about how these objectives can be achieved.

In mixed economies of welfare, funding for welfare initiatives comes from individual donors as well as from the state. There is therefore an interconnection between meanings and practices of taxation and donation as coterminous mechanisms. Redistributive imaginaries have implications for **European welfare states** and systems of progressive taxation.

In a context in which voluntary contribution is increasingly validated as a legitimate alternative to taxation, the digitalization of donation exacerbates certain existing tendencies. Digital platforms promote the aggregation of micro-donations from the largest possible number of platform users. Taxation also aggregates contributions into a fund that can be leveraged for the public good, but it can be applied progressively, so that more wealthy individuals or profitable corporations make a larger contribution. In an ideological conjuncture dominated by platforms, the substantial capacities and advantages of public finance are increasingly disregarded. Advocates of progressive taxation and of a reinvigoration of Europe's welfare states must take up this challenge.

Transforming redistributive imaginaries

Redistributive imaginaries are not unified, stable entities: they are contingent frameworks of understanding that are constantly being tested and elaborated, and can be transformed through the incorporation of new experiences and political demands. Indeed, we see potential for redistributive imaginaries to be elaborated in alternative and more **progressive directions**, in response to interventions from actors within and beyond civil society. While there are many possible openings to be pursued, we suggest three specific interventions that could open up alternative trajectories for civil society and the future of mixed economies of welfare in Europe:

From consumerist choice to participatory decision making

The dominant imaginary of **welfare consumerism** conflates democratization with consumer choice: donors are invited to engage with catalogues of causes, with the promise that they will be 'heard' via their wallets. Many of our research participants adopted this way of thinking, expressing the desire to 'choose' where their money goes and give to the causes that they 'care' about. There is significant potential for these desires to be redirected to mechanisms and infrastructures that enhance,

rather than circumscribe, solidaristic and participatory decision-making, and that provide more significant long-term rewards to citizen-donors than consumerist modes of donation. Here we point to research, policy-making, and practical experimentation with **participatory budgeting** (Kotanidis 2024). We also point to attempts to involve citizen assemblies in making decisions about how both public and private funds can be allocated for the public good (Mohdin 2025; Wealth Shared 2025).

From extractive platforms to a digital commonwealth

We found that the extractive nature of profit-making platforms creates significant frictions for civil society participants who are committed to achieving transparency and value in their welfare provision. At the same time, free to use social media platforms such as X are increasingly perceived as toxic, risky spaces to navigate, and as antithetical to the values of the initiatives concerned. Given these discontents, there is significant potential to engage fundraisers in civil society with policy proposals and political demands for **public ownership** of digital platforms (Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton 2018; Dezentrum 2025).

Towards a digital welfare state for the public good

We saw that despite the declinist tendencies of the majority of dominant redistributive imaginaries, a large number of our research participants actively desired a renewal of a welfare state, believing that only the state has the capacity to deal with the most serious social problems. We've also shown that digital tools and platforms are absent from this **welfare state enhancement** imaginary; they simply don't feature. And yet there are compelling proposals emerging from civic tech, community innovation, and other movements about how European welfare states can develop digital platforms for the public good and ambitious **digital social policy** (Coldicutt 2025). Donor engagement with digital fundraising tools and platforms points to enduring social solidarity, and to opportunities for renewing and transforming the social contract via the mechanisms of taxation and the welfare state. Here, the challenge is to build alliances and connect these demands.

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