

# DEMOCRACY





Front cover illustration: Hani Abbas + Vermillion Design

# EED

## Annual Report 2025

EUROPEAN  
ENDOWMENT FOR  
DEMOCRACY



# CONTENTS

**FOREWORD**

**4**

**INTRODUCTION**

**6**

**ABOUT EED**

**10**

**EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY**

**14**

**PORTFOLIO  
OVERVIEW**

**16**

**EVENTS**

**19**

**ONE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY,  
MANY CONTEXTS**

**25**



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**IMPACT BRIEFS**



**42**

**GEORGIA: CIVIL SOCIETY'S FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL**

**93**

**A YEAR OF PROTESTS IN SERBIA**

**95**

**EED RESPONSE TO US FUNDING CRISIS**

**99**

**EU SAFETY NET**

**102**

**RESULTS AND LEARNING**

**104**

**HUMAN RESOURCES AND BUDGET**

**105**

**FUNDING PARTNERS**

**106**

# FOREWORD

**BY THE CHAIR OF EED BOARD OF GOVERNORS,  
DAVID MCALLISTER MEP**

The year 2025 has brought the fragility of the rules-based international order, which has underpinned peace and prosperity in Europe for decades, into sharp focus. We are witnessing a fundamental shift in the global balance of power, as authoritarian regimes challenge democratic values and international law, while traditional alliances face unprecedented strain. At this moment of uncertainty, it is crucial that Europe defends its values and continues to support those fighting for freedom and democracy.

In this volatile context, I welcome the publication of the "European Democracy Shield" and the "EU Civil Society Strategy", which underline the EU's commitment to supporting democracy and strengthening civil society both within and beyond our borders, particularly within Enlargement countries. The work of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) in supporting independent media and civil society in the EU Neighbourhood is recognised in both these strategies.

The withdrawal of US foreign funding support during the year created a critical vacuum that the EU has struggled to address adequately. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has entered its fourth year and there is persistent instability across the Middle East and North Africa. EED has played a critical role providing strategic support to organisations throughout the year, particularly those affected by the withdrawal of US funding.

As peace negotiations continue, it is clear that peace in Ukraine will not be achieved by yielding to the aggressor. Any settlement must be grounded in international law that fully respects Ukraine's territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty. Throughout these nearly four years of war, civil society and independent media have continued to play a vital role in shaping a stable democratic Ukraine, notably during the July "cardboard revolution" when they mobilised to prevent government attempts to undermine the



independence of key anti-corruption institutions. Ukraine has been a key focus of EED's work since its establishment, with EED providing significant emergency funding to actors affected by the US funding cuts this year.

EED plays a key role in channelling European support to Belarusian democratic actors inside the country and in exile. Following a sham presidential election in January, the Lukashenka regime inflicted a further wave of repression. Despite the release of prisoners, there are still 1,200 political prisoners. These include Andrzej Poczobut, who was one of two imprisoned journalists awarded the Sakharov Prize in 2025. EED's support to the Belarusian political infrastructure in exile, to independent media and civil society as outlined in the Impact Brief of this report is vital to help ensure democracy actors can continue their important work.

In September, Moldovans made an important pro-European choice in their parliamentary elections, demonstrating the resilience of their democracy in the face of unprecedented Russian hybrid warfare. EED supported Moldovan democratic actors during the election period and continues to support them in the post-election phase; this sustained support is vital to help ensure the country's ongoing democratic resilience.

As Armenia prepares for upcoming elections, it can learn from Moldova's experience in increasing the resilience of its institutions and protecting society against foreign interference, disinformation and hybrid threats. EED has now stepped up its support to civil society and independent media actors during this pre-election period.

Throughout 2025, we have witnessed an assault on democracy and fundamental rights of assembly and expression in Georgia, and an aggressive campaign by the authorities against the EU. Sakharov Prize laureate, Mzia Amaglobeli, has been held in prison for over a year. EED is now one of the few actors able to support brave democracy actors in Georgia at this challenging time.

In the Western Balkans, momentum for EU Enlargement stands at unprecedented levels. There has been substantial progress on accession negotiations, particularly in Montenegro and Albania. The Enlargement Package has also detailed clearly what needs to be done in Bosnia

and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia. As these countries navigate their path towards membership, EED's work in supporting civil society, independent media, and democratic actors across the region, is helping to strengthen the foundations necessary for successful EU integration.

In the Middle East, while the Israel-Hamas deal offers a hopeful first step to end the Gaza war, peace is far from secured. Europe must stand together to deliver humanitarian aid and support key regional actors in securing a durable ceasefire. We cannot give in to those who thrive on instability in the region. We need to keep alive the idea of a two-state solution, however distant this might seem today.

Iran continues to represent the largest threat to regional security through its brutal repression at home and its destructive actions abroad. In this context, I welcome that this year EED provided the first grants to Iranian partners.

Since its establishment in 2013, EED has consistently demonstrated the value of its work providing flexible support to democracy actors throughout the Neighbourhood. EED's mission has never been more vital than it is today, as funding for democracy actors has contracted throughout the region, and the global geopolitical environment is likely to become ever more challenging.

As Chair of the EED Board of Governors since 2019, I am honoured to continue championing this critical work.



**David McAllister**

Chair of EED's Board of Governors  
Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee  
in the European Parliament

# INTRODUCTION

BY EED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JERZY POMIANOWSKI

Welcome to the European Endowment for Democracy's 2025 Annual Report.

In 2025, EED awarded 40 percent more grants compared with the previous year. 579 initiatives were funded for a total of €52.4 million. Behind these figures lie stories of remarkable individuals and organisations working in extraordinarily challenging circumstances to protect and advance democracy in Europe's neighbourhood and beyond.

Across the world democracy is increasingly under siege. Authoritarian regimes continue to tighten their grip through repression, disinformation, and the weaponisation of technology, and countries in the EU Neighbourhood are facing mounting pressures. Yet amid this grim landscape, citizens continue to demand that their voices be heard. From the streets of Georgia, Iran and Serbia to the communities rebuilding in Syria or holding government accountable in Ukraine, people are fighting for democratic principles and freedoms.

In September, I was honoured to meet EED partners in Damascus, most of whom remained in the country throughout the twelve years of war. The end of the Assad era in Syria is further evidence that even long-lasting oppressive dictatorships can collapse rapidly and unexpectedly. While Syria's path to democracy remains uncertain, the strength, resilience and determination of its civil society to build democratic institutions and a democratic society offer both hope and a compelling case for continued international support.

I was also delighted to have the opportunity to meet EED partners in Lviv earlier in the year, where we discussed the changing international context and EED's ongoing commitment to support civil society and independent media.

November 2025 saw publication by the EU of two important strategies "The European Democracy Shield" and "The EU Civil Society Strategy". The European Democracy Shield recognises that democracy cannot be defended only within EU borders. It must be supported wherever people are fighting for it. EED's model of providing flexible, rapid, risk-taking support to democracy defenders is precisely the kind of nimble instrument the Democracy Shield envisions. Our

partnerships throughout the European Neighbourhood position EED to strengthen the political, societal, and anticipatory resilience mechanisms that the Democracy Shield seeks to activate.

Supporting democracy beyond EU borders is not charity. It is a strategic investment in Europe's long-term stability, prosperity, and security. When we support independent media in Moldova, we help citizens access reliable information ahead of critical elections and resist Russian interference. When we strengthen civil society in Syria, we invest in the institutional capacity needed for peaceful transition. When we empower democracy actors in Ukraine, we fortify the resilience that will enable post-war reconstruction to be democratic and inclusive.

The struggle for democracy in fragile societies has generated vital knowledge that Europe now needs to strengthen its own resilience. Citizens of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia were the first targets of disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), and hybrid warfare – not EU citizens. Their experiences served as an early warning system, allowing Europe to identify, learn and respond to these threats.

The collapse of US funding this year has meant many challenges for democracy actors throughout the Neighbourhood, creating a vacuum that anti-democratic voices are trying to fill. EED stepped up our work significantly to respond to the immense challenges faced by democracy actors. Immediately following the announcement of the US funding freeze, EED set up an emergency funding envelope to provide lifeline funding to support the survival of key institutions of critical importance within the democracy infrastructure.

EED is also hosting the EU Safety Net Initiative, a crisis response mechanism to support independent journalism in Eurasia, following the US withdrawal of funding assistance and the US termination of grants to Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

This year's annual report includes new Impact Briefs profiling EED's work in six key contexts: Albania, Belarus, Moldova, Syria, Turkey and Ukraine. These briefs go beyond



the statistics to tell the stories of how EED's support makes a tangible difference. They show how EED's human-centred approach and deep contextual understanding supports civil society activists, independent journalists, and democracy defenders to navigate repression, conflict, and uncertainty and build more democratic futures in their societies. They illustrate why EED's work matters not only morally, but strategically.

The report includes a section on Georgia, where civic organisations and independent media continue to resist through daily protests, despite the marked acceleration of authoritarian rule, and the violent suppression of civic space and freedom of expression. It also includes a section on Serbia, which has seen unprecedented civic mobilisation during the year in the face of a coordinated crackdown by the regime.

Throughout this report, we profile the remarkable democracy defenders EED supports, many of whom work in exceptionally difficult circumstances at extraordinary personal risk. Their resilience, creativity, and conviction are a constant reminder to me why this work matters. As I reflect on the challenges ahead and the mounting pressures facing our partners, I remain convinced of the necessity and importance of EED's mandate.

**Jerzy Pomianowski**  
Executive Director of the  
European Endowment for Democracy





# ABOUT EED

**The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is an independent, grant-making organisation, established in 2013 by the European Union (EU) and EU Member States as an autonomous International Trust Fund to foster democracy in the European Neighbourhood and beyond.**

All EU Member States are members of EED's Board of Governors, together with Members of the European Parliament, representatives of Iceland, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the European External Action Service (EEAS), a member designated by the European Commission, as well as three members elected to represent European civil society. Since its inception, EED has provided over 3,300 grants and has evolved into a vibrant, innovative and respected member of the democracy support community.

EED funds a vast array of both registered and unregistered pro-democracy actors, including human rights and political activists, pro-democratic movements, civil society organisations (CSOs), emerging leaders, independent media and journalists, many of whom might not be able to obtain funding otherwise.

## **OUR MISSION**

EED's goal is to provide flexible support to democracy activists, complementing other EU and Member State democracy support programmes. EED provides context-based, demand-driven support based on a principle of fostering democracy and facilitating initiatives of local actors. EED specialises in cases where the space for civil society is shrinking due to administrative, legal, social, and political barriers and accepts significant political and operational risks as part of its operations.

## **WHERE EED WORKS**

EED works predominantly in the European Neighbourhood (Eastern Europe, Middle East, and North Africa), the Western Balkans, and Turkey, as well as in Eurasia, and aims to ensure, as far as possible, a geographical balance of engagement and funding. Some grants are provided for relevant applications from countries in the area adjacent to the neighbourhood depending on needs, available funds, and priorities.

## **HOW EED WORKS**

EED uses an open financing cycle; applicants can apply for support via an online application form on EED's website at any time. EED accepts applications in eight languages. Applications can also be submitted via secure communication channels.



# EED'S APPROACH



## INNOVATIVE

EED invests in transformational ideas and the people behind them. EED welcomes creative proposals that approach democracy through different lenses. EED's grantees come from all walks of life and are often new to activism. EED is frequently a lifeline to democracy activists and independent media struggling to continue their work in times of turmoil or when facing severe repression.

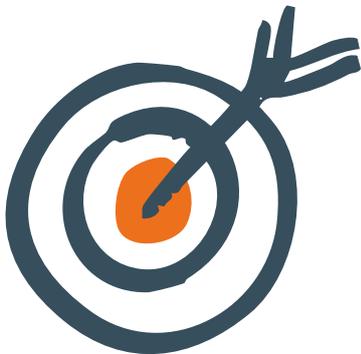
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## SUPPORTING THE UNSUPPORTED

EED supports groups and activists in countries, regions, and thematic areas that other donors do not or cannot support. In this way, EED complements other EU and EU Member State democracy programmes.

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## DEMAND-DRIVEN AND FLEXIBLE

EED support is an act of democratic solidarity. EED works to build trustful relationships with local partners that are focused on their needs, empowerment, and resilience as the main drivers of democratic change. EED can take risks and can respond rapidly and flexibly as grantees' needs change. EED's mandate enables support to activists in environments that may be off-limits to other donors.

EED's support is contingent on grantees' adherence to democratic values, respect for human rights, and observance of principles of non-violence. EED is specialised in providing support in a discreet manner.



## CONTEXT DRIVEN APPROACH TO GRANT MAKING

EED adopts a pro-active outreach strategy to grant making that is adapted to different contexts. EED works through local consultants, leveraging their insights, networks, and understanding of local contexts to effectively engage with stakeholders and to identify pro-democracy actors who can be empowered by support. EED meets with potential applicants and coordinates closely with other donors to maximise the impact of democracy support efforts. In restrictive environments, EED uses direct approaches, such as external missions and civil society networks, to safely engage with applicants.

EED carries out thorough due diligence of all applicants and liaises with all relevant stakeholders to obtain feedback on applicants and their work. EED works closely with applicants as part of a “coaching” process to support applicants in improving the quality and relevance of their applications.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This Annual Report provides an overview of the work of the European Endowment for Democracy in the European Neighbourhood and beyond in 2025. It includes impact briefs that showcase EED’s work across six regions, demonstrating the tangible results that EED partners have achieved. This report also includes the stories of some of the civil society organisations and independent media outlets that EED has supported over the past year.**

## **ONE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY, MANY CONTEXTS**

2025 was a year of ongoing armed conflict and further declines in democracy across much of the European Neighbourhood and beyond, threatening democratic progress and regional security.

Russia’s full-scale war of aggression in Ukraine has continued for almost four years. In the Middle East, despite ceasefire agreements reached during the year, violence persists in Gaza, with Israeli attacks continuing. Sudan’s brutal civil war has intensified dramatically, creating what the United Nations describes as the world’s most devastating humanitarian and displacement crisis.<sup>1</sup>

In Georgia, democracy is collapsing as the ruling Georgian Dream party systematically dismantles democratic institutions through repressive laws, mass arrests of opposition leaders, and brutal crackdowns on protests. In Serbia, mass student-led protests throughout the year demanding accountability and an end to the president’s authoritarian rule have been met with violent police crackdowns.

In Moldova, there was better news. The country consolidated its European course when President Maia Sandu’s party secured parliamentary re-election in September 2025 despite fierce disinformation campaigns, enabling the country to advance its formal EU accession negotiations.

In Syria, the post-Assad transition period is providing unprecedented opportunities for democratic reforms and civil society engagement despite multiple challenges.

This section of the report includes the profiles of the work of EED partners from a variety of thematic areas.

## **IMPACT BRIEFS SHOWING THE BREADTH AND EFFECT OF EED’S WORK**

The 2025 Annual Report has a new section with impact briefs included on six contexts— Albania, Belarus, Moldova, Syria, Turkey, and Ukraine. These impact briefs provide information on EED’s work in these regions, showing the changes that have occurred and the tangible results that EED partners have achieved. They are based on the findings of the 2025 external evaluation of EED, as well as internal evaluations carried out by EED.

The impact briefs demonstrate how EED’s flexible demand-driven support fosters democracy and empowers locally rooted activism through a human-centred approach and deep contextual understanding. They show how EED’s work contributes to the strengthening of democratic values, citizen engagement, media pluralism, and healthy information ecosystems in these contexts, helping to build the social capital and resilience that underpin stable, prosperous democracies. They also include profiles of EED partners in these regions.

## **DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN GEORGIA**

This year, Georgia has been marked by sustained nationwide protests sparked by political developments following the October 2024 elections and the government’s subsequent departure from EU integration commitments. The ruling party has intensified its crackdown during the year through a campaign of repressive legislation, opposition arrests, and violent suppression of dissent, which have had a significant impact on civil society and independent media.

### A YEAR OF PROTESTS IN SERBIA

November marked one year of sustained student-led protests in Serbia, with protesters demanding accountability and an end to authoritarian governance. These have been met with increasingly violent police responses, in an environment where independent media and civil society are experiencing intensified pressure and harassment by the authorities.

### EED'S RESPONSE TO US FUNDING CRISIS

Following the US funding freeze announcement, the EED Executive Committee established an Emergency Funding Mechanism to provide rapid financial support to civil society and independent media partners facing immediate closure. Initially, this mechanism prioritised current and past EED partners; support was later extended to larger established organisations and others experiencing funding gaps. The overall goal of this funding mechanism was to help preserve organisations with a demonstrated impact on democratic development.

### EU SAFETY NET

EED is hosting a Team Europe response to the Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) funding crisis that is affecting many journalists in EU priority regions. The Safety Net initiative is designed to support independent journalism in Eurasia following the disruption of US funding for media, including RFE/RL. An Advisory Expert Hub comprising of high-level media experts has been established that is tasked with assessing the implications of the funding crisis and proposing optimal solutions for the medium to long-term.

### MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING

In 2025, EED implemented several monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) activities, including conducting an internal evaluation of its work in Turkey, facilitating the implementation of the 2025 external evaluation of EED, supporting the preparation of three impact briefs for this annual report, and building and piloting AI monitoring and analysis tools.

### GOVERNANCE, HUMAN RESOURCES, AND BUDGET

The EED Secretariat is composed of 73 staff members from 38 different countries. In 2025, 14 trainees had the opportunity to gain work experience in the field of democracy support.

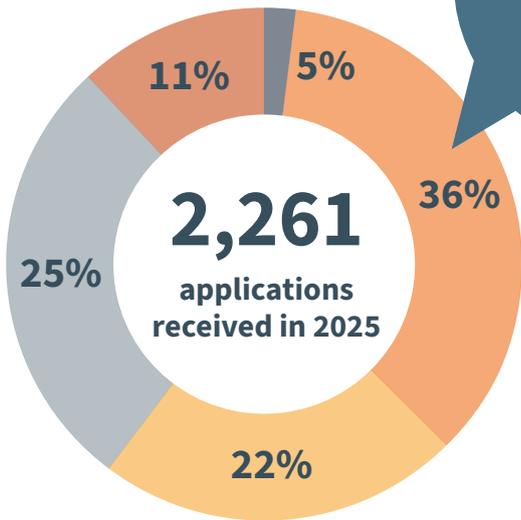
To date, 27 European countries represented on the Board of Governors have contributed to EED's programme budget. EED's operating budget is covered by a grant from the European Commission. In 2025, EED managed a budget of approximately €60 million.

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1 UN News (2025) "Sudan, the most devastating humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world", 15 February 2025, 14 February 2025, accessed at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160161>

# PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW

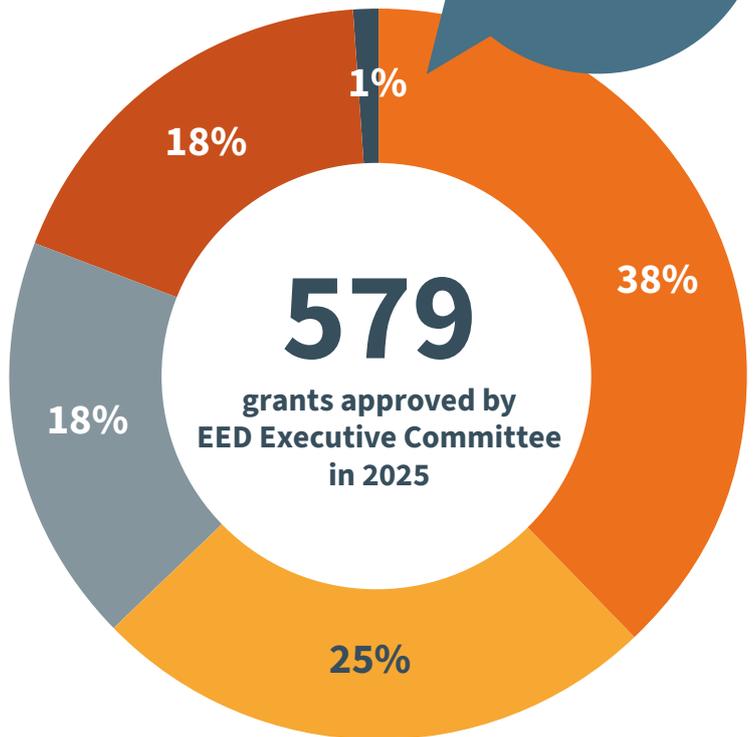
## APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY REGION 2025



**+62%**  
on 2024

**+62%**  
on 2024

- East
- Western Balkans and Turkey
- Middle East and North Africa
- Eurasia
- Rest of the World (including Sudan)



## APPLICATIONS APPROVED BY REGION 2025

Democracy support awarded in 2025

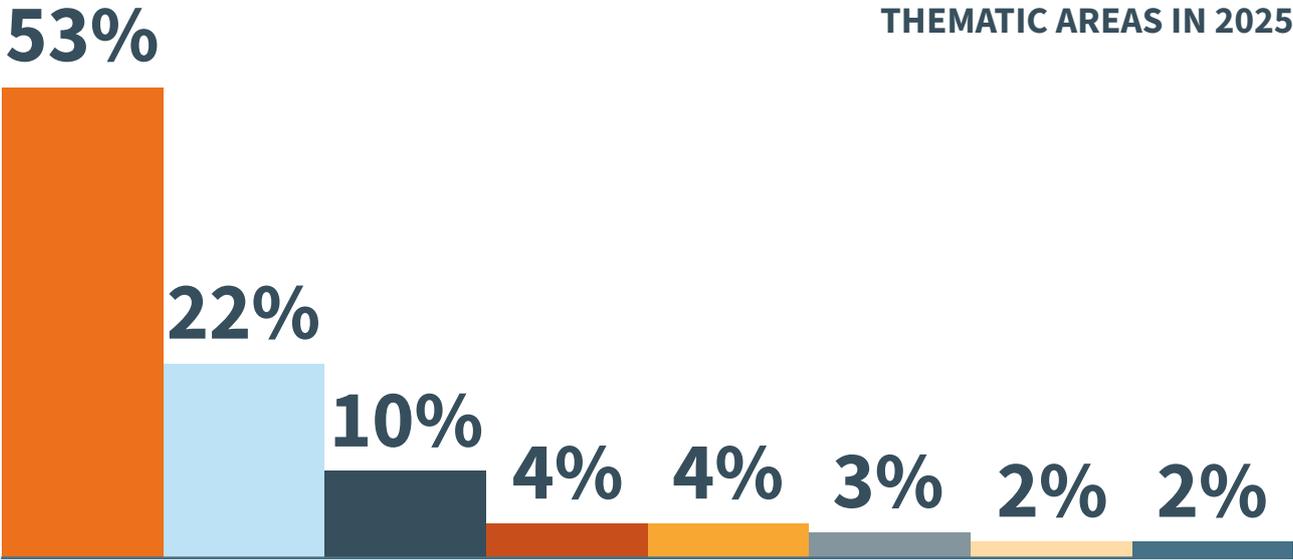
**€52.4 million**

+ 34% on 2024

**941**

ongoing grants in 2025

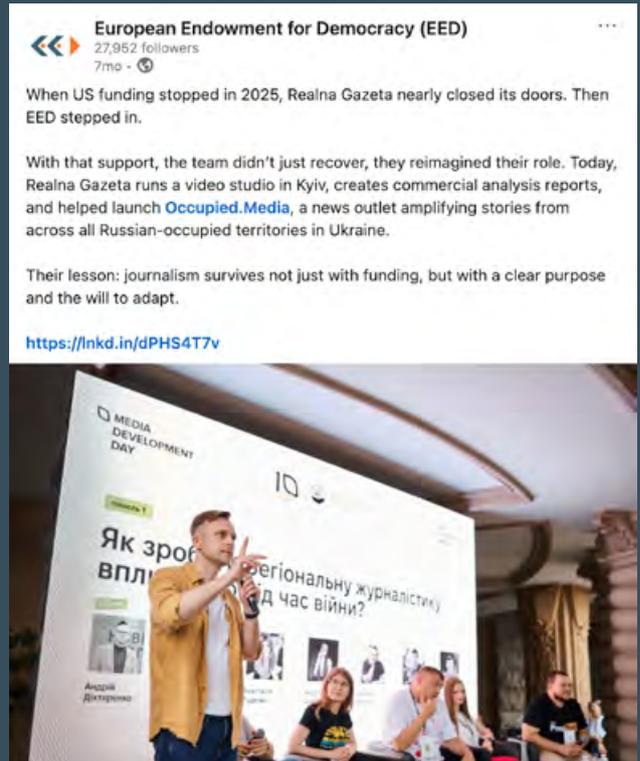
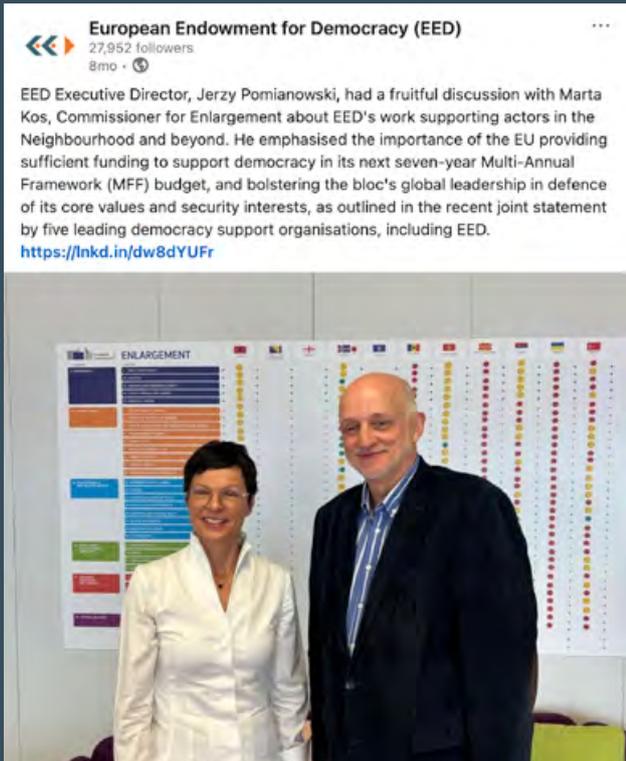
THEMATIC AREAS IN 2025



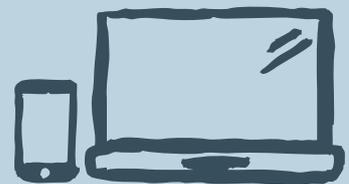
- Independent and social media platforms
- Civic activism & participation
- Human rights activism and monitoring
- Governance, rule of law, anti-corruption
- Arts and culture
- Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI)
- Women's civic and political participation
- Youth



# PRESENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA



97,847 total followers



61,098

Facebook  
followers



5,999

X  
followers



27,402

LinkedIn  
followers



2,750

Instagram  
followers



598

Bluesky  
followers

# EVENTS

**EED’s events are an opportunity for activists and independent journalists from the regions where EED works to make their voices heard with European institutions, Member States, and the broader democracy community.**

In 2025, EED organised, co-organised, or took part in 30 events, including international conferences and summits and smaller events held on EED’s premises. These included

many closed-doors events, which provided EED partner organisations with a platform to discuss developments in their regions with key stakeholders.

## MARCH

### **IS A LASTING AND DEMOCRATIC PEACE POSSIBLE IN TURKEY?**

EED held a panel discussion titled “Is a lasting and democratic process possible in Turkey?” to discuss the evolving peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and its wider implications for Turkey’s political and democratic landscape. The discussion was set against a backdrop of heightened political tensions, including the arrest of Istanbul mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, and widespread demonstrations calling for an end to anti-democratic practices and the protection of constitutional rights. Panellists, including academic researchers, experts in peacebuilding, and civic activists, examined the complexities and persistent challenges surrounding the Kurdish peace process.

Key conclusions focused on the importance of a structured, inclusive peace process with multiple stakeholders for long-term success; the central role of civil society and independent media in shaping a constructive peace narrative; the role of international support to enhance the credibility and sustainability of peace efforts; the need for democratic inclusion; the importance of international mediation to ensure credibility and sustainability; and the need to transition from a fragile ceasefire to a long-term resolution that guarantees democratic inclusion and cultural rights.

## JUNE

### **PALESTINE IN PERSPECTIVE: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE AND POLITICAL DYNAMIC**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June, EED organised an event titled “Palestine in Perspective: The Current Landscape and Political Dynamic” to address the deepening crisis in Gaza and the broader implications for peace and justice. Panellists included political leaders Dr Mustafa Barghoti, presidential candidate in 2005 and founder and leader of the Palestinian National Initiative; Sami Abu Shehadeh, Head of the Balad/Tajamou’ party; as well as civil society actors and human rights defenders from Al Mezan Center, and the Palestinian Institute for Public Diplomacy. Panellists emphasised the toll the war has taken upon Palestinian citizens and the urgent need for concrete international action. A key focus was the structural injustice that underpins the conflict, and the growing perception that international norms are being selectively applied or outright ignored.

## SEPTEMBER

### INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY DAY BRUSSELS

The 11<sup>th</sup> International Democracy Day Brussels (IDD Brussels), themed “Democracy and Inclusion in an Age of Insecurity”, was held on 18 and 19 September 2025 at the Renaissance Hotel and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Over the two days of the conference, international activists, policy makers, politicians, and independent journalists gave their assessments on the current state of democracy and offered insights from global, European, and national perspectives.

In a video address, Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Dubravka Šuica, called for innovation in participation and in democracy. The opening discussion highlighted that lasting democratic resilience relies on meaningful inclusion, requiring sustained investment in civic engagement and equality. Panels covered barriers to youth participation, party reform strategies, and tackling disinformation. The day ended with EU Special Representative (EUSR) for human rights, Kajsa Ollongren, urging action against a growing “democratic recession”.

The second day opened with an address by EESC President, Oliver Röpke, who stressed that inclusion and civic space are core to democracy. In a video address, Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, described EU enlargement as a transformational process. Richard Youngs of Carnegie Europe highlighted a shift toward grassroots civic movements. Other panellists spoke of democracy defence, the shift from top-down aid towards co-created and locally driven initiatives, and the preservation of independent civic space. In the final panel session of the conference, “Democracy Matters: Values as Strategy, Security as Outcome”, EED Executive Director, Jerzy Pomianowski, emphasised democracy’s role in conflict prevention and proposed allocating a small part of defence budgets to democracy building.



**European Endowment for Democracy (EED)**  
27,952 followers  
Brno · 🌐

During **#IDD Brussels**, EED organised a panel discussion “Democracy Matters: Values as Strategy, Security as Outcome.” Speakers shared their experiences and perspective on the intersection between security and democracy.

**Jerzy Pomianowski:** There is nothing better than democracy to protect people.

**Federica D'Alessandra:** An illiberal international order, facilitated by authoritarian regimes, is not auspicious for democracy.

**Sara Ajlyakin:** Investment in civil society is worthwhile. It is expensive, but worth it.

**Liudmyla Yankina:** Our greatest strength is that we transform survival into innovation.

Thank you to everyone who joined us for these two days of critical discussions regarding the state of democracy worldwide and how to further support it.



**Over the two days of the conference, international activists, policy makers, politicians, and independent journalists gave their assessments on the current state of democracy and offered insights from global, European, and national perspectives.**



## SEPTEMBER

### WHAT DO UKRAINIANS THINK ABOUT DEMOCRACY AND RECOVERY?

On 25<sup>th</sup> September, in collaboration with Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), EED co-hosted the panel "What do Ukrainians think about democracy and recovery?" to help deepen the understanding of how Ukraine's democratic trajectory can be best supported during wartime. The event was opened by Katarína Matheriová, Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine, who highlighted the continued commitment of Ukrainians to defending their democracy and the extraordinarily difficult security environment.

Recent WFD research presented at the event revealed that the four most trusted institutions in Ukraine are: the Armed Forces, organisations run by volunteers, veterans, and civil society. All these actors have been instrumental in supporting internally displaced persons while advocating for transparency and accountability. Panellists emphasised the need to channel today's wartime civic activism into institutional reform, the leverage of the EU accession process to drive reforms, and the importance of preparing post-war electoral frameworks. Panellists reiterated that Ukraine's citizens are determined to defend and protect Ukraine's democratic infrastructure, as was made clear in July 2025, when they mobilised in huge numbers to defend crucial anti-corruption agencies.



## SEPTEMBER

### DIGITAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND FREEDOM IN MENA

Also on 25<sup>th</sup> September, EED organised the panel discussion "Digital Accountability and Freedom in MENA", bringing together key actors from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region who are actively working to promote digital rights. Yanal Qushair, from Jordan Open-Source Association, stressed the importance of fostering a digital culture that values open-source technology and digital transparency, which are essential to creating people-centred online spaces. Layla Samara, Executive Director of Sada Social Center, spoke about the organisation's work in documenting digital violations against Palestinian content and underlined how evidence collected through such efforts can help shape EU foreign policy.

Taysir Mathlouthi, EU Advocacy Officer at 7amleh, emphasised the need for mechanisms ensuring that EU standards on privacy, content moderation, and human rights are applied consistently across regions. Panellists spoke of the importance of ensuring the uniform global application of EU digital regulations and implementing human rights due diligence obligations for digital activities outside the EU, as well as setting up mechanisms for meaningful participation of MENA civil society organisations in EU consultations.



## OCTOBER

### FORUM 2000

On 14th October, EED organised a panel named “Belarus: Tech for Democracy” at Forum 2000 and moderated by Lisbeth Pilegaard, Chair of the EED Executive Committee. Panellists discussed effective strategies to support democracy in Belarus and beyond, presenting concrete solutions and best practices. They highlighted how their experience can provide valuable insights for the EU and European countries in addressing growing global technology insecurities.

Also at Forum 2000, EED Executive Director, Jerzy Pomianowski, took part in the panel discussion titled “The Future of European Democracy Support in the Age of New Transnationalism: Reinforcing Democratic Ties in a Fractured World”.



## OCTOBER

### UKRAINE RULE OF LAW

In collaboration with DEJURE Foundation, EED co-organised a panel discussion titled “Rule of Law in Ukraine: Between Russia’s War and Stalled EU Negotiations” on 16 October to present the “Shadow Report” covering Chapters 23 and 24 of the EU enlargement negotiations prepared by the DEJURE Foundation; Anti-Corruption Action Centre; AutoMaidan; Mezha Anti-Corruption Centre; Institute of Mass Information; Media Initiative for Human Rights; and Andrii Mikheiev, an independent expert.

In an opening address, Daria Kaleniuk, Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Action Centre, pointed out that as martial law continues and Ukraine’s checks and balances weaken, the EU’s role has become increasingly critical given the significant geopolitical shifts over the recent period.

During the discussions, panellists argued that substantial work remains to protect progress already achieved on anti-corruption and that EU conditionality is still crucial, particularly given the reversibility of reforms. Panellists also noted that Ukraine must fulfil basic obligations and that without international expert participation, institutions risk staying unreformed. They remained optimistic that Ukraine will become an EU member but noted the process must be accelerated through creative thinking to prevent problems from accumulating.

**Key findings revealed that service provision, including training, editorial work, and content production, offer the most viable revenue stream when aligned with existing organisational strengths.**

## DECEMBER

### EVOLVING SUPPORT FOR THE RESILIENCE AND SCALABILITY OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA, EED SIDE EVENT AT ARIJ ANNUAL FORUM

Independent media across Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) face an urgent viability crisis as donor funding shrinks and political pressures intensify. This roundtable brought together media actors and donors to address a fundamental shift: moving from supplementing grants with income generation to achieving genuine financial independence. Key findings revealed that service provision, including training, editorial work, and content production, offer the most viable revenue stream when aligned with existing organisational strengths. However, participants questioned whether traditional grant-making remains appropriate, suggesting investment models may better support scaling needs.

The discussion highlighted a critical consensus: the region requires an ecosystem approach that prioritises cooperation over competition and resource sharing over isolated support. While audiences demonstrate a willingness to pay, success demands donors rethink funding mechanisms to invest at the ecosystem level, while media organisations pursue strategic sustainability grounded in their contexts. Building sustainable independent media in SWANA requires collective commitment, patience, and shared risk-taking.



# ONE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY, MANY CONTEXTS

**EED was set up with a vision of providing flexible, demand-driven support to democracy activists that responds to local needs and complements other European Union and Member State democracy-support programmes.**

Recent data from the V-Dem Institute reveals that democratic nations now represent a minority globally, with autocracies outnumbering democracies for the first time in two decades. Forty-five nations experienced ongoing democratic backsliding in 2024, an increase from the previous year's figure of 42.<sup>2</sup> Freedom House reported that 2024 marked the 19th consecutive year of deteriorating global freedom, with 60 countries experiencing declines in political rights and civil liberties while only 34 registered improvements.<sup>3</sup>

These concerning patterns are echoed throughout EED's operational regions, as war and conflict rage in many contexts, and authoritarian trends intensify in others. In Ukraine, Russia's full-scale military offensive has entered its fourth year with casualty estimates exceeding one million, including military losses. In Gaza, after over two years of war, there are more than 70 thousand Palestinian deaths; women and children comprise a significant portion of casualties and the entire population of over two million has experienced displacement at least once.<sup>4</sup> In Sudan, a devastating civil war has generated the world's largest displacement crisis and more than 12 million people have been forced from their homes.

Civil society organisations face mounting pressures across the European Neighbourhood. Significant contractions in civic space, press freedom, and freedom of expression have been seen in Algeria, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Palestine, Russia, Serbia, Tunisia, and in many other contexts. Independent journalism is under sustained threat, as reporters encounter escalating pressure from government and political actors. The Gaza war has been characterised by unprecedented violations against journalists and media workers.

Within such demanding environments, EED's capacity to operate in highly restrictive contexts, to continually adapt its grant making to evolving needs, and to maintain discreet support for activists and independent media both domestically and in exile represents an invaluable contribution.

The following section presents an overview of the diverse contexts where EED supported partners in 2025 and provides some examples of EED partners working in these regions.

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2 V-Dem Institute (2025) *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, available at [https://v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr\\_\\_2025\\_lowres\\_v2.pdf](https://v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr__2025_lowres_v2.pdf)

3 Freedom House (2025) *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights*, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>

4 UNRWA (2025) "UNRWA Situation Report #202 on the Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem", available at <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-202-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>

**SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN THE EAST:  
FROM EU CANDIDATE STATUS TO AUTOCRATS**

In **Armenia**, ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections, and amidst simmering internal political tensions, as well as a burgeoning amount of disinformation about foreign actors, EED is focused on strengthening its support to independent media. A grant from the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI) contributed to the institutional funding of key independent media, several of whom had suffered due to the withdrawal of US funding early in the year. This support enabled media to experiment with innovative formats to use AI tools, such as an AI fact-checking hub, to reach younger generations via TikTok and other platforms, and to train investigative journalists of the future. Engaging with youth — who are largely seen as vulnerable to disinformation as well as badly affected by war — was also a key priority. EED supported

youth-led activism, such as around ecological rights or urban development, as well as initiatives that addressed questions related to electoral rights, ballot secrecy, monitoring, democratic institutions, media literacy, and disinformation. Finally, EED partners continued to maintain a strong focus on human rights issues that are critical for ongoing strengthening of democratic institutions, as well as potential EU integration. Such support contributed to reforms in judicial transparency, electoral integrity, and access to information, and enabled a CSO to monitor the disciplinary cases of judges by the Supreme Judicial Council and cases of ill-treatment. Disability rights was also the focus of one grant.

**THEMATIC AREA: ARTS & CULTURE**

**BOON TV: GIVING PEOPLE A VOICE AND SPACE**

Boon TV is an independent Armenian media platform that promotes open discussion, education, and cultural awareness in a media landscape often dominated by partisanship. Founded by active citizens seeking to provide fact-based, inclusive content, it gives voice to underrepresented groups and encourages critical thinking and civic engagement. With support from EED, Boon TV obtained a public broadcasting licence and is now available in every Armenian home.

“We’re now the fourth largest channel focused on educational and cultural content,” says Gemafin Gasparyan, Boon TV co-founder. “Everything we do is fact based and research and knowledge led. We work with activists, scientists, and artists to research each topic. We work with marginalised groups and themes. We give people a voice and a space to speak about new narratives and freedoms. We are increasing people’s knowledge and giving them the tools to understand our society.”



**“We’re now the fourth largest channel focused on educational and cultural content”**

**GEMAFIN GASPARYAN**

© Boon TV

## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS & CULTURE

### FOCUSART: ART AND ACTIVISM

FocusArt is a non-governmental organisation founded by artists who believe that visual art should go beyond aesthetics, and that it can challenge societal norms and inspire activism and change. For over five years, its independent TV channel, ACTV, was an important platform for activists to amplify their voices and document social movements. Now, through its flagship one-year educational programme, MediaLab, FocusArt is equipping people to use art, design, and media tools to tackle social and political issues. With EED support, FocusArt has launched a digital archive of Armenia's social movements that risked being lost. "This project is not just about preserving history, but about providing the tools to learn from it," says Nora Galfayan, FocusArt co-founder.

© FocusArt



ARMENIA

## THEMATIC AREA: YOUTH

### MAQOOR: TAKING ECO-ACTIVISM TO THE COUNTRYSIDE

Gevorg Ghazaryan, co-founder of the environmental NGO Maqoor, leads a growing movement that is mobilising hundreds of young people to take part in environmental campaigns and community clean-ups across Armenia. Maqoor organised Armenia's first official Earth Day in 2023, mobilising hundreds of volunteers to take part in clean-up projects across the country. The Global Maqoor Day attracted participants from over 60 countries. Its Maqoor Villages Programme brings children to rural villages to learn about environmental protection, and Maqoor Academy provides online environmental education.

With support from EED, Maqoor established an Eco-Activism Centre in Vagharshapat, targeting environmental degradation in the Ararat/Armavir region and supporting local civil society, schools and journalists. "The Centre works closely with local environmental organisations and initiatives," Ghazaryan says. It also hosts schools and student groups and engages with the authorities. "We're providing experience and encouraging students to pursue the path of environmental journalism and awareness-raising," he says.

© Maqoor



ARMENIA

In **Azerbaijan**, the situation for pro-democracy activists, civil society, and media has further declined, and repression has intensified during the year. There are now almost 400 political prisoners, including over 30 journalists, held in detention. The clampdown has had a chilling effect on an already beleaguered civil society, with key activists leaving the country and suspending their activities. EED has provided lifeline support to repressed media and civic groups to help them continue working in safer environments. EED is working with democracy activists to help alleviate the effects of the current crackdown and to build Azerbaijan society's long-term capacity to democratise.

In **Belarus**, Lukashenka has consolidated his grip on power. Since the brutal crush of the pro-democracy movement in 2020, the space for opposition and political participation has been narrowing. There are still more than 1,200 political prisoners, despite the release of high-profile prisoners during the year. The presidential election of January 2025 was held without any opposition candidates and further entrenched Lukashenka's grip on power. A new wave of repression targeting any form of activism took place ahead of the election to avoid a replay of August 2020. No elections are expected until 2029, which provides the opposition movement with an opportunity to further consolidate and reinvent the struggle for democratisation. It is now virtually impossible for pro-democracy activists in Belarus to participate in elections or political processes. Currently, opposition actors largely operate as civic groups advocating for democratisation, human rights, and international support, mostly online or working from abroad. The situation has been further complicated by the ongoing effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, the US foreign aid suspension, and an economic "brain drain". Despite this, an independent media sector, which largely functions from exile, continues to have high levels of engagement, including from inside the country. EED supports civil society and media in exile and within the country to help ensure they can continue their work and remain active.

**Georgia's** democracy has deteriorated at record speed, transforming from an EU candidacy frontrunner into a "candidate in name only" as the ruling party intensifies repression to eliminate independent voices and secure power. Through legislation, including the Foreign Agents Law and the Law on Grants, the government has made it challenging for civil society organisations to receive foreign support, while it has frozen the bank accounts of major NGOs and demanded extensive information from organisations. Opposition figures have been imprisoned, and the government has passed laws that could strip opposition parties and members of their political rights. Simultaneously, the government filed over 60 criminal charges against peaceful protesters. Despite these mounting pressures, Georgia's citizens, independent media, and civic organisations continue to resist through sustained daily protests. Investigative reporting media have increased their audiences, with some reporting an increase in readership of up to 50 percent. Legal aid networks are providing pro-bono support to human rights victims, and emerging civic initiatives are laying the groundwork for longer-term resistance in culture and youth sectors.

In **Moldova**, the election of Maia Sandu's pro-European party in the decisive parliamentary elections was evidence of Moldovan voters' determination to pursue democratic reforms and EU integration, despite still facing significant economic and social challenges. Disinformation campaigns, driven by both domestic and foreign actors, in particular from Russian-backed sources, shaped political discourse and influenced public opinion throughout the pre-election period, and were predominant on social media, which is now the primary source of information in the country. Civil society organisations and independent media at the forefront of countering disinformation efforts were targeted and described as "agents" of the West and the ruling party. This concerted effort was aimed at undermining public trust in pro-democracy actors. EED supports a wide range of independent media actors in the country, including non-traditional digital actors, and civic initiatives to build resilience to disinformation and increase citizens' engagement in democratic processes.

## EED ALUMNUS



### THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

#### CU SENS: MAKING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

“We established Cu Sens as the first Moldovan outlet focused on investigations in video format,” says Eva Karlíková, project coordinator at Cu Sens. “Our aim is to make information more accessible.”

Founded in 2019, Cu Sens is now a major investigative actor, investigating corruption and misinformation and producing video content to help viewers understand democratic processes. Many stories have revealed important cases of corruption or external influence. EED supported Cu Sens in 2021, enabling them to launch its website.

“We believe that investigative journalism can foster critical thinking and democratic participation. Our investigations have exposed bribery and the influence of

Russian money channelled through Moldovan oligarchs around the 2024 Presidential elections. They have been critical for democracy, showing how external forces were trying to buy voters,” says Eva.

The team covers important developments in Moldova – such as corruption cases, illegal funding of political parties, and oligarchs’ properties. Among some of the most influential investigations were reports on the luxurious life of Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor, a pro-Russian politician sentenced in absentia for money laundering. The team trains young journalists, who work as interns, teaching them how to conduct video investigations, helping to develop a new generation of investigative journalists.

In **Ukraine**, nearly four years into Russia’s full-scale war, civil society continues to show remarkable resilience as the engine for democratic reform and EU integration, maintaining a delicate balance between its role as a watchdog that can push for reform and the need to avoid potential risks to national security. Civil society was at the forefront of the July “cardboard revolution”, when their mobilisation prevented government attempts to undermine the independence of key anti-corruption institutions. Ukraine’s civil society is laying the groundwork for Ukraine’s future recovery process, ensuring that the broader society, including the most marginalised, can be a part of this process. Within the context of martial law, when elections are suspended and decision-making is increasingly centralised, community-based initiatives play a vital role in establishing horizontal ties, strengthening local leadership, and reinvigorating the political culture in creative ways. This year, EED stepped up its support as it provided emergency support to democracy actors affected by the US funding crisis. EED is also providing support to a range of independent media, which ensure pluralism and accountability, particularly at a regional level. Thanks to active outreach, EED has targeted regions with limited donor presence to ensure needs-based support as well as to identify emerging actors. Importantly, amidst high levels of burnout and trauma, EED has also sought to strengthen the capacities of partners through networking and sharing of best practices.

### THEMATIC AREA: CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

#### ECO MISTO CHERNIHIV: RESTORING COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT IN NORTHERN UKRAINE

Eco Misto Chernihiv is promoting sustainable development by engaging locals in environmentally friendly activities. Formally established in 2016, it focused on ecology and urban development, revitalising public spaces, tackling recycling, and organising workshops for the local community. In 2022, when Chernihiv was under siege for two months, the organisation began to distribute bikes as public transport was disrupted. It has since distributed over 1,000 bikes across the city and de-occupied areas in the region in its #BikesforUkraine project.

Eco Misto is now advocating for policies to promote cycling, with public events and educational campaigns demonstrating the benefits of cycling for individuals and the broader urban ecosystem. It continues to organise workshops and trainings, and its “Tops to Toys” project teaches children the value of recycling through creativity.

With EED’s support, the team launched “City Workshop”, a crowdfunding platform for civil society organisations and small enterprises to raise funds for their own projects. “We’re not just about ecology now. We are building a local ecosystem of innovation and resilience, which is something badly needed in times of war and uncertainty,” says Sergiy Bezborodko, head of Eco Misto Chernihiv.

**UKRAINE**

## **SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN THE MENA REGION: WAR AND AUTOCRATISATION**

In **Algeria**, the crackdown on civil society, human rights activists, and journalists, particularly those engaging in peaceful expression or online activism, has continued unabated. Civic space continues to shrink with restrictions on public freedoms, and freedom of peaceful assembly and association have also been widely infringed. In the last quarter of 2025, human rights groups have warned against a preliminary draft bill on association, as this would further undermine the right to freedom of association, which is already largely violated. The media landscape in Algeria has further deteriorated. Penal code provisions on disseminating "false news" and "hate speech" that harm "national security and order" are routinely used to prosecute journalists. The 2023 media law introduced new restrictions and sanctions, and banned Algerian media outlets from benefitting from foreign funding. This highly repressive environment significantly hinders the work of pro-democratic actors. They are also reluctant, and often unable due to legal restrictions, to seek foreign funding, which is frequently portrayed as a tool for foreign interference and used to discredit recipients. In this context, Algerian initiatives based abroad remain one of the only remaining options for civic activism; however, the Algerian diaspora is also under increasing pressure, through consular services, and a new nationality revocation law, further silencing critical voices.

In **Egypt**, human rights violations and political repression remain pervasive, with ongoing detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, and severe restrictions on free expression and association. Widespread fear of the country being drawn into conflict has meant a lack of scrutiny of rights violations. Independent media, civil society, and activists, particularly those working on democracy, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ rights, continue to face harassment and arbitrary charges as authorities use security-linked institutions and legal tools to crush dissent. Authorities continue to target social media users, especially young women content creators, under vague accusations of "violating Egyptian family values". Thousands still languish in prison on politically motivated charges despite the September 2025 release of Alaa Abdel-Fattah. In spite of these pressures and a lack of donor funding, civil society continues to adapt and operate under immense constraints, reshaping their approaches to survive. EED's support has helped several civic actors and human rights defenders to sustain their operations in the capital and rural areas and has focused on socio-economic rights, legal aid, and gender issues.

In **Jordan**, a year after the 2024 parliamentary elections, civil society organisations and independent media operate in a challenging environment. They are constrained in their ability to work, defend rights, document abuses, and hold power accountable. The war in Gaza consumed government attention, with a firm response to anti-war protests. The

Penal Code and Cybercrimes laws have been used to target journalists and activists critical of the government's policies, limiting freedom of expression. Civil society struggles with restrictive foreign funding control mechanisms. The collapse of US foreign aid funding and the redirection of international aid to humanitarian work in the context of an economic crisis created critical funding gaps for civil society actors. EED works with civic and media organisations that offer innovative approaches to addressing the country's democratic challenges. In response to the shrinking civic space, the current portfolio has broadened to include arts and culture initiatives, which engage disenfranchised youth and deliver creative content that supports democratic progress.

**Lebanon's** security landscape remains deeply unstable despite the November 2024 ceasefire. Israel continues to carry out near daily airstrikes that contribute to ongoing displacement and extensive destruction. Hezbollah has refused to disarm despite government demands and international pressure, undermining the country's stability. Politically, the January 2025 election of President Joseph Aoun and the appointment of Prime Minister Nawaf Salam ended years of institutional paralysis. The new government has prioritised restoring state authority, implementing UNSCR 1701, and advancing long-stalled reforms, although progress is slowed by entrenched sectarian divisions and mounting tensions with Hezbollah over disarmament. The May 2025 municipal elections, the first in nearly a decade, saw low turnout, modest gains for reform forces, and localised irregularities. Press freedoms deteriorated sharply, with leading independent investigative outlets increasingly targeted, smeared as "spies", and blamed for the country's crises. These attacks, intensifying ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections, threatened not only to discredit media, but also to undermine pro-reform candidates who rely on them to reach constituents. Lebanon's draft Media Law has undergone extended committee review during the year. The initial draft included significant protection for free expression, including the abolition of pretrial detention and prison sentences for speech-related violations, as well as the repeal of criminal defamation and insult provisions. However, subsequent amendments rolled back these key reforms. In November, it was announced that the draft law was completed. Civil society organisations have continued pressing for a final adoption that preserves free expression protections. EED plays a critical role in supporting civil society and independent media actors who are advancing reforms, safeguarding civic space, and upholding accountability at a time when Lebanon's democratic and reformist voices are under mounting pressure. EED supported crucial and diverse initiatives in various domains in Lebanon, all of which are committed to promoting human rights values, combating discrimination and injustice, and strengthening democratic resilience and resistance.

## EED ALUMNUS



### THEMATIC AREA: ARTS & CULTURE

#### PEACE OF ART: HARMONY BETWEEN DIFFERENCES

Peace of Art began in 2016 as a humanitarian group and an artistic academy to provide Lebanese youth with a chance to develop their creative skills. Its founder Mahdi Yahya, a teacher and activist from North Bekaa, soon realised the real challenge wasn't cultural, it was political. It was about giving youth the chance to express their desire for a better future, and instilling hope.

Teenagers in the Bekaa region are amongst the most vulnerable to sectarian rhetoric. There are over 18 different religious groups in Lebanon, and many rarely meet peers from other backgrounds. This is a vacuum that extremist groups often exploit in an environment of economic instability, high levels of youth unemployment and the constant threat of a further escalation.

Peace of Art blends civic education workshops, training in leadership, conflict resolution, with photography, music, acting, drawing and film. The goal is to transform individual experiences into collective works of art, and into shared projects of hope for a better future.

"Providing them the space to gather together, without necessarily identifying each other as belonging to either this or that background," says Mahdi. "Showing our similarities, not just focusing on our differences."

EED supported the group at the onset of the project in 2017 as a small community initiative. Today, it is a movement that reaches multiple towns and programmes and it is touching the lives of thousands of vulnerable young Lebanese each year.

## LEBANON

**Libya** remains split between two rival governments, the UN-recognised Government of National Unity in Tripoli and the Government of National Stability in the east, both unable to agree on election legislation that could reunify the country. Despite this deadlock and ongoing volatility, 33 municipalities successfully held local elections, demonstrating persistent civic engagement, although cancellations in western areas and the absence of polling across much of the east and south highlighted the country's deep fragmentation. Civic space remains under severe pressure. Authorities impose arbitrary NGO registration procedures, intimidate activists through kidnappings and smear campaigns linking them to corruption or anti-religious activity, and systematically target independent civil society. Journalists face arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and threats from both political camps. Libya ranks among the world's worst countries for press freedom, with a polarised media dominated by competing political and military factions. In Libya's repressive and fragmented landscape, EED is helping to sustain human rights activism and civic engagement by supporting organisations defending democracy, justice, and human rights, enabling them to operate. This is despite militia control, severe restrictions on civil society, and major funding losses given the withdrawal of US foreign aid support. EED supports partners that document violations, provide legal and security support to human rights defenders, and advocate for accountability at national and international levels. EED has also invested

in independent media, which provide citizens with access to credible information, counter propaganda, and help consolidate the plurality of voices essential to the country's democratic future.

**Morocco** has seen a deterioration in democracy and human rights over the past period and a marked decline in freedom of expression. Several prominent journalists, academics, bloggers, and human rights defenders have been sentenced to prison terms for expressing their opinions on the country's governance. Media outlets are prohibited from receiving foreign funding. Civil society organisations operate within a complex legal environment, where their legal status can be obstructed or denied if they are deemed critical of the system. GenZ 212, an anonymous, grassroots youth movement that emerged on Discord in mid-September, has grown to include over 200,000 members. The leaderless movement has coordinated demonstrations in cities across the country, and tens of thousands of young people have participated in protests. Sparked by the deaths of pregnant women at a public hospital in Agadir, frustration at failing healthcare and education systems, growing economic disparities, and high spending on mega-projects, particularly the 2030 FIFA World Cup, the GenZ 212 movement has used Discord to coordinate discussion on public affairs, politics, and social issues. Despite the organisers' commitment to non-violent protest, the police response escalated with three protesters shot dead in Lqliâa during particularly violent clashes. Currently, over 2,480

people are facing prosecution, with 1,400 in detention.<sup>5</sup> This marks the biggest wave of mass arrests targeted at a social movement since the beginning of the reign of King Mohamed VI. Protesters reported intimidation, digital surveillance, and in some cases sexual harassment. EED supports initiatives to enhance access to information, including new initiatives without a proven track record that support democratic values in unconventional ways. In this way, EED fills a funding gap, as most donors prefer to fund civil society organisations working on less sensitive issues.

In **Palestine and Israel**, the situation remains hugely challenging following the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli military response. Although the ceasefire currently holds in Gaza, the situation remains far from stable due to continued attacks by Israeli forces. In December 2025, the EU recalled the need to stabilise the security environment in Gaza, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2803, including by ensuring the permanent decommissioning of weapons from Hamas and other non-state armed groups. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is severe, and famine is still a reality for

Palestinians, especially in the northern part of the territory.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 81 percent of all structures in the Gaza Strip are damaged.<sup>7</sup>

At least 246 journalists were killed by Israeli forces.<sup>8</sup> Palestinian journalists frequently see their content shadow-banned or removed given heightened censorship by major social networks. Israeli and Palestinian journalists have been equally impacted by broader crackdowns on dissent by the Netanyahu government. In Israel, proposed legislation that has passed a first Knesset reading will impose a 23 percent tax on NGOs receiving foreign funding unless they refrain from political activity and government criticism for three years. The bill will also ban such NGOs from organising or participating in political demonstrations, public advocacy before elections, or lobbying the Knesset. Independent pro-democracy actors and civil society have repeatedly warned against the draft law since its announcement. The West Bank and East Jerusalem have experienced an escalation of human rights violations during the year, including arbitrary arrests, settler attacks, and the intensive expansion of illegal settlements. In this critical environment with a

## THEMATIC AREA: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND MONITORING

### AJYAL ASSOCIATION FOR CREATIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT: DOCUMENTING DIGNITY

When the first bombs fell in Gaza in October 2023, Rawan Fayad of Ajyal did not yet know that fear would become the dominant colour of her life. “The most catastrophic feeling was fear—the fear of losing your loved ones, your home, your memories,” she says. “Home,” Rawan says, “is not a building. It’s the place that holds your memories, the people you love. When those are gone, you have to rebuild home inside yourself.”

Now, Ajyal—a youth-led civil society group based in Gaza whose name means “generations” in Arabic — has established the first Palestinian Observatory for

Internal Displacement with EED support. This is the first Palestinian initiative dedicated to internal displacement, and it is regarded as a key independent source of data and insight on the war. The group are training journalists and human rights defenders to record testimonies and expose human rights violations. They operate from temporary spaces, turning people’s testimonies into stories of life in Gaza beyond the statistics. The team sees these stories as acts of resilience, and ways of reclaiming people’s dignity, ensuring that every displaced person’s experience in Gaza is seen, heard, and remembered.



© Ajyal Association for Creativity and Development (ACCD)

PALESTINE

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### SADA SOCIAL: IN THE TIME OF CONCEALMENT, THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PALESTINIAN NARRATIVE

In a world governed by algorithms, where truth is bought and sold through clicks and views, Nidaa Bassoumi, Media Coordinator at Sada Social, is fighting a silent daily battle. It is not a war of rockets or guns, but a more insidious conflict: the war to erase Palestinian words, images, and videos, which are pulled into the darkness of “shadow banning” and “algorithmic bias” enforced by social media giants Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

This is where the Sada Social team, a Palestinian digital rights organisation, steps in to form the first line of defence. They don’t just monitor; they meticulously document. According to their tracking, hundreds of digital rights violations occur monthly, targeting journalists, institutions, and individuals. They believe that each content removal or ban is a testimony saved from oblivion and an attempt to rebuild the bridge between reality and the screen.

Thanks to strategic support from EED and other partners, Sada Social’s struggle is no longer limited to monitoring. It has evolved into a sanctuary for activists, offering specialised legal and technical assistance and training a new generation of digital advocates on how to survive and persevere in this complex space. It is now building strategic partnerships to strengthen its presence on the very platforms attempting to silence them. Sada Social is fighting to ensure the Palestinian voice is free, heard, and digitally dignified.

severe decline in civic space and freedom of expression, EED supports independent media outlets that deliver high-quality, reliable reporting and in-depth analysis and civil society actors documenting human rights violations, raising awareness of these abuses, and advocating for justice and accountability, including support to a human rights actor defending the rights of Palestinian Christians.

**Syria** remains at a pivotal crossroads after the fall of the Assad Regime in December 2024. The situation remains highly volatile, with serious implications for the prospects of an inclusive, just and genuinely political transition. In this rapidly evolving landscape, Syrian civil society is playing an increasingly important role, remaining a true catalyst for change. While the unfolding transition in Syria has been fraught with challenges, EED partners still consider that there is a unique opportunity to steer and shape a pluralistic, inclusive, and democratic Syrian society, one that upholds the rights of and promotes inclusivity for all its citizens. This is a key challenge considering Syria’s fragmented national identity after thirteen years of conflict and decades of dictatorship. Democracy actors are calling for the safeguarding of civil peace and the protection of all minorities, including Alawites, Christians, Druze and Shias and Yazidis. Early in 2025, a transitional caretaker government formed under the former head of the Idlib-based Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), and the hasty organisation of a National Dialogue Conference to address practical issues, from transitional justice to economic reform, were criticised for their lack of inclusivity. A subsequent constitutional declaration issued by Syria’s new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, raised major concerns about the excessive presidential powers and weakened judicial independence. Parliamentary elections in September, organised according to a hybrid election model, also sparked criticism. Sectarian violence erupted in coastal regions in March and in the Suwayda governorate in July, resulting in over 2,000 deaths and widespread displacement, and subsequent investigative committees fell short of addressing institutional failures and senior official complicity. Civilians, particularly those from both Alawite and Druze communities, paid a heavy toll and remain vulnerable. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reached a historic agreement with Damascus to integrate into state institutions and enforce a ceasefire, although confrontations occurred in Aleppo in October and resumed at unprecedented level in the early days of 2026 causing major displacement of Kurdish civilians. Although the operational

5 ICTJ (2025) “Morocco Charges More Than 2,400 People Over Gen Z Protests”, International Center for Transitional Justice website, 29 October 2025, available at <https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/morocco-charges-more-2400-people-over-gen-z-protests>

6 WHO (2025) “Famine Confirmed for the First Time in Gaza”, 22 August 2025, available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-08-2025-famine-confirmed-for-first-time-in-gaza>

7 reliefweb (2025) “Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Strip Damage Assessment (Imagery analysis: 11 October 2025 / Published: 31 October 2025 / V1)”, 2 November 2025, available at <https://reliefweb.int/map/occupied-palestinian-territory/occupied-palestinian-territory-gaza-strip-damage-assessment-imagery-analysis-11-october-2025-published-31-october-2025-v1>

8 CPJ (2025) “Israel-Gaza War: Attacks on journalists across the region since October 7, 2023”, available at <https://cpj.org/issue/israel-gaza-war/>

## EED ALUMNUS



### THEMATIC AREA: ARTS & CULTURE

#### STORIES FILM: GIVING SYRIAN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS A VOICE

Stories Film filled a critical void in Syria, launched at a time when there was no formal cinema education and sanctions meant that young filmmakers were completely isolated from international expertise and perspectives. It became what its directors describe as a “circle of healing” where participants could discuss their lives and struggles while learning filmmaking.

The pilot edition of Stories Film Labs, supported by EED funding, which ran from 2019 to 2021, took place at a time when cinema production in Syria was almost non-existent. Now completing its fourth edition, each five-to-six-month programme guides twelve participants through theoretical sessions, creative writing workshops, and production training. Participants work through the sensitive process of articulating their director’s intentions, often confronting difficult personal

experiences. The lab has produced tangible successes: two films from the first edition tour international festivals, and three other projects are in production.

Despite new challenges in Syria today, the lab is continuing to expand its work, with a new edition about to launch, film screenings planned across the country, and specialised workshops in development. Recently, former participants formed a union to defend filmmakers’ rights and sustain Damascus’s struggling cinemas.

The initiative’s team remain committed to the project’s transformative impact. “We see how former participants speak about the lab and how it changed them,” they reflect. “This gives us motivation to keep going.”

## SYRIA

environment for civil society remained unclear for some time, with registration requirements inconsistent and frequently changing, the situation has gradually become clearer. In October, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour mandated that NGOs obtain prior approval for foreign funding and international affiliation, referring to the provisions of the law on association that was in force and used as a repression tool under the Assad regime.

Despite these challenges, EED partners remain mobilised and committed to fully seize the remaining window of opportunity. EED has built on its previous support and is continuing to support a wide range of pro-democracy actors across the country, including independent media platforms serving as watchdogs and countering divisive narratives, as well as civil society initiatives documenting violations and advancing transitional justice.



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### SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY: DEFENDING DEMOCRACY FROM FURTHER BACKSLIDING

**Albania** is making meaningful strides towards EU integration, with the country advancing its accession negotiations and working to meet European standards. An encouraging development has been the work of the Special Prosecution Office Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), that is fighting corruption across the political spectrum. This is helping to dismantle the long-standing narrative that political figures are untouchable, while empowering journalists, activists, and EED partners advocating for transparency and accountability. However, longstanding challenges persist, including the misuse of state and administrative resources to benefit the ruling party, organised crime, and high levels of corruption. The governing party's concentration of power – its leader secured a fourth consecutive term in 2025 – has left many citizens feeling marginalised. The parliamentary elections in May 2025 and the partial local elections in November recorded historically low voter turnout. Civil society faces significant structural constraints, as the state treats non-profits as quasi-business entities requiring onerous registration requirements, tax inspections, despite limited funding. This particularly affects organisations outside Tirana. Civil society also suffers from low public trust and limited policy influence. EED supported initiatives are mobilising communities in grassroots activism and empowering youth as agents of change to fight against violations of their civil rights. Media plurality is undermined by the concentration of media ownership and conflicts of interest, weak legal frameworks, politicised regulators and regulatory bodies. Independent media routinely experience cyberattacks, strategic litigation, and obstruction when accessing state information. Investigative media supported by EED, while still small in number, are playing a key role in exposing corruption and organised crime.

### THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

#### PEIZAZHE TË FJALËS: A MEMORY MACHINE OF ALBANIAN THOUGHT

For nearly two decades, Peizazhe të Fjalës has been mapping the invisible structures of Albanian life. Launched in 2007, it is a digital magazine with a new long-form essay published each day, on topics such as urban memory, nationalism, folklore, language, the diaspora, and literature.

The archive now spans thousands of pieces. One day, you can read about post-socialist architecture, the next it might be a linguistic analysis of a word politicised by the state, the next it's on how Albanian nationalist discourse repurposes ancient myths. "We wanted to be somewhere between the Facebook status and the academic paper," Adrian Vehbiu, publisher and editor says. "Rigorous, but not rigid. Intellectual, but alive."

Adrian sees Peizazhe as a bridge, not to the West but to complexity itself. "We adapt intellectual models to Albanian soil," he says. "Ideas don't import well. They have to be homegrown." In a country where archives are crumbling and history is contested, Peizazhe has become a public record of how Albanian thought over the past two decades. The archive is now being used as part of curricula in Albanian universities.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** recently marked the 30th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords, which brought an end to one of Europe's darkest chapters and secured a lasting peace. However, thirty years on, there are still challenges from the past that have not been resolved. Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced a severe political, security, and constitutional crisis during the year, driven by the secessionist actions of the Republika Srpska authorities, which adopted unconstitutional laws rejecting the State Court and Prosecutor's Office jurisdiction in the territory. This followed the sentencing of the entity's president for defying the High Representative's decisions, and his removal from office. This crisis exposed deep issues with judicial independence and rule of law at a critical moment for EU-required judicial reforms. Civic space deteriorated during the year, particularly in Republika Srpska and in some cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This crisis was further compounded by the fact that the country is entering an electoral year, which puts additional pressure on civil society actors and raises audience expectations of independent media. In this context, fostering mutual trust and a shared understanding of constitutional principles is important for supporting the constitutional balance and contributing to democratic governance and long-term stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The so-called "Foreign Agents Law" was adopted in Republika Srpska, following the 2024 Law on Criminalisation and Defamation. Activists and journalists were highly affected by the withdrawal of US funding, hostile "foreign agent" narratives, SLAPP lawsuits, and targeted campaigns. Marginalised groups faced worsening conditions, with rising femicide and shrinking rights protections. Democratic participation and public accountability continued to decline, with civil society excluded from legislative working groups. Shrinking civic space and weakened rule of law continue to constrain the country's democratic development and its ability to deliver sustainable reforms. Against this challenging backdrop, the adoption of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Reform Agenda represents a positive and necessary step in the EU integration process. EED supports various pro-democracy actors, as well as independent, mainly local and niche media, across the country, with environmental and digital activism as key areas for civil engagement.

In **Kosovo\***, a snap election in December 2025 and the formation of a government put an end to 10 months of political deadlock. The unresolved EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia continued to cast a long shadow over Kosovo's domestic and foreign agenda with little progress made despite multiple rounds of talks. Press freedom deteriorated sharply with Kosovo dropping to 99th place in the World Press Freedom Index. A controversial draft Law on Online Media, imposing registration and licensing requirements for digital outlets, heightened concerns, while journalists face mounting online harassment, smear campaigns by party-affiliated actors, and self-censorship, particularly those reporting from northern Kosovo. Civil society remains a key democratic space, although it is increasingly divided between government-aligned and independent organisations. Despite limited resources, civic groups achieved notable victories: women's rights organisations monitored the enforcement of electronic tagging for domestic-violence offenders introduced in 2024 and secured the first national coordination protocol between police, prosecutors, and shelters. The annual Pride Week was opened at the government buildings for the first time, marking symbolic institutional recognition of LGBTQI+ rights. EED's continued support to independent and community-based media has proven essential to media outlets facing existential financial challenges following the suspension of US funding and the ongoing freeze on Kosovo's EU funds. EED's flexible and timely interventions ensured that key actors remained operational, preserving both editorial independence and access to verified information for citizens across the country. The support was especially crucial for Serb minority-led media.

*\*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence*

## THEMATIC AREA: ANTI-CORRUPTION AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

### BUJAR EJUPI: EMPOWERING THE WHISTLEBLOWERS OF KOSOVO

“Sometimes you can’t close your eyes,” says Bujar Ejupi. “Even when you know what speaking out will cost you.” For Bujar, an aviation expert, who spent years in the industry, the cost has been steep. He’s lost his job twice for exposing corruption. He’s faced professional attacks, retaliation, and intimidation. But these experiences didn’t silence him. They transformed him, and with EED support, he has founded the Whistleblowers Support Initiative and has become an advocate for others brave enough to tell the truth.

“The legislation exists on paper,” Bujar says. “But it’s just a tick-box exercise to show the EU that Kosovo is compliant. In practice, it protects no one. Senior government officials stay silent, or worse, they turn hostile towards people trying to do the right thing.”

The Whistleblowers Support Initiative has created a database of whistleblowers and developed resources for whistleblowers, which cover everything from navigating legal systems to working effectively with the media. They explain how to deal with institutions when reporting cases of corruption. More critically, they provide social and mental health support to people whose lives have been upended by doing what’s right. Ejupi relates that the focus is as much on creating societal impact as trying to influence a change in attitude at state policy level. His objective is to create a culture where people are not afraid to speak out about instances of corruption.

**KOSOVO**

**Montenegro** is advancing on its EU accession path, although it continues to face significant challenges, including deep societal polarisation; an overstuffed public sector; and a judicial system weakened by staff shortages, low salaries, and ineffective legal processes. Society remains highly supportive of EU integration; however, it is also prone to foreign influences. Social polarisation, especially among religious and national lines, is intensifying as witnessed by the discriminatory harassment of Turkish citizens that led to temporary visa requirements, a symptom of growing intolerance and discrimination against foreigners, especially Muslims. The media environment shows mixed progress; a prominent case involving a businessman and several officials raised serious concerns about potential ties between some media organisations and criminal structures. Civil society is working to support EU integration while maintaining their watchdog function. EED remains committed to supporting local community actors as well as strengthening the diversity, effectiveness, and sustainability of independent, professional, and investigative media, and investing in new media initiatives that promote civic values. EED also works with marginalised groups.

## THEMATIC AREA: YOUTH

### OPTIMISTI: ENGAGING YOUTH IN LOCAL DECISION-MAKING

The NGO Optimisti is working to boost civic activism in Nikšić, the second biggest city in Montenegro, which faces high unemployment, brain drain, and rising nationalism. In a context where most activism is centralised in the capital, Optimisti is working with young people to strengthen their participation in local democracy and civic life. Thanks to an EED start-up grant, it launched a new youth hub and a new youth activist media *Omladina.me*, the first community media in the city, as well as a print magazine. The team organise regular workshops and meetings on topics of interest to youth, such as volunteerism, activism, writing CVs, combatting disinformation, and LP DJing in preparation for Grafiti Fest, a local festival for youth on democracy and cultural topics. Their actions led to a policy change at local level, as they took the lead together with a partner youth organisation in developing the Local Action Plan for Gender Equality (LAPGD), an obligatory legal document not produced by local government for over eight years.

**MONTENEGRO**

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### VOLIM DANILOGRAD: INCREASING TRANSPARENCY OF MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES.

The media portal Volim Danilovgrad operated on a voluntary basis for three years before EED start-up funding enabled its founder, the civic activist Milan Mijajlovic, to rent and equip a new office, which serves as both a studio and a community centre, and to hire new journalists. Based in the city of Danilovgrad, it focuses on increasing transparency in municipal governance, reporting on local communities, and supporting citizen engagement. Prior to funding, Volim Danilovgrad had already attracted an engaged audience, with the portal reaching over 162,000 unique users and some pages

viewed more than one million times. The media is now working to build trust in institutions and enhance civic participation through articles and video reports on social media providing access to information on municipal work. Citizen participation in public hearings has already improved over the recent period thanks to this work. A crowdfunding initiative has also enabled them to support three local initiatives in the city of Eco Misto Chernihiv.

**MONTENEGRO**

In **North Macedonia**, October 2025's local elections delivered a landslide for the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, which obtained 54 of 81 municipalities, while the opposition obtained just six mayoral seats. The election took place against a backdrop of record-low voter turn-out, public disillusionment and deepening political polarisation. The EU integration process stalled as limited reforms and unresolved bilateral disputes continued to hinder accession momentum. Civil society faces shrinking operating space given scarce funding, political pressure, and declining public trust. Journalists, particularly those exposing corruption or criticising government actions, operate in an atmosphere

of mounting pressure through verbal attacks, online harassment, intimidation, economic precarity, and rising self-censorship. Physical violence against journalists remains relatively rare. Public trust in the media has eroded due to sensationalism, disinformation, and the increase of partisan narratives, especially in online spaces. EED support this year focused on providing rapid support to independent media actors to survive and sustain their operations following the US funding cuts.



© Glasen Tekstilec

## THEMATIC AREA: CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

### GLASEN TEKSTILEC: DEFENDING THE RIGHTS OF FACTORY WORKERS

Glasen Tekstilec, an independent workers-rights organisation based in Štip, North Macedonia, emerged from the city's prominent textile sector to champion labour protections in a region where unions are often politically entwined and hesitant to act. They then expanded to protect all workers and have achieved landmark wins, such as securing equal minimum wage protections for textile workers, winning legal cases for pregnant workers and workers cheated by companies

feigning bankruptcy, and offering free legal support to over 12,000 workers during the pandemic. EED support has enabled Glasen Tekstilec to strengthen its institutional capacity by training its staff in project-writing, financial management, and auditing. It is now developing a three-year strategic plan and setting up a union arm to enhance sustainability and broaden membership-based power.

**NORTH MACEDONIA**

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### IMA: COUNTERING MISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

The Institute for Media and Analytics (IMA), co-founded by Petrit Sarachini and Zharko Trajanoski in North Macedonia with support from EED, works to counter misinformation, hate speech, and digital manipulation in the Western Balkans. Through fact-checking, data analysis, and creative multimedia storytelling, IMA exposes coordinated disinformation campaigns and promotes media literacy. Its flagship TV programme, "Polygraph", and short-form digital videos make complex information accessible to a broad audience,

fostering critical thinking and informed public debate. Building on this success, IMA mentors young influencers to spread truthful, democratic narratives online and ensure that credible information and civic awareness can thrive in an era of algorithm-driven misinformation. They also publish content on hate speech and disinformation risks. During the 2025 local elections, they used short-form formats and a media literacy angle to explain how to vote.

**NORTH MACEDONIA**

In **Serbia**, the political crisis that began in late 2024 deepened throughout 2025. The year was marked by sustained student-led and nationwide protests triggered by the collapse of the reconstructed train station roof in Novi Sad in November 2024 that killed 16 people. The authorities responded with increased repression, the police using excessive force to disperse peaceful gatherings and detaining dozens of protesters and activists. Several human rights organisations documented cases of intimidation, harassment, and pressure on demonstrators, including reports of unlawful surveillance of politicians, civic activists, and journalists.<sup>8</sup> Illegal prosecutorial and police actions against civil society organisations were also recorded, including armed police raids on premises. Media freedom further deteriorated during the year. Pro-government outlets continued to dominate the information landscape, spreading disinformation and stigmatising activists and journalists. Independent newsrooms, particularly those outside Belgrade, faced smear campaigns, political pressure, and physical attacks. Journalists reporting from protests were exposed to increased risks, including public doxing and targeted threats. Media professionals have suffered a record 89 physical attacks over one year, and many activists supported by EED have been attacked, detained for days, or targeted as foreign mercenaries in the pro-government media.<sup>9</sup> EED provided rapid and flexible assistance to grassroots activists and independent media outlets, helping to sustain democratic resilience at the local level during a period of heightened instability and pressure on fundamental freedoms.

In **Turkey**, 2025 saw further democratic backsliding and an acceleration of attacks on the country's remaining democratic institutions. The arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and of other mayors belonging to the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), as well as advisers, journalists, and cultural figures, deepened Turkey's democratic crisis. These arrests targeted a foundational pillar that had remained relatively intact: namely Turkey's electoral system. İmamoğlu's arrest sparked the largest public protests since Gezi Park in 2013, demonstrating that large parts of the population, particularly youth, do not accept this usurpation of their democratic system. The wave of arrests further exacerbates the atmosphere of intimidation and fear in which civil society and independent media operate. New proposed judicial packages have included hardline anti-LGBTQI+ provisions, further targeting these marginalised groups as part of a broader reactionary social agenda. Civil society, including many EED partners, successfully mobilised and temporarily halted the adoption of these draconian laws. This turbulent year has seen positive developments in the peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK, which took its first steps at the end of last year. While large parts of the population view the process with great scepticism, the PKK had a symbolic laying down of arms ceremony and talks between the various stakeholders continue. A parliamentary commission has been formed to consult with civil society actors, including EED partners. Turkey's economic and cost of living crisis and the reduction of available funding, given the US foreign aid withdrawal, is heavily affecting civil society and independent media actors. Many are caught in a political and economic survival mode. For these reasons, EED support is increasingly essential.

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8 CIVICUS (2025) "Serbia Stays on Rights Watchlist as Authorities Seek to Crush Student-led Protest Movement", 30 July 2025, available at <https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist-july-2025/serbia/>

9 RSF (2025) "Protests in Serbia: at least 89 attacks on journalists recorded by RSF in one year", 29 October 2025, available at <https://rsf.org/en/protests-serbia-least-89-attacks-journalists-recorded-rsf-one-year>

## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS & CULTURE

### THEATRE LIFE: ART PRESERVING SPACE FOR DISCUSSION\*

Theatre Life, founded by a group of young artists, is not just a venue for engaged art performances. In a country of increasing repression, it is also a safe place for discussion of important socio-political themes, including feminism, gender equality, freedom of speech, violence, corruption, and decolonisation. It attracts a diverse audience, including people who would usually not engage in political discussion in public but are interested in understanding and discussing social issues. With EED's support, its programming includes dance and drama performances exploring the issue of violence and communication patterns between partners, a production featuring testimonies from women who have experienced military conflict, and other topics which are rarely discussed in society.

Over the past five years, Theatre Life has expanded its activities to include exhibitions, film screenings, and poetry and concerts, despite increasing constraints on independent artistic expression in the country. It has also participated in international festivals. As an independent artistic community, it has succeeded in preserving space for important discussions through artistic and cultural programming, strengthening dialogue in society, and increasing community engagement on relevant topics.

\* The identity of this partner has been anonymised to protect them.



# IMPACT BRIEFS

The following section of the report reviews EED's work in six contexts—Albania, Belarus, Moldova, Syria, Turkey, and Ukraine—examining the impact of EED's work over recent years.

These impact briefs provide information on EED's work in these regions, showing the democratic changes that have occurred and the tangible results that EED partners have achieved. They are based on the findings of the 2025 external evaluation of EED as well as internal monitoring and evaluation missions by EED.

EED works throughout the EU Neighbourhood and beyond to empower locally rooted activism through a human-centred approach and deep contextual understanding. By supporting grassroots movements that strengthen democratic values, citizen engagement, media pluralism, and healthy information ecosystems, EED helps build the social capital and resilience that underpin stable, prosperous democracies. These impact briefs show how EED's mission translates into real-world impact.



# I. ALBANIA: SUPPORTING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

## A new media-civic-political ecosystem emerges with EED's support

Albania's public sphere has long been shaped by a political duopoly and a civil society absorbed into state patronage networks. The media environment is highly constrained, with the independence, diversity and integrity of news eroded by the dependence of most media on non-transparent financing by political and business interests, often reliant on government contracts.<sup>10</sup> In this environment of polluted information and limited political competition, citizens—including youth, the elderly, and marginalised and regional communities—were excluded from democratic life.

This has evolved over the past period as reporting by key independent and investigative media has triggered institutional reactions; citizens have mobilised around issues previously considered untouchable; and new political faces, separate from the traditionally dominant political parties, have entered parliament for the first time in two decades.

What is emerging, with EED's support, is a media-civic-political ecosystem capable of challenging Albania's entrenched power structures.



### The Context:

#### A SYSTEM HOLLOWED OUT FROM THE INSIDE

Albania's media landscape mainly consists of an influential private-sector media owned by a handful of companies with links to the political world.<sup>11</sup> While around 900 portals publish media content every day, around 90 percent of these are controlled by business magnates, political allies, or figures with links to organised crime. Most content is recycled, shallow, or bought. Investigative reporting is confined to a handful of small, often precarious, outlets operating with minimal resources.

Civil society has suffered a similar fate. Large NGOs closely linked to the government and donors dominate the sector, while smaller critical organisations operate at the margins. For many citizens, the sense of political agency has eroded over decades. As one expert described it, "democracy exists as procedure, not as power".

Political life reflects this hollowness. For over 30 years, Albania has been governed by the same two blocs: the Socialists and the Democrats — operating within structures of clientelism and patronage. While power once alternated between them providing a degree of checks and balances, this pattern has eroded since 2013, as Prime Minister Edi Rama's Socialist Party has won four consecutive elections. Elections occur, but they no longer threaten the underlying networks of state capture. The result is a democracy that formally functions but offers few real entry points for citizens, and fewer mechanisms to hold the governing party accountable.

10 OSCE/ODIHR (2025) *Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections 11 May 2025, ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, 23 October 2025*, available at [https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/for\\_documents/0/c/600028.pdf](https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/for_documents/0/c/600028.pdf)

11 RSF (2025) "Albania", available at <https://rsf.org/en/country/albania>



## EED's Intervention

### STRENGTHENING INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND CIVIC MOBILISATION

#### STRENGTHENING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Against this backdrop, a set of independent newsrooms has emerged, many of them supported from their earliest stages by EED. Partner testimony is explicit: "We would not exist as an independent outlet without EED," say **Shteg**, an investigative media. "EED's contribution was substantial for us; it transformed us into a proper media outlet," say **NYJE**, a Kamëz based media platform.

This early support enabled the growth of outlets now considered central to Albania's independent media ecosystem.

- **Citizens.al**, a youth-led community media with an exceptional team of journalists that specialises in embedded community journalism, has proven the importance of focusing on societal issues.
- **Gjurmon**, a local investigative media based in Kotë, Vlorë, launched in 2024 has developed a model of short investigative videos on ineffective municipal work that spread quickly across social media and has forced the authorities to react on key topics.
- **NYJE**, a media platform, based in Kamëz gives voice to locals and brings attention to issues ignored by other media. It is highly trusted within the community.
- **Amfora**, an investigative media based in Durrës exposed corruption related to major public programmes, including the misuse of EU IPARD (Instrument for pre-accession assistance, rural development programmes) funds in Albania and North Macedonia. They won first prize in the EU Awards Investigative Journalism Prize in Albania for an investigation about the profit-led destruction of archaeological heritage in coastal areas.
- **Shteg** has exposed important cases of corruption and is helping to develop a new cadre of investigative journalists.

Together, these outlets filled some of Albania's information deserts with fact-based reporting and provided the country with some of its only independent oversight journalism.

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### CITIZENS.AL: BUILDING TRUST THROUGH COMMUNITY JOURNALISM IN ALBANIA

Citizens.al (formerly Citizens Channel) was founded seven years ago by former students from the University of Tirana thanks to an EED start-up grant. It is now a leading voice in Albanian independent media, with a team of five journalists. From the start, Citizens.al focused on the human stories not reported in other media. Over time, it has proven that this is a formula that works and is well appreciated by its audience.

"We don't report about the people, we report with the people," says Lorin Kadiu, the media's executive director, explaining that its journalists embed themselves deeply within communities, travelling to remote areas by public transport, spending extended time with people, and building lasting relationships with those facing injustice.

One of Citizen.al's big successes is the development of a comprehensive database mapping cultural heritage destruction in Tirana that was developed thanks to

tireless efforts knocking on doors, touring sites of destruction, and working closely with architects. On a more local level, it has helped resolve water access to small villages and has protected workers from being fired.

The outlet faced a major crisis in 2024 when sophisticated cyberattacks attempted to erase six years of work. Thousands of posts were removed, fake followers flooded their accounts, and their website was targeted. The outlet rebranded and relaunched, and its audience doubled following the attack, now reaching seven million people annually.

In 2025, Citizens.al received third prize in the EU Investigative Journalism Award for an article exposing the exploitation of women in garment factories.



## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### GJURMON: FROM THE RIVERBED UP

In 2024, with EED backing, Anesti Barjamemaj launched Gjurmon, an independent investigative outlet based in Kotë, Vlorë. “For years, I’d planned to create a local media outlet focused on the Vlorë region,” he says. “It was a personal challenge, a response to residents of this area who had long expressed frustration that their problems weren’t being reported by the national media outlets I worked for.”

The name Gjurmon, Albanian for “traces” or “footprints,” signals its method and its philosophy. As a small local, independent outlet, each story Gjurmon covers is based on the needs of the local community. Anesti monitors the work of the local municipalities, and he is always available to answer local’s questions. “I always answer them. I consider their problems. I cover the reality of their lives. The problems were big, so I needed to act,” he says. Gjurmon’s investigations have triggered municipal inspections and reversals of local decisions. It succeeded in attracting international attention to the pollution of the Vjosa river, one of the last wild rivers in Europe, by a petroleum company.

### MOBILISING CITIZENS

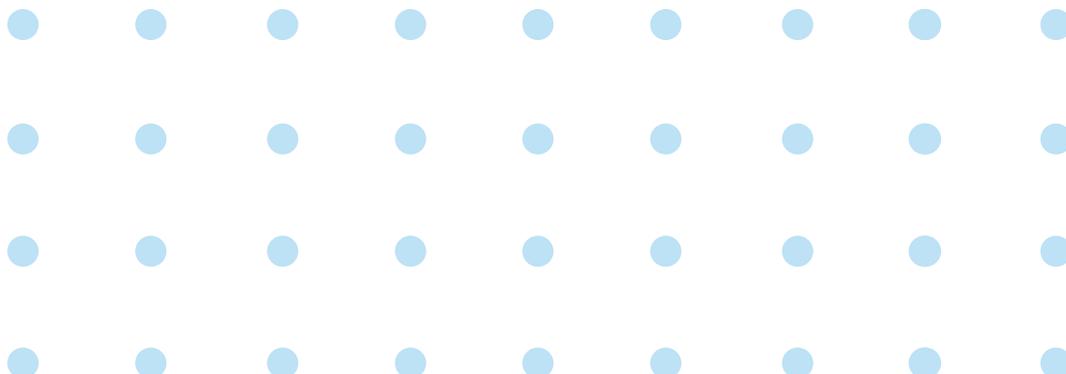
Grassroots civic organisations helped mobilise pensioners and workers, mobilising groups that are usually politically inert. For example, hundreds of pensioners, a group often seen as loyal to the ruling party, came out on the streets in protest. “It was the first time the pensioners went out to protest for their interest,” they say.

Partners believe that this pressure contributed to a nearly three-fold increase in the government’s annual bonus for pensioners. This is important in a context where pensions are meagre and most rely on remittances from emigrants. It also saw the introduction of free transport for pensioners. These are rare examples of concrete benefits won through citizen mobilisation.

### OPENING POLITICAL SPACE

The combination of investigative reporting and civic organising helped create the conditions for new political forces to emerge and challenge the duopoly of the traditional Socialist–Democratic parties. In some cases, this electoral success was achieved with minimal resources and limited coverage from mainstream broadcasters.

The election of new MPs is providing new opportunities for accountability. “For the first time, our reporting is being used inside institutions, not ignored from outside,” one commentator said.





## How Change Happened

### AN EMERGING DEMOCRATIC ECOSYSTEM

Independent media are producing credible investigations exposing corruption and forcing state institutions to respond. Civic organisations are bringing about change for marginalised groups through collective mobilisation. There is now the potential for political newcomers to use these investigative findings and there are civic demands to challenge to challenge entrenched structures from within parliament.

This work marks the foundation of a small and vulnerable nascent democratic ecosystem that is already demonstrating that accountability is possible even in a context of media capture, rampant corruption, and state dominance.

As **Citizens.al** put it: “You cannot change the big government, but you can change small things. The sum of small changes becomes big change.”

#### EVIDENCE OF CHANGE

##### Investigative journalism

- **Gjurmon** investigations triggered municipal inspections and reversals of local decisions. They succeeded in attracting international attention to the pollution of the Vjosa river, one of the last wild rivers in Europe, and ensured the municipality provided rubbish collection in local areas.
- **Citizens.al** reported on water contamination, illegal construction and land transfers forcing institutional responses across multiple municipalities. They stopped factories from polluting the environment, and have ensured locals have continued access to water, by exposing anti-environmental hydropower plants.
- **Amfora**'s investigations into EU IPARD funds misuse contributed to a Prosecutor's Office case.
- **Shteg** exposed high-level corruption involving property deals and foreign investment and revealed that a €2 million EU funded water treatment plant did not exist, prompting an investigation by the Prosecutor's Office. The opposition have raised questions in parliament based on their investigations into money laundering in the construction sector.
- **NYJE**'s reporting has led to greater awareness of the need to protect the environment, and they succeeded in ensuring the legal protection of a local urban forest. It mobilised the local community to combat the environmental damage of the Zadrije hydropower plant.

##### Civic mobilisation

- One partner mobilised more than 20,000 people nationwide, when they collected signatures to address the minimum wage, pushing for parliamentary reform.
- They mobilised pensioners to come out onto the streets, and to hold protests in front of parliament. EED partners note that pensioners, previously one of the most neglected groups in terms of social policy in the country, secured an increase in the government's annual bonus. However, despite this rise, EED partners have expressed concern that the measure appears to be electorally motivated rather than as a substantive and well-designed social policy aimed at improving the wellbeing of pensioners.

##### Political access

- Three new political forces separate from the dominant parties, entered parliament in 2025.
- Today with new MPs in parliament, they can directly raise issues of relevance to civil society in parliament and thus influence policymaking. This is more effective than relying on civic actors to collect 20,000 signatures before an issue can be raised in parliament.

## NYJE

### BUILDING TRUST FROM THE PERIPHERY

In Kamëz, a stigmatised city on Tirana's edge, young activists and journalists are giving voice to a population that has traditionally been marginalised. Kamëz gained city status in the 1990s after the fall of the socialist regime, when internal migrants were able to move freely to live near big cities like Tirana for the first time. It is now one of the most densely populated areas in the country and one of the fastest growing urban areas with a largely young population. In 2014, Aurora Vata and her friends decided to give voice to their city and reclaim its narrative, when they set up a new collective, Ata—Albanian for “them”. A couple of years later with EED support, the activists launched an activist blog that became the independent media NYJE - which means “nod” in Albanian - to write about the stories that affect local people's every day.

NYJE are journalists and activists. When they covered an environmental case in a northern village threatened by a hydropower plant, they didn't just write articles. They helped communities file court cases, organised legal campaigns, and showed up to hearings. They highlighted the case of a forest on Kamëz's outskirts slated for destruction and won a court case, saving the forest. In a country where institutional credibility has collapsed and media is widely seen as corrupt, NYJE has built something rare: trust. The local community call them when organising protests. Residents share sensitive information. Public intellectuals contribute essays. “We are not just a media covering our community,” Aurora reflects. “The community asks for our coverage.”



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## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### SHTEG.ORG: INDEPENDENT MEDIA CREATED AGAINST THE ODDS

Lindita Cela is one of the Western Balkan's most tenacious investigative reporters. Well-known for her work with the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), she set up Shteg.org when she realised there was an urgent need for an independent platform that couldn't be silenced.

In 2023, Lindita had spent months uncovering ties between Albanian political figures and organised crime networks abroad. When the investigation was ready to be published, no Albanian outlet would touch it. One posted it for a day and took it down. She was forced to leave the country temporarily for safety reasons. "That's when I knew," she says. "We needed our own path to tell the truth." With financial support from EED, Lindita launched Shteg in 2024 as an investigative media focused on exposing corruption, human rights abuses and environmental violations. She has made a point of hiring young journalists and training them about investigative reporting.

Despite limited resources, Shteg has already achieved remarkable impact. Its investigation into a missing €2 million EU-funded water treatment plant prompted prosecutors to open an investigation. It has documented money laundering through real estate, with the case raised in parliament. It has exposed criminal groups that are investing in coastal in southern Albania, dubbed the Albanian Maldives. The risks of doing this work are very real. Lindita admits to feeling under constant threat from criminal gangs and the authorities on occasion too. She believes that Shteg's engaged audience are her best defence: "The only people who can protect us are the people, our readers. That's why we need to have close connections with them."



### Why This Matters

Albania's democratic stagnation has long been considered entrenched, marked by captured institutions, media monopolies, and limited civic participation. The emergence of an alternative ecosystem – independent journalism, organised citizens, and new political entrants – indicates that change is possible even in highly constrained environments.

For the EU, this shift strengthens the foundations of Albania's integration process: greater oversight of public institutions, increased citizen voice, and the appearance of political alternatives capable of shaping debate. While still fragile, these developments demonstrate that targeted support to investigative media and civic mobilisation can expand democratic space in settings where formal mechanisms have failed to do so.

Albania has now opened the final chapters of EU accession negotiations; however, persistent internal challenges remain – from distorted political representation to state capture, organised crime, and systematic corruption – that continue to obstruct genuine democratic consolidation. The role of civil society and independent journalism in providing for transparency, accountability and rule of law is more vital than ever as Albania implements fundamental reforms in democratic institutions and judicial independence. These are cornerstones of its EU integration pathway ensuring that these reforms translate into genuine institutional change and provide for continued public trust in the accession process.

# II. BELARUS: DEMOCRACY IN EXILE

**With EED's backing, access to independent information and civic engagement is preserved inside Belarus, while democratic leadership in exile remains relevant in international advocacy**

Belarus is a country where space for independent political, civic and media activity has been systematically restricted. Independent organisations have been liquidated, media declared extremist, civic activity criminalised, and the opposition has been forced into exile. Inside the country, fear, surveillance and repression hamper the space for collective action.

Continuously supported by EED, independent media, civic networks and political actors in exile have managed to operate under these conditions. Inside Belarus, access

to independent information and some grassroots civic engagement has been preserved. Outside the country, democratic opposition structures have focused on international advocacy and preparing alternative governance structures.

While power was not won in 2020, when mass protests followed a widely disputed presidential election, "something changed in society. People learned to organise, to trust one another, and to act."



## The Context:

### A CLOSED CIVIC SPACE IN A CLOSED COUNTRY

Since the mass protests of 2020, Belarus has experienced a significant tightening of authoritarian control. What had long been a highly constrained political environment became markedly harsher and more comprehensive in its repression.

As one observer put it, "before 2020, everything was already controlled – but there was still some space at the margins. After 2020, that space disappeared."

Independent organisations were dismantled, media outlets banned, thousands detained and tens of thousands forced into exile. Civic activity that once operated in informal or tolerated spaces was increasingly criminalised. "Now even neutral civic activity can be treated as a crime," one actor noted. "It doesn't have to be political anymore."

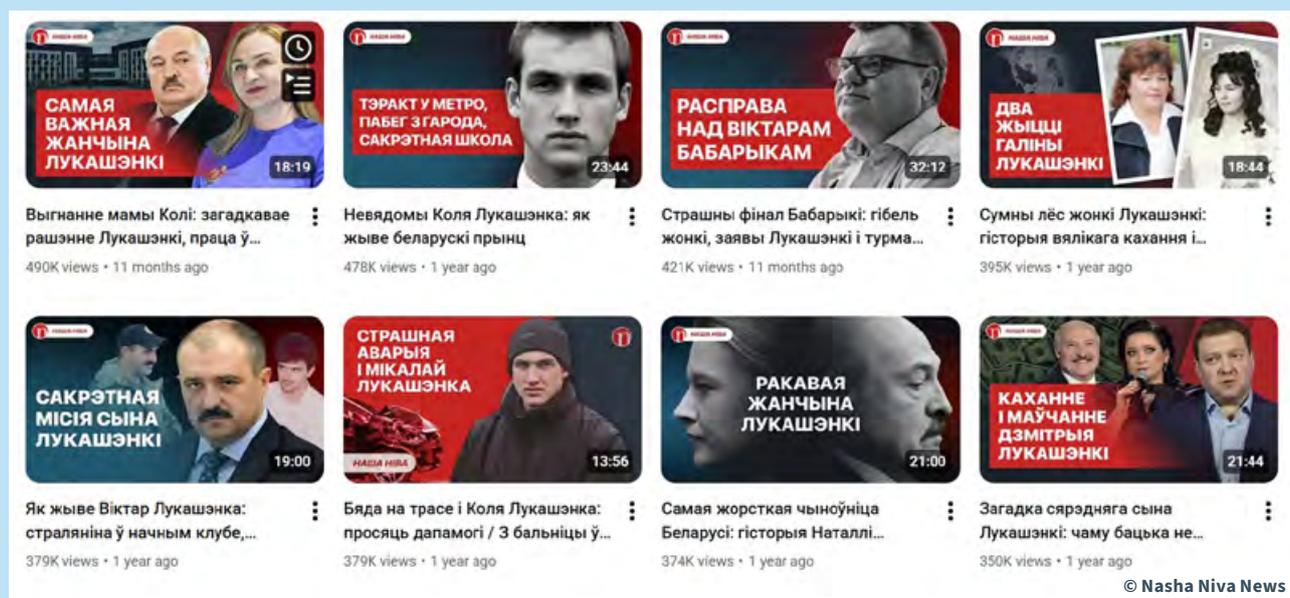
The external environment has also become more difficult. Belarus has become increasingly involved in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, including through the use of its territory and logistical infrastructure. This alignment has

narrowed international engagement on Belarus as attention has shifted to other crises, while repression inside the country has intensified daily pressures on citizens.

Many organisations experienced repeated displacement. "A lot of us had to move twice," one organisation recalled, "first because of repression in Belarus, and then again because of the Russian war in Ukraine."

Inside the country, repression has produced atomisation rather than mobilisation. "People are not mobilised anymore – they are trying to survive," one observer said. "The system is built to isolate people from one another. Collective action is what it fears most."

In this context, civic engagement persists only through alternative channels – information flows, trusted networks and forms of organisation that operate beyond the reach of the state.



## EED'S Intervention

### ACCESS TO INFORMATION, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND VOICE ABROAD

EED support in Belarus since 2020 has focused on supporting key pro-democracy and civil society actors to maintain their activities, despite ongoing repression and a challenging funding environment. This includes supporting activities that inspire activism and citizen engagement, including those that foster ties between exiled and in-country activists; ensuring access to objective information for citizens through diverse independent media; and supporting activities in sensitive areas where other donors cannot intervene. This has meant focusing on sustaining three interconnected areas: independent information channels reaching people inside the country; democratic structures in exile that protect the interests of Belarusians through services and international advocacy; and networks of civic engagement and support that remain relevant to everyday life under repression.

Sustained support for independent Belarusian media forced into exile enabled newsrooms to continue operating after relocation and to adapt to an increasingly hostile information environment. Media actors describe EED support as allowing them to retain core editorial staff, invest in new formats and maintain multi-platform distribution strategies at a moment when visibility inside Belarus was at risk. As one editor put it, “the real challenge was not regaining the audience, but staying relevant year after year.”

EED support has also underpinned networks that allow sustained engagement with citizens inside Belarus, particularly through legal, medical and humanitarian channels. These networks operate largely through secure digital platforms and rely on continuity and trust rather than visibility. With EED assistance, these platforms are preserving civic connection, trust, and mutual support under conditions of repression.

Finally, EED support has contributed to sustaining democratic opposition structures in exile focused on international advocacy, coordination and preparedness. This has included support to building the opposition governance structure in exile. Belarusian democratic actors have become recognised interlocutors internationally, while maintaining channels of connection with people inside the country.

As one partner summed it up, “there is now an ecosystem – political actors, civil society, media, diaspora initiatives – that didn’t exist in this form before.”

Partners also highlight the flexibility of EED’s approach. “When funding is tied too closely to specific activities, it leaves very little room to adapt,” one organisation explained. “But adaptation is exactly what we need in this context.”

This approach proved particularly important in 2025, when the abrupt withdrawal of major US funding created uncertainty across the sector. Organisations were forced to reassess staffing and programming, and some reduced activities. As several actors put it, “it was a big hit.” Flexible EED support helped stabilise core capacity and avoid abrupt disruptions. “Without that support,” one organisation said, “we would have had to limit our activities significantly.”



## How Change Happened

### THREE INTERLOCKING PATHWAYS

#### 1. INDEPENDENT MEDIA SUSTAINED ACCESS TO INFORMATION INSIDE BELARUS

Independent media have repeatedly demonstrated the ability to re-establish operations, regain domestic audiences and sustain engagement over time, even under conditions where other civic and political actors face far greater obstacles to in-country reach.

Editors recall the period after relocation as a race against invisibility. “The biggest fear was simply disappearing,” one said. “People inside Belarus found us again very quickly – faster than we expected,” says another.

Today, outlets such as **Zerkalo**, **Nasha Niva**, **Malenka Media**, **Epramova** and **Budzma** reach millions of users each month, with more than half of their audience consistently inside Belarus. Short-form video is particularly important: editors report that the vast majority of their TikTok audiences are based in-country. This sustained reach reflects a deliberate multi-platform strategy, combining websites, apps, social media and parallel channels designed to bypass censorship.

Having rebuilt operations in exile and regained audiences inside Belarus, the focus is now on sustaining infrastructure, formats and coordination over time. “Our task now is to preserve what we have,” one editor explained, “so that if change begins, our starting position is stronger today than it was in 2020.” Several contrasted the current landscape with the period before the protests, noting that key digital platforms barely existed at the time. “In 2020, Belarusian YouTube didn’t really exist,” one actor said. “Now we have a big infrastructure, and I’m sure that if critical changes happen, we won’t start from zero but from floor 10, we’ll go higher.”

Independent analysts consistently describe this outcome as a major success. Exiled Belarusian media have retained large, stable domestic audiences and, on several platforms, outperform state propaganda in reach and engagement. In a media environment designed to isolate and exhaust independent voices, this sustained presence inside the country remains one of the clearest indicators that independent information channels have not been broken.

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### ZERKALO: INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM FOR BELARUS FROM EXILE

Zerkalo is an independent Belarusian news outlet operating from exile that serves as a vital information source for millions inside Belarus, where state-controlled media dominates and independent journalism is criminalised.

Zerkalo emerged in 2021 after its predecessor Tut.By was destroyed by the Belarusian authorities. The Lukashenka regime arrested more than 10 employees, including the CEO and editor-in-chief. They were sentenced to 12 years in prison. Liudmila Chekina, Zerkalo’s CEO, remains behind bars to this day. Despite two relocations and operating in exile, Zerkalo maintains remarkable reach: 2.2 million monthly website visitors (55 percent from Belarus) and 27 million monthly views across platforms.

Its team works from Vilnius, Warsaw, and other European cities covering everyday challenges Belarusians face, from public transport problems, wage theft, bureaucratic injustices, all issues that state media ignores. Recent stories broken on Zerkalo exposed the shutdown of a nuclear reactor and a drone in a residential area of Minsk. A data-driven approach tailors content across all platforms: long-form YouTube interviews for older audiences, TikTok shorts for youth, with 80 percent of their TikTok viewers inside Belarus, most of them under 30.

Belarusians risk a seven to ten-year prison sentence for contacting Zerkalo, yet sources continue sharing information daily. The outlet never compromises source protection, understanding that “trust is everything”.

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### NASHA NIVA: A CENTURY-OLD NEWSPAPER NOW ONE OF BELARUS' LEADING DIGITAL NEWS OUTLETS

A former newspaper, Nasha Niva is now a thriving digital media and one of the country's largest independent news outlets. In November 2025, it achieved what once seemed impossible: as a media labelled "extremist" by the Belarusian authorities. It saw 170 million views on TikTok alone, plus tens of millions more across YouTube, Instagram and its website.

Run by staff in Lithuania and Poland, Nasha Niva has built a network of channels for various audiences. "Our primary goal is to reach out to people who are afraid of viewing and reading so-called "extremist" content. That

way, people can access objective news without being afraid. They might not even be aware they are reading an independent outlet," they say.

There has been significant youth interest in their political content on TikTok, a surprising discovery over the past year. "We thought they'd only want fun, lifestyle and social problem content, but when we created a network of channels based on political content, they became our most viewed channels. Our TikTok political channel saw 43 million views in last November alone," they say.

## 2. CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IS SUSTAINED THROUGH TRUSTED NETWORKS INSIDE BELARUS

Civic actors working from exile emphasise that their relevance depends on remaining connected to everyday life inside Belarus. Rather than framing their work as service provision alone, they describe it as maintaining trusted networks through which people can engage and seek information, advice and support safely.

Legal, medical and humanitarian support operate as entry points into these networks. Civic organisations stress that what matters most is continuity. "Once you stop, even for a short time, people assume you are gone," one noted. "And then it's very difficult to come back."

Several actors linked this continuity to democratic relevance in more indirect terms. Open mobilisation is not possible under current conditions, but maintaining contact allows information to circulate, relationships to persist and trust to be preserved.

In this context, sustained civic engagement functions as a form of preparedness. While few spoke explicitly about future mobilisation, several emphasised that without these networks and relationships, democratic capacity would be difficult to reconstitute if conditions change. "Without these structures," one actor said, "there would be nothing to return to".

## THEMATIC AREA: CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

### STRANA DLYA ZHIZNI: A LIFELINE TO BELARUSIAN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Founded just weeks after Belarus' historical 2020 elections, the Strana dlya Zhizni (or A Country to Live In) Foundation supports Belarus's political prisoners and their families both inside and outside of the country. Operating under extraordinary constraints, the small team has provided €600,000 of direct financial assistance to date.

The foundation works with a network of people inside Belarus and uses bespoke security protocols to protect volunteers, beneficiaries and staff members. They assist over 60 prisoners and their families monthly to access medical, psychological and legal assistance, accommodation, as well as financial support. They currently run two shelters in Vilnius for up to 30 people.

Sometimes their support can be as simple as providing technical assistance: "We help them set up their phones, messengers, their laptops. Many people are arrested for commenting or liking something on social media. We help them avoid this situation."

EED funding has proven vital in ensuring the foundation can continue to survive over the past couple of years. In the past, team members have taken on jobs to keep operations running during funding gaps.

## THEMATIC AREA: CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

### CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT FILLING STRUCTURAL GAPS AND BUILDING TRUST

Access to independent legal defence in Belarus has become severely restricted as there are only 1,600 licensed lawyers for a population of nine million. “There are simply not enough lawyers left,” one activist said. “And for many people, it isn’t safe to approach those who remain.”

In response, exile-based legal networks now provide support to tens of thousands of Belarusians, handling 500 to 800 consultations each month, the vast majority from inside the country, using secure digital channels. To date 28,000 Belarusians have been supported, 90 percent inside the country, via a secure ecosystem that serves eight partner organisations. In addition, they provide access to online medical services, with a network of trusted doctors both inside and outside the country.

Organisations such as the **Strana Dlya Zhizni Foundation** and **BySol** also provide financial and other assistance to political prisoners and their families, running shelters outside the country and educational programmes, and working with volunteers in-country.

Some civic actors focus explicitly on community-based engagement designed to sustain trust and collective capacity under authoritarian conditions, building long-term relationships with community leaders who emerge organically from existing networks. Engagement is deliberately low-profile, relying on one-to-one conversations, regular phone contact and secure digital channels, with clear protocols to minimise risk. This approach has produced a growing network of engaged communities across all regions of Belarus and in the diaspora.

A central objective is to counter fragmentation between those who left and those who remained, maintaining shared civic space despite repression and displacement. Significant investment is made in the wellbeing and training of community managers.

### 3. DEMOCRATIC VOICE ABROAD

Following the 2020 protests, the leadership of Belarus’s democratic opposition was forced into exile. Those involved describe the initial phase as reactive rather than planned. “We didn’t move into exile with a strategy,” one senior figure recalled. “We were reacting to repression, trying to keep things together.” Over time, however, the opposition consolidated into political structures capable of representation, coordination and agenda-setting outside the country.

At the centre of this effort is the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, alongside the United Transitional Cabinet and the Coordination Council – bodies that together provide political coordination, representation and continuity for the democratic opposition in exile. They have become recognised interlocutors in international discussions on Belarus. Opposition representatives now engage regularly with EU institutions, European governments and parliamentary bodies, contributing to deliberations on sanctions policy, international accountability mechanisms and future transition scenarios.

This international engagement has translated into concrete outcomes. Opposition representatives were involved in sustained diplomatic engagement around several waves of political prisoner releases in 2024 and 2025. Those involved are careful not to overstate their role, but they describe such moments as evidence that coordinated advocacy can still have impact under highly constrained conditions.

At the same time, the limits of political action are clearly acknowledged. “It is very difficult to be active inside the country,” one representative noted. “If there are arrests, we are blamed for calling people to resist.” As a result, political mobilisation inside Belarus remains indirect and highly constrained. The emphasis instead is on preserving political capacity and institutional continuity. “We cannot plan far ahead, the context doesn’t allow it,” one actor said. “But without these structures, there would be nothing to return to.”

## CIVIC TECH ENABLES A DEMOCRATIC ECOSYSTEM IN EXILE

Political, civic and media actors, alongside a rapidly growing diaspora, have gradually assembled a form of democratic scaffolding in exile. As one partner put it: “There is now an ecosystem – political actors, civil society, media, diaspora initiatives – that didn’t exist in this form before.”

For those involved, this ecosystem is less about immediate political change than about preserving democratic capacity under repression. Several actors described this as maintaining a basis for future democratic renewal – so that when political conditions shift, there are institutions, networks and practices capable of taking action and responsibility.

A defining feature of this ecosystem is the role of civil tech in holding it together. Belarus entered the crisis with a highly developed IT sector, and repression redirected this expertise into democratic work.

“I was never involved in politics before,” says Pavel Liber, founder and director of **Digital Belarus**. “I was building complex digital platforms for business. Now I do the same work – but for civil society.”

The maturity of this capacity is reflected in scale as well as design. During the 2020 elections, when independent and credible international observation was banned by the Lukashenka regime, digital platforms enabled 1.5 million people to register and submit information on electoral wrongdoings. Around half a million ballot images were uploaded, creating a credible, data-driven challenge to official results.

Similar tools have supported other Belarusian organisations, enabling tens of thousands of legal and medical consultations for repressed individuals, with developers noting that the overwhelming majority of users connect from inside Belarus. As one partner explained, “we are not replacing civil society – we are giving them the tools they need to keep working.”

Civic tech now underpins much of the ecosystem’s activity: media distribution, legal and medical consultations, humanitarian coordination and civic participation. Importantly, this infrastructure is collaborative. “We build tools so others can do their work,” Liber explained. “Almost everything depends on these platforms now – they connect media, lawyers, volunteers and political actors.”

## THEMATIC AREA: CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

### DIGITAL BELARUS: BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

When software engineer Pavel Liber’s team launched GOLOS in 2020, collecting evidence of electoral fraud from 1.5 million registered users and 500,000 uploaded photos, they demonstrated something unprecedented: technology could document authoritarian falsification at scale. Five years later, Digital Belarus has evolved into one of Europe’s most innovative civic technology operations, serving 100,000 users across multiple platforms.

The organisation’s multi-layered approach combines cultural engagement with critical services. Anonymous legal and medical consultation platforms have handled over 50,000 consultations since 2021, with 99 percent of legal platform users inside Belarus where accessing lawyers carries criminal risk. Over 1,000 consultations occur monthly, provided by Belarusian lawyers in exile working with eight partner organizations.

Digital Belarus pioneered what Liber calls the “multi-funnel approach”, attracting users through cultural events and business directories, which now include over 2,500 Belarusian businesses worldwide, then engaging them in participatory budgeting and civic projects. Through this method, 6,000 people contributed nearly €200,000 over

three years, funding libraries in Lithuania, national history portals countering Russian revisionism, and summer camps for political prisoners’ children.

The New Belarus platform now serves as infrastructure for political actors, providing the United Transitional Cabinet and Tsikhanouskaya’s office with tools for public consultations, event management, and community engagement. The platform attracts 15 to 20,000 monthly active users, with 50 to 60 percent accessing from inside Belarus through specially secured channels that bypass VPN requirements. In 2024, Digital Belarus developed a decentralised blockchain voting system for Coordination Council elections, passing rigorous US cybersecurity audits. The system enabled both diaspora and domestic participation while maintaining full anonymity.

“We’re not political actors,” Liber emphasises. “We’re technologists enabling civil and political actors with infrastructure.” With EED support representing crucial funding, Digital Belarus proves that sophisticated digital democracy tools can work even under severe authoritarian pressure—and scale to support democratic movements worldwide.



## Why This Matters

The continued functioning of independent media, civic networks and political structures in exile has strategic relevance for both Belarus and Europe.

These actors preserve access to independent information for people inside Belarus, sustain civic trust and coordination under repression, and maintain alternative representation at the international level. Together, they ensure that democratic capacity is not erased, even when it cannot operate openly.

When political conditions eventually shift, the presence of functioning media, trusted civic networks and internationally recognised political actors will shape the scope, credibility and speed of any future transition.

By sustaining these capacities over time, Europe helps ensure that democratic renewal in Belarus, when possible, can build on existing institutions and social trust rather than starting from scratch.

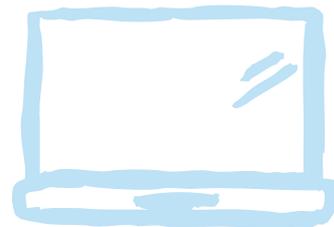
### INDEPENDENT MEDIA CONTINUE TO REACH MILLIONS INSIDE BELARUS

#### ZERKALO:

**2.2 million** unique users per month

**Audience largely recovered** from former Tut.By levels and sustained over five years

**70% of website users** inside Belarus



#### NASHA NIVA:

**500,000 regular viewers** of its evening news programme

**70% of website audience** inside Belarus

**Multi-platform** architecture

*Civic tech protection is operational at scale and building trusted networks of citizens*

**90% of TikTok, YouTube and Instagram users** inside Belarus



#### DIGITAL BELARUS:

**15,000–20,000** monthly participants

**50-60%** traffic from inside Belarus



**100,000** active users

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### **BUDZMA: HOW A BELARUSIAN CULTURAL CAMPAIGN CONTINUES TO PLANT SEEDS OF DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE ONLINE**

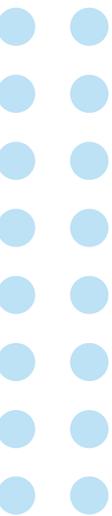
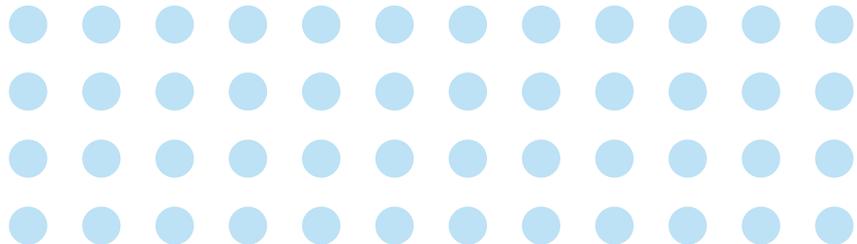
For twelve years before 2020, Budzma (Let us be Belarusian) built something the Lukashenka regime didn't understand until it was too late: a nationwide grassroots movement that made Belarusian identity inseparable from democratic values. Operating in 200 locations along a horizontal network, they oversaw 5,000 cultural initiatives organised across the country, including folk festivals, literary discussions, and historical education initiatives that taught citizenship, independence, and European belonging.

“We see Belarus as part of Europe,” they say. “We systematically challenged Soviet myths about Belarus as an agricultural nation dependent on Russian civilisation. We showcased our noble culture, and our centuries of urban tradition, and demonstrated our European heritage.”

The regime's belated recognition of culture's political power came in 2020, when white ribbons became the symbol of mass protests. Special forces soon arrived at the Budzma founders' homes, and they fled the country. EED funding enabled Budzma to dramatically scale-up the digitalisation of their work and to maintain a team working in-exile.

Today, Budzma is focusing on producing “evergreen content”, long-form videos on issues such as Soviet myths, historical leaders, Belarusian women, and Belarusian cultural heritage as well as short-term content on TikTok and Instagram. It also produced a highly popular animated film: “History of Belarus in Five Minutes”. A recent “Trident and Pahonia” series showed Belarus and Ukraine solidarity against Russian aggression.

Around 50 percent of their audience remains inside Belarus, though they cannot comment or share content openly. Budzma believe that they have made a real difference since they began their work in 2008. They always saw themselves as catalysts of change. “Our work has given birth to generations of leaders,” they say. “We visited so many villages, schools, cities and now we have a network of people who remain inside the country. They may not recognise it, but they are using our messages and speaking our language.”



# III. MOLDOVA: DEMOCRACY STRIKES BACK

With EED's timely support, independent media win Europe's most intense disinformation war

Moldova entered the 2025 election cycle under unprecedented hybrid pressure from Russia – a campaign that blended AI-generated disinformation, decentralised Telegram networks, foreign financing schemes and targeted narratives aimed at fracturing society. At the very moment this pressure intensified, major international donors withdrew, leaving independent media with significant funding gaps. Despite the odds, Moldova seems to have emerged from the elections with a better-informed electorate and a more resilient democracy.

This achievement was anchored in a media-civic ecosystem that had been steadily built over years and that was able to continue operating under acute stress. EED has contributed to the development of this ecosystem through consistent grant support over the past twelve years, that was reinforced at a moment when the sector faced a sudden funding collapse. This meant that independent journalists, analysts and regional newsrooms were able to continue contributing to a vital information infrastructure that allowed Moldovans to withstand the most sophisticated interference the country has faced since independence.



## The Context

### A HYBRID ASSAULT CONVERGING WITH A FUNDING CRISIS

For more than a decade, Moldova has lived with persistent Russian influence efforts, but the 2024 to 2025 cycle marked a major escalation, as the country held elections and a referendum on EU Accession.

During the 2025 pre-election period, EED partner **WatchDog** recorded 10,000 posts on Telegram alone daily, with up to 80 percent of these posts containing disinformation. “If we are to debunk all the Telegram posts, it would take us two years,” they say. Much of the content was AI-generated or coordinated through decentralised groups based in Moldova or directly operated from Russia, designed to evade detection. Paid influencer networks emerged, operating anonymously and relying on micro-targeted messaging to Russian-speaking audiences in the north, Gagauzia and Transnistria. Offline structures, including church-affiliated groups, amplified digital manipulation.

As EED partner Alexei Tulbure of the online **Defacto** series and the **Trigger** talk show put it: “Russia spent hundreds of millions of Euros to destabilise Moldova. They wanted to regain control without a single shot – without rockets, without artillery, without tanks. Simply by changing the government.”

This assault intensified precisely when Moldova's media sector became financially vulnerable. In early 2025, the withdrawal of US democracy funding removed hundreds of thousands of euros from the ecosystem almost overnight. Newsrooms already operating on thin margins faced immediate gaps. Several reported being weeks away from cutting investigative projects or reducing broadcasting.

The coincidence of heightened interference and collapsing funding created a major risk. Moldova's information resilience depended to a significant extent on whether independent outlets could continue to function during the most consequential election period in a decade, as parliamentary elections were held in September.



## EED's Intervention

### SUSTAINING AN INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE AT A CRITICAL MOMENT

#### LONG-TERM, EARLY-STAGE INVESTMENT

The resilience shown in 2025 did not materialise spontaneously. EED has played a distinctive role in contributing to building Moldova's independent media architecture, often supporting outlets at a start-up point when few donors were willing to take risks. In 2025 alone, EED supported 20 media partners for an awarded total of over €2 million.

EED support focused on three areas: investigative capacity, cross-linguistic reach and a network of regional outlets embedded in communities most exposed to Russian narratives. This approach created the backbone of Moldova's informational defence.

**TV8**, now one of the country's most trusted news organisations, grew from a small, vulnerable start-up into a national newsroom with EED as a consistent early supporter. Its leadership is clear about the importance. "Without EED, TV8 might not exist," co-founder Mariana Rață has said.

## TV8

### A PILLAR OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN MOLDOVA'S 2025 ELECTIONS

During the 2025 elections, TV8 positioned itself as a platform for democratic dialogue, informing the population and motivating voter turnout. It broadcast debates at 8pm – TV prime time, with almost all major candidates participating.

"We try to be a platform for all political opinions in society," says Mariana Rață, Senior Editor. "We are for pluralism in media. We are committed to providing balanced coverage while maintaining our editorial independence."

In the pre-election period, TV8 targeted audiences both at home and in the diaspora. They also collaborated with popular social media influencers Vania Băt and Zîmbărele to create satirical content on their channels, exposing the absurdity and manipulation of this disinformation, while reinforcing pro-democratic messages. These products had a high impact on their networks and reached new audiences.

On Election Day alone, TV8's bilingual live coverage reached 500,000 users over 19 hours, with an average audience of 106,000 viewers per minute, topping the ratings. Its digital reach was equally decisive: 7 million Facebook views in two days, 150,000 YouTube livestream views, 1.8 million Instagram views (a 70 percent increase), and 727,000 TikTok views in 24 hours (an eightfold increase). A quarter of a million users in the diaspora

accessed its platforms, and TV8 became the most-read news site in Moldova that day, turning verified real-time reporting into the primary reference point for millions of citizens at home and abroad.

EED first supported TV8 in 2017, when it provided an initial grant to build its studio. EED's sustained support through subsequent years enabled the team to expand and supported platform development, ensuring TV8 could fulfil its public interest mission during Moldova's critical democratic moments. In 2025, EED stepped up its support when US funding support was withdrawn during the vital pre-election period.



© TV8



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EED's long-term support also contributed to the formation of **WatchDog**, the country's leading analytical actor on disinformation; **NordNews**, the main investigative outlet in the Russian-speaking north; and several regional Russian-language platforms, including **TUK.md** and **Laf.md**, and also supported Tulbure's **Defacto** and **Trigger** series, as well as the more recent **EvroIntegratsia** episodes that provided Russian language explainers for the southern and northern regions. More recently, it backed **Malenkaya Strana**, a digital-native explainer platform that quickly became one of the most effective sources of Russian-language content for younger audiences.

### RAPID SUPPORT DURING THE 2025 FUNDING COLLAPSE

When US democracy funding froze in early 2025, EED was among the few actors able to respond quickly. Its support allowed key outlets to maintain operations during the most intense months of the hybrid assault. EED supported nine actors with rapid support of over €225,000. Several partners emphasised the importance of timing: without rapid help, newsrooms would have cut essential teams or reduced election coverage. As Malenkaya Strana put it: "EED gave us freedom and the space to work. Without this funding, we would have had to greatly reduce our explainer videos during the election period and abandon our documentary."

This stabilisation was critical for maintaining public access to trusted information during the campaign and on election day itself.





## How Change Happened

### A FUNCTIONAL MEDIA–CIVIC EARLY-WARNING SYSTEM

#### INVESTIGATIVE AND ANALYTICAL DEPTH

Supported independent outlets revealed influence operations, traced financing networks, and documented attempts to manipulate public opinion. **NordNews**, for example, infiltrated disinformation and recruitment networks ahead of the parliamentary elections, uncovering Russian interference, financing mechanisms, and coordination with local operatives

#### THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

##### NORDNEWS: EXPOSING RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE.

NordNews is used to combatting Russian influence. It sees itself as “fighting for democracy in a forgotten region” in north Moldova, encouraging critical thinking and exposing Russian interference and manipulation.

It has been known to take risks in the past, but during the 2025 pre-election period, its journalists took a much bigger risk than usual. They conducted a sophisticated undercover operation when a NordNews journalist infiltrated a Telegram group organised by Evrasia Foundation, an organisation on the EU sanctions list, aimed at recruiting and training young people to interfere in the Moldovan elections. The journalist was able to document the entire network and Russian interference methods.

Its investigations also exposed the use of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, as an influence channel, with priests running Telegram recruitment networks and being paid per 10,000 followers.

NordNews took part in a sting operation that forced a political party to withdraw from the elections. Its video investigation was viewed by tens of thousands on YouTube and was aired on 12 media channels in Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria.

EED seed funding helped establish NordNews in 2018, and it has grown to become an important regional media outlet with national recognition. This year, EED provided important core support when the media lost a significant US-funded grant.

**WatchDog’s** disinformation and foreign-interference analysis became a national reference point. Its reports exposed crypto-based funding streams, violent mobilisation training, and AI-driven influence operations, and its pre-bunking approach helped shape public understanding of manipulation techniques before Election Day. The analysis was consistently amplified by major broadcasters and online outlets, embedding early-warning signals into the mainstream information space.

##### CROSS-LINGUISTIC REACH

Regional and Russian-language platforms ensured that communities historically dominated by Russian media had access to credible information. **Malenkaya Strana**, with over 2.8 million views, operated directly on the platforms most exploited by influence actors, and reduced the traction of destabilising content among youth audiences.



## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

### MALENKAYA STRANA: LITTLE COUNTRY, BIG DREAMS

In Moldova's crowded feeds of fakes and fabrications, Malenkaya Strana has carved out a name for itself as one of the only Russian-language digital platforms amidst a sea of disinformation.

Dumitru Garcaliuc, who leads Malenkaya Strana, hadn't planned on becoming an investigative journalist. It was his experience reporting from Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine that made him understand something had to change. He realised there was a battle of narratives taking place, and its roots had begun to take hold much further than Ukraine. In May 2024, he created the media platform, and within weeks, Malenkaya Strana's explainer videos on YouTube, TikTok and Telegram had racked up over four million views and had been rebroadcast by EED

partner, Jurnal TV. Its videos take apart common pro-Kremlin tropes, exposing dubious political links and disinformation with patient storytelling, context, and perspective.

In early 2025, EED provided an emergency grant when Malenkaya Strana lost its US funding. In the summer of 2025, thanks to EED funding, it released "The Great Hybrid", an investigative documentary that examined Russian interference during the pre-election period and revealed Russian spy operations in Moldova and neighbouring countries.



© Malenkaya Strana

Episodes of Tulbure's **Trigger** and **EvrolIntegratsia v fokuse**, produced in Russian but widely followed by Romanian speakers as well, became shared reference points across linguistic divides, with Trigger consistently reaching 100,000 viewers and ranking as the top-rated political talk show across language groups.

### TRANSPARENT, HIGH-REACH COVERAGE

**TV8** provided an important information space for the country, delivering continuous, bilingual election coverage that reached millions online and became a main reference point for citizens following the vote.

### INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES AND CIVIC ACTION

The continuous flow of investigations, pre-bunking analysis and high-reach, bilingual reporting triggered concrete institutional and civic responses. Authorities reacted to exposed financing schemes and interference patterns, while civil society organisations and diaspora networks used media outputs to sustain voter awareness, counter manipulation narratives, and mobilise participation.

Together, these dynamics created a functional early-warning and public-information system that supported Moldova's democratic process during an unprecedented hybrid threat.



## Why This Matters

Moldova sits at a strategic fault line in Europe's neighbourhood. The resilience of its democratic process in 2025 has direct implications for EU security and enlargement policy. The ability of independent media to withstand hybrid pressure, maintain public trust and provide transparent coverage was particularly important for Moldova during this vital pre-election period.

The developments in Moldova show how targeted, flexible support to local media and analytical actors – delivered early and sustained over time – can strengthen the foundations of national resilience. In an era of hybrid competition, Moldova's experience illustrates that democratic stability depends not just on state institutions but also on the information and civil society ecosystems that sustain them.



## TV8: ELECTION DAY PERFORMANCE (28–29 SEPTEMBER 2025)

audience leader among all TV channels: **106,000 viewers** per minute.

**500,000 total users** reached during 19 hours of bilingual live coverage.

**7 million** Facebook page views in two days.

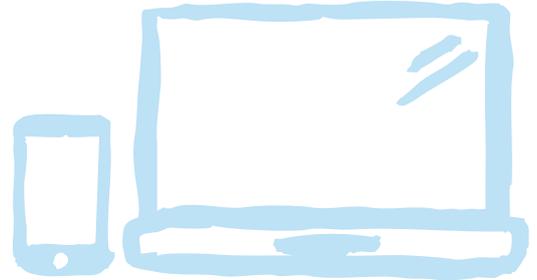
**150,000** YouTube livestream views;

**1.8 million** Instagram content views (+70%);

**727,000** TikTok views in 24 hours (+691%).

diaspora engagement: **250,000 users abroad** accessed TV8 platforms.

TV8 became the **most-read news site** in Moldova on Election Day.



## NORDNEWS: INVESTIGATIVE BREAKTHROUGH

**infiltrated disinformation** and recruitment networks prior to parliamentary elections.

**produced four investigative pieces** showing infiltration of the Moldovan Orthodox Church by Russian interests, with priests creating Telegram channels to recruit people and being paid for every **10,000 followers**.

**sting operation** led to the **withdrawal** of one political party from the elections.

## MALENKAYA STRANA: YOUTH AND RUSSIAN-SPEAKING AUDIENCES

achieved over **2.8 million views** in its first year.

TikTok- and YouTube-first approach **penetrated platforms** most exploited by Russian actors.

released an investigative documentary that **examined Russian interference** during the pre-election period and revealed Russian spy operations

## WATCHDOG (EED START-UP FUNDING IN 2017): SETTING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

analytical **reports on disinformation** and foreign interference were amplified consistently by TV8, ProTV, NordNews, all current EED grantees, and by other media.

**exposed crypto-based funding networks**, violent mobilisation training, and AI-driven influence operations during the pre-election period.

pre-bunking strategy helped **shape the public understanding** of manipulation mechanisms before election day.

## TRIGGER: A TALK SHOW WITH GREAT REACH

show set up with EED funding, **watched by both Russian and Romanian speakers** during the pre-election period.

ratings show it as the best show across **all language groups**

**100,000 people** reached consistently

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### MOLDOVA'S REALITATEA MEDIA: BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH INNOVATION

In 2014, seven journalists launched realitatea.md, which would later become Realitatea Media Group, an alternative initiative to news and media products dominated by media conglomerates then mostly controlled by oligarchs. Today, Realitatea Media is one of Moldova's most dynamic independent media organisations, and a multimedia powerhouse reaching 1.5 to 2 million monthly online visitors. It has achieved "must-carry" TV status for three consecutive years and increased its audience five-fold over that time.

Realitatea Media operates six websites in Romanian, Russian and English, and produces 16 to 18 hours of daily content. It has the capacity to manage nine simultaneous live broadcasts. During the recent elections, it had 39 broadcasts per day. It also ran a "Get Out To Vote Campaign", encouraging Moldovans to challenge their friends to go to vote.

This has not been an easy road. In 2017, Realitatea was forced to close the Realitatea TV broadcast and to fire 82 journalists in a single day, when the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc cut all commercial contracts. It has also experienced significant online attacks, including an email blackout two weeks before the 2025 elections.

EED first began supporting the media in 2022, when it helped it increase its production and capacity. This year, EED provided further support when the media lost significant funding due to the US funding withdrawal.

A strategic focus of the media is on regions underserved by independent media, including rural areas and Transnistria and Gagauzia and on building social cohesion in the country. A multimedia project about Gagauzia includes a 25-episode documentary with short video fillers, 48 audio podcasts provided to radio stations, and a book published in four languages with QR codes linking to video and audio content.

# IV. SYRIA: A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR A DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

**A civil society ecosystem nurtured during years of repression is seizing the opportunity at this moment of democratic opening**

## **EED'S LONG-TERM STRATEGIC SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY ACTORS**

The collapse of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 after 53 years of authoritarian rule, ended decades of systematic repression and human rights violations and ushered in a new era for Syria. This sudden transition created unprecedented opportunities for civil society to push for a democratic transition.

The change was dramatic. Classified as a “closed autocracy” in the bottom 10 percent of V-Dem’s liberal democracy index, the country was divided into four regions, each controlled by distinct military forces with parallel political structures.<sup>12</sup> The humanitarian crisis was severe: 17 million Syrians required humanitarian assistance, with poverty rates at 69 percent and extreme poverty at 27 percent.

Against this backdrop, global democracy funding was contracting, and independent media, grassroots activism, and human rights monitoring operated under severe constraints with no clear path toward democratic change. The prospects for democracy appeared nearly non-existent. Yet throughout this difficult period, EED continued to support civil society actors and independent media in the country, responding to their evolving needs amid ongoing instability. As civic space continued to narrow, flexible and confidential forms of assistance proved essential to maintaining this engagement.

In the immediate aftermath of the regime’s collapse, many actors returned from exile, community initiatives gained visibility, youth-led groups emerged, and independent journalists could work openly for the first time in years. One EED partner described this period as one of both “excitement and astonishment”. As one civic actor shared, “For the first time, we saw the sea”, a symbol of both the new freedom of movement and reconnection with the whole of Syria.

However, this fragile democratic opening faced immediate threats: sectarian violence, inadequate inclusive governance structures, and the risk of restrictive regulations being reimposed on civil society. The timing coincided with a crisis in international support. The US foreign aid freeze directly affected Syrian NGOs and media outlets at the precise moment when their contribution to democracy promotion was most instrumental.

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<sup>12</sup> V-Dem Institute (2024) *Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot*, available at: [https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem\\_dr2024\\_lowres.pdf](https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf)



## EED's Intervention

### CRISIS RESPONSE FOLLOWING YEARS OF CONSISTENT STRATEGIC PRESENCE

#### IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO NEW OPPORTUNITY

When the Assad regime collapsed, EED immediately launched an Emergency Funding Mechanism to help partners quickly react, seize the opportunity and capitalise on the transitional moment, to steer and shape a pluralistic, inclusive and democratic Syrian society.

Several weeks later, this rapid response was expanded to organisations affected by the US funding freeze. This funding proved vital for democracy actors, filling a critical gap at a time when civic work was vital to the transition process, and most international support stagnated or evaporated.

During this first year of political transition, EED has supported a wide range of pro-democracy actors, who have mobilised across the country to seize this unique momentum.

These include:

- **Independent and social media platforms:** From community platforms to national media outlets fostering an open and informed public space, playing watchdog functions, bringing key issues to public debate, and countering divisive narratives that threaten an already fragile social fabric.
- **Civic society organisations:** Enabling grassroots mobilisation and democratic engagement through civic education, youth empowerment and promoting social cohesion, particularly in regions that have hugely suffered over the past decade, as well as human rights monitoring and activism documenting violations and actively shaping transitional justice frameworks.

## THEMATIC AREA: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND MONITORING

### SYNERGY: VICTIMS LEADING THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE IN SYRIA

Established in March 2021, the Synergy Association for Victims is a victim-led organisation ensuring justice for victims of human rights violations in Syria, particularly those impacted by abuses such as enforced disappearances. Led by a Kurdish human rights defender, it operates through five interconnected programmes: documentation, accountability, victim empowerment, victim support, and advocacy.

Unlike other organisations, Synergy is committed to documenting violations by all parties – not just the Assad regime and ISIS, but also the Syrian Democratic Forces and Turkish-backed groups to ensure balanced narratives for under-covered regions. Initially focused on north-east Syria, since the fall of the Assad regime, has now expanded its work to other regions throughout the country.

Synergy's team are all survivors of human rights violations. They document human rights violations across Syria using a rigorous field methodology. The organisation's secure Bayanat Database now contains over 35,000 data units, which it shares with international accountability mechanisms including the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) (335 testimonies were shared in 2024 alone), the UN Commission of Inquiry, and war crimes units in Europe and the US.

Central to its mission is empowering victims to lead their own advocacy. It has established the Missing Persons Families Platform (which has over 750 members) and it provides capacity-building on transitional justice. Today, the Synergy team also collaborates with Syria's National Commission for Transitional Justice, advocating for comprehensive approaches that include all victims and perpetrators. It is also part of an initiative with six civil society organisations developing a law on transitional justice.

## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### ROZANA: AMPLIFYING SYRIAN VOICES THROUGH INDEPENDENT DIGITAL MEDIA

Founded in 2013 as Syria descended into conflict, Rozana Media has emerged as a critical independent multimedia platform committed to telling Syrian stories by Syrians. Rozana broadcasts online and where possible, via FM transmitters, targeting audiences aged 18 to 35 through websites, apps, Instagram, and podcasts.

Rozana's editorial mission is firmly rooted in peacebuilding, women's empowerment, and social accountability. The platform brings together voices from across Syria's geographic, social, and political divides, encouraging communities to recognise shared suffering and collective responsibility, rather than reproducing conflict-driven narratives. Rozana tells real stories from within communities and does not shy away from taboo or sensitive topics.

Through innovative and courageous programming, Rozana has demonstrated its impact. In one programme, a fictional character named Ababdo explained why he refused to educate his daughter. The episode generated thousands of responses, including messages from conservative communities expressing support for girls' education. In another episode, a transgender person from Aleppo shared their lived experience, while another featured a survivor of marital rape who described being forced into marriage at the age of 13. These programmes sparked wide public debate and challenged deeply rooted social norms.

Today, Rozana has built a network of more than 350 digital ambassadors who actively support women's rights and social justice across social media platforms as part of sustained and coordinated online campaigns. Beyond storytelling, Rozana practices explanatory journalism and solutions journalism, helping audiences understand complex issues while highlighting pathways for change. It also plays a watchdog role through investigative reporting, contributing to accountability in an environment where transparency remains fragile.

As Syria enters a post-Assad phase, Rozana faces a new and complex set of challenges. While overt censorship has decreased, independent media outlets, particularly those amplifying women's voices, are increasingly targeted by sophisticated disinformation campaigns and coordinated online harassment using fake profiles. Access to information remains limited, with government institutions rarely responding to official requests. Rising internet costs exclude economically vulnerable communities, while new registration regulations significantly increase the financial burden of operating independently inside Syria.



## BUILDING ON PAST CONSISTENT PRESENCE

EED’s response to these emerging opportunities and challenges for Syria’s pro-democracy movement pro-democracy movement was built upon and informed by EED’s strategic presence in Syria Syria throughout the final years of the Assad regime. Between 2020 and 2024, approximately 19 percent of regional MENA grants were provided to Syrian partners.

EED primarily provided core funding and start-up funds through a demand-driven model, deliberately targeting chronically under-resourced areas that other donors overlooked. This approach prioritised flexibility, local ownership, and long-term sustainability over short-term project deliverables.

According to the assessment in the 2025 EED external evaluation covering the 2020-2024 period, EED’s impact in Syria stemmed from three interconnected approaches:

- **Preserving Syria’s civic space through strategic support:** EED invested strategically in maintaining civic infrastructure with the explicit objective of “planting the seeds” for democratic transition when the context would allow it during the latter years of the Assad-regime. This

patient, long-term approach ensured that when the regime fell, a resilient network of well-organised civil society actors was already in place and ready to act immediately.

- **Amplifying marginalised voices and expanding democratic participation:** EED’s flexible funding model enabled marginalised actors to gain visibility and influence within Syria’s civic landscape. By deliberately diversifying the range of voices and organisations receiving support and enabling marginalised actors, EED strengthened the foundation for inclusive democratic transition.
- **Redefining donor-grantee partnership for lasting impact:** EED trusted Syrian partners to lead risk assessment and adaptation strategies, fostering genuine ownership among local actors. This gave them a direct stake in defending the civic space they operate within. This partnership model challenges the traditional donor-recipient dynamic widely criticised by experts and civil society actors for perpetuating inequality and dependency.

## THEMATIC AREA: WOMEN’S CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

### BRIDGING SYRIA’S DIVIDES: WOMEN FOR COMMON SPACES

Women for Common Spaces is bringing together young people from starkly different experiences to develop their political understanding and to build connections between each other, vital in a context of polarisation in today’s post-Assad Syria. The pilot programme, supported by EED, is being held in Homs, one of the most affected areas during the war in Syria with high levels of destruction, displacement and sectarian tensions.

“We want to give these young people an opportunity to understand politics from scratch, and to form their opinions based on knowledge rather than stereotypes,” says the founder, a journalist and native of Homs, who spent 13 years in exile.

She explains that the young people include those who stayed in government areas during the long years of war, as well as those who were displaced, those who were

able to attend university and former fighters, whose education was interrupted. The training will engage 40 participants across two intensive six-day workshops. Participants will have an opportunity to meet with political actors, academics, and civil society leaders. Key to the programme is creating space for the participants to advocate on local issues, with the participants leading on the choice of issue.

The plan is to replicate this model across Syrian cities, ultimately connecting participants nationally. As international funding declines, this work represents a crucial investment in bringing young people from profoundly different realities together to build a shared democratic future beyond sectarian grievances.



## THEMATIC AREA: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND MONITORING

### SYRIANS FOR TRUTH AND JUSTICE: A LEADING HUMAN RIGHTS NGO

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is an independent, non-governmental, nonprofit Syrian human rights organisation. STJ was founded in 2016 in Turkey and moved to France in 2019. The organisation's work focuses on documenting human rights violations committed by all parties against all victims, without discrimination in Syria. It also works on litigation and advocacy in Syria and internationally. It implements projects on topics such as fact-checking, digital security, civic engagement, direct victim support, and inclusive representation in the constitutional and democratic process.

Following the regime's collapse, STJ expanded into previously inaccessible regions, and it accessed new evidence of human rights violations, including from Syrian detention centre records. It has been working closely with prison survivors and their families. STJ was instrumental in documenting widespread violations in the coastal areas of the country in March, publishing a joint report with Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Archive.





## Evidence of Change

### SUSTAINED CIVIC PRESENCE UNDER AUTHORITARIANISM

EED helped to maintain operations for key civil society and independent media when prospects for democracy were “nearly non-existent”. As one EED partner described, “they instilled hope in many despairing and lost souls—activists, artists, and the general public yearning for a dignified life and peace.” These initiatives equipped local communities with the skills and platforms needed to participate meaningfully in civic dialogue. This sustained support meant that a resilient grassroots civil society infrastructure was in place when the Assad regime collapsed, and it was operational and ready for the moment of transition.

An example of this resilience was civil society’s strong reaction to the October 2025 directive by the authorities requiring civil society organisations to obtain prior-government approval for foreign funding or to join international bodies among other restrictive provisions. Civil society actors, including many EED partners, published a joint-position expressing their concerns about the reimplementation of the former regime’s repressive Associations Law to restrict NGO activities

### RAPID CRISIS RESPONSE

EED’s Emergency Funding Mechanism launched immediately after regime collapse filled a critical gap at a moment when other donors needed time to adjust their programming and funding strategy to the new context, a gap that was further exacerbated by the US funding freeze. This enabled partners to capitalise on the transitional moment and prevented the collapse of key democracy actors at this crucial juncture.

### EXPANDED MEDIA SPACE POST-TRANSITION

In previous years, EED provided vital support to a variety of independent media outlets inside Syria and in exile, ranging from well-established entities to smaller, local community-based platforms. This support allowed them to break the Assad regime’s information monopoly and combat disinformation from multiple armed and political actors. They were able to connect with diverse audiences – from Syrian diaspora to international policy actors to readers within the country – while creating a unique space for minority voices in public discourse.

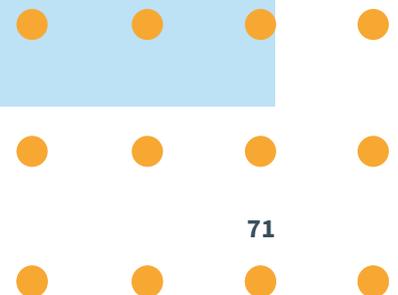
Today, independent journalists are reporting on developments, elevating critical public debates, ensuring accountability, continuing to cover taboo topics and fact-checking competing narratives from Syria’s emerging power broker. Their reporting is reaching audiences throughout the country. However, the situation remains complicated with many media still operating underground.



## Why This Matters

The situation in Syria today remains precarious. Over the past 12 months, the country has witnessed both progress and setbacks, with the formation of a new government under former Idlib-based leadership, a National Dialogue Conference to address issues such as transitional justice and economic reform, a constitutional declaration, and parliamentary elections in September. These developments have sparked criticism for their lack of inclusivity, excessive centralisation of presidential powers, and underrepresentation of women and minorities. Sectarian violence erupted in coastal regions in March and in the Suweyda governorate in July, resulting in over 2,000 deaths and widespread displacement. In March, the Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast reached a landmark agreement with Damascus for integration into state institutions, though implementation has faced significant obstacles and at the time of writing has not yet been achieved.

However, despite these challenges, this transition period marks a unique opportunity for Syria’s democratic future. By strengthening Syria’s civic infrastructure, and supporting democratic transition and inclusive governance, EED partners are helping to build the conditions necessary for long-term stability. EED partners in independent media and fact-checking initiatives are combatting divisive narratives and extremist ideologies that threaten Syria’s social fabric and stability. In an environment where multiple actors are competing to shape Syria’s future, pluralistic, locally owned media are countering authoritarian influence and disinformation campaigns



## EED VISIT TO DAMASCUS IN SEPTEMBER 2025

In September 2025, an EED delegation, including EED Executive Director Jerzy Pomianowski and EED Executive Committee Chair Lisbeth Pilegaard, visited Damascus to meet with a diverse range of civil society actors—from established organisations to grassroots groups, activists, and media professionals. These discussions revealed strong momentum and a deep commitment to democratic transition, as well as significant needs across multiple sectors and regions.

A key finding was the high potential of locally anchored civic initiatives that resonate deeply within their communities. Many of these actors show great promise, have a good understanding of the local dynamics and community needs, but often lack institutional experience. They require close mentoring and capacity-building support to maximise their impact while developing sound financial management practices. Partners also emphasised their efforts and determination to strengthen local agency and community ownership of their initiatives—essential for ensuring long-term sustainability and genuine local ownership of the country's democratic future.

## THEMATIC AREA: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND MONITORING

### JUSTICE FOR LIFE: DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN SYRIA'S FORGOTTEN NORTHEAST

Founded in 2015, Justice for Life is the one of the few organisations dedicated to human rights and justice in the Deir Ezzor governorate of northeast Syria. This is a region long marginalised by Damascus and underserved by the international community, and it experienced widespread destruction during the long years of war, as well as ongoing political, economic and humanitarian crises.

Before the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, it was already documenting human rights abuses, engaging with local tribal and political dynamics, and advocating for the region's recognition, navigating deep ethnic, religious, and ideological divisions that no other organisation was prepared to confront. It has always relied on a community-based approach grounded in human rights.

Today, as many Syrian civil society organisations have relocated to Damascus, Justice for Life has stayed in Deir Ezzor. They admit this is a difficult decision given the ongoing tensions between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the new central government, but it is important. "Today, we are working to empower people and to engage them with politics. Human rights need to be at the heart of discussions," they say.

Justice for Life has consistently worked to support a transition from military conflict to political inclusive sphere and democratic governance. It has participated in negotiations between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Damascus government and has advocated for transitional justice and democratic transition by providing technical reports and recommendations designed to bring the parties closer together. It has produced 300 research papers to highlight human rights issues of public interest.

The team recognises that the challenges are considerable. There are deep social divisions, a restrictive legislative environment, regional interference, and a central government sceptical of the role of civil society, all this compounded by difficulties in securing international funding. However, they believe that protecting civil space is essential for any transitional path toward democracy.

"We have expanded our alliances to defend civil space," they explain. "We are part of the Madaniya network and have advisory board members at the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Aid Fund for Syria. Civil society today is the only carrier of meaningful political transition in Syria."

# V. TURKEY: DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

**Supported by EED, Kurdish cultural spaces endure, and have become an essential part of the democratic infrastructure**

In Turkey, questions of language, identity and cultural expression are not peripheral to democracy; they are central to it. For decades, policies designed to suppress Kurdish cultural and political life shaped the architecture of the state's security doctrine. These methods – grounded in broad terrorism laws, criminalisation, and the seizure of elected municipalities – later became the template for repressing journalists, opposition parties, student movements and civil society at large.

In this environment, the cultural spaces, theatres, language institutes and community centres supported by EED have emerged as essential democratic infrastructure. More than buildings, they function as places where civic, intellectual, artistic and political expression can occur and where Kurdish cultural life, in all its linguistic and artistic forms, continues despite ongoing pressures.



## **The Context**

### **WHERE CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY INTERSECT**

Turkey's democratic decline is often described through unfair elections, media capture or judicial erosion. But in the southeast, the story begins earlier and runs deeper. For decades, the repression of Kurdish identity – its language, cultural institutions, elected representatives and public spaces – formed the core of the state's approach to dissent. Anti-terror legislation became a flexible instrument used not only against armed groups but also against mayors, writers, teachers, students and artists.

This model reached its peak between 2016 and 2020, when more than 90 elected Kurdish mayors were removed and replaced with state-appointed trustees. Municipal theatres were shuttered, libraries were emptied, Kurdish-language institutes closed, cultural centres dismantled. Entire urban cultural ecosystems were threatened.

Experts and EED partners consistently describe these actions as a turning point: the techniques refined against the Kurdish political movement – criminalisation, asset seizure, cultural erasure – became the operating logic for suppressing broader opposition. What began as a targeted assault evolved into a generalised pattern of authoritarian governance.

The southeast has also experienced extreme social vulnerability: mass displacement, high unemployment, limited access to public services and the lingering effects of conflict. When the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2023 earthquake struck, they further constricted civic life, eroding the few remaining public spaces where communities could gather.



## EED's Intervention

### PROTECTING CULTURAL AND CIVIC SPACE IN A REPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Amid this shrinking landscape, independent cultural and linguistic spaces became crucial for maintaining a pluralistic public sphere. Several partners emphasise that EED was one of the very few democracy donors willing to support these actors – not as “arts projects”, but as pillars of civic expression.

Over the years, EED supported around 25 cultural initiatives, including theatres, cultural centres, literature collectives and publishing houses, Zazaki and Kurmanji language media and institutes, women-led organisations and youth initiatives across the southeast. Much of this support began during periods when trustees had seized municipal assets, leaving local cultural life without institutional backing.

A significant share of EED's portfolio in the region consists of arts and culture initiatives, which are seen by experts as key to democratic support. As one commentator put it: “Supporting the endurance and sustainability of art organisations in the region is not only a necessity but also a responsibility for all actors in Turkey or outside Turkey who want to support democratic culture.”

One partner put it simply: “Culture is our only safe way to speak. EED understood that.”

This support kept venues open, allowed artists to perform, enabled language teaching and ensured that writers, translators, theatre groups, filmmakers and musicians had places to work when state institutions had removed everything else. In several cases, these spaces became the only locations where Kurdish cultural production continued after municipal closures.

## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS AND CULTURE

### MERKEZKAÇ SANAT KOLEKTIFI: ART HEALING WOUNDS OF CONFLICT

Merkezkaç Sanat Kolektifi is a rare oasis in Turkey's southeast where young local artists can express themselves freely without pressure from either side in the conflict that has torn the region apart. “You are either on the side of the state or on the opposing side,” says Remzi Sever, one of the founding members. “We're trying to stand our ground in that impossible place in between.”

Hosting exhibitions, workshops, and discussions, Merkezkaç's diverse team focuses primarily on local youth who otherwise have no exposure to art. Many visitors to their gallery in Diyarbakır tell them they've never seen anything like it before.

Remzi believes art can help heal the region and bring the Kurds together, replacing conflict as a source of identity. “The only way for the Kurdish people, who have been subjected to 100 years of assimilation policies, to preserve their culture and identity, and carry it into the future is through art,” he says. “Perhaps it sounds a bit lofty—but art has the potential to replace war, keeping this society together.”

**“The only way for the Kurdish people, who have been subjected to 100 years of assimilation policies, to preserve their culture and identity, and carry it into the future is through art”**

**REMZI SEVER**



## How Change Happened

### CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE AS DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE

#### SUSTAINING PUBLIC SPACES FOR EXPRESSION

EED-supported centres became safe ground in a political environment where almost every institution was polarised. They hosted theatre groups, language courses, plays, human rights discussions, film screenings and women’s gatherings – often simultaneously. Many became the preferred meeting points for civil society actors and international visitors, simply because there were no alternative safe venues.

Civic spaces serve as catalysts for inclusive civic activism, supporting multiple civil society actors, and provide spaces where communities can speak freely. As one expert on the region put it, “When you have a space you have autonomy. You have freedom. You can make new collaborations, network, organise, invent or invite your audience and possible partners.”

These venues became places where different groups could network. In one city, a single cultural centre hosted more than 30 theatre groups over two years. Another renovated its performance hall and reopened with sold-out shows, attracting audiences who had lost access to cultural life for nearly a decade. Another shared the space with media actors and national and international actors.

Cultural spaces provide a place for artists to perform after public spaces were shut down. They are spaces that provide “breathing space for those who are left and have lost their space,” as another commentator put it.



#### THEMATIC AREA: ARTS AND CULTURE

##### AMED ŞEHİR TIYATROSU: A THEATRE BORN FROM PERSECUTION

Amed Şehir Tiyatrosu was born out of persecution, during a massive government crackdown in 2017. “There was deep hopelessness. Hundreds, even thousands, of associations were closed,” recalls Berfin Emektar, one of the founders. Diyarbakır’s metropolitan theatre was shuttered, but dismissed actors refused to back down, and opened their own theatre, inspiring hope in others.

“After we opened, many other associations and initiatives began forming again: women’s organisations, alternative art collectives, cultural groups. We received so many messages from people saying that our courage created a domino effect for them,” Befin says.

The theatre was founded as an incubator for Kurdish stories told in their own voices. “Creating something in Kurdish—that was the heart of it. It was about holding on to our language and culture,” Berfin says.

Though theatre is often seen as something middle class, Amed Şehir Tiyatrosu attracts a diverse audience. “We have people who come to the theatre for the first time in their lives, bringing their mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers. Many had never seen a Kurdish play before—many had never seen any play before. Reaching those people is incredibly meaningful for us,” Berfin says.



© Mordem Sanat Derneği

Several partners have expanded their collaborations beyond Turkey's borders, connecting Kurdish artists, writers and theatre groups from Iraq, Iran and the diaspora. This cross-regional exchange preserved artistic traditions and created professional pathways that local restrictions had curtailed.

These spaces also became anchors for crisis response in the region. During the post-Covid period, when spaces reopened, they saw sharp increases in attendance, demonstrating sustained community demand for these spaces. Following the 2023 earthquake, cultural centres supported hundreds of displaced families, coordinating volunteers and distributing essential goods.

## PRESERVING AND DEVELOPING LANGUAGE

In Turkey, language rights remain one of the most politically sensitive dimensions of Kurdish identity. EED-supported actors maintained and expanded access to resources for Kurmanji and Zazaki language teaching, a language classified as "vulnerable" by UNESCO in 2009, at a time when municipal courses had been shut down.

Several partners developed Kurdish-language curricula, terminology guides and grammar materials; others produced children's books, dictionaries and cultural magazines. Theatres did multi-day festivals in Kurdish, and they brought plays to 87 villages. One organisation created an etymological commission that documented vocabulary from three dialects, publishing books now used by students, teachers and academics.

A partner described this as democratic work: "If we want Turkey to be a democratic country, we need to come to a resolution of the Kurdish issue and that will come with the Kurdish language development and integration into the life."

## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS AND CULTURE

### AVESTA: LITERATURE AS A POLITICAL ACT

Literature is how a culture speaks to itself across space and time. Young people, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, can read books and learn who they are and where they come from. But for most of Turkey's history, Kurds didn't have this right. There was nowhere to publish in the Kurdish languages or about Kurdish issues. In 1995, the establishment of Kurdish publishing house Avesta Yayınları was an act of defiance—publishing Kurdish books and celebrating Kurdish culture in a country that had only recently lifted a ban on speaking the language.

“By underlying the importance of Kurdish art and literature, you're saying, ‘We are here, we have a culture, history and language,’” says Gül Hür of Avesta. She believes this is an inherently political act in Turkey, which has long tried to marginalise or erase Kurdish culture. This struggle is ongoing—around 20 of their books were banned in the last five years alone. Gül maintains that acknowledging minority cultures isn't just healthy for democracy—it's a prerequisite. “Without accepting our existence, we can't talk about democracy,” she says.



© Avesta

## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS AND CULTURE

### ZAZAKÎ NEWS: LANGUAGE AS CULTURE AND A WAY OF LIFE

The Zazas are an ancient community in Mesopotamia who speak a distinct Kurdish language. Today, they are a minority within a minority in Turkey, and most are illiterate in Zaza, due to a politically motivated lack of learning resources. That's why veteran journalist Enver Yılmaz set up Zazakî News, the only outlet publishing daily in Zaza.

“When I look at the community I live in, there's no education in their mother tongue, no publishing, no magazines, no television. That's why I decided to do journalism in this language,” says Enver. “A language is a culture, a way of life, a person. It must not die.”

His purpose isn't just to report the news, but to give the Zaza people a platform to learn about issues relevant to their community in their own language, using a rights-based approach, and focusing on topics such as women's rights, ecology, and disadvantaged groups. “We must never give up our struggle for the right to education in one's mother tongue, for publishing in one's mother tongue, and for people to express themselves freely and democratically—people of different genders, cultures, and beliefs,” he says. “Our stance, our very existence, is a result of this struggle.”



## Why This Matters

Turkey's democratic trajectory cannot be understood without recognising the centrality of culture, language and identity to political rights. The suppression of Kurdish cultural life has historically shaped national governance practices – and continues to influence how dissent, journalism, opposition and civil society are treated.

The resilience of the cultural and linguistic ecosystem in the southeast therefore has implications far beyond the arts. It represents a form of democratic continuity in an environment where formal political avenues are restricted. The survival of these spaces ensures that pluralism, cultural rights and civic expression remain visible and active components of Turkey's social fabric.

For the EU, supporting these actors strengthens the conditions for long-term democratisation, social cohesion and rights-based governance. Their work demonstrates that cultural freedom is not an accessory to democratic life – it is one of its foundations. The recognition of cultural rights is a core demand of Turkey's Kurdish population and critical to the ongoing peace process. Supporting these rights lays essential groundwork for lasting resolution.

## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS AND CULTURE

### MORDEM: HEALING THROUGH ART

The Kurds, in every situation—even in their pain—are a people who express themselves through art,” says Barış Işık, one of the founders of Mordem Sanat ve Ekolojik Yaşam Derneği.

This is the philosophy behind unique initiatives such as helping children in tent cities and rural areas following Turkey’s 2023 earthquake to deal with their trauma. Mordem does a bit of everything—theatre, arts workshops, drama therapy, dance, film screenings, festivals, and cultural heritage preservation—but its real passion is helping children grow through art. It’s especially active in rural areas, with a special focus on girls, trying to make up for the distinct lack of children’s right to arts education in Turkey.

“When we work with children, we’re essentially restoring a right they’ve been deprived of, and while restoring that right, we see something light up in their eyes,” Barış says. He believes the arts aren’t just a leisure activity, but something fundamental to democracy and a healthy society. “Democracy means establishing mechanisms that allow societies and communities to make decisions together, but I think art is often overlooked here. Art unites societies.”

Mordem do numerous projects supporting Kurdish culture, but Barış believes that language rights are the core of Kurdish demands: “If you look at fieldwork data, you clearly see that the main demand of Kurdish people is mother tongue education, officially recognised by Turkey.”



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# VI. UKRAINE: DEMOCRACY AT A TIME OF WAR

## EED enables the wartime revitalisation of Ukraine’s media, watchdogs, and civic sector.

Russia’s full-scale war has reshaped Ukraine’s political landscape. Under martial law, elections are suspended, civil liberties temporarily restricted, and the state is more centralised. In this environment, democracy cannot be understood through its formal institutions; it lives on through practice. The continuation of independent media, watchdog oversight, civic organisation, youth leadership, veteran self-advocacy and rights-based work all form Ukraine’s democratic backbone during war.

Across nearly four years of war, these practices have not collapsed. They adapted, reorganised, decentralised, and in many cases grew. This continuity was neither guaranteed nor accidental. EED supported pre-war ecosystem building

and has provided rapid, flexible emergency assistance throughout the war, enabling independent journalists, civic actors, youth initiatives, watchdogs and veteran groups to remain operational when they were displaced, under fire, or at risk of dissolving.

This survival has created something rare in wartime: early signs of revitalisation and innovation. New organisations have emerged, new networks have formed, and democratic energy is regenerating. EED’s role has been to ensure there is democratic infrastructure to rebuild from, when wartime restrictions eventually lift.



© Sevm Storey Mountain



## The Context:

### PRACTISING DEMOCRACY WHEN FORMAL DEMOCRACY IS SUSPENDED

Wartime Ukraine is defined by overlapping crises: mass displacement (estimated at 10.4 million people), economic contraction, infrastructure attacks, and constantly escalating security threats. These pressures forced the state to adopt measures incompatible with normal democratic operations: postponed elections, limited public protests, and highly centralised governance.

The war also reshaped civic realities. Forty percent of media outlets were damaged, destroyed, or displaced; 28 percent of regional media suspended operations entirely. Local civil society organisations lost staff to mobilisation, evacuation, and

trauma. Youth initiatives lost safe spaces; veterans returned with urgent reintegration needs; marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ communities, faced heightened risk.

Yet public expectations for participation did not disappear. Surveys show that up to 80 percent of Ukrainians engaged in some form of volunteering or civic action. This created a paradox: civic demand expanded while civic infrastructure shrank. The question was whether Ukrainian democracy – not as a formal system, but as a lived practice – could survive this mismatch.



## EED'S Intervention:

### DUAL-PHASE SUPPORT: ECOSYSTEM-BUILDING AND EMERGENCY STABILISATION

According to the assessment of the 2025 external evaluation, EED's work supporting start-up media, regional civic groups, watchdogs, youth organisations, LGBTQI+ actors and new community initiatives, often at early stages when few donors were able to support them, was important in maintaining a pluralistic public sphere, fostering civic participation and collaboration, and enabling watchdog and media actors. Sectors supported by EED included:

- independent investigative and regional media;
- civic hubs and local organisations in under-funded oblasts (particularly since 2022);
- youth-led groups experimenting with digital mobilisation;
- watchdogs and anti-corruption actors;
- veteran advocacy groups in their formative phase.

This diversified, decentralised network became the architecture of Ukraine's democratic resilience in wartime.

### POST-FEBRUARY 2022: THE EMERGENCY LIFELINE

After 24 February 2022, EED shifted to rapid-response funding cycles averaging 15 days, one of the fastest among democracy donors. Grants covered evacuation, relocation, core salaries, backup power sources, editorial safety, psychological care, digital security, and the rebuilding of offices and studios. EED contacted partners proactively, enabling dozens of organisations to continue working when operations would otherwise have halted. Over the first 60 days of the war, EED issued an average of one grant a day.

EED provided emergency support for independent media and watchdogs, flexible grants for local democracy actors, networking and coaching to cultivate new voices, with an emphasis on youth-facing media, and targeted support to marginalised groups including veterans and LGBTQI+ at critical moments. EED rapidly rolled out the Centre for Ukrainian Activists in Przemysl, Poland, close to Ukraine's border, to provide a physical space and psychosocial support to activists.

During the US funding freeze in 2025, EED again became one of the few democracy assistance actors capable of stabilising media and civic organisations suddenly facing shortfalls.

Across all phases, partners describe EED's support as decisive: "We survived the first year because EED moved when others couldn't." As another put it: "Without the core support, the organisation simply would not exist today."





## How Change Happened:

### CONTINUITY, ADAPTATION, AND WARTIME REVITALISATION

#### KEEPING WATCHDOG AND ACCOUNTABILITY WORK ALIVE

Although wartime constraints limit classic oversight, watchdog groups continue to adapt by documenting reconstruction risks, monitoring local authorities, publishing analyses of procurement and humanitarian distribution, and maintaining transparency where possible. This sustained public scrutiny and prevented the erosion of accountability norms.

#### MAINTAINING INDEPENDENT MEDIA AGAINST OPERATIONAL COLLAPSE

More than 40 percent of media faced physical damage, displacement or shutdown risk and 28 percent suspended their operations at some stage during the full-scale war, making emergency and institutional support vital. EED-supported outlets rebuilt operations, restored broadcasting, moved to safer regions, and continued reporting even during blackouts. Local media in front-line regions preserved vital information flows for civilians.



## THEMATIC AREA: INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

### REALNA GAZETA: THE LAST DISPATCH

It has been ten years since Andriy Dikhtiarenko left his home in Luhansk. He always hoped to return; instead, he's built a newsroom from scratch. Realna Gazeta, founded in 2013 just months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is one of the few Ukrainian news outlets still reporting from inside Russian-occupied Luhansk. Headquartered in Kyiv, its network of reporters, some of them operating undercover in Luhansk, produces critical, survival-oriented reporting on topics from property rights and Russian passports to safe evacuation routes.

After the collapse of US foreign funding in 2025, the outlet nearly folded. EED provided an emergency grant, enabling the team to rebuild their operations and their imagination. The team launched a new website and a merchandise line co-created with artisans from Luhansk. Now the outlet produces commercial and analytical reports about the situation in occupied territories of Ukraine for international clients. It has also launched OCCUPIED.MEDIA, a bilingual site with stories from across Ukrainian territories illegally seized by Russia. The newsroom is no longer just a media outlet—it has become a memory bank for the occupied regions and a policy actor for Ukraine's democratic future.



### SUPPORTING CIVIC ORGANISATIONS UNDER DISPLACEMENT AND TRAUMA

Civil society organisations that lost offices, equipment or staff reconstituted themselves in new locations. Many transformed their mandates: from community-building to humanitarian aid, from rights advocacy to psychosocial support, from youth training to volunteer coordination. Their survival preserved pluralism at the local level.

### EXPANDING AND REFRESHING THE DEMOCRATIC “BENCH”

One of the strongest findings of the independent evaluators is that EED helped generate a new generation of actors: youth media, new watchdog initiatives, fresh civic movements, innovative regional organisations, and veteran groups building democratic participation from the ground up. This is revitalisation in wartime – the emergence of new democratic energy even amid destruction.



© Civis Fortis

## THEMATIC AREA: HUMAN RIGHTS AND ACTIVISM

### CIVIS FORTIS: STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF UKRAINE'S DISSIDENTS

Liudmyla Yankina never planned on being a human rights defender, but when her hometown Luhansk was occupied by Russian military forces in 2014 everything changed. In Kyiv, as an internally displaced person, she realised that she had no constitutional right to vote. Determined to address this injustice, she launched a reform campaign bringing together over 150 experts, and five years later she succeeded.

Today, as co-founder and leader of Civis Fortis (Foundation for Civil Society Protection), Liudmyla is protecting the rights of Ukraine's civic activists, journalists and human rights defenders, who are fighting each day for the democratic future of their country. Civis Fortis has two main areas of work: support for civil society defenders facing persecution inside Ukraine; and support to civil detainees held in Russian captivity and those released from captivity, who face considerable challenges adapting to life in today's wartime Ukraine.

The Civis Fortis team helps former Russia-held civilian prisoners access medical and legal services, housing, find a job and get access to psycho-social support. They also advocate for the state to provide comprehensive and holistic support to released civilian hostages at the same level as veterans. The team is also working to protect democratic structures inside Ukraine itself. Referring to the Ukrainian dissidents of old, many of whom spent decades languishing in Soviet gulags, Liudmyla says: "As a human rights defender, I believe I'm standing on the shoulders of these dissidents. They started this democracy movement, and many paid with their lives, their freedom and with their health."



## FROM THE FRONT LINE TO CIVIC LEADERSHIP: HOW UKRAINE'S VETERANS ARE DRIVING DEMOCRATIC RECOVERY

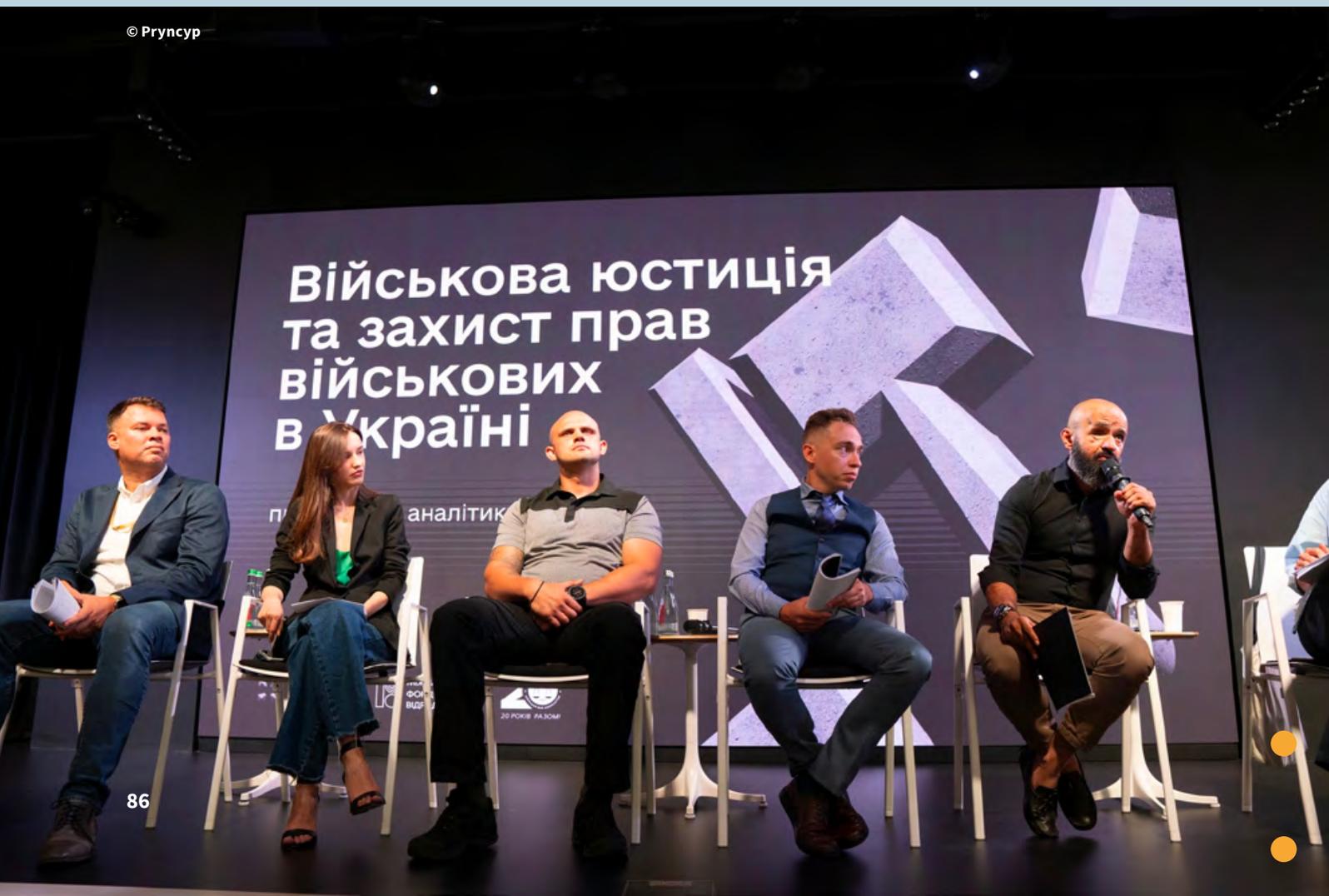
EED-supported initiatives are helping Ukrainian veterans become architects of inclusive recovery and democratic renewal. Estimates suggest that around five to six million Ukrainians will hold veteran status in the future, a number that includes affected family members. This will reshape every layer of society, from employment and education to local politics and public services. Previously, Ukraine's veteran policy was shaped by outdated networks and fragmented governance. Post-Soviet laws offered an array of guarantees on paper, but implementation was inconsistent and underfunded. Veterans face many challenges, from social exclusion and employment discrimination to legal gaps, and many struggle to access healthcare, psychosocial support, and skills training.

EED's support in the veteran space is focused on two key foci: upholding the human rights of veterans and active servicepeople and supporting veterans' reintegration into public life. EED provided start-up support to **Pryncyp**, a groundbreaking initiative launched by a human rights lawyer and veteran that, together with other organisations, has helped lead a national coalition that produced the country's first comprehensive concept for a veteran policy. Another

EED partner, **Legal Hundred**, provides a legal hotline and courtroom representation for veterans and feeds their insights into policy proposals.

The **Ukrainian Women Veteran Movement**, supported at its inception by EED, has become a major civic actor in the intersection of gender and military service, leading on a national petition demanding enforcement of anti-harassment mechanisms in the Armed Forces. In Odesa, **Plemya** runs a civic hub for veterans who can take part in training and cultural events. In the Poltava region, wheelchair users at the **Rehabilitation and Adaptation Institute** are leading on barrier-free accessibility audits, helping to adapt and rebuild social spaces so they are accessible. In rural communities, the **Mobile Volunteer Group** runs the School of Civic Engagement for veterans and their families.

These initiatives are proving that veterans are not just beneficiaries. They are agents of change, who are shaping local policy, driving social enterprise, building community infrastructure, and holding institutions to account.



## BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS SECTORS

Wartime necessity pushed actors into collaboration: civil society, independent media, humanitarian groups, businesses and local authorities formed new partnerships. EED-supported organisations were often conveners or early participants in these networks.

### THEMATIC AREA: YOUTH

#### SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN: PROMOTING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING

“Public spaces can form strong social ties and promote democracy. They are crucial for promoting democratic values within communities,” says Lyubomyr Dmytryshyn, founder of Seven Storey Mountain, a youth initiative in Lutsk in northwest Ukraine, that is focused on urban planning and inclusive city building. Operating at the intersection of urban planning, civic engagement, and governance, Seven Storey Mountain is working to promote democratic participation in decision-making processes related to city development and supporting youth communities throughout the region.

From its establishment in 2020, Seven Storey Mountain attracted the attention of young people who wanted to make their city more inclusive, fight against illegal construction, protect cultural heritage and historic sites, and play their part in Lutsk’s development. EED provided the NGO with its first institutional support, enabling the team to launch a new space for young people, access legal aid to safeguard them against legal cases initiated by the local authorities, hold a series of lectures and events focused on urban planning, and expand their educational programme.

#### PRESERVING RIGHTS-BASED PRACTICE UNDER WAR CONDITIONS

LGBTQI+ organisations maintained their visibility and community support despite increased risks, offering safe spaces, legal aid and emergency assistance. Their continuation ensured that equality norms did not disappear from Ukraine’s civic landscape during the war.

## THEMATIC AREA: INCLUSIVE SOCIETY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND GENDER IDENTITY

### GENDER ZED: OUT LOUD

Gender Zed, based in Zaporizhzhia, began in 2008 as a grassroots initiative fostering visibility and support for LGBTQI+ people in the conservative south of the country. They organised discussion groups, trained teachers, talked to police officers, and in 2020 organised Zaporizhzhia's first Pride march. With the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the group pivoted from advocacy to crisis-response: converting their community centre into a bunker, providing lifesaving aid and shelter, and adapting quickly to wartime conditions. Today, thanks to EED funding, they are continuing to post short-form video content on YouTube reaching over

100,000 subscribers, and they train teachers and civil society actors in inclusive practices. They're quieter than before as the community they serve has changed, as some have joined the army, and others have fled. "We don't do public events anymore," says Oleksandr Vytvitskyi. "But we know they're there. Watching. Listening."



**“We don’t do public events anymore.  
But we know they’re there. Watching. Listening.”**

**- OLEKSANDR VYTVITSKYI**



## Why This Matters

Ukraine is fighting a defensive war while maintaining the social conditions on which a democratic future depends. The survival of independent media, watchdogs, civic organisations, youth initiatives and veteran groups under wartime stress is not simply resilience. It is the foundation of eventual recovery and revitalisation.

EED's role has been to ensure that when democracy's formal mechanisms restart, elections return, decentralisation resumes and civic freedoms fully

reopen, there will be something to revitalise. The infrastructure of democratic life is being preserved and renewed now, not delayed until post-conflict reconstruction.

For Europe, this is strategic: a Ukraine that maintains its pluralism during wartime is a Ukraine that can return to peacetime as a functioning democratic partner. Supporting that continuity today dramatically reduces the democratic costs of the war tomorrow.

### EED SCALED SUPPORT TO MEET WARTIME NEEDS:

**220 grants** provided to Ukrainian actors since February 2022.

**€15 million** in direct support.

at peak, **120 active grants** operating simultaneously across regions.

emergency approval cycles shortened to an average of **15 days**.

### SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE:

**€7 million** allocated specifically to organisational survival and infrastructure (core costs, salaries, relocation, power supply, safety).

**44 core funding grants** ensured continuity of operations for key media and civic organisations

**50 emergency grants** providing for a rapid response.

### YOUTH, VETERANS AND NEW CIVIC ACTORS EXPANDED DESPITE WAR:

dozens of **youth-focused grants** supported start-ups, digital mobilisation, and volunteer initiatives.

multiple **EED-supported veteran groups** created self-help networks, legal aid services, public communication platforms and reintegration initiatives that collectively **reached thousands of veterans and families**.

**dozens of organisations** monitored reconstruction, procurement, local authorities, humanitarian distribution, and rights violations.

**emergency assistance** enabled **LGBTQI+ groups** to support hundreds of at-risk individuals, sustain safe spaces, and expand legal aid.

civic organisations **across more than 15 oblasts** remained operational despite displacement and preserved regional pluralism.





## THEMATIC AREA: ARTS AND CULTURE

### NAFTA THEATRE: MAKING ART AMID WAR

Nafta Theatre in Kharkiv, Ukraine, continues to rehearse and stage performances just 30 kilometres from the border with Russia. Founded in 2018, the theatre troupe offers socially engaged performances and recently incorporated accessible features like sign-language interpretation. Performances are held at a cultural centre of Nafta's partner, Some People, also an EED partner, and one of the few public venues equipped with shelter facilities. EED's funding allowed Nafta to focus on strategic development: training, planning, and enhancing their organisational culture. Nafta draws strong local audiences at home, who are hungry for culture and community. Nafta's show 'Someone Like Me', a performative-physical solo show about life during war was presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and toured across Europe.

**Nafta Theatre in Kharkiv, Ukraine, continues to rehearse and stage performances just 30 kilometres from the border with Russia.**





© Oleksandr Osipov



Anonymous

# GEORGIA: CIVIL SOCIETY'S FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

Throughout 2025, Georgia experienced sustained nationwide protests in response to political developments following the October 2024 elections, and the government's subsequent departure from EU integration commitments.

Initially concentrated in Tbilisi, demonstrations expanded to other regions, including Batumi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, and Telavi, with regional activism a sign that protest dynamics extended well beyond the capital. Parallel to street mobilisation, civil society and journalists launched sustained campaigns targeting the public broadcaster, accusing it of providing unbalanced coverage and of reinforcing official narratives.

## ESCALATING REPRESSION

The ruling party intensified its crackdown on independent voices through an aggressive legislative agenda. The adoption of a raft of repressive legislation, including the Foreign Agents Law, the Law on Grants, and the Law on Political Union of Citizens, and amendments to the law on broadcasting financing have effectively prohibited independent civil society organisations from receiving foreign donor support. This has put a critical constraint on their operations.

Pressure hit a critical point in late August when the Prosecutor's Office froze the bank accounts of seven major civil society organisations as part of investigations into alleged sabotage by aiding hostile activities. This was followed by a broader campaign in which the Anti-Corruption Bureau sent formal letters to over 80 NGOs and media outlets demanding extensive information under the Law on Grants.

These measures have forced independent civil society into a reactive position, compelling organisations to dedicate most of their time and resources to legal compliance as they adapt to survive.

## POLITICAL OPPOSITION AND UNREST

The ruling party has pursued aggressive action against opposition figures. Numerous opposition leaders have been imprisoned or placed under investigation for refusing to cooperate with a parliamentary investigative commission on the activities of the Union of National Movement (UNM) during the period from 2003 to 2012. Sentences have been imposed on prominent figures who defied summonses, and many have been banned from holding public office for extended periods.

Efforts by President Salomé Zourabichvili to unite the fragmented opposition failed to produce tangible results. The imprisonment of key political leaders and widespread fatigue with the existing parties have left protests largely leaderless and self-organised—an unusual development in Georgia's post-independence political history.

However, early signs of renewal are emerging, with new movements and parties attempting to introduce issue-based politics, including social justice issues.

## ROLE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Within this repressive context, independent media plays a crucial role in providing accurate reporting and counteracting disinformation. Some outlets noted a steep increase in their audiences over the year – sometimes by more than 50 percent – reflecting public demand for reliable information sources.

Independent media has documented daily protests, monitored violations of peaceful protesters' rights, and produced high quality and innovative investigations into corruption.

The independent media community has demonstrated solidarity with imprisoned journalist, Mzia Amaglobeli, founder of *Batumelebi* and a Sakharov laureate. A coordinated media blackout by Georgian media outlets, and the crowdfunding campaign "The Light Must Not Go Out" raised awareness of the critical importance of independent media.

**CIVIL SOCIETY ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE**

The situation has forced large NGOs to cease operations, prompting activists to reorganise into smaller decentralised networks focused on regional engagement and targeted campaigns. These include sustained campaigns against the public broadcaster and demonstrations in mining regions in Chiatura, as well as coordinated actions by artistic and cultural communities. Education reforms that carry a high risk of limiting if not fully abolishing academic independence have also sparked civic and political groups to mobilise around this issue through protest and other means.

Legal aid groups provide pro-bono support to many of those whose rights were violated during peaceful protests and who face substantial fines. These organisations are pursuing strategic litigation to challenge repressive legislation – including the Foreign Agent law – and are bringing cases of torture to international attention.

New civic initiatives are also emerging that aim to establish foundations for sustained civic resistance and longer-term opposition to authoritarian trends.



# A YEAR OF PROTESTS IN SERBIA

## How student-led protests revived Serbia's democratic conscience.

For nearly a year, Serbia has experienced its most sustained wave of civic mobilisation since the early 2000s. Sparked by tragedy and driven by a new generation, the student-led protests began shortly after 1 November 2024, when the canopy of a newly reconstructed railway station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 16 people, the youngest a five-year-old child, the oldest a 77-year-old pensioner.

The collapse revealed what everyone had long suspected: that in a country where shortcuts are rewarded and oversight is by-passed, corruption will eventually claim lives. As one EED partner observed, “They weren’t victims of gravity, they were victims of our political system.”

An independent inquiry revealed systemic failure. During the implementation of a transport infrastructure modernisation project, part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, top government officials were implicated. The government systematically lowered construction standards and exempted key contracts from public procurement regulation. Cost overruns ballooned from €330 million to over €1 billion—with an estimated €700 million lost to corruption.

The tragedy shook the country and brought about an eruption of moral outrage led by young people who refused to accept impunity as the national standard.

### A GENERATION DEMANDS ACCOUNTABILITY

Students were the first to mobilise, marching from universities, dormitories, and high schools to demand accountability and transparent investigation. Within weeks, more than 10,000 demonstrations took place in 620 communities across Serbia. The tragedy shocked the country, sparking the mass demonstrations.

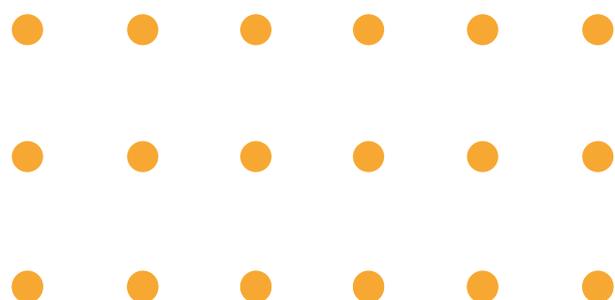
“The rebellion is led by young people,” one EED partner noted. “They brought an energy Serbia hasn’t seen before. No political party could have sustained this for so long, only a generation tired of fear.”

### BREAKING OLD DIVIDES

One of the most unexpected outcomes of the protest movement has been the transformation of social relations within Serbia. Regions carrying scars from past conflicts, like Sandžak, home to many Bosniak and members of the Muslim community who had long been marginalised and mistrusted, became involved. The protests began dismantling these narratives that were deepening inter-ethnic tensions.

“For the first time, students from Novi Pazar, the cultural centre of the Sandžak region, were welcomed not as outsiders, but as part of Serbia,” explained an EED partner from the region. “Those prejudices of being ‘extremists’ or ‘unpatriotic’ fell apart during the marches.”

Interfaith solidarity also emerged. Muslim students fasting for Ramadan were supported by peers throughout the country. Orthodox students travelling through Sandžak were warmly welcomed. Even deliberate attempts to provoke ethnic tensions by pro-governmental media and actors, a traditional pillar of President Aleksandar Vučić’s crisis management, failed. Students responded with calm dialogue and a firm rejection of division, refusing to inherit the fear-based politics that had shaped Serbian public life for a generation.



**“If EED support ends, we will shut down in a month”**

**MEDIA ACTOR**

### REPRESSION WITHOUT RESTRAINT

As protests grew, so did government efforts to crush them. EED partners describe a level of intimidation exceeding anything seen in Serbia’s recent democratic era. According to Reporters Without Borders, media professionals reported at least 89 physical attacks from November 2024 to October 2025, 82 in 2025 alone, the highest annual figure documented since 2008.<sup>13</sup> Roughly half were perpetrated by law enforcement officers who, in many cases, allowed or enabled pro-government actors to assault journalists.

“There is no safety for journalists anymore,” one media partner reported. “Police have become political instruments.”

Amnesty International documented a growing pattern of digital repression and surveillance, including invasive spyware and digital forensic tools used by Serbian police and intelligence agencies against journalists, activists, and civil society actors. These are often installed on phones during detention without meaningful oversight or remedy.<sup>14</sup>

EED partners interpret these events as a coordinated crackdown. President Vučić openly boasted about using a “non-institutional response”, which partners understood to mean criminal networks. The repression is multi-layered: overt police force, covert digital surveillance, economic suffocation of independent outlets, and legal harassment of journalist and activists. The result is a climate of fear where many investigative journalists have either left the field or operate under self-censorship.

“If EED support ends, we will shut down in a month,” one media actor stated bluntly. “That is how close we are to the edge.”

### EU INTEGRATION: THE RHETORIC AND THE REALITY

For years, EED partners described a widening gap between Serbia’s declared EU commitment and reality on the ground. What was once framed as reform had become “a diplomatic monologue: Europe asks for alignment while Serbia performs compliance without delivering substance.”

In 2025, this began to change. The European Commission’s annual progress report stated that Serbia made “no progress in the judiciary, anti-corruption reforms, or media freedom” and highlighted “serious concerns regarding excessive use of force by law enforcement during public assemblies.” The report emphasised that media pluralism is deteriorating and the institutional environment remains deeply captured.

The turning point came with the European Parliament’s resolution in October 2025, which described Serbia as “a state where democratic backsliding has reached a critical stage.” The Parliament expressed “deep concern at the growing pattern of police violence, arbitrary detentions, digital surveillance of journalists and activists, and the use of criminal networks for political intimidation.” It warned that failure to restore rule-of-law guarantees could trigger suspension of EU funds under the accession conditionality mechanism.

One passage resonated particularly with EED partners: “Stability cannot be purchased at the expense of democracy. Serbia’s trajectory is incompatible with its obligations as a candidate country.”

Partners also noted changes during recent high-level EU visits to Belgrade. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen’s latest visit was conducted, in their words, “in a noticeably different register.” One partner described the atmosphere: “It was no longer about box-ticking or keeping things quiet. The message was that reforms can no longer be performative.”

“For a decade, the EU tolerated the erosion of institutions,” one partner observed. “Now it finally acknowledges that Serbia cannot join the Union by hollowing out the values that make the Union possible.”

Another emphasised the psychological importance of these developments. “People felt seen for the first time. For years, pro-European citizens believed the EU had abandoned them. Now at least Europe is speaking honestly.” Commissioner Marta Kos’ contribution and commitment was highly appreciated by partners, as was the decision of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to shift some funding from institutional support to civil society, due to the lack of reforms in the field of rule of law.

13 RSF (2025) “Protests in Serbia: at least 89 attacks on journalists recorded by RSF in one year,” Reporters Without Borders website, 29 October 2025, available at <https://rsf.org/en/protests-serbia-least-89-attacks-journalists-recorded-rsf-one-year>

14 Amnesty International (2024) “Serbia: ‘A Digital Prison’: Surveillance and the suppression of civil society in Serbia,” 16 December 2024, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR70/8813/2024/en/>

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Despite the repression, Serbia's student protests have already reshaped public expectations and revived a culture of civic responsibility. However, without determined international engagement, this momentum could fade. EED partners and civil society actors conveyed the following priorities to the EU and Member States:

- **Embed and closely monitor rule-of-law conditionality in all engagement.** Serbia's accession process must be directly tied to transparent investigations into the Novi Sad tragedy, judicial independence, and accountability for subsequent abuses. Diplomatic dialogue and financial assistance should reflect these standards consistently.
- **Ensure conditions for free and fair elections.** Equal media access, independent oversight, long-term monitoring, and strict prevention of misuse of public resources are essential. President Vučić's outright refusal to hold early elections—despite the movement's demands—underscores the need for more direct international engagement.
- **Provide flexible, sustained support to independent media and civil society.** Many trusted outlets face imminent closure without rapid, simplified EU funding streams. The survival of independent journalism and civic organisations is critical to maintaining democratic accountability.
- **Prioritise the safety of journalists, students, and activists (legal, digital and physical).** Regular monitoring missions, public pressure on authorities, and tangible consequences for attacks are needed to deter further repression and demonstrate that the EU stands with those defending democracy.
- **Counter systemic disinformation and propaganda.** Long-term support to empower communities susceptible to manipulation and to challenge the state-controlled narrative dominating Serbian media.
- **Clearly communicate that stability without democracy is unacceptable.** EU credibility in Serbia depends on ending the practice of rewarding governments that erode democratic standards. The strategic choice is clear: either support the values the European Union was founded on or watch them erode on its doorstep.





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# EED RESPONSE TO US FUNDING CRISIS

**In January 2025, the US government issued a stop work order on foreign assistance and began the review of USAID that eventually led to its dismantling.**

The National Endowment of Democracy (NED) was also unable to access congressionally appropriated funds from late January to early March. The immediate impact of this funding freeze and then the withdrawal of most US foreign funding had a devastating effect on civil society organisations across the EU Neighbourhood region.

EED saw a substantial increase in applications for support and in the number of applications approved, mainly due to US funding cuts and reductions in other donor funding. In 2025, EED received nearly double the number of applications for support compared with 2024. The EED Executive Committee approved 579 initiatives, compared with 357 during the whole of 2024, with some additional funds and smaller grants provided in many instances.

## **LAUNCH OF EED EMERGENCY FUNDING MECHANISM**

Immediately following the announcement of a US funding freeze in January 2025, the EED Executive Committee approved an Emergency Funding Mechanism to enable EED to provide limited emergency funding to reduce the immediate impact on civil society and independent media partners.

This funding mechanism was launched in the context of thousands of democracy actors, including many independent media outlets, human rights organisations, and civic actors at risk of suspending operations, laying off staff, and abandoning critical programmes. Organisations that had relied heavily on US support struggled to cover basic operational costs, while some ceased activities

entirely. At the same time organisations faced other pressures as this decision by the US to drastically reduce foreign aid funding was used as a pretext to attack and discredit civil society and to advance restrictive laws in contexts such as Serbia and Georgia.

Initially, EED's support was envisaged as ensuring the short-term survival of former and current EED partners. The focus was on covering the basic costs essential to maintaining their existence, such as rent and utilities, essential services, key technical and support staff, and their physical and digital security. Partners submitted applications via EED's ongoing application system as needs were identified.

However, given the challenging situation faced by pro-democracy actors in many countries of EED's mandate, EED also accepted emergency requests for funding from larger and more established organisations who would not be usual recipients of EED funding. This included providing funding to partners funded by NED, who were subjected to a temporary pause in their funding until the reinstatement of NED support mid-year. As it became clear that the suspension represented a permanent withdrawal of US administration support rather than a temporary freeze, EED stepped up its response, increasing support to current partners, resuming funding to former partners, and beginning to fund new critical actors.

The following provides a review of EED's response across the regions where it works.

## RESPONSE IN EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

In **Belarus**, pro-democracy organisations faced significant budget shortfalls with many on the brink of closure. Media organisations lost significant portions of their budgets. EED saw a 51 percent increase in applications compared to 2024. EED responded by providing emergency core support to new actors and increasing its support to current partners. Overall, EED increased its support to Belarusian actors by 21 percent with a focus on preventing the collapse of key Belarusian pro-democracy actors.

In **Georgia**, the announcement of the suspension of US support to civil society and independent media took place at a particularly vulnerable time, as new legislation was being implemented to severely restrict civil society operations and freedoms of association to further enable the regime's repression of the democracy sector. Taking advantage of the situation, the ruling party welcomed the US administration's decision to suspend foreign funding, stating that the move was an admission that these funds were used "to cause unrest in various countries, to organise revolutions, to destabilise countries." EED coordinated closely with NED after the announcement of the pausing of its support to provide continuous support to its most vulnerable grantees. In collaboration with major contributors to Georgian independent civil society, EED pioneered the organisation of a donor coordination meeting to convene on a regular basis to provide updates on the country's operational environment, coordinate support, exchange best practices, and address the challenges created by the deterioration of the environment.

In **Moldova**, the suspension of US funding came during the critical pre-election period. EED offered budget reallocations to all affected partners within one week of the suspension announcement, enabling them to cover core staff and activities and to continue operations as smoothly as possible while they regrouped and restructured. EED also provided emergency short-term lifeline support to nine key actors who had lost significant US support, some disbursed within a few weeks of the funding crisis. EED scaled up its overall support to Moldovan actors, increasing it three-fold compared to 2024.

In **Ukraine**, EED received almost double the number of applications in the first half of 2025 compared with the same period the previous year. EED reacted swiftly providing 32 emergency grants, supported by EU funds for a total of around €2 million. A key focus of EED's emergency support was independent media, particularly regional and community-based media, which represented 75 percent of applications received in the initial weeks. Other notable sectors affected included anti-corruption, human rights, gender and culture, with EED funding some well established actors to provide breathing space as they reviewed their operational structures and made fundraising efforts.

## RESPONSE IN WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

In **Serbia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, all sectors were badly hit by the suspension of US funding, principally media, anti-corruption, community engagement, and human rights organisations, as well as social services and peacebuilding education projects. Many big organisations lost 60 to 90 percent of their funding, while small media depending on sub-granting schemes were on the brink of closure. In both countries, EED engaged in donor coordination and managed to enable actors to sustain their operations thanks to the support from the European Union Delegations, Norway (for the media sector), as well as Denmark and Germany. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, EED is now one of the main donors in the country, especially for the media sector.

In **Serbia**, the government of President Vučić was fast to react to the suspension of funding by amplifying false assertions from the US administration's narrative accusing organisations of corruption and waste and launching investigations into several prominent civil society organisations, which were accompanied by a campaign of intimidation, pressure, and legal threats.

The impact of the US freezing its international aid in **Kosovo** was significant with US funds estimated at \$40 million. The largest impact was on independent media, as the US was the only donor supporting fact-checking and analytical media, and minority media outlets, particularly those serving the Kosovo Serb community. Nearly 65 percent of EED awarded initiatives in Kosovo in 2025 provided support to pro-democracy actors to sustain their operations after the US funding cuts. Most were media, and five were Serb-minority media.

In **North Macedonia**, EED's limited funding was directed only to media actors directly affected by the US funding cuts to help sustain their operations.

In **Albania**, EED supported only a limited numbers of actors affected by the US funding cut. Albania was less impacted than other countries in the region, however, the phase-out by other donors has placed civic and media actors in the country in an increasingly vulnerable situation, further increasing the relevance of EED support.

In **Turkey**, US funding was not as substantial as in other regions, although it supported key actors in the human rights field. EED was able to quickly step in to ensure the continuation of essential work in the field of freedom of expression and journalists' rights. For pro-democracy actors, European donors' shifting funding priorities had a larger impact on the community of practice and the significant reduction of support to civil society actors contributed to an atmosphere of great worry and scarcity, further increasing EED's significance as a key donor.

## RESPONSE IN SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

In **Syria**, the timing could not have been more challenging as the US announced its funding freeze several weeks after the collapse of the Assad regime. EED immediately expanded its Emergency Funding Mechanism that had already been launched to fill critical gaps at a time when civic work was vital to the transition process. This enabled partners to seize the opportunity and capitalise on the transitional moment to steer and shape a pluralistic, inclusive, and democratic Syrian society.

US foreign aid to **Iraq** was immense, given its history, and had evolved over the years, shifting from military assistance to economic, humanitarian, and governance support. Lack of support to civil society actors and independent media puts these actors in danger, jeopardising two decades of work navigating Iraq's civic space after Saddam Hussein's regime and the US-led invasion. This was particularly crucial in the pre-election period prior to the November parliamentary elections. EED supported two media outlets, including one that had lost all its funding.

In **Tunisia**, EED responded rapidly to the US funding freeze, which severely impacted several organisations, including those supporting particularly vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities. EED provided emergency grants that enabled them to preserve their teams and re-strategise despite the abrupt funding gap and a volatile operating environment.

## RESPONSE IN OTHER REGIONS

In **Sudan**, the US administration's withdrawal of funding had catastrophic effects amidst the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis. EED's role as a complementary donor changed given the large and sudden gaps. EED is now providing essential support to organisations monitoring human rights violations and creating hubs and capacity building for displaced civil society actors, independent media reporting from dire and remote conflict areas, and local social cohesion among rising hate speech and polarisation.

# EU SAFETY NET

## SAFETY NET FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

The EU Safety Net initiative is a crisis response mechanism designed to support independent journalism in Eurasia following the US withdrawal of foreign assistance. A combination of US foreign aid withdrawal, declining international assistance levels, and increasing authoritarianism in several countries across the region has created a crisis for independent media. Independent media outlets are facing severe funding gaps, forcing many to lay off staff, scale back operations, or close entirely.

In March, the US administration terminated grants to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), placing the organisation's operations at risk. This funding collapse occurred at a critical geopolitical moment, marked by ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, democratic backsliding, and the growing influence of malign foreign actors.

The EU stepped in by committing €5.5 million "to support the vital work of Radio Free Europe". This is intended as "short-term emergency funding designed as a safety net for independent journalism". Sweden and the Netherlands subsequently pledged an additional SEK 20 million (Swedish krona) and €3 million respectively to the initiative. While RFE/RL eventually succeeded in obtaining a reversal of funding termination in 2025, the broader impact of the US funding crisis still inflicted lasting damage and heightened uncertainty for RFE/RL. Even though operations can continue under the current continuing resolution, the organisation's longer-term funding outlook remains unclear.

The EU Safety Net was conceived as a short-term emergency intervention providing immediate financial assistance to at-risk journalists and supporting infrastructures that enables their work while simultaneously developing longer-term, sustainable solutions. As a coordinated EU and Member State response, it is implemented by EED.

A priority for the Safety Net initiative are journalists and essential support staff in regions where independent journalism is either severely restricted or under increasing pressure, as well as where EU foreign policy priorities lie.

## ADVISORY EXPERT HUB

As part of the Safety Net initiative, an Advisory Expert Hub comprised of high-level media experts has been established. To date, it has met on six occasions in meetings convened by EED, together with representatives of EU institutions. It is tasked with assessing the implications of the US funding crisis, and proposing optimal solutions and scenarios for the medium to long-term, particularly in the context of the uncertain financial future of RFE/RL.

A central focus of the Advisory Expert Hub's discussions is to identify strategic priorities, which include focusing on RFE/RL's core journalistic mission in key regions, prioritising humanitarian relief for displaced journalists, and supporting the broader independent media eco-system. It is clear EU funding alone will not make up for the damage inflicted by the US funding withdrawal on RFE/RL and other independent media in the region. For this reason, several solution scenarios are being evaluated. As an example, the group has discussed collaborative arrangements with European broadcasters and the preservation of anti-censorship technologies currently funded by the US.

To better inform members of the Advisory Expert Hub about RFE/RL's added value in the region, several analytical studies were commissioned, including a media ecosystem mapping study and a technological review. The technological review looks at RFE/RL's internal technology and external dependencies that affect how content is produced and shared, especially in restrictive conditions. The media ecosystem mapping examines RFE/RL's role and influence across Eurasia using quantitative data, content analysis, and expert interviews. It includes a focused assessment of 15 countries identified as facing heightened risks to press freedom and an evaluation of the potential impact of reduced US funding.

The media mapping confirms that the loss of RFE/RL in any country or region would inevitably harm the information space, with significant risks for media pluralism, the broader information environment, and democratic resilience. At the same time, the study shows that the severity of this impact would vary significantly across markets. In several countries,



the absence of RFE/RL would create far greater damage than in others, particularly where alternative independent media are scarce. The mapping also highlights that RFE/RL often acts as a blueprint and standard setter for other independent outlets in the region, helping shape journalistic norms and editorial integrity. One of the organisation's strongest assets identified in the research is its human capital, the established highly skilled teams that would be extremely difficult to rebuild if lost.

The study also recognises that in some areas local or European-funded independent media could continue fulfilling key democratic and informational roles even if RFE/RL were required to scale down its operations due to budget constraints. It also lists a number of challenges, including lagging behind digital trends, losing younger audiences to digital-native alternatives, and institutional disparities across services and countries. Operating costs in RFE/RL are high due to legacy broadcast structures, expatriate packages, and specialist staff, and reliance on external tools for circumventing censorship may be threatened by funding cuts. Tailored, context-specific strategies are needed to address these institutional and operational challenges.

# RESULTS AND LEARNING

**In 2025, EED implemented comprehensive monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) activities to capture and assess the relevance and results of the democracy support provided to its partners and to foster sharing knowledge and lessons learned with internal and external stakeholders.**

## **MEL MISSIONS AND REPORTS**

In line with EED's Statutes, an external evaluation of EED was conducted in 2025. EED's Statutes require an external evaluation at least every five years.

The external evaluation explored the following key questions:

- What have been the most important results achieved with EED's support? What has been the biggest impact of EED's work? Does EED's risk-taking approach pay off?
- To what extent has EED been able to effectively adapt and respond to the changing circumstances (e.g. democratic backsliding, violent conflict/war) and changing needs for support in the countries of its operations?
- To what extent are EED's support modalities fit for purpose considering the significant changes in the context in which it operates (e.g. increasing security risks in highly repressive environments)?
- To what extent has EED been able to complement other donor support and avoid duplication?
- To what extent has EED been able to safeguard the security of its grantees?

The final report will be approved by Board of Governors in June 2026.

In addition to facilitating the external evaluation, EED also conducted an internal evaluation in Turkey. This evaluation explores the extent to which EED's support has contributed to the protection and promotion of Kurdish citizens' rights and civic participation. The report is expected to be finalised at the beginning of 2026. The MEL team also supported the preparation of the impact briefs included in this Annual Report.

## **BUILDING MEL CAPACITY AND TOOLS**

EED continued building staff and country consultants' MEL capacity through MEL training and on-the-job assistance. Several MEL workshops and sessions were held during the year to facilitate learning and experience sharing.

Work also started to explore, build, and pilot different AI tools in 2025 to facilitate the monitoring, analysis, and reporting on results.

## **COOPERATING TO STRENGTHEN EVIDENCE-BASED REPORTING ON THE IMPACT OF DEMOCRACY SUPPORT**

EED was in close contact with NED and its core institutes to foster knowledge sharing and work on an initiative to foster evidence-based reporting on the impact of democracy support as part of the wider EED-NED Transatlantic Democracy Support Dialogue initiative

# HUMAN RESOURCES AND BUDGET

EED's 73 staff members have lived and worked extensively in the countries where EED operates. Staff members are nationals of 38 countries, including Albania, Armenia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Egypt, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

In 2025, EED's traineeship programme offered 16 trainees the opportunity to gain valuable experience in democracy support. Trainees worked with the operations, finance, IT, communications, administration, and programme teams for one-year periods.

Many former trainees have continued their careers in the field of democracy support, securing roles in organisations such as the European Institute for Peace, European Partnership for Democracy, Open Society Foundations, Prague Civil Society Centre, Democracy Reporting International, Médecins du Monde, International Center for Migration Policy Development, European Peace Building Liaison Office, European Youth Forum, EaP Civil Society Forum, European Parliament, and the European Commission. Others have pursued further studies with scholarships at the College of Europe in Bruges and Natolin.

To date, 27 European countries represented on the Board of Governors have contributed to EED's programme budget.

EED's operating budget is covered by a grant from the European Commission. In 2025, EED managed a budget of approximately €60 million.



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# FUNDING PARTNERS

To date, 27 European countries that are members of the Board of Governors and the European Commission have contributed to EED's budget.



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Canada<sup>ca</sup> also contributes through a special grant for Ukraine.



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