Civic Participation
Accountability Judicial independence
International cooperation
Electoral processes Human trafficking
Crisis management Anti-corruption
Democratic values Digital
Inclusive education Democratic literacy
Governance institutions
Legal aid Transparency Civil
Cybersecurity society
Democracy
support Youth
Refugee leadership
protection Legal reforms
Skill development
Human rights Access to
protection justice
Youth empowerment
Economic
Good governance
Peacebuilding
Political rights
Civil Accountability
liberties Public safety
Migration

Security
Freedom
Democracy

**Annual Report
2024**

EUROPEAN
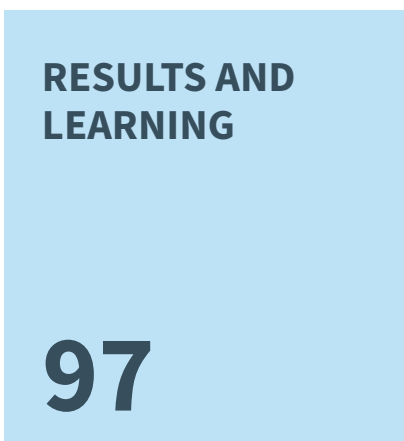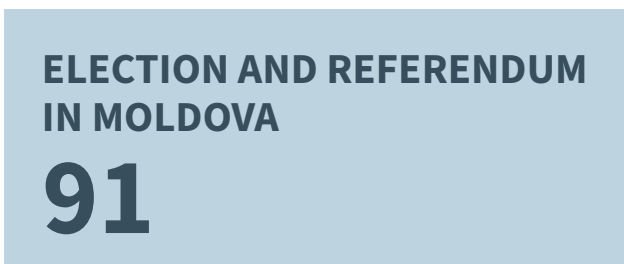ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

EED

Annual Report
2024

EUROPEAN
ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

BY DAVID MCALLISTER MEP
CHAIR OF EED BOARD OF GOVERNORS

The year 2024 has been a particularly turbulent one for the European Neighbourhood, marked by conflicts and significant sociopolitical and geopolitical developments. These challenges have tested our continent's democratic principles, economic growth and regional security.

The Georgian government's decision to pause EU accession negotiations and suspend relations with the EU is deeply concerning, especially following national elections that were marred by irregularities. However, the ongoing mass protests across the country, with citizens from all walks of life taking to the streets to defend their democratic and European future, are a sign of hope. I strongly condemn the excessive violence by police and groups affiliated with the ruling party against civil society, journalists, including several of EED's partners, as well as the politically motivated arrests. The Georgian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release all individuals detained for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

EED remains at the forefront of European efforts to support Belarusian civil society and independent media inside the country and in exile. The Lukashenka regime has continued its campaign of relentless repression throughout this year, violating human rights and suppressing all democratic freedoms. Building a free, democratic Belarus as part of a peaceful Europe remains crucial, given the regime's complicity in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Belarusian democratic forces, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, continue to work tirelessly to defend the rights of their people and to bring about a peaceful and democratic transition in the country.

In Ukraine, a strong civil society and independent media are critical to the country's successful European integration. I commend the remarkable efforts of EED's partners across Ukraine this year. The EU remains steadfast in its solidarity with Ukraine. On the first day of their mandates, HR/VP Kaja Kallas, the President of the European Council Antonio Costa, and Commissioner Marta Kos visited Ukraine, to reaffirm our commitment to supporting Ukraine during these challenging times.

There were some positive developments in the Eastern Neighbourhood this year, including the re-election of pro-European President Maia Sandu and the approval of a referendum on EU enlargement. These achievements occurred despite significant Kremlin-sponsored disinformation campaigns. The Moldovan people have reiterated their commitment to democracy, self-determination, and a European future. President Sandu has demonstrated her ability to manage crises effectively, and the EU will continue to work closely with the Moldovan government to support democratic reforms and the country's strategic alignment with the European Union.

In the Western Balkans, the renewed momentum for EU enlargement presents a significant opportunity. Enlargement is now more critical than ever, as all European countries must uphold democratic values and the rule of law. While some like Montenegro are making steady progress, others are falling behind. Serbia remains a strategic partner for the EU. But its government must intensify its efforts to align with EU values, particularly concerning the rule of law, democracy, and human rights.

The Middle East and North Africa region remained a major concern throughout 2024, although the year ended with some positive developments. The initial phase of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas is being implemented in Gaza. Although it may take many years, I am hopeful that a peaceful solution may be found for Israelis and Palestinians that is based on respect for international law, human rights, and security of individuals. The Two-State-Solution between Israel and the Palestinian Territories, on the basis of the 1967 borders and with Jerusalem as the shared capital, remains the way to bring lasting peace to the region, and enable the people to live in peace and security.

In November, hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah were suspended after 13 months of conflict. At this crucial juncture in Lebanon's history, and with the appointment of a new president, the Lebanese authorities need to prioritise governance, anti-corruption measures and judicial reform. EED's partners can play a key role in advocating for and helping build a new, inclusive Lebanon that unites societal and religious groups, as well as local communities in a national movement for change.

© Media April

The collapse of the Al-Assad regime in December marks a turning point for Syria, the Middle East, and broader geopolitical dynamics. The regime was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens. The new leadership now faces the monumental task of establishing peace through an inclusive process that respects the voices of all religious and ethnic communities. Civil society will play a pivotal role in this transition, needing to adapt swiftly to the new political, military, and security realities in what remains a highly complex environment.

Since its inception in 2013, EED has consistently demonstrated its value by offering flexible support to democracy actors across the Neighbourhood. Thousands of individuals and organisations have received support to drive democratic change, combat corruption and authoritarianism, foster political participation, promote freedom of expression and advocate for human rights and democratic reforms.

The decision by the US administration in January 2025 to suspend foreign aid funding deals a severe blow to democracy support programmes globally and across the European Neighbourhood. In this uncertain environment, with many civil society and independent media actors experiencing drastic funding cuts, EED's mission is more vital than ever. Its flexible democracy support mechanism uniquely positions it to respond quickly to urgent needs by providing emergency funding to bridge financial gaps.

As we face a challenging year for democracy in 2025, the European Parliament remains unwavering in its support for EED. As Chair of the Board of Governors since 2019, I am honoured to continue advocating for its critical work during these turbulent times.

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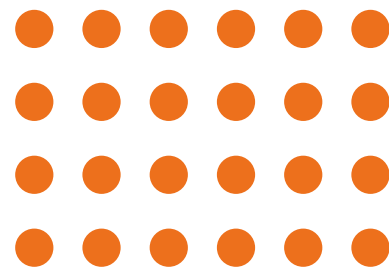
INTRODUCTION

BY JERZY POMIANOWSKI
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

Welcome to the European Endowment for Democracy's 2024 Annual Report.

In 2024, EED received over 1,395 applications for support, 357 of which were funded for a total of €39 million.

2024 was a tumultuous year within the European Neighbourhood, with the full-scale war in Ukraine into its third year, war in Gaza, Lebanon and Sudan. Democratic norms eroded in many contexts and societies in the region became increasingly polarised, fueled by toxic narratives and social media algorithms. While these trends are concerning, the massive public demonstrations in Georgia and Serbia offer a counterpoint to this grim outlook. Citizens around the European Neighbourhood remain passionate defenders of democracy and the rule of law; they want their voices to be heard, and they want to play a role in their countries' democratic futures. However, they need our support.

Georgia is a case in point. Civil society organisations in Georgia sounded the alarm bells well in advance about the Georgian Dream's government lack of real commitment to EU values and to the EU integration process and the worrying decline in democratic standards. Unfortunately, their warnings went unheeded. 2024 serves as a stark reminder of the flaws in our early warning systems. We need to do better. The international community should have prioritised more proactive political pressure and stronger support to civil society when these concerns were first raised. That way, we would not be in a situation today where genuinely democratic elections are no longer possible.

Similarly in **Belarus,** it is vital that the international community continues to support the democratic forces and civil society that have shown unprecedented levels of self-organisation and unity. The democratic opposition has taken the lead in establishing proto-government structures and engaging in policy debate on key areas, such as education, culture, economy, judiciary, defence and independent media.

IDD Brussels © Bruno Maes

Independent media, most of them operating abroad, are reaching millions of Belarusians inside the country. When the opportunity comes - as it will eventually – they are the people who can lead Belarus toward a democratic future. The evidence of Syria, where a dictatorship of five decades crumbled in just a week serves as a stark reminder that dictators can fall unexpectedly and swiftly. It is misguided for policy makers to adopt a "Belarus fatigue" mentality today, as we witness the regime further tightening its hold on power through mass repression and terror, particularly during this recent election period.

In **Syria,** EED's partners are leading the way in rebuilding state institutions and local governance. Syrians have gained valuable experience managing communities that lived outside of regime control. Local councils have provided for relative stability in these areas. Syrian civil society understands that this will be a fragile and complex process. Let me share the comments of one of EED's partners: *"We don't know how long this moment of openness will last, but whatever we can contribute to our society now is extremely important if another moment of closure comes."* Syrians need our support right now.

In the latter half of 2024, events in **Serbia,** particularly following the fatal collapse of a railway building balcony in Novi Sad, ignited widespread protests from society and students. Protesters have reached breaking point, refusing to tolerate the pervasive corruption, the disregard for environmental standards, state capture, the physical attacks on civil society activists and independent journalists, and the connections between organised crime and government officials. President Vucic must listen to these voices, and we in Brussels and across Europe's capitals must listen to them too. They deserve our recognition and support.

In November, I was privileged to visit **Kyiv** to take part in an event co-organised by the Agency for Recovery and Development, marking Ukraine's Day of Dignity and Freedom and 1,000 days of full-scale war. The event brought together more than 35 of EED's partner organisations from throughout the country. These partners are relentlessly advocating for long-term democratic reforms. There is a growing sense of political activism, although the political process remains in its infancy. EED's partners know that the democratic resilience of post-war Ukraine is vital for the country's independence and its long-term security.

This year saw several journalists and activists from EED's partner organizations killed in **Gaza** in 2024. The horrific terrorist attack by Hamas on 7 of October 2023 cannot justify the scale of atrocities and suffering experienced by Palestinian society during the Israeli military offensive.

While 2024 was tumultuous, the decision of the US administration to suspend foreign aid funding at the beginning of 2025 is nothing short of catastrophic. The democracy support community is now facing an unprecedented challenge. Today, it is more important than ever to remember the close interconnection between democracy and security, and the challenges of tackling issues such as migration, economic growth, health and education with accountable democratic governments and an engaged active civil society. At this critical time for global democracy, I am proud to lead EED's important work supporting our partners throughout the European Neighbourhood. Today, more than ever, I believe it is our responsibility as Europeans to stand in solidarity with these brave individuals as they advance and shape the democratic futures of their countries.

Jerzy Pomianowski
Executive Director
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 Norway, Iceland, 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 2,800 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, and 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 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.

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.

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 specialises 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 (EED) in the European Neighbourhood and beyond in 2024. It tells 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

2024, dubbed the "super year of elections", saw a surge in military conflicts, including within the EU Neighbourhood. In November, Ukraine marked 1,000 days of full-scale war. The war in Gaza continued into a second year, and in Lebanon, the Hezbollah-Israel war reignited until a cease-fire in late November. A devastating civil war continued to rage in Sudan.

In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in highly contested elections, and announced a pause in the start of EU accession negotiations, leading to mass protests.

In October, President Maia Sandu was re-elected by a narrow margin as the president of Moldova and the country reaffirmed its European path in a referendum on EU membership. 2024 ended on an optimistic note with the fall of Bashar El Assad at the beginning of December, putting an end to decades of dictatorship, repression and the most serious human rights violations.

AREAS OF SUPPORT

Initiatives supported by EED can be broadly categorised into eight thematic areas: anti-corruption and public accountability; independent and social media platforms; civic activism and participation; human rights activism and monitoring; women's civic and political participation; inclusive society, sexual orientation and gender identity; arts and culture; youth.

This report is structured around these thematic areas, with information included on a selection of initiatives supported by EED in each area.

The report also includes profiles of EED alumni, organisations that received EED funding in the past and have since become well-established and successful organisations. Included too are anonymous profiles of partners, who operate in particularly restrictive environments, with their names changed to protect their identities.
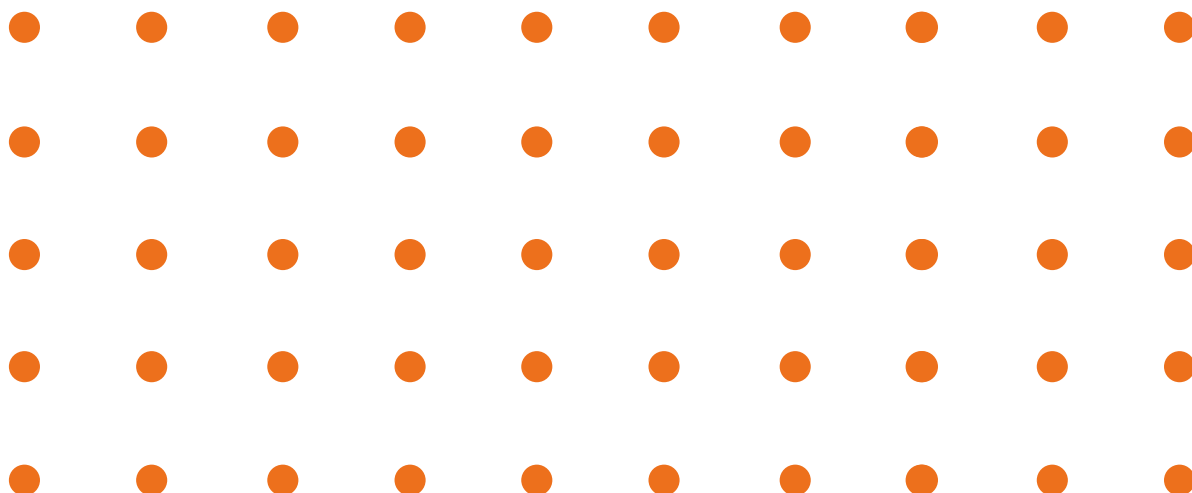
A NEW ERA FOR SYRIA?

The fall of Bashar El Assad and the Syrian regime offers an important window of opportunity for Syrian civil society to contribute to building a new democratic Syria and for the international community to reinforce support to Syrian civil society and independent media. These actors have a vital role to play in this period of transition, as safeguards and watchdogs, and as an active force to push for the construction and emergence of a future democratic Syria. A special section on Syria is included in this report.

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN GEORGIA

A special section on Georgia takes stock of developments in 2024. In May, thousands of protesters took to the streets when the government introduced a law requiring western-funded organisations to register as "foreign agents". In October, the Georgian Dream swept back to power in highly contested parliamentary elections. EED's partners were at the fore of a large citizen observation movement during these elections and led a coalition of independent media outlets which broadcast live for 13 hours on election day. Government forces reacted with violence against protesters who came out onto the streets in large numbers in the last weeks of the year, following the government's announcement to pause the start of EU accession negotiations.

© Ne Haber

© Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Centre

ELECTIONS AND PRO-EU ASPIRATIONS IN MOLDOVA

Another section of this report reviews this year's elections in Moldova, where President Maia Sandu was re-elected by a tight margin and a referendum on including EU integration in Moldova's constitution narrowly passed with a 50.35 percent "Yes" vote. Throughout the election period, EED's partners worked to counter Russian-led disinformation and misinformation and improve media literacy, and implemented civic initiatives to encourage voters to go to the polls.

MONITORING EVALUATION AND LEARNING

In 2024, EED implemented several Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) activities, including a comprehensive evaluation of its work in Egypt, an evaluation of EED's support to pro-democracy actors in Libya and a learning review in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

GOVERNANCE, HUMAN RESOURCES, AND BUDGET

The EED Secretariat is composed of 69 staff members from 28 different countries. In 2024, 15 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. In 2024, Iceland was elected as a member of the Board of Governors at the December Board of Governors meeting. In 2024, EED also received contributions from Iceland and from Canada through a special programme for Ukraine. EED's operating budget is covered by a grant from the European Commission. In 2024, EED managed a budget of approximately €55 million.

EED IN NUMBERS

€39 million in democracy support awarded in 2024

357 grants awarded

1,395 requests for support

69 core staff members from 25 countries

90,301 total followers

60,947 Facebook followers

6,091 X followers

20,829 LinkedIn followers

2,434 Instagram followers

PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW

APPLICATIONS RECEIVED BY REGION

*For the purposes of this report, the EAP includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova
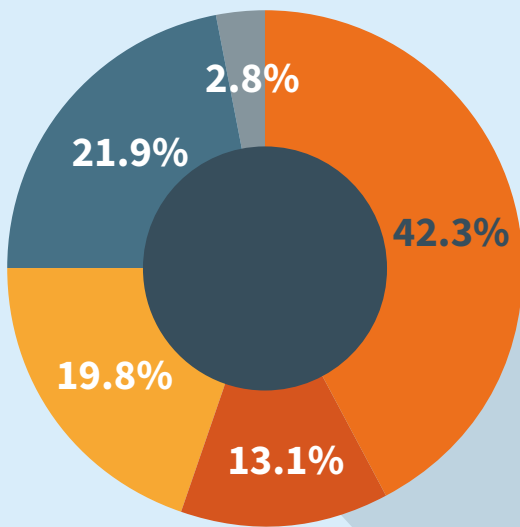
1,395 applications received in 2024

357 grants awarded in 2024

Applications received by region:
- 42.3%
- 13.1%
- 19.8%
- 21.9%
- 2.8%

Grants awarded by region:
- 35%
- 17%
- 22%
- 26%

Legend:
- Eastern Partnership (EaP)*
- Eurasia
- Middle East and North Africa
- Western Balkans and Turkey
- Rest of the World
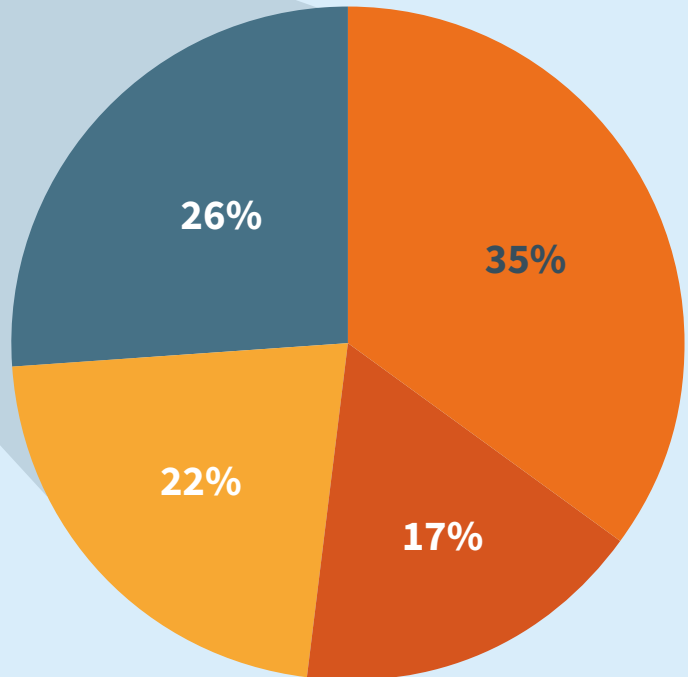
GRANTS AWARDED BY REGION

LANGUAGE OF APPLICATION

*BHS: languages of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia

59.7% English

6.2% Arabic

12.6% Russian

3.9% Turkish

7.6% BHS*
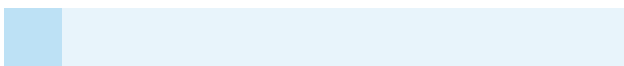
2% French

7.3% Ukrainian

0.8% Albanian

Nafta Theatre © Oleksandr Osipov

EVENTS

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

In 2024, EED organised, co-organised and participated in 27 events, including international conferences and summits and smaller events held on EED's premises. Many of these were closed-door events, which provided EED's partner organisations with a platform to safely discuss their work and the challenges they face.
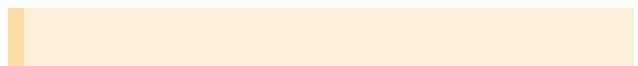
The following provides an overview of the highlights of this year.

In **March,** EED collaborated with the Anti-Corruption Action Centre (AntrAC) to organise an event on the reform process, with a follow-up event held in **October.**

In **April,** EED brought 21 media partners from the MENA region to Brussels for a discussion on their role, the additional challenges they now face given the ongoing war in Gaza, and their recommendations for future funding of independent media in the region.

In **May,** EED launched the Transatlantic Democracy Support Dialogue (TDSD) at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit.

In **May,** EED was also one of the co-organisers of the annual Difference Day event, that marks World Press Freedom Day in Brussels.

In **June,** EED facilitated the participation of partners in the Deutsche Welle's Global Media Forum in Bonn with a panel on media organisations working to promote civic participation.

In **September,** EED was the lead organiser of the collaborative International Democracy Day Brussels event, which celebrated its tenth edition in 2024, consolidating itself as the main democracy event in Brussels celebrating the UN International Day of Democracy.

In **September,** EED also organised a panel discussion to mark the launch of the "Voices of Democracy: Ukraine's Women Leaders" short film at the Ukrainian Civil Society Hub.

In **October,** at Forum 2000 in Prague, EED organised a panel discussion with women media representatives from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

In **November,** EED Executive Director Jerzy Pomianowski took part in a two-day event in Kyiv that brought together over 35 Ukrainian civic leaders to discuss ways to preserve Ukraine's democracy during the war.

In **November,** EED also organised a panel discussion on new technologies and the fight for freedom and democracy at the Warsaw Dialogue for Democracy.

Also in **November,** EED supported a number of partners to attend the World Movement for Democracy's Global Assembly in Johannesburg, South Africa.

In **December,** EED co-organised an event on the role of Belarusian independent media in the context of the ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine and the upcoming presidential elections in collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee. This was held as part of the DG NEAR and EEAS "Belarus Days" programme.

EED's partners at World Movement for Democracy 12th Global Assembly, in Johannesburg, South Africa © EED
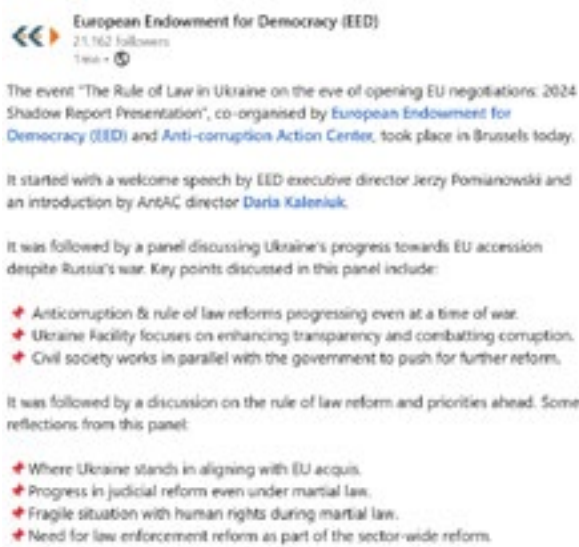
In November, EED supported a number of partners to attend the World Movement for Democracy's Global Assembly in Johannesburg, South Africa

MARCH

OCTOBER

RULE OF LAW IN UKRAINE

This year, EED collaborated with the Anti-Corruption Action Centre (AntAC) to organise two events on the rule of law in Ukraine and on the reform process, with progress on the rule of law now vital given Ukraine's EU member candidate status and the strains of Russia's ongoing invasion.

On 5 March, EED hosted an event titled "Ukraine and fundamental reforms in 2024: between EU accession and Russia's war". Over two panels, civil society activists, institutional representatives, and Ukrainian experts discussed the changes made to law enforcement and the judiciary systems since the Revolution of Dignity, and the reforms that need to be prioritised to bolster transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption efforts.

On 16 October, EED co-organised a second event titled "The rule of law in Ukraine on the eve of opening EU negotiations: 2024 Shadow Report presentation". The AntAC presented its assessment of Ukraine's performance on anti-corruption and rule of law reforms during the last year. The panellists discussed Ukraine's progress towards EU accession in the face of Russia's war as well as reform priorities for 2025.

European Endowment for Democracy (EED)
21,162 followers
1 mo •

The event "The Rule of Law in Ukraine on the eve of opening EU negotiations: 2024 Shadow Report Presentation", co-organised by European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and Anti-corruption Action Center, took place in Brussels today.

It started with a welcome speech by EED executive director Jerzy Pomianowski and an introduction by AntAC director Daria Kaleniuk.

It was followed by a panel discussing Ukraine's progress towards EU accession despite Russia's war. Key points discussed in this panel include:

- Anticorruption & rule of law reforms progressing even at a time of war.
- Ukraine Facility focuses on enhancing transparency and combatting corruption.
- Civil society works in parallel with the government to push for further reform.

It was followed by a discussion on the rule of law reform and priorities ahead. Some reflections from this panel:

- Where Ukraine stands in aligning with EU acquis.
- Progress in judicial reform even under martial law.
- Fragile situation with human rights during martial law.
- Need for law enforcement reform as part of the sector-wide reform.

eedemocracy.bsky.social
@eedemocracy.bsky.social

On 21/11, Ukraine's Day of Dignity and Freedom, EED and the Agency for Recovery and Development brought together 35+ Ukrainian CSOs in Kyiv to discuss how to preserve Ukraine's democracy during war. #UkraineRecovery #CivilSociety #LuganoDeclaration

MAY

DIFFERENCE DAY

EED marked World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2024 as one of the co-organisers of Difference Day in Brussels, together with *Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Université Libre de Bruxelles, and Erasmushogeschool Brussel,* and other partners. The theme of the conference was: "Speak Freely, Listen Respectfully, Different Opinions Matter."

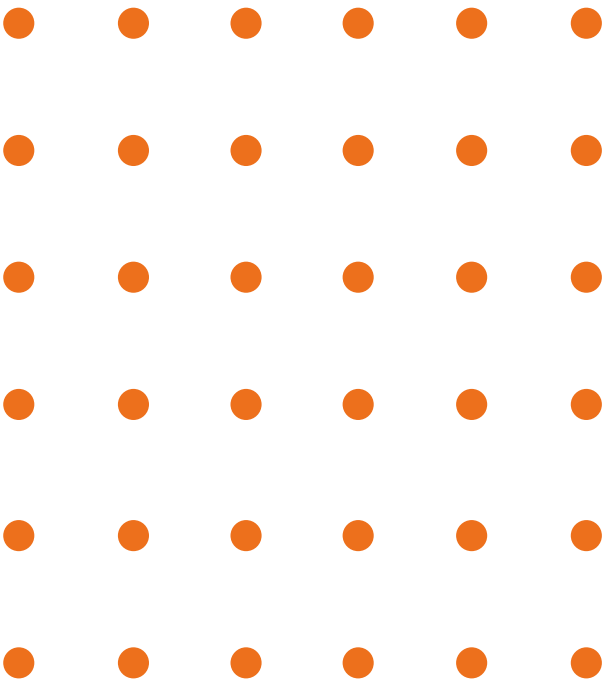EED contributed to the organisation of the panels "Freedom of Expression and the Climate Crises", which included EED's partner Miroslava Nikolić from the *Organisation for Political Ecology Polekol,* and "AI and Press Freedom", where EED's partner Serhii Prokopenko of *Gwara Media* intervened.

Miroslava spoke of the importance of involving local communities in the fight against pollution. She highlighted how in countries where the media market is dominated by big outlets connected to the government, as in Serbia, independent media are vital to promote scientific knowledge and raise awareness about environmental justice.

Serhii spoke of the potential of AI for journalism. Reporting from the frontlines in Kharkiv, *Gwara Media* developed a bot capable of assessing the trustworthiness of digital news and social media content. He emphasised the need for media literacy training to ensure regulated and responsible development of AI.

European Endowment for Democracy
@EEDemocracy

"The fight for environmental justice is a long one. We need to work together with scientists and journalists," says EED partner Miroslava Nikolić of @pravonavodu in a #differenceday panel on freedom of expression and the climate crisis. #WorldPressFreedomDay

European Endowment for Democracy
@EEDemocracy

"We created a chatbot to help us answer all the questions people had about the war. We want to use AI for good to facilitate our work as journalists," says @Prokopchek of @GwaraMedia in a panel on AI and press freedom at #differenceday. #WorldPressFreedomDay

MAY

LAUNCH OF TRANSATLANTIC DEMOCRACY SUPPORT DIALOGUE

On 14 May, on the occasion of the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, a new Transatlantic Democracy Support Dialogue (TDSD) was launched to improve cooperation, foster annual agenda setting, coordinate collective action to address urgent challenges and opportunities, and to engage in other network strengthening activities.

This follows on from a Transatlantic Dialogue held at EED's premises in September 2023. During the TDSD launch, a number of working groups and themes were discussed. These formed the focus of the Dialogue's work over the year. This included a focus on Monitoring and Evaluation and Bank Derisking and Sanctions, among other themes.

The TDSD had a follow-up meeting during the year, where members provided updates on working groups and there was a discussion on specific challenges faced in the democracy support sector and on approaches taken by different actors.

© Görner

JUNE

GLOBAL MEDIA FORUM BONN

EED organised a panel discussion at the Global Media Forum Bonn on 18 and 19 June, where the focus was on media organisations' work to promote civic participation.

Iryna Fedoriv from *Holka*, a Ukrainian transparency and anti-corruption NGO, shared how it empowers citizens by helping them write and publish stories on important issues, connecting them with major media to amplify their voices in advocacy campaigns.

Betsy Penso, from the Turkish media organisation *Avlaremoz*, detailed its work documenting antisemitic incidents, facing censorship and security challenges, while raising awareness and educating the public about rising antisemitism in Turkey.

A representative from *Zerkalo*, a Belarusian media outlet, forced to operate in exile due to government repression, explained how it continues to reach millions of people using VPNs, mirror links, and social media platforms like TikTok to bypass censorship. Despite being labelled an "extremist organisation" by the authorities, the outlet remains a vital source of independent news, adapting its strategies to engage audiences on both political and social issues in a highly restricted environment.

SEPTEMBER

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY BRUSSELS 2024

The International Day of Democracy Brussels (IDD Brussels) 2024, themed "A Year of Elections", was held from 19 to 20 September at the European Committee of the Regions. The event featured global, European, and national perspectives on democracy and elections.

IDD Brussels began with discussions on the importance of citizen participation, especially among youth, and the need to ensure a more inclusive political process. Panels explored global threats to electoral integrity, the impact of democracy on daily life, and ways to mobilise young voters. An OECD survey revealed declining trust in public institutions, particularly among women. The day ended with reflections on the shrinking space for civil society and the rise of authoritarianism.

The second day of IDD Brussels opened with discussions on countering disinformation in conflict zones. Panels explored the role of social media platforms in undermining judicial reforms and the threats that journalists face. The day also focused on gender equality, with discussions about the political restrictions women endure under authoritarian regimes. The event concluded with reflections on EU democracy support and priorities for strengthening global democracy over the next five years.

SEPTEMBER

PREMIERE OF *VOICES OF DEMOCRACY: UKRAINE'S WOMEN LEADERS*

On 26 September, EED premiered "Voices of Democracy: Ukraine's Women Leaders" at the Ukrainian Civil Society Hub, a short film featuring seven women who lead EED's partner organisations in Ukraine.

The women featured in the film are: **Kateryna Pereverzeva** of *Lyuk Media,* a media outlet covering cultural activities in war-torn Kharkiv; **Leyla Djaksim** of the Crimean Tatar Cultural and Sports Centre *Kuresh* that is empowering Crimean Tatars to take part in civic life; **Liubov Halan** of Human Rights Centre *Pryncyp* that works with war veterans and their families; **Mariia Nikitina** of *Zahyst*, that defends the rights of people with disabilities in Chernivtsi; **Natalia Drozd** of the *Dobrochyn Center* NGO that is creating opportunities for youth in rural areas; **Olha Reshetylova** of the *Media Initiative for Human Rights*, monitoring human rights violations in the occupied territories; and **Sofiia Skyba** of *Pershyi Kryvorizkyi,* one of the few independent media platforms in the city of Kryvyi Rih.

After the screening, Liubov Halan and EED's Programme Officer, Veronika Kucherchuk, took part in a moderated discussion on the challenges faced by veterans in Ukraine and how best to support them, and on how EED works to support Ukrainian civil society in this time of war.

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.

According to the V-Dem Institute, 71 percent of the world's population, or 5.7 billion people, live in autocracies, an increase from 48 percent just ten years ago. 42 countries are currently experiencing ongoing episodes of autocratisation.[1] Global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023, with flawed elections and armed conflict contributing to this decline.[2] In this "super year of elections", which saw over half the world's population go to the polls, one in three voters live in a country where the quality of elections has declined.[3]

These global trends are evident throughout the region where EED operates. There were elections in many countries, including in Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tunisia, and Turkey, with many elections deeply flawed.

In Ukraine, Russia's full-scale invasion continued into a third year, with the country marking 1,000 days of war in November. In Gaza, an estimated 46,000 people have been killed since the 7 October 2023 terrorist attack, a large majority of these women and children. Nearly all of the enclave's 2.3 million people have been displaced at least once. In Lebanon, an escalation in the Israeli Hezbollah conflict killed over 3,000 people, with a cease-fire called at the end of November. In Sudan, the brutal ongoing civil war has forced millions to flee their homes, displacing at least 12 million, currently the largest displacement crisis in the world.

There was a further rise in authoritarianism, with civic space, media freedom, and freedom of expression shrinking significantly in many contexts. Press freedom is continually threatened, with journalists experiencing increased pressure from state and political actors in many contexts. The war in Gaza has seen a record number of violations against journalists and the media.

Throughout the year, EED has been under constant attack related to its work in various countries where it operates, specifically in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Serbia, and Russia. This has included cyber-attacks, personal intimidation of EED staff and country consultants, and propaganda narratives against EED's work.

It is a mark the success of EED's work this year that even in the most challenging contexts, it has been able to constantly adapt its grant giving as needs and circumstances evolved to ensure ongoing support to democracy activists.

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1   V-Dem (2024) *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot;* accessed at: **https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf**

2   Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflicts*; accessed at: **https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf**

3   International IDEA (2024) *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty*; accessed at: **https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024/**

THE FOLLOWING PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW OF THE MANY CONTEXTS WHERE EED SUPPORTS PARTNERS IN 2024

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN THE EAST: FROM EU CANDIDATE STATES TO AUTOCRATS

In **Armenia,** negotiations with Azerbaijan have taken precedence over all other issues. Democratic reforms show poor progress. Women's rights are not protected, particularly when it comes to domestic violence. Anti-corruption efforts are stagnating. Homophobia and transphobia are not considered aggravating circumstances in hate crimes. In a positive development, trust in the media is growing and independent media is playing a significant role in holding the government accountable. EED supports start-up civil society organisations and is helping to bring new life to a civil society that is exhausted by conflict and crises. EED is a main provider of core funds to independent media in the country.

In **Azerbaijan,** the situation for pro-democracy activists, civil society, and media has further declined and repression has intensified during the year. Military success in the 2023 operation to reclaim territory in Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan's importance in the global energy markets have enabled the regime of Ilham Aliyev to silence domestic and international criticism on democracy and human rights in the country. In the run-up to the presidential elections in February and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) of November 2024—key political events for the regime—waves of repression annihilated the remaining independent media inside the country and put political and human rights activists behind bars. There are now over 300 political prisoners, including 23 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 ways. EED is working with democracy activists to help alleviate the effects of the current crackdown and to build the long-term capacity of Azerbaijani society to democratise.

In **Belarus,** the population is terrorised by the security forces. Following the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy movements, the country now has more than 1,200 political prisoners. The parliamentary and local elections of February 2024 were held without any opposition candidates, and the presidential election in January 2025 is set to entrench Lukashenka's grip on power. During the election period, there was a further wave of repression. Pro-democracy activists in Belarus are effectively excluded from meaningful participation in elections or political processes. Instead, they operate as civic groups advocating for democratisation, human rights, and international support, mostly online or working from abroad. Independent media is in a precarious state, largely functioning in exile. In this repressive environment, which has been further complicated by the ongoing effects of the war in Ukraine and a "brain drain" that has ravaged the economy, EED is supporting civil society and media to help ensure they can continue their work and remain active.

Georgia's democracy continued to backslide during the year. Key civil society figures were vilified through smear campaigns in the run-up to the October elections. Thousands came out onto the streets to protest the re-introduction of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, dubbed the "Russian Law", which imposes hefty fines if civil society or independent media organisations refuse to register as foreign agents, threatening the future existence of independent actors. The Georgia Dream party claimed victory in October's parliamentary elections. During these elections, five of EED's partners were part of a 30-strong CSO coalition that initiated Georgia's largest citizen observation movement in years. They revealed credible evidence of large-scale vote rigging and are seeking accountability by bringing their cases to court. EED's media partners were

at the forefront of a media coalition that joined forces to broadcast uninterrupted on election day. Following the Georgian Dream's announcement of a pause of the EU accession process in November, Georgians once again came onto the streets in large numbers. Many were met by violent attacks; several of EED's grantees were among media representatives brutally attacked by riot police. The Georgian Dream dominated electoral college nominated Mikheil Kavelashvili as president; the opposition refused to recognise his inauguration on 29 December. Civil society now faces existential questions on how to operate and keep the civic space open. In the face of this increasingly repressive environment, EED's support is helping to strengthen and sustain media and civil society. The number of initiatives supported has tripled in recent years. Further information on EED's work in country is included in the "Elections in Georgia" section of this report on page 93.

Moldova is divided, as was made clear by the outcome of the recent referendum on EU accession, which passed by a narrow margin. Leading up to the elections, disinformation and corruption reached unprecedented levels, with an estimated US$ 39 million transferred from Russia as part of a vote-buying scheme. As Moldova prepares for parliamentary elections in 2025, it faces significant economic and social challenges. These are exacerbated by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is severely impacting the country's economy. EED supports independent media and initiatives aimed at increasing civic engagement and combating corruption. Further information on EED's partners work in Moldova is included in the "Election and Referendum in Moldova" section of this report on page 91.

In **Ukraine,** three 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 is at the forefront of addressing urgent needs within society and is laying the groundwork for Ukraine's future recovery process, ensuring that all society, including the most marginalised sections, 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. While EED provided dozens of emergency grants at the start of the full-scale war, 2024 saw EED supporting start-up initiatives and helping to stabilise initiatives to help them establish longer-term perspectives. EED supported around 90 initiatives across the country during the year, including in occupied territories. EED provides support to a range of independent media, particularly at a regional level, helping to ensure pluralism and accountability. Thanks to active outreach, EED has targeted regions and towns with a limited donor presence to ensure needs-based support. As part of its work, EED constantly seeks to strengthen the capacities of partners through networking and sharing of best practices, vital given high levels of burn-out and trauma among civil society. In November 2024, EED gathered around 40 partners in Kyiv to exchange ideas on the key needs for Ukraine's future and the role of civil society.

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SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN THE MENA REGION: WAR AND AUTOCRATISATION

In **Algeria,** persecution against civil society, human rights activists, and journalists has increased. New penal code amendments adopted in 2024 reinforce a repressive legal climate and limit fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression. In 2020, the authorities had already adopted amendments allowing them to prosecute any actors in receipt of foreign funding, if their activities are considered to undermine the "normal functioning of institutions" or "national unity". This legal context significantly hinders the work of pro-democratic actors who are increasingly reluctant to seek foreign funding. EED has increased its support to Algerian initiatives based abroad that specifically target local communities.

In **Egypt,** due to ongoing conflicts in the region, particularly in Palestine and Sudan, the regime has further tightened its grip on power and is suppressing any dissent. In this climate, the pursuit of stability and security has taken precedence over the protection of human rights. The government is now trying to legalise these violations, creating alarm in the human rights community. Civil society is also concerned about the introduction of a restrictive bill to regulate Egypt's asylum system which, if passed, will subject asylum seekers to even greater challenges. Civil society organisations remain under constant pressure, as state security continues to stifle the work of registered NGOs and persecutes unregistered groups. Many human rights defenders continue to be subject to travel restrictions and asset freezes. EED is supporting initiatives that focus on the legal justice system, on capacity building for political participation, and on LGBTQI+ rights.

In **Jordan,** civil society organisations are facing pressure and a restrictive foreign funding mechanism, with many non-profits resorting to for-profit registration to bypass state interference. Journalists continue to be intimidated, detained, and sentenced. The elections in September, the first held under a revised election law, had only a 32 percent voter turnout. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) gained additional popularity due to the population's dissatisfaction with the government and ongoing poor economic conditions. However, its gains were not large enough to give it a majority in parliament. The war in Gaza affected the election results and bolstered support for the IAF. Protests in solidarity with Palestinians were restricted and, at times, violently suppressed during the year; hundreds of peaceful protesters were detained and later released without charge. In Jordan, EED supports independent media outlets and initiatives that specifically engage with youth and deliver creative content that challenges societal norms.

In **Lebanon,** Israel's military response to Hezbollah's rocket attacks exacerbated the country's political and economic challenges. The country had no president or a fully empowered cabinet until January 2025, as power struggles during 2024 meant that parliament was unable to secure a two-thirds majority for any candidate. The escalation in the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict led to over 3,000 deaths and more than 10,000 injured, displacing more than a million people from their homes, until a ceasefire was announced in late November. EED is one of the few flexible and demand-driven sources of funding to civil society and independent media. EED's partners are working to strengthen frail state structures, support those affected by conflict, engage with local communities, and provide quality and trusted reporting and information.

In **Libya,** political deadlock has persisted since the emergence of two parallel governments in Tripoli and Tobruk in 2022, with minimal progress on resolving their differences. Elections, initially delayed, are now indefinitely postponed. The UN is facilitating discussions with Libyan political stakeholders to agree on a roadmap for elections. There have been multiple crises during the year. Personal freedoms were reduced during this period following the reintroduction of the morality police and the imposition of further restrictions on women's freedom of movement. Civic space continues to dwindle given relentless attacks by security forces on journalists and activists, who face constant threats of intimidation and kidnapping. Fear of persecution and punishment have meant that journalists resort to a high level of self-censorship. In this challenging environment, EED continues to support civil society organisation and has a particular focus on emerging actors, who can challenge polarising narratives.

In **Morocco,** civil society has assumed the role of an opposition given the absence of a real political opposition and is now facing the consequences of this position. Many journalists, academics, and human rights defenders are serving prison sentences. To mark 25 years on the throne, King Mohammed VI "pardoned" 2,278 people, however, many activists remain behind bars. Media freedom is highly challenged, and journalists have been targeted by slander and smear campaigns that further narrow the media space and control the narrative. Independent media outlets struggle to survive financially; they cannot receive foreign funding and government pressures have seen advertising revenue reduced significantly. The government has used surveillance software such as Pegasus on journalists.

Discussions are now ongoing about reforming the Family Code. Moroccan activists hope that reform of this code will end gender-based injustices, including child marriage, in divorce settlements, inheritance arrangements, and the guardianship of children. In Morocco, EED adds value by providing support to new initiatives that support democratic values, as most donors prefer to fund civil society organisations working on less sensitive issues.

In **Palestine** and **Israel,** the Israeli war against Hamas, launched in response to the horrific 7 October 2023 terrorist attack and the abduction of hostages from Israel, continued into a second year. A severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, acute shortages of water, poor sanitation, lack of food and medical supplies and services and the forced displacement of civilians had a profound effect on EED's partners' ability to operate, with the situation in northern Gaza described by humanitarian leaders as "apocalyptic".[4] The West Bank and East Jerusalem also experienced an escalation of human rights violations during the year, including settler attacks and an intensive expansion of illegal settlements. In its Advisory Opinion, the International Court of Justice concluded that "the State of Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful".[5] In January 2025, a ceasefire agreement was signed to allow for the phased release of hostages held in Gaza for over fifteen months in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, an end to hostilities and an easing of the humanitarian suffering in Gaza.

At least 141 Palestinian journalists were killed by Israeli forces during the year, including two individuals working for EED's media partners, in what the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) describes as a deliberate targeting of journalists.[6] CPJ has noted that this is the deadliest war for journalists since

documentation began in 1992.[7] This dire situation led many media personal, including EED's partners, to opt out of wearing press vests to avoid further targeting. In addition, Palestinian journalists frequently see their content shadow-banned or removed, given heightened censorship by major social networks.[8] Israeli journalists were also impacted by broader crackdowns on dissent by the Netanyahu government.

In this critical environment with a severe decline in civic space and freedom of expression, EED's presence is growing. EED supports independent media outlets committed to delivering high-quality, reliable reporting and in-depth analysis and civil society actors that are documenting human rights violations, raising awareness of these abuses, and advocating for justice and accountability.

In **Syria,** the rapidity of the fall of Bashar Al Assad and his regime came as a surprise to Syrians at home and abroad, as well as to the international community. This marked the end of decades of dictatorship, fierce repression, and serious human rights violations. In a country marked by long years of violence, a volatile political and security context, and with 90 percent of the population living below the poverty line, there are many challenges ahead. Press freedom has been severely restricted nationwide, reflected in Syria's second-to-last ranking on the World Press Freedom Index.[9] Today, civil society and independent media have a critical role to play at this time of transition in pushing for accountability, transparency, and in supporting the development of a democratic Syria. EED remains committed to supporting a range of local actors across Syria, in particular local community media, and this support is helping them to strategise and consolidate their efforts. At the end of 2024, EED launched an Emergency Grant

4   IASC (2004) *Statement by Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee – Stop the assault on Palestinians in Gaza and on those trying to help them*, 1 November 2024; accessed at: **https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-standing-committee/statement-principals-inter-agency-standing-committee-stop-assault-palestinians-gaza-and-those-trying?123**

5   ICJ (2024) *Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. The Court gives its Advisory Opinion and responds to the question posed by the General Assembly*; accessed at: **https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-pre-01-00-en.pdf**

6   CPJ (2024) *Special Report: No justice for journalists targeted by Israel despite strong evidence of war crime* (October 2024); accessed at: **https://cpj.org/thematic-reports/no-justice-for-journalists-targeted-by-israel-despite-strong-evidence-of-war-crime/.**

7   CPJ (2025) *Journalist casualties in the Israel-Gaza war;* accessed at: **https://cpj.org/2025/02/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/**

8   Human Rights Watch (2023) *Meta's Broken Promises: Systematic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook;* accessed at: **https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and**

9   Accessed at: **http://rsf.org/en/country/syria**

scheme for EED's Syrian partners to provide fast top-up and emergency funding to former and existing partners to enable them to seize the momentum of this huge change. For further information on EED's work in Syria, see "Empowering Civil Society and Independent Media to build a new and democratic Syria" on page 87 of this report.

Tunisia's democracy is continuing to backslide at a worrying rate, as new legislation and other measures further undermine the rule of law. Civil society, particularly groups advocating for democracy and human rights, is under growing pressure from the authorities. In May 2024, the situation worsened with arrests and legal actions targeting migrant rights organisations, journalists, feminist activists, and lawyers. This crackdown has since expanded to include social media influencers jailed for content deemed to "undermine moral values". EED complements other EU and Member State civil society support programmes and provides flexible support to local democracy actors. This year, support has particularly targeted women's rights NGOs and emerging alternative media.

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

In **Albania,** deep-rooted problems persist in 2024. State capture and the concentration of power on the ruling party mean that many citizens feel disenchanted and disenfranchised. EED's partners express concern about the close links between the ruling party and oligarchs and business interests, and about the erosion of democratic norms in the country, as a result of the government's long incumbency. Civil society is active in Tirana but is poorly developed outside the capital and has limited influence on policymaking. Trust in grassroots activism is low, with phony civil society organisations linked to political parties further undermining confidence. The media environment is controlled by large channels linked to oligarchs, and independent media outlets face cyberattacks, targeted lawsuits, and limited access to information. EED is supporting individual activists, informal groups, youth organisations, and emerging independent media, with the aim of cultivating a more dynamic civil society that champions democratic values and enhances public discourse.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina,** major reforms have recently been approved thanks to the engagement of the international community, primarily the EU and the US. These led to the European Council's decision to open accession negotiations in 2023. However, across the country, environmental activists face increasing pressure and intimidation from both the authorities and investors, although there have been some notable successes. In early October, catastrophic floods hit several cities, claiming lives and revealing corruption in the concessions sector. EED is supporting various community actors, as well as local and niche independent media, thereby complementing more extensive media programmes. Journalists continue to be targeted by high-ranking officials, and benefit from little protection from the authorities. In Republika Srpska, civil society space continues to shrink, with restrictive laws like the "foreign agents' law" threatening human rights. The Republika Srpska authorities continue to take separatist actions, including by adopting unconstitutional laws and ignoring constitutional court rulings.

In **Kosovo,**[10] the political arena continues to be heavily dominated by the EU-mediated dialogue with Serbia. International calls for dialogue and de-escalation go largely unheard by the government. Tensions are high, especially in northern Kosovo, where Kosovo Serbs face restrictions. In 2024 alone, 15 to 20 percent of this community emigrated. Civil society remains active in the country, while it is split between those advocating for engagement with the governmental authorities and those maintaining a critical stance towards government. In 2024, EED focused on supporting start-ups, informal groups, and independent media, thereby sustaining vital components of Kosovo's civil society that might otherwise be overlooked.

Montenegro is making progress on its EU accession path, but it continues to grapple with significant challenges, including deep societal polarisation and an overstaffed public sector. According to EED's partners, the judicial system faces numerous challenges, such as a shortage of judges, prosecutors, and police, coupled with low salaries, resulting in ineffective legal processes that undermine the rule of law. In response, EED remains committed to supporting local community actors as well as strengthening the diversity, effectiveness and sustainability of independent, professional, and investigative media in the country, and working with marginalised groups.

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10   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.

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In **North Macedonia,** presidential and national elections led to a change in government as the ruling party was comprehensively beaten amid voter disenchantment and low turnout. The country's most pressing issues remain unaddressed, including the lack of judicial independence, cronyism, political patronage, and clientelism. Civil society and independent media continue to be dynamic despite the challenges, which include high emigration rates, relatively small-sized and fragmented organisations, and a lack of financial and popular support. EED is focused on helping to sustain the work of smaller and newly established CSOs, as well as supporting independent media to survive in a difficult economic and political environment.

In **Serbia,** local elections were held in June in many cities, following widespread criticism of polls held the previous December. The election period was marked by significant irregularities. The ruling coalition retained overall power, however, the opposition polled better than in previous years. This period also saw large-scale environmental protests. In addition to environmental concerns, protesters called out the government's lack of democratic processes in decision-making. In November, the political crisis in Serbia deepened when the roof of a reconstructed train station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 15 people. This tragedy sparked large scale peaceful country-wide protests initiated by students, putting the spotlight on corruption, non-transparency and the absence of political responsibility. The authorities and their cronies responded with violence, arrests, threats by the intelligence services, and smear campaigns against protesters. An Amnesty International report released in December revealed unlawful surveillance of journalists and activists by the Serbian government.[11] Media freedom in the country deteriorated during the year. Government-backed outlets continued to promote disinformation, anti-western and pro-Russian narratives. Independent journalists, especially those working in smaller towns, were also the target of physical attacks. Throughout the year, EED provided quick and flexible support to activists that enabled them to respond to the changing political context, as well as to independent media, particularly at a local level, thus contributing to media plurality and ensuring access to credible information in the country.

In **Turkey,** the landslide victory of the main opposition party in local elections this year gave much needed hope for democratic change. It remains to be seen if the political change on the municipal level in many different parts of the country will translate into democratisation and if independent pro-democracy actors can play a larger role. The population is struggling with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis in the country, and this has made democratic activism more challenging as rents in urban centres soar and salary increases fail to match price hikes. Increased misinformation, targeting, and hate speech deployed by the members of the governing alliance and its media apparatus have had far-reaching consequences beyond the elections, deepening polarisation and division in society. Civil society and independent media face legal intimidation tactics, particularly those advocating for Kurdish rights. While the unexpected opening from the governing coalition to start a new peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) provides a glimmer of hope that change is possible in this protracted conflict, success will depend on broad civic involvement and embeddedness in a broader democratisation agenda. The reactionary agenda of the AKP government on so-called "family-oriented policies" is putting great pressure on LGBTQI+ communities and the women's rights movement. During the past year, the number of applications received by EED increased significantly, given Turkey's deepening rule-of-law crisis and deteriorating economic conditions. These applications came from emerging actors, as well as more established ones who sought EED's support to bridge funding gaps. In this challenging environment, EED demonstrated its risk-taking approach by supporting pro-democracy actors working in high-risk areas, such as LGBTQI+, independent media, and in the south-eastern region.
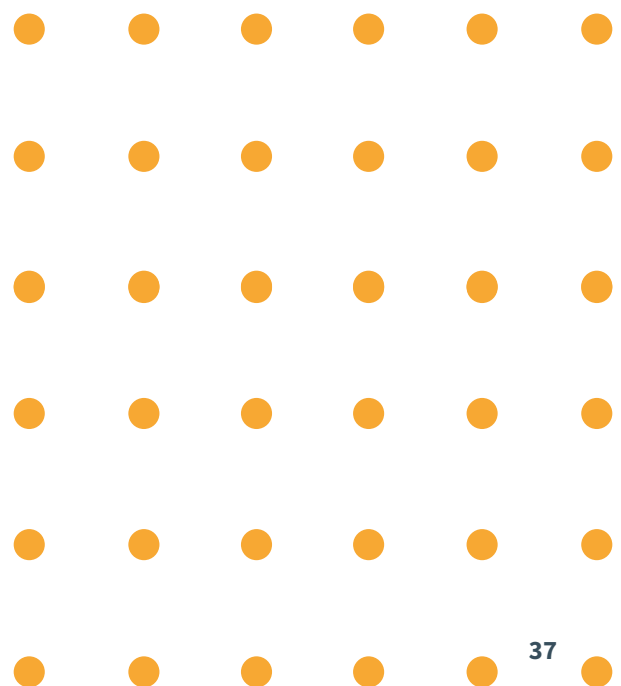
11   Amnesty International (2024) *Serbia: "A Digital Prison": Surveillance and the suppression of civil society in Serbia*, 16 December 2024; accessed at: **https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/**

EED'S THEMATIC AREAS OF WORK

This section of the Annual Report takes an in-depth look at the work of a selection of EED's partners during 2024 across the various thematic areas of operation. It profiles the work of democracy activists from diverse countries and backgrounds, alongside media outlets and journalists committed to defending free speech and media freedom. While these activists work in varied environments, they share a common goal: to create more democratic and hopeful futures for their countries and societies.

I. ANTI-CORRUPTION AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Corruption poses a significant obstacle to the progress of democracy. Every democracy requires institutions and mechanisms that act as checks and balances, fostering accountability, transparency, and oversight in government.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

EED supports partners across the European Neighbourhood and beyond who are committed to fighting corruption in their societies and restoring public oversight and trust in their institutions.

In this section of the report, we profile organisations in Ukraine and Jordan, that are building cultures of anti-corruption and transparency in their societies.

© Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Centre

© Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Centre

UKRAINE

KHARKIV ANTI-CORRUPTION CENTRE – BUILDING STRONGER DEMOCRACY EVEN AMID WAR

In 2015, the *Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Centre* was set up to address corruption in Ukraine's second biggest city. It was created in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity that ousted the corrupt regime of former President Viktor Yanukovych, when Ukrainians elected a new pro-European government and advocated for more transparent and democratic decision-making.

Over the years, the Centre has analysed many public procurement tenders and other public documents identifying discrepancies in public spending or in other decisions made by the city and regional authorities in Kharkiv.

"We managed to stop corrupt schemes for selling land, and other unlawful spending by officials," says Dmytro Bulakh, chair of the Centre's board. He explains that while corruption remains a serious problem in Ukraine, open registries mean it is now easier to hold perpetrators to account. The Centre's work has also helped.

The situation in Ukraine has changed drastically over the past nine years. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to a reduction in publicly available information and forced some of the Centre's members to relocate or join in

"I can still see an improvement in public procurement and government decision-making which is the result of our work. There is progress, but we want more of it"

- DMYTRO BULAKH

the defence of their country. However, the Centre's track record over these years means that it still has the clout to continue to fight corruption. Today, it has expanded its work to include identifying collaborators and people who worked with Russian occupiers when parts of the Kharkiv region were under Russian control, and it is also fighting Kremlin-led disinformation.

Dmytro explains that today, this work is more crucial than ever. Among the projects they now analyse are the construction of defences around Kharkiv and procurement processes for the army. They have found equipment bought at prices well above the market price, wasting taxpayers' money. They continuously flag such violations.

KAFA'A | كفاءة

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JORDAN

KAFA'A PERFORMANCE INDEX CENTRE –
A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO ELECTION MONITORING IN JORDAN

In 2020, Hanan Baki and Muath Al Mbaideen founded the Performance and Monitoring Centre *Kafa'a* to address the need for greater transparency and accountability in Jordan.

Focusing on democracy, gender equality, and political reform, *Kafa'a* systematically evaluates governmental decisions through various indexes that assess development, freedom, peace, entrepreneurship and security.

Ahead of the 2024 elections, *Kafa'a* introduced an "Imtithal Index" to measure the Independent Election Commission's compliance with national laws and international democratic standards. This index includes indicators on voter access, election transparency, and result accuracy.

Despite facing challenges, such as limited access to data, *Kafa'a*'s monitoring revealed reduced voter registration objections but noted violations of vote confidentiality.

With EED's support, *Kafa'a* is also training 20 university students to become government performance observers, equipping them with research and analytical skills. Looking ahead, *Kafa'a* aims to expand its monitoring model to other countries, while focusing on issues such as public freedoms and women's empowerment in Jordan.

UKRAINE

HOLKA – BUILDING A NETWORK OF ACTIVISTS TO FIGHT CORRUPTION

The *Holka* NGO was founded in early 2024 by well-known activist and journalist Iryna Fedoriv together with her colleague, journalist Margaryta Sytnyk, to fight for transparency and anti-corruption in Ukraine. EED provided seed funding for the initiative. Iryna explains that the word *Holka* —or needle—signifies their ambition to build a new network of leaders from the media and civil society as well as politicians and judges, who together can empower activists from across Ukraine in their fight against corruption.

"We want to 'sew' people together as a network to protect values that are important to us all," she says, explaining that the idea of a "needle" represents Holka's determination to do this job properly, by needling into every nook and cranny where this corruption might lie.

Holka works to identify and monitor instances of corruption by local and state governments, or policies that enable this to take place. As a network, it gives weight to local anti-corruption initiatives, helping them to extend the influence and impact of their work. A particular focus is on decisions related to non-renewable resources in the country, notably land, forests, water bodies, and finance. Now *Holka* is developing a "ReCharge Ukraine is in Your Power" online instrument, that seeks to ensure transparency of the voting patterns of political factions, parties, and individual MPs in the national parliament.

© Holka

> ## "We want to 'sew' people together as a network to protect values that are important to us all"
>
> **- IRYNA FEDORIV**

© EED (Holka)

II. INDEPENDENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Independent media play essential watchdog roles in democracies, providing citizens with accurate information, promoting transparency, and holding those in power accountable. Today, media professionals work in increasingly challenging conditions which affect their ability to operate freely and to fulfil their role as a cornerstone of democracy.

The 2024 World Press Freedom Index highlighted the increased political pressures on journalists worldwide, with government influence, restrictive laws, and political interference deteriorating in democratic and authoritarian contexts. In a year where more than half the world's population went to the polls, political scores saw the steepest decline in the Index's five evaluated areas, with governments less willing to safeguard media independence.[12] As press freedom has eroded, journalists are facing increased harassment and violence, and rates of disinformation have spiked, particularly in conflict zones and authoritarian states.

In the **Middle East and North Africa**, press freedom continues to decline fast in most countries, as authorities seek to control the media through violence, arrests, draconian laws, financial pressure, and manipulation of societal norms, with systematic impunity for crimes of violence against journalists.[13] The ongoing war in Gaza is on record for becoming the deadliest war for journalists since documentation began in 1992.[14]

In **Russia,** this year saw further efforts by the authorities to undermine the work of independent media. In March 2024, a new bill was introduced prohibiting advertising with "foreign agents", reducing independent media's already limited ability to generate revenue. The Kremlin has intensified attempts to control online information, with social media platforms, including YouTube, Signal and Telegram, experiencing blockages and slowdowns over the summer, and additional measures taken to block websites and VPN services. An estimated 36.2 percent of Russians use VPNs. The "foreign agents" registries now top 333.

In **Belarus,** massive repression against journalists has continued during the year. According to the Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ), at least 400 journalists are now working in exile, and 36 journalists are behind bars.[15]

In **Ukraine,** journalists continue to face significant dangers while reporting on the war and ongoing challenges rebutting the deluge of Russian-led disinformation. They also encounter difficulties at home, as some journalists have faced repercussions for holding the government to account in their reporting.

12 RSF (2024) *2024 World Press Freedom Index – Journalism under political pressure*; accessed at: **https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure**

13 RSF (2024) *Middle East – North Africa – Journalism throttled by political pressure*; accessed at: **https://rsf.org/en/classement/2024/middle-east-north-africa**

14 CJP (2024) *One year and climbing: Israel responsible for record journalist death toll*; accessed at: **https://cpj.org/2024/10/one-year-and-climbing-israel-responsible-for-record-journalist-death-toll/**

15 See: **https://baj.media/en**
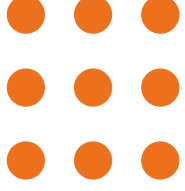
In **Azerbaijan,** there has been a wave of arrests of journalists and civil society leaders. Today, 13 media professionals are in detention, as independent media face growing repression of press freedom.

In recent years, media freedom has declined across much of the **Western Balkans,** most notably in **Serbia,** where independent journalists face frequent attacks, rising self-censorship, and intimidation, which often comes in the form of SLAPP lawsuits. Meanwhile, the government-backed media continues to publish disinformation and pro-Russian narratives. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina,** journalists are left unprotected from being targeted by social media and high-raking individuals. Similarly in **Albania,** a lack of media pluralism and transparency remain significant concerns.

In **Turkey,** independent media continue to operate under great political, legal, and financial pressure. Nevertheless, the independent media landscape continues to grow in reach and have an impact at both national and local levels.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

In 2024, over 53 percent of EED grants were provided to independent media and social media platforms. EED funds a wide spectrum of media—from hyperlocal media outlets and bloggers to more established news organisations. This support includes core funding to outlets, temporary bridge funding to cover financial gaps, and smaller project-based grants. Flexible EED funding is especially critical in repressive contexts, where it can discreetly assist key independent media in the most challenging of conditions.

This section includes profiles of a small selection of the many media supported by EED during 2024, including outlets from Ukraine, Palestine, Montenegro, Albania, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as a profile of a successful media platform from Jordan first funded by EED in 2014. It also includes a piece on community media supported by EED, and a separate section on a media event held on EED's premises in April, that brought 21 journalists from the MENA region to Brussels.

UKRAINE

GRUNT – A NEW MEDIA EMERGES AMID RUSSIA'S WAR AND DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Valerii Shelupets and a few like-minded journalists and civil society activists set up *Grunt* (or Seed) on the first day of the full-scale war against Ukraine. They knew there was a huge need for a media outlet to address the avalanche of fake news and disinformation, to communicate official information about the invasion, and to produce quality reporting about the war. They wanted to create a media platform that could act as a voice for civic activists and civil society.

Initially launched as a Telegram channel, within three days *Grunt* had 150,000 followers, and it soon launched a website to become a fully functional media platform. Today, 16 journalists work across Ukraine, including on the frontlines and in the occupied territories. The outlet also has over 1,000 paying subscribers.

Grunt is particularly popular among young professionals and students who care about what is happening in their country and want to influence its development. The team works hard to understand its audience and to respond to their needs.

The newsroom has launched a successful YouTube project called "The Long War", that explains how Russia was using hybrid warfare against Ukraine many decades before the full-scale invasion. The videos have received millions of views and lots of positive feedback.

Grunt has also worked to raise awareness about the dangers of anonymous Telegram channels to Ukraine's democracy and media environment. It recently produced an investigation into Ukraine's largest Telegram channel "Trukha" to expose its untransparent ownership, biased information, and lack of adherence to journalistic standards.

Despite the challenges of operating during a time of war, the team at *Grunt* is determined to continue to be a voice of civil society. In the future, they hope to develop an ecosystem of organisations advancing democracy and development in Ukraine.

In the future, they hope to develop an ecosystem of organisations advancing democracy and development in Ukraine

© Untold Palestine

"After 7 October 2023, we were looking for a way to keep hope for Palestinians alive. We wanted to show Palestinians as normal people who want to live a normal life, who have wishes and hopes"

- MOHAMED BADARNE

PALESTINE

UNTOLD PALESTINE – NARRATIVES ABOUT PALESTINIANS BY PALESTINIANS

"After 7 October 2023, we were looking for a way to keep hope alive for Palestinians. We wanted to show Palestinians as normal people who want to live a normal life, who have wishes and hopes," explains photographer and activist Mohamed Badarne, one of the founders of the digital platform *Untold Palestine,* founded by a collective of photojournalists, storytellers and photographers to change mainstream narratives about Palestine and Palestinians.

It was at the beginning of the current war in Gaza that *Untold Palestine* started the social media campaign "We are not numbers". This campaign allows friends and families to tell the stories of their relatives and friends who have been killed. It is a way to keep their memories alive. They post pictures of their happiest moments and their achievements.

"We didn't want to show pictures of atrocities, there are plenty of media outlets who do that already," says Mohamed. "We want people to show solidarity with Palestinians when they're alive, not just when they die."

MONTENEGRO

GLAS ZABJELA – A LOCAL MEDIA OUTLET IN MONTENEGRO WITH COMMUNITY AT ITS HEART

"We are working to strengthen our community and to encourage a culture of volunteerism. We want to motivate people to take care of their community. We believe that you can't change the whole world, but you do have the power to change your own backyard for the better," says Vladan Đurišić, a young activist and journalist and head of online local community media *Glas Zabjela* (Voice of Zabjelo).

Glas Zabjela was founded at the end of 2016 as a print newsletter that Vladan and a team of volunteers distributed door to door in Zabjelo, Podgorica's largest neighbourhood.

Vladan was inspired by the "Republic of Zabjelo", a 1990s youth-led creative and satirical revolt against the horrors of war in the Balkans that included theatre, art, and in the latter part of that decade, an eponymous TV show. He saw the concept of a collective identity as a good foundation for the community activism that is at the heart of *Glas Zabjela.*

In 2017, *Glas Zabjela* earned national recognition for organising local campaigns, including a high-profile football tournament to raise money for a local poet who was living in difficult conditions. Transitioning online, the platform

now reports on local issues, conducts polls, and produces investigative content. *Glas Zabjela* also works to foster community spirit, acting as a mediator between citizens and authorities, and supporting local initiatives.

With EED's support, the media has expanded its content, incorporating videos and podcasts, and launched projects like the neighbourhood's first youth centre and a music festival. Vladan remains committed to continuing to grow the platform, engaging with younger audiences, and ensuring long-term financial sustainability.

© Glas Zabjela

> **"We believe that you can't change the whole world, but you do have the power to change your own backyard for the better"**
>
> **- VLADAN ĐURIŠIĆ**

© Ditari Media

© Ditari Media

ALBANIA

DITARI MEDIA – CHALLENGING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

Ditari Media is an independent digital news site focused on anti-corruption, human rights, and abuses of power in Albania. According to Erald Kapri, founder of *Ditari Media,* this is essential. "We have an unwritten code of silence. Even on the big issues," he says.

He explains that Albania's communist past has conditioned society, affecting the way people regard the government and the media. This attitude, combined with a media ecosystem that is controlled by the government and a few businessmen close to government, has enabled corruption to fester.

Ditari uses in-depth investigative journalism to address this culture of impunity. To date, Kapri's journalists have uncovered multiple corruption scandals and cases of abuse of power that go unreported in mainstream media. Several politicians and business personalities have been prosecuted thanks to these investigations, that have exposed high-profile authoritarianism and favouritism in government.

The media outlet also provides a platform for other journalists to publish anonymously, especially those working in government-owned media platforms. This enables *Ditari* to highlight issues that are often silenced. It is now supporting a community of journalists committed to uncovering the truth.
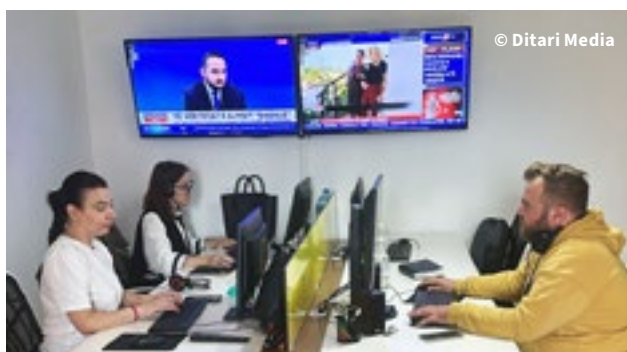
TURKEY

NE HABER NEWS AGENCY: A RIGHTS-BASED MEDIA THAT PUNCHES ABOVE ITS WEIGHT IN A SMALL CITY IN SOUTHEASTERN ANATOLIA

The Ne Haber News Agency or "What's up?" is a news website run by young journalists, Yusuf Elik, Yusuf Eren, and Bünyamin Aybek, in the city of Siirt in Turkey. The three men were journalism students and graduates when they decided to establish their own media outlet with support from family members. They realised that existing media failed to represent the city's diversity.

Ne Haber gives voice to individuals typically ignored by mainstream media and has a particular focus on minority rights, LGBTQI+ issues and economic matters. Video content is central to their work. News is accessible on their website, or via Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok.

In the past, as a rights-based organisation, it was difficult to work in this space, as this is a region where the electoral success of Kurdish parties has led to intense governmental scrutiny.

Since 2016, local authorities have been centrally imposed by the Ankara government. *Ne Haber* was excluded from press events and was even sued by the administration.

The team believe that the results of the March 2024 local elections point to a revival of the democratic processes. They saw victory of the pro-Kurdish democratic opposition in Siirt and throughout the region. However, they continue to face many challenges, particularly financial sustainability, given the deteriorating economic situation, high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis in Turkey. *Ne Haber* hopes to launch a subscription model for select content and to generate revenue on YouTube.

© Watara

LEBANON

WATARA – TELLING UNTOLD STORIES ONE PODCAST AT A TIME

"Watara started because of a love for audio," says Nada Abdelsamad, one of the three founders of this Arabic language podcast.

Nada explains that *Watara* aims to provide a space for diverse perspectives to be heard and is envisaged as a platform to amplify marginalised voices. She believes that by giving visibility to the experiences of those who are affected by abuse, discrimination, and stigma, Watara can help to enable positive change within Arab society.

To date, *Watara* has covered a wide range of themes and key issues in Arab society which are taboo or rarely addressed. To date, podcast shows have addressed the stigma around disability, the perspectives of young people from different Arab countries on what the future holds for them, and the consequences of climate change in the region. The first podcast show produced by *Watara* was "Our Shades", which focused on the mental health of journalists covering wars and catastrophes in the region, their trauma, and the overall impact of covering these stories.

The team is now working to develop an Instagram audience throughout the Arab world, particularly among youth and marginalised audiences. While the podcasts are currently only available in Arabic, they plan to expand to English and French editions too. EED provided *Watara* with seed funding to produce its initial episodes.

© Ne Haber

JORDAN

AMMANNET – BALANCING EDITORIAL FREEDOM WITH SURVIVAL IN JORDAN

Daoud Kuttab, a renowned Palestinian journalist and founder of *Radio Al Balad* and *Ammannet*, operated by non-profit *Community Media Network* (CMN), faces constant challenges balancing his integrity as a journalist without losing his ability to be effective.

He explains that all Jordanian journalists deal with censorship, self-censorship, and legal threats, while independent outlets like *Ammannet* struggle for revenue in a space dominated by government-aligned media and with tech giants attracting most advertising revenue. Daoud ensures that his journalists can report freely, although it is harder to protect himself; he was recently a target of Pegasus spyware.

Daoud set up *Radio Al Balad* (initially called *Ammannet*), the Arab world's first internet radio station in 2000, later obtaining an FM licence, and he later set up the *Ammannet*

news portal. While radio continues to be a key part of CMN's work, Daoud admits this is an older audience, and today, *Ammannet's* social media reach is far greater.

CMN relies on foreign funding for its operations, which under Jordanian law must be approved by the government. The authorities frequently use this mechanism as leverage against independent media and civil society actors. Daoud faced this challenge in 2024 following the publication of a *Foreign Policy* article where he was critical of the censorship of journalists in the country. He was one of 35 people in Jordan targeted by the Pegasus spyware and CMN's funding was not approved for a long period, putting the media in serious jeopardy. It was at this point that EED provided CMN with emergency funding to enable it to pay salaries and annual radio licence fees.

© AmmanNet

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SERBIA

GLAS ŠUMADIJE – LOCAL INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM FOR THE CITIZENS OF KRAGUJEVAC

A veteran journalist from Kragujevac, Jovanka Nikolić had long witnessed the negative impact of unregulated privatisation on local media. This was what pushed her to set up *Glas Šumadije* in 2018. She also wanted to find a way to maintain her professional independence and integrity.

Thanks to EED's support, Jovanka was able to hire a team of young university-educated mainly female journalists, and develop its YouTube channel. Although Kragujevac only has 150,000 inhabitants, *Glas Šumadije's* website has 500,000 unique daily visitors.

Glas Šumadije is a media outlet embedded in its local community and is in constant dialogue with the public. Thanks to Jovanka's reputation as a trusted journalist and the media's rigorous fact-checking, it has gained the trust of citizens who see them as a force for positive change.

"People in Kragujevac say that if you want the local authorities to repair something in your street, you just need to call *Glas Šumadije*," says Jovanka.

The media's journalists covered recent local elections, investigating falsely registered voters, a common issue in Serbia, and organised debates between candidates from all political parties. The media also makes a point of covering positive local news. They reported on high levels of immunisation helping to combat vaccine scepticism and on a recent theatre festival organised by young people. Jovanka relates that her journalists are not afraid to speak out for the community and to be critical of institutions, when they do not work in the interest of the community.

© Glas Šumadije

> **"People in Kragujevac say that if you want the local authorities to repair something in your street, you just need to call** *Glas Šumadije***"**
>
> **- JOVANKA NIKOLIĆ**

© Glas Šumadije

© Glas Šumadije

UKRAINE

THEBUCHACITY – INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM AMID OCCUPATION AND LIBERATION

Oleksandr Ostapa initially established *TheBuchaCity* in 2015 as an Instagram account and over the years it became a local news website.

In 2022, the outlet played an instrumental role maintaining independent reporting in Bucha during Russia's occupation. When the invasion began, Oleksandr immediately adapted the platform to share crucial updates, track Russian military movements, and help locals reconnect with their loved ones. Volunteers joined Oleksandr to fact-check and report, turning the outlet into a key source of information and aid coordination.

Following Bucha's liberation, *TheBuchaCity* shifted its focus to ensuring transparency in the town's reconstruction, exposing corrupt contractors, and pushing for greater oversight of public funds.

© TheBuchaCity

The newsroom has since expanded, producing investigative reports, documentaries, and other content highlighting the challenges of war, local life, and rebuilding efforts. As Oleksandr explains, *TheBuchaCity* works hard every day to foster community activism and to inspire other cities with its independent grassroots journalism.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

DOKU.BA – SLOWER JOURNALISM AND STORYTELLING TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION AND CLICKBAIT

"We believe that it's only by telling stories about ourselves and others that we can understand society and change it for the better," says Osman Zukić, co-founder of *Doku.ba* in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This media platform creates long-form documentary reports and films, aiming to uncover stories often neglected by mainstream media, always maintaining what Osman calls a "human touch". He contrasts this with more lucrative, and more superficial, clickbait articles that dominate most of the country's media landscape.

With EED's support, the *Doku.ba* team has travelled across the country to produce a series of stories about activists working on human rights, women's empowerment, and the environment.

"There is a negative perception about activism here. People think it is just something you do to get a pay cheque. Many politicians want to discredit and silence activists. Our articles wanted to counter this narrative. We know those activists, and we know they are doing incredible things. That's why we wanted to share their stories," he says.

> "We believe that it's only by telling stories about ourselves and others that we can understand society and change it for the better"
>
> - OSMAN ZUKIĆ

INCOGNITO STORY

POLITICAL SATIRE*: USING LAUGHTER TO CRITIQUE THE RULING CLASS

A group of media professionals in a country with highly restricted freedom of speech decided to use a powerful weapon of resistance to defend democratic values and to mock obscurantism and censorship: laughter.

Inspired by an old satirical show that used to air before the country became a fully-fledged dictatorship, they decided to launch "Political Satire", a web show that impersonates members of the government, re-enacting news stories that resonate with a broad audience. The idea was simple: with a government deeply afraid of looking funny, ridiculing the political elite would showcase the absurdity of their actions and policies. They soon amassed almost 100,000 followers, posting their content on YouTube and on TikTok, engaging with younger audiences.

The core team and their freelance collaborators are all media professionals, from screenwriters to journalists and television producers. Most of the creative process takes place remotely to protect the team's safety, and team members only meet in-person when they are filming episodes of the show. While some of the team live abroad, others still live inside the country where most of their audience is also based.

With EED core support, the group has been able to produce episodes of the show more regularly, increasing their outreach and social media following. They have attracted new script writers to further improve the quality of their output and are working with lawyers to be better placed to face online threats.

* The organisation's name has been changed to protect the
  team's identity.

© Al Hudood

EED Alumni Stories

JORDAN

AL HUDOOD – USING SATIRE TO MAKE SENSE OF CURRENT EVENTS IN THE MENA REGION

In 2014, EED provided vital support to *Al Hudood*, a nascent Arab-speaking satirical website covering political events in Jordan and the wider MENA region. The media platform had become highly popular soon after its establishment, but it had struggled to officially register with the Jordanian authorities. This had also meant that prior to EED's funding, it could not attract external funding, as most investors were hesitant to fund what they saw as a highly political project.

Ten years later, *Al Hudood* (The Limits) is a fully-fledged satirical media outlet with a large following in the region and among the Arabic-speaking diaspora. It specialises in using deadpan humour to call out the hypocrisy of leaders in the MENA region and in the west. It criticises outlets that spread hate speech and fake news.

Over the years, *Al Hudood* has trialled various products and business models, from a print magazine to paid membership. It created an annual award for the worst of Arab journalism. Its in-person events organised in Jordan, Lebanon, and Europe, are often sold out.

"I think there is a strength to dealing with serious things lightly, because it allows you to see them with less of the crippling emotions that come with all the difficult situations that we have in the world. It triggers different parts of the brain. It allows people to engage with these topics in a healthier way. It can provide relief, which is incredibly valuable by itself," says founder Isam Uraiqat.

"I think there is a strength to dealing with serious things lightly"

- ISAM URAIQAT

مواطن

11.

"مواطن"

ما بعد الخطوط الحمراء

### قصة احتيال على التحديات

OMAN

A SPACE FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION FOR OMANI AND ARAB VOICES

Mohammed Al-Fazari, CEO and editor-in-chief, founded *Muwatin* in 2013 in Oman to publish content that, as he puts it, went "beyond the red lines", challenged government narratives and promoted rights and freedoms, in a region where few other independent media exist.

Three years later, Mohammed was forced into exile following a series of arrests in Oman. He moved to London and expanded the work of *Muwatin* to cover the entire Gulf region and the broader Arab world. "Operating the media from exile gives me the opportunity to explore the full potential of the platform on the editorial and financial levels," he says.

Since then, *Muwatin* has exponentially grown its reach through the production of high-quality in-depth pieces on issues including minority rights, the environment, corruption, and most importantly women's issues. The media makes a point of reinforcing women's rights to choice and agency within the culture that they live, rather than imposing western-led ideas of women's liberation. It has succeeded in starting important conversations.

The team behind *Muwatin* has big hopes and ambitions for the growth of the media and its contribution to a more democratic region. However, as Mohammed explains, their growth and impact depend on institutional funding. "Few donors work in the Gulf region, and given the burden on those exiled and the risks for those based in the region, investment in independent media has to be larger," he says.

© Muwatin
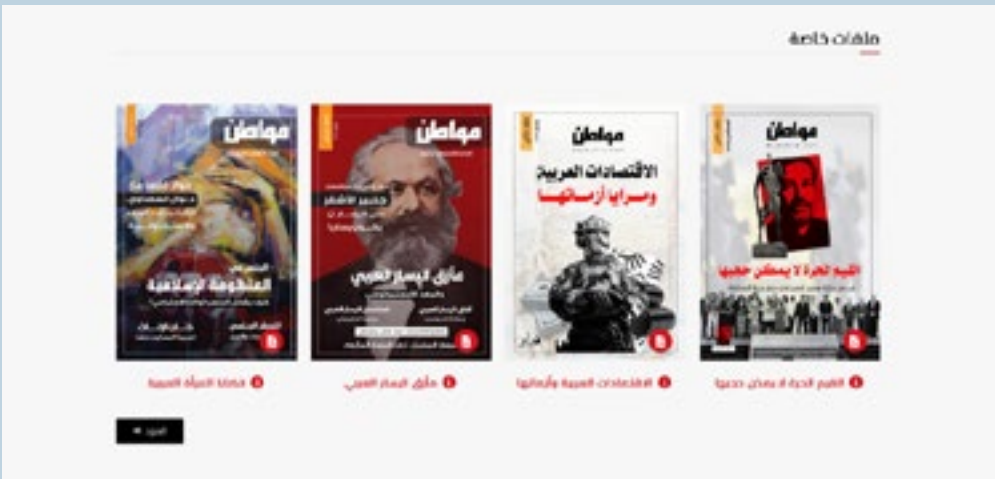
SPECIAL:

Community media fostering democracy in the Middle East and North Africa

Community media emerged as an important alternative to mainstream media in the MENA region following the Arab Spring. Unlike more mainstream media, community-based media are strongly anchored in their local communities, and they have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their interests, habits, and demands.

"Community media produce content that directly documents people's stories and needs, adding a democratic dimension to the media landscape. They provide tools for individuals to defend their rights and participate in public debate," say team members of *Campji,* a community media platform led by a well-established local NGO giving a voice to refugees in Lebanon.

BUILDING COMMUNITY TIES AND SHAPING POLITICAL AGENDAS

One of EED's partners is a radio station in a rural region in North Africa. "Our added value is our ability to produce content that is directly relevant to the inhabitants of our region. We focus on local challenges, from agriculture to the environment, and local economic conditions. We are more reactive to citizens' needs, reinforcing their sense of belonging to the community," they say.

Community media actively encourage their public to interact with them, and this in turn helps strengthen their bond with the local community. "People can call the radio station, take part in our shows, and express their worries. They can submit content, ask questions, interact with presenters and journalists" explains a member of the radio station's team. They relate that they invite their audience to propose topics of discussion, and they make all the station's projects available to the public on their web portal.

> "Community media produce content that directly documents people's stories and needs, adding a democratic dimension to the media landscape. They provide tools for individuals to defend their rights and participate in public debate"
>
> **- TEAM MEMBERS OF CAMPJI**

© Campji

In *Campji,* citizen journalists come from the community that they report on, and this proximity is key to fostering a close connection between their audience and their content creators.

"This allows us to produce content that genuinely reflects the culture and daily life of our target community," they say. By hiring local journalists, they are also creating job opportunities for youth refugees, who are typically economically disadvantaged.

Community media often work closely with civil society organisations and local authorities to better serve their communities.

"We regularly invite local authorities to our shows and public debates. This partnership allows us to be an intermediary between citizens and authorities, facilitating dialogue and encouraging a transparent approach to local problems," say representatives from the North African radio station.

The radio station also conducts cultural and social activities with local NGOs, which the team considers, "essential to reach common objectives and amplify the impact of civil society actions." The team works closely with a network of like-minded community media, which allows them to exchange ideas and jointly train young journalists.

Campji works in the fields of culture, education and development. "This connection provides the *Campji* media community with a supportive environment and a solid foundation to build its engagement," they say.

In some contexts, where information gaps are due to a very restrictive media landscape, community media are often the only credible alternative to pro-government media. This is also the case for one of EED's Syrian partners.

"We noticed that there were no independent media outlets conveying the truth to citizens in our province. Even alternative sources, such as Facebook pages, were controlled by the intelligence services and were spreading the same propaganda as state-controlled media," say EED's Syrian partner.

Over the years, community media platforms have provided valuable reporting for their communities. This has included reporting on security challenges faced, helping them to gain local audiences' trust and allowing them to influence local affairs.

"Without this support, we would have had to stop working"

- SYRIAN PARTNER

GIVING A VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

This proximity to locals enables community media to be more than just a platform for sharing information. They can amplify local voices, including those of youth, women, and marginalised groups. They can promote inclusivity and representation, and they can often directly influence local affairs.

Campji, for example, is committed to changing the narrative about refugees in Lebanon. "We strive to showcase their unique contributions and initiatives, helping to break the prevailing stereotypes," explain team members. The organisation has direct access to refugee camps that often cannot be reached by more traditional media.

This ability to fill information gaps is a powerful tool for many community media outlets.

LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND OTHER CHALLENGES

Community media face many of the same challenges as other independent media in the region, including fear of censorship, legal harassment, and shadow-banning on social media. Those operating in restrictive and/or politically sensitive environments explain that they face a lack of legal mechanisms to protect journalists.

Economic sustainability is a particular concern. Limited financial resources make it difficult to access proper equipment, affect their ability to regularly produce content, and mean they are overly reliant on volunteers. According to *Campji,* this "limits the media's ability to seek legal and technical support and institutionalise their work."

EED core support has provided a much-needed source of stability to community media in highly volatile contexts, which allows for higher-quality journalistic output. It has empowered marginalised groups, including refugees, to fully own and operate their own outlets, allowing them to amplify their voices and narratives beyond stereotypes and superficial news coverage.

"EED gave us the ability to remunerate our staff, who were then able to fully focus on their reporting job," says EED's Syrian partner. "Without this support, we would have had to stop working."

For security reasons, some partners are not named in this article

© Hicham Kayed

SPECIAL:

EED MENA media partners discuss challenges faced and make five recommendations

In April, EED brought 21 media partners from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to Brussels for important discussions on the challenges faced by media organisations in the region.

The partners discussed the important counterbalance that independent media offer locally and regionally, as civic space and freedom of information shrink across the MENA region and mainstream media prioritise official narratives or business interests. This is crucial at a time when misinformation and misleading narratives are rife.

CHALLENGES HAVE ESCALATED SINCE WAR IN GAZA

Partners noted that media actors in the region have long faced significant political, legal, and financial challenges. However, the war in Gaza has exacerbated these pressures, impacting the operations of media outlets throughout the region and forcing them to adapt and expand their editorial line.

Journalists covering the war from the frontlines face increased risks and responsibilities as they report on the reality of this war to the outside world. By the end of 2024, an estimated 141 media workers were killed since October 2023,[16] most of them Palestinian journalists.

Media outlets dedicate considerable time and resources to fact-checking and debunking unverified news due to the deluge of disinformation. There has been a sharp increase in online censoring of Palestinian content. EED's partners reported that several of their websites have been hacked and their social media accounts shadow banned.

Challenges that existed prior to the war, such as political persecution, remain pressing issues. Journalists are often the butt of attacks and intimidation tactics that force them to self-censor their reporting. Partners also pointed to the growing trend of repressive legal frameworks that restrict journalistic freedom of expression.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Financial sustainability continues to be a major concern throughout the region, as independent media outlets compete for limited resources. Most mainstream media are either state-sponsored or business-affiliated, and this has resulted in a proliferation of polarising and misleading narratives. Partners argued that this situation undermines the integrity of journalism and makes it even more difficult for independent outlets to survive.

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16   Accessed at: **https://cpj.org/full-coverage-israel-gaza-war/**

THE JOURNALISTS MADE FIVE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY MAKERS:

- **Scale up support:** There needs to be a greater focus on longer-term and core funding, given the important role played by independent media outlets in supporting democracy. There should be realistic expectations about the self-sustainability of independent media outlets. Prioritisation of and investment in organisational sustainability, both in terms of their structural setup and editorial lines, requires time, human resources, and allocated funding.

- **Demand-driven not donor-driven:** Donors need to be receptive to the diverse needs of the various media actors and the different contexts in which they operate. Media actors should be viewed as equal partners in strengthening independent journalism and press freedom. Hyperlocal content, which can foster trust in media among local communities and counter disinformation, should be a particular focus.

- **Broaden evaluation criteria:** Donors should broaden evaluation criteria to prioritise qualitative indicators rather than just quantitative metrics. Indicators such as internal journalistic skill development, editorial quality, depth of investigative reporting, rigour of fact-checking procedures, and diversity of perspectives offer a more detailed image of a media organisation's impact and better demonstrate the role of journalism in educating the public, holding the authorities accountable, and fostering democratic discourse.

- **Ensure international solidarity and use diplomatic influence to support journalists:** This has proven to be an important form of protection to journalists, especially in repressive environments and during conflicts. It must also be recognised that in some highly repressive environments, partners might not wish to communicate their funding sources to the broader public, given the security risks associated with such disclosure.

- **Support is a political rather than a technical activity:** Support should be extended to media outlets that represent diverse voices, provided they uphold democratic values, thereby fostering pluralism and ensuring that a wide range of voices and opinions are heard in the media landscape.

There needs to be a greater focus on longer-term and core funding

III. CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTICIPATION

Civic engagement empowers ordinary citizens to influence and oversee government actions, shaping policies that impact their lives. EED offers flexible support to civic activists and organisations, tailored to their evolving local needs.

At least one third of EED's grants are provided to civil activists, including grassroots organisations, new groups and individuals, environmental groups, as well as to more established organisations.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

This section of the report includes profiles of current EED's partners from Serbia, Ukraine, and Israel, as well as the profile of an established civil rights-based organisation in Syria which EED first supported in 2016.

At least 1/3
of EED grants are provided to civil activists

© Klara i Rosa + Sezerda Zsófia

"They came from all over the Balkans, and had a unique opportunity to meet, make new connections, and start new projects"

- GORDANA VUKOV CIGANJIK

SERBIA

KLARA I ROSA – ARTS AND CULTURE TRANSCENDING ETHNIC DIVIDES

"We take pride in being a multinational city, but we realised that we had no space to unite and gather across ethnic lines. Culture in Subotica is often a tool for local authorities to foster divisions among different national groups," says Gordana Vukov Ciganjik, co-founder of the cultural association *Klara i Rosa* in Vojvodina, Serbia.

With *Klara i Rosa,* Gordana, an actress by profession, and fellow founder Danijela Mamužić, a sculptor, wanted to offer a place for cultural exchange, dialogue, and citizen engagement through art that went beyond ethnic origin. Today, *Klara i Rosa* is working to unite Subotica's divided community through arts and culture, providing a space for cultural exchange that transcends ethnic lines.

For nine years, the group has organised events in public spaces, including exhibitions and workshops. Thanks to EED's grant, the association has now been able to rent a permanent venue, where they host concerts, film screenings, ceramic classes, and discussions, among many other activities. They also run a radio station called *Plac*.

One of *Klara i Rosa's* most successful activities is an annual retreat for female artists. "Some participants said it changed their life. They came from all over the Balkans, and had a unique opportunity to meet, make new connections, and start new projects," says Gordana.

© My City

UKRAINE

MY CITY – TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES IN PEACEFUL TIMES AND IN WARTIME

"It was about ten years ago that I realised that doing business alone was not enough. I wanted to do more. I wanted to help make Ukraine a better place to live," says Artem Borodatiuk, founder of the *My City* platform that facilitates the development of social projects in southern Ukraine.

To date, almost 200 initiatives have benefited from the support provided by *My City,* which works through a digital platform promoting social projects across the south of Ukraine. Its team provides training and expertise, and helps activists develop and implement their ideas. It also helps them raise funds. Almost 16,000 people have contributed to these projects through the *My City* platform, by initiating them, promoting them, or making donations.

During the initial stages of the Russian full-scale invasion, the *My City* team focused on humanitarian support, although today this has evolved to increasing demand for social projects. Funding is a significant challenge. Artem notes the need to train more activists and community leaders and to involve more entrepreneurs in these projects. An EED grant helped *My City* cover core costs, including the salaries of its 20 staff members, during this difficult period.

Today, Artem hopes that *My City* can serve as a reference for organisations seeking to implement social projects and to promote them. He wants to broaden the community potential of changemakers, who can network and develop their societies. *My City's* ambition is now to pass on their expertise to thousands of other organisations, so they too can crowdfund and implement their own community initiatives.

© Citizens for the Environment

© Citizens for the Environment

ISRAEL

### CITIZENS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT EMPOWERING THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY TO FIGHT AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS

For more than 30 years, *Citizens for the Environment* has been at the forefront of the fight against pollution and environmental damage in Galilee in northern Israel and the effect this has on the Palestinian community. Palestinian towns in Israel are poorer, underfunded, and ill-equipped to handle fires, floods, or other environmental disasters. They have very high levels of pollution due to the illegal burning of waste.

Citizens for the Environment is working to empower Palestinians in Israel to push for policy changes and to take their place in decision-making circles. With EED funding, they have trained a cohort of 20 young activists—many of them professionals in the field of environmental protection or involved in local politics—to engage in environmental advocacy at both a local and national level. This project has continued even as the war in Gaza has disrupted the lives of the Palestinian community in Israel. For many participants, the training group has become a source of support at a very difficult time.

Today, many of the graduates of this and other programmes by *Citizens for the Environment* continue to be active on environmental committees in their local municipalities. They are building partnerships between citizens and local authorities and are slowly but steadily developing a network committed to improving environmental policy and making sure that Palestinian voices are heard.

Citizens for the Environment is working to empower Palestinians in Israel to push for policy changes and to take their place in decision-making circles
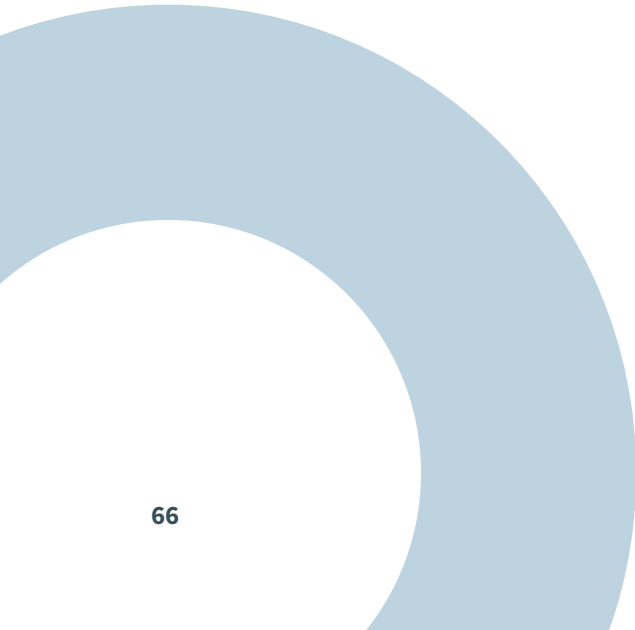
© Badael

EED Alumni Stories

SYRIA

BADAEL – FOSTERING CIVIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

In 2013, when Oula Ramadan founded *Badael,* a rights-based organisation that works closely with local civil society and grassroots organisations in Syria to foster transformative justice, the conflict had entered a particularly violent and complex stage.

"At that time, many people felt there was no alternative to Bashar Al-Assad and to militarisation. *Badael* means 'alternatives' in Arabic, and it is the foundation for our philosophy, as we believe there are always alternatives," says Oula.

Over the past 11 years, *Badael* has emerged as a key actor helping to strengthen civic awareness and community mobilisation in northern Syria. It has worked with over 300 grassroots civic groups providing training on human rights topics, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and advocacy, as well as coaching and providing general support to partners. It also provides small subgrants to assist grassroots groups led by women. Grants are provided following coaching and training programmes, when participants are invited to submit applications.

"We invest in people. We provide them with spaces for collective thinking and collective problem-solving. We help to bring them together and to form networking alliances," she says.

Badael also runs a research programme that aims to advance grassroots feminist knowledge in Syria and to promote better informed approaches to Syrian memory and citizenship. Over the years, the team has recorded hundreds of hours of oral history from Syrian women refugees in Turkey, which Oula believes has a strategic value in Syria's future and gives voice to marginalised stories.

"In 20 years' time, the new generation of Syrians must be able to know what happened. That is why we have documented the perspectives of these women, their experiences of detention, revolution, siege, and of being refugees. Through our oral history work, we are preserving the narratives of their untold stories," she says.

Badael now has team members working in Syria, Iraq, and Germany. EED initially provided the organisation with a bridging grant in 2016, and this year, it provided a second such grant when they faced an urgent funding gap.

IV. HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND MONITORING

Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of opinion, expression, and association, is a cornerstone of democracy.

EED supports human rights activists who are working to defend these rights and raise awareness and understanding among citizens.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

In 2024, EED support has enabled human rights defenders to continue their work, even in the most difficult of circumstances. In this section, we include profiles of partners from North Macedonia, Palestine, and Turkey, and we also include the profile of a Syrian partner first supported by EED in 2017.

© Glasen Tekstilec

NORTH MACEDONIA

GLASEN TEKSTILEC – DEFENDING THE RIGHTS OF TEXTILE WORKERS

For decades, the city of Štip has been at the centre of North Macedonia's textile industry, a popular destination for brands looking to produce goods in Europe due to low labour costs and poorly implemented labour legislation. In 2017, *Glasen Tekstilec* emerged as an independent organisation to raise awareness of systemic issues faced by workers in the industry, including mobbing and low salaries, to educate workers on their rights, and to lobby for laws to protect textile workers.

As *Glasen Tekstilec* president, Kristina Ampeva, explains, the organisation was determined to provide an alternative to traditional unions. These have typically been viewed by workers as serving the interests of political parties. They are often reluctant to advocate for workers' rights in the private sector.

"Our first success back in 2017 was to successfully lobby to raise the minimum wage for textile workers, making it equal to that of other sectors. We also successfully lobbied for a law instituting Sundays as non-working days," she says.

Glasen Tekstilec provided free legal support to 12,000 workers during the Covid-19 pandemic and succeeded in preventing the introduction of illegal overtime. It collaborates with regional and European experts about sustainability practices and respecting workers' rights, sharing knowledge with them. It was one of the first organisations to start a public conversation on topics such as the illegal layoff of pregnant workers.

Today, *Glasen Tekstilec* is a trusted institution and a go-to resource for workers in the industry. "Everyone knows us, every worker has my phone number," says Kristina.

With EED's support, *Glasen Tekstilec* conducted capacity-building workshops for its staff, training them in advocacy, project writing, and management, and effective engagement with stakeholders. The grant also helped them to produce more informational material for workers and to amplify *Glasen Tekstilec's* social media presence.

One of *Glasen Tekstilec's* latest projects is the establishment of a workers' union to work in parallel with the NGO, that will eventually be able to sustain itself through membership fees. "The more members we have in the union, the more powerful it will be," says Kristina. "People don't traditionally trust unions, but they believe in us. We want to continue growing so we can put more pressure on the institutions and achieve more victories for workers' rights."

© Glasen Tekstilec

"The more members we have in the union, the more powerful it will be"

- KRISTINA AMPEVA

PALESTINE

MADA – DOCUMENTING THE RISE IN VIOLATIONS AGAINST PALESTINIAN JOURNALISTS

MADA, the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedom, was established in 2006 to document violations against Palestinian journalists and promote freedom of expression. These risks have increased hugely since the start of the war, given the high death toll among Palestinian journalists and media workers.

Shireen Al-Khattib notes that *MADA* documents 21 types of Israeli violations against Palestinian journalists, including physical attacks, killings, and online attacks, across the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The organisation reported a dramatic rise in violations during the war in Gaza, where journalists are working in dire conditions, many of them living and working out of tents, and repeatedly forced to move due to constant risks to their lives. There has also been an increase in arrests of journalists in the West Bank during this period. "They are arrested because they are journalists. The Israeli authorities do not need to have, provide or find a reason," she says.

MADA provides legal assistance and media training to journalists and advocates for legislative changes to protect freedom of expression. EED provided *MADA* with funding at a critical moment when they faced financial difficulties. Thanks to this grant, the organisation has now recruited an employee responsible for fundraising. It now has five different ongoing projects.

© MADA

© MADA

© MADA

© Freedom of Belief Initiative

TURKEY

FREEDOM OF BELIEF INITIATIVE – MONITORING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HATE CRIMES

In 2011, Mine Yildirim was writing her doctoral thesis on the collective dimension of freedom of religion or belief in public and international law when she noticed that there were no human rights-based initiatives promoting freedom of religion and belief for all in Turkey.

She started *Freedom of Belief Initiative* as a blog monitoring changes to freedom of belief legislation. Now, it is a fully-fledged research and advocacy project. In addition to its core focus on freedom of believe legislation, it also covers interconnected rights, such as freedom of association, non-discrimination, and gender equality. EED's support covered the costs of part-time salaries for staff to conduct monitoring work on religious freedom and religion-based hate crimes.

Every year, Mine and her colleagues visit the Turkish Parliament to present their findings to MPs. Their research is also made public and it has been used by lawyers to support court arguments, by journalists and international organisations, and as an advocacy tool by minority rights groups and other civil society organisations.

Working with local authorities is a central part of the organisation's work. "It can be easier to find an opening in local administrations, less so with the central government," Mine says. She is cautiously optimistic that this may improve in the future following local elections, which saw gains by secular and pro-Kurdish parties.

© Krzysztof&Malgorzata_Pacula (Syrians4Truth)

EED Alumni Stories

SYRIA

SYRIANS FOR TRUTH AND JUSTICE – SHEDDING LIGHT ON HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Bassam Al Hamad explains that it was thanks to seed funding from EED, that *Syrians for Truth and Justice* (STJ) was set up in 2017. Now a leading human rights NGO, STJ documents human rights violations perpetrated by all sides in the Syrian conflict. It focuses on human rights violations that tend to be less monitored, such as economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights.

Bassam explains that this was STJ's objective from the offset. "We believe that justice must be inclusive. If we want real justice for all Syrian people, we need to document violations by all parties involved in the conflict," he says.

STJ documents human rights violations, publishes reports on its website and via its social media, submits information and complaints to international mechanisms, and provides legal support to victims of economic, civil and social rights violations. It has a team based both inside and outside Syria.

While STJ's work has a particular focus on northern Syria, it has focal points in governates throughout the country. It works closely with United Nations mechanisms. Earlier this year, STJ submitted the first criminal complaint on violations in northwestern Syria in collaboration with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR).

Bassam notes that today, donors and other actors are more aware of taking an inclusive approach to the monitoring of human rights violations. He sees this as evidence of the effectiveness of STJ's work.

"There is a greater emphasis today on inclusiveness, and condemning violations by all parties, not just by the Syrian government. This is very important, as selective or biased justice will not bring real justice to people," he says.

In recent years, STJ has attracted funding from a variety of donors which has enabled it to expand its work. EED recently provided STJ with a bridging grant to cover a shortfall in funding. Bassam is now focused on planning for STJ's future in a context where funding to Syrian civil society organisations is decreasing.

The collapse of the Syrian regime and the end of 2024 has presented a unique opportunity for STJ to expand the geographical areas of its work and enabled it to access new evidence of human rights violations, including dozens of official documents from Syrian detention centres, as well as to dozens of survivors who emerged from those places. STJ has also begun to reach new victims of the violations that began to emerge after the overthrow of the Assad regime.

V. WOMEN'S CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Empowering women and enabling women and girls to participate fully as equal citizens in political and social life are fundamental to democracy.

Democratisation and women's rights movements are deeply interconnected. Women's engagement is a recurring focus throughout EED's funding portfolio.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

This section of the Annual Report contains profiles of organisations empowering women in Moldova and in Kosovo.

© Femeile Moldovei

MOLDOVA

FEMEILE MOLDOVEI – BRINGING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

Femeile Moldovei, or Moldova's Women, is changing the futures of women in rural Moldova. "We are a platform to support women to have a stronger voice in society. We work to empower them, so that they can have confidence and trust in themselves and in their power," says Iana Stantieru, one of the initiative's co-founders.

"We educate them through training, mentoring, and residential schools. We help them develop their communication skills and leadership capacity, as well as their media skills. We give them technical skills, so that they can better position themselves within their

current roles," she continues. She explains that it was the experience of working abroad that convinced her of the importance of setting up this platform.

"I've seen women's empowerment and engagement in different contexts. There is huge pressure on women here to be perfect mothers, perfect wives, to look great, and to hold down a job, but little of what they do is really valued. I wanted to change these perceptions and to make women's voices heard," she says.

© Femeile Moldovei

"We are a platform to support women to have a stronger voice in society"

- IANA STANTIERU

Femeile Moldovei started as a series of two-hour meetings in villages with local women about their lives and needs. It was thanks to these discussions that the need for training and mentorship programmes emerged.

The initiative engages with women of all ages, backgrounds, and political views, including women who work as teachers, local administrators, library directors, business owners, and medical practitioners, among many others. These are women already active in their communities. They are "mini-influencers", according to Iana Stantieru, co-founder of *Femeile Moldovei*.

"We put women from different counties in Moldova together. We have a strong mentoring programme. Sometimes, it's reverse mentoring, because every woman knows something. They learn so much from each other," she says.

While *Femeile Moldovei* does not engage in politics, Iana acknowledges that the initiative clearly has political influence. "Anyone can take part in our project. There are no boundaries when it comes to political affiliation, but we're verbal that we're fighting for a pro-European future of our country and women need to have a voice in this," she says.

© Femeile Moldovei

KOSOVO

FOURTH WAVE – SUPPORTING VICTIMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

"I was a vocal feminist activist in Mitrovica. I saw young girls who had potential, who could do more," says Nerimane Ferizi, founder of the feminist NGO *Fourth Wave* in Kosovo.

She explains that during *Fourth Wave's* first year, they organised 13 actions of "feminist revindication" where women demanded their rights. This was over twice the number of actions planned. "Now, every week we go on television, and we talk about women's position in society," she says.

Fourth Wave supports women survivors of gender-based violence with advice and legal assistance. She explains that in doing this work, they are fighting against Kosovo's deep-rooted patriarchal traditions. They also monitor legal cases, which includes convincing reticent judges to let them attend court hearings.

Nerimane believes that there is much to do to improve the situation for women in Kosovo. *Fourth Wave* is now printing a "Feminist Manifesto" that brings together the group's key demands. This will be distributed around the country's communities and institutions. They believe that this, alongside their training sessions and debates, will help plant the seed for women's empowerment in the country.

## "I saw young girls who had potential, who could do more"

- NERIMANE FERIZI

VI. INCLUSIVE SOCIETY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND GENDER IDENTITY

LGBTQI+ individuals, people from ethnic and religious minorities, and people with disabilities experience daily discrimination and exclusion in many of the countries where EED works, limiting their ability to exercise their democratic rights.

EED supports a variety of organisations that promote awareness of LGBTQI+ and minority issues, empower communities, and work to shift societal attitudes and improve the conditions in which these groups live. Rising nationalism and populism in regions like the Middle East, the Western Balkans, and Russia have intensified the challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community and other minorities, who increasingly encounter hate speech, physical attacks, and state-led discrimination and repression.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

This section of the report includes profiles of organisations from Turkey and Kosovo that are creating spaces for LGBTQI+ people.
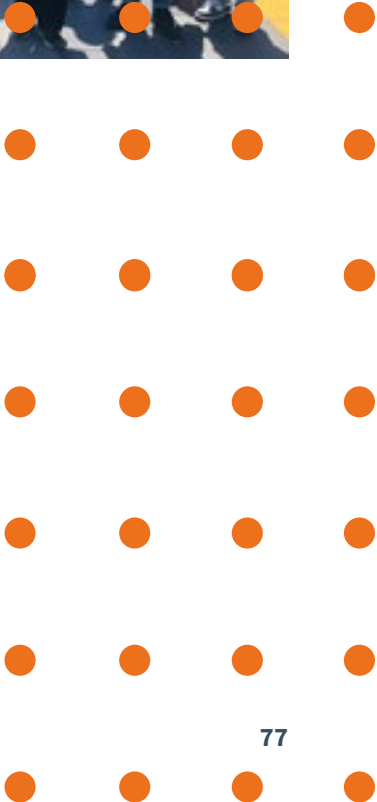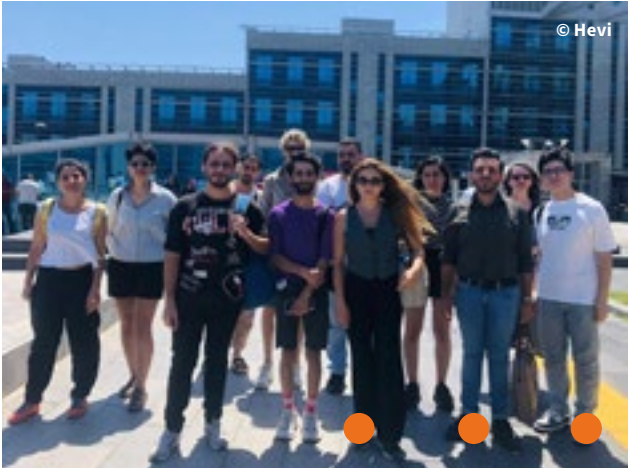
© Hevi

© Hevi

"LGBTQI+ refugees face serious safety threats. While international protection mandates safeguard migrants, LGBTQI+ refugees often feel unprotected and experience widespread rights violations"

- MÜZEYYEN ARAÇ

TURKEY

HEVI – CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR QUEER REFUGEES AND MINORITIES

Being queer and Kurdish in Turkey means facing double discrimination. For Müzeyyen Araç, it seemed almost impossible to find a place where both these identities could be accepted. This lead to them founding *Hevi* in 2013 as a platform to defend the rights of marginalised groups in Turkey.

While the project initially targeted queer Kurdish people in Istanbul, their first-hand experience with displacement led them to expand its reach to support queer refugees arriving in Turkey. "LGBTQI+ refugees face serious safety threats. While international protection mandates safeguard migrants, LGBTQI+ refugees often feel unprotected and experience widespread rights violations," says Müzeyyen.

Hevi has faced many hurdles over the years, not least of which has been dealing with state authorities' hostility towards queer asylum seekers. With the backing of EED, *Hevi* has now expanded its reach and scope. The team offers 24/7 multilingual support to LGBTQI+ refugees and is advocating for legal reforms in the country.

The *Hevi* team hopes to contribute to a positive transformation in Turkey where all communities, including refugees and other minorities, are treated with dignity and respect.

KOSOVO

DYLBERIZM – BUILDING AN ALBANIAN-LANGUAGE ARCHIVE OF QUEER HISTORY

Dylber or *Rainbow* has long been used as a slur in Albanian to label effeminate young men. Now, it has been reclaimed as an Albanian-language equivalent to queer by *Dylberizm*, Kosovo's first LGBTQI+ platform.

Initially launched as an Instagram page, the project aims to preserve the history of queer people in Kosovo, empower the community, and offer its members a safe space. *Dylberizm* is now a fully-fledged NGO. It publishes interviews with LGBTQI+ activists and translates queer literature into Albanian.

More importantly, it allows queer people to connect with and support one another. People can share their stories and experiences and find support via an anonymised forum on their website.

In 2024, *Dylberizm* celebrated the first edition of the Pristina Queer Festival. For three days, the city saw concerts, live drag performances, and movie screenings celebrating local queer culture. The event attracted attendees from across the Western Balkans. Now, the team is working on the festival's next edition, which they hope will become the main event for queer expression in Kosovo.

© Dylberizm
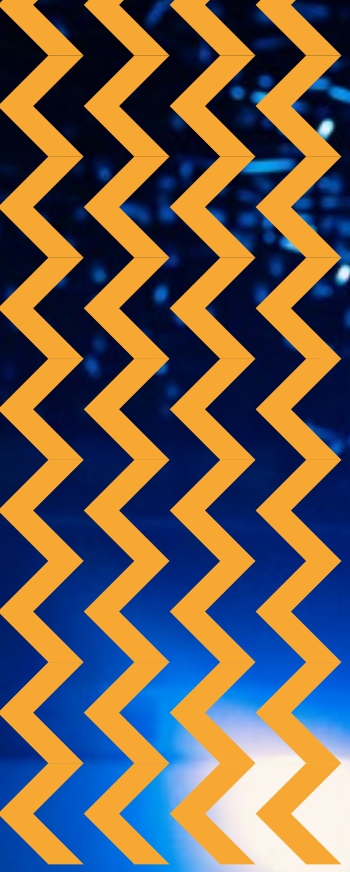
VII. ARTS AND CULTURE

Arts and cultural activities often serve as gateways to activism, allowing individuals to convey ideas and advocate for democratic values in ways that can be both impactful and safer than conventional forms of activism.

EED supports various arts and culture initiatives that promote freedom of expression and encourage people, including marginalised groups, to engage in activism and public life.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

This section includes profiles of partners from Sudan, Ukraine, and Armenia, all of whom see arts and cultural activities as important vehicles to promote and support democracy.
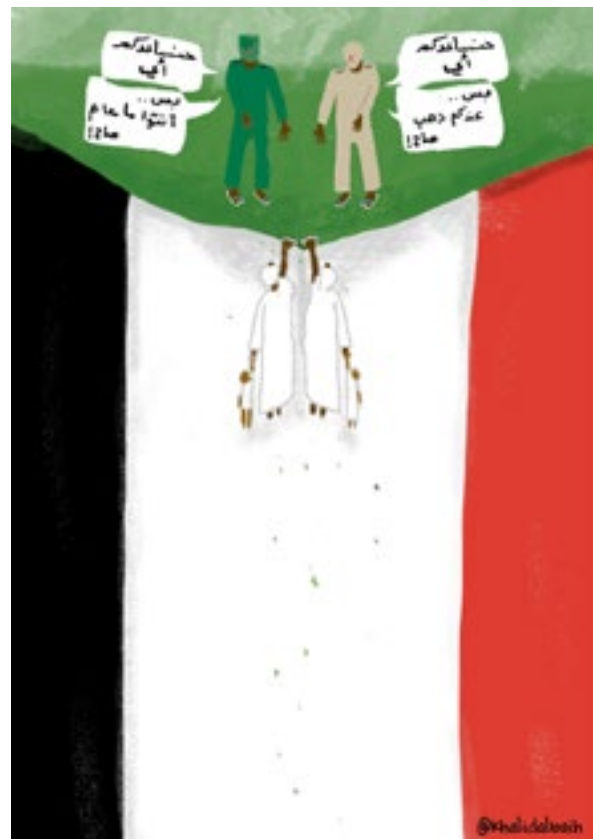

Man in green: "We will help you, but you are not with them, right?"
Man in beige: "We will help you. But do you have gold, though?"
© Khalid Albaih

SUDAN

KHALID ALBAIH – USING CARTOONS TO GIVE A VOICE TO SUDANESE PEOPLE

Khalid Albaih spent his childhood reading Belgian comics as he grew up abroad, far from his native Sudan. As a teenager, he discovered political cartoons in Arabic through his father's magazines, which sparked an interest in politics and allowed him to see himself and the Arab world more represented in the art that he loved.

A few years before the Arab Spring, he started posting his own work on his online page *Khartoon.* But while the public, especially young people, was enthusiastic about his cartoons, the Sudanese government soon came to see them as a threat, and he was forced to seek asylum in Europe. Now living between Qatar and Norway, he continues to advocate for human rights in Sudan, expressing his opinion through cartoons and articles published by international outlets, from *Al Jazeera* to *the Guardian*.

Khalid is committed to engendering a new generation of cartoonists in Sudan. "I came from a privileged background, so I wanted to pay it forward and help young cartoonists," he says. The project started with an online cartooning competition for young talents and with EED's support, it is now being further developed into an online residency programme. There are opportunities to connect the artists with international cartoon platforms to promote their work.

These young cartoonists represent an invaluable first-hand source about the war in Sudan, filling a considerable information gap. "Us Sudanese need to get a fair chance for the world to know what's going on, we do not want to be reduced to a small article on the fifth page of a newspaper. Those young cartoonists are chronicling their daily life, how they are being displaced, are writing our history," he says.

UKRAINE

TETYANA HOLUBOVA AND NAFTA THEATRE –
REVITALISING UKRAINIAN IDENTITY THROUGH THE THEATRE

The *Nafta Theatre* in Kharkiv provides a vital space for citizens to reflect on the ongoing war and on their Ukrainian identity. Located less than an hour away from the Russian border, Kharkiv is under daily missile attack. Operational director Tetyana Holubova explains that Nafta has remained resilient throughout the onslaught of Russia's full-scale invasion, despite having to initually pause its activities for one year.

Nafta emerged in 2018 as an artistic movement to showcase the Ukrainian identity of Kharkiv and to celebrate artistic developments in the city.

"The myths generated by Russian propaganda have been poisoning the minds of Kharkiv residents for a very long time," Tetyana says. "At the same time, the city has a very strong community that has a clear Ukrainian identity, and this community has grown tremendously in the past few years.

We want to support these people. That's why we're building more Ukrainian-speaking spaces for them and constructing more cultural bridges through our activities."

Nafta's first post-war show, a comedy, focused on hope amid the hardship. They later staged productions focusing on the war's impact, including "Someone Like Me" that shared real stories from Ukrainians, from children to seniors, who have been impacted by the war. Tetyana explains that theatre can help audiences to process the constant threats in their daily lives.

With support from EED, *Nafta* is continuing to produce art that connects the Kharkiv community. The troop has toured Europe and it is continuing to expand its troupe by training new actors.

Nafta Theatre ©Oleksandr Osipov

ARMENIA

FOCUS ART NGO – FOSTERING A CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE ARTS

In today's world, photography, video productions, and art are often used to undermine democracy. *Focus Art* has long been doing the opposite, using arts and artistic education to foster a more democratic culture in Armenia, and supporting future generations of leaders.

Nora Galfayan, co-founder of *Focus Art,* explains that it aims to prioritise local issues, activism and education in the visual arts.

Initially focused on broadcasting stories, *Focus Art* launched the "MediaLab" project to bring about more sustainable change. "MediaLab is a one-year educational program for people who want to use the tools of contemporary art for societal change. There are artists using visual arts such as photography, graphic design or sound, but there are also students coming from the social or humanitarian studies who want to learn these tools and this type of thinking," she says.

Through MediaLab, students are provided with free theoretical and practical artistic courses, allowing them to develop and exhibit artistic projects addressing social and political challenges. Many of the programme's alumni have become changemakers through documentary filmmaking, photography, and media studies at international institutions.

Another groundbreaking initiative of *FocusArt* is the creation of an archive of social movements, including physical and digital archival materials, photos, videos, documents, and posters. The team believes that preserving, centralising, and sharing these materials is essential to preserve Armenia's contemporary history. Core funding from EED has helped make this project happen.

Despite its successes, the organisation faces significant challenges. It still has no permanent space and generational renewal is a constant concern. Yet today, *Focus Art's* work is vitally important given the years of crisis and instability in the country. Nora firmly believes that creativity, art sensitivity, and critical thinking are the recipe needed to support healthy democratic practices.

> **Focus Art has long been doing the opposite, using arts and artistic education to foster a more democratic culture in Armenia, and supporting future generations of leaders**

VIII. YOUTH

Youth engagement in democracy is vital to ensure that democratic systems continue to evolve to address modern challenges and that they can be inclusive and adaptive societies.

Youth bring fresh ideas, challenge the status quo, and drive innovation. Many civil society organisations throughout the European Neighbourhood region are led by young people or are engaging with young people.

EED ADDED VALUE IN 2024

This section of the report includes profiles of initiatives from Morocco, Moldova, and North Macedonia that are providing spaces for young people to have a voice in their societies and their democratic futures.

© National Youth Council of Moldova

© Young Creators Association

MOROCCO

YOUNG CREATORS ASSOCIATION "DIALOGUE FOR DEMOCRACY" – A BRIDGE BETWEEN YOUTH AND DECISION-MAKERS IN MOROCCO

"We try to create a neutral space where people can come and speak to each other without polarisation," says Lahcen Chuis, who leads the *Young Creators Association* (AJC), together with Hassan Bousmene. The organisation is breaking barriers by fostering dialogue between Moroccan youth and decision-makers through its initiative "Dialogue for Democracy".

Founded in Guelmim-Oued Noun, a marginalised region in the southwest of Morocco, the AJC started as a university club in Agadir and has grown into an independent association that promotes creativity, democratic dialogue, and human rights among the region's youth.

AJC is raising awareness of topics that are rarely discussed in public, such as educating young people on sexual and reproductive health, enabling social development, and supporting young people, especially young girls, from marginalised rural areas.

AJC's Dialogue for Democracy platform, developed with EED's support, is the first of its kind in Guelmim, offering young people the opportunity to directly engage with politicians and decision-makers. The initiative empowers youth by allowing them to choose which decision-makers are featured on the platform. This is helping young people's voices to be heard in a region where opportunities for youth engagement are limited. Gender equality is central to the platform's work.

Lahcen explains that Dialogue for Democracy holds politicians accountable by questioning their policies and actions, addressing the needs of marginalised youth, and countering misinformation. He admits that it has faced resistance from some quarters, but he underlines their determination to remain transparent. He explains that AJC applies further public pressure by publishing the names of individuals who refuse to participate in the Dialogue.

The initiative has already had tangible results, including through the revival of the "Equality, Equal Opportunities and Gender Approach Committee" in Guelmim. This body was reactivated following youth calls for civil society involvement. Since then, local councils have invited youth organisations to engage in discussions on upcoming projects and budgets.

AJC's work is expanding, with growing interest from young volunteers and collaborations across the region. With EED's support, AJC has strengthened its capacity and has set up its own studio, which has enabled the platform to broaden its impact.

© Space Tetova

NORTH MACEDONIA

SPACE TETOVA – A CULTURAL CENTRE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE THAT HAS DEFEATED THE ODDS

Tetova, a mainly Albanian-speaking city, is the third-largest city in North Macedonia. It boasts two universities and has a significant student community.

Yet, as *Space Tetova* founder Trime Halili explains, "You can feel the depression among young people because there is nothing to do. There is nowhere to meet people. There is no club. We used to say, that no one dances in this city… We wanted to give something back and develop an inclusive space for all young people."

Trime was in Kosovo when she discovered the youth club *Termokiss*, a former EED partner. She immediately knew the project had to be replicated at home. In 2018, she obtained local authorities' permission to use an abandoned radio station and *Space Tetova* was born to foster a culture of volunteering among the city's youth. Over four years, the group renovated the space, transforming a derelict building into a vibrant hub. In 2020, EED provided a grant to the group to enable them to expand their activities.

In 2022, the organisation faced a crisis as politics intervened and a new mayor gave them five days to move out of the space. Despite an advocacy and media campaign, the authorities forced their hand, changing the locks and blocking activists' access to the building overnight.

EED provided *Space Tetova* with an emergency grant enabling them to rent new premises. Once again, volunteers have helped to make the new centre a vibrant space, even turning an outdoor area into a garden. Trime and other members of the community are determined to ensure the project can become sustainable. They are hopeful of soon finding a new public building, as they cannot afford to pay rent in the long term.

> "We wanted to give something back and develop an inclusive space for all young people"
>
> - TRIME HALILI
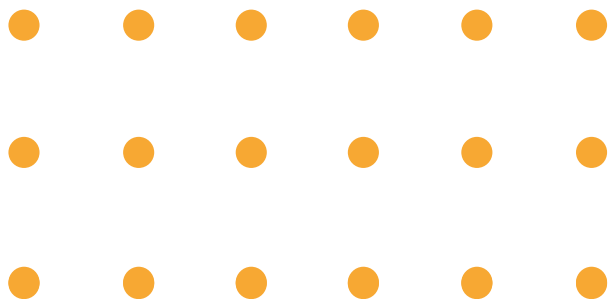
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"It's easy to meet to play football; it's less easy to go to an event and listen to someone talking about the importance of engaging in decision-making processes"

- GRIGORE RINJA

MOLDOVA

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF MOLDOVA – CREATING A GENERATION OF ACTIVE CITIZENS

Founded in 1999, the National Youth Council of Moldova is one of the biggest structures in the country for youth representation in civic life, an umbrella organisation including 36 groups across Moldova.

One of its main goals is to increase youth participation in elections, both as voters and as candidates. The Council obtained EED funding for the 2023 local elections for a project that hosted debates and provided mentorship to young locally elected officials. This project culminated in the creation of the "National Congress of Young Mayors and Local Councillors", a platform for young, elected officials to network and support each other.

"It can be hard to motivate young people, especially in rural areas," says Grigore Rinja, the project coordinator. "It's easy to meet to play football; it's less easy to go to an event and listen to someone talking about the importance of engaging in decision-making processes."

Ahead of the October 2024 referendum on Moldova's EU accession, the team and their partner organisations worked hard to engage youth in debates on EU integration, including in areas particularly targeted by Russian misinformation such as in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

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SYRIA:

EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA TO BUILD A NEW AND DEMOCRATIC SYRIA

The fall of Bashar El Assad and the Syrian regime at the beginning of December 2024 put an end to decades of dictatorship, fierce repression, and the most serious human rights violations.

This historic moment offers a significant window of opportunity for Syrian civil society to contribute to building a new democratic Syria and for the international community, including donors, to reinforce support to Syrian civil society and independent media. These actors have a vital role to play in this period of transition, not only as safeguards and watchdogs, but also as an active force to push for the construction and emergence of a democratic Syria respectful of all its components without any discrimination. It is their shared responsibility to shape this transitional phase that can cement future democracy standards.

Existing networks of Syrian civil society, including many of EED's partners, provide for a strong network, capable of incubating and fostering a just and a gradual democratic transition in Syria and of navigating the significant challenges that lie ahead.

CHALLENGES FACED BY CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE INITIAL PERIOD

EED's partners have identified the initial challenges that will inform the focus of their work.

Firstly, it will be vital to rebuild trust among different communities, given the 13 years of conflict, local military conflicts, risks of potential sectarian violence and retaliation against communities and individuals considered as supportive of the regime, and tensions that may result from the return of IDPs and refugees, among others.

Secondly, civil society must push for accountability, rule of law and the design and implementation of a political transition roadmap to ensure a fair and inclusive criminal and transitional justice. They must commit to a political transition roadmap that complies with relevant provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which includes a new constitution and free and fair elections.

Thirdly, it is vital to encourage good governance and efficient and transparent institutions, by focusing on local governance and institutions and pushing for community participation and engagement of all sectors of society.

Finally, there will need to be a focus on fighting mis- and dis-information and promoting access to free and independent information, by supporting the consolidation of independent local media.

EMERGENCY GRANT SCHEME FOR SYRIAN PARTNERS LAUNCHED

At its December meeting, the EED Executive Committee approved an Emergency Grant scheme for EED's Syrian partners, enabling EED to provide fast top-up and emergency grants to existing or former grantees, so that they could seize the momentum of this huge change.

In this new evolving situation, civil society and activists will need to intervene on multiple levels in a very complex context while also adapting to the new political, military and security situation.

To date, EED has provided emergency grants to actors from across Syria to help them to increase their capacity and respond to significantly increased needs. Many of EED's partners have already conducted assessment missions and have travelled back to previously inaccessible regions. They are reconnecting with partners and are exploring opportunities for work that reflect society's needs.

Top-up support has been provided to EED's partner, *Syrians for Truth and Justice,* to enable the team to expand their work in regions and localities previously under the control of the regime and to monitor recent and ongoing violations affecting local communities, particularly vulnerable groups and minorities. They will continue their work of collecting evidence and testimonies of victims of violations of the last decade.

EED is also supporting three media initiatives, a local community media, a more established radio station focused on gender equality and women's rights, and a fact-checking platform. The objective is to enable these platforms to expand their coverage and reach in accordance with the new reality. This work is vital given increased risks of disinformation.

SUPPORTING SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY SINCE 2013

Since 2013, EED has supported many Syrian initiatives across the country and in exile, and they represent a solid network of democracy advocates, including civil society actors, grassroots initiatives, media and media-related initiatives.

In the past years, while general donor support to Syrian civil society decreased, EED's approach was to help local actors to maintain the civic space built since 2011, despite the odds. EED has continuously adapted its support to Syrian pro-democracy groups and actors to meet their needs amidst continuous volatility. Against the backdrop of a shrinking civic space under all de-facto authorities, EED's ability to provide flexible and discreet support was essential.

EED's support to Syrian democracy actors has included:

- **Support to community-based civic actors, that sensitise and empower local communities,** including actors such as *Justice for Life,* that focused on civic participation of local communities in the north-east of Syria, and *Equity and Empowerment,* working on women's civic engagement in Idlib.

- **Support to document and report human rights violations,** including *Syrians for Truth and Justice* that fills gaps by covering human rights issues and violations that generally go unreported and closely monitoring the human rights situation in the north of the country; and *Access Centre for Human Rights* based in Lebanon, that documents violations of Syrian refugees' rights and conducts awareness raising efforts on systematic infringements.

- **Support to independent media** to enable them to provide diverse narratives, counter widespread propaganda, fight hate speech, raise awareness on important topics and foster dialogues. This has been crucial in a country where freedom of press is among the worst in the world (second to last according to the ranking of Reporters without Borders in 2024).[17] Partners include: *Al-Jumhuriya,* one of the most successful Syrian independent media outlets that is a leading actor of a regional network of seven like-minded media outlets, *The February network,* as well as leading investigative journalists, and local and community media that play a significant role in reporting on events in the regions, some of whom are profiled in this report. (See also Special: "Community media fostering democracy in the Middle East and North Africa" on page 58)

- In February 2023, **following the earthquakes that hit Turkey and Syria,** EED put in place a framework that enabled the EED Secretariat to provide additional resources and to respond flexibly to the increasing needs of former and current grantees, enabling independent media platforms and civil society organisations to expand their work at this crucial moment.

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17   Reporters Without Borders 2024, accessed at:
     https://rsf.org/en/country/syria

ELECTION AND REFERENDUM IN MOLDOVA
DEFENDING DEMOCRACY AGAINST FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Moldova held the first round of its presidential elections alongside a referendum to amend the country's constitution to include its EU aspirations on 20 October 2024. The polls were targeted by disinformation and Russian interference, which continued into the second round of the presidential election on 3 November.

The election results saw incumbent president Maia Sandu re-elected with 55 percent of the vote in the second round. The referendum was passed by a narrow margin. Throughout the electoral campaign, EED's partners worked to address disinformation, increase transparency, and encourage people to vote.

There were wide expectations that the constitutional referendum of EU accession would pass with a significant majority, particularly given high support for EU membership in the polls. Many were worried by the small margin of the "Yes" vote on the referendum to include EU integration in Moldova's constitution, which won by just 50.35 percent against 49.65 percent for the "No" vote.

EED's partners point to the significant role played by the Moldovan diaspora, who overwhelmingly voted in favour of the referendum. Vadim Pistrinciuc of the *Institute for Strategic Initiatives* (IPIS), a think tank working on countering disinformation, believes the diaspora are essential to the country's future. "They can enrich political debate and bring fresh energy to the country's modernisation process," he says. Many regions inside Moldova, including the capital Chisinău, also voiced their desire to enter the European Union.

EED'S PARTNERS COVER THE ELECTIONS AND FIGHT DISINFORMATION

In the run up to the elections, EED's partner organisations conducted activities to counter Russian misinformation and to encourage citizens to vote.

"At IPIS we launched the campaign 'Punem viitorul la adăpost' (Protect the Future), to raise awareness about the benefits of EU integration and to build resilience against misinformation," said Pistrinciuc of IPIS.

Nord News, a media organisation in the northern city of Balti, hosted debates with three of the 11 presidential candidates and produced shows, interviews, and reports on the importance of the referendum and the benefits of EU integration.

Similarly, *Media Birlii,* a news outlet from the autonomous region of Gagauzia, posted articles about the implications of the elections for the region and the rest of the country, organised a live broadcast for election night, and conducted media literacy seminars to teach local residents how to evaluate the information they read or watch on the media.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Despite the closer than expected results of the presidential election and referendum, some of EED's partners were optimistic.

"The results reflect the desire of the people of Moldova to choose a democratic path. Even with such a close result, this was a victory for all of us—major battles are often hard-won," says Pistrinciuc.

Grigore Rînja of the *National Youth Council of Moldova* shares a similarly positive outlook. "Despite the narrow margin, the outcome of the referendum marks a significant step forward for Moldova's European future. This choice, made even in the face of intense external interference, shows a strong commitment to aligning with European values and standards," he says.

The next key challenge for Moldova's path towards EU membership will be its parliamentary elections, scheduled for the first half of 2025. Moldova's civil society is already actively preparing.

"In light of the growing disinformation and manipulation by pro-Russian forces, it is essential to continue informing the population about the real benefits of European integration. Our team strives to strengthen independent media and ensure access to quality information for the residents of Gagauzia," says Vitali Gaidarji of *Media Birlii*.

© Media Birlii

ELECTIONS IN GEORGIA
DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING CONTINUES

Georgia's democracy continued to backslide during the year, following the re-introduction of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, a parliamentary election marred by irregularities, which saw the reelection of Georgian Dream, the government's subsequent announcement of its stalling of the EU accession process, and the inauguration of former footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili as president.

WIDESPREAD IRREGULARITIES DURING THE ELECTION PERIOD

The parliamentary elections in October were framed as a referendum of Russia versus Europe by the opposition, and war versus peace by the Georgian Dream ruling party—a dichotomy highlighting the high level of political polarisation in the country, which poses a significant challenge for democratically minded civil society.

The election results, which saw Georgian Dream claim a win with 54 percent of the vote, have been contested by civil society, which filed lawsuits to dismiss them, citing widespread vote fraud and intimidation by ruling party officials at the polling stations. Thousands of people took to the streets in Tbilisi to protest the results.

As protests continued, a presidential election was held; the first under the new electoral system mandated by the constitutional amendments of 2017. A Georgian Dream dominated electoral college chose former footballer, Mikheil Kavelashvili, who stood unopposed. His inauguration on 29 December 2024 was denounced as illegitimate by the opposition.

For Natia Gvritishvili of EED's partner, *Daqali,* a feminist group, the widespread perception of fraud during these elctions has disillusioned many voters. "Even voters who previously supported the ruling party feel betrayed. The election was framed as a referendum on Georgia's orientation—towards Russia or towards Europe. Many, regardless of political affiliation, chose Europe, and are now resolved to protect their choice," she says.

Intimidation was experienced first-hand by many of EED's partners, with a member of *Daqali* in the majority Armenian town of Ninotsminda explicitly warned by local government officials to avoid election-related activism. Gela Mtivlishvili of the media platform *Information Centers Network* and his fellow observers in the Kakheti region were verbally and physically intimidated by Georgian Dream party members at polling stations.

EED'S PARTNERS JOINING FORCES TO MONITOR ELECTIONS AND PROVIDE MEDIA COVERAGE

In the run-up to the elections, EED's partners were at the forefront of a societal engagement campaign. A coalition of 30 CSOs—including five of EED's partners, with two playing a lead role—brought together 2,000 citizen observers in one of Georgia's largest citizen observation movements in years to observe one third of Georgia's polling stations. The group has demanded the annulment of votes in 246 precincts where they observed violations that affected over 10,000 Georgian voters in total.

In an important effort to join resources, several independent media outlets, led by EED's partner *Project 64,* broadcast live for 13 hours on election day, marking the start of an ambitious "anti-TV" project that is planned for online and potentially satellite broadcast. "We want to use a more creative approach to reach audiences in the regions that are not consuming independent media right now," says *Project 64's* George Gogua. EED has ensured consistent support to numerous media in recent years as Georgia's media space has continued to narrow.

Tbilisi Protests Gogua © Project 64

STALLING OF EU ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS AND PROTESTS

Following the election, partners report that the paths of civil society and independent media have naturally diverged from that of the political opposition as they take stock. Today, civil society faces existential questions as to how they may continue to operate and keep open the civic space, with lots of uncertainty about what is going to happen in the future for Georgian democracy, civil society, and the European path.

These questions became ever more pertinent when on 28 November, the Georgian Prime Minister announced a decision to freeze EU accession negotiations for the next four years, despite over 80 percent of the population supporting EU membership. This decision ignited widespread protests across the country, reflecting broader frustrations over electoral irregularities, the controversial "foreign agents" law, democratic backsliding, and human rights abuses.

Protests took place in over 30 cities, emerging as a grassroots movement without clear leadership. Protestors come from all layers of society, including university students and academia, and from arts and cultural spheres. There is a sense of the rebirth of civil society. Media have played an important role throughout.

The authorities responded to the protests with harsh crackdowns. Within the first 12 days, around 500 individuals had been arrested on administrative charges and another 30 on criminal charges, with hundreds more under investigation. Most detainees reported ill-treatment, including beatings, torture, and degrading treatment.

Eduard Marikashvili of EED's partner, *Georgian Democratic Initiative,* says it is time to ring the alarm bells. "Now we're witnessing consolidated authoritarianism in Georgia, I don't expect there will be free or fair elections here anymore. We need to prepare for the worst-case scenario," he says. Like many other members of Georgian civil society, he called for dialogue and support from the international community to evaluate what can be done to preserve Georgia's democracy.

At a closed-door event in EED's offices in December, civil activists provided five messages to the international community that they believe are vital for Georgia's long-term democratic survival:

1. Call for the release of political prisoners;
2. Do not give legitimacy to the election results;
3. Continue to support Georgian civil society and independent media;
4. Do not legitimise Georgia Dream;
5. Follow the example of the Baltic States in applying targeted sanctions against the members of Georgian Dream.

RESULTS AND LEARNING

In 2024, 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 knowledge sharing and lessons learned with internal and external stakeholders.

MEL MISSIONS AND REPORTS

In March 2024, EED conducted a MEL mission to capture and analyse the relevance of and results from grants and capacity-building support provided to unsupported and under-supported pro-democracy actors in **Libya.** These grants focused on strengthening actors' capacity to observe elections and on pro-democracy activism, namely election observation. The MEL mission found that this support was relevant, complementary, and addressed the needs of actors. Partners' capacity to implement election-related activities increased, and there is evidence of greater awareness about the relevance of elections among targeted citizens in different regions of Libya.

MEL also conducted a learning review in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** focusing on the period from the start of EED operations in the country, February 2018, to July 2024. The review set out to identify lessons about the relevance, value added, and effectiveness of the support provided. It found that support to environmental activism and independent and local media was particularly important. EED provided institutional support that filled critical funding gaps, enabling mission-focused rather than project-focused work, thereby complementing other donors. EED responded to emerging opportunities and challenges, and acted as a catalyst for further organisational growth and professionalisation. Stakeholders considered the ability of EED to fund informal and unregistered grassroots initiatives and individual activists as especially relevant, with its emergency support and discrete funding also commended. They also appreciated EED support of key pro-democracy actors at a critical time when there was limited funding available in Banja Luka, as well as EED's ability to reach out to actors outside the main cities.

BUILDING MEL CAPACITY

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 the sharing of experiences.

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HUMAN RESOURCES AND BUDGET

EED's 69 staff members have lived and worked extensively in the countries where EED operates, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Palestine, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

Staff members are nationals of 28 countries, including Albania, Armenia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Egypt, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

In 2024, EED's traineeship programme offered 13 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, ICMPD, 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. In 2024, EED also received a contribution from Canada through a special programme for Ukraine.

EED's operating budget is covered by a grant from the European Commission. In 2024, EED managed a budget of approximately €55 million.
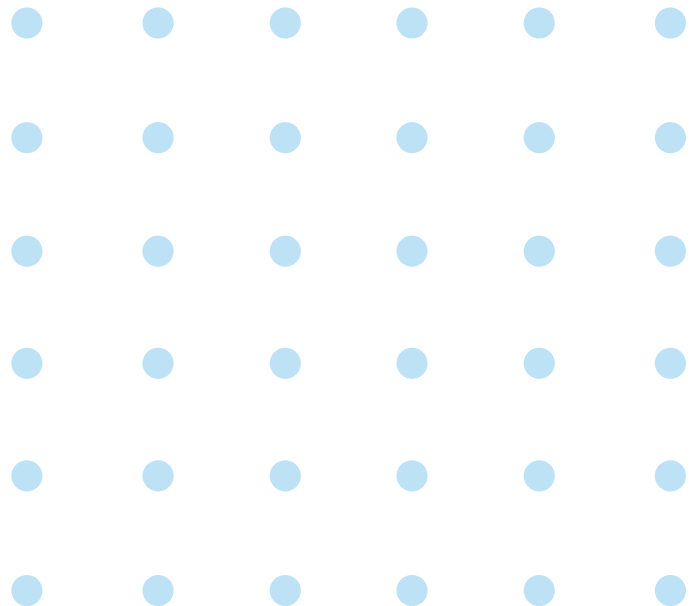
FUNDING PARTNERS

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

Austria	Belgium	Bulgaria	Croatia	Cyprus
Czechia	Denmark	Estonia	Finland	France
Germany	Hungary	Iceland	Ireland	Latvia
Lithuania	Luxembourg	The Netherlands	Norway	Poland
Portugal	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia	Spain
Sweden	UK	European Commission		

Canada also contributes through a special grant for Ukraine.

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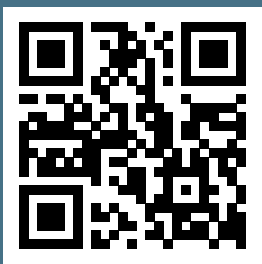Linkedin: European Endowment for Democracy
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