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Forewords

Balazs DenesExecutive Director



A Super Year

2024 was the year of democracy: over one billion people around the world went to the polls. This alone shows that despite its challenges, democracy remains resilient and capable of renewal.

Together with our network and partners, Liberties worked not just to defend democracy, but to advance it. How? To name just a few examples: we held politicians trashing democracy accountable with our major report on the rule of law, tackled manipulative political advertising threatening electoral integrity, and made concrete proposals to strengthen journalist protections in our media freedom report.

We also placed special focus on empowering civil society—expanding our network and supporting the sector to up-skill with capacity-building initiatives, training materials and renewed e-learning tools so they can build campaigns that resonate with the public.

2024 was not just a super-year for democracy, but the year of the AI boom and, as a consequence of echo chambers and misinformation, growing digital polarisation. We strive to create change not only through legislation, but in practice as well: we left X behind and are building a new community for democracy on other platforms.

Of course, democracy is a on-going relationship between us and our political leaders, not an event that comes around every four years. Small, regular actions matter.

Follow us, join our causes or a local community, take part in shaping the future of democracy!



Krassimir Kanev President of the Board

All for one, one for all

In 2024, we witnessed a strengthening of extremist forces across the EU. While they may not yet dominate the mainstream, the trends are troubling. Restrictive or stigmatising policies targeting civil society appear more frequently—not just as fringe ideas but as part of official government agendas.

In such a climate, it becomes more important than ever for civil society to organise, pool resources, build networks, and support one another through shared knowledge and solidarity.

We are encouraged to see that more and more civil society organisations recognise that joining an umbrella group means gaining support and added value—while preserving their autonomy and independence. This growing awareness has enabled Liberties' flagship project, the annual Rule of Law Report, to benefit from the contributions of an expanding group of member organisations. It is also reflected in our growing membership and the new partnerships currently being developed.

We are especially proud that key institutions—such as the European Parliament and the United Nations—see Liberties as an effective partner and value our role in channelling local concerns into broader policymaking processes.

There is strength in community, and this holds true for civil society networks as well. That's why we continue to welcome organisations from across the EU that wish to join the growing Liberties family.

About Liberties

Protecting Rights, Defending Democracy: Liberties in Action





In 2024, Liberties continued to champion a Europe where fundamental democracy, and rights justice, are strengthened. We believe in societies where people and speak freely, participate fully, and live without fear of discrimination or repression. Together with our members and partners, we empowered civil society, informed public debate, and worked to ensure that laws and policies reflect our shared values. Through research, advocacy, and strategic communications, we helped build stronger, more resilient democracies rooted in transparency, accountability, and human dignity. A fair, free, and democratic Europe is possible — and worth fighting for every day. Learn more about how we're making this vision a reality.

Democracy and Justice: Monitoring, Advocating, and Building Safeguards

At the heart of Liberties' work lies a profound commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and access to justice. In 2024, our efforts in this area reached new heights through expanded monitoring, sharper advocacy, and new strategic partnerships across Europe.

One of our flagship projects, the **Annual Rule** of Law Report, reached its fifth edition in 2024. Produced with input from 37 partner organisations across 19 EU member states, the report provided a uniquely independent and nuanced picture of the health of democracies across the continent.

You can access the full 2024 Rule of Law Report here.

This report is much more than a collection of facts and figures. It tells the story of a continent at a crossroads — where some governments, emboldened by populism, sought to weaken checks and balances, curtail civic freedoms,

and undermine the rule of law. Meanwhile, others showed resilience and regeneration, offering blueprints for strengthening democratic institutions even under pressure.

"Berlin-based Liberties said in its annual report, compiled with 37 rights groups in 19 countries, that in older democracies with mainstream parties in government, such as France, Germany and Belgium, challenges to the rule of law remained sporadic."

The Guardian

Our analysis revealed worrying trends. Civil society continued to face growing restrictions, from limitations on the right to protest





to reduced opportunities for participating in policymaking. Media freedom suffered as governments exerted political pressure on public broadcasters, encouraged the concentration of media ownership, and turned a blind eye to — or even encouraged — attacks on journalists. In some cases, marginalised groups such as refugees, ethnic minorities, and LGBT-QIA+ communities bore the brunt of these assaults on rights.

In October, we complemented our findings of the European Commission's Rule of Law Report with a **Gap Analysis**, which called attention to the limitations of the European Commission's Rule of Law monitoring process. We warned that without stronger enforcement mechanisms, this monitoring exercise risks becoming a toothless exercise. Read our 2024 Gap Analysis here.

Through persistent advocacy, Liberties influenced both national governments and EU institutions to act on our recommendations. Our findings were cited in major outlets such as Politico, The Guardian, and Euractiv, demonstrating the central role Liberties plays in shaping the European discourse on democracy and rights.

Media Freedom: Building Resilience Against Threats

Freedom of the press is not simply a pillar of democracy — it is its lifeblood. In 2024, Liberties deepened its commitment to defending independent journalism against the many forces seeking to silence or manipulate it.

Our third **Media Freedom Report**, covering 19 EU member states, painted a sobering picture. From government control over public broadcasters to the opaque allocation of state advertising and the illegal use of spyware against investigative journalists, the threats were as diverse as they were serious.

You can explore the Media Freedom Report 2024 here.



The findings reinforced what we have long warned: that attacks on the press are often the first warning signs of deeper democratic decay. When media outlets are pressured, journalists harassed, and public trust in news eroded, it becomes easier for governments to consolidate power without scrutiny.

"The findings are worrying. According to the latest report from the German-based NGO Civil Liberties Union for Europe, press freedom is "dangerously close to breaking point" in several European Union countries. And France is hardly a model."

<u>Le Parisien</u>

Throughout 2024, Liberties worked intensively and successfully secured a strong **European**



Media Freedom Act (EMFA). When the EMFA was finally adopted, it was a historic moment — the first time the EU introduced legislation aimed specifically at safeguarding media pluralism and independence. Yet, our celebrations were cautious: we knew that in many countries, implementation would be the real battleground.

That is why Liberties immediately turned its attention to raising awareness and pushing for robust national measures that go beyond the EMFA's minimum standards. We stressed the urgent need for strong protections for journalistic sources, genuine transparency around media ownership, and strict regulation of spyware use. Learn more about our advocacy for the EMFA here.

In addition to lobbying EU institutions, we provided national CSOs with tailored policy briefs, legal analyses, and advocacy tools, helping them engage effectively with their own governments. This two-tiered approach — Brussels and national — sets Liberties apart and amplifies the impact of our work across the EU.

Protecting Civic Space: Advocacy and Monitoring

Civil society organisations are the voice of communities, the watchdogs of governments, and the guardians of democracy. Yet throughout 2024, they faced increasing attacks — both legal and informal — aimed at silencing dissent and shrinking civic space.

Liberties played a leading role in monitoring these threats and pushing back against restrictive measures. Through our contributions to the **CIVICUS Monitor**, we helped document crackdowns on peaceful protests, smear campaigns against NGOs, and attempts to cut off civil society organisations from vital funding.

One of the most serious developments in 2024 was the European Commission's proposal for a so-called **Defence of Democracy Package**. While intended to protect EU values, parts of the package — particularly provisions requiring CSOs to disclose foreign funding — risked stigmatising legitimate organisations and chilling free association. Read our <u>contribution</u> to the in-depth analysis of the Defence of Democracy Package.

"So, rather than provide authoritarian leaders with ammo, the Commission should instead focus on positive initiatives that effectively counteract the threat of foreign interference — not ones that squeeze civic space." Op-ed by Liberties

POLITICO

Liberties responded rapidly and transparently. We issued a detailed **briefing paper** outlining the potential dangers, coordinated a **joint letter** signed by over 150 organisations, and held meetings with EU policymakers to propose better alternatives. In parallel, we worked with the European Parliament to raise awareness among MEPs, many of whom later echoed our concerns during the legislative debates.



Beyond advocacy, we continued to champion stronger protections for human rights defenders (HRDs) in Europe. In a political environment increasingly hostile to activism, we believe it is vital to recognise and support those who risk their safety to defend rights and freedoms. Working with allies, Liberties launched a new initiative to establish an EU-wide protection mechanism for HRDs, and we co-hosted a high-level breakfast with the Belgian EU Presidency to build momentum behind this proposal.

Fighting SLAPPs and Setting Precedents

A major focus this year was combating **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation** (**SLAPPs**) — abusive lawsuits used by powerful individuals and corporations to silence journalists, activists, and watchdog organisations. SLAPPs are not about winning in court; they are disingenuous lawsuits aimed at intimidating critics into silence through the threat of costly, time-consuming legal battles.

Throughout the year, Liberties provided expert legal opinions, supported key initiatives, and supported our members facing SLAPPs in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Croatia. One of our proudest achievements was the successful adoption of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive in 2024 — the first European-wide legal shield for public watchdogs. Read the summary of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive here where Liberties also contributed.

"Another European law, the anti-SLAPP directive, is facing difficulties not only in Hungary. It is intended to prevent abusive, strategically deployed lawsuits against journalists, which are increasingly being used in some countries to exert political pressure on members of the press", Liberties' report finds.

Süddeutsche Zeitung

Liberties played a central role in shaping this legislation. We coordinated with an alliance of CSOs, media groups, bar associations, and civil society organisations, provided detailed amendments to policymakers, and raised public awareness about the devastating impacts of SLAPPs through op-eds, webinars, and social media campaigns.

Importantly, we didn't stop with the adoption of the Directive. Recognising that national implementation would be critical, the CASE coalition, with whom Liberties is an active participant, published a comprehensive Anti-SLAPP Implementation Guide to help governments, lawyers, and NGOs understand and apply the new rules effectively. Access our Anti-SLAPP Implementation Guide here.

Technology and Rights: Safeguarding Privacy and Free Expression





As digital technologies continue to evolve, so too do the challenges they pose to fundamental rights. In 2024, Liberties expanded its work at the intersection of technology and human rights, focusing on the regulation of artificial intelligence (AI), digital surveillance, content moderation, and algorithmic transparency. We also worked to ensure that EU legislation, such as the Artificial Intelligence Act and the Digital Services Act (DSA), protect democratic processes, civic space, and freedom of expression.

"We push for proper enforcement of the EU digital files, such as the AI Act, the Digital Services Act and the Media Freedom Act, to defend fundamental rights. Data protection, freedom of expression, and access to information are designed to ensure European policymakers act responsibly and that big tech companies are accountable, transparent, and respect human rights."



Shaping AI Policy and Countering Digital Authoritarianism

We took a leading role in influencing the development and implementation of the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act. In partnership with ECNL and ECR, we published a detailed analysis of the Act from a rule of law perspective, highlighting serious gaps—particularly in law enforcement, migration, and national security—where unchecked AI use, such as biometric surveillance and emotion recognition, threatens civic space and fundamental rights. The analysis also underscored the absence of clear guidelines, the overreliance on voluntary codes, and the exclusion of civil society from implementation processes.

We brought these concerns to the forefront through active participation in policy discussions, including an online event on the risks AI poses in illiberal democracies like Hungary and Poland. In May, we attended a Brussels workshop hosted by the European Partnership for Democracy on AI systems that threaten election integrity. We also contributed to European Commission consultations on general-purpose AI, joined academic courses at Oxford University and MIT, and co-signed a civil society statement on the regulation of surveillance spyware.



Addressing Surveillance and Spyware

In parallel, Liberties continued to push for strict controls on the use of surveillance spyware, which poses a grave threat to democratic institutions and individual freedoms. We co-authored an open letter with the Spyware Working Group calling for decisive EU-level action, including a legal framework to ban the production, sale, and use of spyware until adequate protections are in place. The letter urged greater transparency, accountability, and safeguards in surveillance practices, particularly in light of abuses targeting journalists, politicians, and human rights defenders.

We also monitored developments surrounding the new EU-US agreement on Passenger Name Records, offering our expertise from a data protection standpoint to assess its implications for privacy rights.

Implementing the Digital Services Act (DSA)

Liberties was deeply involved in DSA implementation, recognising its potential to reshape online civic space. We worked to ensure that the Act's enforcement upholds users' freedom of expression and promotes platform

transparency. We produced policy papers, submitted feedback, organised civil society consultations, and led communication campaigns addressing systemic risks from Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Search Engines (VLOSEs).

Our advocacy, including a <u>response</u> co-authored with EPD to the Commission's consultation on election integrity guidelines under the DSA, emphasised the need to address online threats that extend beyond elections. These include algorithmic amplification, political ad targeting, and over-removal of political content. We proposed safeguards such as limiting inferred data use in advertising and improving transparency and accountability in content moderation.

We hosted a risk mitigation workshop at CDT's DSA enforcement event, participated in multiple expert meetings, and coordinated with civil society partners through regular calls and events. Our policy paper was cited in both the draft and final DSA guidelines, and we published related op-eds and blog posts to broaden public engagement. We also monitored the independence of national Digital Services Coordinators, with seven member organisations assessing their compliance with DSA governance standards.





Promoting Transparency in Political Advertising

Throughout the year, Liberties continued to advocate for stronger protections around political advertising. We joined a civil society statement on the EU Regulation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising, which welcomed its adoption but highlighted the need for clearer definitions—especially concerning third-country sponsorships and civil society campaigns—and better safeguards for political expression.

We called for stronger coordination among enforcement authorities, increased platform accountability, and the involvement of civil society in designing political ad repositories.

Protecting Elections: Tackling Disinformation and Foreign Interference

Ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, Liberties launched a wide-ranging program aimed at safeguarding electoral integrity across Europe. With growing concerns about disinformation, foreign interference, and voter suppression, we recognised that urgent action was needed to protect the legitimacy of democratic processes.

In 2024, we led the *Who Targets Me: Monitoring EP Elections project* to protect democratic integrity during the European Parliament elections. Coordinating six national watchdogs—Hungarian, French, Spanish, Bulgarian, German, and Polish—we created a strong, values-driven

network to monitor how political ads targeted voters online.

"Overall, the Civil Liberties Union warns that opaque targeting in political advertising threatens the integrity of democratic discourse."

NETZPOLITIK • ORG

In a joint open letter with six partner organisations, we alerted the European Commission and Google to flaws in Google's Ad Library, a move that garnered coverage in *Politico*. We also developed shared advocacy tools and identified key EU interlocutors ahead of the new Commission's formation.

National findings revealed how digital campaigning continues to outpace regulation:

- In **Bulgaria** and **Hungary**, lack of oversight and media literacy left elections vulnerable to opaque, partisan messaging.
- France and Spain showed that even with formal bans or limits, social media remained a powerful political tool—often sidestepping official scrutiny.
- Poland and Germany highlighted compliance gaps with EU rules and underscored the need for clearer enforcement and ad transparency.

This project reaffirmed our commitment to fairness, transparency, and digital accountability—key pillars in defending democracy across Europe.

Capacity Building:
Strengthening
Civil Society for
Effective Advocacy





In 2024, Liberties continued its strong commitment to building the capacities of civil society organisations and human rights

defenders. We focused on providing in-depth knowledge and practical skills, particularly in utilising the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights at the national level. Our capacity-building efforts were tailored to meet the needs of our members and other stakeholders, equipping them with the tools needed to navigate the evolving landscape of human rights protection in Europe. A training was held in Berlin for Liberties members and the course Privacy and Personal Data for the Charter E-Training was developed for our free e-learning platform, Knowledge Hub -A major initiative in 2024 was the ACCESS project, which aimed to enhance the effectiveness of CSOs in defending and expanding civic space. Through this project, we partnered with our members - local CSOs in Croatia, Hungary, Sweden, and Italy to develop messaging guides and training programs on key issues such as migration, anti-racism, and citizenship rights. These resources are designed to counter populist narratives and build positive, values-based messaging that resonates with the public.

"Authoritarian leaders rely on the same playbook to win over undecided voters. Our narrative guides help campaigns do more than just push back — they help change the conversation entirely."



Liberties also conducted workshops on various themes, including gender equality, combating smear campaigns, and advancing LGBT rights. Notably, our summer school, the Campaign Accelerator, partnered with Amnesty International Netherlands to help Hungarian LGBTQIA+ activists refine their advocacy strategies.

These efforts aimed to foster resilience and encourage proactive approaches to defending human rights across Europe. In 2024, we also delivered two messaging guides: one on violence against women in collaboration with the European Institute on Gender



Equality and a messaging guide on building support for the School Child Reform in Italy.

As part of our capacity-building work, we continued to provide resources for strategic communication and cybersecurity under the CERV STRIVE grant. By the end of 2024, we had developed a course that was made available through our Knowledge Hub e-learning platform, contributing to a growing body of free and invaluable knowledge accessible to human rights advocates. This platform saw a steady increase in visits and module completions throughout the year.



Network Development: Expanding the Reach of Human Rights Defenders

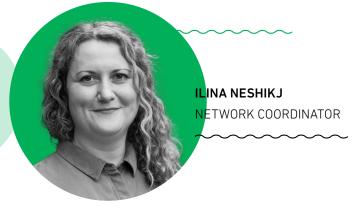




2024 marked a year of significant growth for Liberties' network of human rights defenders and civil society organisations. Our efforts to

expand membership led to the inclusion of <u>three new members</u> – Latvian Centre for Human Rights, Xnet, Spain, and the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, Malta, strengthening the diversity and geographical reach of our coalition. A highlight was the annual members meeting in Berlin, where 25 participants gathered to discuss the year's activities and review the new strategic direction.

"Growing and working together across our network isn't just about sharing knowledge or building capacities – advanced collaboration makes us stronger, more resilient, and better prepared to respond to outside pressure."



In addition to expanding our membership, we focused on enhancing member impact at the national level through initiatives like the CERV STRIVE 2024 re-granting program. This program supported national-level projects aimed at reinforcing the use of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, strategic litigation, and advocacy campaigns based on our Rule of Law Report findings. Projects awarded under this program included those by APADOR-CH (Romania), Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania), and Via Iuris (Slovakia), PILP (the Netherlands) and HCLU (Hungary).

We also maintained a robust member-only platform, COLLAB, which hosted over 110 active participants throughout the year. COLLAB facilitated collaborative working groups, project coordination, and shared resources. Notably, the platform will host the new Civil Society Action Hub created through the ACCESS project, further promoting cross-border cooperation and the exchange of best practices among CSOs.

By focusing on network growth and strengthening connections among human rights defenders, Liberties ensured that the collective impact of our members was maximised. This network allowed us to mobilise resources quickly and effectively in response to emerging threats to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights across Europe.

Communications and Outreach: Growing Liberties' Voice





2024 was a year of unprecedented growth in Liberties' public pres-

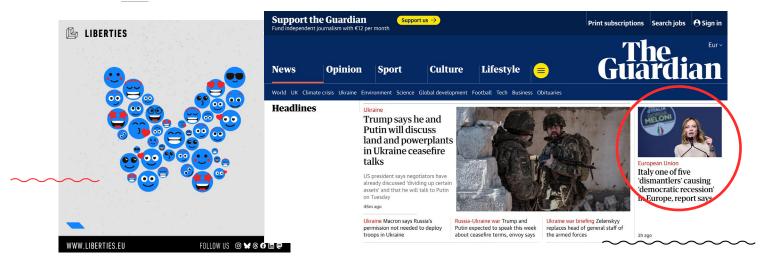
ence. Our media work, campaigns, and public events reached larger and more diverse audiences than ever before, cementing our reputation as a trusted voice for democracy and rights in Europe. Our stories were featured in major international outlets across the EU and beyond, such as the *Politico Europe, The Guardian, La Parisien, El País*, or *Handelsblatt*. Liberties experts were quoted more than 200 times in media stories in over 40 languages, offering critical perspectives on developments from media freedom and surveillance laws to democratic backsliding.

"There's no secret sauce for successful campaigns—only systematic hard work, creative thinking, and meticulous execution. It's the only way to outsmart authoritarian regimes and the algorithmic bias of Big Tech."



We also made major strides in direct citizen engagement. Innovative campaigns like #WhoTargetsMe2024, #MediaFreedomReport2024, and #ElectionIntegrity or the #RolReport2024 sparked conversations, mobilised support, and built greater public understanding of complex issues. Explore our campaigns and media resources here.

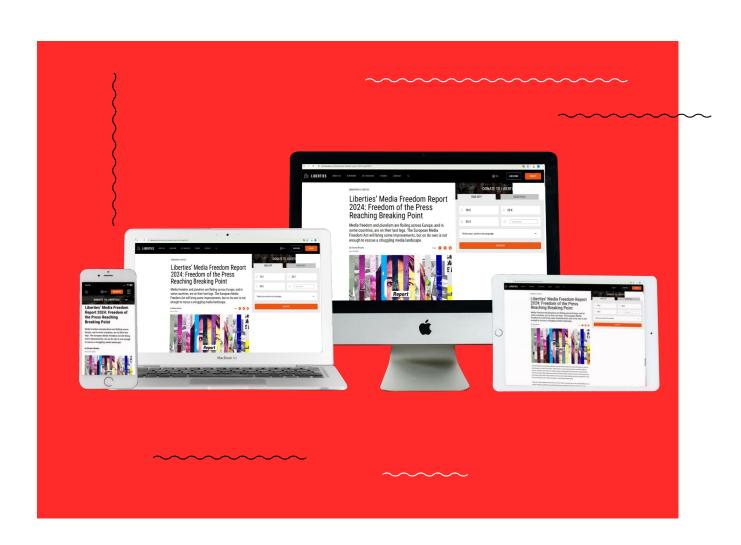
Due to the unchecked hate speech and disinformation on the platform, we made the difficult decision at the end of the year to <u>suspend</u> <u>our X account</u>, which had more than 10,000 followers. To maintain our connection with our professional audience, we opened a new channel on the emerging platform Bluesky and strengthened our presence on LinkedIn.





In 2024, Liberties' website — <u>www.liberties.</u> eu — became not only a hub for research and advocacy, but also a platform for storytelling and inspiration. Through articles, videos, podcasts, and infographics, we brought human rights issues to life and showed why they matter to every person in Europe.

Finally, 2024 marked a major investment in building long-term supporter relationships. Through regular newsletters, webinars, and advocacy alerts, we created a growing community of engaged individuals ready to stand up for democratic values when they are under threat.



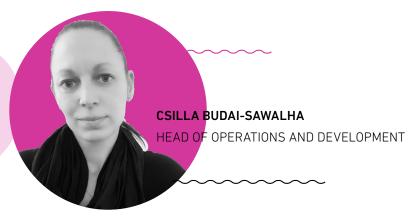
Our Values in Funding: Independence, Integrity, and Sustainability





At Liberties, our funding model reflects our core values of independence, integrity, and mission-driven work. We are proud to be supported by mission-aligned foundations such as the Open Society Foundations, the Ford Foundation, and the Oak Foundation. In 2024, we continued to secure project-based funding from the European Commission's CERV programme through two distinct streams, as well as from Civitates and Civicus.

"Remaining robust advocates for fundamental rights and democratic values is no small task. At Liberties, we must vigorously fight for both the financial resources and the public recognition necessary for civil society to thrive. In an era of shrinking civic space where independent voices are increasingly challenged, our operational viability enables vital organisations to continue their essential work."



In line with our Ethical Fundraising Policy, we are actively working to strengthen our financial resilience and build a diverse and sustainable funding base that supports our long-term independence. We prioritise collaboration with like-minded think tanks, civil society organisations, and academic institutions, working together in consortia to pursue our strategic objectives and amplify our collective impact.

Throughout the year, we submitted a significant number of funding proposals to private

foundations, intergovernmental, and supranational organisations, while staying true to our principles: we do not accept government funding, which ensures our autonomy and impartiality.

While Liberties is a membership-based organisation, we do not charge a membership fee, reinforcing our commitment to accessibility and solidarity. A modest share of our income comes from individual donations, which remain an important expression of public support for our mission.



We are deeply grateful to all our financial partners and individual donors whose trust and support make our work possible. To contribute to our mission and help protect rights and freedoms across Europe, please consider making a donation at our website.

SOURCE OF INCOME	AMOUNT EUR	TYPE OF SUPPORT
European Commission CERV operating grant	610 368	project support
European Commission CERV action grant	265 277	project support
Open Society Foundations	390 154	operating support
Oak Foundation	150 000	operating support
Civitates	95 000	project support
Civicus	15 722	project support
Proton Foundation	45 124	operating support
Transparency International	15 000	project support
Amnesty International	9 600	project support
Micro Donations and other income	13 856	operating support
TOTAL INCOME	1 610 101	

Strategic Spending: Investing in People and Purpose





Liberties' work is driven by deep expertise and principled advo-

cacy. As an organisation focused on research, advocacy, and capacity building, our greatest asset is our dedicated and skilled team. The majority of our resources are invested in supporting our staff, whose passion and professionalism are central to achieving our impact.

We are also fortunate to be supported by a number of interns and volunteers, whose contributions enrich our work and extend our reach. We view this as part of our commitment to building the next generation of human rights defenders in Europe. Their support is invaluable—we could not achieve the same scale or impact without them, and we thank them wholeheartedly.

As part of our mission to empower our member organisations and strengthen our shared capacity, Liberties provided €134,883 in small grants and €287,156 in compensation for participation in joint work as part of Liberties' direct action costs during 2024.

To all our partners, supporters, and allies—thank you. Your belief in our mission allows us to continue defending democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights across Europe.

To join us in this effort, you can support Liberties by donating at our website.

EXPENSES	AMOUNT EUR	PERCENTAGE
Human resources and experts	901 288	56%
Direct action costs	389 949	24%
Re-granting	134 883	8%
Network events, Training events	107 225	7%
Core mission support	76 705	5%
TOTAL	1 610 051	

A Future Worth Fighting For





As Liberties looks toward 2025 and beyond, we remain more determined than ever to defend the foundations of free and open societies. The threats we face are serious — but they are not insurmountable.

Together with our members, partners, supporters, and allies across Europe, we will continue to monitor abuses, expose wrongdoing, advocate for better laws, and empower citizens to protect their rights.

Democracy is not a gift nor a commodity. We believe it is a living project — one that demands vigilance, courage, and hope. At Liberties, we are proud to do our part every single day.

Join us. Defend rights. Protect democracy.

Contact

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a non-governmental organisation promoting the civil liberties of everyone in the European Union. We are headquartered in Berlin and have a presence in Brussels. Liberties is built on a network of 21 national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU.

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