



Liberties Annual Report 2025



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FOREWORDS

A Transformative Year

2025 was the year we set a new course for Liberties' future. As democracy faced mounting pressures across Europe, ranging from shrinking civic space to the weaponisation of AI against fundamental freedoms, Liberties chose to prepare for these challenges by building structures and programmes that will carry us forward into a new era. We initiated the process to choose a new Board, new leadership, and continued growing the network, thereby proving that even in turbulent times, civil society can reinvent itself and stand stronger.

Together with our networks and partners, Liberties worked tirelessly to advance democracy even during turbulent times. To name just a few examples: our sixth annual Rule of Law report, our most comprehensive to date, generated 200 media mentions and 12 million views, holding governments accountable across 21 EU countries. We took decisive action against Hungary's use of biometric surveillance to target Pride participants, urging the Commission to uphold the AI Act and protect human rights. And we empowered civil society by expanding our network to 24 organisations across 21 member states, and supporting them with capacity-building initiatives, strategic communication, and messaging guides.

2025 was not just the year of defending democracy but also the year of preparing for its next chapter. We set in motion the

changes that enabled Liberties to begin 2026 with renewed energy, fresh perspectives and a clear strategic direction.

We want to thank our previous Executive Director, Balázs Dénes, for turning a bold vision into a thriving network, which constitutes the foundation upon which Liberties stands today. The baton has now been passed, and while the hands may have changed, our commitment to the causes we champion has not wavered.

Of course, democracy is not a singular moment but rather a continuous effort. Small, regular actions matter. And as we close one chapter and open another, we invite you to be part of what comes next.



Ilina Neshikj
Executive Director



Carrying Forward, Moving Ahead

2025 was a year of transition, not just for European democracy but for Liberties itself. Transitions are never easy, but I am confident that the renewal we set in motion will carry Liberties further than ever before.

In such a climate, the need for a strong, agile, and well-resourced civil society has never been greater. When the rules of the game are changing, those who defend the rules must have the resources to keep up. In these turbulent times, we invite you to stay closely connected with our work. Your engagement and trust empower us to adapt swiftly to emerging challenges and continue our essential mission.

We are proud that our network continues to grow and deepen. In 2025, we welcomed new members and strengthened

collaboration across different programmes. Our members are active co-creators of our shared mission. They bring local expertise, on-the-ground intelligence, and a fierce commitment to human rights that enriches everything we do.

I am confident that the changes we set in motion will help Liberties grow, not just in size but also in strength, relevance and impact. The new Board brings fresh perspectives. The new leadership brings renewed energy. And together we are building a Liberties that is ready for whatever comes next.



Georgiana Gheorghe
President of the Board



Advancing Rights, Democracy and Civic Space in the EU

At Liberties, we believe that everyone in the European Union should have the opportunity to enjoy their basic rights and freedoms. We strive to ensure that human rights are actively promoted and protected, safeguarding individuals from the wrongdoings of both governments and corporations.

To achieve our goals, we collaborate with our network of members to strengthen civic spaces and support resilient democracies rooted in the rule of law. Our efforts focus on advocacy, research, and building communication capacities.

As democratic backsliding is unfolding in a number of EU Member States, it is critical now more than ever to take decisive action to defend democracy.

Learn more below about how we are working to uphold democratic values across the EU.

Democracy, Rule of Law and Civic Space: Monitoring and Advocacy

Liberties monitors current developments in justice, corruption, media freedom, checks and balances, civic space, and systemic human rights issues across the EU. The findings are consolidated in our **Annual Rule of Law Report**, which reached its sixth edition in 2025. The report, based on the qualitative input from over 40 civil society groups covering 21 EU countries, is one of the most comprehensive shadow reports by an independent civil liberties network.

You can access the full Liberties Rule of Law Report 2025 [here](#).

The 2025 Report highlights rule of law infringements across all the above-mentioned thematic areas. The report's overarching findings underline why we can no longer keep taking democracy for granted. Political manipulation is undermining the independence and quality of the judicial system. Lack of transparency is eroding trust in EU national governments and affecting their ability to fight corruption. Media freedom is compromised by political influence and harassment against journalists. Fast-track legislative processes are weakening checks and balances. Civic space is shrinking due to smear campaigns and restrictive laws. Furthermore, rising discrimination and hate speech are mounting pressure on human rights. Meanwhile, the European mechanisms appear to be weak and incapable of preventing growing trends of illiberalism.



“ Civil liberties report warns that Italy along with Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovakia intentionally undermining rule of law ‘ in nearly all aspects ’ . ”

The Guardian

While the picture painted by the 2025 Report is worrying, positive trends have been registered in some European countries, including attempts to restore judicial independence in Poland and the effort to strengthen the rule of law seen in Estonia and the Czech Republic.

The findings of our Rule of Law Report 2025 were cited in over 120 outlets around the

world, including [The Guardian](#), [Euractiv](#), and [Der Spiegel](#), [El Nacional](#), [La Repubblica](#), showing the outreach of Liberties and its credibility in the eyes of the media.

Finally, throughout 2025, Liberties closely monitored the situation in Hungary, denouncing the continuous attacks of Orbán’s government on civic space. In May, Liberties produced an open letter to the Commission urging them to take immediate steps to counter the “Transparency of Public Life” bill introduced in the Hungarian parliament. While the initial letter was signed by 329 NGOs across Europe, we continued to receive requests to join and reopened the letter to further signatories, strengthening our collective voice. Read more about our open [letter here](#).

Media Freedom: Safeguarding Pluralism and Independence

A free and pluralistic media ecosystem is necessary for a strong and stable democracy. In 2025, Liberties continued to protect this ecosystem from the powerful actors seeking to endanger it.

Our fourth **Media Freedom Report**, which covers 21 EU member states, clearly showed that media freedom was under attack across the EU, and in some cases, facing an existential battle against overtly undemocratic governments.

You can explore the Media Freedom Report 2025 [here](#).



In line with previous years' findings, the European media landscape remains shadowed by national governments attacking media freedom and actively weakening the independence of regulatory bodies.

Meanwhile, the approval of the **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** has been met with strong opposition by some Member States. Consequently, the success of enforcement by European institutions has become fundamental to protect freedom and plurality of the media, which are cornerstones of democracy.

Building on our findings, we provided a series of recommendations to the European Commission. We highlighted the need for the EU to ensure strong enforcement of media laws (e.g., EMFA and the Anti-SLAPP Directive), to improve coordination between regulatory bodies, and promote transparency in media ownership. In regard to the protection of journalists, we recommended that the EU prevent surveillance and support safety measures across the Union. Finally,

we recommended that the EU should provide sustainable funding for independent media and civil society organisations, all fundamental actors for media freedom and pluralism, freedom of expression, and the functioning of democracy.

“ A report by the Civil Liberties Union for Europe highlights growing concerns over media pluralism and political pressure on journalists across the EU. ”

POLITICO

Liberties also worked on a series of papers targeted at fundamental stakeholders. These include [a submission](#) to the European Commission Call for Evidence on the Digital Fairness Act, [an input paper](#) on recurrent and prominent systemic risks and mitigation measures, and [a submission](#) to the commission Targeted Consultation on Article 18(9)EMFA.

Strengthening Civil Society: Advocacy and Monitoring

The extent and depth of democratic backsliding considerably threaten civil society across Europe. This is not only a danger to organisations but to the values, pluralism, and solidarity enshrined in the Treaties of the European Union. Now more than ever it is necessary to stand up and defend this cornerstone of open and vibrant democracies.

Our contribution to strengthening civil society took the form of **advocacy** and **monitoring**.

Liberties was particularly vocal in denouncing the ban on Pride in Hungary by the autocratic government of Viktor Orbán. In June,



we demanded action from the European Commission in defending organisers and participants of Budapest Pride to express their right to peacefully assemble and their freedom of expression. Our [letter](#) received support from over 45 NGOs across Europe.

In September, we sent a further [letter](#) renewing our commitment to call out

wrongdoings by urging the Commission to launch infringement procedures against Hungary for violations of EU law following the ban on Pécs Pride.

Liberties also understands the need to properly fund civic spaces in order to truly protect democracy. Therefore, we produced a brief paper asking for an increase in funds connected to **The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)**. Our paper highlighted the urgency of the matter, seeing the high number of application rejections (90%) due to the size of the current grant, while democratic standards are falling, and the hostility against human rights workers is increasing.

Read more about the solutions we identified to protect civil society [here](#).



During 2025, Liberties continued to report on the developments in freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association as part of our **CIVICUS Monitor**. Throughout the year, 22 reports by Liberties on eight different countries were published on the Civicus website (accessible [here](#)). These included Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, and, for the first time, Slovakia.

Finally, in December, we conducted a meeting to discuss the lessons learned from our yearly training titled **“Using the Charter of Fundamental Rights for Strategic Litigation”**, which took place at the same time as the Conference on the 25th Anniversary of the Charter. During the meeting, we reflected on the experiences of members engaging in strategic litigation and discussed next steps, including the possibility of a joint litigation fund.



LIBERTIES





Digital Rights: Protecting Privacy and Freedom of Expression

In a world where powerful corporations are pushing increasingly sophisticated technologies and government surveillance is directly affecting our lives, our work to protect free speech and privacy in the digital world has become essential.

In 2025, we focused our efforts on finding ways to shape AI policy so that it is used as a tool to improve the lives of citizens, rather than corporations and autocratic governments. We also brought our attention to the

use of facial recognition by the Hungarian government, advocating for the full implementation of the DSA, and promoting transparency in political advertising.

Shaping AI Policy

Following our participation in the Commission's stakeholder consultation on the AI Act in 2024, Liberties produced a [paper](#) analysing the shortcomings of the Act in relation to the prohibitions and definition within its articles. Our goals were to draw attention to the shortcomings of the law and ensure the delivery of strong legislation.

Liberties was also involved in the Commission's Targeted stakeholder on the Classification of AI Systems as high-risk. We highlighted the risks of biometric AI in law enforcement and stressed the importance for EU guidelines to strictly uphold existing bans on harmful systems while ensuring strong protection of fundamental rights.

Read more [here](#) about our contribution to the discussion and our recommendation to the Commission.

In 2025, a big legislative talking point in the EU was the Omnibus Package. We expressed our concern about the impact of simplification and reduction of regulatory norms on our fundamental rights. We believe that Digital Omnibus represents a step back for

responsible AI Governance, and it could easily kickstart a process of deregulation, making protection weaker and standards diluted.

Read more about our concerns in our papers on the subject [here](#).



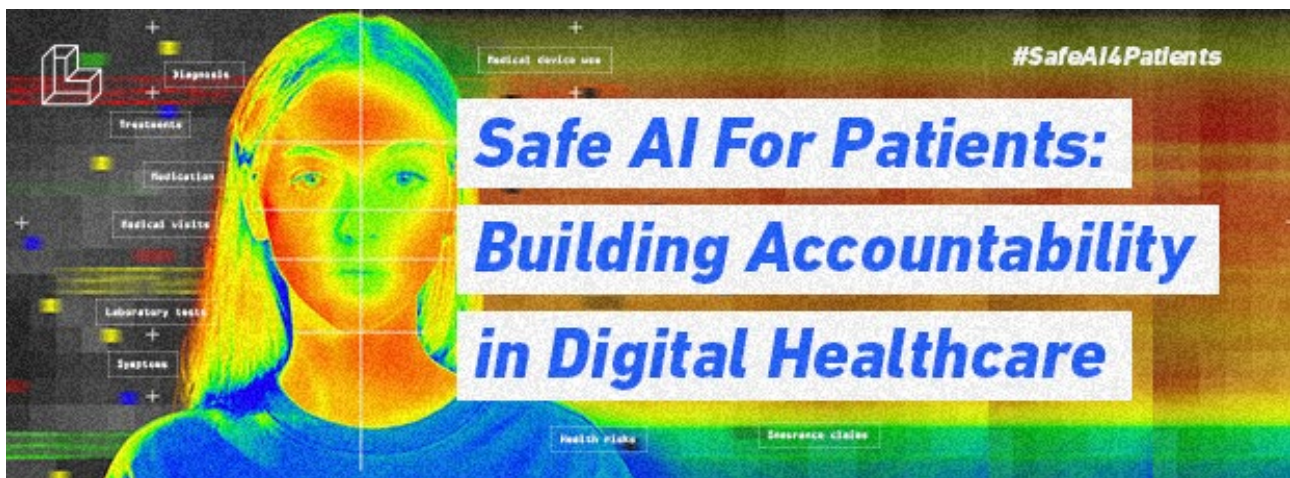
AI Projects

During the third quarter of 2025, Liberties was pleased to be awarded a grant from the The Omidyar Group LLC – AI Collaborative for two years to implement two distinct projects: the first is our **AI and Health project** and the second is a coalition effort to work on the first ever prohibition case under the EU AI Act in the context of **Hungarian biometric surveillance** and the criminalisation of LGBTQAI+ demonstrations.

The AI and Health project, developed in cooperation with and spearheaded by former Engine Room Executive Director and Senior Mozilla Fellow, Júlia Keserű, a renowned tech and rights activist and researcher, aims at challenging the current environment and promoting more responsible health data practices. The project takes on a creative approach that leverages the full potential of existing legal frameworks as powerful tools for health data accountability. The ultimate aspiration is to lay the groundwork for

improved governance in AI healthcare tools, fostering a more responsible and accountable environment for the integration of AI in healthcare, eventually paving the road for further safeguards in data protection and AI practices.

The Hungarian biometric surveillance project is hosted by Liberties, led and implemented by the coalition of four organisations: the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, EDRi, ECNL, and Liberties. The coalition aligned its efforts in March 2025, when three amendments in the Hungarian laws regulating freedom of assembly, designed to criminalise LGBTQAI+ demonstrations and use biometric surveillance, were rushed through the Hungarian Parliament within 24 hours and without any public debate. Beyond the clear issues of the law itself, the case is also seen as the first real test of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act.



Addressing Surveillance and Spyware

Liberties provided a legal analysis (accessible [here](#)) on the use of new biometric laws in Hungary. On 18 March 2025, within 24 hours, and without any public consultation, Orbán's majority in parliament adopted a number of amendments, amongst which one created a

legal basis for the use of facial recognition to punish those attending Pride. We found these amendments to be in direct breach of Articles 10 (freedom of expression) and 11 (freedom of assembly) of the Charter, as well as Article 14 (discrimination).

Implementing the Digital Services Act (DSA)

Liberties supports the effective enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA). To ensure the correct implementation of the Act, we monitored and evaluated the independence of the Digital Services Coordinators, as mandated by Article 50(2) of the DSA, in six EU member states: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, and Romania.

We found several persistent issues that undermine the independence of the coordinators. First, while from a legal perspective they are recognised as independent, there are structural dependencies that weaken their position. Moreover, political interference in the appointments and the lack of civil society involvement are present in all the countries analysed. Finally, legal safeguards against conflicts of interest and undue private sector influence vary significantly.

Based on these findings, we recommended that the Member States ensure financial autonomy, introduce a multi-stakeholder advisory council to ensure merit-based appointment, implement comprehensive



conflict-of-interest rules, and increase engagement with civil society.

For a more comprehensive analysis of our findings, read the full report [here](#).

The success of the DSA has become particularly important, especially as political campaigns increasingly move online and are now delivered by social media influencers. We produced a paper on the subject (accessible [here](#)), highlighting how influencer-driven political content threatens electoral integrity and how platforms need to step up and implement the DSA to protect democracies.



Promoting Transparency in Political Advertising

We welcomed and supported the implementation of the Targeting and Transparency of Political Advertising Regulation (TTPA), as we agree that effective transparency in political advertising is vital for citizens to engage in democratic discourse in an informed way.

If the TTPA was a successful step forward, the decision by Meta and Google to stop serving political, electoral, and social issues ads on their platforms, ahead of the enforcement regulation, was a major step back, as it disproportionately disadvantaged moderate and non-partisan political actors (see our joint letter on [Google's](#) and [Meta's](#) decisions)

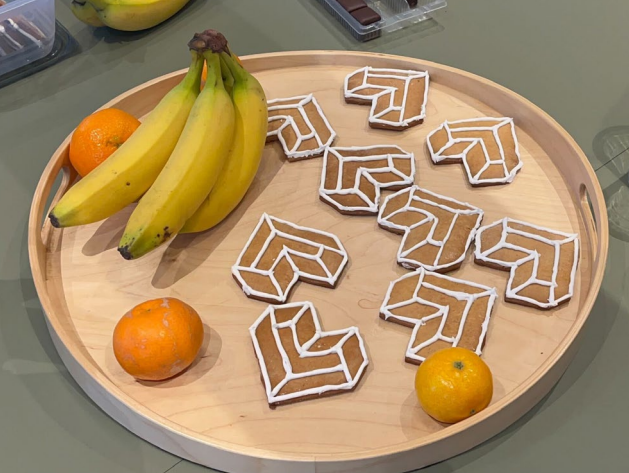
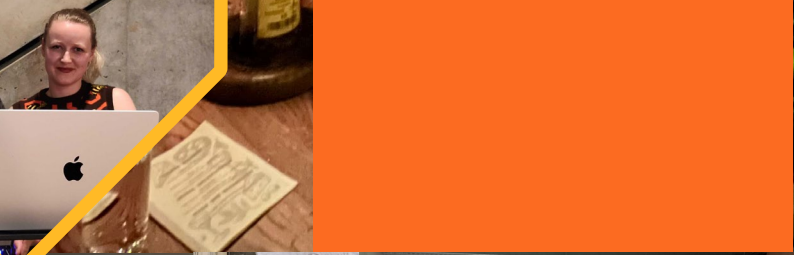
Liberties produced a report (accessible [here](#)) to examine the impact of the political ad bans on Hungary's online political advertising landscape ahead of the 2026 elections. We found that instead of increasing transparency, the bans have pushed political actors toward less visible and less regulated tactics, such as influencer promotion, repurposed social media pages, mislabelled or undeclared ads, and AI-generated content.

The report also documents weak enforcement of the TTPA by platforms, including misclassification of political ads, continued ad circulation despite bans, removal

of transparency tools, and retroactive data manipulation, all of which hinder monitoring and accountability. Liberties concluded that current safeguards under the TTPA and Digital Services Act are insufficient in practice and urged the European Commission to strengthen enforcement, restore

transparency mechanisms, clarify rules, and ensure that even banned or mislabelled political ads are properly disclosed and recorded.







Capacity Building: Supporting Stronger Civil Society Action

In response to the growing number of smear campaigns towards NGOs and the increasing difficulty in mobilising public support, Liberties launched its 2025 Civic Space Messaging Lab, developed through the CERV Action grant and implemented with four of its members in Croatia, Sweden, Italy and Hungary. This project aims to assist civic society organisations in developing evidence-based communication and campaign strategies to counter authoritarian narratives by growing support for their causes.

This capacity-building programme was divided into three components: a data-collection phase, a production phase in which communication materials were created in train-the-trainer workshops, followed by a second data-collection phase in which the communications were tested using focus groups. Learn more about the different phases of the project [here](#).

Based on the analysis conducted, we created messaging guides for each partner involved in the project, which were then translated into their own languages and used to train local NGOs. An overarching guide focusing on how to message to strengthen civic space across Europe was also developed. Find out more about the messaging guides [here](#).

Liberties also created a messaging guide for staff in organisations interested in

communicating more effectively when it comes to fighting violence against women. Current campaigns tend to focus only on one aspect of the issue: how to change the behaviour of victims, perpetrators, and third parties. However, this is only one of many measures necessary to fight against violence. Learn more about how to structure messaging for a broader range of campaigns [here](#).

Moreover, we organised a three-day **Campaign Accelerator** in Bulgaria, aimed at improving the organisations' capacity to communicate fundamental rights through strategic campaigns. 25 participants from nine organisations took part in the event, delivered with the America For Bulgaria Foundation, where they strengthened their capabilities through values-based framing, audience segmentation, and practical exercises.





Network Development: Promoting Collaboration in Civic Space

In 2025, Liberties focused on deepening the collaboration among members in order to consolidate the strategic direction of the network, while strengthening coordination and capacity building. The success of these efforts has been visible in the growing number of active participants on our member-only COLLAB - now reaching over 200 individuals - as well as the establishment of various working groups.

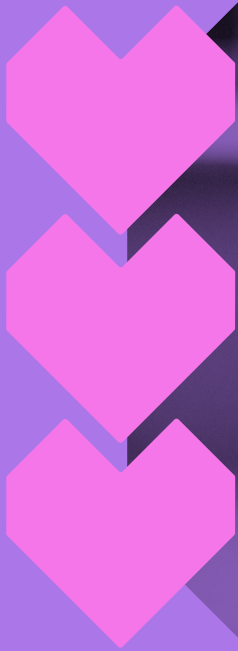
The closing **Annual Members' Meeting**, held online and in-person in Berlin during September 2025, was the culmination of our efforts to improve cohesion across the network. During this event, a single membership category was introduced to ensure equal rights and participation for all our members.

Moreover, Liberties' network of human rights defenders and civil society organisations grew once more. In November, we welcomed a new member organisation, NYTEuropa (New Europe), allowing our coalition to extend its positive impact to Denmark as well.

In addition to expanding our geographical reach, we also focused on strengthening our members' capabilities at the national level through initiatives like the CERV STRIVE 2025 re-granting program. The programme provides funding to national-level projects following three specific objectives:

Supporting initiatives that enhance capacity building for applying the Charter of Fundamental Rights and EU law at the national level; Promoting initiatives that advance research and strengthen the Charter's role in fundamental rights litigation; Fostering initiatives that leverage the Charter through strategic campaigns on fundamental rights litigation, guided by recommendations and findings from our annual Rule of Law report. In 2025, the winning projects were presented by the CILD (Italy), VoxPublic (France), VIA IURIS (Slovakia), EHRC (Estonia), The Peace Institute (Slovenia), Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation (Malta), and League of Human Rights CZ (Czech Republic).





Communications and Outreach: Amplifying Liberties' Voice

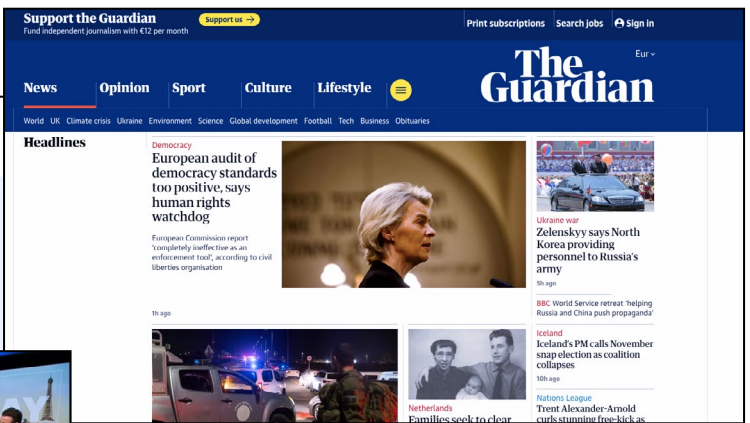
Our presence online and our ability to effectively communicate are fundamental to reaching a broader audience with our campaigns and mobilisation activities. Through social media, websites, newsletters, and direct outreach, we were once again able to meet the challenge.

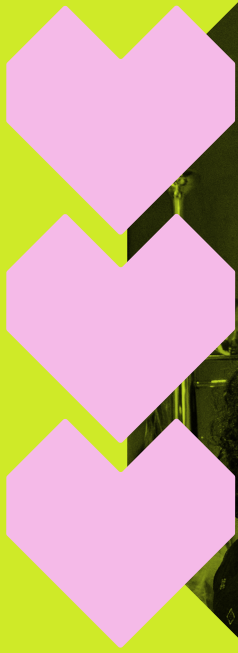
In 2025, we confirmed our position as a trusted and reliable source for democratic monitoring in Europe. Our reports were shared by numerous international news outlets across Europe - including The Guardian, EuroNews, Euractive, Der Spiegel, La Repubblica - and beyond, all the way to China.

We have also witnessed a stable growth in the number of our followers across social media platforms. In particular, Liberties

ended 2025 with over 3k followers on LinkedIn - an increase of 67%, double the followers on Instagram, and 57k followers on Facebook. Our new profile on BlueSky was also successful, gathering over 700 followers in its first year.

Finally, our website www.liberties.eu, has remained a central tool to reach a wider audience through articles, newsletters, and infographics, with almost 700k visits in 2025.





Strategic Spending: Investing in Impact and Capacity

Our role as a knowledge-driven organisation is reflected in our financial efficiency and the cost of personnel, which represent a significant portion of our budget. We view our staff as the primary engine to deliver our cross-border coordination, EU policy watchdog work, and capacity development activities.

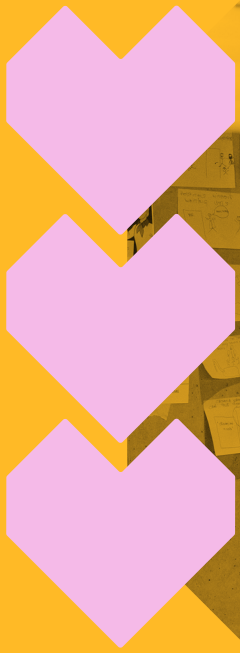
Our cost effectiveness is directly connected to fostering the work of our internal team: by centralising high-level strategic functions within our core team, we provide network members and other partners with access to specialised resources they would otherwise have to procure independently at a much higher cost. Furthermore, our internal capacity reduces reliance on expensive external legal services, ensuring that the vast majority of funding is converted directly into intellectual output and policy impact.

Finally, we rely on a number of talented interns and volunteers from various academic and professional backgrounds, driven by their passion and will to protect human rights and strengthen democracy. We consider them an integral part of our team, and we deeply value their commitment and contribution to Liberties' work. A warm thank you to all those who joined our team this year and to Emanuele Vaudano, who helped write the Liberties Annual Report for 2025. We hope we have inspired you to become the next generation of human rights activists!

SOURCE OF INCOME	Amount EUR rounded to the nearest 10	%	TYPE OF SUPPORT
European Commission CERV operating grant	637,330	37%	project support
European Commission CERV action grant	181,740	11%	project support
Open Society Foundations	488,000	28%	operating support
AI Collaborative	249,800	15%	project support

SOURCE OF INCOME	Amount EUR rounded to the nearest 10	%	TYPE OF SUPPORT
Civicus	14,910	1%	project support
Mercator Foundation	100,000	6%	operating support
Amnesty International - Rainbow project	9,600	1%	project support
America for Bulgaria Foundation	25,000	1%	project support
Nadace Open Society Fund Praha	1,300	0%	project support
Micro Donations and other income	4,500	0%	operating support
Total	1,711,000		

Expenses	Amount EUR	Percent
Human resources and experts	1 001 184	58%
Direct action costs	269 279	16%
Re-granting	125 643	7%
Network events, Training events	142 739	8%
Core mission support	172 693	10%
	1 711 538	



Higher Stakes, Stronger Stand

We cannot sugarcoat the truth: 2025 was a particularly challenging year for democracy. From increasing pressures on civic space, to democratic backsliding, and even extending to the use of AI to restrict freedom of expression, the challenges are in front of our eyes - but they are possible to overcome!

Alongside our members, supporters, and allies, we renew our commitment to advocate, monitor, and expose wrongdoing

in the name of protecting democracy throughout Europe.

Join us. Protect our rights. Defend 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 24 national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU.

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