



# Annual report 2023





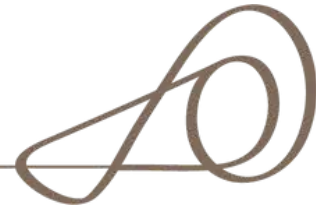
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# Forewords from the co-presidents



**After the resignation of ECF's founding leader, Jean-Marc Roirant,** the ECF General Assembly elected me to become a new co-president in September 2023. The members' choice and trust are a great honour and a challenge at the same time.


For several years as a member, I have had the chance to observe and admire the work ECF does for a more democratic and inclusive Europe, and an enabling civil space. In my new position, I have the responsibility not only to strategise about future directions and development, but also to follow the ongoing activities of the network, support its growing (and sometimes overloaded) staff, as well as to contribute to its reports, papers, and events.

And **2023 was indeed an active year,** with several extremely important EU policy dossiers to follow: the draft directive of the European Cross-Border Associations, the Defence of Democracy package, the Artificial Intelligence Act, and the follow-up of the annual Fundamental Rights Report, to name just a few. **All these will have lasting impacts – positive or negative – on European civic space,** and thus required constant attention and active advocacy.

The 300-page Civic Space Report, covering 14 member states was another great – and successful – undertaking,

consolidating ECF's credibility as an expert partner of the European institutions.

But 2023 was also a year of unexpected crises, such as the dramatic escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine, and its impacts in Europe, to which ECF also had to respond. On the other side, 2023 provided space for growth and experimentation. **ECF, for the first time in its history, was able to provide small grant support to its members** through an open call (thanks to the support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values program). The new format of the traditional **European Civic Academy,** a huge task of organising, brought together a great diversity of activists from all over – as well as important lessons for future events.

2024, with the **European elections** and many other developments, promises to be similarly challenging – and hopefully satisfying, too. **I'd use the opportunity here to thank the staff, Board, Steering Committee and member organisations** for the successes achieved through hard work, collaboration and commitment, and wish us all the same for the coming weeks and months! 

by ECF Co-President  
Vera Mora



In 2020, during the lockdown, we wrote the "**Lessons of the Pandemic**", a list of important things that a small, invisible virus was teaching humanity at great cost.

We said that **we must invest in human, social, and environmental security** to protect our lives and our future. We said that security is mutual and that **we are only safe if others are safe**. We said that the **future had to be different from the past**.

And indeed, things have changed on our continent. But sadly, they have changed for the worse.

The year **2023 began and ended with a war on European soil that shows no sign of ending**. Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues to sow death and destruction, and as time passes the risk of the conflict spreading increases. As if that were not enough, **since 7 October we have witnessed an escalation of horror and war crimes in the Middle East**. And the slaughter in Gaza continues.

European leaders are proclaiming a state of "war economy", they say we need to "prepare citizens for war", many European states are talking again about compulsory military service and military spending and investments are increasing.

**It is in this worrying climate that we are approaching the year of the European elections.**

In many European countries, the extreme right is on the rampage, hoping to enter the Parliament and the European institutions in the next EU elections.

**The political majority leading Europe is moving to the right in an attempt to normalise the reactionary offensive.**

There have been backtracks on the Green New Deal, and immigration agreements with Mediterranean and African regimes to prevent the arrival of migrants. The nightmare of austerity, with its axe on public accounts and services, has returned to the negotiating table of the new Stability Pact.

It's a bleak picture, and one full of dangers. All the more reason why the fight to keep the European civic space open and alive is crucial. Against all criminalisation, repression, restriction, and limitation.

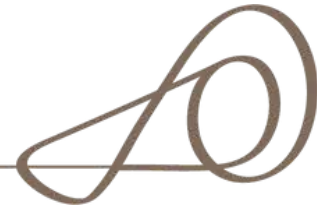
European democratic civil society has an enormous responsibility: **this is the time when all positive energy must be used to reverse the course**. For a just peace, for the rights of all, for climate justice, for democracy and participation, which are possible, necessary, and indispensable to guarantee us peace and a common future.

**The European Civic Forum is at the forefront**. We will continue to play our part with all the courage, competence, and conviction we can muster. Together, from across the continent, in all our diversity, united for our just, fair, and democratic Europe. 🇪🇺

by **ECF Co-President  
Raffaella Bolini**



# About ECF



## Who we are

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a **pan-European** network of more than **100 associations** and NGOs across **29 European countries**.

Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to **protect civic space, enable civic participation** and **build civil dialogue** for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

## Our vision

### A Europe that delivers for all

Out of the ashes of the Second World War, a new Europe emerged with the promise of peace, prosperity, and democracy. In the decades that followed, we saw **advancements in rights and democracy**, victories **against dictatorship** and authoritarian regimes, and in the struggles to **overcome colonialism, patriarchy and racism**.

But today, **these advances are being eroded**. The growing audience for and electoral success of regressive populist agendas across Europe shows that current policies are not properly addressing people's needs.

We believe that Europe is our future, but **another Europe is necessary, urgent and possible**: one based on democracy, equality and solidarity, which **puts people and the planet above economic interests**, and which listens to and **delivers for all of its inhabitants, leaving nobody behind**.

### An enabling environment for civil society organisations

We believe that a **vibrant and independent civil society** is vital for open civic space, healthy democracy and true social justice, as it allows people to organise, amplify their voices and be heard at all levels of government.

However, **civil society is facing increasing challenges**, including restrictive laws, stigmatisation, financial constraints, and even physical attacks.

We need a reversal of this trend. That means creating a **truly enabling environment for civil society**, where civic actors can thrive and perform their vital democratic role.

# How we take action

## Advocacy

We advocate at the EU level by **engaging directly with policymakers, participating in consultations**, and working with our partners, particularly through alliances and networks like Civil Society Europe.

Our advocacy takes two forms:

- Ensuring EU policies respect and promote fundamental rights for all
- Calling on the EU to introduce structures and policies that create an **enabling environment** for civil society organisations and **genuine civil dialogue** – as envisioned in **Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union**.

## Monitoring and reporting on civic space

Through our **Civic Space Watch** platform, we monitor and report on developments in **civic space** across Europe, as well as providing information and resources. Every year, we publish our **Civic Space Report**, which collects findings from a select group of countries in addition to a horizontal analysis of civic space in Europe.

## Network and capacity building

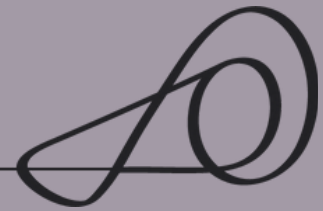
Since our founding, we have been committed to fostering **ever-greater links within European civil society** and to helping build structures that recognise the importance of the sector.

From the founding of the European Civic Forum in 2005, to the European Year of Citizens Alliance, and in turn the creation of Civil Society Europe, our **European Convening** in 2022, and our annual **European Civic Academy**, we work to connect civil society actors transnationally and cross-sectorally through conferences, forums and alliances.

## Campaigns and alliances

At ECF our campaigns take many forms – from ongoing campaigns like **Civic Pride** – which aims to showcase people power – to specific campaigns in partnership with like-minded organisations - like the **Civil Society for EU** campaign ahead the EU elections.

# 2023 highlights



## January

ECF launches a new visual identity and refreshed website as its secretariat grows to its biggest ever.

We publish the **recommendations** that emerge from December's European convening.

## February

Our co-presidents **write** for Euronews to warn that the Commission's focus on foreign interference misses the bigger threat to our democracies.

## March

We publish our annual **Civic Space Report** and host a policy debate in Brussels alongside, in cooperation with Civil Society Europe

## April

Following the kick-off of ECF's advocacy on the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act, we publish our first **assessment**, arguing that the act must be "rights-based, serve the common good, and be shaped first and foremost to meet people's needs.

## May

ECF, Civil Society Europe and 230+ NGOs **raise the alarm** over the Defence of Democracy package – and succeed in getting it postponed for further consultation and an impact assessment.

## June

Together with Civil Society Europe, Social Platform and 100+ CSOs, we launch the **Civil Society for EU** campaign ahead of the EU elections, to call for a Civil Society Strategy and Civil Dialogue agreement.



## July

The European Commission publishes its annual Rule of Law report – to which ECF provided a substantial contribution to the consultation.

In our **reaction**, we underline our commitment to the process but urge the Commission to drastically improve it.

## October

ECF Member Okotars hosts a conference in Brussels dedicated to the civil society strategy, as part of the **Reclaim our Civil Space** project

## December

We celebrate civil society in **Civic Pride Week**, putting outstanding CSOs, movements and initiatives in the spotlight.

We publish the first of a series of **podcast episodes** focusing on the winners of this year's civic pride awards.

## September

We host the **European Civic Academy** and **Civic Pride Awards** in Brussels. The awards celebrate four outstanding CSOs and movements.

At the ECA, 90 activists, CSOs representatives and academics gather over two days to learn and exchange on how to build collective empowerment for just and inclusive societies.

## November

Following the dramatic escalation of violence in Israel-Palestine, we hold our first member exchange on the issue.

Later we adopt a **statement** at our staff and steering retreat, calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the release of the hostages, and an end to the occupation.

# 2023 in numbers



**45%**

Increase in LinkedIn following



**9**

Events and trainings



**125**

Alerts on Civic Space Watch



**453**

Participants in ECF events



**4**

New member organisations, from

**4**

countries



**95**

Articles on the ECF website



**30**

Events at which ECF representatives spoke



**3**

New staff members



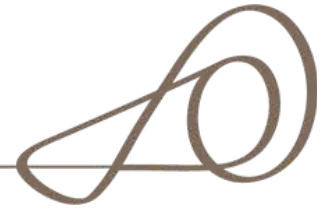
**303**

Pages of analysis in our Civic Space Report, including

**14**

Country chapters

# Our activities



## Monitoring, research and reporting on civic space.

In 2023, we continued our monitoring and reporting through our Civic Space Watch platform. In March, we published our annual **Civic Space Report** – made up of 303 pages of detailed analysis of civic space across the EU, including fourteen country-specific chapters, in collaboration with our national members and partners on the ground.

This report fed into the European Commission's Annual Rule of Law cycle and helped inform several country-specific advocacy briefings and meetings with representatives of European institutions, the UN and COE.



Throughout the year, we continued our regular monitoring and reporting for Civic Space Watch and the CIVICUS Monitor, for whom we are a research partner.

Following the dramatic escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine after the 7 October attack by Hamas, we thoroughly documented the extensive restrictions on demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine and published a **joint letter** on the issue, bringing in key partners including Amnesty International, Liberties and Civicus.

## Advocacy and campaigning

This year was a huge year for ECF's advocacy, with a big increase in relevant policy files emerging. In particular, we focused on the impact on civic space and fundamental rights of three main policies: the **Defence of Democracy Package** (DoD), the European Cross Border Associations Directive (ECBA) and the **AI Act**.

When the Commission published its call for evidence on the DoD, it revealed plans for a directive on foreign interference which bore worrying similarities to foreign agents acts around the world.

Immediately, we **mobilised** on this issue: organising over a dozen meetings with Commissioners and other policymakers to express our concerns about the plan.

We also engaged in several meetings with our members to prepare our **response** to the public consultation, as well as countless coordination meetings within Civil Society Europe.

In May, 230 organisations **wrote** to the President von der Leyen, urging her to drop plans for the directive. Soon after, the Commission delayed the package to allow for further consultations the ground in the preparation of the DoD recommendation on civic participation. In December, after the proposal was published, we issued a **statement** condemning the Commission's decision to go ahead with the foreign interference directive.



We also kickstarted our advocacy on Artificial Intelligence and Digitalisation, thanks to support from ECNL, organising and participating in a number of joint letters, attending meetings with policymakers and hosting capacity building sessions for our network.

Following on from December 2022's European convening, we engaged in advocacy with the Cabinet of Commissioner Vera Jourova, European Commission DG JUST to present the recommendations that emerged from the convening. This work then fed into our work on the 2024 European elections.

In March, we helped found the **Civil Society for EU campaign**, made up of over 200 European CSOs. The campaign brings forward many of the demands that emerged from our European convening, including a European Civil Society Strategy and a Civil Dialogue Agreement.



Since January 2023, ECF has chaired the CSE working group on civic space to coordinate civil society actions at the European level on democracy and rule of law files. In this group, we coordinated a **joint response** to the European Commission's rule of law report and held several meetings to provide civil society's feedback on the process with the relevant DG JUST unit and Reynders' Cabinet.

The ECF was also a driving force in the first ever **Civil Society State of the Union report**, prepared by Civil Society Europe, which was launched in a public event with policymakers in September.

## Building capacities and community

In September, we hosted the [European Civic Academy](#) alongside the [Civic Pride Awards](#). The awards celebrated four outstanding organisations and movements across Europe.

This year's ECA brought together 90 people from across Europe, including activists, ECF members and academics. Through an open application process, we selected 30 grassroots activists to sponsor to participate in the event.



This year's theme was "Building collective empowerment towards just and inclusive societies," with an aim of fostering collaboration, sharing experiences, and identifying strategies to renew civic actors' collective social and political agency. Over two-days, we organised a horizontal, participatory event, featuring workshops, trainings and self-organised sessions.

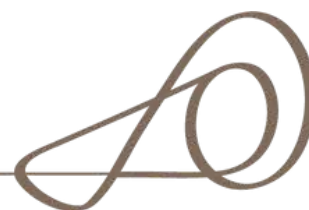
ECF organised also organised three information and capacity building sessions on Artificial intelligence with member organisations and created a dedicated [webpage](#) to provide members with resources on the topic.

## Providing financial support to members

In 2023, we launched our first re-granting scheme for members, allowing us to distribute small grants to member organisations for two specific strands: operational support and rapid support grants.

The [programme](#) allowed 4 beneficiaries with 5 initiatives to strengthen their abilities to engage in European issues, including post CoFoE and before the EU elections, participate in study visits to the EU, support their communications and capacity and leadership building activities, and much more!

# Our impact



## Placing civic space and civil dialogue firmly on the agenda

For years, ECF has led the effort at the EU level to promote awareness of the **crucial role that civil society plays in safeguarding democracy and the rule of law**. In doing so, we have contributed to a growing understanding that that, to defend democracy and the rule of law, we must project and enhance civic space – a crucial component of health democracies.

Thanks to our work and that of our allies, in 2022, we managed to unite EU-level civil society organisations around the need for a **Civil Society Strategy**, through our joint letter and later our European Convening. In 2023, this impact has started to feed into institutional outputs.

In 2023, the European Commission organised a **series of workshops** to engage with civil society as a follow-up to its 2022 Report on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which focused on civic space. The **final report** of these workshops echoes many longstanding demands of ECF and other CSOs, such as developing an early warning system and emergency response mechanism in case of threats and attacks, giving

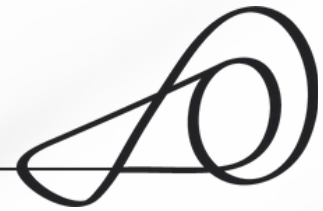
specific attention to the groups representing most vulnerable communities, as they are in the frontline of these threats and attacks, and developing a framework for civil dialogue.

In March, for the first time ever, the Council of the EU agreed **conclusions on civic space**, which affirm the essential role of civic actors in protecting fundamental rights and call on member states to take action to expand civic space.

Then, as part of its Defence of Democracy package, the European Commission published a **recommendation** on civil society engagement – a welcome step forward.

Now, with the **Civil Society for EU** campaign ahead of the EU elections, it is clear that civic space and civil dialogue are cemented as a key priority across civil society organisations in Europe.

# ECF in the media



**In 2023, ECF continued to speak up for Civil Society Organisations with a range of media organisations and in a number of formats.**

euronews.



WORLD NEWS

**Euroviews. 'Foreign interference' is not the main threat to democracy in the EU**

The ongoing European Parliament corruption scandal is being used by some to launch a witch-hunt against civil society and NGOs. This is only fuelling the already worrying crackdown on critical voices that hold governments to account, Raffaella Bolini and Jean-Marc Roirant write.

28/02/2023

EURACTIV

**NGOs warn that EU's foreign agents law could 'silence critical voices'**

News | Justice

📅 3 May 2023

🕒 Est. 4min

Civil society groups have urged the European Commission not to table new rules that would require NGOs to disclose if their funding comes from outside the EU, in a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Wednesday (3 May).

POLITICO



**EU Commission wants registry for foreign lobbyists**

The idea was to expose Vladimir Putin; critics say it emboldens Viktor Orbán.

DECEMBER 12, 2023 • 5 MINS READ

The plan will be “deeply harmful to democracy and will fail in its stated intention of exposing covert foreign interference in EU policymaking,” said Alexandrina Najmowicz, secretary general of the European Civic Forum, an umbrella organization of NGOs and associations. She argued that the measure was “likely to weaken” civic groups trying to promote fundamental rights and fight malign interference, noting that many Eastern European NGOs working on rule of law receive funding from USAID.

## Ensuring fundamental rights are not forgotten

Through our advocacy work and alliance building, we worked to ensure fundamental rights were at the heart of policy files. 2023 saw the start of our advocacy on the **Artificial Intelligence Act** – organising trainings for our members and building strong alliances with generalist and digital rights organisations.

Through our efforts, we were able to bring fundamental rights considerations into the Act – especially at the LIBE Committee vote. While the act was eventually watered down, key civil society demands remain in the final text.

## Building trust, mutual understanding, and participation

Through our events in 2023 (online, offline and hybrid), we brought together activists, decision-makers and scholars.

An important marker of our impact is also the high number of EU decision-makers present at our events, including Heads of Units of the European Commission, several MEPs, representatives of the European Council and representatives of regional and international human rights bodies. For example, our policy debate in March was attended by representatives from the UN OHCHR, the Fundamental Rights Agency, the OECD, European Council, and European Commission.

With all these activities, we promote trust and understanding among participants with diverse backgrounds, bridging civic engagement between different forms of civil society and policymakers.

In particular, our activities contributed to:

- Building solidarity and community
- Bringing national issues to the European level – and vice versa
- Campaigning against regressive trends across Europe





# European Civic Academy 2023

Building collective empowerment towards just and inclusive societies

**On 19-20 September, 100 activists, civic actors and academics gathered at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies for the sixth edition of the European Civic Academy.**



**Read the key takeaways!**



# CIVIC PRIDE AWARDS 2023

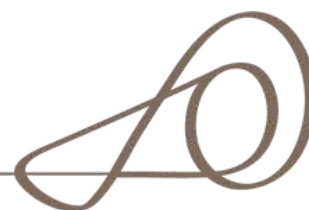


Every year, the European Civic Forum recognises outstanding civic initiatives with the Civic Pride Awards. This year's ceremony took place on 18 September 2023 in Brussels, attended by civil society actors and activists.

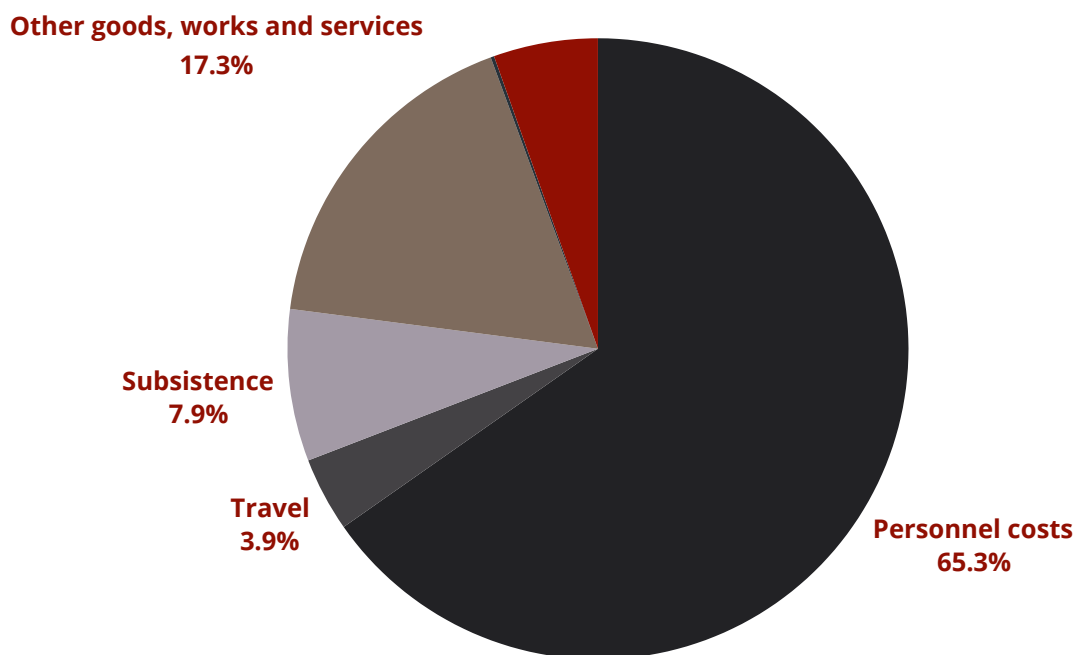
Visit our webpage to read about the winners and listen to exclusive interviews!

[Visit the webpage!](#)

# Financial report

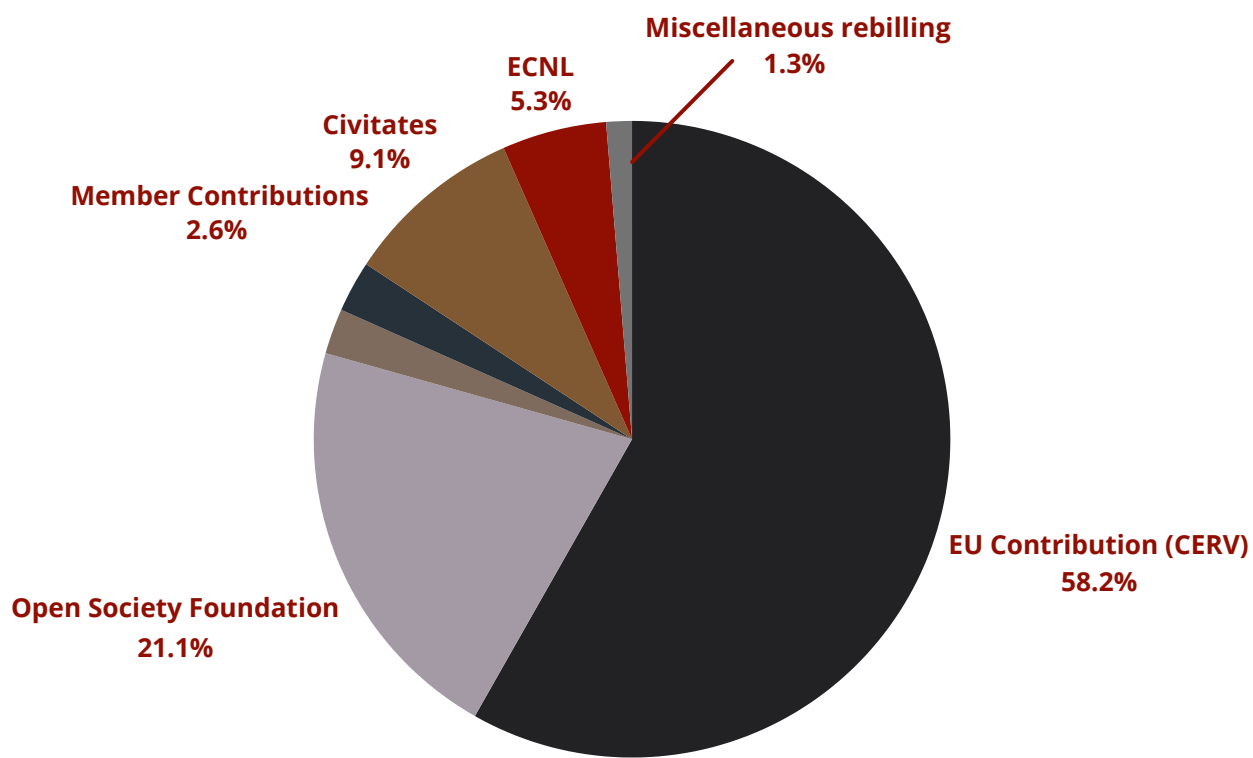


## Expenditure



Personnel costs		€430,840
Travel		€25,542
Subsistence	(accommodation, local transport, meals)	€52,113
Equipment (depreciation)		€1,177
Other goods, works and services	Running costs, office rental and supplies, catering, conference facilitation & training, venue rental, bookkeeping and audit services, banking fees, insurance...	€114,397
Financial support to third parties		€35,812
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>€659,881</b>

# Income



EU contribution (CERV)		€384,000
Open Society Foundation		€139,653
Civicus research partnership	Civicus Monitor	€15,499
Member contributions	Fees and contributions	€17,387
Civitates		€60,000
European Center for Not-for-profit Law (ECNL)		€35,200
Miscellaneous rebilling	Office subrental	€8,870
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>€660,609</b>

**Total EXPENDITURE**

**€659,881**

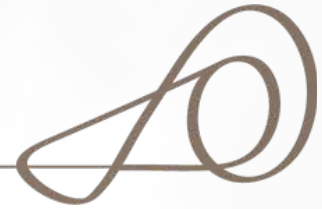
**Total INCOME**

**€660,609**

**The European Civic Forum ended the  
year with a positive accounting record of**

**€728**

# Governance



## Steering Committee

After 19 years at the helm of ECF, our founder Jean-Marc Roirant stepped down as Co-President. Jean-Marc has been a much-loved driving force in the ECF and in wider European civil society, helping to forge alliances and cooperation amongst civil society actors.

Jean-Marc's presence will be greatly missed, but it is a testament to his work that he leaves ECF in a stronger position than ever. In recognition of his role, the General Assembly elected him Honorary President.



**ECF Honorary President Jean-Marc Roirant, left, with Vice President Jan Robert Suesser**

At the General Assembly on 18 September in Brussels, ECF members elected Vera Mora of Ökotárs Alapítvány as our new Co-President, alongside Raffaella Bolini of ARCI. Vera is a longtime champion of civil society in Hungary and Brussels and will be invaluable to the ECF over the coming years.

Members also voted to elect a new Vice President, Julie Rosenkilde of Nyt Europa and two new members of the Steering Committee: Frank Heuberger of BBE and Thais Bonilla of NOVACT, which also joins the ECF Board for the first time.



**Raffaella Bolini**  
Co-president  
Arci, Italy



**Vera Mora**  
Co-president  
Okotars, Hungary



**Jan Robert Suesser**  
Vice President  
Ligue des droits de  
l'Homme, France



**Oonagh Aitken**  
Vice President  
Volonteuropé



**Karolina  
Dreszer -Smalec**  
Vice President  
OFOP, Poland



**Filip Pazderski**  
Vice President  
Institute for Public Affairs,  
Poland



**Yonous Mohammadi**  
Vice President  
Greek Forum of Refugees



**Julie Rosenkilde**  
Vice President  
Nyt Europe, Denmark



**Frank Heuberger**  
Member  
BBE, Germany



**Thais Bonilla**  
Member  
Novact, Spain

# Board of Directors

## Belgium

Oonagh Aitken, Volonteurope  
Roger Casale, New Europeans

## Czech Republic

Jolana Turnerova, SPIRALIS

## Denmark

Julie Rosenkilde, Nyt Europa

## France

Jan Robert Suesser,  
Ligue des Droits de L'Homme  
Martine Besson, La Ligue de  
l'enseignement

## Germany

Frank Heuberger,  
Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement  
Daniela Vancic, Democracy International  
Maarten De Groot, The ECI Campaign  
Jens Baganz, We Are Europe

## Greece

Yonous Muhammadi, Greek Forum of  
Refugees

## Hungary

Bálint Farkas, Okotars  
Miklos Barabas, European House Budapest

## Italy

Lorenzo Carangelo, ARCI  
Giuseppe Labita, CIPSI  
Pier Virgilio Dastoli,  
European Movement Italy

## Latvia

Kristine Zonberga, Civic Alliance Latvia

## Lithuania

Gaja Savele, National NGO Coalition

## North Macedonia

Sreten Koceski,  
Community Development Institute

## Poland

Filip Pazderski, Institute of Public Affairs  
Karolina Dreszer,  
National Federation of Polish NGOs

## Portugal

João Labrincha, Academia Cidada

## Romania

Stefania Andersen,  
Civil Society Development Foundation

## Serbia

Miodrag Nedeljkovic,  
Initiative for Development and Cooperation

## Spain

Rosario Sanchez, Fundacion Cives  
Elena Jimenez, Òmnium Cultural  
Thais Bonilla Martinez, NOVACT

**27**  
Members

**16**  
Countries

**52%**  
Women



# Our staff

In 2023, our team grew from just four staff members and one trainee to seven full time staff members and one trainee.



**Alexandrina Najmowicz**  
Secretary General



**Vladimir Sestovic**  
Communications and  
Network Coordinator



**Giada Negri**  
Research and  
Advocacy Coordinator



**Aarti Narsee**  
Senior Policy &  
Advocacy Officer



**Benjamin Goodwin**  
Communications and  
Campaigns Officer



**Meron Mengesha Mamo**  
Administrative and  
Financial Officer  
*(until June)*



**Kerttu Willamo**  
Policy and Capacity  
Building Officer

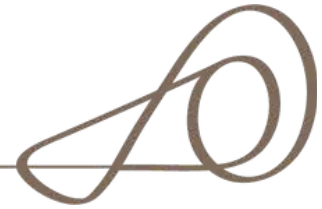


**Alexia Ozeel**  
Civic Space Assistant  
*(from February)*



**Hana Jemli**  
Office Manager  
*(from July)*

# Members



## Full members





## Associate members

**A BUON DIRITTO**  
— ONLUS —

**anne frank**  
stichting

**AZIRA**

**anno**  
Asociace nestátních  
neziskových organizací  
České republiky z. s.

**ASOCIACE  
OBČANSKÝCH  
PORADEN**



**ad**  
asociația pro democrația

**À PRAÇA**  
criar, agir, participar



**PRIPREMA  
POZOR  
SMART**

**AD**

réseau national  
de la participation  
enfance jeunesse  
**anacej**

**ATD  
QUART MONDE**

**CEO**  
CENTRUM EDUKACJI  
OBYWATELSKIEJ

**CEP**

**cidem.org**

**Paremvassi.gr**



**culture &  
liberté**  
mouvement  
d'éducation  
populaire

**de verenigde  
verenigingen**

**documenta**  
INSTITUTO EUROPEO DE ESTUDIOS PARA LA FORMACIÓN Y EL DESARROLLO

**la ligue de  
l'enseignement**  
Fédération de Paris

**FÉDÉRATION  
FRANÇAISE  
DES MAISONS  
DE L'EUROPE**

**les francas**  
L'éducation en mouvement !

**GS**  
ITALIA  
GRUPPI SOLIDARIETÀ INTERNAZIONALE

**HR  
CN**



# About the European Civic Forum

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of more than 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

[Visit the ECF website](#)

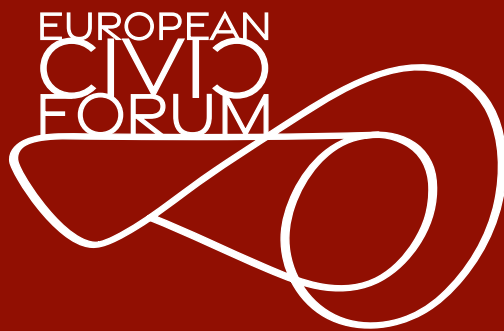
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