



Civic Space Report 2024

LATVIA





About the author

The Civic Alliance - Latvia is an independent umbrella non-governmental organisation dedicated to strengthening civil society and democracy. Its mission is to represent the collective interests of civil society, including associations and foundations, while upholding fundamental democratic freedoms and human rights. The Civic Alliance - Latvia boasts a membership of over 140 organisations, representing approximately 70,000 individuals.

About this report

This analysis was published as part of the European Civic Forum's Civic Space Report 2024. The full report contains chapters written by its secretariat, by member organisations, or by partner organisations and individuals. Much of the content originally appeared as part of ECF's submission to the European Commission's Rule of Law consultation. Each chapter reflects the views and analysis of its respective author. For more information about the European Civic Forum, please visit www.civic-forum.eu

Read the full report at

civic-forum.eu/CivicSpace24

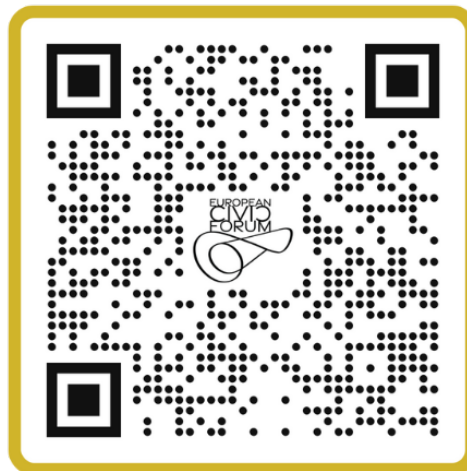


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Key trends

- 🔍 **Overall positive environment for civil society**
- 🔍 **More measurements needed for public participation at all levels**
- 🔍 **Adequacy of funding resources a significant constraint to CSO and societal resilience**

Summary

Civic space in Latvia is rated as "open" by the CIVICUS Monitor¹ and fundamental freedoms are generally well respected. In its 2023 Rule of Law report on Latvia, the European Commission recommended that the government ensure the effective implementation of legislation on lobbying, including the establishment of a special lobby register. Additionally, it concluded that Latvia had "fully implemented the recommendation on taking measures to increase the participation of civil society in decision-making at the local level" since Latvia passed the new Local Government Law in 2022. However, civil society organisations (CSOs) do not believe that this recommendation was fully implemented, given that the legal framework must be implemented in practice. In several policy planning documents, the government and parliament have stated their political commitment to implement civic dialogue and to strengthen the existing Memorandum Council as the central platform for civic dialogue. The availability and adequacy of financial resources remain one of the most significant constraints to the activities of CSOs in Latvia.

¹ <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/latvia/>

Institutional, political and socio-economic landscape

More than 25,000 associations and foundations were registered in Latvia in 2023.² Data shows³ that fewer CSOs are established. While in the period 2010-2013, at least 1,500 new organisations were founded, less than 1,000 have been founded in the last four years. However, in 2023, the number of new organisations has increased for the first time in the last seven years, relative to the previous year.

Only half of all registered associations and foundations are active and functioning. Although there are overall 25,600 associations and foundations in Latvia, about a quarter of them do not submit annual reports. Additionally, 25 per cent of those who submit annual reports do not report any financial activity.

The number of employees in the sector is decreasing, from 29,600 in 2018 to 21,900 in 2022 (a decrease of 7,700 persons). Moreover, while the total number of persons employed is high, they are employed in a small proportion of all CSOs, as only 17 per cent of CSOs have at least one employee.

The financial activity of CSOs has been declining in recent years, with a gradual decrease in the number of organisations showing financial activity across all revenue categories. Specifically, the number of CSOs receiving donations (-27%) and grants (-6%) has decreased. The total amount of donations is increasing, but the number of CSOs receiving them is decreasing. Donations received by CSOs in 2022 amounted to EUR 97.7 million, representing a 55 per cent increase compared to the previous year. However, the number of CSOs that have received donations has decreased year on year over the last four years due to a 2018 tax policy reform that affected the system of donations. Of all the CSOs that have submitted annual accounts, only 16 per cent reported donation income in 2022.

² According to the official database of Lursoft Ltd., https://www.lursoft.lv/lursoft_statistika/?&id=41

³ CSOs monitoring report 2023:

https://nvo.lv/uploads/nvo_sektora_monitorings_2023_pap181.pdf

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According to a study⁴ by the Civic Alliance - Latvia (CAL) on the economic impact of the non-governmental sector, in 2022, CSOs contributed EUR 331 million directly to the economy in Latvia, while indirectly contributing EUR 223 million. However, the true size of the sector is larger, but as there is no data available on the added value of all the organisations of the civil society sector, including volunteering, the full picture of the economic impact is incomplete.

Latvian civil society supported Ukraine in diverse ways in 2023, including military support, humanitarian aid, aid for war refugees, housing, volunteering, and community-building activities. More than 2,000 off-road vehicles were delivered to Ukraine (Twitter Convoy), among other forms of assistance.⁵ There are numerous support activities organised by CSOs and new social initiatives such as volunteer coordination, fundraising campaigns, creation and maintenance of various platforms, and translation services.

The New Unity (JV) party won the elections in October 2022 and formed a coalition with the conservative National Alliance and the United List. However, after less than a year, the coalition collapsed. Evika Siliņa (also from JV) was appointed as the prime minister. The new government is composed of a three-party coalition between the New Unity (JV) party, the Greens and Farmers Union (ZZS), and the social-democratic Progressives (PRO).

President Edgars Rinkēvičs assumed office as the President of Latvia on July 8, 2023. In his inauguration speech to the Parliament (Saeima), President Rinkēvičs highlighted: “During my presidency, I will stand up for a modern and strong Latvia, for a legal and just Latvia, for the well-being of the people, for an inclusive and respectful society.”⁶

After long discussions, on November 30, 2023, Latvia's Parliament supported the draft law intended to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention⁷. The Convention will enter into force on May 1, 2024.

Additionally, on November 9, the Parliament adopted amendments to eight laws envisaging the introduction of a new partnership institution in Latvia – a new way to legally strengthen relations between two adults, including same-sex couples, and provide social and economic protection for them. Amendments to the laws are expected to come into force on July 1, 2024.⁸

⁴ Non-governmental organisations Socio-economic impact. Contribution to GDP and public investment https://nvo.lv/uploads/petijums_nvo_ieguldijums_latvijas_ekonomika_.pdf

⁵ <https://www.mk.gov.lv/en/latvia-supports-ukraine>

⁶ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/president/09.07.2023-president-rinkevics-inauguration-speech-to-saeima.a515947/>

⁷ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/28.12.2023-latvian-foreign-minister-signs-istanbul-convention-ratification-document.a536991/>

⁸ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/09.11.2023-latvian-saeima-adopts-partnership-law.a531042/>

Civic freedoms: regulatory environment and implementation

Freedom of association

The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia recognises and protects fundamental rights. The existing fundamental rights chapter in the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and thought, press freedom, freedom of association and assembly, freedom to strike, and inviolability of correspondence and home.

CSOs are primarily governed by two laws – the Law on Associations and Foundations and the Public Benefit Law. CSOs are generally able to operate freely under the law without harassment by the government and can freely address matters of public debate and express criticism. The registration process is easy and accessible, and all documentation can be submitted electronically.

The core legal document establishing citizen's rights to participate in state matters (Article 101) states that: *"Every citizen of Latvia has the right, as provided for by law, to participate in the work of the State and of local government, and to hold a position in the civil service. Local governments shall be elected by Latvian citizens and citizens of the European Union who permanently reside in Latvia. Every citizen of the European Union who permanently resides in Latvia has the right, as provided by law, to participate in the work of local governments. The working language of local governments is the Latvian language"*⁹.

During 2023, the Ministry of Justice drafted amendments to the law governing associations and foundations. These proposed changes aim to enhance the regulation for greater participation of members, boards, and other stakeholders in the decision-making processes of organisations. They also seek to enable organisations to operate more efficiently and resourcefully by granting the right to conduct membership meetings electronically.

⁹ <https://www.saeima.lv/en/legislative-process/constitution>

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The amendments also establish a classifier for CSOs, which is viewed as a crucial tool for effective sector analysis, monitoring, and the implementation of data-driven civil society development policies. Without comprehensive and complete data, it is impossible to analyse civil society organisations, their areas of activity, and various financial indicators, including development trends. Moreover, an inaccurate database, which includes inactive or defunct organisations, provides a misleading portrayal of the associations and foundations sector.

As of 2023, there remains no specific institution explicitly responsible for civil society in Latvia. However, discussions on this matter have been ongoing in various formats throughout the year. Suggestions have been made to appoint a civil society advisor within the offices of the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Culture, or to designate a ministerial member specifically responsible for the development of civil society.

In response to these discussions, the Ministry of Culture has taken steps by identifying a responsible official for civil society and dialogue with CSOs, namely the parliamentary secretary. Furthermore, discussions are in progress regarding the establishment of a government committee to address issues related to a cohesive society, which may include matters concerning civil society.

Safe space

In June 2023, the Parliament adopted amendments to the State Border Law and the Border Guard Law legalising pushbacks of migrants and refugees. The law aims to prevent illegal entry at the border to Belarus, including by force, violating international and EU human rights standards and the right to seek asylum.¹⁰ Pushbacks have already been taking place on the Latvian-Belarusian border for years and the violations have resulted in injuries and even the death of one person.¹¹ In January 2023, the Latvian State Border Guard initiated criminal proceedings against Ieva Raubiško and Egils Grasmanis, two members of the refugees and migrants rights organisation "I want to help refugees" for providing assistance to a group of five Syrian nationals on the Latvian and Belarusian border.¹² The Un Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders raised concerns that the case was "initiated in direct

¹⁰ <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/102005-unhcr-concerned-with-new-legislation-in-latvia.html>

¹¹ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/45549/latvia-afghan-migrant-smuggled-from-belarus-dies-of-hypothermia>

¹² <https://www.world-today-news.com/a-criminal-case-has-been-initiated-against-two-i-want-to-help-refugees-activists-for-activities-on-the-border/>

response to their legitimate acts of solidarity with asylum seekers.”¹³ The first hearing in the case began on 28 February 2024.¹⁴

Funding for civil society

Availability and adequacy of funding resources a concern

According to data¹⁵, the total revenue of associations and foundations in 2022 amounted to approximately EUR 590 million. From 2020 to 2021, revenues remained relatively stable, but in 2022, they experienced a notable increase of 22 per cent compared to the previous year.

However, expenditures have shown a significantly higher rate of increase over the last two years. While they decreased by 10 per cent in 2020, they increased by 10 per cent and 21% in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Over the past four years as a whole, expenditures have grown at a faster rate than revenue.

Regarding revenue sources, 25% of the total revenue comes from operating activities, 19% from grants, and another 21% from miscellaneous sources. Donations contribute only 17% of the sector's revenue, while EU and other non-EU funding account for nine per cent. Membership fees represent 9% of the total revenue.

In comparison to the financial performance of associations and foundations between the period 2019-2022, the number of organisations showing financial activity has gradually decreased in all revenue categories, indicating a declining financial performance of the sector. Specifically, the number of organisations receiving donations (-27%) and grants (-6%) has decreased. Although donations and grants have increased in total, they are reaching a narrower range of organisations.

The total government expenditure on associations and foundations in 2022 amounted to EUR 102.9 million, out of a total budget of EUR 102 billion. The majority of this expenditure comes from public

¹³ <https://srdefenders.org/latvia-alleged-undue-use-of-criminal-proceedings-against-human-rights-defenders-ieva-raubisko-and-egils-grasmanis-joint-communication/>

¹⁴ <https://gribupalidzetbegliem.lv/2024/02/26/saksies-tiesas-process-pret-gribu-palidzet-begliem-darbinieci-par-palidzibu-patveruma-mekletajiem/>

¹⁵ https://nvo.lv/uploads/nvo_sektora_monitorings_2023_pap181.pdf p.29

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subsidies at both national and local levels, totalling EUR 69.7 million. The largest portions of this budget expenditure are allocated by the Ministry of Education (EUR 35.5 million), the Ministry of Culture (EUR 18.6 million), and the Ministry of Welfare (EUR 16.1 million).

The financial sustainability of organisations is largely linked to the diversification of revenue sources. However, data on annual accounts show that most organisations typically have only one major source of revenue, while the others account for an insignificant share. In this respect, it can be concluded that the financial sustainability of associations and foundations is currently weak, as a large proportion of organisations are dependent on a single source of funding.

CSOs had access to increased government funding, after receiving approximately two million euros from the National NGO Fund, which is administered by the Society Integration Foundation. In addition, the foundation provides other programs for CSOs, funded by the state.¹⁶ Line ministries in the fields of youth, culture, environment, and other sectors also provide different grants for CSOs. There were also specific programmes for CSOs who implement activities to help Ukrainians.

On December 9, 2024, the Saeima adopted the national budget. An evaluation of the budget's content reveals that calls from civil society for additional funding to support civil dialogue, civic participation, and cooperation have been partially met. The funding allocated in the State Budget for the Council for the Implementation of the Memorandum of Cooperation between the cabinet of ministers and CSOs, which serves as a platform for civic dialogue, received an annual allocation of 200,000 euros (from 2024 to 2026).

In addition, The National NGO Fund program is allocated €2.5 million in the national budget, EUR 105,000 are allocated for the co-financing programme, and the funding for the Regional NGO Support Programme remains unchanged at EUR 150,000. Additionally, there is a new program planned to be administered by the Ministry of Culture, financed by EU funds, titled "Bringing Society Together by Promoting Self-Organization and Enhancing Skills and Opportunities for Cooperation and Participation." The total allocated amount for this program is more than four million euros, spanning from 2024 to 2029.

¹⁶ <https://www.sif.gov.lv/lv/nvo-fonds>

Civil dialogue and the right to participation

Regulatory enactments, such as the State Administration Structure Law and the Cabinet Rules of Procedure, determine civic participation in the state administration, and methods for such participation – including working groups, advisory councils, participating in public consultations, providing opinions, proposals and objections in the process of drafting political and legal acts. This means that at the governmental level, each ministry at least has a consultative council, and parliamentary commissions which invite CSO representatives to participate in their meetings and provide input.

In practice, CSOs have relatively easy access to politicians and civil servants who are responsible for various public policy issues. However, the quality of the dialogue between state and CSOs generally depends on the individuals involved.

To assess the local authorities' involvement with associations and foundations in public participation, a survey was conducted on the participation of local governments in public and voluntary associations and foundations, as well as the engagement of representatives from the non-governmental sector in various participation mechanisms established by municipalities.¹⁷ The survey identified a total of 655 associations and foundations that participated in public participation mechanisms set up by municipalities between 2020 and 2022. Among these, 13 organisations participated in multiple municipal participation mechanisms, with nine of them operating at the national level.

Overall, there are at least 600 local associations and foundations in Latvia that have been engaged in decision-making processes at the local government level. Notably, 309 of these organisations are based in Riga, while 346 are located outside of Riga. It's important to note that not all of these organisations are strictly civic organisations; they also include entities such as housing associations, sports clubs, cultural groups, and firefighters' associations.

Some municipalities report cooperation with associations and foundations on practical day-to-day issues, although these organisations may not be involved in formal participation mechanisms. Other municipalities altogether lack formalised mechanisms for public participation. Additionally, some

¹⁷ https://nvo.lv/uploads/apkopojums_nvo_lidzdaliba_lemumpienemsana_lpa_2023.pdf

municipalities mention that associations and foundations participate in various municipal events such as seminars, workshops, and discussions, but not in formalised participatory mechanisms. These types of engagements were not considered as part of the research on participation in the decision-making process.

Attempts to improve participation

There is a delay in the implementation of local government referendums, which, according to the law, was planned for 1 January 2024. It is related to ensuring the necessary financing, and technical solution development. In December 2023, the parliament adopted voting procedures in local government referendums - whereby voting via electronic voter register will be possible through registration envelopes, until the introduction of the online electoral register. To ensure participation in decision-making in local governments and influence the work of the council in the interests of local residents, as of September 1, 2024, the residents have the opportunity to propose local government referendums.¹⁸

Additionally, in December 2023, the parliament, the European Commission, and the European Parliament Liaison Office in Latvia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strategic partnership. The memorandum aims to jointly raise awareness and educate society about important matters concerning Latvia's membership in the European Union, promote broader public participation in EU-related discussions, and provide information about the role of national parliaments in EU-level decision-making.¹⁹

To promote meaningful public participation, the State Chancellery has developed new procedures and drafted a new legal framework. The proposed legislation updates the process for institutions to provide opportunities for public participation and introduces significant changes to the current arrangements. For instance, it clarifies that opportunities for public participation should be provided for both policy-making processes, such as drafting planning documents and legislation, as well as for other initiatives and processes of public interest, including reforms and budgetary matters. The draft legislation also emphasises the importance of public feedback in fostering understanding and citizen involvement in decision-making processes. Institutions are encouraged to publish summaries of public participation events on the TAP portal or their websites, outlining proposals received and follow-up actions. This enhances transparency and accountability in public administration.

An important aspect of the proposed legislation is the ability for citizens to initiate their own participation processes on issues, with institutions obligated to consider these requests and respond if opportunities for public participation are not provided.

¹⁸ <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/32967-the-saeima-adopts-voting-procedures-in-local-government-referendums-until-the-introduction-of-the-online-electoral-register>

¹⁹ <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/32991-saeima-signs-memorandum-of-understanding-to-promote-public-participation-in-eu-related-discussions>

Additionally, the draft legislation updates existing forms of participation by standardising their conditions and incorporating innovative methods such as think tanks and project teams. This move aims to provide greater clarity in organising various participation opportunities for both authorities and the public, fostering more inclusive and effective decision-making processes. Following proposals from civil society calling to implement civil dialogue, similarly to social dialogue, both the government and parliament have expressed a political commitment to implementing civil dialogue through various policy documents. These include the National Development Plan, Declaration of the Government, Action Plan of the Government, Open Government Plan, Guidelines for Development for a Cohesive and Civic Active Society, and other key political documents pertaining to civil society.

The Government's Declaration and the Action Plan include a political commitment to promote a cohesive society, increase funding for initiatives of civil society organisations, develop a legal framework for civil dialogue, and strengthen the resilience of society.

The plan includes commitments on strengthening civil society, civil dialogue, cohesive societies and societal resilience by:

- 🔍 promoting a cohesive society – increasing community representation in cohesion-building activities, promoting inclusive community self-organisation, strengthening local communities and organisations working with ethnic minorities, vulnerable and disenfranchised groups.
- 🔍 increasing funding for CSOs ' initiatives – increasing funding for key CSO support programmes, creating a new programme to promote volunteering.
- 🔍 developing of a legal framework for civil dialogue – in addition to the practical implementation of civil dialogue,
- 🔍 strengthening societal resilience – in addition to the establishment of a Crisis Management Centre, strengthening the self-organisation of society and local communities, the psychological resilience of the population, ensuring resistance to misinformation and the improving capacity of the population to organise resistance in the event of a possible invasion.

The government's commitment to the implementation of the plan is also welcome, with the involvement of its social and cooperation partners and non-governmental organisations representing the sector in the implementation of the measures included in the action plan, as well as the semi-annual reporting on the implementation of the measures in the plan.

In addition, there are financial milestones set for advancing civil dialogue in Latvia. Two specific programs for civil dialogue will begin in 2024. The first program is funded under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the implementation of civil dialogue. Cooperation partners from CSOs will be allocated 500,000 euros for the period of 2024-2027. The second program provides funding from the national budget for the Memorandum Council as the central civic platform. An annual allocation of 200,000 euros is designated for this purpose, spanning from 2024 to 2026.

Civil society resilience

CSOs play a vital role in fostering a strong, independent, and democratic civil society with a focus on the common good and social impact, thus increasing societal resilience. Recent crises in Latvia, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine, underscored the indispensable role of civil society in crisis response and humanitarian aid efforts, particularly at the local level. Leaders within local communities, social media influencers, and national-level CSOs all played crucial roles in these crisis situations, driven by shared values regarding humanity, rights, and freedoms. They served as trusted sources of information, catalysts for action, facilitators of connections, and agents of change.

The past years have demonstrated that motivated and skilled individuals can lead remarkable civil society actions at all levels. It is noteworthy that the majority of these roles have been performed by women, who constitute a predominant part of the civil society sector in Latvia.

In recognising the importance of bolstering the capacity of CSOs, it is acknowledged that there is a need to strengthen resources at the regional level to promote social resilience. However, municipal resources alone are insufficient for this purpose. While increasing funding for CSOs is necessary, there is a concern that a significant increase could lead to undue political influence over CSO activities. Therefore, a careful balance must be struck to ensure that CSOs can effectively fulfil their roles while maintaining their independence and integrity.

During 2023, Civic Alliance – Latvia and The Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation (LAPAS) collaborated with national and international experts on a series of activities for CSOs. These activities included workshops and training aimed at building various crisis management skills, ranging from individual to collective action. The initiative aimed to establish a network of resilience champions within the civil society sector, to increase social capital and lead by example.

Through these workshops and training, CSOs were equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively respond to crises, whether at the individual level or through collaborative efforts. By empowering CSOs with crisis management skills, the initiative aimed to strengthen their ability to navigate and overcome challenges, ultimately contributing to the resilience of the civil society sector as a whole.

The capacity of the civil society sector to respond to crises is currently limited, but its role in providing support during the later stages of crises is growing. CSO representatives interviewed for a study,

conducted by PROVIDUS in 2023,²⁰ expressed that the sector in Latgale (eastern Latvia, next to the Russian border) was not active during crisis situations, such as in the pandemic or during the arrival of refugees from Ukraine. Reasons cited included a lack of capacity for additional activities, perceived redundancy due to active local government intervention, and concerns about ethnic tensions affecting their involvement.

However, examples were provided where organisations became more engaged in crisis-related issues as the situation evolved, such as supporting the integration of Ukrainian civilians into the local community. Additional funds from sources like municipalities and the Society Integration Fund were crucial for facilitating such activities.

²⁰ <https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Providus-Latgale.pdf>

Recommendations

Targeted recommendation:

- 🔍 Recognise and implement civil dialogue as equal dialogue to social dialogue

- 🔍 Identify the institution responsible (at political and civil servant level) for the development of civic society and the strengthening of democracy, through cross-sectoral policies to guide and coordinate reforms; to develop and support mechanisms for societal self-organisation and resilience, as well as the establishment and implementation of a crisis management system, which is particularly relevant in the current geopolitical situation.
- 🔍 Take measures to increase the participation of civil society in decision-making at all levels, including local, national and parliamentary levels in practice.
- 🔍 Ensure public participation in the planning and monitoring of public funding.
- 🔍 Implement a targeted civic society development policy in practice, with permanent state budget funding to strengthen civil society capacity.



About European Civic Forum

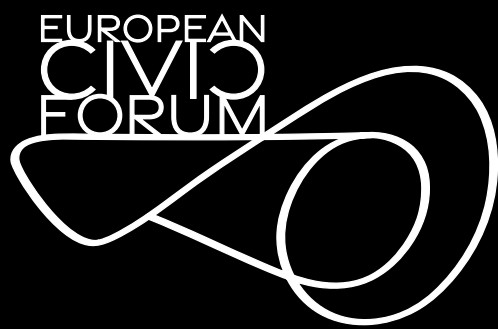
European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of more than 100 associations and NGOs across 30 European countries,

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.



About Civic Space Watch

Civic Space Watch collects findings and analyses from actors in Europe on the conditions for civil society to operate, capturing national and trans-European trends in civic space. Through ongoing monitoring of social media and regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground, we strive to provide easy access to resources and improve information sharing within civil society across Europe.



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