

ANNUAL REPORT

July 2024 - July 2025





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A WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT



The past year at Civil Society Europe (CSE) has brought opportunities, achievements and the chance to further develop our work. We've formed new partnerships and have further expanded our network, and have continued our efforts on relevant policy areas and initiatives.

The first half of 2025 saw positive developments as the European Commission announced the EU Civil Society Strategy as part of its 2025 work programme. Campaigning for this initiative has been a core part of our work, and we remain committed to shaping a strategy that genuinely delivers for civil society. We recently contributed to the Commission's public consultation on the strategy, jointly facilitating civil dialogue on this matter. We look forward to seeing it progress further.

In mid-2025, we launched our 2025 'Civil Society State of the Union' report, the result of bottom-up engagement with 35 civil society organisations. The launch event, taking place in the European Parliament, was a resounding success and provided a key opportunity to bring civil society actors and policymakers together to discuss and shape the EU's 2026 political agenda.

We are advocating strongly for adequate funding in the Multiannual Financial Framework, the EU's long-term budget, and we continue our work on several key EU policies, such as the European Cross-border Associations (ECBA) Directive and the Defense of Democracy package. This year also saw the launch of the first edition of the 'Civil Dialogue Award', an exciting initiative which aims to recognise best practices of civil dialogue within EU institutions, agencies, or bodies. We also continued our work on a joint civil society contribution to the annual Rule of Law report, an essential tool for monitoring the Rule of Law across Member States. Moreover, we developed common positions on civil dialogue and on the protection of human rights defenders by coordinating civil society organisations.

It has been a challenging time for civil society as we navigate an increasingly polarised and complex political and social environment. This year, civil society has seen unprecedented attacks from some conservative and far-right actors at EU level, and defending, reacting and mitigating against this has made up a significant portion of our work. In April 2025, we coordinated a statement against these attacks which was supported by 600 civil society organisations, a successful effort that had great impact. Our advocacy on this issue has led to reinforced alliances with civil society organisations beyond our network.

Of course, none of this impact would be possible without the outstanding leadership of our Board, the continued dedication and expertise of our members, and the support from the secretariat. Together, we've been able to achieve many remarkable goals and have laid the foundations for further success going forward. We look forward to continuing such important work and achieving our ambition of an enabling civic space at EU level.

Gabriella Civico

President of Civil Society Europe

1.

**WHO
WE ARE**

We represent the diverse voices of European civil society.

Civil Society Europe (CSE) is the coordination of civil society organisations at European (EU) level.

We represent 26 networks and platforms of civil society organisations (CSOs) who are active in a variety of causes, such as education, social rights, civic participation, environmental protection, culture, transparency, international cooperation, youth, volunteering, patients' rights, anti-racism, anti-poverty, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Established in 2016, CSE is the most representative organisation gathering civil society across policy fields at EU level. We are recognised as the point of reference for EU institutions on all matters related to civic space and civil society involvement in policy-making, which is defined by the term 'civil dialogue'.

We work towards regenerating the European project around the shared values of equality, solidarity, inclusiveness and democracy.

2. 

OUR

MISSION

Our mission is to contribute to EU and national institutions' recognition of the essential role of independent civil society organisations (CSOs) in building and nurturing a democratic society based on fundamental rights.

We strive to develop a strong civil society voice and an effective, open, and structured civil dialogue at EU level, as well as a thriving and enabling civic space across the EU.

We call for:

- An enabling civic space based on fundamental rights, at national and EU level
- The renewal of European democracy by promoting the transparency, accountability, and participation of CSOs in EU decision-making processes
- The recognition by policy-makers of civil society's role in closing the divide between citizens and institutions, and providing needed solutions to societal issues
- An enabling environment for exchange among CSOs and movements across the EU

3.

A SNAPSHOT OF OUR WORK

Between July 2024 and July 2025, CSE coordinated coalitions of civil society organisations on key EU policies and legislation affecting civil society.

Some of our highlights include:

Our work on the EU Civil Society Strategy, which has now been included in the Commission's 2025 work programme

Our work on the transparency of European Parliament committees in the 2019 - 2024 term

The launch of our 2025 'Civil Society State of the Union' report, which highlights the EU's current state and proposed solutions from civil society's perspective

Our paper on civil dialogue, 'EU Civil Dialogue: The Foundations of an Institutional Framework'

Our joint civil society contribution on civic space to the 2025 Rule of Law report

Our open letter calling for a vibrant civic space and an EU strategy for civil society

Our work on the Multiannual Financial Framework, calling for a strengthened funding programmes

Our statement on the proposed 'Civil Society Platform'

Our statement, supported by 600 CSOs, defending against attacks on civil society

Our joint statement on the 'Foreign Interference Directive' and the risk it poses to media freedom in the EU

4.

OUR WORK

CIVIL SOCIETY STATE OF THE UNION

The Working Group on the Civil Society State of the Union, chaired by Judit Lantai (JEF Europe) and Gabriella Civico (CEV), was reconvened to continue its work after the Civil Society State of the Union (CSSOTEU) 2023 report¹. The proposals of the CSSOTEU 2023 report were analysed and updated by the thematic sub-working groups, and formed the basis for the CSSOTEU report for 2025. The report², written by more than 35 civil society organisations, presents key civil society proposals for the EU's policy agenda of 2026 across six thematic areas: democracy and fundamental rights, migration and mobility, social EU, climate transition, digital transformation and human-centred security. The aim of the report is to set the agenda for the debate around the State of the European Union address by the European Commission's President, and for the Commission's Work Programme 2026. The report was launched on 3rd July 2025 at a well-attended high-level event³ in the Presidential Salon of the European Parliament, co-organised with the European Parliament Vice-Presidents in charge of the relations with European civil society organisations, Katarina Barley and Nicolae Ștefănuță, with the participation of the MEPs Abir Al-

Sahlani and Marc Angel, and of Miron Podgorean, Member of the Cabinet of the Commission's Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu. The report was disseminated to the Commission's Directors-General, as well as to all the members of the College of Commissioners. The Working Group will continue its work in developing specific amendments to the Treaties needed to implement some of the political proposals of the CSSOTEU 2023 report.



EUROPEAN CROSS-BORDER ASSOCIATIONS (ECBA) DIRECTIVE

The European Cross-Border Associations (ECBA) Directive is a proposed legislation that would allow non-profit organisations with members in at least two (EU) member States to be recognised and operate in all Member States. With this legislation, such associations would be recognised and treated like the equivalent national association throughout the EU, removing current obstacles for non-profits in the EU single market. With the legislation having been approved by the European Parliament in March 2024, CSE's attention was focused on the Council of the EU. Together with the ECBA coalition it coordinates, CSE led an awareness-raising action towards national civil society organisations on the Directive, in order to involve them in the advocacy efforts. CSE developed a handbook for national organisations⁴, such efforts led to the involvement of organisations from France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland in CSE's advocacy activities. To address some of the concerns of the Council, CSE published a Q&A document on the

Directive⁵. On the 3rd June, CSE organised a meeting at the European Parliament, under Chatham House rules, between Member States' representatives and European and national civil society organisations, to discuss the added value of the Directive and the Council's concerns on the file. Another awareness-raising event was organised during CSE's General Assembly on the 19th of June, with the participation of the European Commission and European CSOs. From those exchanges, CSE published a paper⁶ giving clear examples of the added value of the ECBA for national associations, and addressing the security concerns expressed by the Council. Furthermore, CSE and Philea wrote a joint contribution to the Rule of Law report (the Single Market focus)⁷ and for the Single Market Strategy⁸; to highlight how the obstacles for non-profit organisations to operate across borders (a part of which would be solved by the ECBA Directive) are also hindrances for the full development of the Single Market.



CIVIL DIALOGUE

Civil dialogue is the regular, structured, and meaningful interaction between institutions and civil society organisations along the entire law and policy-making cycle. The creation of an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue, to implement the Art. 11 of the Treaty on European Union, is a key objective for Civil Society Europe. A result of CSE and its members' advocacy effort is the proposal for a Civil Society Platform, which CSE has supported while providing guidelines for it⁹. On a more general level, CSE and its members produced the paper 'EU Civil Dialogue: the foundations of an institutional framework'¹⁰, which indicates the purpose and makes some proposals about the structure of a civil dialogue framework, as well as the eligibility criteria for participating organisations, and some examples of its possible implementation in the key EU institutions. CSE has also been called as an expert for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opinion 'Good practice for EU civil dialogue in the light of participatory processes'¹¹, and has been involved in the interviews and focus groups for the drafting of the study for the EESC study 'Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions'¹². Furthermore,

in early 2025, Civil Society Europe launched the first edition of the 'Civil Dialogue Award'. As civil dialogue is enshrined in the EU Treaties (Art. 11 TEU), this award formally recognises best practices within EU institutions. CSE will continue work on this award in the remainder of the year, with the winner to be announced during an award ceremony, hosted by CSE, in Brussels in late 2025.



THE FUTURE OF EU FUNDING

Together with its Working Group on Funding, chaired by Brikena Xhomaqi (LLL), CSE has worked to develop a common civil society vision on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034. In particular, the WG on Funding developed a common civil society position paper¹³ giving indication on the principles for the next MFF, its funding, on the issue of the operating grants supporting civil society, and giving indications of reform for the different programmes. Further papers were developed on the importance and possible common rules for the operating grants¹⁴, and in support of a stronger, standalone CERV programme¹⁵. These papers were used in the discussions with policy makers on the next MFF. Furthermore, also in view of the possible restructuring of a part of the MFF on the principles of the Next Generation EU's National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), together with its Task Force on the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, CSE developed a paper¹⁶ outlining ten recommendations for the next MFF from the lessons learnt on civil society (lack of) involvement in the NRRPs, documented in two previous CSE reports¹⁷. Based on these documents, CSE developed its snap reaction¹⁸ to the MFF 2028-2034 package, focusing on the size, sources of funding, structure, and civil society support and involvement in the different proposed programmes.

DEFENDING CIVIL SOCIETY AGAINST ATTACKS ON THEIR FUNDING

After the 2024 European elections, some MEPs from the right-wing groups mounted a defamatory campaign against NGOs, initially targeting environmental NGO beneficiaries of the LIFE programme's operating grants, claiming that they were being paid by the European Commission to lobby MEPs for the Commission's interests. While this accusation was baseless, it gained ground in the Parliament and in the press. To respond to this, CSE organised a Task Force against the attacks on NGO funding, chaired by Patrizia Heidegger (Green10). The Task Force coordinated a vast coalition of civil society actors, which followed the different facets of the smear campaign (both in the press and in the Parliament). CSE drafted declarations explaining the difference between lobbying and advocacy¹⁹, gathering the support of 600 civil society organisations against the smear campaign²⁰, and replying against the weaponisation of a European Court of Auditors' report on the transparency of EU funding to NGOs²¹. In collaboration with other CSOs such as the European Environmental Bureau and Transparency

International EU, CSE held an online press briefing, giving journalists the opportunity to talk with civil society leaders directly on this issue. Carlotta Besozzi, CSE Director, also spoke at a EESC plenary debate on NGO funding, further bringing the perspective of civil society. CSE's efforts turned the initial narrative and contributed to debunking false allegations against civil society. With the proposal of an inquiry committee against NGOs proposed by the far-right, CSE signed a joint letter²² urging the democratic forces to reject it, and a further statement condemning the approval of a working group in the European Parliament to scrutinize NGO funding²³.

DEFENCE OF DEMOCRACY

PACKAGE AND DEMOCRACY

SHIELD

The Directive on interest representation on behalf of third countries, part of the Defence of Democracy Package, has been considered by civil society organisations and by four UN special rapporteurs²⁴ as dangerous for civil society organisations, closer to a foreign agents law than a transparency regulation. With the work of the civil society coalition on the directive, led by CSE, the undue impact on fundamental rights of the Directive have gone to the centre stage in the discussions in the Council and the Parliament. CSE co-signed a statement with Article 19 and the European Federation of Journalists on the risks the proposed directive poses to media freedom²⁵. CSE also wrote a Q&A paper²⁶ debunking the myths around the directive. The Directive is still being discussed in the Parliament and the Council, with no compromise in sight for the near future.

CSE also contributed to the consultation on the upcoming communication on the Democracy Shield with its own position paper²⁷, requesting a bold proposal that does not only shield democracy, but creates strong safeguards at the EU level and that advances real democratic and transparency reforms, including the institutionalisation of civil dialogue.

‘CIVIL SOCIETY FOR EU’

CAMPAIGN & EU CIVIL

SOCIETY STRATEGY

Civil Society Europe (CSE) continued implementing the EU elections campaign Civil Society for EU (CS4EU), launched in 2023 along with one of its members, the Social Platform. Overall, 480+ candidates signed the campaign pledge, among which 100+ were elected as MEPs. Building on this, in the post-election phase CSE met with 30+ of the newly elected MEPs to consolidate relationships and pitch the creation of a new European Parliament Interest Group on Civil Society, which will be officially launched in October 2025. With the support of the EP Vice President Katarina Barley, in November 2024 CSE also organised the event Civic Pulse, bringing together MEPs and EU civil society to exchange on how to foster collaboration on civil society issues. In parallel, CSE engaged with institutional leaders to ensure civil society support was included in the EU’s new political agenda. This included EP Vice-President Katarina Barley, who subsequently took on a portfolio for civil society relations, as well as relevant civil servants in different Commission DGs and in the cabinet of the EC President during the

drafting of the new Political Guidelines and mission letters. The campaign delivered a number of concrete policy outcomes, including the appointment of two European Parliament Vice-Presidents responsible for relations with civil society; explicit reference to strengthening civil society support in the European Commission's Political Guidelines 2024–2029 and in the mission letter to Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection; the inclusion of a Civil Society Strategy in the Commission's 2025 Work Programme. In June 2025, CSE Board met with the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection Michael Mc Grath to exchange the vision for the Civil Society Strategy and the associated Civil Society Platform. CSE also further engaged with DG Just and contributed to organise 3 focus groups involving several CSOs as part of the consultation process on the Civil Society Strategy.



CIVIC SPACE AND

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

CSE continued working actively to promote an enabling civic space in the EU, especially through the Working Group on Civic Space and Fundamental Rights. Key areas of focus included contributing to the Rule of Law Cycle and annual reports, advancing a protection mechanism for human rights defenders (HRDs) and civil society in Europe, as well as safeguarding fundamental rights in the EU's anti-money laundering (AML) and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) measures. Moreover, in December 2024, CSE contributed to a toolkit published by Philea and ECNL to assess the Civic Space Impact of EU legislative proposals. A training session was co-organised with the same organisations in March 2025 at the European Economic and Social Committee to raise awareness among civil society organisations at EU and national level of the impact of the package on non-profit associations and foundations, and to identify areas where further clarification would be needed.²⁸

RULE OF LAW

CSE contributed to the European Commission's Annual Rule of Law Report through a joint civil society contribution highlighting key horizontal trends in challenges to civic space and proposals for country-specific recommendations. The findings were discussed in early May with the Commission in a dedicated meeting on civic space in which CSE gathered several civil society organisations. Furthermore, within the framework of the Rule of Law Report stakeholder consultation, CSE and Philea wrote a joint contribution to highlight how the obstacles for non-profit organisations to operate across borders affect a full development of the Single Market.²⁹ CSE also provided input to the European Parliament report on the Rule of Law 2024 and was invited to speak at the LIBE Committee shadows meeting. CSE also contributed actively to the work of the EESC Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Working Group by intervening at hearings, high-level events and plenaries, as well as to relevant opinions.

PROTECTION MECHANISM FOR HRDS AND CSOS

In October 2024, CSE published the Mapping paper and the Pathways paper for a Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Organisations in Europe.³⁰ The two papers, drafted in collaboration with a coalition led by CSE and the European Civic Forum, aimed to map the existing protection landscape and, based on the gaps and challenges identified, propose ways to build a stronger ecosystem for the protection of human rights defenders and civil society organisations.

TRANSPARENCY OF THE EU INSTITUTIONS

Transparency of the institutions is a key requirement for democracy. It means, among others, accessibility to documents, clarity in officials' organigrams, and availability of their public contacts. CSE has therefore been committed to analysing the transparency of the EU institutions. On the Commission, together with Social Platform, CSE had filed a complaint to the European Ombudsman about the removal of key contact details from the EU Who'sWho website. The two organisations condemned³¹ the Commission's decision not to follow the Ombudsman's decision, which was in favour of the complaint. Furthermore, CSE analysed the transparency of the European Parliament's Committees in the last part of the 2019-2024 EP term³², finding a patchwork of opacities and no consistency in the information provided. Contacts with the EP Chairs and the EP Secretariat were established to address the issues of the report. Finally, CSE updated its analysis on the transparency of the Member States' Permanent Representations to the EU³³, finding that some Member States had bettered their track record, while others worsened, for instance not providing up to date information.

STRENGTHENING

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH

TRAINING

On December 11th, 2024, CSE organised an in-person accountability training session on “Decolonising systems and processes in civil society organisations (CSOs)”. It gathered senior staff from CSE members and other EU-level CSOs.

Then, on January 23rd, 2025, CSE organised an in-person accountability training session on “Cybersecurity awareness for non-profit organisations”. It gathered participants from CSE members and other EU-level CSOs. The session was led by representatives of the CyberPeace Institute.

PARTNERSHIPS

In the context of the EU Polish Presidency, Civil Society Europe had several meetings with the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland and the Minister and Deputy Minister on Civil Society between Autumn 2024 and beginning of 2025. This led to CSE contributing actively to the organisation of the EU Polish Presidency Conference on 'Building resilience to crises in contemporary Europe through the civil society' which took place in June 2025, where CSE's President was also among the keynote speakers. CSE Director, Carlotta Besozzi, was also among the speakers in the High Level meeting on Civil Society and Crisis Preparedness, which took place in early February 2025. In this meeting, an exchange with Member States responsible for crisis management and civil society took place.

CSE continued to cooperate with the European Economic and Social Committee and its President, and was invited to speak during plenary sessions and in various section meetings. CSE also contributed to the work of the Associational Life Category, acted as an observer to the Liaison Group with civil society, and contributed to the organisation of various events during Civil Society Week.

CSE also enhanced its cooperation with the Co-Quality network, working on the promotion and understanding of management and learning on Quality across Europe and third sectors, and identifying the challenges CSOs face in achieving impact while sharing learnings and best practices. In particular, a first joint [report](#) on the results of the survey to European level CSOs on quality standards and quality compliance frameworks for civil society organisations, was published in April 2025.

CSE was invited to speak at various events and hearings organised by the European Parliament, the Fundamental Rights Agency, the Regional Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights and by CEDEFOP in the context of their 50th anniversary conference.



5.

OUR

MEMBERS

Civil Society Europe gathers 26 platforms and networks of civil society organisations among the most representative CSOs active at EU level in a wide variety of causes.

During the July 2024 to July 2025 period, CSE welcomed two new members: European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), and World Scouting (WOSM). We are pleased to welcome them to our network and deepen our collaboration.





6.

OUR GOVERNANCE

6.1 OUR INTERNAL STRUCTURE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

1 DELEGATE FOR EACH MEMBER ORGANISATION

Meets annually and adopts a work programme,
budget and accounts

Elects every 2 years



BOARD

COMPOSED OF 9 MEMBERS

Elects a President, 2 Vice-Presidents and a Treasurer
among its members



OVERSEES WORKING GROUPS

- WG on the Civil Society State of the Union, co-chaired by Judit Lantai (JEF Europe) and Gabriella Civico (CEV)
- WG on Civic Space and Fundamental Rights, chaired by Giada Negri (ECF)
- WG on Funding, chaired by Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP)
- WG on Communication

Besides the Working Groups and Task Forces, CSE also leads some coalitions that include CSE members, members of members and like-minded CSOs to support common goals, especially around policy files. Examples of this are the ECBA coalition, working on the European Cross-Border Associations Directive, and the DoD coalition, working on the Defence of Democracy Package, the related Directive on interest representation on behalf of third countries, and the Democracy Shield. Similarly, also the Civil Society for EU campaign, coordinated by CSE and Social Platform, expanded well beyond CSE and Social Platform members, getting the support of over 250 CSOs from all over Europe.

6.2 OUR BOARD

From July 2024 to July 2025, the Board met on September 17th 2024, February 20th 2025, May 15th 2025, and June 19th 2025. Each session provided valuable opportunities for in-depth discussions and decision-making to support CSE's goals.

A new CSE Board was elected during CSE's annual General Assembly on 19 June 2025:



Gabriella Civico

CSE President

Centre for
European
Volunteering
(CEV)



**Patrizia
Heidegger**

*CSE Vice-
President*

Green 10



Judit Lantai

*CSE Vice-
President*

Young European
Federalists
(JEF Europe)



**Giuseppina
Tucci**

CSE Treasurer

Lifelong Learning
Platform
(LLL)



Adrien Licha

European
Association
for Local
Democracy
(ALDA)



**Alexandrina
Najmowicz**

European Civic
Forum
(ECF)



Ivana Davidovska

European
Association of
Service Providers
for Persons
with Disabilities
(EASPD)



Martina Corti

SOLIDAR



**Nicholas
Aiossa**

Transparency
International EU
(TI EU)

6.3 OUR SECRETARIAT



Carlotta Besozzi

Director



Nastassia Maes

Policy and
Membership
Engagement
Officer

*until September
2025*



Matteo Vespa

Policy and Project
Officer



**Riccardo
Rossella**

Advocacy and
Fundraising Officer



Carla Pimentel

Communications
and Events Officer

until June 2025



Dylan Power

Communications
and Outreach
Officer

as of March 2025

7.

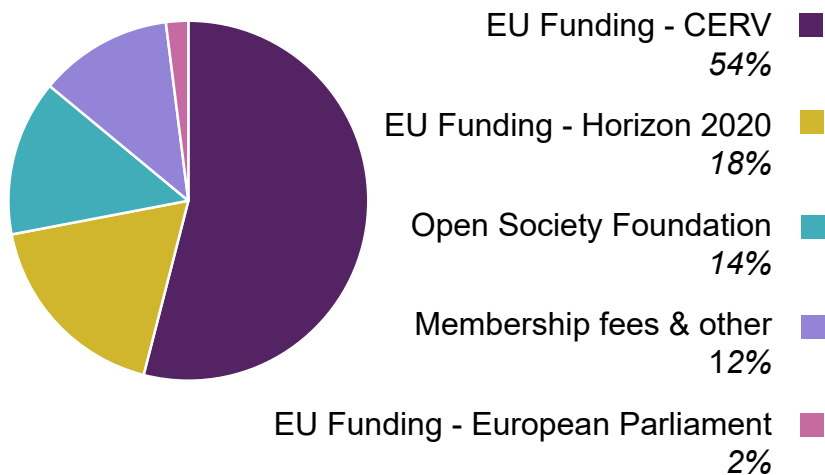
FINANCES

Civil Society Europe (CSE)'s 2024 accounts were approved unanimously during the General Assembly in June 2025, after being validated by an accountant and reviewed by an independent auditor. In 2024, we received €313,453.99 and spent €313,153.3, leaving a surplus of €300.69.

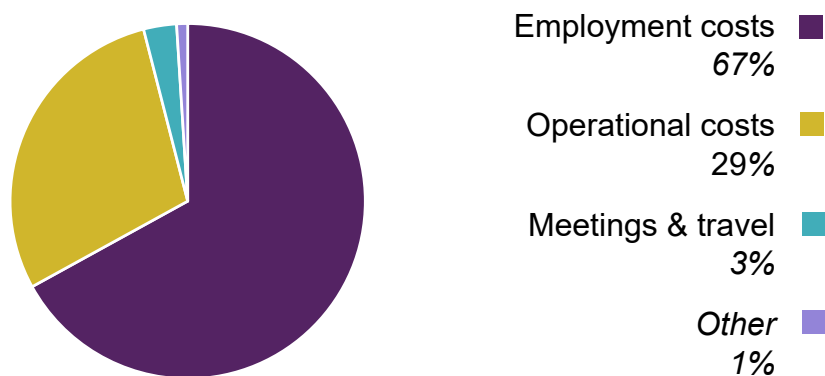
Our income was constituted of funding from the European Union: an operational grant from the European Union's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, Horizon 2020 (for the Entrust project), a contribution from the Greens/EFA for a conference, a grant from the Open Society Foundations, membership fees and other contributions from our members as well as contributions from other civil society organisations for a common project on a protection mechanism on human rights defenders.

All our funding was spent on advocacy work and awareness-raising activities, including the organisation of events, publications and position papers, capacity-building and exchanges among civil society organisations, as well as research and related dissemination activities.

INCOME 2024



EXPENSES 2024



ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSE-State-of-the-Union-DIGITAL-v3.pdf>
- 2 <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/CS-SOTEU-2025-Digital.pdf>
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