

Defending Democratic Futures



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About ARTICLE 19 Europe

ARTICLE 19 Europe is a leading voice in the defence of freedom of expression and access to information across Europe and Central Asia. As a regional office of the globally recognised organisation ARTICLE 19, we shape the conversation and develop pioneering responses to both emerging and longstanding human rights threats. We work at the intersection of human rights, technology, and policy to drive systemic change, push back against censorship, and safeguard independent media, freedom of expression online and offline, and civic space.

Our work spans information integrity and democratic resilience, digital rights and platform accountability, the safety of journalists and human rights defenders, and civic space, including the legal harassment of journalists and activists through abusive litigation and criminal defamation laws. We push back against surveillance, transnational repression, and the erosion of civic freedoms, while insisting that responses to disinformation do not become a backdoor for censorship or state control of public debate.

At a time when authoritarianism is rising and both online and offline spaces are increasingly contested, we translate global freedom of expression standards into concrete regional, national, and local advocacy. We connect our work with European and regional institutions to the realities faced by journalists, human rights defenders, and communities affected by repression across the region.

From the director

2025 was my first full year as Regional Director for Europe. It was also a year that made clear, sometimes brutally, that freedom of expression cannot be defended simply through statements, reports, or policy papers. It has to be defended through institutions that are credible, partnerships that are real, and organisations that are able to keep working when the political and financial ground shifts underneath them.

Across Europe and Central Asia, we saw democratic space narrowing, independent media under pressure, activists and journalists facing attacks both at home and in exile, and digital technologies being used not only to connect people but also to monitor, manipulate, and silence them. We also witnessed powerful attempts to weaken the very rules that were designed to make digital spaces more accountable. Some of these efforts came wrapped in the language of innovation, competitiveness, or free speech. We know this language well. We also know when it is being used to protect power rather than people.

For ARTICLE 19 Europe, 2025 was a year of sharper positioning. We continued to stand with Ukraine and to insist that crimes against journalists, human rights defenders, and civilians must remain on the international agenda. We worked on the implementation and enforcement of key European frameworks, including the Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), Anti-SLAPP Directive and AI-related standards. We pushed for digital rights, media freedom, and civic space to remain at the centre of European policymaking, not as decorative values, but as concrete obligations. We also extended our work on digital infrastructure, platform power, information integrity, and the resilience of civil society.

Internally, 2025 was also a year of building. We moved from transition to consolidation: strengthening our governance, clarifying our role as a regional office and affiliate, improving our operational systems, and becoming more visible and grounded in the Netherlands. This work is not always the most exciting part of an annual report. But it matters. Without clear governance, responsible financial management, good systems and a supported team, even the strongest advocacy becomes fragile.

The funding environment also changed. Human rights and democracy organisations across the region faced cuts, uncertainty and difficult choices. ARTICLE 19 Europe was not immune to this reality. But the answer cannot be to become smaller in ambition or louder without strategy. The answer is to become clearer: about where we add value, where we lead, where we support, and where we need to say no.



In 2026, our priority is not to do everything. It is to do the right things well: defend freedom of expression where it is most under pressure, challenge power where it becomes unaccountable, and support the people and organisations who keep democratic space alive.

From the director

Looking ahead, we will focus on the areas where ARTICLE 19 Europe is especially needed: information integrity and democratic resilience; digital rights, AI governance, and platform accountability; media freedom and the safety of journalists; civic space and transnational repression; and the legal and policy frameworks that shape freedom of expression across Europe and Central Asia.

We will also continue strengthening ARTICLE 19 Europe as an organisation. That means protecting the time and capacity of our team, investing in partnerships, improving financial sustainability, and engaging constructively but honestly in wider organisational transformation. We will not pretend that resilience is only about commitment. It also requires resources, clarity, and fair operating models.

I am grateful to the ARTICLE 19 Europe team, our Supervisory Board, our colleagues across ARTICLE 19, our partners, donors, and allies. Most of all, I am grateful to the journalists, activists, lawyers, technologists, and civil society organisations who continue to do this work in increasingly difficult conditions. Our task is to stand with them, amplify their voices, and help build the conditions in which they can continue not only to survive, but to shape the future.



Antanina Maslyka

Regional Director for Europe

Executive summary

Across Europe and beyond, the environment for independent media and civil society organisations has become increasingly challenging. In recent years, we have witnessed **a rise in attacks on media freedom and civic space**, alongside growing **efforts by political actors and powerful corporate interests to frame European regulation as a threat to freedom of expression**, when in fact they are simply fiercely protecting their business interests and financial profit. At the same time, **the spread of restrictive 'foreign agent' legislation**, which in practice translates to anti-non-governmental laws, has further constrained the ability of civil society organisations to operate freely and effectively.

We have also witnessed **escalating attacks on protesters, repression of activists and journalists** both in their home countries and in exile, and **increasingly sophisticated digital threats** that are becoming harder to spot as AI rapidly evolves. Disinformation has become a weapon. And the significant cuts to humanitarian and human rights funding (notably through US foreign aid) have put many organisations on the verge of existence, with staff members facing layoffs and real fear about how to sustain programmes and continue working with local communities. This comes at a moment when some democratic countries increasingly seem to be shifting their funding priorities away from fundamental rights.

Against this backdrop, this report is the story of our year: policies, work on the ground, relevant contributions, valuable partnerships, hard negotiations, and everything in between.

Executive summary

Despite mounting challenges, organisations like ours and our partners continue to adapt, collaborate, and respond to emerging threats, work to safeguard democratic values, and protect fundamental rights and an **open, diverse and informed public sphere**.

ARTICLE 19 Europe is at the forefront of shaping the democratic future across the continent. From influencing European standards and policies (such as the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence), actively engaging in implementation of key existing or planned legislation such as the Digital Markets Act (DMA), Digital Services Act (DSA), the Anti-SLAPP Directive, and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), as well as contributing to discussion on the final shape of the Cloud and AI Development Act (CADA). **Our work places media freedom, digital rights, and civic space at the centre of Europe's policymaking.**

This report highlights our achievements in 2025 and the work behind those efforts: driving enforcement of major European legislation, pushing back against threats to media freedom and civic space, building alliances across civil society, and bringing freedom of expression standards into some of the most consequential policy debates in Europe today.

Our work **would not be possible without partners, individuals, and many organisations** that have supported us and stood alongside us in defending freedom of expression. To continue our work, we will continue relying on the support of those who share our values and want to protect democracy across Europe and beyond.

Standing with Ukraine

Ukrainians have now been fighting for their sovereignty and territorial integrity for more than four years. 2025 was yet another year marked by war crimes, with continued attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, grave violations in occupied territories, and a devastating toll on civilians, critical infrastructure, and cultural heritage.



Evacuation from an apartment building damaged by a Russian drone strike, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 12 June, 2025. Credit: Vyacheslav Madiyevskyy / Reuters

Russian forces carried out dozens of deadly airstrikes and indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations, including media workers and activists. Despite immense risks to their safety and lives, rights defenders and reporters continue to document Russian crimes and expose the reality of this brutal war. Many have been detained and held in inhuman conditions. One of the most atrocious examples of Russian ruthlessness is the death of journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna, who was abducted, tortured, and died in Russian captivity.

The situation in the occupied territories is dire: Russia is systematically erasing the Ukrainian language from public life, including the media space. Any expression of support for Ukraine can result in severe reprisals, including imprisonment. At the same time, Russia continues to weaponise information, flooding the internet with false content, doctored videos and propaganda to justify its war.

We regularly bring the situation in Ukraine – war crimes committed by Russian forces and violations of freedom of expression and access to information – to international audiences, using every available platform to ensure Ukraine remains a priority on the global agenda. This includes making statements during the interactive dialogue with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine at the UN Human Rights Council. We also work with partners on the ground on digital safety programmes and support initiatives aimed at countering Russian disinformation.

During the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) Summit in Brussels in October 2025, we facilitated a conversation with award-winning war correspondent Inna Varenysia and the Human Rights Centre ZMINA's expert Tetiana Zhukova on the challenges and incredible strength of journalists and human rights defenders amid the ongoing war, the urgent need for sustained international support, and efforts to document crimes for future accountability.



Our Katia Mierzejewska in conversation with Inna Varenysia and Tetiana Zhukova



ARTICLE 19 Europe's director Antanina Maslyka and our colleague from the Asia-Pacific team I-chen, Lviv Media Forum 2025

In addition, together with our colleagues from ARTICLE 19's Asia Pacific team, we organised a side event during the Lviv Media Forum on how to build cross-regional resilience against authoritarian disinformation, drawing on lessons from Ukraine and Taiwan. Together with Ukrainian civil society partners, we explored ways to respond to mounting disinformation threats from Russia and China.

Rethinking digital rights and infrastructure governance



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Opening digital markets to fair competition



We continued to advance our work on the Digital Markets Act (DMA), with a particular focus on contestability, diversity, user choice, and their implications for freedom of expression and media pluralism. Building on our thought leadership, we organised, in cooperation with three universities across the EU, [the third iteration of our annual symposium](#). The event is a space for independent scholars, public interest technologists, and regulators to interact and discuss research-based papers around DMA enforcement. The strong participation of representatives from the European Commission underscored growing recognition of our expertise and role in shaping informed debate around DMA implementation. Such recognition has led to us being one of the very few civil society organisations invited to attend a [meeting of the DMA High Level Group](#).



DMA enforcement symposium, Brussels, November 2025.

A key priority was making concrete contributions to enforcement. To this end, we submitted two complaints to the European Commission concerning non-compliance with the DMA by Alphabet and Apple. These actions were well received by regulators and attracted significant attention from the media and relevant stakeholders, demonstrating the importance of technically grounded, public interest interventions in ensuring effective enforcement. In addition, we joined an open letter to the European Commission on Google's non-compliance with the DMA and urged the European Commission to open investigation into Google and its practices. We aim to further expand this line of work, including through collaboration with other civil society organisations and experts.



We also co-organised the high-level conference **'The Future of Democracy: Speech, Thought, Sovereignty, and Power in the Age of Platforms and AI'** in Brussels in partnership with the Open Markets Institute. The event brought together leading policymakers, technologists, and advocates, including Nobel laureates, current and former European Commissioners, and former heads of state, to address the growing threats posed by dominant online platforms, AI, and foreign interference. Together with our speakers we delivered a strong and timely message against calls for deregulation in the EU and about the importance of taming big corporate power to safeguard free speech and our democracies.



Our senior EU advocacy lead, Mark Dempsey, in conversation with Michael McGrath, European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection.

In parallel, we contributed to the European Commission's public consultation on the first review of the DMA through an evidence-based research paper focusing on cloud and AI services. The paper sets out 27 recommendations, including proposed legal interpretations of existing obligations, the introduction of new measures, and calls for market investigations and further guidance. To support uptake of these proposals, we convened a closed-door roundtable at the European Parliament with EU officials, industry representatives, researchers, and civil society actors.

Finally, we contributed to a joint response to the European Commission's public consultation on the review of the Merger Guidelines, which are fundamental to ensuring competitive, fair, and open markets in the EU, and to limit concentration and guarantee pluralism in the media sector.



Holding platforms accountable



ARTICLE 19 Europe continues to support the Digital Services Act (DSA) as a key framework for protecting fundamental rights online and addressing systemic risks posed by Big Tech. We engaged in the Court of Justice of the European Union proceedings in [*Technius v. Commission*](#) concerning the designation of Stripchat as a Very Large Online Platform (VLOP) under the DSA and the company's request to annul this decision. This designation subjects Stripchat to enhanced due diligence obligations, including in relation to the protection of fundamental rights.

In our intervention, we argued that the DSA's systemic risk framework is central to safeguarding fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, and that responsibility for risk assessment lies primarily with platforms under Commission oversight. We further submitted that platforms such as Stripchat are inherently capable of generating systemic risks addressed by the DSA, including risks to freedom of expression and harms linked to tech-facilitated gender-based violence.



Shaping rights-based AI regulations



ARTICLE 19 Europe has stepped up its engagement in AI governance, given its rapidly growing impact on fundamental rights, media freedom, and democratic governance.



In response to the European Commission’s consultation on forthcoming guidelines on AI prohibitions and AI system definitions, we [joined a call for a robust](#), rights-based approach to enforcement. We emphasised the need to address existing loopholes, ensure that high-risk and harmful uses of AI are effectively regulated, and reaffirm that fundamental rights must serve as the central guiding principle in the interpretation and application of the AI Act.

Rethinking digital infrastructure

We continued our work on digital infrastructure, cloud computing, and open internet governance, with a particular focus on the human rights implications of technological architectures and tech business models.

We contributed to international academic and policy debates on digital infrastructures and human rights, including co-organising a panel at the Association of Internet Researchers (**AoIR**) conference 'Infrastructural ruptures: anxieties, borders, and clouds'. We also helped facilitate a comparative research workshop on digital rights in Latin America and Europe at the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro, with a particular focus on infrastructure governance. In addition, we presented our work on internet governance and infrastructure power at the European Digital Rights (EDRi) workshop and delivered a guest lecture at Fundação Getulio Vargas on cloud computing, internet standards, and freedom of expression.



PERSPECTIVE

Amazon Cloud Outage Reveals Democratic Deficit in Relying on Big Tech

CORINNE CATH, DON LE / OCT 20, 2025

Correction: A previous version of this article stated that Wikipedia relies on AWS, but its current compute infrastructure is not AWS dependent.



AUTHORS

CORINNE CATH
Dr. Corinne Cath is a cultural anthropologist who studies the computing industry. She currently works as Head of Global Team Digital at Think-and-Do tank ARTICLE 19. Previously, she did her post-doc on the political economy of cloud computing at the technical university of Delft (NL), and her PhD at...

DON LE
As part of ARTICLE 19's Team Digital, Don Le explains the role of digital infrastructure in facilitating people's human rights. His work focuses on managing interdisciplinary communities and convening stakeholders to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborations to improve access to information an...

We further strengthened public debate on the open internet including through an article on the democratic implications of a major global AWS cloud outage, which was widely cited across international media, as well as a socio-technical analysis of AI web crawlers and their impact on the open web, and access to information about it.

Our research and analysis contributed to policy discussions on cloud computing and platform infrastructure, including input into Dutch initiatives exploring a European equivalent of an Open Tech Fund. We also provided technical analysis for [research on Europol's use of new technologies](#), including AI systems, contributing to subsequent an in-depth investigation in which our experts were cited.

ARTICLE 19 Europe **was one of the few human rights organisations invited to speak at the [Digital Sovereignty Summit](#) in November 2025**, contributing to discussions on safeguarding digital futures and preventing excessive concentration of infrastructural power. We also engaged in expert discussions on EU cloud policy developments, including a workshop on consolidating emerging regulatory approaches, as well as engaging with all the major EU cloud providers directly, to discuss feasible alternatives for a more diversified market. We are engaging actively with the European Commission's team working on cloud, and specifically on the CADA.



Director of Global Team Digital Corinne Cath-Speth at the Digital Sovereignty Summit, Berlin, November 2025

ARTICLE 19 Europe's head of programmes and strategy, Joanna Szymańska, spoke about how to uphold fundamental rights in an era of rapid digital transformation, Moldova Security Forum, April 2025.



During the **Moldova Security Forum**, held in April 2025 in Chişinău we joined two discussions focused on the intersection of digitalisation, human rights, and information integrity. Key topics included strengthening trustworthy online information environments in Moldova, addressing disinformation, AI-generated content, and digital resilience, as well as protecting fundamental rights and freedoms in the era of digital innovation.

Finally, we supported community-building within the digital rights ecosystem, including organising a meet-and-greet in Amsterdam with local organisations, researchers, and the President of Signal, Meredith Whittaker, fostering exchange on secure communications and infrastructure governance. We also discussed **the future of digital governance** during the Internet Accountability Forum in Brussels.

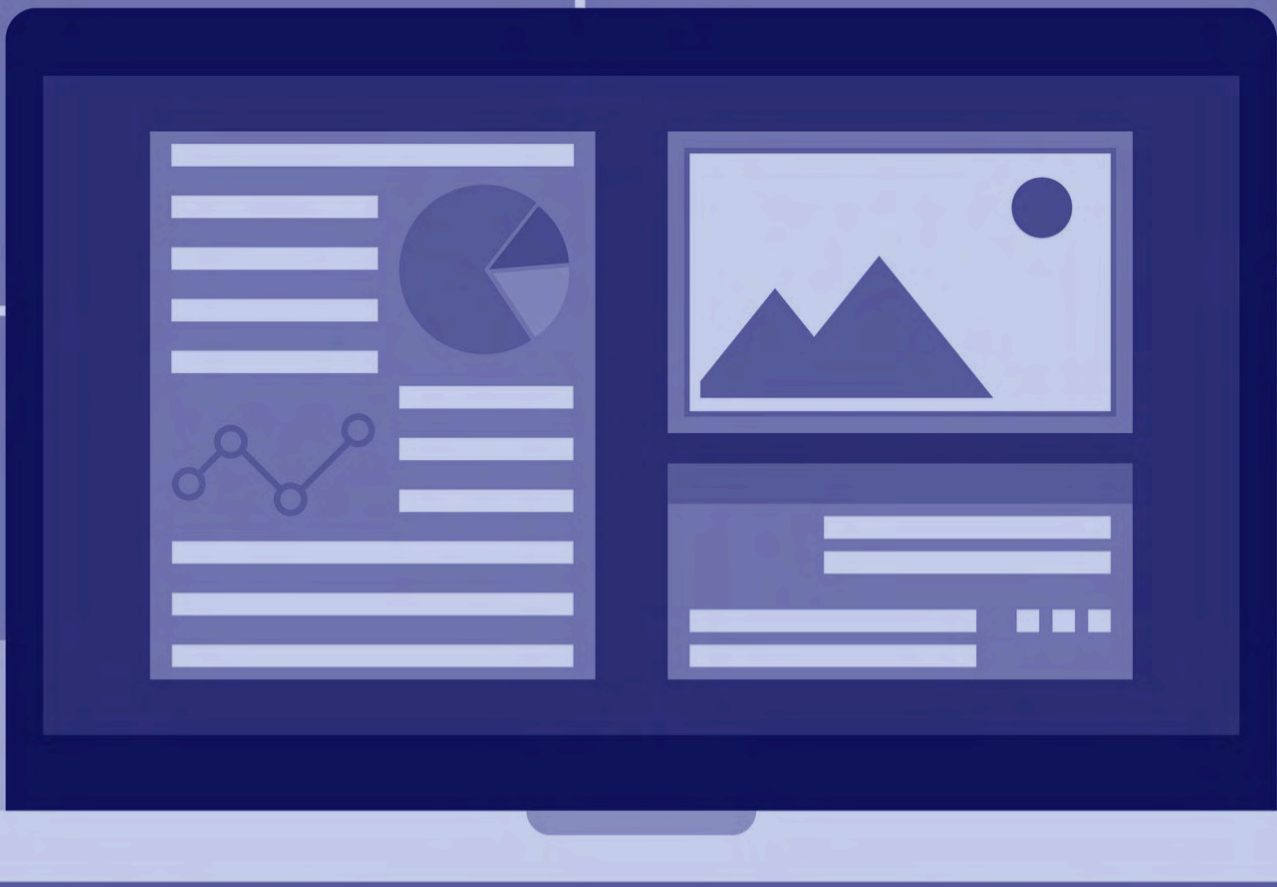


ARTICLE 19 Europe's director Antanina Maslyka at the Internet Accountability Forum

As in previous years, we maintained a strong presence at the **Global Gathering**, where we facilitated a discussion on satellite infrastructure and undersea cables, reflecting the growing importance of physical internet infrastructure for rights-based digital policy.

Strengthening

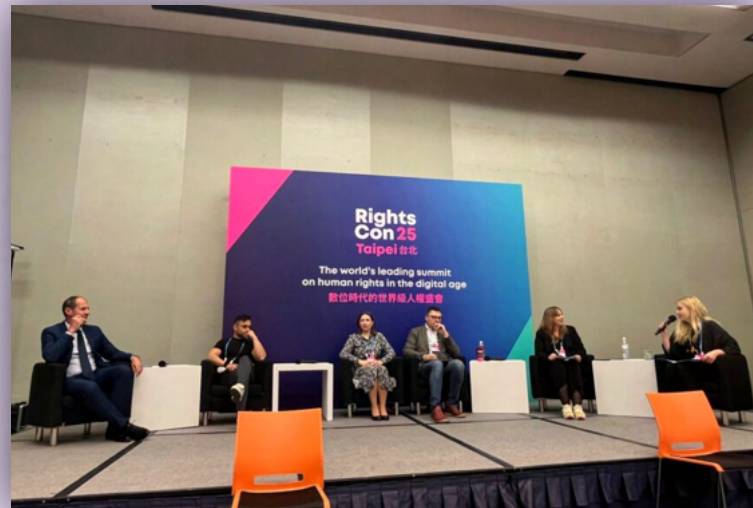
information integrity



Protecting the information space and rights across borders

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and transnational repression (TNR) remain key and growing challenges across the Europe and Central Asia region. In 2025, we continued to actively engage in policy discussions, expert dialogues, and capacity-building activities aimed at addressing these threats and strengthening responses grounded in international human rights standards.

During RightsCon 2025 in Taipei, together with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) we [co-organised a discussion on information integrity](#), drawing on EU policy perspectives as well as examples from Serbia, Moldova, and Armenia. We explored in depth various aspects of Russia-driven disinformation and propaganda. The discussion also addressed the challenge of safeguarding fair and pluralistic public debate while countering manipulative narratives that distort reality and fuel hostility and polarisation – all without undermining freedom of expression.



Joanna Szymańska co-moderated a discussion on protecting information integrity, Taipei, February 2025.



Joanna Szymańska facilitated a discussion on countering transnational digital repression, Chişinău, November, 2025.

Transnational digital repression, countering foreign interference, and cyberattacks were key topics of our pre-event to the [Moldova Security Forum](#). We explored the pressures faced by exiled civil society, including cross-border legal, financial, and digital attacks, as well as the responsibility of tech platforms to prevent the misuse of their systems. We also discussed practical lessons from frontline incident response, including how digital security hubs support journalists and NGOs under active attack, and how regional cooperation strengthens resilience.

We contributed to exchanges between EU institutions and electoral authorities from EU candidate countries, including Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, and North Macedonia, organised by [International IDEA](#). Discussions focused on foreign interference in electoral processes, cybersecurity threats, and the impact of armed conflict and digitalisation on election integrity. We highlighted the links between electoral integrity, media freedom, and EU regulatory frameworks.

We also participated in the closing conference of the [Infolead Project on 'information disorder'](#) (University of Oxford, University of Florence, University of Helsinki), bringing together policymakers, judges, academics, and civil society. Discussions addressed disinformation, electoral interference, and the role of large digital platforms, AI, and the EU regulations.

Our position is that responses to information threats should avoid overly restrictive approaches and instead focus on addressing the channels and enablers of information manipulation rather than content-based regulation. ARTICLE 19 Europe sees the risks of centering regulatory frameworks on the 'veracity of information'. We also note that overly broad regulatory approaches may lead to disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression, including through the criminalisation of 'false information'.

Our team also took part in a workshop on [transnational networks and international cooperation](#) organised by University College Dublin and Northeastern University. The workshop examined transnational repression in digital and physical forms, including surveillance, harassment, legal intimidation, the misuse of international cooperation mechanisms, as well as the role of digital platforms in enabling or mitigating TNR.



At the Council of Europe level, we joined [an expert workshop](#) on the development of a strategic policy document on **'Ten Steps to Counter Disinformation and Promote Information Integrity'**. The goal was to make the document as relevant as possible so it can genuinely help addressing national challenges through practical and tangible recommendations.

Joanna Szymańska joined the expert workshop on disinformation at the Council of Europe

We further participated in an OSCE expert seminar on disinformation and its intersection with counter-terrorism frameworks. Discussions focused on the risks of overly broad definitions of 'disinformation', 'extremism', and 'harmful content', and their implications for freedom of expression and media freedom. We highlighted the need for safeguards to ensure that responses remain consistent with international human rights standards.



Antanina Maslyka at the Global Parliamentary Conference on Counter-Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism, October, Istanbul 2025

In the same spirit, we participated in the Global Parliamentary Conference on Counter-Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism in Istanbul in October, where we reiterated our position:

Counter-terrorism policies must protect, not erode, fundamental rights. When laws rely on vague definitions, normalise surveillance, or restrict access to information, they risk undermining freedom of expression, eroding public trust, and ultimately weakening the legitimacy of security efforts themselves.

Strengthening EU democratic resilience



European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)



European Commissioners Věra Jourová and Thierry Breton
Credit: European Commission

We have long advocated for a robust, forward-thinking, and comprehensive EU-wide framework to strengthen media freedom across the bloc, so [the entry into force of the European Media Freedom Act \(EMFA\)](#) in August 2025 was undoubtedly an important milestone – for the media ecosystem in the EU, but also for us personally.

However, regardless of the ambition of the text, [the real impact of the EMFA](#) depends on political will within Member States. Many are still lagging behind in fulfilling their obligation to align domestic legislation with the rules set out in the EMFA. ARTICLE 19 Europe will continue working with local and international partners to maintain pressure and ensure that the regulation becomes a living guarantee of press freedom with real impact for journalists and media workers.

Our work concentrated on the media plurality test under Article 22, a key safeguard for ensuring fair and transparent media market concentration assessments across the EU. We developed policy briefings, the [blogs](#), and spoke at several relevant events to support understanding of the provision's implications for media freedom and pluralism. At national level, we also engaged in implementation debates, including [in Poland](#), where we contributed to a joint submission in response to the draft legislation. This work has been possible thanks to CIVITATES support.

Strengthening EU democratic resilience



European Democracy Shield



European Commissioners Henna Virkkunen and Michael McGrath
Credit: European Commission

On 13 November 2025, the European Commission adopted its European Democracy Shield, the first comprehensive, flagship strategy for strengthening democratic resilience within the bloc, with a key focus on free and independent media, fighting disinformation, and creating healthier information ecosystems to protect European values and security.

We welcome that [the final text](#) (though it a non-binding political statement) reflected key priorities raised by us and our MFRR partners in our submission, in particular the need to strengthen the economic viability of independent media, enhance protections for the safety of journalists, including through measures to counter SLAPPs and other forms of legal and digital harassment, and address emerging challenges related to disinformation and AI. The Shield also recognises the importance of sustained funding and stronger regulatory frameworks to support media pluralism and resilience.

We remain engaged to ensure that the Shield not only meets but exceeds its stated goals and does not remain merely a set of commitments on paper. Ultimately, its success will be measured by its ability to translate these promises into concrete actions that protect and sustain independent journalism in an increasingly hostile environment.

Strengthening EU democratic resilience



Ensuring economic viability for independent media



The MFRR Delegation, including our senior EU advocacy lead Mark Dempsey, met with Henna Virkkunen

As the EU intensifies the debate over the top lines of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), we, together with numerous civil society organisations, **have been advocating** to ensure that key priorities include substantial, sustained, and long-term EU funding and investment in independent media across the region. A strong and vibrant public interest information ecosystem must be shielded from external pressures, including political and economic interference. The EU has both the tools and a crucial role to play in enabling media to fulfil their public interest function, ensuring they can continue providing accurate and reliable coverage. This is an increasingly vital task in an age of mounting disinformation.

Drawing on our joint submission, we held several meetings in Brussels, including with **European Commission Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy, Henna Virkkunen**, to raise increasing concerns regarding the economic viability of the media sector, the online safety of journalists, and the impact of AI on the media landscape in Europe.

Working towards media resilience on the ground



In 2025, together with our partners in the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) and the Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, we carried out media freedom missions to several countries. Each mission assessed the key challenges undermining a pluralistic and independent media landscape and resulted in a report providing a detailed overview of findings, alongside recommendations to improve the situation.

In **Bulgaria**, hostility towards the journalistic profession has increased in recent years. The media landscape continues to be shaped by the corrosive influence of political and economic interests over editorial independence and media pluralism, resulting in persistent media capture. While Bulgaria has seen modest progress over the past four years, the situation remains undermined by structural, legal, and political challenges. Urgent action by government and public authorities is needed to advance both domestic and EU-mandated reforms.



The Council of Europe Platform and the MFRR delegation including Joanna Szymańska in Sofia, Bulgaria

Hungary presents the most sophisticated system of media capture within the European Union. This system has been built through sustained control over public media, consolidation of private outlets under politically aligned ownership, and distortion of the market via state advertising. Independent journalists operate in a highly restrictive and hostile environment, facing online harassment, including smear campaigns aimed at undermining their credibility. Legal harassment is also increasing, including abusive claims based on the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and press correction procedures. Yet, as reaffirmed **during our mission**, independent journalists continue their meticulous work and investigations into corruption despite mounting threats.



The Council of Europe Platform delegation including Joanna Szymańska in Budapest, Hungary

Working towards media resilience on the ground

Our mission to **Croatia** has revealed a significant gap in perceptions between government representatives and journalists. Media freedom continues to be constrained by institutional and legal challenges that successive governments have failed to address, contributing to declining media pluralism, hostility towards journalists, and precarious working conditions. While some progress has been made – notably in transposing the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive, improving transparency of media ownership, and introducing safety protocols and training for journalists – these measures remain insufficient and, at times, inconsistently implemented. Overall, we continued to call for meaningful implementation of the SLAPP Directive including through referring to our legal analysis to advance advocacy for the decriminalisation of defamation and insult in Croatia.



The MFRR delegation including our senior legal officer, Maksym Popovych, in Zagreb, Croatia

Seven years after the assassination of Slovak investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, the full justice remains elusive. On the anniversary of their brutal killing, we released a **report examining ongoing threats** to media freedom and the safety of journalists, drawing on findings from our mission to Bratislava in November 2024. The continued failure to fully resolve the murders remains a stark reminder of the dangers journalists face daily in Slovakia: intimidation, smear campaigns, verbal abuse, and legal harassment.



The MFRR delegation including our senior director of Law and Policy, Barbora Bukovská, in Bratislava, Slovakia

We also closely monitored developments in Italy, as the country is experiencing a steady decline in media freedom. A [report](#) summarising our 2024 urgent advocacy mission to Rome examined key challenges in the media freedom landscape in Italy. These include political interference in public media, problematic legislation open to abuse, and legal harassment against dissenting journalists. In terms of harmful legislation, we have regularly called for a [comprehensive defamation reform](#) and decriminalisation of defamation in Italy, but also in other countries in the region. For two consecutive years (2024-2025) Italy was also named the country with the highest number of SLAPPs according to the [CASE Coalition research](#).



The MFRR delegation including our senior director of programmes, David Diaz-Jogeix, in Rome, Italy

Addressing SLAPPS

In June 2025, we participated in the [closing conference](#) of the European Implementation Network's two-year project on protecting freedom of expression through ECtHR implementation. Our contribution focused on the structural role of SLAPPs in distorting public debate and impeding the implementation of European Court of Human Rights judgments, especially across Croatia, Greece, Poland, Italy, and Slovakia, where defamation suits, political pressure, and weak institutional safeguards limit reform despite active civil society engagement.



Our senior legal officer Maksym Popovych at the EIN closing conference in Greece, June 2025.

Advocating against the spread of foreign agent laws

Across Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, 2024–2025 saw a growing trend of governments introducing or proposing so-called ‘foreign agent’ laws targeting civil society organisations receiving foreign funding. Often inspired by the model developed in Russia, these measures impose burdensome registration and reporting requirements, restrict access to funding, and contribute to the stigmatisation of civil society actors and independent media. Recent developments, including the adoption of such legislation in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, as well as legislative initiatives in Hungary and Türkiye, highlight an increasingly hostile environment for civic space across the region.



Demonstrators hold a rally to protest against a bill on "foreign agents" in Tbilisi, Georgia, April 30, 2024. Credits: REUTERS/Irakli Gedenidze

Against this backdrop, **we wrote to the president of Slovakia, Peter Pellegrini**, urging him to protect the rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression in the country and to refrain from signing the amendment to the law on non-profit organisations. If adopted, the proposed ‘foreign agent’-style legislation would have serious negative implications for civic space in Slovakia, creating additional administrative burdens for non-governmental organisations, jeopardising their financial stability, and further stigmatising civil society. The Constitutional Court ultimately struck down the law as unconstitutional.

In November 2025, the European Parliament voted to pass its version of the so-called Foreign Agents Directive, formally known as the Directive on interest representation services on behalf of third countries. While the Parliament's text was an improvement on the Commission's original proposal, it remained incompatible with international human rights standards, and **we reiterated our unequivocal opposition** to it. If adopted, the Directive would infringe on freedom of association and expression. Such EU-level instrument could be instrumentalised by governments beyond the EU – mirroring the foreign agent laws we have long criticised in Russia, Hungary, and Georgia. We continue to call on the Commission to scrap the Directive.



**Protecting
journalists,
rights defenders,
and civil society**

Improving women journalists' safety

Women journalists face a double burden: they are exposed to the risks associated with journalism while also being targeted by misogynistic attacks. They are disproportionately affected by online harassment, earn less, and face additional challenges within newsrooms. From violence and state-led attacks to structural inequality and gendered online abuse, women journalists encounter overlapping risks driven by sexism, social stereotypes, and discrimination.

Our project '[Equally Safe](#)' offers research, case studies, practical guidelines, and advocacy tools on how to apply an intersectional feminist approach. As part of this project, we launched [a briefing](#) on investigating tech-facilitated gender-based violence against journalists. We have translated this briefing to several languages including Italian, Polish, Serbian, and Turkish.



We explored what it means to be a woman journalist today, and how these experiences vary across regions, [during a panel discussion](#) in Brussels and [the SEEDIG Conference](#) in Athens. The discussion focused on practical solutions to these challenges and highlighted the need for measures to be co-created with women journalists themselves.

Standing with Belarusians

The Lukashenko regime continues to demonstrate the scale and persistence of its repression, systematically dismantling the remaining pillars of Belarusian civil society and imprisoning those who dare to dissent. An atmosphere of fear is sustained through arbitrary detentions, **imprisonment**, ill-treatment in custody, prosecutions for even minimal social media activity, threats against families, website blocking, and pervasive surveillance.

Among the more than 1,000 imprisoned people is our friend and former colleague **Andrei Aliaksandrau**, who has been in jail since 2021. We will not stop advocating for his release and will continue our **solidarity campaign** to ensure the world does not forget.



Belarus has mastered the use of anti-extremism and terrorism laws to prosecute any form of dissent or 'suspicious' activity online. This could be a meme, a like, or a donation. In an **analysis** we developed with Human Constanta we examine the impact of these excessively broad provisions on digital rights and online behaviour in Belarus.

The tentacles of the regime extend beyond its borders, as Belarus is one of the world's leaders in transnational repression. Activists and journalists in exile face intimidation and digital threats that affect their work and can compromise their physical safety. We spoke about the breadth of challenges and different faces of repression at various international fora including at **the UN Human Rights Council** sessions and **side events**.

The period since the 2020 rigged elections has been incredibly challenging for Belarusians. Many have been imprisoned or seen their friends and colleagues put in jail. Independent media has been blocked. And civil society organisations have either been liquidated or forced into exile.

Yet, this time has also revealed the remarkable strength of the Belarusian people, who continue to resist repression and work to keep the fight for human rights and democracy alive.

In 2025, we saw the release of over a hundred political prisoners as part of agreements with Washington. This included [Siarhei Tsikhanouski](#), one of Belarus's leading activists and the husband of opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Ales Bialiatski](#), an opposition figure Maryia Kalesnikava, and many others.

One of the key priorities and ongoing challenges is ensuring that [Belarus remains on Europe's agenda](#), and repeatedly convincing European stakeholders and EU institutions that supporting the Belarusian democratic resistance movement is crucial for stability in the region. Although the situation remains difficult, sustained attention is essential.

At ARTICLE 19 Europe, we continue to work to maintain momentum on Belarus, including through high-level [conferences](#) and [policy meetings](#).



Antanina Maslyka and Joanna Szymańska met with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya at the 50th anniversary conference of the Helsinki Final Act, July 2025.

Pushing for structural reforms in Poland

Following the 2025 presidential victory of Karol Nawrocki, we **called** for a consistent cross-party collaboration, despite political differences, to safeguard freedom of expression. It's clear that **many reforms are needed**, as outlined in **our report** from the media freedom mission conducted in September 2024.

We continued our close collaboration with local partners to advocate for a robust anti-SLAPP law, including the **decriminalisation of defamation**, which remains a **key advocacy priority**. We **analysed the draft legislation** and put forward recommendations on how to strengthen and make it truly effective. We have reiterated that there can be no effective legislation aimed at protecting public watchdogs from abusive litigation without repealing criminal defamation law.



In parallel, we engaged in consultations on the long-overdue reform of public service media, emphasising the need to ensure independence, pluralism, and sustainable governance structures.

Poland also has a history of repeated attempts by politicians to influence cultural institutions, use them to suppress critical voices, or reshape cultural narratives. We [joined a session at the UN in Geneva](#) on how democratic backsliding is restricting freedom of expression, with a special emphasis on artistic freedom.



Joanna Szymańska spoke about artistic freedom in Poland in June 2025.

We also continued our advocacy [on the right to peaceful assembly](#). Together with Amnesty International Polska, we engaged with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration to call for amendments to the Law on Assemblies, including the removal of provisions that give priority to cyclical assemblies and impose excessive restrictions on counter-protests. While the government initially signalled willingness to introduce reforms, legislative work has been delayed, with authorities citing concerns related to public safety and the international context. We stressed that such justifications should not be used to postpone necessary human rights reforms and urged the government to follow through on its commitments.

Strengthening digital safety capacities in Moldova

Moldova, a country on an EU accession path, has a vibrant civil society and first-hand experience of disinformation. In 2025, it has become one of our key focuses as we responded to the local need for digital rights support. We have expanded partnerships deepened our engagement on the ground, supporting work on information integrity, digital security, and counter-tactics to resist Russian propaganda.

In 2025, we **organised a series of in-person workshops** for civil society actors and media professionals to help them improve their digital hygiene, privacy and safety practices. We covered a wide range of pressing challenges including targeted attacks, phishing attempts and data vulnerabilities. Our trainings have been warmly welcomed, and more capacity building sessions will be delivered in 2026.



A digital security training in Chişinău.



‘No boring theory. Lots of useful, hands-on practice and interactivity. I left with ideas and skills that I can use to strengthen both my personal digital security and that of my organisation.’ – Anton Matushenko, EcoVisio

Building on this work, in partnership with the Moldovan Association of IT Companies (ATIC), we launched the Training of Practitioners (ToP) – a national programme connecting local IT professionals and digital security specialists with civil society organisations. Our goal is to help develop a new generation of digital security practitioners equipped with up-to-date skills and grounded in the Moldovan context who can offer practical support to NGOs and independent media. Participants can access mentoring from regional experts and mini-grants to deliver security audits, trainings, and infrastructure improvements for civil society.

We also supported the launch of a nationwide online digital safety course for women and girls – 72 interactive video lessons covering digital rights, online safety, and protection from gender-based violence, designed to be accessible and practical. The response was strong: 470 participants from across the country signed up, and the online launch alone drew over 1,300 viewers.



Example of an interactive online lesson addressing image-based abuse.

In 2026, we further expanded our work in Moldova to support civil society organisations and independent media in navigating the country's EU accession process, with a stronger focus on digital rights, media freedom, and democratic resilience. Together with national and international partners, we are contributing to the development of training programmes, policy discussions, and advocacy initiatives aimed at strengthening understanding of key EU digital and media regulations.

As part of this work, we are planning specialised training camps for civil society actors and multi-stakeholder consultations bringing together regulators, media representatives, and government officials. We are also developing policy recommendations to help align Moldova's digital and media frameworks with European standards, while safeguarding freedom of expression and civic space online.

Countering the rise of political repression in Georgia



Rally on the day of local elections in Tbilisi, Georgia, 4 October, 2025. Irakli Gedenidze / Reuters

2025 in Georgia has marked an accelerated shift towards an illiberal path, effectively rolling back much of the pro-European progress made in recent years. The governing Georgian Dream party has scaled up its efforts to erode civic space, including through direct threats (both physical and verbal) against protesters and those documenting the country's resistance, the prosecution of journalists and human rights defenders, and the repressive legislation aimed at severely weakening civil society organisations and harassing dissenting voices.

Despite the deteriorating situation, civil society in Georgia has shown remarkable strength and courage. Many people fear for their safety but choose to remain in the country.

To stand with their communities and continue the struggle for their country.

In 2025, we **analysed** amendments to defamation legislation, which are part of the ongoing democratic backsliding in the country, and further deepen the chilling effect on freedom of expression. The authorities have also **introduced** penalties for critical speech, as well as several severe and unjustified restrictions on protests. Even more worrying is the introduction of a foreign agents' law targeting civil society organisations, clearly inspired by similar legislation enacted in Russia.

Georgians continue to take to the streets, organise themselves, support one another, and advocate for respect for human rights in Georgia and the release of political prisoners at international forums. Among those imprisoned is a veteran journalist **Mzia Amaglobeli** who was sentenced to two years on bogus charges in January 2025. Amaglobeli has become a prominent figure in Georgia's pro-democracy protest movement.

Building resistance against the media freedom crisis in Serbia

In 2025, the **media freedom crisis** in Serbia significantly deepened, with an increasingly hostile environment for independent journalism and civil society at large. This difficult situation was exacerbated in the aftermath of the deadly collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024, sparking the nationwide largest protests in the history of Serbia.



The MFRR delegation including our senior director of programmes David Díaz-Jogeix in Belgrade, Serbia.

During a **solidarity mission** with journalists to Serbia, we examined a climate of intimidation in the media marked by political pressure, deepening media capture, verbal and online threats, smear campaigns and SLAPPs. Perpetrators – including state officials – continue to act with near total impunity, while investigations into threats either fail to take place or do not lead to meaningful outcomes. Journalists' safety is of particular concern.

In 2025, the Mapping Media Freedom Platform recorded 209 violations of press freedom in Serbia – the highest number of alerts on the platform last year. Many of these concern journalists who were attacked while covering demonstrations, including by **police officers**

While the authorities claim to prioritise journalists' safety and media freedom – pointing to the establishment of working groups comprised of state officials and civil society organisations, such as the Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists – many of these measures remain largely ineffective in practice. They risk functioning merely on paper, serving as a façade in the absence of meaningful accountability. The inability of the government to effectively deal with the protests and protect journalists at protests led to a complete breakdown of trust by media associations into the role of authorities.

Independent outlets such as N1 and Nova S have faced sustained political pressure and attempts to interfere with their editorial independence, raising serious concerns for media pluralism. At the same time, the failed process for appointing members of the REM Council – Serbia’s key media regulator – has again been marked by a lack of transparency and political bias, reinforcing concerns about regulatory capture.



A protest march marking the first anniversary of the fatal November 2024 Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse. October 2025. REUTERS/Zorana Jevtic

Despite these challenges, journalists across Serbia continue to work under immense pressure to ensure the public remains informed. Civil society remains resilient but increasingly needs support, particularly from European structures. The EU plays a key role in **monitoring democratic backsliding** and media freedom setbacks and remains one of the few external actors with real leverage to get through to the Serbian authorities.

ARTICLE 19 Europe will continue working closely with civil society and independent journalists on the ground, advocating for meaningful change to safeguard freedom of expression and media freedom in Serbia.

Pushing back on online censorship in Türkiye

Pressure on the civic space in Türkiye kept increasing in 2025, with growing control over social media platforms, **broadcast bans** on unfavourable coverage, prosecution of **journalists** and activists for their online activity and reporting, and crackdowns on protests.



University students demonstrate against the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul, Turkey, March, 2025. Erhan Demirtas/ NurPhoto/Reuters

When the biggest protests in over a decade erupted in March following the detention of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and over 100 others, the authorities imposed sweeping bans on gatherings and throttled social media access. We documented the crackdown and called on Türkiye to **ensure the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression**.

Social media censorship and platform throttling, especially in times of crisis, remained a defining feature of the information environment. We wrote a **joint open letter** to Meta, TikTok, YouTube and X demanding that platforms uphold users' right to freedom of expression, submitted notes to the European Commission on platform throttling, and **contributed** evidence to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders on how Turkish law and platform policies together undermine human rights protections online.

At the EU level, we conducted a joint advocacy mission to EU institutions and co-signed a **letter to Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa** urging the EU to raise press freedom and rule of law concerns in high-level talks with Turkish representatives.

In November, we joined a **media freedom mission** to Ankara, engaging state authorities, diplomats, and journalists to discuss political pressure and judicial harassment of the press. We also **delivered** an oral statement at Türkiye's 4th UPR Adoption in September, challenging the government's claim that freedom of expression recommendations had been implemented.



Our programme officer Kivilcim Ceren Buken represented ARTICLE 19 Europe during an international press freedom mission to Türkiye.



Our programme officer Kivilcim Ceren Buken together with the participants of an audit preparation workshop. October 2025.

Beyond advocacy, we continued investing in bottom-up change and close collaboration with civil society as a remedy to political attacks on civic space. We created two ongoing mental health support groups, organised several trainings where journalists and rights defenders explored **AI, storytelling, and effective communication**.

Civil society organisations also strengthened their capacity to meet audit requirements This is absolutely crucial as the state is harassing CSOs with constant audits and punitive fines.

Defending journalistic and satirical content in Central Asia

ARTICLE 19 Europe continued working in Central Asia, a region shaped by its post-Soviet legal and political legacy, where restrictions on expression are a combination of inherited approaches to information control and new crackdown on civic space. In this context, we promote international standards on freedom of expression and support more open, pluralistic public debate across the region.

In Kyrgyzstan, we **analysed** the 2025 Law on Mass Media, which represents a serious setback for freedom of expression. The legislation contains several deeply concerning provisions, including mandatory registration for all media outlets, restrictions on foreign ownership, the removal of the concept of 'independent journalist', and overly broad and vague content limitations.

We emphasised that the law must be thoroughly revised, as it clearly violates international freedom of expression standards and contributes to an increasingly hostile environment for civil society. Later in the year, we also participated in the **public consultation on the media law** held in Bishkek.

In Kazakhstan, police raided the home of **blogger Temirlan Yensebek**, who was subsequently arrested and charged with 'inciting inter-ethnic discord', an offence punishable by up to seven years in prison. The prosecution was triggered by his satirical activity, underscoring a broader pattern of efforts to silence individuals who speak out publicly.

Supporting resilience of LGBTQ+ people in Kazakhstan

Countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus are following Russia's blueprint on how to weaken civil society, using divisive narratives to paint certain, often vulnerable, groups as enemies, which is embodied in pieces of legislation that clearly violate not only international standards but also countries' constitutions



We [analysed a deeply harmful set of amendments](#) seeking to penalise the so-called 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation', which essentially amounts to an open attack against the LGBTQ+ community in Kazakhstan. These amendments are part of a broader trend in the country, where the rhetoric of 'protecting children' is cynically deployed to justify censorship and the policing of personal identity. The amendments are also deliberately paired with references to paedophilia to dehumanise LGBTQ+ people.

Addressing weaponisation of extremism legislation in Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, we have repeatedly criticised the country's ambiguous 'anti-extremism' legislation, which has been routinely used to prosecute journalists and activists for their critical, public interest reporting. In 2025, a district court **decided to ban Kloop, Temirov Live, and Ayt Ayt Dese**, the country's major independent media outlets.

Once a promising example of respect for human rights, Kyrgyzstan is now effectively shutting down media outlets that are important to everyone, severely limiting access to accurate and often inconvenient information for the government.

At ARTICLE 19 Europe, we **have examined** numerous extremism- and terrorism-related laws and have highlighted how they violate freedom of expression. Their overly broad provisions are open to abuse and are used to target dissenting voices under the pretext of national security.



Governance and organisational update

In 2025, ARTICLE 19 Europe continued its development as a stronger and more independent regional office and affiliate of ARTICLE 19, rooted in the Netherlands and working across Europe and Central Asia. After a year of transition in 2024, our focus shifted to consolidation: making sure our governance, systems, partnerships and internal ways of working matched the role we want to play in the region.

A key development was the revision of the Stichting's governance structure. The updated model clarifies the distinction between management and oversight, with the Director responsible for the day-to-day governance and management of the organisation, and a Supervisory Board providing independent oversight, advice and approval of key organisational documents, including plans and annual accounts. This brings the Stichting closer to recognised Dutch governance standards and creates clearer lines of responsibility and accountability.

We also continued strengthening ARTICLE 19 Europe's operational foundations. This included work on financial management, reporting, internal planning, donor accountability and the practical systems needed for the office to function effectively as a regional entity within the wider ARTICLE 19 movement. This work is essential for our independence, credibility and long-term sustainability.

In 2025, we also became more firmly embedded in the Dutch civil society and democracy-support ecosystem. Our membership in The Hague Humanity Hub strengthened our local visibility and opened new opportunities for exchange with organisations working on human rights, democracy, accountability, media freedom and civic space. This local grounding is important for ARTICLE 19 Europe's identity: we are a regional actor, but we are also a Dutch-based organisation with responsibilities, relationships and opportunities in the Netherlands.



Governance and organisational update

Throughout the year, we worked to sharpen our internal priorities and make better use of our limited capacity. The team continued to operate across a demanding portfolio: EU digital regulation, media freedom, civic space, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, SLAPPs, right to protest, information integrity and digital authoritarianism. The challenge was not a lack of relevance. The challenge was making choices in an environment where almost everything feels urgent.

The funding context made this even more important. Cuts and uncertainty across the human rights and democracy sector required us to look carefully at sustainability, core capacity and the balance between ambition and resources. In response, we continued building relationships with existing and new funding partners, while also being clearer that restricted project funding cannot replace the institutional capacity needed to deliver high-quality work.

These organisational developments are not separate from our mission. They are what make the mission possible. A stronger ARTICLE 19 Europe is better able to support partners, influence policy, respond to threats, and defend freedom of expression across the region. In 2026, we will continue this work with a focus on strategic clarity, sustainable funding, responsible governance, and an operating model that allows the office to do its best work without being stretched beyond what is realistic.

ARTICLE 19 Europe's supporting partners

Our work in 2025 would not have been possible without the continued support of our partners and donors. We are grateful for their trust and collaboration, and we look forward to continuing to work together to protect freedom of expression and strengthen civic space across Europe and Central Asia.

- Adessium Foundation
- The European Union
- Open Society Foundations
- CIVITATES – The European Democracy Fund
- U.S. Department of State
- Global Climate Legal Defence
- German Federal Foreign Office (via Austausch e. V.)

