Annual Report 2023

DEMOCRACY
REPORTING
INTERNATIONAL

Contents

Foreword

By Urður Gunnarsdóttir
Chairperson of the DRI Supervisory Board

As we entered 2023, we were promptly reminded of the global threats to democracy. On 8 January, protesters stormed Brazil's Congress, contesting the legitimacy of the country's December 2022 general elections. They had no evidence for the claim the vote had been stolen, but a powerful precedent in the 2021 "storming of the Capitol" by supporters of the incumbent, Donald Trump, who tried to overturn the legitimate presidential election in the United States.

The year also showed that people will resist authoritarian forces; they want to be active participants in public life, free to elect their governments and have the power to hold their representatives to account. Helping them realise this vision continues to energise all of us at Democracy Reporting International. Polish voters chose change, electing a coalition of parties representing a broad political spectrum that promised the restoration of the rule of law and balanced public media. Since the elections, we have been providing analysis and advice to the new Polish government, devising this new, uncharted path towards restoring democracy – part of our wider rule of law work across the EU.

For many years, we have been researching the challenges that the AI wave would pose for public discourse; the question was always when that wave would crash. It did so in 2023, with an explosion of products that can produce synthetic texts, images, audio, or videos based on simple prompts. What is at stake is the authenticity of public debate.

Of course, AI has been around for a long time (think of social media feeds), but it has been less tangible. We continued our monitoring of social media during elections and equipped numerous organisations worldwide with skills to analyse online public discussions. Both with our own work and by equipping civil society with the needed capacity, we are contributing to a more transparent online information ecosystem, where firms are held to account. Among the focuses of our research have been hate speech, online gender-based violence, and misinformation in the EU and the Middle East. Within the EU, we engaged in working groups under the Code of Practice against Disinformation, which brings together platforms, the EU, and civil society to push back against online disinformation.

The year 2023 also brought shocking moments, such as Hamas' mass atrocity in Israel and an Israeli army response that gravely violated international law — the International Court of Justice noted that the facts are sufficient to conclude that the right of Gaza Palestinians to be protected from genocide is plausible.

We remain active in the region, be it in Lebanon, which is also affected by the Gaza war, or in Tunisia and Libya. In Lebanon, we enabled the political participation of women by building their leadership and campaigning skills, and increased voters' knowledge about their candidates in the local elections. Also in Lebanon, we also supported officials in local governments in bolstering their skills for addressing citizens' problems, while, in Tunisia, we worked to strengthen administrative law.

We were proud to expand our work in Sub-Saharan Africa. As the Democratic Republic of Congo approached its December 2023 elections, DRI helped establish a coalition of civil society groups to monitor the electoral process. The coalition deployed 13,000 observers to follow the voting across the country, and monitored the counting of votes and the social media debates. DRI's work on the African continent will continue to expand.

I extend my gratitude to my DRI colleagues, who completed all this work across a large number of countries, as well as to our partners. You are working with dedication on some of the most pressing problems we face.

Introduction

By Michael Meyer-Resende & Nicola Schmidt
Executive Directors

Last year was eventful for democracy in general, and also for DRI. At the beginning of the year, the Board appointed Nicola as executive director, so that we now share responsibility for DRI's burgeoning portfolio.

We immediately faced a big challenge: Our long-standing director of finance, Laura Meyer, left us in May. Laura was one of DRI's builders, seeing growth from a three-person operation to an NGO with 80 staff members. At the same time, our director for human resources and administration, Janine Meyer, also left DRI. She had also played a critical role for our organisation, not the least in innovating processes and management. We are very grateful to both.

We were then faced with less Meyers and a big hole in the organisation's management. Fortunately, Marcel Merle joined us shortly after to take on the now combined position of director of finances, human resources, and administration.

In 2023, we also welcomed Sameera Mehra and Mikheil Benidze as new board members, and we revised our strategy in discussions with the board, the shareholders, and team members from throughout DRI. We look forward to implementing our new strategy from mid-2024 onwards.

What kept us motivated last year? The crucial role civil society plays in many contexts. Who monitors tech platforms and highlights associated problems? Civil society. How do we know what is really happening when the rule of law and democracy are challenged? Because civil society watches, analyses, and explains. What type of organisations try to keep things together when states fail? Civil society organisations.

Special interests can buy their advocates. But public interest relies on civil society. Often, we are overpowered and, in many countries, face repression and less space in which to act. But we also have our victories. Our hope: The trend set by some funders, such as the Mercator Foundation, to give us more space and time to do our work and spend less of our time jumping through complex hoops of ever-changing funding strategies and processes. This is what we need to respond to the many pressures on democracy and to use all available openings to support it.

About DRI

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) is an independent, non-profit organisation committed to defending and improving democracy worldwide.

DRI analyses threats to democracy and advocates for solutions during key legislative and political processes. By bringing impartial analysis and policy recommendations to policymakers, we encourage them to act before emerging concerns become pressing problems.

Together with citizens and civil society groups committed to democratic renewal, we establish and improve democratic institutions that preserve people's freedoms. Our reference points are internationally agreed democratic principles.

With a presence in eight countries, local teams, and wide networks of partners, we listen to communities and, together with them, chart the best path towards change. We have expertise on a wide range of issues related to democratic governance, and can react quickly to the latest trends and developments in different countries.

What we do

Our work centres on analysis and reporting, training, and raising public awareness. In this, we are guided by the democratic and human rights obligations enshrined in international law. We work to promote democratic elections, independent judiciaries, transparent government and public institutions, and fundamental freedoms for all.

We work across countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and Sub-Saharan Africa, to strengthen the following five pillars of any democratic society:

Elections: We help defend the heart of democracy through social media monitoring to ensure authentic online debates, through analysis and supporting legal reforms and voter education, and through involving citizens in election observation.

Justice: Beyond supporting the writing and implementation of new constitutions, we work with courts and lawmakers to help strengthen the rule of law and judicial independence. We also help include civil society and the public in debates on improving and ensuring justice.

Local governance: We work on decentralisation reforms, strengthening how local governments operate, and increasing civic participation, to bring democracy closer to people.

Democratic discourse: We work to make sure that everyone can access public debate, online and offline, regardless of political opinions or personal beliefs. We do this by countering disinformation and political polarisation, and by engaging citizen groups in monitoring online content.

Overview

Offices

Regions and countries where we also worked during 2023

Number of events per region

Number of publications per region

Germany
(headquarters)

Ukraine

European Union

Armenia

Lebanon

Tunisia

Jordan

Libya

Myanmar

Sri Lanka

Democratic
Republic of
Congo

Sub-Sahara
Africa

Brazil

Global		Europe		MENA region		Sub-Saharan Africa	
9	14	25	30	54	9	50	0

Our events in 2023

Number of events   **Number of participants**

Democratic discourse   29   2,421

Local governance   19   295

Justice   21   357

Elections   69   1,861

Our publications and articles in 2023

Number of publications and articles

Democratic discourse   42   15.6%
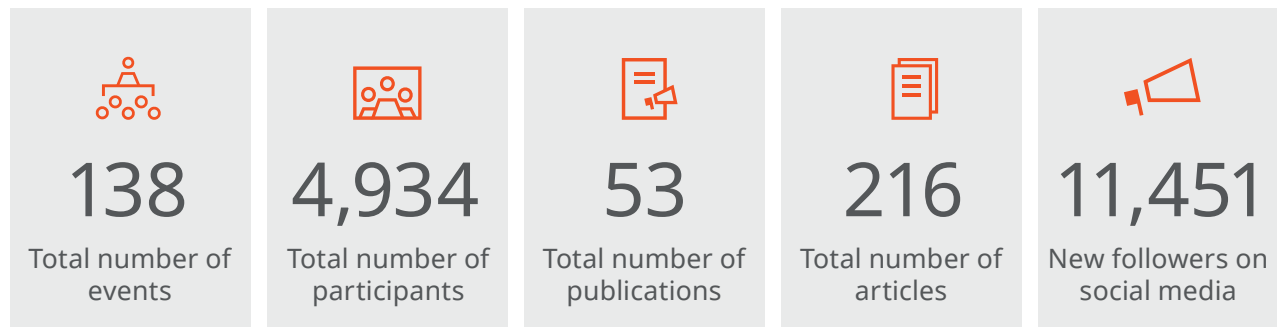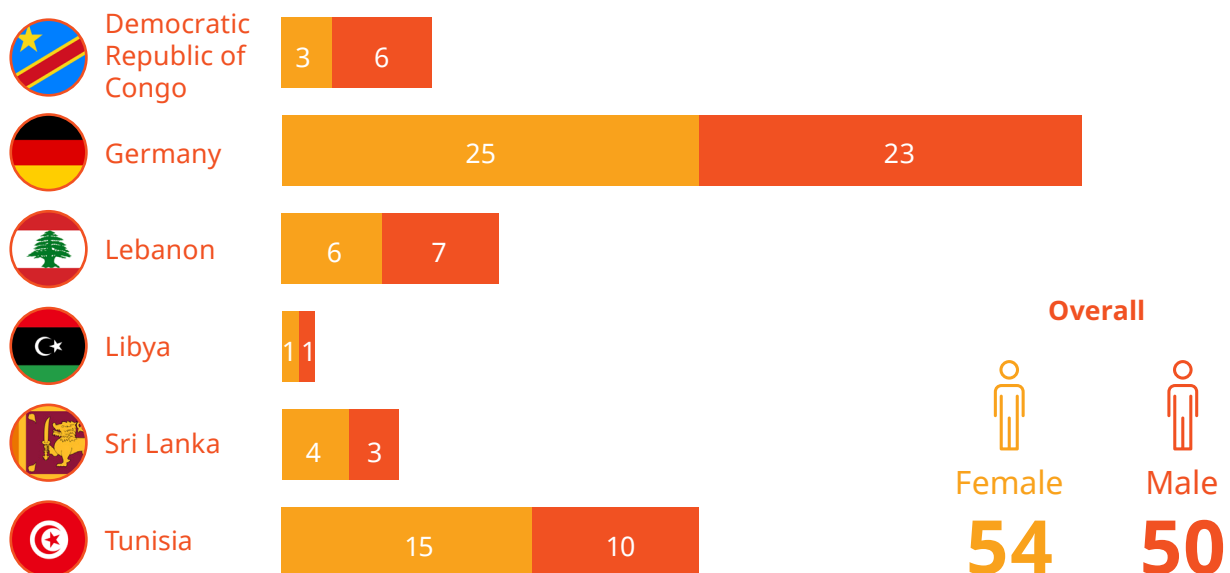
Local governance   14   5.2%

Justice   38   14.1%

Elections   175   65.1%

Total numbers

138	**4,934**	**53**	**216**	**11,451**
Total number of events	Total number of participants	Total number of publications	Total number of articles	New followers on social media

Staff breakdown by gender (as of December 2023)

Country	Female	Male
Democratic Republic of Congo	3	6
Germany	25	23
Lebanon	6	7
Libya	1	1
Sri Lanka	4	3
Tunisia	15	10

Overall

Female **54** Male **50**

Gender balance among participants in DRI activities

📇 Percentage of participants

📇 **51.7%**
Female

📇 **47.9%**
Male

0.4% 📇
Diverse

Who we worked with

■ Partners and contributors

Total 4,934

Civil society organisations
3,354

Academia and independent experts
1,036

Local and regional governments
231

General public
151

National governments
91

Electoral management bodies
47

Youth organisations and representatives
24
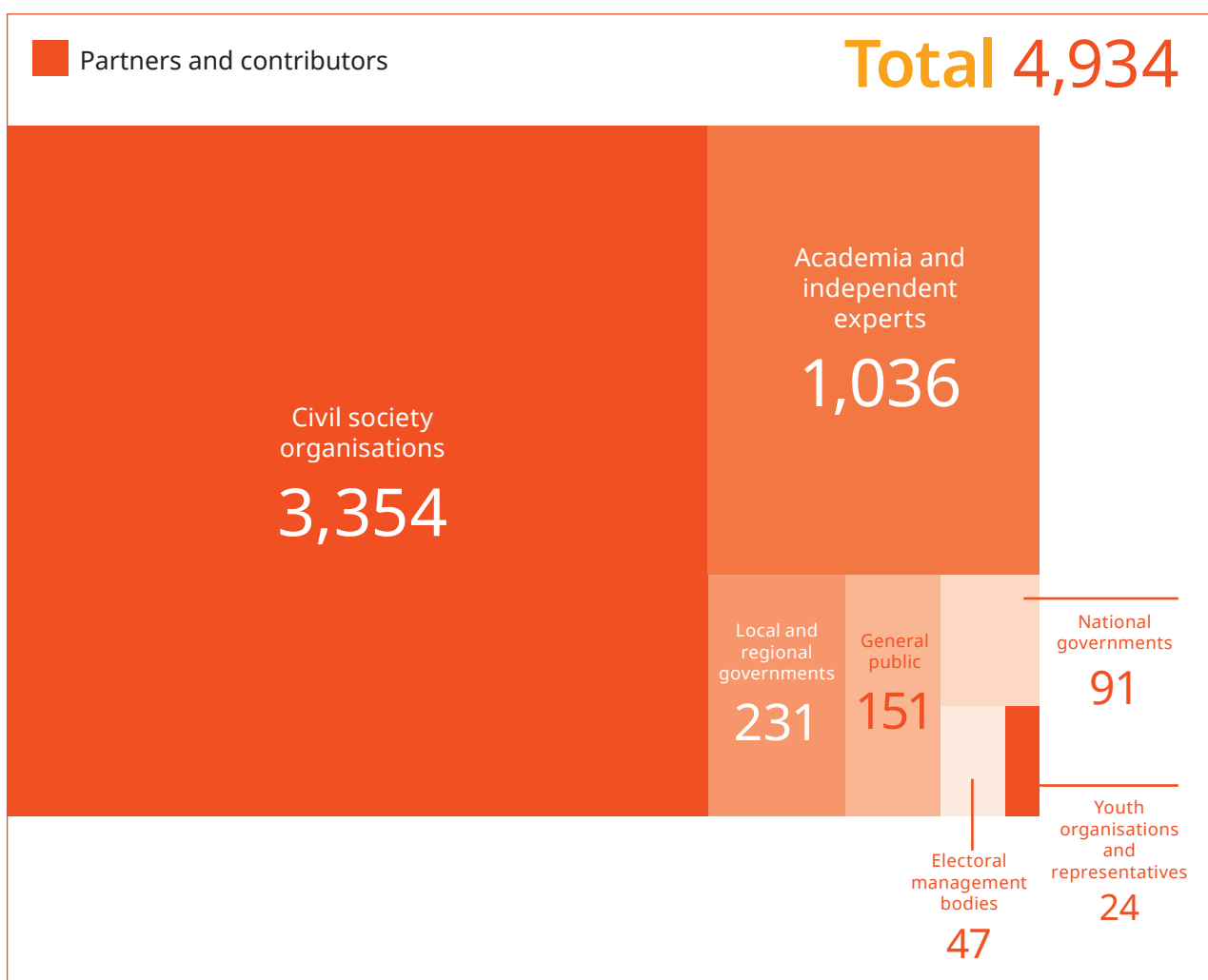
Digital Democracy

Events
14

Participants
851

Publications
25

Articles
7

European
Union
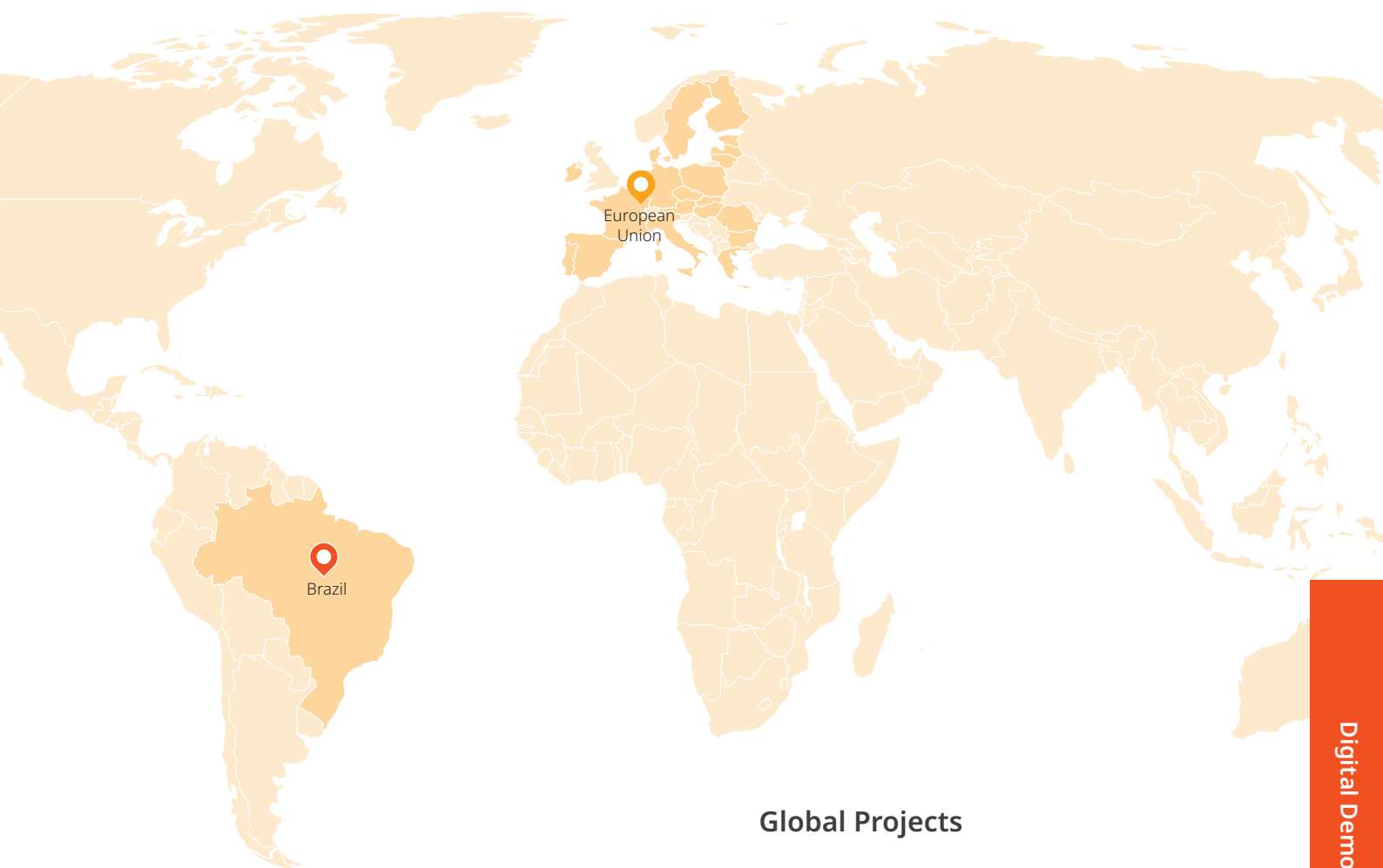
Brazil

- access://democracy – EU
- A Healthy Digital Public Sphere – EU
- Digital Media and Conflict Prevention – Brazil

Global Projects

- DisinfoRadar
- Social Media Monitoring Curriculum
- Election Observation and Democracy Support

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local
governance

Democratic
discourse

Introduction

By Heather Dannyelle Thompson
Digital Democracy Programme Manager

In many ways, the digital elements of democracy dominated our views on politics and governance in 2023. Where 2022 made generative AI (gAI) tangible to many – thanks to the release of ChatGPT – 2023 was marked by responses to the threats posed by this technology, with governments, civil society, and big tech seeking regulatory schemes to address concerns.

Under the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation of 2022, new working groups were established – one on elections and the other on generative AI (DRI co-chairs both groups).

The regulatory efforts were developed alongside a rise in self-regulation by the industry. Many AI practitioners viewed themselves as modern-day Oppenheimers, creating consequential technology they could not fully understand.

All the while, advancements in the field continued apace. ChatGPT inspired a slew of launches by competitors of similar products, including Meta's LLaMA 2, Google's Bard chatbot and Gemini, Baidu's ErnieBot, and GPT-4, as a follow-up release by OpenAI. We saw the rise of AI marketing and integration into products and services, with mixed success.

We also saw the rise of AI doomsaying in the mainstream, with speculation about an apocalyptic level of disinformation and the existential risk of general use AI (G.A.I.) in countless op-eds and news pieces. As we have been doing for many years, DRI continued to protect our democracies against digital threats globally. We continued our partnership with the German Federal Foreign Office to put on our second annual DisinfoCon, this time with a keynote speech by Anne Marie Engtoft Meldgaard, Denmark's Tech Ambassador. We also began monitoring the Brazilian political information system and produced bi-monthly reports on wide-ranging thematic topics, from gender issues to environmental disinformation. Finally, with the support of Mercator Stiftung and together with local project partners, we monitored the online debate in the Spanish general and Polish parliamentary elections, producing reports and dashboards to spread awareness about online political discourse.

The year also saw the development of our social media monitoring curriculum, as part of our efforts with project partners to increase social media monitoring capacity globally.

As we turn to the enforcement of major laws and regulations in tech in 2024, DRI's role to protect against digital threats will become even more important, as civil society works to ensure enforcement and continued regulation against arising threats.

InFocus

access://democracy
For Tech Transparency and Accountability through Evidence-based Reporting

By Sorina Matei
Digital Democracy Programme Coordinator

Elections in the digital age remain vulnerable to various forms of toxic political discourse, such as online disinformation and hate speech. The actors exploiting these vulnerabilities, as well as the tools and tactics they use to do so, evolve quickly and differ from country to country. This means that real-time monitoring and analysis of online political activities is crucial for safeguarding online discourse.

In response to this challenging context, in 2023, DRI gathered evidence on online debates surrounding elections and advocated for platform accountability and transparency.

We monitored the online political discourse during the Spanish general elections and Polish parliamentary elections, together with Maldita.es and the Institute of Public Affairs, respectively. In the case of Poland, we also conducted a pre-election assessment of the online vulnerabilities in its information space.

In six election analyses and reports, we measured the volume and impact of digital engagements, identified signs of toxicity in social media messages, and analysed misleading narratives and community claims of disinformation. We flagged that both the governing party and the opposition in Poland fostered a highly emotive electoral campaign, for example, on the subject of migration, and that disinformation reinforcing racist narratives surfaced during the campaign for the Spanish elections.

Our analysis underscored that, in order to provide a democratic online information space, platforms must comply with the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) and invest in solutions that prioritise reliable information and do not privilege disinformation. DRI pushed for effective data access for research, including through briefs and opinion pieces in the media, a stakeholder roundtable in Brussels, and our digital data access hub, which helps users assess each platform's accessibility to data and understand how each complies with the DSA.

Over the course of the year, DRI engaged with 60 EU regulatory bodies, tech platforms, civil society organisations, and journalists on challenges and solutions relating to elections, disinformation, toxicity in online discourse, and DSA implementation.

Main Reports and Activities

Election Dashboard: 2023 Polish Parliamentary Elections

Our user-friendly election dashboard analyses the online speech of politicians, journalists, and civil society in Poland, offering visualisations to help users navigate the complex terrain of Polish politics.
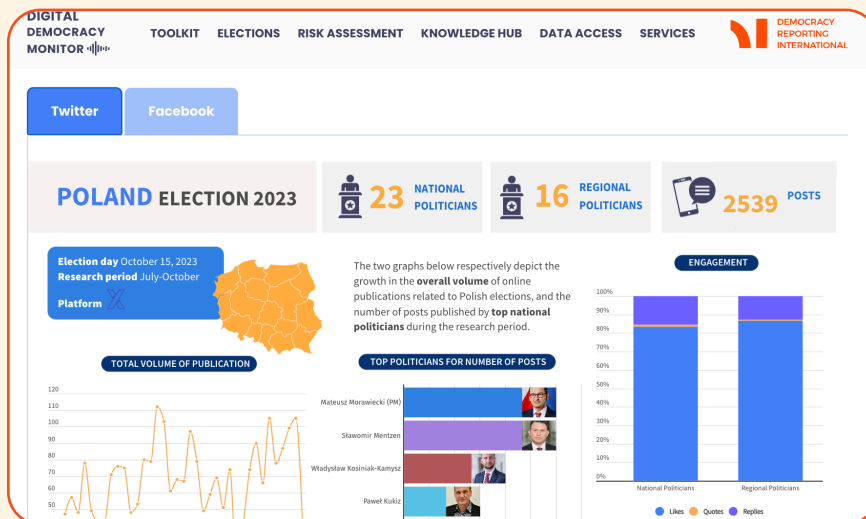
Visit website

From Hashtags to Votes: Social Media Patterns in Poland's 2023 Parliamentary Elections

Our report covers the role of social media in shaping the political upheaval witnessed during the elections. It provides a detailed analysis of how various political actors used the different platforms, examining the quantity and impact of their digital engagements. The report also assesses how social media strategies might have influenced voter perceptions and the outcome of the elections.

Read report

The Data Access Problem: Limitations on Access to Public Data on Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs)

In March, DRI published a first report assessing the state of data access on VLOPs, and comparing the nature and accessibility of their data. Based on our findings, we recommended that platforms provide access to all public data, regularly update their APIs to provide access to data on new features, and modify the APIs terms of service so they better reflect the DSA.

Funding Partner

Stiftung Mercator

InFocus
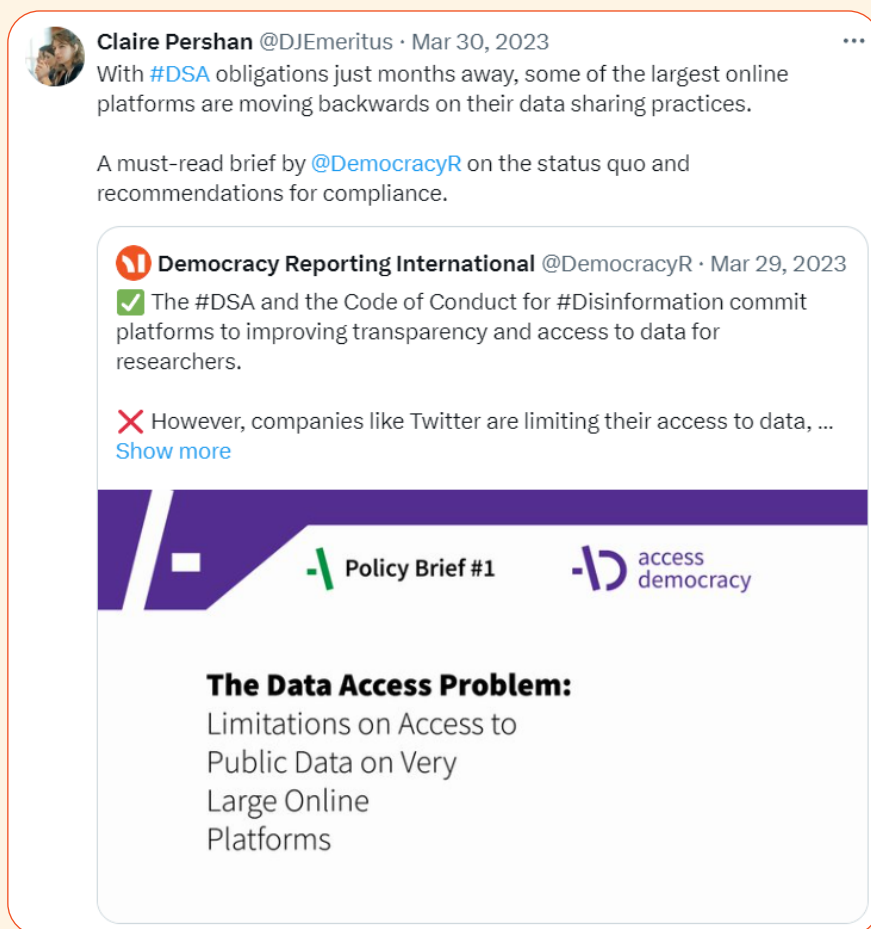
DisinfoRadar

By Duncan Allen
Digital Democracy Research Associate

From the use of AI voice clones in the Slovakian elections to the risk of the proliferation of Russian large language models, we witnessed dangerous developments in disinformation this year – and adjusted our project's scope accordingly.

Whereas the preceding year's research primarily focused on explaining and mapping the disinformation risk associated with emerging threats, in 2023, our team observed the impact of these technologies as they exploded into the mainstream. Much of the research in 2023 focused on the potential for new and popular generative AI tools to spread hate speech and disinformation, using real-life examples to inform our work.

Throughout the year, we organised working groups, bringing together experts from civil society, academia, and government to discuss new threats and suggest solutions. At our DisinfoCon conference, which attracted over 300 online attendees and 40 in-person participants in Berlin, debates and panels focused heavily on AI technologies. The feedback from these events informed our largest output of the year – an AI disinformation detection guide, providing tailored guidelines to combat the rise of AI-generated disinformation.

DRI also contributed to the EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation, by leading the Working Group on Generative AI. To warn the larger public of the dangers of AI-powered disinformation, we provided insights to major news outlets, such as the BBC, and published op-eds in news outlets, such as Politico. Our events, reports, and the guide enjoyed widespread engagement and media coverage, a testament to the relevance of DisinfoRadar's mission to identify and unpack emerging disinformation threats.

DisinfoCon 2023: Exploring AI's Threat to Democracy

Our annual DisinfoCon hybrid event in Berlin gathered high-level speakers, including journalists, tech ambassadors, academics, and civil society members, all of whom spoke on the evolving disinformation landscape. The 2023 topics focused heavily on artificial intelligence, exploring its potential impact on democracy, the hidden costs of training models, and the battle for better detection tools.

▶ Watch event

Synthetic Media Exposed: Our Guide to AI Disinformation Detection

Everybody talks about generative AI, but how do we identify its outputs? Our AI disinformation detection guide empowers researchers, policymakers, civil society, and everyday users, who may otherwise lack the technical expertise to identify synthetic disinformation. We talk readers through manual and technical methods for identifying AI-generated images, videos, audio, and text. Over 100 attendees joined with us for the guide's online launch, among them representatives from the investigative organisation Bellingcat.

Read our guide

Rapid Response Briefs: Early Warnings on How AI is Fuelling Disinformation

DRI published five Rapid Response Brief reports in 2023, ranging from investigations into the disinformation potential of open-source large language models to explainer pieces on how authoritarian governments like those in Russia and China engage with domestic AI tools.

Across **11** publications, including the guide for AI disinformation detection, five Rapid Response Briefs, and six op-eds, we investigated the impact of emerging digital trends on democracy.

546 participants followed DisinfoCon 2023, our hybrid conference on the ever-evolving disinformation landscape.

170 representatives from civil society, academia, think thanks, and platforms joined our webinars and working groups.

POLITICO

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NEWS > DEFENSE

The race to detect AI can be won

As regulation faces growing challenges, detection technology could provide a crucial edge for mitigating the potential risks of generative AI tools.

▷ LISTEN   ⤴ SHARE

"I think DisinfoCon is very special, because it brings together people from civil society, from academia, and from the industry. This is a conversation that doesn't happen very often, and it's very precious."

– Dr. Renana Keydar, Senior Lecturer of Law and Digital Humanities at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Funding Partner

The German Federal Foreign Office

Other Projects

Regulation across the EU

As part of a long-standing collaboration with the European Partnership for Democracy, DRI updated its Knowledge Hub, an online resource detailing EU Member States' efforts to combat online hate speech and disinformation. We also published two reports, examining the role of civil society in the implementation of the DSA and the compliance of social media platforms with the EU Code of Conduct 2022, respectively

Media and Democracy in Brazil

With funding from the EU, DRI's partnership with the Fundação Getulio Vargas and Agência Lupa contributes to strengthening Brazil's democracy and digital integrity through social media monitoring and its Digital Democracy Council, which convenes researchers and civil society. In 2023, we monitored social media discourse on issues identified as threats to Brazilian democracy, such as transphobic narratives promoted by parliamentarians and disinformation campaigns on climate change.

Social Media Monitoring Curriculum

Funded by Civitates, in 2023, DRI turned its current social media monitoring toolkit into a training programme for civil society organisations, activists, universities, and anyone interested in learning how to research social media and democracy. Our curriculum is designed to introduce participants to the key concepts of social media monitoring, help them identify the necessary elements of successful research, and equip them with data analysis techniques to conduct their own projects.

Election Observation and Democracy Support

This project strengthens the EU's election observation missions worldwide. DRI's team provided training workshops for the missions' social media analysts, and supported the development of an improved election observation methodology.

Funding Partners

Civitates, The European Union, The German Federal Foreign Office, Stiftung Mercator

Europe

Events
20

Participants
1,781

Publications
19

Articles
25

Germany

European
Union

Ukraine

Moldova

📍 re:constitution – EU

📍 Network of Networks for Democracy (Nets4Dem) - EU

📍 Anchoring Democracy and Human Rights in German Foreign and Security
Policy – Germany

📍 Instigation to Democracy II – Moldova

📍 Supporting Engagement in European Elections and
Democratic Societies – EU

📍 The Solidarity Project – Ukraine

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local
governance

**Democratic
discourse**

Introduction

By Paul Zoubkov
Europe Programme Manager

Again, Russia's war against Ukraine was the dominant topic in Europe in 2023. The brutal and illegal invasion continued, becoming a grinding slog, rippling across the region, and taking a political toll within both countries. Amid its fight for survival, Ukraine accelerated the drive towards euro-Atlantic integration, passing ambitious reforms and pursuing high-level investigations. These efforts paid off, with the EU agreeing to open accession talks, while also giving the same nod to Moldova, and granting formal candidate status to Georgia (despite or, more likely, because of the latter's slide into Russia's orbit). Armenia also pivoted towards the "West", but this failed to hold off Azerbaijan, which forcefully seized the Nagorno-Karabakh region, ending the 30-year stand-off there, and causing a mass exodus of the local population.

In the EU, Poland and Hungary continued their slide into illiberalism for much of the year. The European Commission launched new legal proceedings in response, but folded in part, opting for the more effective tool of withholding EU funds in the face of Prime Minister Viktor Orban's persistent blackmailing and blocking in the Council. The Commission also introduced new far-reaching anti-corruption proposals, and a flawed "Defence of Democracy" package, with its "foreign interest" registration provisions. Meanwhile, the European Parliament struggled to properly overhaul its ethics rules in the wake of the "Qatargate" foreign interference scandal.

Overall, there was increasing electoral support for far-right forces in Europe, with these parties making notable gains in Bulgaria, Finland, the Netherlands, and Serbia. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan secured another term in an election in what was widely assessed by observers as an unfair vote, while in Slovakia, the return to power of former PM Robert Fico boded poorly for the country's democratic institutions. Conversely, in Poland, a record-breaking turnout ushered in a new government committed to restoring the rule of law, with wider implications for the EU.

During the year, DRI assessed the performance of Ukraine's democratic institutions in the face of Russia's war, and pressured for states to place democracy at the heart of their foreign security policies. We engaged heavily in protecting the rule of law in the EU, building media capacity, advising policymakers, and supporting civil society action. We also worked with emerging grassroots changemakers in Moldova, and began a flagship project to develop a pan-European network on democratic innovation.

re:constitution

By Jakub Jaraczewski
Research Coordinator for the Rule of Law

The attacks on rule of law are a major concern in the EU. DRI's re:constitution project builds public awareness and advocates for stronger action by decision makers to respect and protect the rule of law.

In 2023, DRI collaborated with the media to promote a fact-based public debate on the issue, and pushed for stronger use of the EU's tools against violating Member States. We supported emerging reforms in Poland, and examined how various countries implement judgments from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). We also continued our work supporting public communications on the rule of law, debunked disinformation, and strengthened the community of NGOs, experts, and institutions.

Main Reports and Activities

Ongoing Media Support

Throughout the year, DRI continued to build journalists' capacity to report on the rule of law. This included behind-the-scenes analytical support and running public commentary on such issues as the EU stand-off with Poland and Hungary, the judicial impasse in Spain, constitutional proposals in Italy, or developments in EU candidate states. We also contributed op-eds to such publications as The Guardian, Politico, and EUobserver. Overall, our experts fielded over 220 journalist queries in 2023, and were quoted at least 130 times by 91 media outlets from 34 countries, reaching millions of citizens across Europe and beyond.

Enforcing Regional Court Judgements
"Justice Delayed, Justice Denied – 2023 Edition"

One of Europe's key rule of law challenges is the disregard for decisions by European courts, which protect human rights and EU values. To address this, DRI and the European Implementation Network assessed Member States' compliance with ECtHR and CJEU judgments. Shockingly, nearly 40 percent of key ECtHR judgments, for example, remain unimplemented after a decade. The findings, released in a final report in July, have been included in the European Commission's 2023 Rule of Law Report, referenced in a European Parliament resolution, and influenced the Council of Europe's reporting on judgment implementation.

Read report

Restoring the Rule of Law in Poland

In 2023, Poland faced its most significant election in 30 years, with potential outcomes ranging from an accelerated slide into authoritarianism to the restoration of the rule of law, both of which would impact the wider EU. To clarify the stakes, DRI and the Verfassungsblog forum published a series of articles on the legal aspects of the vote and the future of the rule of law in Poland. DRI also held exclusive press briefings for global and regional media.

In December, following the reformist opposition's victory, DRI co-organized an international seminar in Warsaw to discuss rebuilding the rule of law after eight years of legal turmoil. Scholars, lawyers, judges, and diplomats exchanged views on judicial reform and other solutions, informing the new government's legislative actions.

Funding Partner

Stiftung Mercator

InFocus

Anchoring Democracy and Human Rights in German Foreign and Security Policy

By Dennis Wenzl
Outreach Officer

In 2023, DRI continued its work to ensure a democratic character at the heart of the new German National Security Policy. After testing political narratives on democracy and security with the German population, DRI published the results and presented them to key German ministries. We also published several op-eds, and co-hosted, in cooperation with the business forum Baden-Badener Unternehmergespräche, a discussion at the Munich Security Conference on Germany's economic model and geopolitical risks.

The new German National Security Strategy, introduced in June 2023, picked up the overarching logic of DRI's research on "values and interests". The strategy highlights human rights, the rule of law, and democracy as conditions for human security in Europe. It fails, however, to link their absence to how repressive structures of governance often set the path for external military aggression.

Following the Strategy's release, DRI expanded its efforts, by developing a set of international recommendations on integrating democracy into national security strategies, presented at an international round table, with the attending diplomats emphasising the timely and constructive contribution of the recommendations to ongoing security considerations and strategy processes.

Main Reports and Activities

Democracy or War (Demokratie oder Krieg), op-ed by Oleksandra Matviichuk (with DRI support), in Süddeutsche Zeitung

The author, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, argues that a state's type of government affects not only its citizens, but those of every other state. "First and foremost, one has to understand that the attacks on democracy in so many countries make our world more dangerous. [...] Due to a lack of open discourse, and without checks and balances, [authoritarian governments] make dangerous decisions purely based on the will of their authoritarian leader".

Only Values or Also Interests? Democracy in the New German Security Strategy (Nur Werte oder auch Interessen? Demokratie in der neuen Sicherheitsstrategie), conference with a keynote address by German State Minister Dr. Tobias Lindner

On the day of the Strategy's launch, DRI hosted an event attended by German State Minister Dr. Tobias Lindner, who presented the new German National Security Strategy and answered questions from the audience and the moderator. This was followed by panel discussions with experts from academia, diplomacy, and civil society, focusing on the role of democracy in the Strategy and the future implementation of this significant shift in German foreign policy.

Strengthening Democracy in National Security Strategies - Our Recommendation Paper

After analysing 13 national security strategies and advocating its own proposals for the new German security blueprint, DRI developed its set of international recommendations on integrating democracy into a security strategy. We then presented them at an international round table, which made its own contributions and expressed support for the recommendations.

Other Projects

Nets4Dem – Innovating Democracy, Together

The Nets4Dem project is a pioneering network of networks, creating a hub for collaboration and advanced research in the field of democratic innovation, civic deliberation, participation, and citizenship education. Started in 2023 and coordinated by DRI, the network includes founding organisations representing over 200 European cities, 300 civil society organisations, and 50 research institutions. Over the course of the project, Nets4Dem will consolidate cutting edge knowledge, develop new solutions, and build the capacity of at least 300 institutions and 3,000 policymakers and practitioners
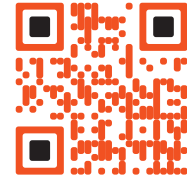
Visit website

Feminist Instigation to Democracy II – Moldova

Instigation to Democracy, a collaborative effort by DRI and CPR Moldova, trains community leaders in Moldova. It empowers active citizens, particularly women, to advocate for good governance, address local issues, and foster resilience during crises. Fifty-six emerging leaders graduated from the programme in 2023, and they were supported with follow-on funding and mentoring to drive positive change in their communities.

Supporting Engagement in European Elections and Democratic Societies – EU (SEEEDS)

SEEEDS seeks to increase public understanding of and civic participation in European Parliament elections. During the year, DRI worked with partners to develop policy recommendations for strengthening voter turnout, particularly of women, youth, and mobile citizens, and presented them in the European Parliament. We also held a public event on risks and opportunities in the European Parliament elections, and helped strengthen a transnational network of active citizens working on election observation.

The Ukraine Solidarity Project

In 2023, we continued to speak forcefully about Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, its impact on democracy worldwide, and the need for international action. We also worked with local partners to examine the performance of Ukraine's democratic institutions in time of war, and held a high-level public conference in Kyiv to discuss the findings of that work, timed with Ukrainian Constitution Day. The work emphasised the resilience of the country's democracy, and also highlighted emerging risks and the need for post-conflict reforms on Ukraine's path to the EU.

Funding Partners

Civitates, The European Union, The German Federal Foreign Office, Open Society Foundations, Stiftung Mercator

Middle East and North Africa

Events
54

Participants
646

Publications
9

Articles
57

Tunisia

Lebanon

Jordan

Sudan

- A bottom-up reform agenda for Lebanon – Lebanon

- Nafas Jdeed Season 2 – Lebanon

- Political Knowhow for Host Communities - Lebanon

- Promoting Community Policing in Lebanon - Lebanon

- Justice Reform, Enhance the Rule of Law, Develop Human Rights and Strengthen Institutions – Tunisia

- Safeguarding Democratic Achievements – Tunisia

- Youth Talks e-Democracy – Tunisia

- Words Matter – Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia

- Hemaya – حماية – Libya

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local governance

Democratic discourse

Introduction

By Hannah Becker
MENA Programme Manager

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region saw more democratic decline and increasing authoritarianism in 2023, mirroring a global pattern. Despite demands for greater equality during the "Arab Spring", over a decade later, the economic plight of many remains severe, especially for women and youth, who face economic exclusion, hampering their ability to participate in public life. Institutional gains are being dismantled. Authoritarianism and the vilification of minorities are gaining traction, exacerbating vulnerabilities for groups such as Sub-Saharan African migrants in Tunisia, Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and LGBTIQ+ persons across the region. Disinformation and hate speech are on the rise, fueled by a lack of independent media, large-scale fact-checking mechanisms, and effective online literacy initiatives. Our research highlights an increasingly difficult legal environment for civil society in Libya, Lebanon, and Tunisia, further decreasing citizens' access to channels for voicing their opinions. Natural disasters and the wars in Sudan and Gaza added in 2023 to an environment of instability and uncertainty.

Amidst these challenges, DRI continues to support actors and institutions working to protect democratic gains in the region.

Operating in five countries, DRI worked with communities to improve democratic governance and raise civil society's voice in local and national reform efforts. We also created innovative and safe spaces online and offline where young people could come together and express their opinions safely. We empowered civil society by exploring rights and helping them navigate complex legal frameworks. Finally, we brought organisations from different countries together to design joint recommendations for countering online threats to democracy in the region.

Many of our partners are continuing to work in support of democracy, despite significant personal risks. Engagement in our activities remained high, despite all of the setbacks of 2023. Many people in the region believe in democratic governance, pluralism, and equality. It is crucial that democratic values again become a priority for funding partners investing in the region; they are our best chance at fostering peace and resilience to global challenges.

InFocus

Words Matter

By Wael Abu Anzeh
MENA Programme Coordinator

The "Words Matter" project was aimed at safeguarding democratic processes and the resilience of societies in the MENA region to online disinformation and hate speech. Implemented between February 2021 and December 2023, Words Matter counted on an extensive network of six local organisations in Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia.

With this project, we:

- Built the capacities of local organisations in social media monitoring to ensure the relevance and localisation of these efforts and their results
- Advocated for policy recommendations and reforms among relevant actors and regional authorities
- Raised awareness to increase society's resilience against the threats of hate speech and disinformation

Countering Online Gender-Based Violence and Other Forms of Hate Speech During Elections

Following extensive capacity building and coaching on social media monitoring, our partners produced five reports on social media debates in the region that examined issues such as hate speech, defamation, online disinformation, and online gender-based violence during key democratic events across Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia, and their impact in shaping political narratives. This was possible thanks to the Arabic version of DRI's Social Media Monitoring Toolkit, which we adapted to the local context.

Our overall findings pointed to the severe consequences of online gender-based violence, including mental health impacts and the fomenting of real-world violence.

Read report
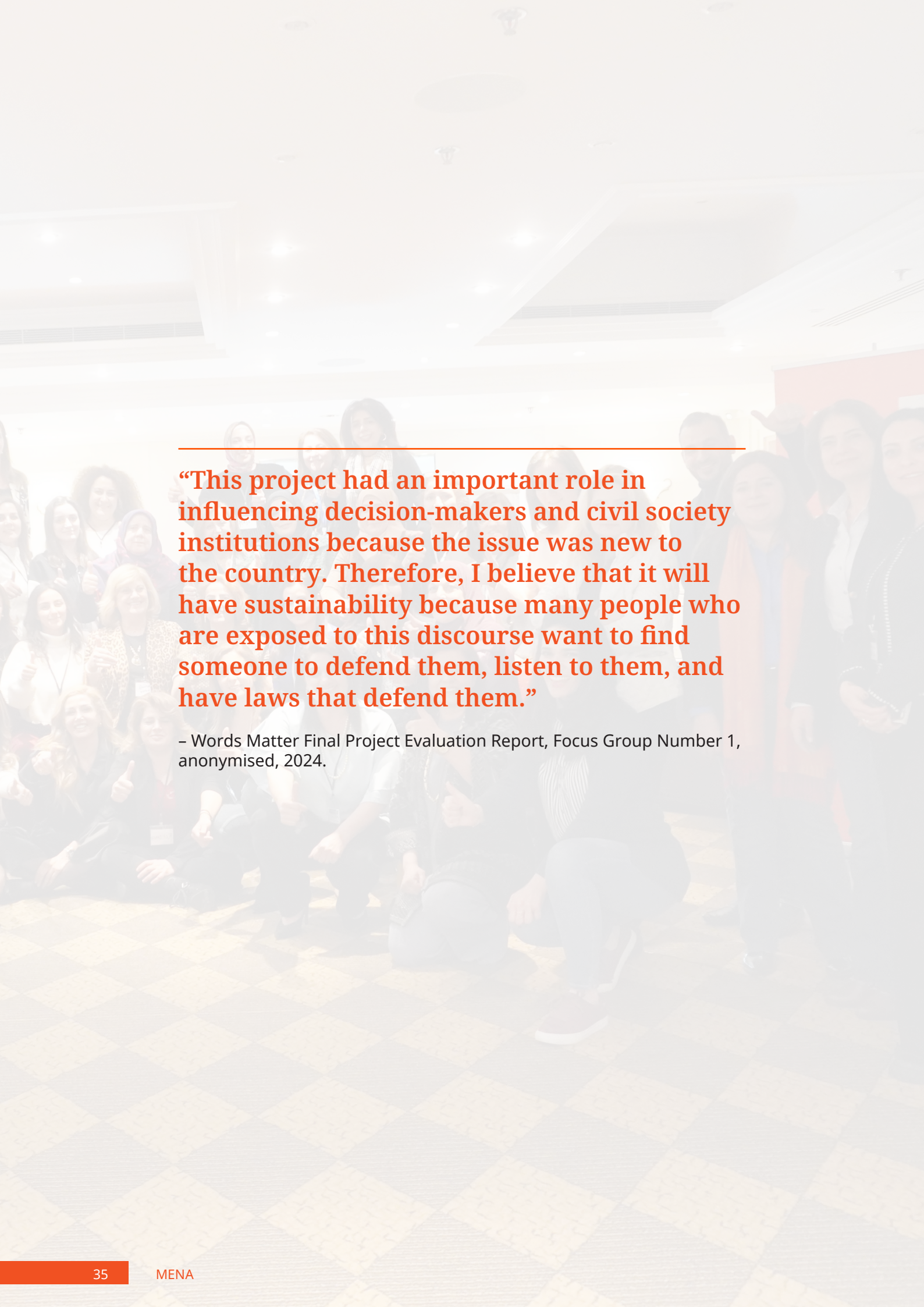
Artificial Intelligence to Counter Online Gender-Based Violence

We supported the Jordan Open-Source Association in developing Nuha, an innovative AI open-source platform to monitor and detect online violence against women in the Jordanian Arabic dialect. The platform supports the protection of women in Jordan through improving the monitoring and reporting of online hate speech and enhancing the knowledge and capacities of at-risk individuals. The platform detects online gender-based violence in a specific Arabic dialect, addressing the limitations of standard algorithms focused on Modern Standard Arabic.

Words Matter Network Regional Forum: Exchanges on Tackling Disinformation and Hate Speech in the MENA Region

The "Words Matter Network Regional Forum" tackled a number of topics regarding online disinformation and hate speech on social media in the MENA region, in 11 sessions held online between 31 October and 2 November. The forum was initially planned to take place in Beirut, but had to be moved online due to security concerns related to the Israel-Hamas war. Around 200 people from different backgrounds attended the forum, including representatives of social media platforms and civil society organisations, independent experts, and representatives of the Words Matter partner network.

The forum resulted in several recommendations advocating for the reform of legislation to address disinformation, raise levels of media literacy, and increase collaboration between relevant actors, to ensure transparency and accountability in combating online harms. It also served as a platform for networking and exploring partnerships to advance joint advocacy and awareness-raising efforts.

"This project had an important role in influencing decision-makers and civil society institutions because the issue was new to the country. Therefore, I believe that it will have sustainability because many people who are exposed to this discourse want to find someone to defend them, listen to them, and have laws that defend them."

– Words Matter Final Project Evaluation Report, Focus Group Number 1, anonymised, 2024.

Lebanon

Events	Participants	Publications	Articles
40	**537**	**8**	**52**

By André Sleiman, DRI Lebanon Country Representative

In 2023, DRI's work in Lebanon focused on reform-minded individuals: An incredible 600 people from 50 localities took part in more than 50 DRI training activities over the year. Five hundred citizens took on political decision makers in discussions that tackled some of the most pressing public issues in the country, spanning 15 policy sessions.

Our work in 2023 revolved around four topics. First, the accomplishments of young Lebanese ambassadors of change in independent media and local politics. Second, the local community initiatives of our civil society partners, who dedicated every effort towards bettering their environments – out of DRI's deep-seated belief that change begins on a small scale.

Third was the capacity-sharing sessions we ran for prospective municipal candidates, especially those women candidates determined to shatter the glass ceiling in municipal councils, and for current municipal officials who continue their public service. Women made up 45 per cent of participants in our activities this year – a high proportion, given how under-represented women are in the public sphere.

Finally, our advocacy work prompted politicians and officials to modernise the laws on municipalities and public procurement.

While we continue to invest in people, we believe that public institutions remain irreplaceable. A large segment of the public might have lost hope in public institutions, feeling they are corrupt and decaying. We are always reminded that individuals create change, but it is public institutions that keep changes alive.

Thematic Areas

Elections   Justice   Local governance   Democratic discourse

InFocus

A Bottom-Up Reform Agenda for Lebanon Supporting Youth, Women, and Civil Society Actors to Expand Civic Space

Our capacity-sharing programmes strengthened the capabilities of women, municipal officials, and potential candidates willing to run for the upcoming municipal elections. More than 130 participants benefited from a wide range of focused training sessions, and built the needed confidence and motivation to fulfil their role as change agents at the local level. The programme opened doors for new partnerships, network-building, and the exchange of practices between activists aspiring for public office.

DRI Lebanon funded five local community initiatives with 4,200 citizens in diverse Lebanese regions. Local actors became more aware of their rights and roles at the local level, and demonstrated eagerness to be part of the reform process in their localities.

At the national level, DRI supported ongoing policymaking efforts, by developing implementation decrees, draft laws, and legal memoranda on public procurement and municipal governance. We trained 47 municipal officials on the 2021 Public Procurement Law, to increase transparency and accountability.

The team organised training sessions for emerging political groups to support their long-term planning, as well as their organisational and network development.

In addition, we published two policy papers – one on the benefits of open data in accelerating democratic change, and the other on the importance of voting megacentres in improving electoral integrity.

In total, over 4,200 beneficiaries actively participated in community projects, strengthening our civil society partners' capacity in local governance. Trust and collaboration among citizens, local authorities, and civil society flourished, fostering collective action. Capacity-sharing programs boosted knowledge and confidence for potential candidates in upcoming municipal elections. Emerging political groups showed an enhanced understanding of key policy issues, enriching decision-making. We also shared drafts of bills integrating good governance principles with legislators, highlighting a commitment to institutional reform. These outcomes signify substantial strides toward supporting transparent, inclusive, and effective local governance.

Main Reports and Activities

Unlocking Women's Political Potential

Our tailored capacity-sharing programme, enabling women's increased political participation, including through the provision of technical knowledge about local governance (municipal legal framework, public procurement, access to information, and financial management) and the further development of leadership skills (interpersonal skills, public speaking, electoral campaigning, and canvassing).

Building Competence, Strengthening Communities

DRI delivered 12 training workshops to increase the knowledge of prospective municipal candidates and current members of municipal councils to become competent actors on the local level. The workshops focused on six topics for around 50 participants.

"Thanks to the project, young people became aware of their role in ensuring accountability, and were encouraged to participate in public life, even as candidates in the municipal elections. We witnessed high enthusiasm and willingness to change."

- Nadine Saba, Akkar Network for Development

From Vision to Impact in Local Initiatives

DRI implemented five local community initiatives in diverse Lebanese areas, tailored to the specific needs of specific communities, and benefiting more than 4,000 citizens through their active involvement.

Towards Fairer Elections

DRI published two policy papers on open data and voting megacentres, providing entry points to reform the Lebanese electoral system, and enhancing the integrity and fairness of the voting process.

Through the capacity-sharing programme, DRI delivered essential information and helped further build skills to boost women's participation in municipal politics. Most participants, and especially those coming from rural areas, stated that they gained self-confidence and motivation to pursue public work. In the impact evaluation survey, more than 70 per cent of participants stated their willingness to run in the next municipal elections. The opportunity to establish networks with other women planning to run for municipal office emerged as one of the most significant benefits of the programme.
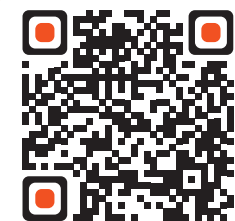
▶ Our 2023 activities

"The change was evident through a positive shift in community engagement: an increase in the number of residents participating in public life and intensive interactions indicating a change in the way of thinking. The website Umdear.com facilitated public services and ensured the access to information regardless of geographic location."

- Jean Khashan, Smart Municipality Academy

Funding Partner

The German Federal Foreign Office

The candidacy will be more planned, as well as my activities on the field. I will certainly continue my journey in political activism. Now, I know my right to social, economic, and political integration. I will certainly not isolate myself politically, whether I will win or not, because political work is a human right."

Towards Fairer Elections - Programme Participant

Other Projects

Nafas Jdeed Season 2: Expanding the Media Discourse around Elections and Political Reforms in Lebanon

With the second season of our political talk show Nafas Jdeed ("A New Spirit"), we amplified the voices of politically marginalised actors and communities. The talk show promoted a youth-led media discourse around elections and political reform, thanks to the contribution of young media makers. DRI also created a media community centre for media makers, students, and young media professionals to produce media materials free of charge.

Municipal Know-How for Host Communities

In coordination with The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), we provided technical assistance in developing decentralised partnerships between German and Lebanese host municipalities to further the exchange of know-how in local governance. DRI Lebanon accompanied and advised delegations of German municipal representatives visiting Lebanon on the development of municipal project partnerships with Lebanese counterparts.

Promoting Community Policing in Lebanon

DRI supported the development and implementation of new standard operational procedures, a code of conduct, and recruitment guidelines to better align the work of municipal police officers with human rights and the rule of law. Through social dialogue and local community activities, the project professionalised local police work in six municipalities, and built bridges between local law enforcement agents and their communities.

Funding Partners

The German Federal Foreign Office, Porticus, Engagement Global, International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies

Tunisia

Events	Participants	Publications	Articles
4	72	0	1

By Alix Arquilliere Country Representative at DRI Tunisia

In 2023, in the aftermath of the introduction of a new constitution by President Kais Saied in 2022, Tunisia went through major political changes. A newly elected Parliament was inaugurated. Local elections took place, as a first step to forming the second chamber of Parliament, while the dissolution of municipal councils halted the decentralisation process. This new institutional architecture is characterised by a reduced role for political parties, weaker checks and balances, and increasing repression.

Several figures from the political, economic, media and civil society arenas were arrested for "conspiracy against the State" (decree-law 2022-54) or through a decree-law restricting online freedom of expression. This wave of arrests put a strain on the civic space, the justice system, and the rule of law.

The presidential camp also stirred up suspicions against non-governmental organisations, and threatened to amend the current decree-law that regulates the establishment of associations.

Despite a troublesome beginning of the year, marked by delays in funding, staff turnover, and political uncertainty, DRI Tunisia navigated the challenges effectively.
Away from the disinformation and polarisation present in Tunisian public discourse, DRI Tunisia worked with independent online media to create digital spaces for young people to access reliable information, and on the analysis of key political and socioeconomic developments. We also engaged youth in constructive dialogue.

DRI Tunisia also supported civil society organisations in analysing the new institutional and electoral frameworks, and bolstered their engagement in advocacy on election-related issues.

Finally, we continued to improve the accessibility and effectiveness of the Administrative Tribunal, contributing to its mission of upholding citizens' rights against unlawful administrative acts by the authorities.

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local governance

Democratic discourse

Youth Talks e-democracy - Empowering Tunisian Youth Engagement in the Digital Age

By Alix Arquilliere,
Country Representative at DRI Tunisia, and Yasmine
Hamrouni, Communications Coordinator at DRI Tunisia

How can we talk about politics in a way that is attractive to young people, while countering polarisation and misinformation? This is the core mission of Youth Talks e-Democracy (#Y-TeD), a project launched in August 2022, right after the introduction of Saied's controversial new constitution. In partnership with the digital investigative media Al Qatiba and the online magazine Yaluna, we fostered discussions and interest in political discourse.

Over 17 months, through an iterative and adaptative approach, DRI, Al Qatiba, and Yaluna produced 112 pieces of digital content on a broad range of topics – from local elections and women's rights to state subsidies and green energy – that reached an impressive audience of over 3.4 million people, including more than 1.2 million young people.

The high level of engagement with the project by young people has been particularly encouraging. Our audience went beyond passive interactions, such as likes or reactions. They actively shared content on their personal stories, leaving insightful comments and reflections, and tagging friends in the process.

While being mostly digital, the project also organised round tables and focus group discussions to better understand the interests and priorities of youth.

One of the focus groups indicated that content created by our partners Yaluna and Al Qatiba increased the knowledge of political concepts for 87 per cent of participants. They said they found the content engaging and informative, especially regarding economic policies.

Seventy-five per cent of the participants stated that the round table discussions significantly influenced their perceptions of the political landscape, while 22 per cent said they gained new insights into political concepts they were previously unaware of. This hybrid model, combining both online content and physical events, has proved highly effective, and is one of the key lessons we learned from #Y-TeD.

Main Reports and Activities

Crafting Digital Content that Connects with Youth

#Y-TeD successfully reached its target audience by using channels tailored to young people, especially social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. DRI and its partners offered simple and accessible content that blends information and dialogue through formats such as infographics, reels, content creator collaboration, and podcasts.

كيفاش يوصللنا الماء لسبالتنا؟

👁 View content

Round Tables, Ramadan and Rappers

The project also created a space for expression by organising five interactive round table discussions in various regions of Tunisia. Another event featured a well-known rapper, who sings socially-engaged lyrics. The project's closing gathering offered a series of interactive panel discussions on the future of youth, and the role of digital platforms and serious journalism in politics.

A Toolkit with Lessons Learned

To capitalise on the learning and best practices that DRI and its partners gained throughout the implementation of the project, we developed a toolkit for youth activists and organisations on fostering youth's political and civic engagement online.

Beyond engaging young people, through this project, DRI and its partners have developed new skills and broadened their audience.
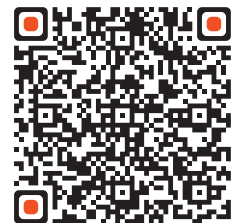
Read toolkit

Funding Partner

Ifa Zivik
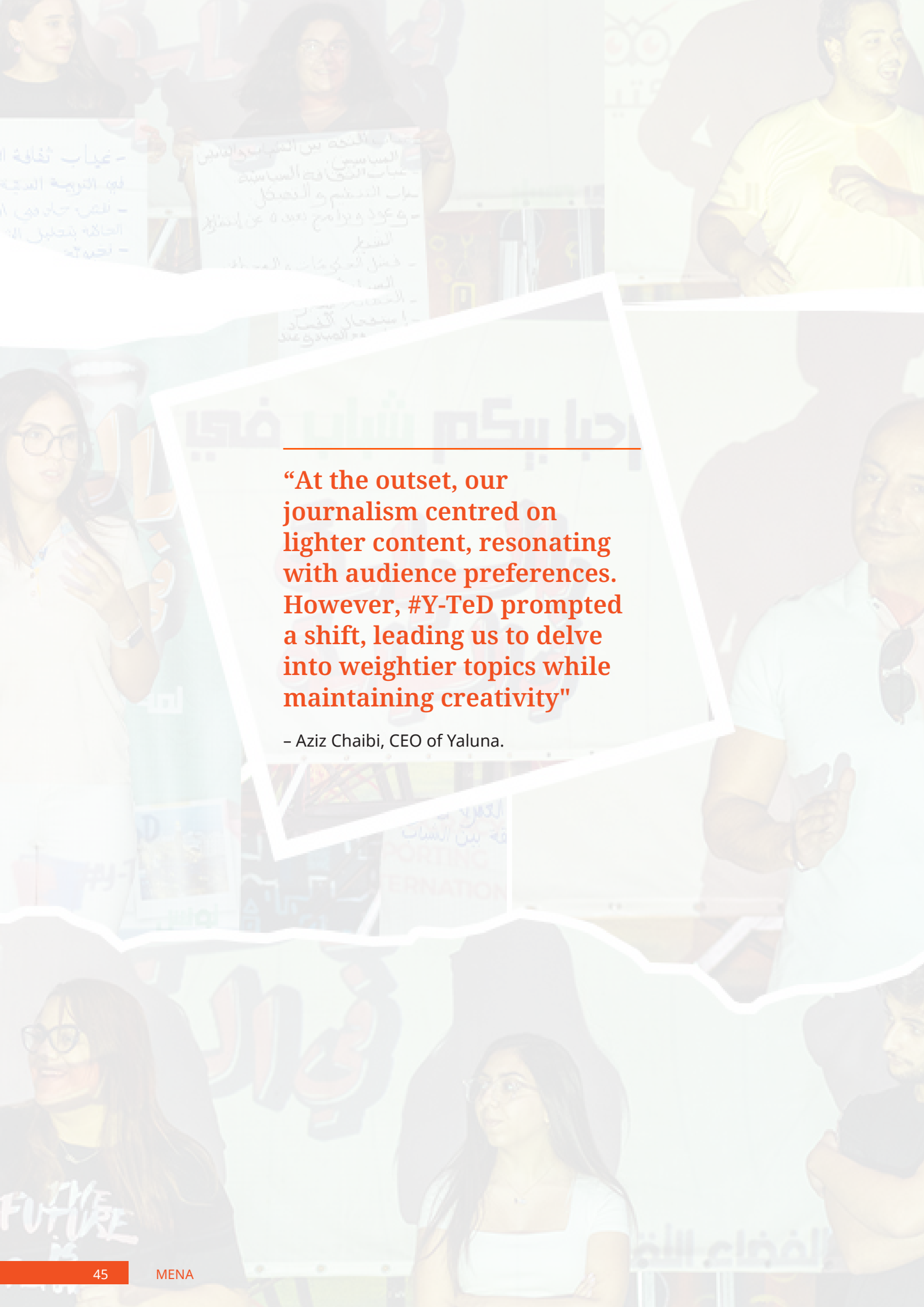
"At the outset, our journalism centred on lighter content, resonating with audience preferences. However, #Y-TeD prompted a shift, leading us to delve into weightier topics while maintaining creativity"

– Aziz Chaibi, CEO of Yaluna.

Other Projects

Justice Reform, Enhance the Rule of Law, Develop Human Rights, and Strengthen Institutions – JEDI II

The second phase of our JEDI project aims to make administrative justice more accessible to and effective for citizens. DRI Tunisia is partnering with both civil society and the Administrative Tribunal. With the former, we will run a nationwide awareness-raising campaign. As for the Tribunal, we aim to enhance the digitalisation of its services and better equip its regional chambers.

Preservation of Democratic Achievements in Tunisia and Strengthening of Civil Society in Electoral Matters

The project supports the participation of civil society in electoral processes, to safeguard their integrity and transparency in the new institutional context. DRI Tunisia provides civil society with analyses of the changes in the electoral legal framework, so as to boost their advocacy efforts for electoral reform. We also produce informative digital content for the public.

Funding Partners

The European Union, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Ifa Zivik

Libya

Events	Participants	Publications	Articles
10	**37**	**1**	**4**

*By Asma Dekna
Programme
Manager*

In 2023, DRI worked diligently to support civil society efforts in improving the regulatory framework of civil society organisations in Libya. The team published an analysis of the regulatory framework, exploring the different layers of international norms, constitutional clauses, decrees, and decisions that continue to shape the regulatory framework. The analysis makes concrete recommendations to local and international actors on how the regulatory framework can be improved. The recommendations were co-drafted with local partners and experts.

We also hosted a series of round tables with various stakeholders and policymakers to discuss the outcomes of the analysis and discuss ways to collaborate in the enhancement of the regulatory framework. During 2023, we continued to provide training and one-to-one coaching to Libyan civil society organisations, to support them in their efforts to advocate for a better regulatory framework.

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local
governance

Democratic
discourse

Sub-Saharan Africa

Events
50

Participants
1,656

Publications
127

Articles
0

Liberia

DRC Congo

Sub-Sahara region

South Africa

- Candidates Together to Act Locally – DRC Congo

- Supporting Domestic Election Observation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (PACONEC) – DRC Congo

- Women and Youth in Democracy Civic Engagement (WYDE) – Sub-Sahara region

- Action for a Holistic Electoral Approach for Democracy (AHEAD) – Liberia

- Enhancing Accountability. Supporting Good Governance - South Africa – South Africa

Thematic Areas

Elections   Justice   **Local governance**   Democratic discourse

Introduction

By Nicola Schmidt
Executive Director

In 2023, we became much more active in Sub-Saharan Africa. The region faces multiple challenges to democratic participation: economic and educational barriers, political instability, military influence on governments and military coups, civil war and violent conflicts, corruption, climate change, and lack of access to facilities, infrastructure, and digitalisation. The region has the world's youngest population, but its governments often alienate young people. Our unique focus has thus been on improving enfranchisement, empowerment, and inclusion of people, especially youth, in democratic participation and decision making. For this, we use DRI's tested approaches on participation, capacity-building, and awareness-raising, and our expertise in elections and election observation.

In a regional project, we focus on youth participation in elections through election observation, including monitoring of discourse on social media, by providing training, support, and expertise to regional election observation and youth networks. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), we have been building on our previous work to support domestic election observation. We have supported the formation of a coalition of civil society organisations for the observation of the December 2023 elections, the first of several scheduled elections in the country, and the deployment of over 13,000 election observers. Through a mentoring programme, we have supported women candidates running the local elections, increasing their chances of being elected. In South Africa, we are working to increase democratic accountability, by supporting institutions and civil society with research on anti-corruption measures and on elections. We worked on the preparation of several other projects in 2023, ranging from providing technical assistance to institutions and international organisations in relation to electoral processes in South Sudan, to working with pan-African civil society on electoral issues. Across all our activities in the region, we tackle disinformation, by monitoring social media and sharing our expertise in this field with our partners.

Addressing the challenges in the region by working with engaged people, especially youth and women, to increase their participation will continue to be our focus in the coming years.

PACONEC: Supporting Domestic Election Observation in the Democratic Republic of Congo

By Laurence Carlier
Country Representative at DRI Sub-Saharan Africa

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has navigated its journey toward democratisation through three major electoral events, in 2006, 2011, and 2018. This progression has been marred by socio-economic challenges, bad governance, embezzlement, and widespread corruption. These issues have resulted in people's withdrawal from public life, xenophobia, and a struggle for survival, aggravated by galloping insecurity and the armed conflict in the eastern region. This has increased poverty and the number of internally displaced people.

The DRC held its general elections in December 2023 against this backdrop. The process suffered from many legal and procedural shortcomings, and in the context of a wide-spread lack of trust among voters, politicians, institutions, media, and civil society. Historically, this situation has led to the contestation of electoral results, the reduced legitimacy of elected officials, and a lack of trust in institutions.

DRI believes that civil society can contribute to the organisation of credible, transparent, and inclusive elections, strengthening democratic culture in the country. For this, we supported the establishment and work of Regard Citoyen, a coalition of Congolese civil society organisations dedicated to election observation and advocacy for electoral reform. In December 2023, we supported the deployment of 13,000 observers, who monitored the voting, counting, and result tabulation, along with the monitoring of media and social media. Additionally, we supported our partners with organisational development, training, and capacity-building, to enhance their sustainability and capabilities.

Main Reports and Activities

Building a Coalition of Congolese Civil Society Organisations

PACONEC facilitated the building of a coalition by bringing together six recognised civil society platforms (REGED, RENOSEC, RODHECIC, RSLF, ECC and CENCO). The project consolidated the synergies of the coalition, and provided member organisations with the knowledge and tools needed for the observation of the electoral process. Moreover, the peer-to-peer exchange of best practises reinforced capacities and solidarity within the coalition.

Supporting the Election Observation Mission Regard Citoyen

With DRI's support, four organisations created the Regard Citoyen election observation mission. To achieve this objective, DRI supported the setting up of a national coordination group, together with 26 provincial coordinators from the coalition and for the observation mission. We also facilitated the recruitment, training, and deployment of more than 450 long-term observers, along with over 13,000 short-term observers.

Monitoring of traditional and social media

The project recruited and supported the training of media monitors, who were members of the partner organisations. Seventeen monitors observed traditional and social media during the electoral campaign, and identified hate speech and gender-based violence, in particular. This was the only media monitoring unit specialised in elections in the DRC.

"The coalition allowed six different organisations to aim for a common goal, common objectives, and to work together for the improvement of the electoral process in DRC."

- Richard Mbombo, Member of RODHECIC

Funding Partners

The European Union, The German Federal Foreign Office

Other Projects

Candidates Together to Act Locally

This project reinforced the capacity of 20 Congolese women running in local elections in two provinces. By facilitating exchanges between the candidates and 10 mentors, DRI applied a "one-to-one buddy relationship" coaching programme, which provided the women candidates with solid expertise in electoral campaign management. Four of the 20 mentees won five-year city councillor mandates.

The Women and Youth in Democracy Civic Engagement (WYDE)

WYDE strives to enhance the participation, empowerment, and inclusion of women and youth in democratic processes globally. Leading the elections-focused Cluster, DRI works with three affiliates and five African partners to strengthen youth political participation in The Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. We focus on enhancing the election observation capacities of our partner networks, including through training.

Enhancing Accountability. Supporting Good Governance in South Africa

DRI partnered with GOPA Worldwide Consultants to implement the EU-funded service contract Technical Assistance to operationalise the EU Capacity Building & Engagement Window of the "Enhancing Accountability" programme in South Africa. This five-year project aims to improve South Africa's public governance through enhanced accountability, democratic engagement and transparency.

Funding Partners

The European Union, The German Federal Foreign Office, The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ)

Asia
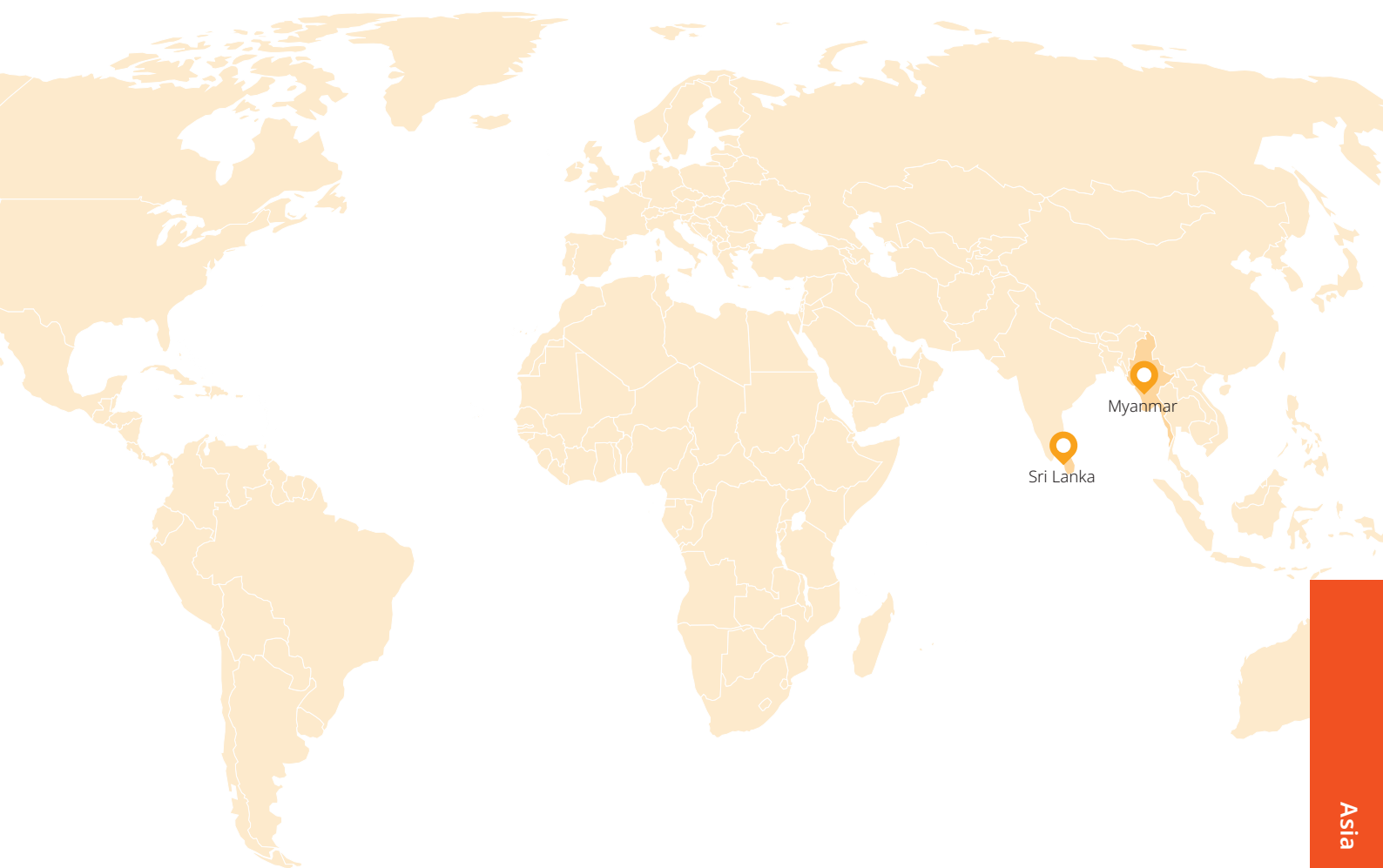
Myanmar

Sri Lanka

📍 Protecting Civic Space in Sri Lanka to Overcome Challenges to Fundamental Freedoms – Sri Lanka

📍 Promoting Peaceful Myanmar through Culture of Inclusive Dialogue – Myanmar

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local
governance

Democratic
discourse

Introduction

By Nicola Schmidt
Executive Director

DRI had to scale down its work in Asia over the past year, due to a lack of funding for our programmes. Our project in Myanmar supporting pro-democracy activists within and outside the country ended, as did our work in Sri Lanka to support independent research and networking and training for democracy actors, with a specific focus on women. Unfortunately, the situations in Pakistan and Sri Lanka have not yet provided more conducive environments for democracy and civic action. Myanmar is mired in a war between the military, which illegally seized power in 2021, and resistance groups. Despite having to take the difficult decision to close our offices in these countries, we remain hopeful to one day continue supporting civil society and government institutions in maintaining democratic gains and ensuring space for civil society.

Sri Lanka

*By Asma Dekna
Programme
Manager*

In 2023, Sri Lanka grappled with the aftermath of a significant economic and political crisis that began in 2022. A proposed "anti-terrorism" bill alarmed human rights advocates and the international community, due to its potential impact on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. The UN Human Rights Committee highlighted severe restrictions on civil liberties, including the use of force against peaceful protesters, civil society groups, and activists. DRI Sri Lanka remained committed, however, to navigating this shrinking civic space and harsh government measures to continue activities.

DRI's project focused on evidence-based activism to protect civic and democratic space. We intervened at the district and provincial levels, launching consultations, organising regional forums with civil activists, and conducting training programmes for rights defenders and media professionals. All our actions were aimed at empowering those actors in defending the fundamental freedoms that are being challenged in Sri Lanka, using national and international mechanisms. DRI also helped its partners provide recommendations for policy reforms.

DRI Sri Lanka also developed a strategic framework aimed at guiding civil society in advocating for progressive reforms. This framework, developed in consultation with the civil society organisations that will implement it, is being used by the NGO Collective, a strategy-driven network comprising diverse rights-based and development actors, to mobilise organisations and activists in their fight against the repressive measures undertaken by the Sri Lankan government (in the content of an anti-terrorism bill and an online safety bill).

The national-level civil society organisations, media outlets, and activists we trained in Sri Lanka closely collaborate with local civil society actors, thus multiplying our efforts to defend fundamental rights and freedoms in the country. Despite these efforts, funding constraints led to the conclusion of our operations in Sri Lanka in 2023.

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local governance

Democratic discourse

Main Reports and Activities

Protecting Civic Space in Sri Lanka to Overcome Challenges to Fundamental Freedoms

Our work in Sri Lanka promoted unity among diverse civil society groups, fostering resilience to safeguard freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. By facilitating strategic collaborations and building the capacities of civil society, we supported local actors in effectively countering threats to these freedoms, improving access to national and international mechanisms, and advocating for improved legislative and administrative responses.

Funding Partner

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Myanmar

By Nicola Schmidt, Executive Director, and Muhammad Nasir, Head of Finance and Administration at DRI Myanmar

Since the military takeover on 1 February 2021, Myanmar's political, economic, and security context has been deteriorating. The Myanmar military has detained, tortured, and imprisoned members of the opposition and resistance groups. Resistance groups are continuing their fight against the military. DRI adapted to the challenging operating context, and continued strengthening a culture of inclusive dialogue in Myanmar, supporting pro-democracy actors through online events, including multi-day training events and workshops on communication, mediation, negotiation skills, pluralism, and federalism.

Our project ended in 2023, after having brought together national and international stakeholders from civil society, academia, and government bodies. We built connections and developed technical capacities to strengthen the diverse voices of civil society actors, political parties, individual politicians, community leaders, youth activist groups, and student movements. Many of the project beneficiaries continue using their acquired skills in various dialogue and advocacy initiatives across the country. We hope that one day they will be able to openly participate in political decision-making in a democratic Myanmar.

Disclaimer: Due to the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021 in Myanmar, and the ongoing repression and violence that has followed, we have not been able to include all the information that this section would provide under normal circumstances. The decision has been made to protect our colleagues and partners.

Thematic Areas

Elections

Justice

Local governance

Democratic discourse

Main Reports and Activities

■ **Promoting Peaceful Myanmar through Culture of Inclusive Dialogue**

DRI contributed to dispute resolution capabilities among civilian political stakeholders, including from political parties and civil society organisations, grassroots movements, universities, and labour unions. The aim was to facilitate political dialogue among different groupings, equipping beneficiaries with skills to build peace, oppose violence, and work towards a democratic Myanmar. In particular, women were included through specific platforms for discussion and dialogue, and young people were equipped with skills to participate and lead community-based dialogues.

Funding Partner

The European Union

Amplifying Impact through Collaboration

Collaboration is at the heart of democratic practice and our approach to defending and supporting democracy worldwide.

DRI builds relationships of trust with many other groups and institutions, allowing us to build capacities and multiply the impact of our research, policy recommendations, and activities.

Here are some examples:

Brazil
We partner with Fundação Getulio Vargas and Agência Lupa to monitor social media in the country. We also bring together national and international researchers and civil society actors to exchange good practices and discuss digital policy recommendations to foster a democratic online public discourse.

Sub-Saharan Africa
We work with regional networks and civil society organisations, providing them with tools and knowledge to observe electoral processes, and to foster a more coordinated and vibrant civil society in the region.

Middle East and North Africa (MENA region)
We built a network of six organisations in Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia to combat online disinformation and hate speech in the MENA region. By building the capacity of the network partners in social media monitoring, our analysis of the region's online landscape was more localised, as were our advocacy efforts addressed at the authorities.

Europe
We brought together key civil society organisations working on the rule of law in the EU to for the exchange of assessments, ideas, and recommendations, and to strategise and enable collective action. We have carried out these exchanges with EU institutions and national governments.

DRI is also part of numerous networks and governmental forums, allowing us to multiply the reach of our policy recommendations and advocacy.

Here is a selection of global networks in which DRI is active:

European Partnership for Democracy: As a member of the European Partnership for Democracy, we work with some 20 organisations from across Europe to support pro-democracy actors across the world.

Global Network on Securing Electoral Integrity: Formed after the first Summit for Democracy, in 2021, and based on United States President Joseph Biden's announcement of an initiative to defend democratic elections, this network brings together leading international actors on elections to advance electoral integrity. DRI is a founding member of the network. We remain active in this platform and cooperate with other members to strengthen norms and standards for democratic elections and electoral integrity, so as to defend and promote democratic elections around the world.

EU Code of Practice on Disinformation: In 2023, DRI joined the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, co-chairing the working groups on elections and generative artificial intelligence. The latter is the first such regulatory group to tackle this new technology in a formal setting, with the cooperation of the EU Commission and platform representatives from TikTok, Meta, Google, and Microsoft.

Nets4Dem: Beginning in 2023, DRI is leading a new initiative to build a pan-European network of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers on democratic innovation. Involving 11 founding organisations, each with a wide-reaching membership, this network already covers over 200 cities, 50 think tanks and universities, and 320 NGOs, active in 38 countries in the region.

We also participate in the following networks:

| Declaration of Principles for Election Observation Group	FairShare	GADN - Gender and Development Network
GISP - Global Interagency Security Forum	Global Democracy Coalition	Team Europe Democracy Network	WEPS – Women's Empowerment Principles

In the Media

euobserver

Democracy — is it in crisis or renaissance? euobserver.com - Is democracy in retreat after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, or is it gaining new momentum? Our Executive Director, **Michael Meyer-Resende**, proposes three points to tilt the balance in favour of democracy.
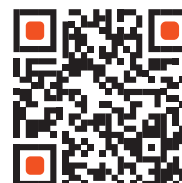
.coda

Grief and conspiracy collide in Russia's "Council of Mothers and Wives"
codastory.com - A Telegram channel run by conspiracy theorists in Russia briefly caught the attention of anti-war protesters. With DRI's support, and based on our research, journalist **Amanda Coakley** writes that grief and conspiracy collide online in this case.

THE JORDAN TIMES

Shboul discusses dangers, opportunities of social media
jordantimes.com - Jordan's Minister of Communications, Faisal Shboul, participated in the national conference "Hate Speech and Misinformation: Impact and Reduction Mechanisms", organised by Hayat Centre-Rased, in cooperation with DRI, as part of our regional Words Matter project.

The Guardian

Poland election: The opposition has won – what happens next?
theguardian.com - Our Research Coordinator, Jakub Jaraczewski, writes that restoring the rule of law won't be easy, but this is the first step.

EURACTIV

Euractive
Our Programme Officer, Lena-Maria Böswald, takes an in-depth look at Twitter's (now X) decision to remove API access, and why researchers and organisations will suffer the most.

Frankfurter Allgemeine
ZEITUNG FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

ChatGPT lies its head off
faz.net - In this article for Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, our Michael Meyer-Resende shows that ChatGPT systematically invents information in "closed domain" fields, where it has little training data. He urges OpenAI and Microsoft to solve this problem (in German).

POLITICO

The race to detect AI can be won
POLITICO - Our Research Coordinator, Jan Nicola Beyer, highlights the need for detection technology to mitigate risks posed by generative AI tools, stressing that regulation alone is insufficient.

هنا لبنان

Launching administrative decentralisation of tourism development in Lebanon
This is Lebanon - Our Country Representative for Lebanon, André Sleiman, writes on how decentralisation is a path to boosting the economy and tourism.

FOLHA DE S.PAULO
★ ★ ★

Far right dominates debate about trans people on Facebook
Folha de S.Paulo - Our analysis of Brazilian Facebook posts about trans people between 2019 and 2023, conducted with the Fundação Getulio Vargas, was covered by this media outlet.

euobserver

Von der Leyen got it wrong on Israel and Gaza
EUobserver - In a personal view of the conflict between Hamas and Israel, our Executive Director explains why he thinks the European Commission's President "blank cheque" for Israel's response after the attacks was a mistake.
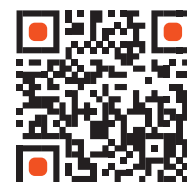
Our Staff

DRI Shareholders

- Andrew Bruce
- Richard Chambers
- Michaela Küfner
- Nils Meyer-Ohlendorf
- Duncan Pickard
- Zsuzsanna Szelényi
- Geoffrey Weichselbaum

DRI Supervisory Board

- Dr. Killian Bälz
- Mikheil Benidze
- Urður Gunnarsdóttir, Chairperson of the Board
- Sameera Mehra
- Ghassan E. Moukheiber

DRI Berlin, Germany – Headquarters

- Wael Abu Anzeh, Programme Coordinator MENA
- Duncan Allen, Digital Democracy Research Associate
- Beatriz Almeida Saab, Digital Democracy Research Officer
- Daniela Alvarado Rincón, Digital Democracy Programme Associate
- Ines Amri, Programme Manager Africa
- Sofia Andersson, Programme Officer Africa
- Jan Nicola Beyer, Digital Democracy Research Coordinator
- Isa Bojaj, Fundraising and Marketing Intern
- Hannah Becker, Manager MENA
- Gizem Bilim, Human Resources and Administration Officer
- Lena-Maria Böswald, Digital Democracy Programme Officer
- Lea Choueifaty, Programme Coordinator MENA
- Adam Cohen, Finance and Controlling Manager
- Şilan Dağlar Göç, Working Student Human Resources and Administration
- Heather Dannyelle Thompson, Manager Digital Democracy Programme
- Austin Davis, Working Student Digital Democracy
- Maliha Fairooz, Business Development Expert
- Sandra Frank-Kaspuhl, Digital Expert
- Saw Gabriel, Finance Officer
- Francesca Giannaccini, Digital Democracy Research Associate
- Deniz Gökce Güzey, Working Student
- Albert Guasch Rafael, Communications Coordinator
- Lorand Gyenge, Programme Finance Coordinator
- Iheb Harbi, Programme Finance Coordinator
- Mariam Humayun, Communications Officer
- Oleksandr Iakymenko, Country Representative Ukraine
- Jakub Jaraczewski, Research Coordinator Rule of Law
- Tobias Kleineidam, Digital Democracy Intern
- Richard Kuchta, Digital Democracy Programme Officer, Policy and Legal Expert
- Selma Kukuruzovic, Finance Manager
- Oumaima Laâraki, Programme Coordinator MENA
- Jonche Manevski, Programme Finance Coordinator

- Sorina Matei, Digital Democracy Programme Coordinator
- Marcel Merle, Director Finance, HR and Admin
- Janine Meyer, Director of HR and Administration
- Laura Meyer, Director of Finance
- Michael Meyer-Resende, Executive Director
- Matteo Miccichè, Communications Officer
- Yousef Musarsaa, Programme Finance Coordinator
- Muhammad Nasir, Financial Management Support
- Luz Emilia Ochoa Ruiz Godoy, Communications Officer
- Cartney Pacheco, Monitoring and Evaluation Programme Coordinator
- Dario Pasquini, Programme Associate Africa
- Nicola Schmidt, Executive Director
- Tracy Shimoli, Digital Democracy Intern
- Nino Tsereteli, Research Officer Rule of Law
- Aysu Uygur, Programme Officer Europe
- Dennis Wenzl, Outreach Officer Europe
- Rieke Wönig, Programme Coordinator Europe
- Gerrit Zauke, Programme Finance Officer
- Oumaima Laâraki, Programme Coordinator MENA
- Paul Zoubkov, Manager Europe

Lebanon

- Dory Abou Jaoude, Progammes Manager
- Hamze Abou Ghoush, Logistics and Admin Assistant
- Rana Asmar, Field Coordinator
- Sara Audi, Finance and Admin Manager
- Michella Chehade, Visual Communication Officer
- Sabine El Hayek, Project and Research Officer
- Elie Haddad, Procurement and Logistics Coordinator
- Youssef Jaber, Finance and Admin Officer
- Jocelyne Khoury, Project and MEL Officer
- Marwan Kotob, Project Coordinator
- Mostapha Raad, Content Production and Media Relations Coordinator
- Fadia Shinder, Project Coordinator
- Andre Sleiman, Country Representative

Libya

- Asma Dekna, Programme Manager
- Walid EL Rageiag, Finance and Administration Manager

Sri Lanka

- Rebeka Alexander, Finance Officer
- Pawan Kalugala, Social Media and Communication Officer
- Aingkaran Kugathasan, Programme Manager
- D V Isuri Lakshani, Programme Intern
- Prageeth D Liyanaarachchi, Project Coordinator
- Thinesh Patkunalingam, Finance Intern
- Sajani Uthpala Ekanayake, Human Resources and Administration Associate

Tunisia

Some names have been removed from this list due to security concerns

- Imen Abidi, Finance and Administration Officer
- Bilel Ayari, Operations Coordinator
- Alix Arquillière, Country Representative
- Mohamed Wassim B'chir, Director of Finance and Administration
- Ramzi Ben Brahim, Logistics Assistant
- Ismail Ben Khalifa, Project Coordinator
- Mohamed Abderahim Ben Salem, Finance Coordinator
- Ferdaous Ben Sassi, Project Manager
- Mariem Boujelbene, Project Assistant
- Hervé De Baillenx, MENA Representative
- Rahma Dhieb, Project Officer
- Yasmine Hamrouni, Communications Coordinator Amel Hanchi, Finance Coordinator
- Wafa Hmadi, Project Coordinator
- Baligh Kouki, Infographist
- Amira Kridagh, Project Coordinator
- Josselin Leon, Country Representative
- Haifa Mansouri, Project Coordinator
- Emna Mouelhi, Project Coordinator
- Nadine Romdhani, MEL Officer
- Mejda Souissi, Project Officer
- Khawla Tanfouri, Procurement and Logistics Assistant Emna Tebourbi, Project Officer
- Amine Thabet, Legal Expert

Democratic Republic of Congo

- Maxime Somba Akemi, Programme Assistant
- Laurence Carlier, Country Representative
- Mbengho Mbonetuabite Dan, Social Media Monitoring Coordinator
- Bibiche Kakesedi Muzeke, Communication Officer
- Erick Kolela Mukendi, Senior IT Assistant
- Baruti Munda Simamba, Senior Programme Officer
- Maurice Nkisi Kiangala, Admin and Financial Assistant
- Raphael Tiemoko Ouattara, Senior Electoral Expert/Project Coordinator
- Fatoumata Toure, Administrative and Financial Manager

Myanmar

We thank all members of our team in Myanmar for their hard work. Their names have not been included here for their own protection, but we carry their achievements with us every day.

Our Finances

Income by Funding Partner

Other governments or
government-affiliated bodies
106,416 €

2%

2%

5%

Other foundations
301,989 €

The German Corporation for
International Cooperation (GIZ)
82,040 €

1%

3%

Porticus
174,011 €

7%

The Ministry of Foreign
Affairs of the Netherlands
475,544 €

8%

Stiftung Mercator
530,182 €

**Total income:
EUR 6,682,960**

100%

26%

European Union
1,753,350€

47%

German Federal Foreign Office
3,160,464 €
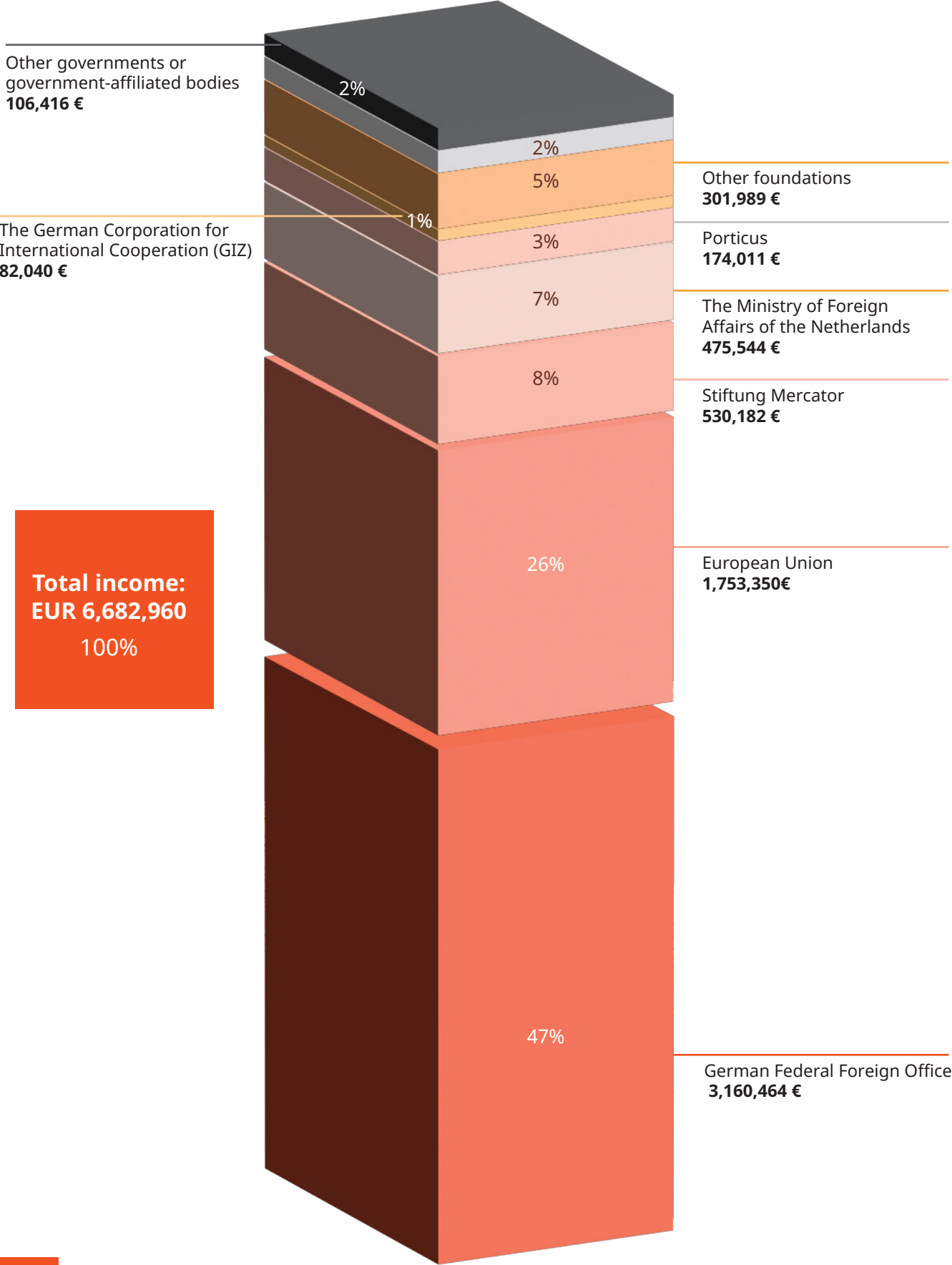
Expenditure by Programme

Programme	Percentage	Amount
DR Congo	28%	1,928,295
Lebanon	14%	920,126€
Digital Democracy	13%	880,219€
Tunisia	12%	792,036€
Cross-country MENA	9%	629,291€
Cross-country Europe	6%	399,356€
Cross-country Africa	2%	138,411€
Moldova	2%	124,647€
Myanmar	2%	120,706€
Libya	1%	87,417€
Sri Lanka	1%	49,841€
Ukraine	<1%	8,141€
Other	<1%	32,757€
Administrative costs	10%	680,114€

Total expenditure: EUR 6,791,356

Turnover

Grants (€) **Service contracts (€)**

Total (€)

2016 3,637,043€ | 90% 399,955€ 4,036,998€

2017 4,705,803€ | 93% 378,523€ 5,084,326€

2018 3,290,367€ | 85% 560,753€ 3,851,120€

2019 5,250,745€ | 95% 293,994€ 5,544,748€

2020 5,103,978€ | 95% 284,546€ 5,388,524€

2021 5,625,837€ | 93% 465,451€ 6,091,288€

2022 6,073,921€ | 93% 483,144€ 6,557,064€

2023 6,278,966€ | 94% 382,412€ 6,682,960€

Our Partners

Funding Partners

- Civitates
- Engagement Global
- The European Union
- The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ)
- The German Federal Foreign Office
- Ifa Zivik
- The International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway
- Open Society Foundations
- Porticus
- Stiftung Mercator

Programme Partners in Europe

- Amnesty International
- Carnegie Europe
- The Centre for Policies and Reforms - Moldova
- The Center of Policy and Legal Reform
- Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES)
- The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties)
- Civil Society Europe
- Coglobal
- Commissie Meijers
- The Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe
- Demos Helsinki
- Electionwatch.eu
- Eurocities
- The European Center for Press and Media Freedom
- The European Civic Forum
- The European Commission – Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
- The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)
- The European Implementation Network (EIN)
- The European Implementation Network (EIN)
- The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions
- The European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)
- The European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE)
- The European Policy Centre (EPC)

- The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)
- The EU Media Advocacy Group
- The Finnish Rule of Law Centre
- Forum Transregionale Studien (FTS)
- The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ)
- Good Lobby Profs
- The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
- The Hungarian Helsinki Committee
- IFDT, University of Belgrade
- Institut Royale des Relation Internationales (Egmont)
- The International Federation for Human Rights
- Open Source Politics (OSP)
- The Reanimation Package of Reforms Coalition
- Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe (RARE)
- Resilio
- Ruleoflaw.pl
- The Stefan Batory Foundation
- Team Europe Democracy (TED)
- The Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA)
- Transparency International EU
- Verfassungsblog
- The World Justice Project

Sri Lanka

- The CSO Collective

Lebanon

- Akkar For Development (AND)
- Al Midan
- The Beity Association
- The Development For People and Nature Association (DPNA)
- Engagement Global
- Environment for Life (EFL)
- Expertise France
- Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas (FIIAPP)
- The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ)
- The Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace (LFPCP)
- The Smart Municipalities Academy (SMA)
- Sustain the World (STW)
- Tamadon
- TERRE Liban
- Tiro Association For Arts

Libya

- *Due to security concerns, we cannot list our local partners in Libya.*

Middle East and North Africa - Regional

- Alhayat Center – Rased
- The Institute of Press and Information Sciences (IPSI)
- The Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA)
- Maharat Foundation
- Mourakiboun
- The Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA)

Tunisia

- Global Institute 4 Transitions (GI4T)
- Mourakiboun
- Munathara
- The Tunisian Association of Alternative Media (ATMA)

Sub-Saharan Africa

- The Center for Democratic Development (CDD)
- Gambia Participants (GP)
- The Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON)
- National Election Watch (NEW)
- Yiaga Africa
- Réseau national d'observation et de la surveillance des élections au Congo (RENOSEC)
- Rien-Sans-les-Femmes (RSLF)
- Réseau Gouvernance économique et Démocratie (REGED)
- Réseau des Organisations de Droits Humains et d'Education Civique d'Inspiration Chrétienne (RODHECIC)
- Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO)
- Eglise du Christ au Congo (ECC)