

Statewatch

Activity report 2023



Publication information

Published by Statewatch, September 2024

This is a truncated version of our annual report and accounts, which are available [here](#).

Statewatch produces and promotes critical research, policy analysis and investigative journalism to inform debates, movements and campaigns for civil liberties, human rights and democratic standards. We began operating in 1991 and are based in London.

Registered UK charity number: 1154784. Registered UK company number: 08480724. Registered charity and company name: The Libertarian Research & Education Trust. Registered office: Statewatch, MayDay Rooms, 88 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH, UK.

statewatch.org

(+44) (0) 203 393 8366

c/o MayDay Rooms
88 Fleet Street
London EC4Y 1DH
UK



Support our work by making a donation

Scan the QR code or visit:

statewatch.org/donate

Join our mailing list

statewatch.org/about/mailling-list

Contents

Introduction	4
Strengthen civil society's access to information	6
Expose and challenge new means of surveillance, coercion and control	7
Build a more sustainable and more effective organisation.....	8
Income and expenditure.....	9
How you can support Statewatch.....	11

Introduction

Civil liberties in an era of crisis and turmoil

“It has been said that history repeats itself. This is perhaps not quite correct; it merely rhymes,” the Austrian psychoanalyst Theodor Reik [once wrote](#). At a time of growing support for parties and movements of the extreme right, and the adoption of their ideas by mainstream political parties; rising geopolitical tension between the world’s most powerful states; outright war and military conflict; flagrant racism and xenophobia; and growing economic inequality, it is sobering to think that the 2020s may rhyme with the 1920s.

It is in this context that European states, and “the west” more broadly, are seeking to define themselves in opposition to their geopolitical foes – primarily Russia and China. Both these countries have vastly different forms of government to those of European states, marked by a disturbing level of state control over both individual and collective activities, and brutal human rights violations. Nevertheless, events in Europe increasingly appear to suggest that the differences between the “old continent” and its current rivals are of degree, rather than kind. Europe has plenty of its own authoritarian tendencies, and these are increasingly coming to the surface.

The most obvious and longstanding example is that of Hungary, where the far-right *Fidesz* government has been in power for over a decade. But Italy is now governed by a coalition of the far-right, with a prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, whose political life began in neo-fascist movements. Meloni, in turn, apparently forged close links with former UK prime minister Rishi Sunak, whose governing programme was largely based on trying to appease the most right-wing elements of the Conservative Party. Meanwhile, in France and Germany – the EU’s two most powerful states – the far-right is increasingly popular with the electorate. Examples abound within and without the EU, across the European continent, and beyond.

Predictions for the European Parliament elections consistently show a substantial increase in support for parties explicitly opposed to universal rights and freedoms. At the same time, amongst EU institutions and member states there is a broad consensus that forging alliances with and funding authoritarian leaders abroad is a price worth paying to halt the arrival of unwanted migrants and refugees, a policy goal that is also seeing increasing restrictions on and repression of those defending migrant and refugee rights, and those saving lives in the Mediterranean and Aegean. The ongoing attempts to delegitimise protest movements – for racial justice, action against climate change, or in solidarity with Palestine – including by painting them as extremist or even terrorist, has made the political colours of many European governments increasingly clear.

The claims advanced by European governments that they are steadfast supporters of human rights, civil liberties and democratic standards – an idea often bundled up in the phrase “European values” – is starting to ring hollow to a growing number of people. It is likely to become increasingly so for as long as governments that claim to support those values continue to undermine them domestically, and through the influence they exert over the institutions of the EU and other supranational fora. In this context, the role of an independent, critical and contentious civil society, understood in the broadest possible sense – a civil society of associations, organisations, trade unions, campaign groups, journalists, lawyers, researchers and beyond – becomes more important than ever.

Throughout 2023 we continued to support that vision of civil society. Our core tasks of reporting, documentation and analysis – focusing on police powers, border controls, state secrecy, surveillance and security technologies – have supported campaigns and movements seeking to defend and extend the values and principles that are being actively undermined by governments across the continent.

We remain a widely-used and well-respected resource: our website received almost 170,000 visits over the course of the year, our work was cited in the press more than once per fortnight, and at least 18 other civil society organisations or initiatives have publicly-cited our work. We were closely involved in projects and activities undertaken by our networks, and participated in a wide range of events that helped to disseminate our work and foster the development of new ideas and projects. Our staff, trustees and contributors can be immensely proud of what we have achieved in 2023, and we are grateful to all those who supported our work, financially or otherwise.

Nevertheless, there remains much that we can do to improve, both with regard to the work we produce, and how we produce it. Some of those improvements began in 2023: at the end of the year, we employed our first ever member of staff to work on solely on communications, which in 2024 will change the way our work is publicly presented. This will help us to disseminate the findings of our research and reporting in clearer and more accessible ways, broadening our audience and aiding their understanding of our work.

We still have much to do in terms of working more closely within our networks and with organisations and associations of people at the sharp end of state power to gain a better understanding of what it is they want and need from our work. This will require increased coordination and cooperation across groups and countries, and will require us taking more time to explore topics and ideas before diving into research and writing. The increased income we have enjoyed in 2023, which we aim to see continue in 2024 and beyond, will help us with this. This will also make it possible for us to achieve the more mundane, but crucial, objective of increasing staff remuneration and conditions to a level that ensures we can recruit and retain people over the long-term – something we have made substantial progress with in recent years, but on which we still have much to do.

Ultimately, we also need to gain a better understanding of how civil society can work together in an increasingly repressive political environment to defend and, in the longer-term, extend the rights and freedoms that everyone in society should be able to exercise and enjoy. Our part in that struggle is to conduct research and investigations into policies and practices that undermine those rights and freedoms, and to oppose them through campaigning and advocacy alongside others. In the years to come, we will build on our existing knowledge, connections and practices to do that work even more effectively.

Chris Jones
Executive Director

This is a truncated version of our annual report and accounts, which are available [here](#).

Objective 1

Strengthen civil society's access to information

139 news articles and 17 in-depth analyses

In 2023 we published 139 news articles (an average of more than two per week) and 17 in-depth analyses. These were written by our staff, members of the *Statewatch* contributors group, or produced in partnership with other organisations, and provided a vital resource for activists, researchers, journalists, civil society organisations, and others. Over the year, the news section of our website received almost 140,000 hits.

135+ official documents made public

Along with those articles we made more than 135 official documents (primarily from the Council of the EU) public, providing access to key primary sources on policy-making and legislative discussions.

31 citations in 28 media outlets

Our work and staff were cited in at least 31 articles, podcasts and documentaries produced by 28 different media outlets around the world, an average of more than once per fortnight. These included *El País* (Spain), *BBC World Service* (global), *The Guardian* (UK), *i* (UK) and *la Repubblica* (Italy).

18 public citations by civil society organisations

Our work was cited in public reports by at least 18 civil society organisations including *Border Violence Monitoring Network*, *Cairo Institute for Human Rights*, *EuroMed Rights*, *European Digital Rights*, *European Council on Refugees and Exiles*, *ProAsyl* and the *Transnational Institute*.

2 citations in institutional publications

Algorithmic persecution in Turkey's post-coup crackdown: the FETO-Meter system (published in 2022), was cited in the UK government's country policy and information note on Turkey, written to inform decision-making on asylum applications; and *Europe's techno-borders* was cited by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Objective 2

Expose and challenge new means of surveillance, coercion and control

4 in-depth reports

We published five in-depth investigative reports in 2023:

- [Telling the story of EU border militarization](#)
- [Europe's techno-borders](#)
- [Access denied: Secrecy and the externalisation of EU migration control](#)
- [Frontex and interoperable databases: knowledge as power?](#)

1 guide for activists

In partnership with *European Digital Rights*, we also published [a guide](#) for activists and others on how to request their personal data from EU policing agency Europol. The agency has long gathered information on political and activist organisations, with it more recently taking an interest in so-called “environmental extremism”, making data subject access requests a powerful tool for understanding more about police surveillance of political activity, and a means for seeking redress.

2 public events

We organised two online public events in 2023:

- [Activists and NGOs under watch! Are you in Europol's databases?](#) (in partnership with *European Digital Rights*)
- [Surveillance technology and artificial intelligence: what impact for people on the move?](#) (in partnership with *EuroMed Rights*)

We also organised a workshop at the *Privacy Camp* conference in Brussels, with speakers from civil society organisations (*European Digital Rights*, *Fair Trials* and the *European Sex Workers Rights Alliance*), the European Data Protection Supervisor, and Saskia Bricmont, an MEP for the Greens group.

1 evidence submission

We submitted a joint response to a European Commission public consultation on a proposal to set up a “security-related information sharing system between frontline officers in the EU and key partner countries.” Nine other organizations and two individuals contributed to and signed the submission. The proposal was subsequently scrapped.

4 parliamentary questions

Over the course of the year four sets of parliamentary questions were submitted by MEPs based on our work, relating to our [report on secrecy and the externalisation of migration control](#), and the activities and development of Europol.

Objective 3

Build a more sustainable and more effective organisation

Key developments and impact

2 new funding partners

In 2023 we received funding for the first time from the *Fund for Global Human Rights*, to undertake research on the repression of refugee and migrant rights activism. We also signed a grant agreement with the *European AI & Society Fund*, to undertake work in 2024 on AI tools being developed by EU agencies and institutions for policing, migration and criminal justice purposes.

Ongoing focus on staff learning and development

In 2023, in response to a request, one member of staff attended a training course on good practices in volunteer management. An internal training session was also organised on digital security practices. Materials and resources provided during training courses are made available to all staff and volunteers for reference. We also hosted a Mercator Foundation fellow between October and December, who was a significant asset to our small team, assisting with our research and writing as well as conducting their own research on sexualised border violence.

1 meeting of the contributors group

In October, 10 members of the *Statewatch* contributors group met online to discuss developments in countries across Europe, and to consider priorities for future work. Throughout the year, three analyses and 10 news articles were authored by contributors. A contributor also provided visualisations of data on deportation flights coordinated by EU border agency Frontex.

Increase in followers, web users and subscribers

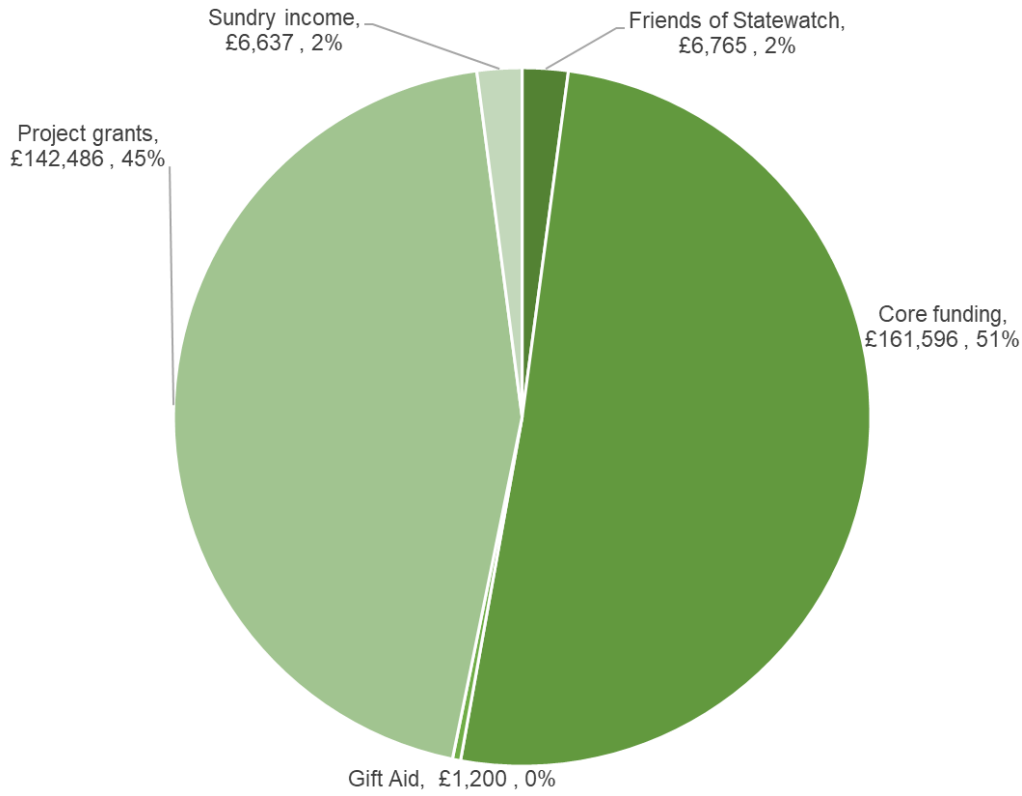
The total number of visits to our website grew by 3% in 2023 (to a total of 168,232), despite significant unavoidable website downtime throughout the year. Our social media following on X (formerly Twitter) grew by some 900 new followers, and the number of subscribers to our mailing list increased by over 100, to a total of 11,114.

Working in coalition

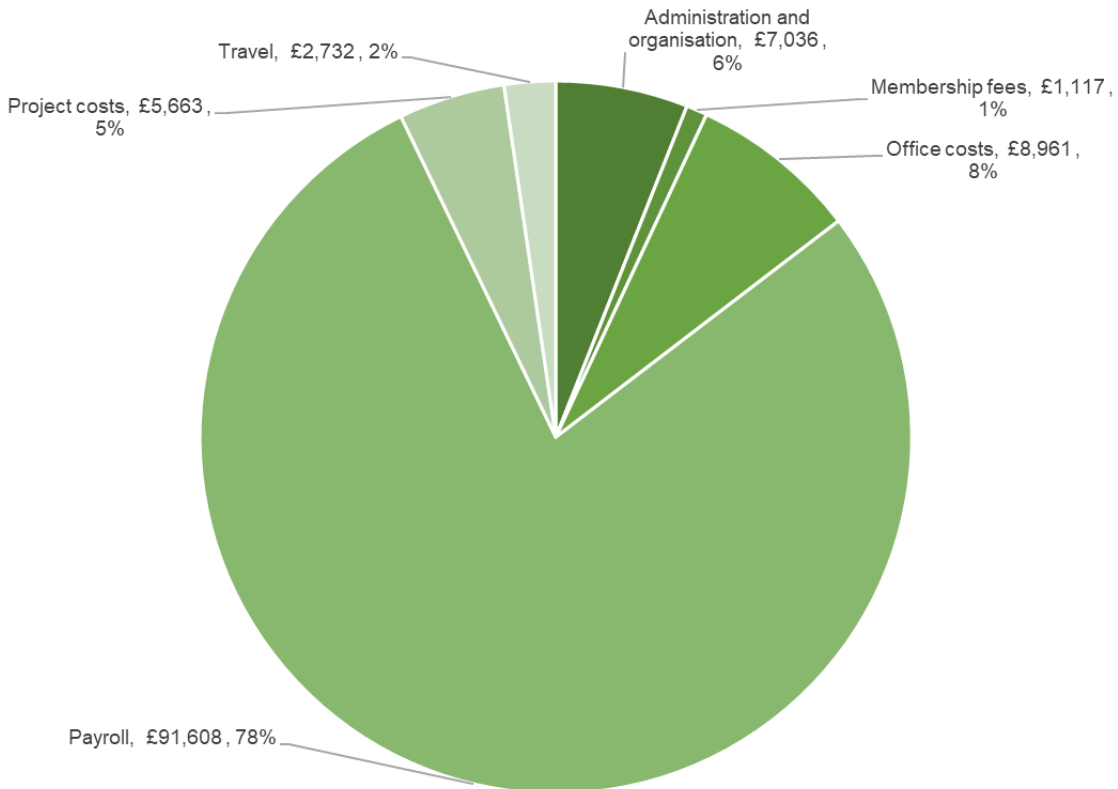
Throughout the year, we worked with the *Protect Not Surveil* coalition to seek amendments to the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act that would protect the rights of asylum-seekers and migrants. We were re-elected to the co-presidency role on the administrative council of *Migreurop*, a Euro-African network of human rights organisations, activists and researchers working on migration policy. We attended a number of meetings throughout the year, as well as a webinar on the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum that attracted almost 500 attendees. We continued to work with *European Digital Rights* on topics such as the AI Act, Europol and police powers. Our Director, Chris Jones, remained part of the *Decolonising Digital Rights* project, which ended with the publication of [A vision for digital justice organising in Europe](#) in October.

Income and expenditure

Income



Expenditure



Our total income in 2023 amounted to £318,684, while our expenditure was £117,117. This made it possible for the board of trustees to approve a 10% pay rise at the start of the year, the third in three years, as part of a longer-term plan to increase staff wages to a level comparable to those of other organisations in the sector, and to ensure the sustainability of the organisation with regard to future recruitment. Despite this increase, we continue to seek new funding partners to ensure that we have the resources needed to implement our strategic plan for 2022 to 2026. Due to a lack of dedicated resources, in 2023 we were unable to pursue certain activities foreseen in the plan, as detailed in our full annual report.

The increased income we acquired in 2023 meant that we could, for the first time, recruit a member of staff to work solely on communications. Our Communications Worker was appointed in December and was due to start with us at the beginning of 2024, when they will develop a communications strategy and develop a new visual identity for the organisation. The successful development and implementation of that strategy is a key objective in our 2022-26 strategic plan, and will allow us to increase the reach, engagement with, and use of our work by different audiences.

We are grateful for the support received in 2023 from:

- *EuroMed Rights*
- *Friends of Statewatch*
- *Funders Initiative for Civil Society*
- *Garden Court Chambers*
- *Global Fund for Human Rights*
- *Open Society Foundations*

How you can support Statewatch

Become a Friend of Statewatch

Friends of Statewatch provide regular donations to support our work. This gives us a stable, regular income that we can depend on, use to plan for the long-term and keeps our work independent.

In return, Friends of Statewatch receive a twice-yearly newsletter; advance invitations to workshops and events; and know that they are crucial to the work of Statewatch.

Become a Friend of Statewatch online at:

statewatch.org/donate

Or contact us if you'd like to talk about donating another way.

Phone (+44) (0) 203 393 8366

Email comms [at] statewatch.org

Post c/o MayDay Rooms
88 Fleet Street
London EC4Y 1DH
UK

Become a contributor

Our work is greatly enhanced by our network of volunteer contributors across Europe. If you would like to contribute material to Statewatch, please read [our guide for contributors online](#) and get in touch.

Tell us what you think

We are always looking to improve our work and would love to know what you think about what we do. If you have any questions, comments, ideas or suggestions, please feel free to get in touch by email, phone or post:

office@statewatch.org

(+44) (0) 203 393 8366

c/o MayDay Rooms
88 Fleet Street
London EC4Y 1DH
UK

statewatch.org



Support our work by making a donation

Scan the QR code or visit:

statewatch.org/donate

Join our mailing list

statewatch.org/about/mailling-list