

Annual Report 2023

European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity

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Staff during 2023:

Board

Björn von Sydow
Daša Šilović
Kido Koenig

President
Board Member
Secretary General

Staff

Meriem Hammami
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MENA & News Service
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Introduction

Dear friends, Dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that we present to you the Annual Report for 2023 for the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity. In a world marked by geopolitical challenges, our commitment to fostering unity and collaboration remains steadfast. The ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the accelerating EU integration processes of various countries, election victories for democratic forces in Poland, and right-wing populist surges in the Netherlands – to name a few - all pose different challenges that merit close co-operation between social democratic and progressive forces throughout Europe.

During 2023, the EFDS' focus moved also towards updating the functioning of the organisation. Key structures of the Forum were re-installed, such as quarterly Steering Committee Meetings and frequent Board Meetings. We also continued the yearly Annual Meeting and conducted a Fact-Finding campaign in Georgia.

The EFDS takes pride in its role as a networking platform, creating synergies between social democratic foundations and parties in- and outside the EU, and fostering research and knowledge dissemination on the fast-changing contexts in which our members work.

As we reflect on the achievements of 2023, we extend our gratitude to the individuals, parties, and organizations that have contributed to the success of the EFDS. In the coming year, we look forward to further strengthening our partnerships, expanding our reach, and continuing the important work of promoting social democracy and unity. Thank you for your ongoing support and dedication to the values that define our social democratic network.

Sincerely,

Also on behalf of the our President Björn von Sydow and Board member Daša Šilović,

Kido Koenig

Secretary General
European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity

Key 2023 Highlights

Information Dissemination:

Throughout 2023, the EFDS has remained active in spreading information on political developments that are of interest to the European social democratic community, through its website www.europeanforum.net. We continued our bi-weekly Newsflash and informed our network through election and network updates.

Networking Activities:

The EFDS has actively organized networking activities, providing a space for foundations and parties to collaborate, share insights, and build relationships. Network meetings such as our Annual Meeting (in Sarajevo, November 2023), the Korčula School (organised with the CEE Gender Network) and the quarterly Steering Committee Meetings are of great importance to bring a variety of people together and discuss key aspects of our work.

Fact-Finding Georgia

In October 2023, the EFDS organised a Fact-Finding Mission to Georgia. This long-requested research mission was of great importance to spread knowledge on Georgia's progressive and social democratic politics. A concluding report has been disseminated in our network afterwards.

Survey

In 2023, the EFDS organised a Survey among its members to gain knowledge on the proceedings of the platform, and especially efforts within its News Service. Knowledge from the survey had caused great insight towards new opportunities and directions for the future of some of the core aspects of the EFDS.

Online 'Election Updates'

Across 2023, the EFDS organised various online 'election update' sessions, some publicly streamed, some for invitees-only. These online sessions were watched reasonably well and have the potential to bring new audiences towards the work of our social democratic and progressive community. Webinars were held on elections in [Poland](#) (12 October), [Egypt](#) (5 December) and [Turkey](#) (24 May). We've also shared physical sessions in the Netherlands on [Serbia](#) (7 December) and [Ukraine](#) (19 October).

Membership Expansion

In 2023, the EFDS has had several discussions with various European parties and foundation to expand its membership. These discussions will continue in 2024. The EFDS is very excited to welcome Društvo Progresiva from Slovenia as a new steerco member from 2024 onwards after a long-standing relationship and fruitful discussions throughout 2023. Positive conversations were also held with Polish social democratic foundations, and talks with these towards joining the EFDS will continue in 2024.

The EFDS in 2023

2023 was marked by various challenges for EFDS - in several areas.

Background

The role of the EFDS has changed solidly since its inception in the 1990s. At the time, it was an association of social democratic politicians and foundations to quickly undertake working visits and Fact-Finding missions. This was particularly relevant towards the "Big Bang" EU accession of 2004, where many links were made with later members of the S&D group. Although the EFDS always retained this role, the organization also became increasingly bureaucratized. The EFDS became important in writing various publications, and much of its work came to lie in the "News Service" - a broad collection of documentation and news coverage of non-EU countries in the Eastern Partnership, the Western Balkans and the MENA region. Over the years, this strategy somewhat diminished the relevance of the EFDS. EFDS' publications on its site www.europeanforum.net have sometimes not been sufficiently reached by the European social democratic audience.

In addition, the momentum in the EU accession process stalled sharply in recent decades due to the stalling of accession negotiations in the Western Balkans. On the financial front as well, this has meant that the EFDS' clout has not grown along with that of other political foundations and partnerships, and has even diminished in recent years.

Renewed course

In 2023, the EFDS set up a new course, in consultation with its board and Steering Committee. The platform should again become a central place for networking between social democrats inside and outside the EU, focused on the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. Avoiding duplication is of great importance here. The Platform - as in the 1990s and 00s - will become an advance post in network development and knowledge building on potential new EU members - an important role as EU accession processes seem to accelerate under the geopolitical realities post-February 2022. In addition, the scale of the "News Service" is being greatly revised. This is also happening partly under financial pressure - the project of this with the Olof Palme International Center from 2019-2022, was not renewed and the EFDS has not succeeded in finding new sources for it.

The role of the Foundation of European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is of great value here. They have become a focal point for dozens of European political foundations, and also publish several studies. The EFDS will further align its News Service with the work of FEPS in 2024 to avoid duplication. The relations of both organizations are good and in 2024 there will be further discussions on what aspects of network development and research the EFDS can cover compared to FEPS.

In 2023, the EFDS renewed and strengthened several aspects of its organisation.

- First, the quarterly meetings with the Steering Committee were reinstated. In these meetings, representatives of the various EFDS member organisations come together and discuss opportunities and the course of the EFDS.

- Second, the board was strengthened with the highly experienced Daša Šilović from the CEE Gender Network. The EFDS looks to adding another board member in 2024.
- Third, the EFDS is in talks with several political foundations within the EU to join the steering committee platform, which includes becoming a paying member. This has at least resulted in the participation of the Slovenian Social Democratic Foundation Društvo Progresiva to the steering committee of the EFDS. Close talks were also held with two Polish foundations – these will continue in 2024. This is also the case for other actors – the EFDS will sharply check opportunities to diversify its member base.
- Fourth, the EFDS launched a large survey that collected opinions and feedback from the target group of the Forum. The knowledge from this survey is very important for the further development of the platform and has mostly informed the ‘renewed course’ in the paragraph above.
- Finally, the EFDS has moved to strengthen its contribution structure, agreeing with Steering Committee members that contribution will be paid earlier in the year, that comprehensive co-operation agreements will be drafted, and that the co-operation will be focused on multi-year partnerships, with the possibility of yearly evaluation.

Activities and milestones in 2023

In addition, the EFDS continued aspects of its work with a stronger focus on network development and avoiding duplication among political foundations in Europe.

First, in August 2023 the Korčula School was organized in cooperation with the CEE Gender Network, notably main organizer Daša Silovic, where very many dignitaries from all over Europe were present for a multi-day conference. The FEDS was also present here with online participation of Kido Koenig in a panel on capacity building and an opening speech by Björn von Sydöw, the President of the EFDS. In addition, the EFDS contributed financially to translation at the event. [We also shared online footage of the event afterwards via YouTube.](#)

Second, the EFDS organized the "Fact-Finding Georgia" in October 2023. In line with the Steering Committee's desire for the EFDS to once again become a forward post in potential EU members, a visit to Georgia was very important. During the multi-day fact-finding mission there was participation from fellow organizations from Sweden, Germany and Great Britain. This increased synergy, knowledge and network sharing around the context of Georgian politics within our organizations. More on this below.

Third, the EFDS also organized again the "Annual Meeting" again – this time in cooperation with FEPS and its "Friends of the Western Balkans" project. This took place in November 2023 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. This networking meeting is always of great value to have all partners physically meet and discuss plans and strategy for 2024. More on this below as well.

Fourth, the EFDS organised again the "Promoting Inclusion and Tackling Inequalities in the Western Balkans - Rights of Minorities" program In addition to this regional project providing an important impetus to LGBTIQ+ inclusion in the Western Balkans, the EFDS also

strengthened its relationship with Labour UK (the partner organization) as part of this project. More on this below as well.

Lastly, on November 10 and 11, we attended the PES congress in Malaga with the EFDS. Here we were able to have several bilateral meetings with parties which are not yet members, especially the PSOE (Spain) and the Gramsci Center (Italy), as well as current members and partners, including the Belarusian opposition and politicians, scholars and activists in the European social democratic family.

Annual Meeting 2023 in Sarajevo

The 25th of November, 2023, marked the Annual Meeting of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity. During the meeting, which was held in Sarajevo, we touched upon different topics with a large group of members of the Forum. We started the day with a discussion on trainings and discussed how we can improve the synergies between international foundations and partners. Hereafter we talked about the results of the EFDS Fact-Finding mission in Georgia and the intended Fact-Finding mission to Ukraine. We closed off the day with a session on the priorities and goals of the EFDS. All members of the Forum took the floor to present their plans for the upcoming year.

The Annual Meeting is a key moment for colleagues among European foundations to discuss ideas and to find co-operation towards the new year. We will continue these yearly meetings then also in 2024.

The Annual Meeting was organised together with FEPS Friends of the Western Balkans. This was considered a success, as both networks overlap in many senses and we could greatly diminish logistical and financial costs by organising it together, which is why we intend to continue this cooperation.

To get an impression of the meeting, please take a look at the photo's below.



Fact-Finding Mission: Georgia

In end-October, a European Forum of Democracy and Solidarity (EFDS) delegation of seven people visited Georgia. The group consisted of members of parliaments from different states in Europe and political foundation representatives. The focus was mainly on Georgia's foreign policy, fulfilment of EU commission recommendations, conversations with and assessing the relations between civil society actors and political parties. Moreover, our delegation assessed the key challenges with regard to the 2024 parliamentary elections taking place in October.

The importance of our visit

The EFDS needs to engage in knowledge-building on challenges Georgia is facing regarding their democratic development. Whereas the country initially made important steps towards becoming a full democracy, progress has slowed or even reversed in some areas. In the past decade, it has become increasingly difficult for opposition, activists and NGOs in the country to operate in the civic space. State encroachment on governmental institutions, the media and security forces as well as election malpractices have caused distrust in the government and led to large-scale protests, notably in March 2023. Normalisation of relations with Russia have caused further concern about the commitment to both democratic values and transatlantic allegiances. At the time of the EFDS visit Georgia was still bidding to gain EU candidate status which they achieved in December 2023. If fulfilled, the strict conditions for becoming a member-state could steer Georgia away from Russia, towards democratisation.

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has solidified the belief amongst parts of the Georgian public that appeasement is the best strategy to prevent a war with Russia. The conflict has further securitised the Georgian political discourse that was already heavily focused on the relationship with and potential threat of Russia. Disagreements about security issues are an especially important source of contention between GD and UNM. They have led to further polarisation and had a negative effect on Georgia's democratisation trajectory.

Another important part of the mission was to establish relations with organisations in Georgia. Various social democratic and progressive foundations are present within the country and could benefit from network-building. The EFDS visited several of such organisations to assess whether collaborations in the future are possible. The main goal is to foster co-operation between EFDS organisations and set up projects in Georgia that help progressive actors to tackle the domestic socio-political challenges.

Findings and recommendations

The political trajectory of the governing Georgian Dream (GD) party is important to understand the current political situation in Georgia. Over the past years the party has moved away from its socially oriented policies towards a more [repressive](#), power-seeking strategy. The 'foreign agents law' is an infamous example but there are many other examples where political institutions are hollowed out by the governing party.

The legitimacy of Georgian politics is rather low due to the role of opaque funding streams, vested business interest and personal feuds. The entry barrier for new parties seeking to challenge bipolar 'status quo' political set-up – with GD and UNM as main parties – is quite

high. However, if a third force in politics were to emerge, it could lead to more political pluralism and cross-partisan legislature. Additionally, there is currently a lack of communication between CSOs and political parties. If improved, it could help new political parties gain institutional knowledge and increase mobilisation and backing.

Georgia's civil society has also faced increasing pressures. Although the civic space is prosperous, it has faced sustained attacks from the Georgian government which are especially harmful to vulnerable communities such as the LGBTQI+ people. The EU should monitor for violations of minorities and tie them to consequences in regard of Georgia's EU accession procedure.

The media landscape in Georgia is largely controlled by the governing party and used to promote their ideas. There are worrying signs that it does not function the way it should in a full-fledged democracy. Investing in a pluralistic, non-partisan media landscape and independent journalism is considered key to combatting the political polarisation and establishing democratic foundations.

In October 2024, parliamentary elections take place in Georgia. It will be an important moment for the country in several respects. Close monitoring of election conduct will reveal the direction the Georgian government takes in regard to the strict requirements for EU accession. GD will face off against its main rival, the United National Movement (UNM). The two parties are bitter rivals and base their identity on opposition against the other. The elections will be an important moment to gauge the political polarisation in the country, and will be followed closely by the EFDS as well.

Regional projects – bringing foundations and parties together

Throughout 2023, the EFDS has continuously tried to find synergies among members, resulting in joint projects and important moments of network-building. This is fully in line with the results of the Survey we conducted among the EFDS' members. In this chapter, we point out some of these synergies.

LGBTI+ inclusion in the Balkan

The progress the countries in Southeast Europe have made over the last years when it comes to the protection of the rights of LGBTI+ people is fragile, and support remains important. The EFDS, with the financial support of the Labour Party's Westminster Foundation for Democracy programme, has organised various activities in the Western Balkans in the framework of the project "Promoting inclusion and tackling inequalities in Western Balkans".

The project builds on the capacity of social-democratic parties in the region to formulate answers to the challenges faced by the LGBTI+ population in the region and advocate for LGBTI+ rights. The project also strengthens ties between politicians and civil society, and also creates connections between political foundations in the region.

In each project country (Montenegro, Bosnia & Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia) several capacity-building activities were executed. This includes increased skills in advocating for human rights, as well as increased knowledge about the various forms of discrimination LGBTI+ people face in education, healthcare, the labour market, and more.

Gender equality: How to pursue it in the context of right wing, authoritarian regimes?

Three decades after the transition to democracy, countries in the Central and Eastern European countries are experiencing democratic backsliding in various contexts. Gender and sexual orientation based equality is particularly hit: the cultural backlash translates to gendered processes of de-democratisation. During 2023, members of EFDS SteerCo organisations, such as FMS and FES discussed the idea of creating a program that provides capacity-building programs to democrats and gender activists in the region. This program was created in end-2023 and is to be executed in the beginning of 2024.

120 years of Belarusian Social Democracy

The EFDS was present at an international conference dedicated to the 120th anniversary of the Belarusian Social Democracy. The event gathered leaders of social-democratic parties and movements from Belarus and other countries, as well as representatives of democratic trade unions of Belarus. Various members of the EFDS network were present, and interesting opportunities were discussed to support the Belarusian communities in Lithuania and Poland better.

Regional Training of Trainers

Lastly, the EFDS has been an actor in setting up an European 'Training of Trainers', together with FEPS. The goal of this project is to educate and bring together a variety of talented trainers from various organisations in a central workshop setting. This will create an exchange of knowledge and didactic skills between partner organisations and the possibility to utilise the

European 'pool of trainers' in a variety of activities of our partner organisations. This activity has been discussed and set up during 2023, the EFDS is commencing it together with FEPS in 2024.

News Service, Website and Communication

The EFDS informs the international social democratic movement on the political situation in the countries of Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the MENA-region with an emphasis on the developments of social democracy. EFDS tries to analyse the situation in and inform about certain countries, thereby improving knowledge and extending contacts. This information is published in Country Updates. The Country Updates are drafted by the project managers and interns, who provide up to date information on the political developments in various countries. The project managers are also responsible for the website and for the composition and distribution of the bi-monthly Newsflash.

As in previous years, we have continued to provide people interested or working in the field of democracy with relevant information about the political context of the countries we are active in.

This 'News Service' delivers high level and unique information through the use of different tools:

- **Monitoring:** day-to-day monitoring of the political situation in our target countries. We do this by following international and local media sources, as well as through regular contact with our partners on the ground.
- **Reporting short term:** on a day-to-day basis, we report on the developments in our target countries through our website, Facebook and X. Again in 2023, many articles were written and shared through our channels and new website, which worked particularly well.
- **Reporting mid-term:** every two weeks, we provide over 3400 subscribers with our Newsflash, which contains all relevant political news on our target countries.
- **News alerts:** we provide our network with News Alerts – short memos/briefings - whenever something extraordinary happens in our target countries or with our partners in the target countries. This also includes election updates, in which we spread news around elections in our target countries.
- **Country updates:** we publish Country Updates on the website, in which all relevant political information about our target countries is mentioned, especially focusing on social democratic actors.

In 2023, there was no direct funding for the News Service, which meant the secretariat had to allocate funds from membership fees to keep it afloat. We will continue to do so in an adjusted version of the News Service in the coming year.

Online election sessions

During 2023, the EFDS has set itself the goal of increasing its presence in spoken media, particularly focusing on knowledge sharing about countries and contexts that are often not in the news in EU channels. To this end, during 2023, the focus was particularly on themed

YouTube conversations focused on elections in different countries. Webinars were held on elections in [Poland](#) (12 October), [Egypt](#) (5 December) and [Turkey](#) (24 May). We've also shared physical sessions in the Netherlands on [Serbia](#) (7 December) and [Ukraine](#) (19 October). These conversations with partners and colleagues from our social democratic network were moderately to well viewed (100-200 views per video), partly assuming that this was the first year we deployed this format. These talks were published on the YouTube of the Foundation Max van der Stoel and shared through EFDS socials.

2023 Financial report

The European Forum is not a legal entity in itself. The Foundation Max van der Stoel is the legal entity under which the projects are carried out. Accountants are responsible for the annual FMS audit and this includes the check of the European Forum finances.

Income	2023	2022
SPD Germany	€25.000,00	€25.000,00
SAP Sweden	€27.000,00	€27.000,00
SDP Denmark	€6.000,00	€6.000,00
Karl-Renner-Institut	€6.000,00	€6.000,00
Olof Palme International Center	€0,00	€213.385,32
PvdA Netherlands	€6.000,00	€6.000,00
Labour Party UK	€37.228,00	€26.136,66
Total	€107.228,00	€309.521,98

Expenditure	2023	2022
Fact Finding Mission Georgia	€4.788,00	€0,00
LGBTI Project (support Labour)	€37.288,00	€26.136,66
News Service	€21.000,00	€51.305,12
MENA Academy (support Olof Palme International Center)	€0,00	€162.080,20
Annual Meeting Sarajevo	€9.500,00	€6.944,10
Website project	€1.500,00	€5.901,80
Fact Finding/Network meeting on Belarusian opposition	€302,00	€0,00
PES congress meeting	€636,08	€1.423,00
Cost support Korčula school	€1000,00	€0,00
Project management and overhead/office costs	€42.000,00	€45.500,00
Total	€118.014,08	€299.290,88

The 2023, the Forum ran a financial deficit of €10.786,08, whereas last year we had a positive result of €10.231,10. Last year's positive result was caused by the collaboration with FEPS around the annual meeting, which we continued this year.

However, due to the ending of the two projects which were financed by the Olof Palme International Center, the News Service was no longer financed as a project and we had to cover its cost with general means from the Forum. In 2023, we did try to mitigate this deficit, through narrowing the focus and quantity of the News Services activities, which we will continue in 2024, but we weren't able to balance the budget entirely. The deficit was covered by the Foundation Max van der Stoel.