



Securing civil society through targeted legal action in Turkey: Evaluation of MLSA

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Executive summary

Founded by a journalist and a media lawyer, the Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA) is a human rights organisation in Turkey that has been defending freedom of expression and press freedom since 2017. With a track record of securing releases from detention and winning administrative and constitutional court cases, MLSA is a credible and well-recognised civil society organisation which receives grants and works with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It earns regular citations in both national and international media for its work.

In Turkey's constrained environment, there is clear value in MLSA's litigation and defence. This comes through the measurable protection of journalists on a case-by-case basis, establishing constitutional baselines (e.g. constitutional court ruling that travel bans breach freedom of expression), and the use of trial monitoring to generate high-quality records that have been used by the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). These outputs reduce harm now and preserve institutional memory and the legal architecture needed for future reform when the political situation changes. Given the state's documented non-compliance with ECtHR and ongoing prosecutions, MLSA's work could be evaluated on the basis of its resilience and preservation of civic engagement rather than short-term policy shifts.



Notable successes include:

In 2024, MLSA represented 204 clients in 154 cases, including 39 journalists facing charges such as terrorism, misinformation, and insulting officials, securing 12 acquittals and six charges dropped despite a repressive legal climate.

MLSA has increasingly noted an increased rate in favourable outcomes (acquittals, dismissals, or decisions not to prosecute):

- 2023: MLSA secured 10 favourable outcomes and faced 8 convictions, resulting in a favourable outcome rate of 55.6% among concluded cases.
- 2024, MLSA secured 18 favourable outcomes and faced 11 convictions, yielding a favourable outcome rate of 62.1%.
- 2025, MLSA secured 33 favourable outcomes and faced 9 convictions, reaching a favourable outcome rate of 78.6%

In the first half of 2025, MLSA won 19 cases, represented clients in 52 hearings, and secured seven releases.

MLSA’s trial monitoring, the most comprehensive in Turkey, covered 641 hearings in 2024, exposing fair trial violations and misuse of laws. This evidence is vital for international advocacy, amplifying the impact of individual legal cases and mobilising public support.¹

MLSA achieved several significant rulings, including a constitutional court decision declaring travel bans unconstitutional; a ruling that the access ban on journalist Rabia Çetin’s podcast violated free expression; a judgment in favour of FreeWeb, MLSA’s anti-censorship platform, finding that blocking access to its reports breached free speech rights; and a Council of State decision affirming journalists’ right to cover public demonstrations.

What problem does this initiative address?

Several indices of record have charted Turkey’s current transition towards a closed autocracy over the past two decades, with the arrest of Istanbul Mayor and opposition presidential candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, in March 2025 marking a pivotal turning point.

The country’s eroding press freedoms since 2013 have likewise been noted by Reporters Without Borders.² Turkey now ranks 159th out of 180 countries in RSF’s World Press Freedom Index.³

Targeted legal support is especially critical for three groups: journalists reporting on protests, activists documenting rights violations, and political candidates arrested to curb competition. Legal support and strategic litigation offers protection in individual cases and empowers pro-democracy actors to continue their work.

While a captured judiciary and state apparatus limit the prospects for immediate practical change, active civil society in Turkey continues to bring cases before administrative courts, the Constitutional Court, and international bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). These cases primarily aim to contest unlawful practices, preserve legal norms, and build a record of violations that may support future accountability and reform.

This work documents and exposes systemic unfairness, helps anchor in law democratic norms such as the right to due process, and channels evidence into advocacy that increases international pressure on the government. It also contributes to a greater sense of legal protection among journalists and civil society actors, which, if political conditions allow, could support renewed civic engagement ahead of possible early presidential elections, currently scheduled for 2028.

MLSA fights targeted persecution of journalists

MLSA directly addresses the most acute threats to journalists and activists in Turkey: arbitrary arrests, politically motivated prosecutions, and judicial restrictions such as travel bans and house arrests.

'The scale of repression is severe and escalating.'

In 2024, 57 journalists were detained and ten imprisoned, according to the BIA Media Monitoring Report, while the Stockholm Center for Freedom documented at least 89 media workers faced trial in 70 cases.

In the first quarter of 2025, 25 journalists were jailed and 157 faced prosecution in 90 separate cases, resulting in 28 prison sentences, according to Civicus. By the end of the second quarter, BIA Media Monitoring Report documented a further 16 journalists had been arrested and four were assaulted.

These figures highlight not only the widespread use of the courts to silence dissent, but also the urgent need for legal challenge, documenting cases of abuse and advocacy informed by MLSA’s extensive trial monitoring. Defending speech protects vital democratic freedoms. Despite notable repression, elements of the civic space in Turkey remain active. Civil society organisations continue to contest shrinking freedoms and document rights violations. The March 2025 arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu marked a pivotal moment, unexpectedly uniting parts of Turkey’s fragmented opposition and demonstrating that civic mobilisation is still possible, even under restrictive conditions.

In this context, protecting the actors behind this momentum – journalists, protesters, and civil society leaders – remains vital, not because legal support alone can prevent repression, but because it can reduce harm in individual cases. This can be achieved through, for example, shortening sentences, securing acquittals or releases, helping preserve constitutional norms, and documenting systemic abuses.

MLSA carefully selects its cases for their strategic value, and while the number of resulting rulings may seem limited, their significance lies in their precedent-setting nature, providing important reference points for future legal challenges. For example, many of its cases concern charges under Article 301 and Article 299 of the Turkish Penal Code, including accusations of insulting the president or other public officials, as well as alleged offences against civil servants in the course of their duties.

Through its legal defence and strategic litigation, MLSA offers essential safeguards by challenging censorship and arbitrary restrictions, securing decisions that shape case law, which can be applied in subsequent cases, and producing documentation that informs international advocacy and accountability mechanisms. Precedent-setting cases are frequently referenced by international organisations; for instance, UNESCO has cited a ruling of the Constitutional Court of Turkey, illustrating the wider impact that strategic litigation can achieve.⁴

Overall, supporting MLSA now will not, by itself, reverse repression. It will, however, provide individual benefits for journalists such as mitigating legal penalties and securing their release from detention. It is also helping maintain the legal and civic infrastructure and institutional memory needed for future democratic recovery, ensuring that constitutional principles and rights-based arguments remain alive and available when political opportunities for reform emerge.

Background on MLSA

Founded in Turkey in 2017, the Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA) works to strengthen legal safeguards for freedom of expression, press freedom, fundamental rights, the right to assembly and protest, and access to information. It pursues this mission through targeted legal support, strategic litigation, trial monitoring, international advocacy, and legal trainings for lawyers and journalists on ECtHR mechanisms.

'Its work results in precedent-setting judicial decisions, by challenging unlawful measures, and by empowering journalists and civil society.'

MLSA's co-founders and co-directors bring extensive, practitioner-level expertise. Veysel Ok is a media and human rights lawyer who has defended dozens of journalists in landmark cases. He received the Thomas Dehler Medal in 2019 for his defence of free expression under pressure. Barış Altıntaş is a journalist who is a founding board member of the Balkan Network of Science Journalists. She has reported on politics, rights, and digital freedoms for Turkish and international outlets, and she now guides MLSA's programme design, advocacy, and capacity-building.

MLSA has six full-time staff members and its Legal Unit consists of three lawyers and one project manager, forming the core team that directs litigation strategy, case selection, and representation before Turkish courts and international bodies such as the ECtHR. This core is supported by a network of around 30 freelance trial reporters and contracted lawyers who ensure nationwide coverage. Contracted lawyers are chosen for their proven experience in freedom of expression and journalism-related cases, vetted with local bar associations, and often drawn from participants in MLSA's ECtHR trainings.



16 July 2020: Veysel Ok of MLSA represented Deniz Yucel, a German-Turkish journalist, in an Istanbul court after he was accused of 'incitement to hatred.'
Credit Image: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Mehmet Guzel

MLSA's impact is strengthened through collaboration with national and international partners. In Turkey, its partners include the Solidarity Network for Human Rights Defenders (İHSDA). Regionally and internationally, MLSA works with the Campaign to Uphold Rights in Europe (CURE), CEELI Institute, Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE), and the CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counterterrorism. Strategic partnerships with Article 19, Media Defence, and Freedom House amplify litigation, co-authored legal opinions, and joint advocacy before the UN and Council of Europe. Recognised with awards such as the GGC Press Freedom Award from Turkey's Southeastern Journalists Association, MLSA is regarded as a credible actor in defending freedom of expression through legal work.⁵

Why donor support is needed

Donor support would directly fund MLSA’s flexible legal model, which coordinates a nationwide network of outsourced lawyers and legal consultants to defend at-risk journalists, pursue precedent-setting litigation, and strengthen protections for civic space.

Additional funding will stabilise MLSA’s Legal Unit following the withdrawal of major donor support from the United States. A significant funding stream for MLSA’s work ended after cuts to US foreign assistance spending after US President Donald Trump’s signed the executive order, ‘Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid,’ on 20 January 2025.



26 October 2025: Supporters of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayor and presidential candidate Ekrem Imamoglu, were met by a heavily police presence when they gathered in front of Caglayan Courthouse in Istanbul.

Credit Image: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | Abdullah Tepeli

Resources will cover fees for contracted lawyers to represent clients, prepare applications, and attend hearings, as well as reinforce legal documentation and case-monitoring workflows. This support will enable MLSA to sustain uninterrupted legal aid to an average of 170 clients annually, encompassing both newly opened and ongoing multi-year cases. It will also preserve institutional knowledge and ensure rapid responses to urgent cases, including constitutional complaints and applications to the ECtHR.

Goals of MLSA action

MLSA’s objectives are to reduce the number of journalists detained or prosecuted for their professional work and to establish safeguards and procedures that hold perpetrators of violations accountable. Through sustained engagement with national and international courts, it seeks to secure decisions that challenge rights-violating practices and expand protections for journalists. At the same time, its work equips journalists and rights defenders with the tools to resist legal harassment, while placing increased legal pressure and international scrutiny on national authorities.

Ultimately, MLSA contributes to a more transparent and accountable judiciary by combining public engagement, rigorous reporting, and strategic litigation.

MLSA's track record

One prominent example of MLSA's work came after several journalists were arrested on 24 March 2025. They had been covering the protests as reporters but were accused of taking part in unlawful demonstrations against the imprisonment of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.

MLSA immediately lodged an appeal, securing their release. MLSA provided direct legal representation for the journalists Joakim Medin,⁶ Yasin Akgül, Bülent Kılıç, Zeynep Kuray,⁷ and Vedat Örüç. These successful defences not only secured the journalists' immediate release but also underscored MLSA's capacity to act quickly, challenge unlawful detentions, and safeguard press freedom under highly repressive conditions.⁸

Another example of MLSA's work is its strategic litigation aimed at advancing systemic legal standards, even in a context where implementation remains limited. In the case of journalist Sedat Yılmaz, who was held for 291 days under a secrecy order that denied him access to evidence, MLSA filed a complaint that led the court to rule such orders unconstitutional – the first decision of its kind.

According to MLSA, this precedent is expected to curb the arbitrary use of investigative confidentiality, especially in cases where anti-terrorism laws are misused to criminalise journalists, by requiring that any restriction on access to investigation files be specifically justified and proportionate to the needs of the investigation.

Similarly, MLSA secured constitutional court rulings in favour of journalist Nurcan Kaya and civil society actor Aret Demirci, both subjected to travel bans. The Constitutional Court recognised these restrictions as violations of freedom of expression, establishing a landmark interpretation that now offers hundreds of journalists and activists a legal basis to contest similar bans, as authorities continue to use travel bans and other judicial restrictions to suppress journalistic activity.

Other examples of MLSA's litigation include an administrative court challenge to a police directive that prohibited journalists from taking photographs of on-duty police officers. MLSA's lawsuit led to the annulment of the directive, with the court affirming journalists' right to document protests – a significant precedent for protecting an individual's rights. In a separate case, MLSA secured a judgment in favour of its anti-censorship platform, FreeWeb, alongside a raft of similar legal challenges, in which the court ruled that blocking access to its reports violated the right to freedom of expression.

MLSA has secured constitutional rulings that offer hundreds of journalists and activists a legal basis for protecting their rights.

Theory of change

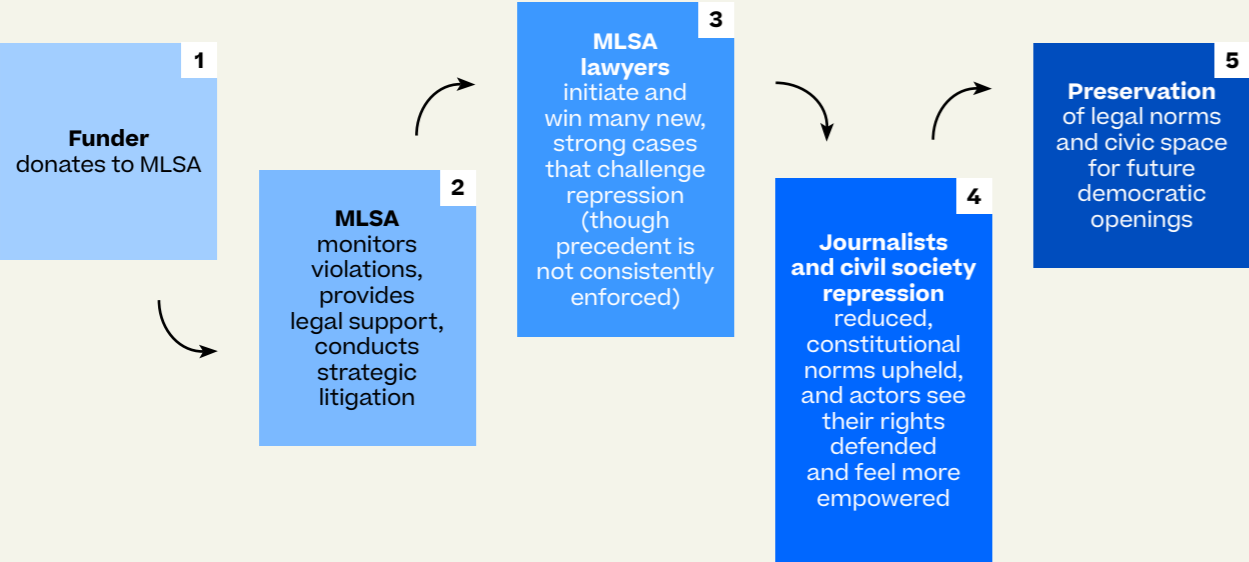
Through activities such as representing journalists in court, filing constitutional and ECtHR applications, and challenging unlawful administrative measures, MLSA works to mitigate the legal risks faced by journalists and media actors. At the same time, their work generates jurisprudence that articulates and reinforces fundamental rights, even if these rulings are not consistently enforced under current conditions.

Cases are selected strategically, drawing on MLSA's nationwide trial monitoring network to identify emerging patterns of repression or potential openings. Regular trial monitoring and published reports increase transparency, inform domestic and international audiences about systemic violations, and strengthen accountability efforts. Legal trainings build the capacity of lawyers to defend journalists and civil society with stronger legal arguments.

Expected outcomes

While these interventions alone cannot prevent arbitrary repression, they can reduce harm in individual cases, preserve key elements of civic space, and anchor democratic norms in constitutional and international law through precedent-setting case wins. Over time, the jurisprudence, documentation, and legal capacity generated through this work can help sustain the conditions and institutional mechanisms necessary for future democratic recovery, should political opportunities for reform emerge.

By providing legal defence and rights-based advocacy, MLSA defends the rights of journalists, activists, and citizens who challenge encroaching autocracy. This preserves their ability and willingness to engage with civil society even under repressive conditions.



For the above theory of change to be successful, MLSA assumes:

- domestic courts remain accessible for rights-based litigation;
- civil society and an independent press are able to operate and document legal violations;
- international legal mechanisms continue to be available and responsive.

A key assumption in this theory of change is that within an authoritarian setting with high non-compliance, litigation’s primary near-term value is resilience and record-building rather than immediate behavioural change from authorities. Turkey’s persistent prosecution and detention of journalists and the systematic non-execution of ECtHR rulings substantiate this constraint.

In this highly repressive context, the theory of change does not assume broad reductions in repression or systemic policy change in the short term. However, MLSA’s work can have tangible short-term effects – such as reducing repression for its clients through legal defence and securing court rulings that, when implemented, may block specific autocratic measures or even generate limited policy shifts. These short-term impacts complement MLSA’s longer-term goal of preserving legal norms and civic capacity for future democratic openings.

Evidence base for strategic legal action on behalf of the press

According to the Open Society Justice Initiative, the potential impacts of strategic litigation are diverse, ranging from changes in law, policy, and practice to shifts in public awareness. Moreover, in repressive authoritarian contexts such as Turkey, the impact of targeted legal support and strategic litigation should be understood as a process rather than a single legal action.⁹

Long-term change depends on careful case selection, coordination with civil society, and sustained advocacy. According to the international human rights lawyer, Helen Duffy, strategic litigation is most effective when rooted in the needs of those affected and connected to broader efforts for systemic reform.¹⁰



Through strategic litigation, media repression can be reduced.
Credit Image: picture alliance / Daniel Kalker

Notable impacts of strategic litigation have been documented elsewhere.¹¹ These include: triggering institutional responses, such as increasing international pressure; improving the quality of legal arguments which can be used in further strategic cases; raising public awareness of rights violations; and preserving the capacity of civil society actors to organise around rights-based demands when political conditions allow.¹² Even unsuccessful cases can generate visibility, document abuses, and demonstrate resistance to authoritarian practices.

Consequently, the success of strategic litigation in Turkey cannot be measured solely by court rulings or the implementation of judgments. Its value lies equally in the wider effects: reducing harm in individual cases, setting norms that authoritarian practices can and should be challenged, preserving institutional memory, and maintaining the legal and civic infrastructure necessary for future democratic recovery.

For example, precedent-setting judgments that recognise travel bans, website blocks, or censorship as violations of freedom of expression create legal norms that can be cited in future cases and used in advocacy. Even when not enforced, such rulings shape how courts, lawyers, and journalists frame rights-based arguments, reinforcing the expectation that executive actions remain subject to legal scrutiny. Similarly, every case record, dissenting opinion, and constitutional reference preserves institutional memory of rule-of-law principles.

Legal NGOs such as MLSA sustain this infrastructure by training lawyers, documenting cases, and maintaining litigation networks that keep the mechanisms of legal redress functional. In this way, the norm of challenging autocratic practices and the skills to do so remain alive even under repression.



One high-profile case before the ECtHR concerns the unlawful detention of former HDP MP Selahattin Demirtaş. Cases such as these have drawn international attention to restrictions on freedom of expression and political pluralism, with human rights NGOs providing expert opinions and submissions that shaped the court's rulings.
picture alliance / NurPhoto | Diego Cupolo

Conditions under which tactic works

Despite the lack of judicial independence and mounting political pressure, Turkish civil society has remained remarkably active, pursuing strategic litigation before the Constitutional Court. These efforts have led to important outcomes, such as challenging secrecy orders in journalists' cases and securing the release of reporters detained during the March 2025 protests against İmamoğlu's detention. In another precedent-setting case, a decision by the Constitutional Court allowed the People's Democratic Party's (HDP) Faruk Gergerlioğlu to return to Parliament from prison.

At the international level, civil society has played an equally significant role in long-term strategic litigation. High-profile cases before the ECtHR – such as the unlawful detention of former HDP MP Selahattin Demirtaş – have drawn international attention to restrictions on freedom of expression and political pluralism, with human rights NGOs providing expert opinions and submissions that shaped the court's rulings.

Equally important have been ongoing civil society efforts to highlight Turkey's failure to implement key human rights judgments. In one case, repeated NGO submissions to the Council of Europe contributed to the decision to initiate infringement proceedings against Turkey. It cannot achieve compliance but keeps the cases alive and can trigger international solidarity campaigns and prompt mobilisation around the rule of law. This role in exposing non-implementation is itself part of the impact of strategic litigation, as it underscores systemic unfairness and fosters mobilisation around the rule of law.

Past evidence shows that strategic litigation had an impact in Turkey earlier: an Open Society Justice Initiative study shows that ECtHR rulings against Turkey for police torture led to Erdoğan's 2003 'zero tolerance for torture' policy, indicating that strategic litigation can achieve policy changes.¹³ However, Erdoğan's commitment eroded after the 2016 coup, when reports of ill-treatment and torture resurfaced. Nevertheless, in the current restricted context, legal action is an effective democracy tactic that, as outlined in this evaluation, can help preserve and maintain pro-democracy norms and the elements that future democratic actors may build upon if the political conditions change. This is underscored by previous examples: the Open Society Justice Initiative found that in contexts that at first seemed unpromising – such as Argentina during and after the dictatorship – legal action helped uncover information that mobilised public pressure and contributed to accountability for rights violations.

There is evidence that, despite increasing judicial capture, the Constitutional Court of Turkey remains partially available for human rights litigation. According to the constitutional law scholar, Bertil Emrah Oder, the Constitutional Court has been both a constraint and enabler of authoritarian consolidation, defined as the resistance-deference paradox. In previous years, it alternated between resistance in some selective politically significant rights cases (e.g. Academics for Peace, Şahin Alpay, Mehmet Altan) and deference in others touching regime core interests (e.g. Kavalas, Cumhuriyet journalists, presidential decrees).¹⁴

Although the Constitutional Court largely aligns with the regime's policy preferences, it occasionally issues pro-democracy rulings – often selectively and with delay – as part of an authoritarian strategy to project legitimacy. Nonetheless, human rights defenders continue to use constitutional review as a legal remedy in matters of democratic concern, and some of the court's rights-based decisions help preserve institutional memory and provide limited moments of judicial confrontation with the regime.

The global evidence of effects of legal action on mobilisation provides positive examples. For instance, in South Africa, civil society successfully mobilised through legal actions against state capture by creating publicity for a case against state capture. A 2018 report from the Open Society Justice Initiative on strategic litigation highlighted a dynamic relationship between social movements and strategic litigation, showing that, under certain conditions, social movements can drive litigation efforts, while litigation can, in turn, amplify social movements.¹⁵

According to the legal scholar Lynette Chua, a further advantage of litigation is that it can mobilise minorities and attract the attention of transnational organisations who may provide resources, advice, and publicity.¹⁶

'Challenging unlawful government actions in domestic and international courts offers a viable form of resistance.'

Targeted legal support defends against threats such as politically motivated prosecutions of unlawfully detained pro-democracy actors and harassment of journalists in a restricted media environment. In a system where the judiciary is politicised, direct lobbying for judicial independence is not feasible. Instead, using the remaining legal avenues – challenging unlawful government actions in domestic and international courts – offers a viable form of resistance.

Finally, additional tactics such as supporting journalistic networks can amplify the impact of legal aid. Journalists document rights violations, keep cases in the public eye, and sometimes provide evidence used in litigation. In turn, legal challenges and litigation gain visibility and momentum when amplified by independent media, ensuring public awareness and stronger advocacy.

Funding gap and use of funds

In 2025, MLSA operates on an existing committed budget of €500,000, covering its legal support work. Projected revenues are estimated at €515,000 for 2026, assuming stable staffing and donor renewals, and €560,000 for 2027, reflecting higher staff costs, rising rent, and expanded legal fieldwork. This income derives from a combination of grant funding and donor support, with core contributions from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Sigrid Rausing Trust. Additional project-based support is provided by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, UNESCO’s Global Media Defence Fund, Article 19, the Consulate General of Sweden, the Embassy of Switzerland, the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, and Media Defence.

To fully meet its legal action objectives, MLSA will require €640,000 in 2026 and €695,000 in 2027. This additional funding is essential to maintain the organisation's capacity to provide high-quality legal support, at a time of rising political pressure. As Turkey’s political situation deteriorates and threats against journalists and media intensify, demand for MLSA’s assistance continues to grow – making expanded capacity for its Legal Unit increasingly urgent.

	Projected revenue (€)	Required (€)	Budget gap (€)
2025	500,000	—	—
2026	515,000	640,000	125,000
2027	560,000	695,000	135,000

This leaves a defined funding shortfall due to USAID cuts, leaving a gap of €125,000 in 2026 and €135,000 in 2027. Closing this gap is essential to maintaining and stabilising MLSA’s legal support and strategic litigation programme by easing the burden on the in-house Legal Unit. It would enable MLSA to retain its caseload and litigation strategy through external legal partnerships. The organisation has a reasonable and cost-effective plan to sustain and scale its legal support using a flexible staffing model, alongside clear procedures for selecting and evaluating contracted lawyers.

Without additional funding, MLSA would focus on maintaining its current level of activity. This includes filing 30-35 strategic cases annually, monitoring approximately 800 hearings, and producing eight publications, such as legal reports, amicus briefs (expert legal opinions submitted to courts to inform their decisions), or Rule 9.2 submissions (formal reports to the Council of Europe highlighting Turkey’s failure to implement human rights judgments).

Filling the current funding gap would allow MLSA to significantly scale up its efforts. Strategic cases could double to more than 60 per year, while constitutional court and ECtHR applications would increase to at least 18 annually. The organisation estimates it would strengthen its advocacy efforts by supporting the publication of 12-14 legal analyses and reports, expand courtroom monitoring to underserved regions, and secure an estimated 12-15 impactful decisions each year – rulings that shape domestic jurisprudence and support international advocacy.

Additional resources would also ensure MLSA can continue to challenge unlawful restrictions, including censorship orders, arbitrary travel bans, and misuse of anti-terror laws, while keeping civic space open, protecting journalists, and countering democratic backsliding in Turkey.

MLSA uses its funds judiciously to deliver legal support and strategic litigation in Turkey’s highly restrictive environment. The organisation prioritises important, winnable cases with potential precedent-setting impact and coordinates with well-respected, highly competent partners nationally and internationally to ensure the greatest likelihood of success. MLSA’s efficiency is further strengthened through pro bono legal services and collaboration with experienced lawyers, many of whom have attended MLSA’s legal trainings and work closely with local bar associations. Through targeted case selection and strategic partnerships, MLSA maintains high-quality, cost-effective legal action that advances freedom of expression and fair trial rights.

These efforts are complemented by the annual Legal Unit Report, which analyses key cases, procedural anomalies, constitutional court rulings, and administrative directives. The report serves both as a public resource and as an internal tool for refining litigation strategy.

Table 1: Annual budget for legal support and litigation

Direct costs	220,000
Overhead	35,000
Opportunity costs (pro bono activities)	30,000
Average cost per legal case	1,000-2,000
Projected total revenues committed (€)	310,000

Table 2: 2025-2026 Projections

Clients represented	240
Cases handled	150
File strategic litigation in national / intl court	40-50
Monitoring of court hearing	600-800
Emergency interventions	30
Thematic briefs/updates	8-12



26 October 2025, Supporters of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayor and presidential candidate Ekrem Imamoğlu, who is currently detained, gather in front of Caglayan Courthouse in Istanbul after a new espionage investigation was launched against him.

Credit Image: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | Abdullah Tepeli

Risks and mitigation

Political and legal risks: MLSA operates under conditions of sustained political pressure on civil society in Turkey. Significant risks arise from the ‘Law on Preventing Financing of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction,’ and related legislation, under which foreign funding can trigger politically motivated audits and investigations. Looking forward, the potential adoption of a ‘foreign agent’ law would further increase scrutiny of internationally funded organisations, placing MLSA at risk of restrictive labelling or sanctions. Nevertheless, at the moment, there is no such legislation in place.

Operational and reputational risks: MLSA may be targeted in pro-government media with accusations of foreign influence or political affiliation. This could erode legitimacy, invite administrative pressure, and fuel smear campaigns.

Security risks: Hostile media coverage or political targeting may escalate into online harassment against staff, while the broader digital environment remains vulnerable to surveillance and cyberattacks.

Mitigation measures

Mitigation measures for the risks above include strict legal review of communications, politically neutral public messaging, and avoiding the publication of donor ties unless required by authorities. These steps help minimise targeting and protect operational safety.

To mitigate online attacks, MLSA invests around €3,000 annually in cybersecurity measures. These include: subscription-based cybersecurity tools such as VPNs, antivirus software, and two-factor authentication tools for staff; security-related hardware, such as privacy screen filters and secure USB drives; and professional website management services, which forms the bulk of MLSA’s annual cybersecurity costs. MLSA’s service provider security monitors and maintains its domains, which include DDoS protection, real-time threat response, and regular patching. With additional support, MLSA could expand these protections and improve resilience against online threats and harassment.

Due to MLSA’s current combination of risk profile and risk mitigation strategy, Power for Democracies believes that funding this initiative will lead to relatively low additional risk and has a high potential for positive impact on Turkey’s democratic trajectory.



1 July 2025: People demonstrate in Istanbul to mark 100 days of detention of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, a potential presidential candidate for Turkey, at a protest called by the Republican People's Party (CHP).
Credit Image: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | Abdullah Tepeli

Follow-up and learning plans

Power for Democracies is also committed to ensuring that the resources allocated because of our recommendations are used effectively. MLSA will closely monitor implementation activities and track progress against key performance indicators for this recommendation including the following:

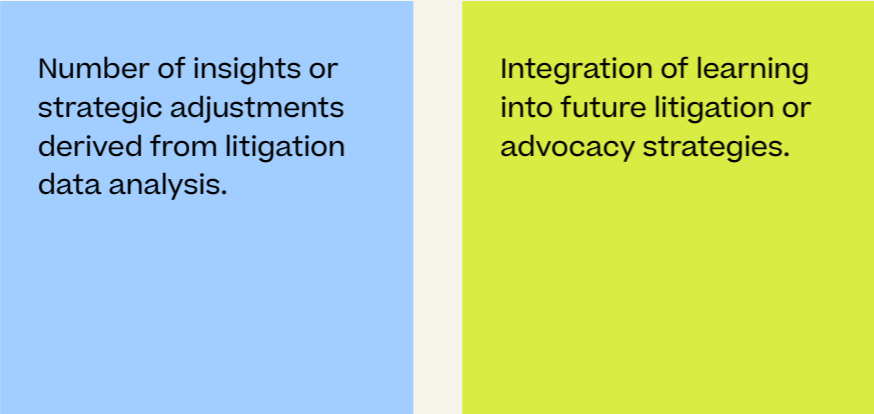
Litigation and legal outcomes

Number of new cases initiated in response to rights violations.	Number and type of precedent-setting rulings achieved at national or international levels.
Percentage of cases resulting in positive judicial outcomes (e.g. suspension of unlawful administrative measures, protective injunctions).	Number of cases escalated to Constitutional Court and ECtHR.

Advocacy and outreach



Institutional learning and impact



Regular updates to donors will be published for this recommendation, tracking progress on these outputs. If feasible, Power for Democracies will collaborate with the MLSA to design a more rigorous evaluation approach to assess outcomes and impact. The monitoring, learning and evaluation insights derived from this initiative will feed directly into future donor recommendations – helping refine strategies, identify best practices, and ensure that subsequent investments are grounded in evidence and experience.

Conclusion and recommendation

MLSA has a strong track record of protecting journalists, securing releases, acquittals and non-prosecutions, and winning precedent-setting cases on freedom of expression, including challenges to travel bans, secrecy orders, and censorship.

Uniquely, MLSA combines direct legal aid, strategic litigation, trial monitoring, and advocacy – an approach few other organisations can deliver at scale in Turkey. Its trial monitoring not only documents fair trial violations and misuse of laws but also feeds international advocacy and builds public awareness at home.

Providing legal support in an average of 150 cases each year, MLSA helps sustain independent reporting under authoritarian pressure. In today’s context, MLSA’s very ability to remain active and keep civic space open is a strategic achievement, as a functioning civic sphere is essential for resisting democratic backsliding and laying the groundwork for future democratic recovery. Supporting MLSA therefore reinforces both immediate protections and the long-term resilience of civil society.

MLSA faces a clear funding gap of €125,000 in 2026 and €135,000 in 2027. Without bridging this shortfall, the organisation would be forced to operate with a reduced caseload, leaving many strategic cases unpursued. Court monitoring in underserved provinces would shrink, and journalists would be left more vulnerable, with detentions and prosecutions going unchallenged.

A recommended funding amount is €125,000 for 2026 and €135,000 for 2027, which would close MLSA’s projected shortfall and stabilise its flexible staffing model.

This level of support would allow the organisation to maintain and expand its litigation and monitoring activities while ensuring long-term sustainability. Given MLSA’s efficient structure and proven track record, the investment is cost-effective, making it a high-impact, low-cost organisation in Turkey’s restrictive civic space.

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