



# Arena for Journalism in Europe

## **Annual Report 2024**

## Contents

Stronger together: Arena supports collaborative journalism in difficult times .....	3
Collaborative journalism needs infrastructure and competencies .....	4
Bringing people together .....	4
Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference .....	4
Climate Arena Conference .....	5
Networks (moderated or open) .....	5
Supporting collaborations and journalism .....	6
Arena Academy .....	7
Intense training programmes .....	7
Journalism education towards cross-border collaborative journalism .....	8
Training and networking partnerships .....	8
Arena Journalism .....	8
The Journalism Value Project .....	9
A robust organisation to carry lively activities .....	9
Strategy .....	10
Board and management team .....	10
Team .....	10
Communications .....	11
Operations .....	11
Finances .....	12
Arena in numbers .....	13
Funders .....	13

# Stronger together: Arena supports collaborative journalism in difficult times

We live in difficult times: we face wars and climate crisis; democracy and freedom of expression are under attack on many levels and in multiple countries. Discussions based on facts and scientific knowledge are discredited more often than before. In peacetime, journalism in democracies contributes to public discourse, allowing all voices to be heard, including the weaker ones: journalism supports democratic decision-making. But, when times get turbulent, how can journalists contribute to the societies we live in?

At Arena, we believe that together we're stronger – stronger to do thorough, well-researched, well-told journalism that serves our communities at local, national or European level and beyond. But no matter how much our wide community of competent and committed journalists across Europe supports this vision, collaboration does not happen by itself. Providing the necessary infrastructure and developing the competencies to carry out powerful collaborative journalism has thus become even more important. This is Arena's focus.

In 2024, this infrastructure and knowledge-sharing was further strengthened. Arena offers two annual in-person meeting spaces: the Dataharvest and Climate Arena conferences. These are popular in the investigative community with Dataharvest tickets now selling out several months before the conference. We also offer online meeting places in the form of thematic networks that allow hundreds of journalists to exchange ideas, and through the Collaborative Desk we offer secure work spaces that allow groups of journalists to dive securely into their data and investigation. To offer these collaborative opportunities, we need a robust organisation. Arena continues to develop its own systems and processes, making it more sustainable in all aspects of its work — editorial and non-editorial.

The Arena team and board are happy to serve a community of journalists from across the continent; all wishing to do and develop powerful journalism in the public interest.

Brigitte Alfter, Director

July 2025

# Collaborative journalism needs infrastructure and competencies

Publishing thorough journalism in multiple countries at the same time is a powerful contribution to the public discourse, often resulting in international agenda-setting. To do this, journalists need infrastructure; for a start, to find and reach the right colleagues. Complementary skills, ranging from project management, to data journalism, to intercultural communication, are essential. And not least, teams need a secure digital work environment. The Arena team provides both infrastructure and a wide set of competencies – always in service of publishing journalistic stories.

Our flagship in-person annual meetings are Dataharvest, the European Investigative Journalism Conference, with ~500 participants (since 2011), and the Climate Arena Conference with ~200 participants (since 2023). These events are not only about knowledge sharing, but also power houses for developing ideas, finding team members and starting new investigations.

Arena also hosts and moderates online networks for journalists on specific topics (climate, food and water, labour, arms trade, editorial coordination). We organise and deliver fellowships, trainings and consulting to journalists across Europe. Further, we work on advancing journalism as a practice, by working to develop new methods in the field of collaborative, investigative and data journalism.

But infrastructures are not just technicalities; they come with a culture. At Arena, we've worked to develop a welcoming and inclusive culture, where journalists of all levels of experience can connect easily, and where sharing of knowledge is considered a common goal in the public interest. These are the immediately visible structures.

In 2024 we have started to pay more attention to another task on the to-do list: geographical inclusiveness, which connects to uneven income levels that prevent colleagues joining events, especially in-person meetings. While only materialising on a small scale in 2024, we've spent time and effort to work on the concept and fundraising for better inclusion. This is not just a moral imperative; it is an editorial need that all be involved, bringing insights, background knowledge, sources and potential publications essential to strong cross-border collaborations. Our so-called All of Europe programme will be further developed in the coming years.

## Bringing people together

### *Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference*

Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference [took place](#) in Mechelen, Belgium, from 30 May to 2 June 2024. With a focus on hands-on training, methodology, and skill-sharing, the programme included three full-day masterclasses, a Hackday, and [over 120 sessions](#) on topics ranging from data journalism and storytelling to right of information laws and different OSINT techniques.

This year, AI and algorithms were featured prominently, including a keynote debate between three experienced journalists on the merits and challenges of AI use in reporting. Data skills included more

advanced sessions (i.e., use of SQL, building custom Telegram bots using large language models for document analysis, etc.), all of which drew strong interest, showing demand for more advanced-level data skill training.

Dataharvest prides itself on being a conference organised for journalists by journalists; a place where journalists connect and launch new collaborations and networks. We introduced self-organised networking sessions around shared topics of interest to further facilitate this. One session led to an informal network on [access to information in the EU](#); a session on editorial coordination in cross-border teams developed into another new network, active via a Signal group and monthly virtual meet-ups. Arena's [Food and Water](#) and [Labour](#) networks also hosted informal meetings. But networking wasn't all work and no play! Participants also connected during side activities, testing their trivia knowledge at the Dataharvest quiz night or teaming up to solve OSINT quest challenges.

## *Climate Arena Conference*

The third Climate Arena Conference took place in Bologna, Italy, on 18–19 October 2024, gathering around 200 journalists and scientists from across Europe. Built on the Dataharvest model, Climate Arena aims to be a hands-on, working conference focused on sharing tools and methods, datasets, insights, and planting the seeds of collaboration, creating the space for building connections and setting up new cross-border projects.

In Bologna, over two days, participants [attended 30 sessions](#), covering topics such as greenwashing in finance, the climate cost of AI, food systems, animal welfare, and corporate lobbying. The programme featured hands-on data workshops, round-tables, and networking events designed to inspire cross-border collaborations. Italian journalists were strongly represented, and overall, the conference reflected a commitment to diversity, with women making up 65% of speakers and moderators and 61% of total attendees. We received excellent feedback from participants regarding both organisation and content.

Our climate conference continues to grow in reputation, receiving almost 100 session proposals in 2024 – double that of the previous year – as well as an increasing number of participants, highlighting its value to and future potential for the investigative journalism community. We are proud that in the last two years, Climate Arena resulted in the emergence of brand new cross-border collaborations, the kick starting of investigations, and the publishing of impactful stories.

## *Networks (moderated or open)*

Arena has initiated and hosted several open thematic networks. They are selected based on editorial needs. Criteria to select a theme include actuality, urgency and political agenda, proximity to people, and Europe-wide relevance. Obviously, competencies and resources in the team, and financial means are also considered. These criteria lead to networks being set up, actively developing and organically changing in character and intensity over the years.

### *Arena's thematic networks:*

#### **The Arena Climate Network (set up in 2020)**

The Arena Climate Network in 2024 (400 members in its Signal group) was the most active and best developed of our thematic networks. The annual Climate Arena Conference attracted around 200 participants this year, we have a lively Signal group, and our team of journalists and data experts keeps connected to journalism through doing journalism in the field themselves. This does not just

unveil new information but also drives forward new methods in the field of collaborative and data journalism.

### **The Arena Food and Water Network (set up in 2021)**

In 2024, the Arena Food and Water Network (164 members in its Signal group) focused on data work, not least the annual update of the Farm Subsidy Data collection in collaboration with FragDenStaat in Germany. Food and Water topics were integrated into both Dataharvest and the Climate Arena Conference. A central investigation of the Arena Climate Network, 'Under the Surface', published in 2024, focused on scarcity of ground water. The Food and Water Signal group is active.

### **The Arena Labour Network (emerging)**

The Arena Labour Network (116 members in its Signal group) is an emerging network. In 2024, journalists interested in covering labour and connected issues across Europe gathered for an informal round table at the Dataharvest conference in May 2024. The Arena Labour Network Signal group is alive and growing.

## **Arena's methodology- and knowledge-sharing networks:**

### **Reference – the European Independent Media Circle (founded in 2021)**

Reference – the European Independent Media Circle is a knowledge-exchange network for independent public service media. Founded in 2021 and hosted by Arena since, [Reference](#) has brought together more than 25 such media from across Europe, meeting for a twofold purpose: to exchange knowledge on non-editorial topics and to ultimately become a shared voice for public interest media. 2024 was a year with a strong focus on institutional questions such as decision making, the hosting agreement with Arena, and so forth. Two in-person meetings were held: one in Mechelen on the eve of the Dataharvest conference and one at Publix in Berlin at the launch of the Journalism Value Project.

### **Coordinators Without Borders (founded in 2024)**

In collaborative journalism, a new professional role has emerged: the editorial coordinator. It combines editorial leadership and project management in collaborative teams, where team members support the shared story idea, and where the coordinator needs to juggle editorial pressures such as deadlines while motivating culturally diverse teams. During Dataharvest 2024, a group of editorial coordinators met under the headline "Keep calm and coordinate". This gathering was followed up by a Signal group (23 members, upon invitation/recommendation) and moderated monthly meetings focusing on various aspects of editorial coordination challenges. The response is positive, and the group continues in 2025.

## **Supporting collaborations and journalism**

### **Collaborative Desk**

With the Collaborative Desk, Arena is offering a secure online working environment for investigative teams. Since Arena's early days we have aimed to use our own infrastructure with open source tools for our internal tech set-up wherever it makes sense and is possible. We followed this approach when we initiated the Collaborative Desk. The importance of independent infrastructure and the

need to stop relying on big tech companies has recently been dramatically emphasised due to authoritarian political developments.

The Collaborative Desk covers all aspects cross-border teams might require to set up a team and start an investigation, including a file cloud, an online office suite and various tools to organise the work, from communication and knowledge-sharing to data management. In addition, we started integrating AI-based tools, which run on our own privacy-friendly infrastructure.

Our approach is demand-driven and was developed with the experience Arena has gained from working with cross-border collaborations over the years. Our starting point is a needs analysis and risk assessment, which allows us to tailor the technical setup to the individual needs of each team. Each team also receives a security awareness training tailored to their risks and needs.

In 2024 we continued working with a significant number of cross-border teams and partnered with IJ4EU to offer the Collaborative Desk to eight grantee teams of each cohort.

## **Arena Data**

Valuable data sets are available and of high relevance for journalists across the continent – for local, national and European stories. But journalists and their newsrooms often lack data skills and the time to connect to the policy context. In 2024, Arena Data was set up with the double purpose to serve Arena's own investigations with data work, and to serve our community of journalists with access to complex data sets connected to questions discussed on the political agenda. This activity is in its pilot phase.

## **Arena Academy**

Collaborative, in-depth journalism not only needs infrastructure – collaboration itself is a professional competence with a variety of aspects connected to the practice. Arena develops teaching and training, and publishes papers that reflect on competencies in the field of collaborative journalism, always with the goal to actually publish (or at least to take some steps on the way to publication).

## *Intense training programmes*

The [European Collaborative Journalism Programme](#), developed with and for the Alfred Töpfer Foundation in Germany, is an annual fellowship spanning several months. Based on an application process, 15 participants from all over Europe are invited to a five-day retreat. Here, lectures on collaborative practice are combined with guidance by experienced journalists. At the end of that week, 3-5 teams have been shaped each with an initial work plan for a cross-border investigation. They reunite 2 months later at the Dataharvest conference, and the team of lecturers remains available for guidance and networking. This model has led to many interesting publications over the years.

The [Arena Climate Fellowship](#) brought together 16 fellows (including one team of 3, so totalling 14 story teams). The fellows attended a full day retreat on the day before the Climate Arena Conference in Bologna with the purpose of preparing work plans for collaborations on stories covering the

climate. After the conference, fellows have regular monthly check-ins with their facilitator and tailor-made offers for online training, particularly on data journalism.

Arena crafted and co-ran a [training programme for the Dutch Fonds Bijzondere Journalistieke Projecten](#) supporting local journalists to collaborate across municipality borders within the Netherlands.

## *Journalism education towards cross-border collaborative journalism*

Collaborative journalism as a method and mindset has arrived in the mainstream, it is applied in newsrooms, and thus a demand has reached journalism education. In collaboration with Gothenburg University, Arena developed a pilot course: the [Crossborder Journalism Campus](#). Students from three universities met for a work week in Brussels with the purpose of getting to know each other, set up work groups and develop a research plan. The actual research was carried out upon return to their respective journalism schools in Leipzig, Paris/Lyon and Gothenburg, and their findings were published in their respective national news outlets, and for an EU-target group in a Brussels news service. In 2024, the project was concluded, and our [Crossborder Journalism Campus guidebook](#) summarises and allows other journalism course providers to use and build upon the experiences.

## *Training and networking partnerships*

Arena is a partner in several areas of [the IJ4EU project](#) (Investigative Journalism for the EU). We introduce journalists to the key steps in collaborative journalism in preparation for teams applying for IJ4EU funding and support. We offer free online masterclasses a month before the submission deadline for IJ4EU projects, plus a 'match-making' service to help potential partners find each other, and mentor some of the teams. This project has also funded Dataharvest participation for grantees and speakers.

Arena is involved as contractor with a project called [Pulse](#) run by OBCT. We've run training sessions for co-ordinators (in partnership with N-Ost in Berlin) and will be involved in writing the formal report on the project at completion.

## Arena Journalism

Arena is an organisation by and for journalists. While the focus of our work is to support and facilitate collaborative, data and other in-depth journalism in Europe, we also deem it important to do journalism ourselves with a double purpose: to thread new paths for journalism, and to constantly update ourselves by staying involved in the practice. As in previous years we have engaged in one major investigation, which embraced all our criteria for selecting journalism stories: the topic was under-reported, it involved significant data work, it had European perspective, and it further developed the method of collaborative reporting.

In 2024, we brought together seven European newsrooms, including Le Monde, Datadista, De Standaard, and Reporters United, and coordinated a cross-border investigation looking into the state of groundwater in Europe. This was a scaled-up effort from Spanish newsroom Datadista's earlier work in Spain. After months of work collaborating with journalists and scientists, we published [Under](#)



[the Surface: The hidden crisis in Europe's groundwater](#), revealing that aquifers across Europe are in dire conditions with their water exhausted and/or gravely polluted.

*Under the Surface* was a collaborative project, so our overall reach was wider; the stories were read on many platforms across many countries. Our reporting has been widely shared through social media and in scientific circles. Many other media re-reported our stories in Europe, including the French wire agency. Our findings in France were also mentioned in the Parliament. We have joined several journalistic and scientific conferences to share our findings with a wider community of actors and reach outside of the journalism bubble. The project won the first prize in the 'Cross-border investigation' category at the Voices Awards 2025 organised by the European Festival of Journalism and Media Literacy, was one of the winners of the 2025 Sigma Awards which celebrates the best of data journalism from around the world, and one of the stories, *Poison in the Tap*, written by Datadista and published in elDiario.es, won the King of Spain Journalism Award in the 'Environmental Journalism' category.

## The Journalism Value Project

Doing and developing in-depth journalism requires reflection on practice, be that through research or discussion within and beyond the field.

Arena took the lead of a consortium consisting of five actors in the field of independent public interest and investigative journalism: the [Journalism Value Project](#) (JVP), which had the purpose of pondering the value of good journalism and the question of how to make it happen.

The project rested on three pillars of public output:

1. A [survey and mapping of independent public interest media](#) in Europe, supplemented by a report of the main findings in the survey. The research was carried out by academics from Netzwerk Recherche, the project partner in Germany, establishing a replicable categorisation for these type of publications, thus opening the field for further academic study.
2. [A series of 25 podcasts](#) in which editors and journalists from independent media talked about their goals and challenges. The series was coordinated by Átlátszó Erdély (Romania) and Fumaça (Portugal).
3. [A white-paper](#) with recommendations of how to support and develop this new media sector, coordinated and written by Investigate Europe.

The JVP also included study visits between members of the Reference Circle to exchange experiences and ideas. This resulted in valuable knowledge for the individual media but also led to the production of a [manual for successful study visits](#), made freely available on the JVP website.

## A robust organisation to carry lively activities

Arena had its 6th birthday in January 2025. From 2022-2023, Arena more than doubled in both funding and team size. Given this rapid growth, our focus in 2024 was to consolidate the

organisation, with a key focus on developing our first organisational strategy. This also means that we do not plan for major growth in 2025.

The challenges in 2024 were a learning experience: there are obvious vulnerabilities to address in a growing organisation. But 2024 especially demonstrated Arena's sustainability, the commitment from funders and support from partners, and how integrated our activities are in the community of collaborative journalists. Arena's carefully developed activities continue to receive positive feedback and increasing demand, and the growing team is dedicated to supporting often under-supported investigative journalists.

The key objectives for Arena's organisational development now are to provide a solid foundation for our editorial activities, improved organisational coherence and team well-being, and (financial) sustainability in the long term.

## Strategy

Since autumn 2023 we have been working on our first explicit strategy. Arena is a strongly editorial and mission-driven organisation, and the strategy process is mainly about putting into words the principles and vision already in place. In autumn/winter 2023/24, the entire team discussed shared general visions for our work, addressing the overall direction. In autumn/winter 2024/25 we are working on vision and priorities for each of our activities. This is a comprehensive process, and it is essential for the character of Arena to involve the team, typically at our bi-annual team meetings with a few online exchanges in between. The strategy will be concluded in 2025 and will be a key document for guiding Arena's priorities, but also an active tool to coordinate across the decentralised, remote-working organisation.

## Board and management team

2024 marked the first changes to Arena's 3-person board since the organisation's inception in January 2019: Nils Hanson stepped down as chairman and was succeeded by Elisabetta Tola. Norwegian Frank Gander joined the board, and Daniel Simons stayed in his position as treasurer. This update aligns with Arena's goal of further developing its board to take a more active role in promoting and supporting the organisation. (Further planned changes took place in early 2025, when Frank Gander became chairman, Elisabetta Tola left the board, and Roelof Gunnink from the Netherlands stepped in).

For the day-to-day management, the board re-appointed Brigitte Alfter as director.

Arena in 2024 had a small management team that coordinated organisational matters, consisting of Brigitte Alfter as director, Trine Smistrup (journalist, co-founder of Arena), Mikala Rasmussen (operations manager), and Cora Moyano (finance manager). This has strengthened the managerial and operational side of Arena to support the growing activities of the organisation and to secure sound management.

## Team

In 2024, Arena consisted of around 15 team members from more than 10 nationalities. The vast majority have part-time contracts, and the total is around 10 FTE. More than two-thirds of the team members have a journalistic background or are active journalists — in other words, are part of the community that Arena aims to serve — which fits with Arena being an editorially-led organisation.

Arena is a fully remote organisation with team members living across Europe, and meeting in-person at our conferences and two annual team meetings (in 2024 in Faxe, Denmark, and Bologna, Italy). As the organisation grows, the need to be mindful of how to integrate new team members and have strong internal communication increases. We are looking at how a formalisation of the organisational structure can help answer this challenge.

## Communications

2024 was the year when Arena hired its first dedicated communications manager (from May 1st). Our visibility is of the utmost importance to reach the community we serve, to document and illustrate our work, as well as to demonstrate our value to potential funders in an increasingly challenging funding environment. Our need for communication is also rising with the increasing number of activities, two conferences, and in 2024-25, the need to have communication resources for the Journalism Value Project and its products.

With a comms manager, Arena took important steps towards meticulously planned activities on social media, newsletters and websites, which will eventually lead to a communications strategy as part of the overall organisational strategy.

In 2024, we decided to leave X/Twitter and put our primary social media effort into LinkedIn. Arena's communications work serves not only to alert our various audiences to the important work our team is doing, but also to connect European journalists to opportunities, and promote the impacts that can be achieved by cross-border investigation and publication.

We take a values-led approach to our communications; we pursue quality over quantity rather than posting numerous times a day to encourage hyper-engagement. We average one newsletter a month, and social posts 2-3 times a week, to ensure that our audiences know about opportunities we're providing, or successes we've achieved.

## Operations

Consolidating our operations was an important priority in 2024 to meet the needs of a growing and more professional organisation and in order to provide a strong foundation for our editorial activities. With two annual conferences on the programme, we optimised the practical ways-of-working with a dedicated event coordinator/logistics role, which has freed up the conference directors to focus on the content side.

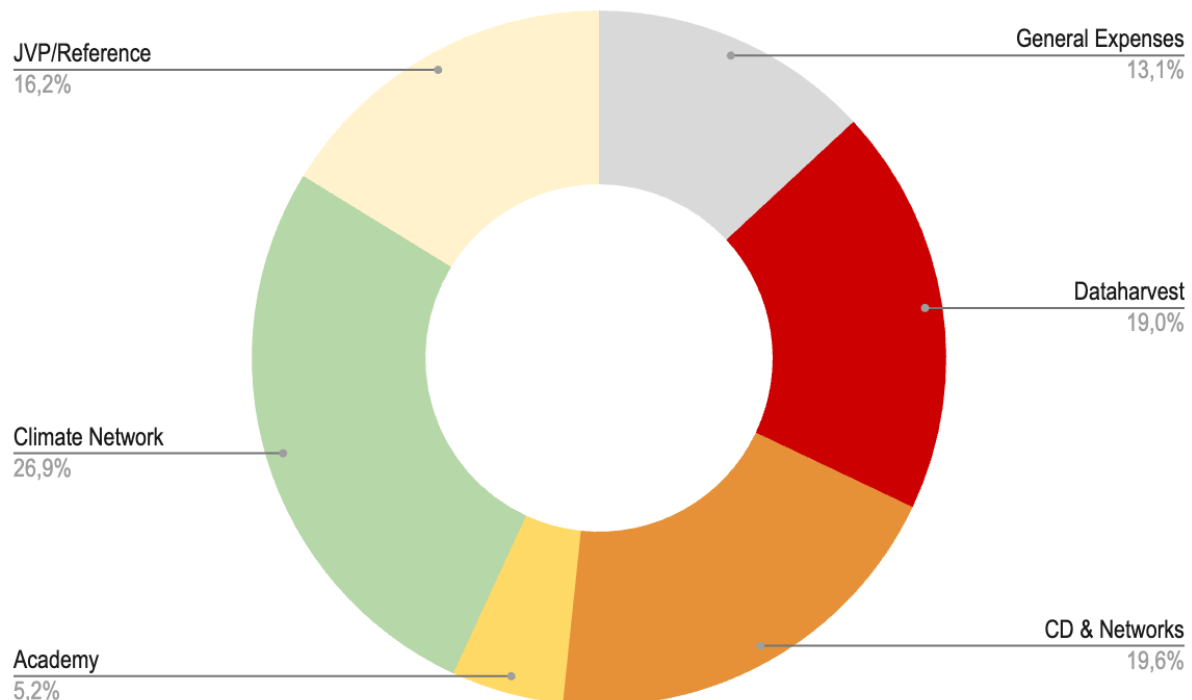
As there are many specific legal questions arising from our organisational set-up and activities, we have sought to identify relevant legal advice experts via our funders, partners and network. In 2024 we established important contacts for technical and HR questions, e.g. via a Dutch pro-bono website, which we continue to benefit from.

In 2024 we also introduced improved planning and coordination among operations colleagues – covering the areas of communications, finance, HR, IT, legal and logistics – with regular meetings and planning tools. Establishing the operational side as a counterpart to the editorial has been a natural and useful step in a growing organisation.

## Finances

The years 2023 and 2024 mark a period of consolidation for Arena, characterised by the strengthening of its programmes, a focus on team retention and development, and the stabilisation of its annual operating budget at around €1.1 / 1.2 million.

Total expenses for 2024 were €1.151.211 distributed across the following projects:



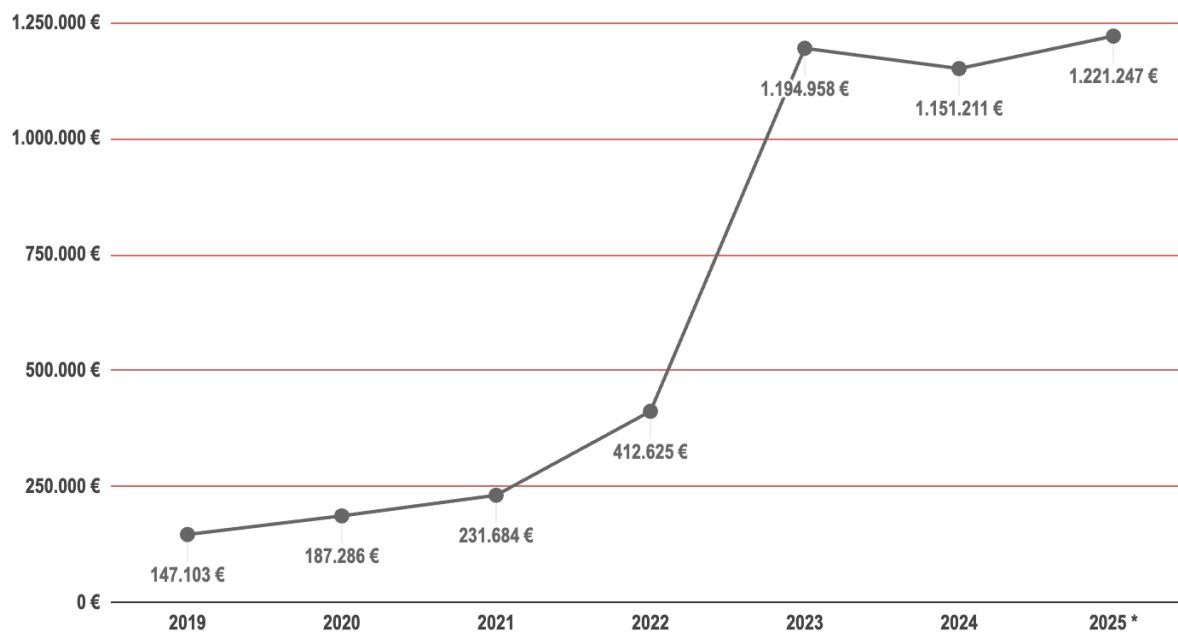
The primary expenses consist of team member fees related to the above activities and projects, followed by direct costs associated with conferences and programmes, as well as additional items such as team travel and meetings.

In 2024, we had a slight delay to our fundraising drive, because Arena's Director, the driving force of fundraising, was absent for a period. However, with several grants from 2023 and 2024 being carried over to 2025 and the back-up of unrestricted funding, the basic coverage for the year 2025 is secured.

We also started the work towards a fundraising strategy, which will be finalised in 2025. The goal is that the funding modalities fit our activities: to be able to build infrastructure, trust and impact for journalists, Arena needs multi-year funding, diversity of income streams, and strong relationships with our funders. Luckily, building on years of hard work, we already have a good foundation.

## Arena in numbers

Arena's growth trajectory 2019-2025 [EUR]



Arena has experienced constant growth since its foundation. The steep revenue increase in 2023 significantly boosted Arena's projects, as well as its reserves: absorbing such a large influx of funds can be challenging, as developing and implementing programmes, and expanding the needed support capacity, take time. As a result, some of these funds were carried over and used in 2024 — and will also be used in 2025.

## Funders

Arena's diverse income streams predominantly stem from philanthropic organisations, project funding through the EU, and to a smaller extent, revenue from conferences, strategic partnerships, trainings and consultancies. We work with over two dozen foundations and partners from across Europe, following our goal of diversifying revenue sources, in quantitative, geographic, and thematic terms.

We are grateful for the support from them all. In order to provide full transparency, [all funders are published on our website](#) when we close the annual accounts.