

Evaluation of TLSP: **Advancing democracy in Turkey through human rights litigation**

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Content

<u>TLSP at a glance</u>	4
<u>The problem</u>	4
<u>The organisation</u>	4
<u>What they do</u>	4
<u>How TLSP’s work strengthens democracy</u>	5
<u>Understanding the problem</u>	5
<u>Why does this threaten democracy?</u>	5
<u>Why is action needed now?</u>	6
<u>Why we recommend TLSP</u>	8
<u>How they got here</u>	8
<u>What they stand for</u>	8
<u>What they’ve worked on in the past</u>	9
<u>The change they've already made</u>	10
<u>How others see them</u>	11
<u>Recognition and awards</u>	11
<u>Who they work with</u>	11
<u>Key international partners include:</u>	12
<u>How TLSP’s initiative will support democracy</u>	13
<u>The initiative in detail</u>	13
<u>How much funding is still needed</u>	14
<u>How change happens</u>	14
<u>What they will do</u>	17
<u>What they will produce</u>	17
<u>What will change as a result</u>	17
<u>The bigger picture</u>	18
<u>When it will happen</u>	19
<u>Risks and mitigations</u>	19
<u>How TLSP will learn and adapt</u>	21
<u>Institutional learning and adaptation</u>	21
<u>Our assessment</u>	22

<u>What makes them stand out</u>	22
<u>Where challenges remain</u>	23
<u>References</u>	24

TLSP at a glance

The problem

Since the 2016 state of emergency, observers have noted a marked erosion of the independence of Turkey's legal system and its use as a tool of repression. International and domestic human rights organisations report that opposition politicians, journalists, human rights defenders (HRDs),^a and lawyers have been prosecuted under broadly framed anti-terrorism laws, subjected to arbitrary detention, and denied fair trial guarantees. International courts have repeatedly found Turkey in violation of its human rights obligations; however, many judgments remain unimplemented, and impunity persists.

The organisation

The Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project (TLSP) is a human rights litigation, research, and advocacy centre established in 2018 within the School of Law at Middlesex University in the United Kingdom. It operates under the legal and charitable status of Middlesex University, a higher education corporation.

What they do

TLSP provides targeted legal support for strategic, precedent-setting cases involving opposition politicians, HRDs, journalists, lawyers, and academics facing repression in Turkey. Working through strategic litigation, third-party interventions, expert opinions, implementation advocacy, capacity-building, and research, TLSP holds the Turkish

^a We use 'human rights defenders (HRDs)' here (same as TLSP) in the sense established by the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (General Assembly resolution A/RES/53/144). The term has been standard UN language since then and is deliberately broad: it covers anyone who, individually or with others, acts peacefully to promote or protect human rights – here, primarily the lawyers, activists, and civil society actors TLSP supports. See OHCHR, Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and the Declaration: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders>.

government accountable before domestic courts and international human rights mechanisms. These include the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, and United Nations (UN) bodies.¹

How TLSP's work strengthens democracy

TLSP's litigation and advocacy before international mechanisms helps counter the government's instrumentalisation of courts to consolidate power and contributes to preserving the civic space that opposition actors and civil society need to operate. For example, TLSP's intervention in the prosecution of the Istanbul Bar Association's leadership contributed to the acquittal of its president and board members in January 2026.²

Understanding the problem

Over the past decade, Turkey's political system has shifted markedly towards authoritarianism. Emergency measures introduced after the 2016 coup attempt were never fully rolled back. During this period, the executive consolidated its control of the judiciary and other key institutions. Opposition politicians, journalists, and HRDs now routinely face politically motivated prosecutions, and the legal system is frequently used to silence dissent.³

Why does this threaten democracy?

At the core of the crisis is the erosion of judicial independence: courts no longer function as an effective check on executive power. The most pressing examples follow:

Opposition figures – including elected mayors and members of parliament – have been arrested, stripped of their mandates, or prosecuted on terrorism or organised crimes charges.

Lawyers defending these individuals face harassment, intimidation, and prosecution themselves. The Istanbul Bar Association's leadership was recently tried on charges of terrorist propaganda, a case that drew international condemnation. TLSP contributed directly to advocacy and strategic case intervention in this instance,⁴ playing a key role in⁵ the eventual acquittal of president and board members in January 2026.⁶

Turkey has been found in violation of the ECtHR in a series of landmark cases – including those of Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş, both of which TLSP intervened in as a third party⁷ – yet the government has continued to defy binding rulings requiring their release. Thanks in part to sustained advocacy by TLSP and partner organisations, this non-compliance triggered infringement proceedings in the Kavala case by the Committee of Ministers – a rare and significant measure – and placed the Demirtaş case under enhanced supervision.⁸

Why is action needed now?

The situation in Turkey is deteriorating rapidly. Several factors make continued action particularly urgent:

- The arrest of Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, in 2025 triggered widespread protests and a broad crackdown on opposition actors, including the detention of several elected mayors.
- On 21 May 2026, an Ankara appeals court annulled the 2023 Republican People's Party (CHP) party congress, removed opposition leader Özgür Özel and the entire party leadership, and reinstated former chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as interim leader. Three days later, on 24 May, riot police stormed CHP headquarters in Ankara with tear gas and rubber bullets to enforce the ruling. Human Rights Watch described the decision as 'the latest deeply damaging blow to the rule of law, democracy and human rights' in Turkey, while the CHP characterised it as a 'judicial coup'. The episode underscored how the executive's capture of the judiciary now extends to effectively dismantling the elected leadership of the country's main opposition

party, which had defeated the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2024 local elections.⁹

- Ongoing peace process¹⁰ negotiations with Kurdish political actors have created an opportunity for TLSP's human rights protection work as the release of several unlawfully imprisoned Kurdish politicians and activists is reportedly under consideration. While the government's more conciliatory stance appears partly driven by electoral calculations aimed at Kurdish voters, from a human rights perspective, the potential for TLSP's legal victories to be given recognition represents a significant step from a human rights perspective.
- Civil society, lawyers, and HRDs operating within Turkey require robust external support, as the domestic environment increasingly restricts independent action and exposes them to considerable personal and professional risk. The CIVICUS Monitor rates Turkey's civic space as 'repressed' and, in July 2025, added Turkey to its Civicus Monitor Watchlist, citing the jailing of opposition politicians, the violent suppression of mass protests, and an escalation in censorship, arrests, and intimidation.¹¹

Without TLSP challenging the authorities' narrative through the ECtHR, Committee of Ministers, and relevant UN bodies, there would be almost no sustained external pressure on the government to acknowledge and redress rights violations. Sustained advocacy is essential to preserving the possibility of democratic reform when political conditions eventually shift.

Why we recommend TLSP

How they got here

TLSP was founded in 2018 by a group of international human rights lawyers and academics at Middlesex University's School of Law in direct response to the normalisation of exceptional measures following Turkey's 2016 state of emergency. As domestic remedies were increasingly dismantled, lawyers, and HRDs in Turkey were more and more isolated. TLSP was created to ensure they could continue to access the international mechanisms that remained open even as national avenues closed.

Over seven years, TLSP has grown from an emergency response initiative into a sustained programme addressing systemic human rights and rule of law issues in Turkey. The organisation has developed recognised expertise in ECtHR litigation, Committee of Ministers supervision processes, and UN human rights mechanisms, positioning TLSP as a key actor linking local practitioners with global protection systems and advancing long-term structural change.

What they stand for

TLSP's mission is to strengthen human rights protection and improve access to justice in Turkey by supporting strategic litigation, working alongside lawyers and HRDs to exchange expertise and reinforce their work, and advocating for accountability before international human rights mechanisms. This mission is grounded in both academic research and TLSP's hands-on experience. Its approach is informed by leading experts in the field, including Professor Helen Duffy (a former TLSP supervisor and current member of its Advisory Group) and Professor Philip Leach, two of the foremost global authorities on strategic human rights litigation.

What they’ve worked on in the past

Between June 2023 and May 2025, TLSP has:

- supported at least 35 individuals, 15 lawyers, and five civil society organisations through case-specific legal advice, mentoring, and litigation support, strengthening their capacity to bring strategic cases before the Constitutional Court, ECtHR, and UN mechanisms
- drafted, coordinated, or contributed to at least 14 strategic litigation support actions and 6 third-party interventions or expert opinions before the Constitutional Court, an Istanbul Heavy Penal Court, the ECtHR, and UN treaty bodies
- submitted 10 UN urgent action letters and 14 submissions to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe
- produced at least 20 advocacy and research outputs, including a briefing paper,¹² submitted to the Turkish Parliamentary Commission established in August 2025 as part of the government–PKK dialogue process, and participated in more than 10 public events and advocacy visits.

In each project period, TLSP has consistently exceeded its minimum committed outputs.

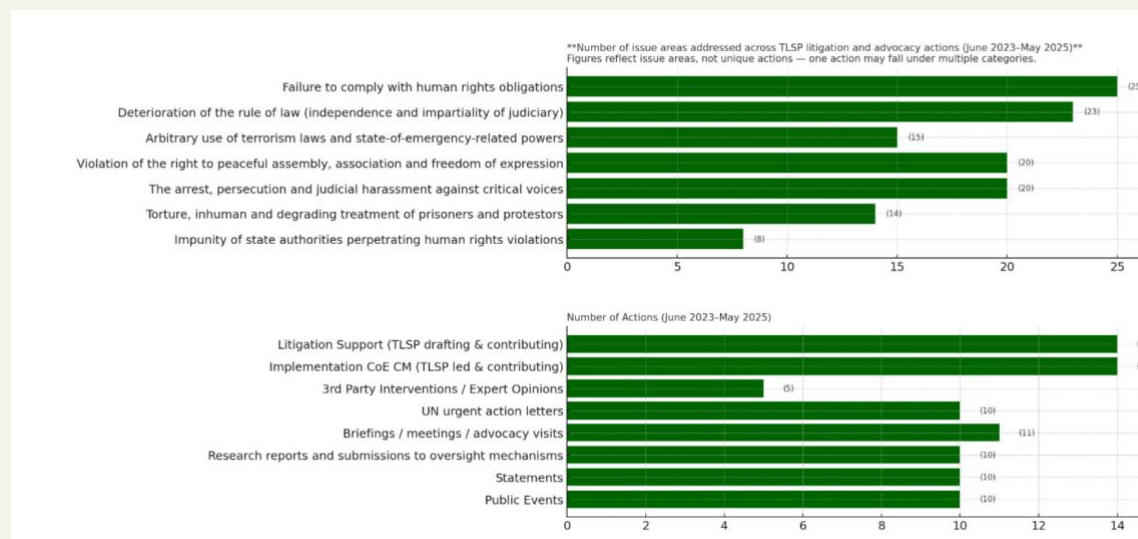


Figure 1. Source: TLSP

The change they've already made

TLSP's work has contributed to and resulted in concrete changes at both the individual and systemic level, through a combination of approaches: pressing landmark cases at the national and international level; conducting sustained advocacy before the Committee of Ministers; engagement with relevant UN mechanisms; undertaking outreach to European Union (EU) and Council of Europe bodies; carrying out public communications and coalition-building; and strengthening the capacity of lawyers and civil society organisations.

Some examples:

- TLSP's third-party interventions have been explicitly cited by the ECtHR in finding violations in concluded cases, including *Taner Kılıç v. Türkiye*, *Osman Kavala v. Türkiye*, *Selahattin Demirtaş (4) v. Türkiye*, *Pişkin v. Türkiye*, and *Telek and others v. Türkiye*.
- TLSP's Rule 9.2 submissions helped trigger infringement proceedings in the Kavala case, secured enhanced supervision in multiple cases, including *Demirtaş* and *Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu* group of cases, and contributed to repeated interim resolutions.
- In the *Aysel Tuğluk* case, a coordinated urgent action letter led by TLSP – joined by more than 40 domestic and international organisations – formed part of the wider advocacy that led to her release on health grounds.
- In January 2026, following TLSP's sustained advocacy and coordination of a strategic intervention concerning the prosecution of the Istanbul Bar Association's leadership, an Istanbul court acquitted its president and 10 board members on terrorist propaganda charges.¹³

How others see them

TLSP has earned a strong reputation among civil society, international courts, and donors:

- Its submissions are regularly cited by the ECtHR, the Committee of Ministers, and UN treaty bodies.
- TLSP maintains a strong working relationship with the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the ECtHR (DEJ) and is actively engaged in Turkey-related judgment supervision.
- TLSP is a recognised interlocutor for the ECtHR, the Committee of Ministers, the DEJ, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.
- An independent external evaluation (MEL) conducted in 2024 confirmed that TLSP delivers highly valued, high-quality support, highlighting its trusted partnerships, approachability, strategic flexibility, and expert legal capacity as central to its effectiveness.

Recognition and awards

- Cited in landmark ECtHR judgments including *Osman Kavala v. Türkiye* and *Selahattin Demirtaş (4) v. Türkiye*.
- Recognised by Council of Europe bodies for its role in judgment implementation supervision.
- Acknowledged by international partners for the quality, and strategic value of its legal contributions.
- Led by founders and experts who have received several prestigious international awards, including the Human Rights Award presented to the Advisory Group member Ayşe Bingöl Demir.¹⁴

Who they work with

TLSP's work is rooted in collaboration. A core part of its approach is to bring together effective and influential organisations and actors around systemic issues of shared concern. Through these coalitions, TLSP aims to broaden the reach of its interventions, draw on diverse areas of expertise,

increase the potential for impact, and keep partners engaged and focused on long-term challenges.

TLSP's domestic and international partnerships are often built around specific cases or thematic issues and encompass a wide range of prominent civil society organisations, legal experts, and grassroots actors. Its strategic litigation and legal advocacy efforts are primarily targeted at Council of Europe institutions, with sustained engagement with the ECtHR, the Committee of Ministers, the DEJ, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). TLSP also maintains, where relevant, communication with EU and UN mechanisms as part of its broader advocacy efforts towards these institutions.

Key international partners include:

- Human Rights Watch
- International Commission of Jurists
- Amnesty International
- Connecting Europe Network
- PEN Norway and international lawyers' rights organisations

TLSP also works closely with grassroots civil society organisations and lawyers' groups in the country.

How TLSP's initiative will support democracy

The initiative in detail

TLSP's funded work for the period June 2025 to May 2027 is a multi-armed initiative combining strategic litigation, implementation advocacy, dialogue and exchange, research, and outreach. These elements reinforce one another: cases emerge from monitoring ECtHR-communicated cases, domestic news, referrals from partners, and direct approaches from lawyers, and are selected on the basis of priority and potential impact.

The initiative focuses on six thematic areas that reflect both long-standing patterns of repression and urgent emerging threats to democracy:

- Capture of democratic institutions and the rule of law, including dismantling of judicial independence and political targeting of elected representatives.
- Arbitrary restrictions on civic space, including criminalisation of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.
- Entrenched repression of HRDs and civil society, including LGBTQI+ individuals and rights defenders, pro-Kurdish rights defenders, women's rights defenders, and environmental activists.
- Fair trial rights violations, arbitrary detention, and prison conditions.
- Impunity and breakdown of legal remedies, including the structural ineffectiveness of domestic remedies and the need for accountability and reparations.
- Failures of international legal and political mechanisms, including persistent non-

implementation of ECtHR and UN treaty body judgments and decisions, weakening of international accountability mechanisms, and democratic conditionality. TLSP responds with strategic litigation and advocacy to build narratives that counter populist rhetoric and strengthen public trust.

TLSP's work across these areas aims to address these threats and contribute to strengthening democracy in Turkey.

How much funding is still needed

Year	Budget (EUR)
2025–2026	Included in total below
Total project budget (2025–2027)	€306,515
Secured (Stiftung Mercator)	€240,000
Funding gap	€66,515

On fungibility, additional funding is unlikely to displace existing resources. TLSP reports that donor funding since its inception has consistently covered the full costs of the activities set out in its proposals, narratives, and budgets, with no restrictions beyond alignment with those approved plans. Additional funding will therefore be directed towards expanding legal support and litigation, broadening implementation advocacy, deepening engagement with UN mechanisms, strengthening collaborative capacity-building, and supporting knowledge production and dissemination.

How change happens

TLSP prepares third-party interventions and expert opinions for the ECtHR, domestic courts, and UN treaty bodies; supports lawyers representing politically targeted individuals; and files Rule 9.2 submissions to the Committee of Ministers. This work reduces the legal risks facing opposition politicians, journalists, HRDs, lawyers, and academics in Turkey. It also contributes to a body of jurisprudence and international findings that reinforce fundamental rights, even where rulings are not consistently implemented.

Cases are selected strategically – drawing on monitoring of ECtHR-communicated cases, domestic developments, and referrals from partners – to identify emerging patterns of repression or potential openings for systemic change. Sustained engagement with the Committee of Ministers, UN mechanisms, and EU institutions, alongside thematic research and public communications, increases transparency, informs domestic and international audiences about systemic violations, and strengthens accountability efforts.

Capacity-building support, mentoring, and convenings build the ability of lawyers in Turkey and civil society actors to defend politically targeted individuals and pursue strategic cases with stronger legal arguments. Together, this keeps civic space open and the rule of law contestable – basic conditions for democratic change when the political context allows.

Activities	Outputs (2025–2027)	Expected outcomes	Intermediate goal	Long-term impact
Strategic litigation support, third-party interventions, and expert opinions before the ECtHR, domestic courts, and UN treaty bodies	≥10 strategic litigation support actions	Politically targeted individuals secure stronger legal representation and better access to effective remedies	Sustained legal and political pressure on the Turkish government	Civic space and the rule of law in Turkey are kept open and contestable, which are the necessary preconditions for democratic recovery when the political context allows
Rule 9.2 submissions and advocacy before the Committee of Ministers	≥5 third-party interventions or expert opinions	Courts and international bodies engage with rigorous legal arguments; jurisprudence articulates and reinforces fundamental rights	Accountability mechanisms remain engaged on Turkey	
Targeted advocacy with EU, Council of Europe, and UN mechanisms	≥2 published research and legal analyses	Lawyers and civil society organisations in Turkey are better equipped to bring strategic cases	Civic space, rule of law, and the legal foundations of democratic opposition are preserved	
Dialogue and exchange with lawyers and HRDs in Turkey	≥2 advocacy visits or events			
Thematic research and public communications	Advice and case-specific support to lawyers, HRDs, and civil society organisations			

What they will do

During the 2025–2027 period, TLSP will:

- provide direct legal support, expert exchange, and advice to lawyers and HRDs pursuing strategic cases before domestic and international mechanisms
- prepare and submit third-party interventions and expert opinions in precedent-setting cases before the ECtHR, domestic courts, and UN bodies
- make Rule 9.2 submissions to the Committee of Ministers in leading cases, including the *Kavala*, *Demirtaş*, and *Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu* groups
- conduct targeted advocacy with EU institutions, the Council of Europe, and UN mechanisms, including advocacy visits, joint briefings, and participation in key institutional processes
- organise dialogue and exchange workshops and strategic convenings with local and international partners
- produce thematic research reports and accessible legal analyses to support and inform others working on similar challenges.

What they will produce

TLSP has committed to the following minimum outputs for 2025–2027:

- At least 10 strategic litigation support actions
- At least 5 third-party interventions or expert opinions in strategic domestic and international cases
- At least 2 published research and legal analysis resources
- At least 2 advocacy visits or events

Based on TLSP's track record, having consistently exceeded committed outputs in previous project periods, these figures should be seen as a floor rather than a ceiling.

What will change as a result

- Lawyers and HRDs are better equipped to pursue complex strategic cases, with access to expert advice, exchange, and legal resources.

- Individuals facing politically motivated repression secure high-quality legal representation and have a stronger chance of accessing effective remedies at domestic and international levels.
- Domestic and international courts and bodies engage with rigorous legal analysis through TLSP's targeted interventions, submissions, and expert opinions.
- Strategic cases create legal or political precedents, strengthening public awareness and contributing to longer-term legal and political reform.
- The visibility of emblematic cases generates sustained international pressure for accountability, reinforcing the broader ecosystem of human rights protection in Turkey.

The bigger picture

Over the longer term, TLSP helps preserve civic space, the rule of law, and human rights protection in Turkey – foundations without which any future democratic transition will be impossible. Through its litigation and advocacy, TLSP helps maintain the legal frameworks, institutional relationships, and civil society capacity that are essential for eventual democratic recovery. In the absence of organisations such as TLSP, the Turkish government would face even fewer constraints, and the international mechanisms mandated to hold it accountable would have far less information, expertise, and civil society input to draw on.

When it will happen

Now to June 2027. The below is an indicative schedule of activities. All activities are subject to change based on the ECtHR and other bodies' engagement with specific cases, processing times, domestic events in Türkiye and TLSP's funding situation. Project milestones – i.e. the outputs outlined above – may be achieved at any point during the implementation period, as they largely rely on decisions made by third-party institutions (including the Turkish Government, the ECtHR, the Committee of Ministers and representatives from the EU, CoE, UN, etc.).

Activity	Month																							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Legal support, advice, and mentoring to advocates on strategic cases before domestic and international avenues	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Capacity-building events to share experiences and exchange knowledge												x												x
Interventions before domestic and international avenues as an expert organisation (e.g. 3rd party interventions, expert opinions, Rule 9.7 submissions)					x					x					x					x				x
Advocacy before international mechanisms						x							x					x						x
Publication and dissemination of submissions and other resources					x					x					x					x				x
Collaboration and participation in events						x							x					x						x

Risks and mitigations

TLSP works in one of the toughest political environments in the Council of Europe's membership. Its base at Middlesex University in the United Kingdom provides an essential layer of structural protection for staff. The main risks and how they are managed are detailed in the table below.

No additional costs for security, cybersecurity, or staff protection are anticipated, given TLSP's institutional base outside Turkey and the structural protection this provides.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Risk
Political escalation in Turkey	High	Medium	TLSP's model is designed to function under sustained repression; escalation increases urgency but does not alter the operating approach. The May 2026 court-ordered removal of the CHP leadership and the police operation at the party's Ankara headquarters confirm that this risk is materialising in real time.	Political escalation in Turkey
Non-responsiveness by international mechanisms	Medium	Medium	Multi-channel advocacy approach allows TLSP to shift focus between the ECtHR, Committee of Ministers, UN bodies, and EU institutions, as needed.	Non-responsiveness by international mechanisms
Safety risks for partners inside Turkey	Medium	High	Partners' identities and involvement are carefully protected; TLSP takes active precautions to limit exposure and mitigate potential reprisals.	Safety risks for partners inside Turkey
Funding shortfall	Low	Medium	Over three-quarters of the project budget is already secured; TLSP is actively fundraising to close the remaining gap.	Funding shortfall

How TLSP will learn and adapt

Power for Democracies is committed to ensuring that the resources allocated as a result of our recommendations are used effectively. TLSP will closely monitor implementation activities and track progress against key performance indicators for this recommendation. These include:

- the number of strategic litigation support actions undertaken, including third-party interventions, expert opinions, and Rule 9.2 submissions
- the number of cases in which TLSP's arguments are cited or relied upon by domestic or international courts and bodies
- progress in key cases before the ECtHR and the Committee of Ministers, including outcomes in enhanced supervision and infringement proceedings.
- the number of lawyers and HRDs supported through expert exchange, legal advice, and case-specific assistance
- the number of exchange and dialogue workshops and strategic convenings held with local and international partners
- the number of advocacy visits and engagements with EU institutions, Council of Europe bodies, and UN mechanisms
- evidence that TLSP's advocacy is contributing to keeping cases and systemic issues on the international agenda.

Institutional learning and adaptation

- Continued use and refinement of TLSP's MEL toolkit (developed with an external consultant), which combines internal monitoring with external evaluation to trace interventions to litigation, supervision, and capacity outcomes, and feeds those findings back into case selection and programme design.
- Integration of lessons from concluded cases into future litigation and advocacy strategies.
- Regular internal reflection processes to assess whether TLSP's thematic focus and case selection remain responsive to developments on the ground in Turkey.

Regular updates to donors will be published for this recommendation, tracking progress against the planned outputs. Where feasible, Power for Democracies will collaborate with TLSP to design a more rigorous evaluation approach to assess outcomes and impact. Insights from monitoring, learning, and evaluation will feed directly into future donor recommendations, helping refine strategies, identify best practices, and ensure that subsequent investments are grounded in evidence and experience.

Our assessment

What makes them stand out

TLSP fulfils a role that no other organisation in the human rights space in Turkey currently occupies. Its arguments have been cited in landmark ECtHR judgments, and – in a rare step – its advocacy contributed to the triggering of infringement proceedings against Turkey. Across multiple funding periods, TLSP has consistently delivered on and exceeded its project commitments.

Its model is distinctive. TLSP focuses on precedent-setting cases capable of driving systemic change, rather than providing routine legal assistance, and operates at daily rates below comparable international teams – representing strong value for the depth and scope of work delivered.

TLSP does not appear in court as legal representative; instead, it works through third-party interventions, expert opinions, and consultancy to the lawyers carrying the cases, multiplying its reach by strengthening domestic counsel rather than replacing them. Exceptions are made where direct domestic representation is constrained and TLSP must act directly on behalf of applicants.

Operating under the governance and financial oversight of Middlesex University provides a level of transparency and accountability unusual for an organisation of its size. Its base outside Turkey enables TLSP to complement local civil society partners by bringing international legal expertise and access

to international mechanisms without the risk of direct state interference.

The May 2026 court-ordered removal of the CHP leadership underscores why an externally based actor with privileged access to international mechanisms is increasingly difficult to replicate from inside Turkey.

Where challenges remain

TLSP has provided strong evidence of outputs delivered and court citations but has not yet developed a fully systematic causal analysis linking its advocacy to broader democratic impact. This challenge is inherent to the nature of strategic litigation, and TLSP is aware of it. The organisation is in active dialogue with Power for Democracies to develop a more robust impact evaluation framework for the current project period. Given TLSP's strategic importance and strong cost-efficiency, we consider this a reason to act promptly rather than a reason for caution.

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amicus curiae brief:

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Joint statement: https://www.turkeylitigationsupport.com/files/ugd/9265a1_f6fcd5ac99490997bb710e0b41f7e.pdf

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⁷ Demirtas intervention:

https://www.turkeylitigationsupport.com/files/ugd/9265a1_37c4de3d27bf4ec6b39649bf8aad2c56.pdf

Kavala intervention:

https://www.turkeylitigationsupport.com/files/ugd/9265a1_462d2d71993a4c31a4ea5bbcf53b1015.pdf

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