



# FUNDING OF NGOS BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION: WHAT THE LIFE OPERATING GRANTS REALLY ARE



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**While the funding of environmental NGOs by the European Commission's LIFE Operating Grants has been questioned by several political figures, Surfrider Foundation, a repeated beneficiary of this fund, reminds that it was created to maintain the EU's democratic legitimacy and its connection with citizens.**

## **A Historical Funding to Promote Citizen Participation**

Civil society organizations play a key role in European democracy by ensuring transparency, fostering trust, and proposing solutions to environmental challenges such as the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Their involvement is essential to maintain the EU's democratic legitimacy and its connection with citizens.

Unlike multinational companies and industry associations with considerable resources, citizens and their civil society organizations often have fewer means to participate in public debates at the European level. **The EU compensates for this imbalance by granting operating subsidies to NGOs to ensure balanced representation in the decision-making process.**

This is why the European Commission created, in 1992, the LIFE program, the **EU's financial instrument dedicated to environmental, climate, and nature conservation projects**. It plays an essential role in supporting governments, businesses, and non-profit organizations in **implementing initiatives to protect the environment**.

Far from the "scandal" claimed by some MPs, the share of the program allocated to environmental NGOs in the form of operating grants is minimal: only 15.6 million euros per year, which represents 0.006% of the EU's annual budget. (With an allocation of 5.4 billion euros for the 2021–2027 period, it represents only 0.3% of the EU's total budget.)

By comparison, the 50 most influential companies lobbying in Brussels spend nearly 200 million euros annually to influence political decisions ([source : Lobby Control](#)).

[A recent study by Transparency International](#) highlights this disparity: corporate lobbyists represent 65% of all meetings with the European Commission, demonstrating the significant imbalance in access and influence.

## **Governance Ensuring NGOs' Independence**

Contrary to certain accusations, environmental NGOs are neither influenced nor controlled by the European Commission. Calls for proposals are strictly governed by EU treaties, which provide for support to civil society to strengthen democratic governance (e.g., the Treaty on European Union, Aarhus Convention), as well as by the LIFE regulation, adopted by EU

co-legislators, recognizing operating grants as an essential element of democratic legitimacy.

NGOs follow their own agendas and have shown in the past that they can, within the same week, submit grant applications and challenge the European Commission on regulatory proposals.

The selection process for beneficiaries is rigorous and transparent: beneficiary NGOs are subject to regular audits, strict monitoring of fund usage, and independent evaluation of their actions. [The EU Transparency Register](#) allows any citizen to access information about organizations engaged in advocacy towards EU institutions, including details on any EU funding received.

## Attacks Based on Misinformation

For several months, a disinformation campaign has been orchestrated to weaken the voice of civil society in favor of economic interests.

This campaign questions the funding of NGOs, falsely insinuating that they serve the European Commission to influence Parliament's decisions.

These maneuvers seem aimed at undermining the European Green Deal, a major initiative to reduce CO2 emissions and preserve biodiversity. In the face of these attacks, civil society remains mobilized to ensure the implementation of ambitious, science-based environmental policies.

*"For Surfrider Foundation, Brussels policymakers have a major responsibility: to ensure that all voices are heard, in a true democratic spirit. By spreading a misleading narrative about an alleged 'scandal at the European Commission,' some seek to divert attention from the fact that NGOs active in Brussels act solely in the interest of citizens and the planet,"* says Eric Morbo, Director of Surfrider Foundation.

Surfrider Foundation invites all citizens to support the funding of NGOs by the European Commission ([link to petition here](#)).

We remain available for journalists for any information requests or interviews.

### Editor's Note

- [Link to the letter co-signed with other LIFE beneficiary NGOs addressed to Ursula von der Leyen, sent on December 5, 2024.](#)
- All beneficiaries are listed in the [Transparency Register](#), and their activities, funding sources, and projects are detailed on their websites, ensuring full public visibility of their operations and goals.
- A list of all NGOs receiving LIFE operating grants is available [here](#).
- According to [LobbyControl](#) (Association for Information on Influence Strategies in the EU): the 50 companies with the largest lobbying budgets collectively spent nearly 200 million euros on EU lobbying in 2024, two-thirds more than in 2015.
- More than two-thirds of entities registered in the EU Transparency Register represent commercial interests, far outweighing other sectors of society (report [here](#)).

- Fact-checking [article by Politico](#).

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**About Surfrider Foundation Europe**

*Surfrider Foundation is a collective of positive activists who act concretely in the field every day to pass on a preserved Ocean to future generations. Our mission: To amplify the Ocean's voice! Our tools? Raising awareness and mobilizing citizens, both children and adults (thanks to 48 volunteer chapters across Europe), using our scientific expertise for advocacy actions, and transforming businesses. Discover the association at <https://surfrider.eu/>*

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