



TEXTS ADOPTED

P9_TA(2024)0009

Implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme 2021-2027 - citizens' engagement and participation

European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2024 on the implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme 2021-2027 - citizens' engagement and participation (2023/2004(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/692 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EU) No 390/2014¹,
- having regard to the Commission staff working document of 30 May 2018 entitled 'Impact assessment accompanying the document: Proposal for a Regulation establishing the Rights and Values programme, Proposal for a Regulation establishing the Justice programme, Proposal for a Regulation establishing the Creative Europe programme' (SWD(2018)0290),
- having regard to the EU Citizenship Report 2020,
- having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and to Article 9 of the Treaty on European Union,
- having regard to the European Parliament report of 6 April 2022 on the implementation of citizenship education actions (2021/2008(INI)),

¹ OJ L 156, 5.5.2021, p. 1.

- having regard to the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching,
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 3 December 2020 on the European democracy action plan (COM(2020)0790),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 2 December 2020 entitled 'Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU' (COM(2020)0711),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 18 September 2020 entitled 'A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025' (COM(2020)0565),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 12 November 2020 entitled 'Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025' (COM(2020)0698),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 5 March 2020 entitled 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025' (COM(2020)0152),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 5 October 2021 entitled 'EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life (2021-2030)' (COM(2021)0615),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 7 October 2020 entitled 'A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation' (COM(2020)0620),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 24 March 2021 entitled 'EU strategy on the rights of the child' (COM(2021)0142),
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure, as well as Article 1(1)(e) of, and Annex 3 to, the decision of the Conference of Presidents of 12 December 2002 on the procedure for granting authorisation to draw up own-initiative reports,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A9-0392/2023),
- A. whereas active participation in political and cultural life is a fundamental right that should be equally accessible to all; whereas the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides for the right to participate in government and free elections, the right to participate in the cultural life of the community and the right to peaceful assembly and association, enabling full participation in society;

- B. whereas citizenship of the Union gives people various rights, in particular the right to petition Parliament on any issue for which the EU has responsibility, the right to raise perceived cases of maladministration by any EU institution with the European Ombudsman, the right to write to any EU institution in one of the EU's official languages and receive a reply in the same language and the right to access Parliament, Council and Commission documents in accordance with the applicable EU rules;
- C. whereas present and emerging systemic challenges, such as the climate crisis, global pandemics, the digital transition and social inequalities require the adaptation of structures and approaches ensuring active participation of citizens in society; whereas the active digital engagement of citizens should take into account and address the digital gap between generations and social groups as well as between well connected urban areas and rural and remote areas, while improving overall digital literacy;
- D. whereas EU programmes promoting civic engagement, rights and values, the sense of belonging and increasing socio-civic competences and critical thinking are more important than ever;
- E. whereas citizens' engagement must be understood as multilevel, encompassing local, regional, national, European and global processes through which people acquire awareness and knowledge and express their opinions taking part in and influencing the decisions that affect their lives; whereas participants from rural and remote areas must be encouraged to participate in the programme; whereas the ongoing processes of globalisation and European integration will require the new generation of Europeans to be increasingly politically engaged on multiple levels in order to be able to live and work internationally and navigate difference in their daily lives; whereas societies are becoming more diverse, making respect for human dignity, the diversity of cultures and origins and the rejection of any kind of discrimination towards women, LGBTIQ+ people, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups ever more important within Europe;
- F. whereas socio-political changes observed in Member States, ranging from social polarisation and low institutional trust to democratic backsliding, the erosion of the rule of law, the shrinking space for civil society, exclusionary nationalism and the instrumentalisation of Euroscepticism for political purposes, along with the rise of extremist movements and authoritarianism, entryism of religious fundamentalisms, as well as disinformation campaigns and misinformation, may pose a serious threat to European democracies and destabilise the Union as a whole; whereas strengthening citizens' active participation and engagement through formal, non-formal, informal and lifelong learning and education plays a fundamental role in countering this trend;

- G. whereas the emergence of a European citizenship has been hindered by a knowledge gap and an emotional gap, which is often related to misperceptions of the EU and should therefore be accompanied and reinforced by a set of mechanisms enabling citizen participation and intercultural dialogue; whereas a better understanding of our shared European history and stronger citizen engagement in social and political life can have a beneficial impact on an emerging European identity that complements citizens' multiple local, regional national, geographical, cultural or other identities; whereas active citizens' participation and dialogue are interlinked with the European dimension of citizenship education and can effectively contribute to the creation of a European citizenship with clear rights and obligations;
- H. whereas insufficient citizen engagement, limited knowledge of the EU and poor understanding of its added value may contribute to the perception of a democratic deficit and lead to Euroscepticism in Member States;
- I. whereas the shrinking of civic space in the European Union and other countries participating in the programme is affecting democratic participation and the ability of civil society organisations to act as checks and balances with regard to the rule of law; whereas actions to support and enable the participation of civil society, including minorities' and grassroots-level organisations that have long track records and considerable experience, are paramount for defending democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Member States;
- J. whereas minorities' civil society organisations are key for self-representation and civic engagement of minoritised people, especially for those groups that lack other formal pathways for political representation;
- K. whereas there were over 22 million non-EU country nationals residing in the EU in 2020; whereas these groups lack the access to formal political activities, resulting in the lives of millions of people being impacted by decisions that are made without their involvement or input; whereas this represents a fundamental democratic deficit across the EU at all levels and a challenge to producing sustainable, equitable and effective policies and programmes, whereas the realisation of human rights related to political and public participation of non-citizens play a crucial role in the promotion of democratic governance, the rule of law, social inclusion, economic development, and elimination of marginalisation and discrimination in the EU;

The early stages of the implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (2021-2027): Strand 3 - Citizens' engagement

1. Firmly believes that the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme makes a unique contribution to enhancing civic engagement and participation from a fundamental rights perspective by effectively combining values, civil dialogue and citizenship, while also promoting social and gender equality, the diversity through the assistance for preserving the regional heritage, historical consciousness and the fight against discrimination and violence; is of the opinion that the CERV programme is an essential instrument for the future of the EU and for addressing socio-political challenges, such as the knowledge gap, Euroscepticism, shrinking civic space, and the erosion of and challenges to the rule of law across Europe; encourages the programme to support actions aimed at building the resilience of civil society organisations, including those focused on the rule of law and EU values;
2. Recalls that the implementation of the CERV programme is still in its early stages, as the regulation establishing the programme was only adopted in 2021; points out that for this reason, only a few projects in Strand 3 have been completed and there is little information available from beneficiaries to enable results to be evaluated accurately;
3. Calls on the Commission to prioritise data collection on the CERV programme, particularly on disadvantaged groups, including marginalised communities, minorities, and vulnerable populations to address their unique challenges and promote research into their experiences; insists on the need to establish strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; underlines that this approach will be useful to inform policy development, ensuring the meaningful participation of disadvantaged groups in civic engagement initiatives and elevate their voices, and create a more inclusive and equitable programme while ensuring better future evaluations in general;
4. Underlines that the programme faced several challenges that hindered the initial stages of its implementation, many of which were external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, and that these disrupted and compromised citizens' rights and participation in democracy; notes, however, that after a slow start its implementation picked up and now the programme is functioning well; furthermore highlights that awareness campaigns must be organised in order to reach a wider population, especially from rural areas;
5. Is concerned that the use and introduction of new digital tools for the implementation of EU funds (e.g. the eGrants tool) appear to be a key issue for beneficiaries with regard to the programme's development; regrets that complex procedures have also hindered the participation of smaller organisations that do not have the time and resources required to go through the application process within the set timelines; considers that the design of these tools limits the

programme's ability to adapt to new developments and changing needs; calls for the elimination of the administrative burdens and the simplification of the application, contracting and reporting processes; underlines that simplifying administrative requirements also includes a more efficient and flexible application process for organisations that have signed multi-year framework partnership agreements, also in order to anticipate policy developments; stresses, furthermore, the need to make the application portal more user friendly, especially for small-scale organisations, and to ensure that all the documents related to the procedure be translated in all EU languages in order to widen participation from all Member States and ensure cultural diversity;

6. Deplores that it is not obligatory for Member States to set up a CERV programme national contact point (NCP) that offers neutral advice, helpful information and support to applicants, stakeholders and beneficiaries, including assistance with the application process, while sharing easy-to-understand information about programme outcomes; notes with regret that only 20 Member States had NCPs by June 2023;
7. Is deeply concerned that current inflation rates are affecting running costs for CERV beneficiaries; regrets that beneficiaries face challenges in implementing their planned activities, in particular regarding the unit costs for travel, accommodation and daily allowances, and may have to scale back some of the activities they initially planned in order to remain within the budget;

Policy recommendations for the future of the CERV programme

8. Calls on the Commission to establish the Civil Dialogue Group to ensure regular, open, and transparent dialogue to strengthen civil dialogue throughout the programme in such a way as to support a two-way process between institutions at all levels and all relevant stakeholders, especially CSOs, and as part of the implementation of Article 11 of Regulation (EU) 2021/692, as well as using civil dialogue as a tool for governance and to determine priorities for the two-year work programme and promoting further the collective dimension of civic engagement as a critical dimension of democracy and of the rule of law; recalls, in this regard, that innovative actions to support dialogue with civil society should be promoted, including with a view to fostering a culture of trust-based partnership with grantees; calls, in particular, for capacity-building actions to support the wide participation of civil society, particularly through links with other funding schemes provided through shared management, such as the technical support instrument;
9. Recalls the need to encourage citizens' active participation by reinforcing the European dimension of citizenship education, both in curricular and extracurricular activities; highlights that truly

European citizenship education can inform and form citizens in the spirit of civic engagement and participation and that appropriate EU guidelines can be a useful tool in this regard; emphasises the importance of including non-citizens who live in the EU, and their self-led organisations, in the target group of the CERV programme, which will foster democratic governance, the rule of law and social inclusion;

10. Calls on the Member States that have not yet designated NCPs to do so as quickly as possible and calls on the Commission to continue working with the NCP network through meetings, training measures and dedicated exchanges, as these have been organised very successfully so far; in this context, encourages the Commission, Member states and NCPs to establish a European network of NCPs to facilitate the sharing of best practices and the exchange of knowledge; furthermore encourages the Commission to establish a network of CERV beneficiaries to exchange experiences and best practices for a deeper understanding of local and national realities across the EU and beyond;
11. Takes note of the results of introducing different types of re-granting mechanisms under the CERV programme, which have been very encouraging so far; calls for a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the different re-granting calls with a view to possibly extending their use to the other strands of the CERV programme, where relevant, and in particular to Strand 3, in order to ensure that EU funding reaches grassroots-level CSOs that have long track records and considerable experience; urges the Commission to further simplify the administrative procedures and requirements for re-granting to give organisations applying for re-granting more flexibility vis-à-vis sub-grantees, ensuring appropriate working, healthcare and social protection standards; believes that the co-funding requirements could be revised with a view to adapting the rules to the beneficiary's situation in order to support a larger variety of beneficiaries, including individuals and micro structures, and thematic fields; insists on the importance to promote the use of the programme in the educational sector at large, including students, teachers, educational staff and youth workers; underlines that funding provided from the CERV programme in the field of rights, equality, values and civic engagement, for which other sources of funding are very scarce or absent, should cover a greater percentage of grant amounts; urges the Commission to ensure that financing goes to structures that respect the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, for instance by setting up control mechanisms to guarantee appropriate working, healthcare and social protection standards; calls for an assessment on the re-granting mechanisms to evaluate its effectiveness and flexibility in reaching grassroots groups and in supporting organisations in countries with shrinking civic space;

12. Calls for the programme's budget to be increased to EUR 2.6 billion in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) to meet the growing demand for civic engagement and democratic participation initiatives, and for the establishment of an ad hoc mechanism for the protection of human rights defenders, similar to mechanisms in place for human rights defenders outside the EU or the protection of journalists, and, in general, to address the impact of inflation on programme costs, also considering the Conclusions of the Conference on the future of Europe on European citizenship and education, as well as the strategic importance of the CERV programme for the implementation of EU priorities;
13. Emphasises that effective communication and awareness-raising activities are essential for the success of the programme and therefore need to be prioritised in order to engage potential beneficiaries, especially at local level;
14. Acknowledges that exchanges and participation in activities under the CERV programme are key to building the capacity of civil society organisations for civic engagement and the promotion of EU values in non-EU countries; underlines that active engagement and commitment to European values do not start with accession agreements and are the outcome of the long-standing work of activists and civil society organisations to promote these ideas and support local activists in non-EU countries; encourages the Commission to facilitate the participation of non-EU citizens through the engagement of non-EU CSOs in CERV activities; calls, therefore, for the CERV programme to cover the participation costs of civil society representatives, at least for those from candidate and associated countries, regardless of whether their country is involved in the CERV programme; stresses the need to address the challenges associated with the war in Ukraine by encouraging projects with Ukrainian partners through remembrance, and democratic participation activities and recovering Ukrainian cultural heritage;
15. Reiterates its call to make the CERV programme a lever for action in the field of European historical consciousness by actively supporting structures that aim at fostering critical historical memory, for instance on transnational research and visiting places of memory, both in the EU and beyond; particularly to denounce historical and cultural revisionism; calls on the Commission and Member States to pay particular attention to sensitive societal issues that could be subject to possible instrumentalisation;
16. Asks for the CERV programme to support the emerging dynamic of linking town twinning and networks of towns to the twinning of education establishments, which can reinforce the European dimension, the exchange of good practices and the sense of belonging;

17. Urges the Commission to further simplify the administrative procedures for four-year framework partnerships for operating grants, in particular regarding the specific characteristics of the IT tool used, which seems more suited to the character of action grants;

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18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.