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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the *ex post* evaluation of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) programme
(second part), the *ex post* evaluation of the Europe for Citizens (EfC) programme, and
the *interim* evaluation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme**

{SWD(2025) 133 final}

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of the evaluation¹ carried out by the European Commission and consists of three components:

- (1) the *ex post* evaluation of the [Rights, Equality and Citizenship \(REC\) programme](#)², assessing its longer-term impact and sustainability effects, on the basis of the results of the first part of the *ex post* evaluation³ completed in 2022;
- (2) the *ex post* evaluation of the [Europe for Citizens \(EfC\) programme](#)⁴, assessing the results achieved, and its long-term impact and sustainability effects;
- (3) the *interim* evaluation of the [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values \(CERV\) programme](#)⁵, assessing its preliminary achievements.

In line with the Better Regulation guidelines⁶, the evaluation assesses these three programmes against the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU-added-value and relevance criteria.

The REC programme aimed⁷ to contribute to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons – as enshrined in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and international human rights conventions to which the Union has acceded – are promoted, protected and effectively implemented. In parallel, the EfC programme supported initiatives to strengthen remembrance of recent European history and to enhance civic participation at EU level. Since 2021, the CERV programme has sought to support and develop open, democratic, equal, inclusive and rights-based societies founded on the rule of law. This includes a vibrant and empowered civil society, encouraging democratic, civic and social participation, and cultivating the rich diversity of European society, based on common values, history and memory.

The evaluation is based on evidence gathered through a supporting study carried out by external experts⁸. It takes stock of the preceding impact assessment⁹ to analyse a possible proposal for a European culture, rights and values programme, and it acknowledges the REC *interim*¹⁰ evaluation, the first part of the REC *ex post* evaluation and the EfC *interim*¹¹ evaluation. Specifically, the *interim* evaluation of the CERV programme also draws on the findings of the second part of the *ex post* evaluation of the 2014-2020 REC programme as well as the *ex post* evaluation of the EfC programme¹².

¹ See Commission staff working document accompanying the report.

² Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of 17 December 2013.

³ Considering that a significant number of projects were still ongoing in 2021, the first part of the *ex post* evaluation of the REC programme ([COM/2022/118 final](#)) provided an overview of the funding distribution and assessed preliminary achievements. This report presents the second part of the *ex post* evaluation and focuses on the long-term impacts and sustainability of the effects of the programme.

⁴ Regulation (EU) No 390/2014 of 14 April 2014.

⁵ Regulation (EU) No 2021/692 of 28 April 2021.

⁶ [Better regulation: guidelines and toolbox](#).

⁷ Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013, Art. 3.

⁸ Some data quality challenges were identified, particularly with regard to the data availability and analysis for the REC programme, and mitigated as far as possible to produce robust findings.

⁹ [SWD\(2018\) 290 final](#).

¹⁰ [SWD/2018/358 final](#).

¹¹ [SWD/2018/086 final](#).

¹² While the data collection activities for the *ex post* evaluations of the REC (second part) and EfC programmes on one side and the *interim* evaluation of the CERV programme on the other side were carried out in parallel, the overall evaluation exercise was designed and planned as to allow for the findings of the two *ex post* evaluations to feed the analysis of the *interim* one.

The *ex post* evaluations of the REC and EfC programmes cover the implementation period from 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2020 and all activities in all participating countries¹³ during that time. The *interim* evaluation of the CERV programme covers the implementation period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2023 and all activities in all participating countries¹⁴ during that time.

A wide range of stakeholders was consulted, including EU Member States that are members of the relevant programme committees, programme applicants and beneficiaries, expert groups, agencies, programme contact points, civil society organisations and the public. Overall, more than 1 000 stakeholders provided feedback during the entire consultation process¹⁵.

This report summarises the evaluation's key findings. It makes observations and points out areas for improvement that the Commission could consider for the current programming period and for the next funding cycle.

2. Key evaluation findings

The EfC and REC programmes have been effective in achieving their objectives. Lessons learned from these programmes, including on simplifying procedures for efficiency gains for the European Commission and for beneficiaries, and on visibility, have been translated into improvements under the CERV programme. Also, in view of these improvements, it can be concluded that this programme is on track to achieving its objectives. The evaluation also concluded that there is a proven need for a programme addressing the issues covered by the CERV programme. The key findings presented below are structured along the five evaluation criteria, with each criterion addressed for each programme.

2.1. Effectiveness

Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme

The REC programme was effective in meeting its objectives. It effectively reached out to a diverse range of organisations, including public authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs) and research entities, ensuring that broad stakeholder groups benefited from its initiatives. These focused on non-discrimination, gender equality, child protection and the prevention of racism and violence, while indirectly encompassing all individuals in the EU subject to discrimination, intolerance or violence. While target groups were well-distributed across the specific objectives, certain groups were more frequently linked with specific goals, indicating a flexible and adaptive approach within the programme to effectively meet diverse needs and contexts.

The number of grants and procurement contracts funded, as well as the proportion of the budget committed to the nine specific objectives, highlight that the REC programme contributed the most to promoting the effective implementation of the principle of non-discrimination and to preventing and combating all forms of violence against children, young people, women and other at-risk groups, as per the plans under the annual work programmes. However, **most projects funded under the REC programme contributed to multiple specific objectives and not only to the one for which the funding had been received.**

¹³ All EU Member States, Iceland and Serbia were eligible to participate in the REC programme, while Liechtenstein was eligible for some specific objectives only. In addition to all EU Member States, the EfC programme was implemented in six other participating partners: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo*.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions of status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

¹⁴ The CERV programme applies in all EU Member States. In November 2024, participating partners also included: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Ukraine.

¹⁵ Depending on the identified stakeholder group, dedicated methods and tools were used to conduct the consultations: a questionnaire-based online public consultation, interviews, focus groups, deliberative workshops and targeted surveys. They complemented data and information collected through other methods, such as the desk research and case studies.

In line with the specific objectives, one of the achievements of the REC programme is the number of structural coordination mechanisms set up with all stakeholders, including Roma, on the implementation of the national Roma integration strategies¹⁶. In addition, the female employment rate in the EU¹⁷ went up from 62.4% to 66.2% by the end of the programme, the gender pay gap¹⁸ in the EU decreased to 12.3%, and the percentage of people that consider domestic violence against women unacceptable¹⁹ rose from 84% to 96%. These are all positive results. However, it is not possible to establish causality, also considering that multiple factors beyond the REC programme may have contributed to the progress reflected in the corresponding indicators. REC funding contributed to the organisation of the access city awards, the European day of persons with disabilities and awareness-raising workshops in Member States, and to implementing the European Disability Card in the Member States.

The REC programme has shown long-term results beyond the 2014-2020 period. Numerous tools and mechanisms for cross-border cooperation and transnational networks were created. Thanks to REC funding, stakeholders were able to work across the EU and build long-term relationships to promote and implement their strategies over the longer term. Moreover, the types of activities funded tended to produce longer-term effects (e.g. increased knowledge and awareness as a result of training and awareness-raising activities). Between 2016 and 2020, more than 2.3 million people participated in training activities.

The programme had to deal with external factors, with the COVID-19 pandemic having the largest impact. Even though it was necessary to adjust timelines and shift project activities to online platforms, the pandemic did not appear to impact the effectiveness of the funded projects, also thanks to the measures taken by the Commission (such as flexibility in extending the duration of grant agreements). On the positive side, the pandemic did encourage beneficiaries to make better use of digital technologies and collaborate online.

The programme covered all Member States, with the highest number of projects implemented by organisations in Italy, Belgium, Greece and Spain. **Overall, stakeholders were satisfied with how calls were publicised and information disseminated.** However, smaller, grassroots organisations faced challenges in accessing information about funding opportunities, suggesting the need for better outreach and support.

Europe for Citizens programme

The EfC programme achieved its general and specific objectives. While it is not possible to establish causality, Eurobarometer data indicates that the percentage of EU citizens feeling European²⁰ increased from 63% in 2014 to reach 72% in 2023, well beyond the programme's target of 59%. In line with the performance-related indicators set by Regulation 390/2014²¹, the programme's beneficiaries estimated that over 9.3 million participants were directly involved in activities across both its strands, and 388 million people were involved across the EU overall. These numbers are significant, but the estimate should be made cautiously because of the caveats concerning the quality of the reporting on participant numbers. The programme also supported the implementation of over 2 500 projects across the EU and 14 707 participating organisations across all actions. It is therefore reasonable to argue that the programme might have contributed, at least to some extent, to the progress recorded in the Eurobarometer citizenship survey over the years.

¹⁶ This number rose from zero in 2013 to one in all 27 Member States by 2023.

¹⁷ Eurostat, 'Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data', https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSI_EMP_A.

¹⁸ Eurostat, 'Gender pay gap in unadjusted form by NACE Rev. 2 activity', https://doi.org/10.2908/EARN_GR_GPGR2.

¹⁹ Special Eurobarometer 449: Gender-based violence, doi:10.2838/009088.

²⁰ Indicator used as a proxy for the contribution to citizens' understanding of the Union, its history and diversity, to foster European citizenship and to improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at Union level.

²¹ Regulation (EU) No 390/2014 of 14 April 2014, Article 15 and Annex III.

Beneficiaries considered that their projects had achieved their expected results. A third of the respondents to the public consultation recognised that **the programme had been successful in raising awareness of the common history and values of the EU and in increasing participation in civic and democratic life. The existence of separate strands for remembrance and civil society activities was helpful** in providing distinct and separate contributions to achieving the general and specific objectives.

The EfC programme supported projects which generated results with potential for long-term impacts. Its networking value²², low administrative burden, inclusivity and broad thematic scope were success factors which enhanced long-term impact. Several examples of the ways in which activities continued after the end of a project or generated an impact beyond the project's expected results were identified, e.g. the development of policy initiatives at local level to provide more assistance for non-governmental organisations working with vulnerable groups, and the creation of regional stakeholder dialogue platforms.

The most significant unexpected effects on the programme related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in projects facing delays or significant challenges to their implementation. However, this did not necessarily affect outcomes because beneficiaries adapted quickly and, as in the case of the REC programme, the measures taken by the Commission were effective. There were beneficial side-effects from the accelerated digitalisation imposed by the pandemic, which led to some CSOs reaching out through virtual tools to more people than planned.

Grants were awarded to beneficiaries in all Member States. The programme was mainly visible to larger, well-networked eligible organisations with a strong focus on seeking funding opportunities. Beneficiaries highlighted ways in which they thought the programme could have been more proactively promoted, e.g. through social and interactive media. Nonetheless, the programme successfully attracted a growing number of first-time applicants over the years (peaking at 66% in 2019), which indicates that potential applicants had been or had become aware of the programme.

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme

At mid-term, **the CERV programme is on track to achieving its objectives.** The projects and their proposed activities and outputs are in line with the types of action envisaged by the programme across all strands. Moreover, **the programme has already surpassed most of its indicators' targets.** Based on the evidence collected, it is likely that the outcomes envisaged in the intervention logic will be achieved, even though it is still too early to make any definitive judgement.

Based on the evidence collected for this evaluation, **awarded projects were in line with EU policy priorities, addressed a real need in the field, were based on well-established methodologies and strong partnerships established in advance, had a strong EU dimension and offered EU added value²³, and planned realistic and sustainable results²⁴.** There was consensus across all stakeholders consulted that the re-granting mechanisms in the areas of Union values and Daphne addressed important needs in the civil society sector. At the same time, the evidence collected also showed that **the need for increased EU funding**

²² i.e. facilitating international cooperation across the EU, creating networks in niche thematic areas and exchanging best practice with like-minded organisations.

²³ Beneficiaries interviewed and surveyed considered the EU dimension of the programme a key strength and motivating factor for them to apply to work across multiple EU Member States. Sometimes working across Europe and on promoting and implementing EU strategies was only possible through funding under the CERV programme.

²⁴ The first grant awarded was often a stepping stone into further developing methodologies and approaches for the project(s) that followed, and helped to consolidate organisations' networks.

dedicated to values, rights and citizenship remains unaddressed. The shortage of resources allocated to these critical areas may limit the ability to fulfil the CERV objectives.

External factors, such as COVID-19, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Brexit²⁵ and specific national contexts, have had a limited effect on the programme overall. While COVID-19 led to delays in the implementation of some projects, this does not appear to have had any effect on the CERV programme as such. Moreover, COVID-19 and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have been reflected in the 2021-2022 and 2023-2025 work programmes²⁶, thus maintaining the programme's relevance.

The programme's visibility mainly relies on the CERV national contact points (NCPs) and information webinars. Information is also shared via several other channels²⁷, which reach out to potential applicants throughout the EU. **The programme does appear to be moderately well known in EU Member States, but mainly by larger organisations with international networks or in major cities.** The efforts of NCPs to increase the visibility of the programme and stakeholder engagement were widely appreciated; however, the evidence highlighted the scope for improving awareness about the CERV programme, particularly outside the strict confinements of its own target groups.

The programme **covers all EU Member States and a number of non-EU countries** that opted to participate in the programme on a voluntary basis. The **geographical balance has also improved under the CERV programme**, with a higher proportion of projects in Eastern Europe than under the predecessor programmes²⁸.

The CERV programme demonstrates a strong commitment to mainstreaming gender equality and promoting a more inclusive and equitable approach to its activities. To ensure effective implementation, and based on practices already started under its predecessor programmes, the programme has integrated gender equality into its calls for proposals and evaluation methodology^{29,30}. Furthermore, each project financed through grants is also assessed and scored based on its contribution to gender equality. Nevertheless, despite the significant training and guidance efforts, a considerable number of beneficiaries continued to find including the gender perspective a challenge. Comparisons between the gender scores³¹ of the CERV programme and equivalent EU funding programmes³² shows that the CERV programme has the largest proportion of funding dedicated to projects that specifically aim to promote and advance gender equality, which is in line with the programme's objectives. **Between 2021-2023, every fourth euro of CERV financing from grants contributed strongly to gender**

²⁵ Several interviewees regretted that the UK had chosen not to negotiate participation in the CERV programme.

²⁶ Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine was emphasised in the 2023-2025 CERV work programme, particularly in calls for proposals on European remembrance (i.e. noting the challenge of historical distortion and revisionism), on children's rights (i.e. mental health) and gender-based violence and violence against children (i.e. support to victims of war crimes). The emphasis on 'solidarity' under Strand 3 (citizens' engagement and participation) can also be considered as a response to both Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and COVID-19.

²⁷ Such as a DG JUST newsletter launched in 2019, the EU Funding & Tenders portal, call for proposals information sessions, etc.

²⁸ Considering these findings, the absence of NCPs in Belgium, Bulgaria, Ireland, Malta, Hungary and Poland does not appear to have had an impact on geographical balance in 2021-2023, taking into account the presence of other information channels that targeted potential applicants.

²⁹ Applicants must demonstrate how they will respect and monitor gender equality during project implementation, and experts contracted to support the evaluation of proposals are trained on tracking expenditure related to gender equality, as part of the [Commission's work to mainstream gender equality in the EU budget](#). This approach has contributed to capacity building among experts and improved data collection, including sex-disaggregated data.

³⁰ Information sessions and Q&A documents provide guidance on incorporating a gender perspective into proposals.

³¹ Gender scores are assigned to project proposals as part of the Commission's work to mainstream gender equality in the EU budget.

³² The asylum, migration and integration fund (AMIF), the creative Europe programme, the European social fund plus (ESF+), Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the justice programme, the LIFE programme.

equality; additionally, about half of all the grants funded projects closely intertwined with the promotion of gender equality³³.

2.2. Efficiency

Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme

The REC Regulation set a budget of EUR 439 476 000 for 2014-2020, with yearly amounts set out in the work programmes. By August 2024, 91% of the committed budget had been spent on grants and procurement³⁴. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, beneficiaries confirmed spending the funding they were awarded as planned, even though the pandemic was still the most frequently cited factor impacting expenditures. On the one hand, it reduced the travel and subsistence budget, while on the other hand it sometimes increased the internal costs of projects e.g. due to the (no-cost) project extensions awarded, or to unplanned costs linked to the shift to online seminars and podcasts.

Most beneficiaries were satisfied with the timeliness of information on calls, the eligibility criteria, the selection process and the feedback they received. The introduction of the eGrants portal in 2016 led to mixed reactions: while some appreciated the ease of use, others faced technical difficulties. The current evaluation confirmed the results of the first part of the *ex post* evaluation that small organisations, such as civil society and grassroots organisations, struggled with securing the required 20% level of co-financing. Stakeholders considered both the application and reporting burdensome³⁵. Stakeholders proposed a shift towards a more results-oriented approach, which was tackled in the meantime under the CERV programme with the lump-sum funding. In addition, the number of yearly deliverables, deemed as excessively high by beneficiaries, has also been reduced under the CERV.

Despite the highlighted administrative burden of the application and reporting process, **the benefits of the REC programme clearly outweighed the costs to beneficiaries.** Not only is there an interest in continuing to apply for funding, but for many recurrent applicants, **the programme filled a real gap, providing independent funding, and in many cases no other funding could have covered the themes and types of activities funded.**

Europe for Citizens programme

Regulation 390/2014 set the budget of the EfC programme at EUR 185 468 000. The budget was increased twice during the implementation period: in 2014 by EUR 2.25 million, and in 2020 by EUR 6.9 million. Except for 2014 and 2020, programme expenditure remained stable over the years and in line with the plans made in the respective work programmes.

Success rates varied greatly³⁶, with a high number of good quality proposals that could not be funded. **The benefits of the EfC programme outweighed the costs to beneficiaries**, with most beneficiaries successfully absorbing the funding they were awarded; those that experienced difficulties absorbing the funds did so because of the extraordinary circumstances that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all the EfC beneficiaries consulted considered the application process to be clear, accessible, simple and straightforward. It is

³³ Between 2021-2023, around 23% of CERV funding provided via grants received a score of 2, based on the gender mainstreaming methodology adopted by the European Commission, while 53% of funding received a score of 1. The methodology is based on a four-point scoring system. Score 2 indicates interventions whose principal objective is to improve gender equality. Score 1 indicates interventions having gender equality as an important and deliberate objective but not as the main reason for the intervention. Data source: European Commission budget performance data.

³⁴ With payments still outstanding of several grants that ended in 2024, this percentage is likely to further increase.

³⁵ Some of the feedback received concerned unnecessary repetition in reporting and changes to the reporting requirements during the implementation period.

³⁶ Ranging from only 6% for civil society projects to 30% for proposals in the first phase of Town Twinning.

important to note however that the programme was already using lump-sum funding when it was not relying on the eGrants system (as the REC programme did from 2016 onwards). For some EfC beneficiaries, the transition to the eGrants system may have presented challenges, leading them to perceive that the previous procedures were simpler in comparison.

The simplifications which had taken place over the successive iterations of the programme improved accessibility to CSOs of all types and sizes. The use of lump sums and unit costs was a successful feature of the programme.

Although it was challenging for some smaller or grassroots CSOs, the co-financing requirement was accepted as necessary and conducive to the leveraging of additional funds. Most beneficiaries did not face any specific difficulties in raising the additional funds. The advance payment increases, from 40% to 50% in 2019 and to 60% in 2020, made it even easier for smaller organisations to access the programme.

The programme's funding generated worthy results, which contributed to its objectives and the wider EU policy goals and priorities. The evaluation did, however, identify a few instances in which the administrative burden could have been reduced even further, e.g. through more guidance.

Communication between the Commission and beneficiaries was open and clear. The selection process was considered generally fair and transparent, and it was noted that the Commission provided appropriate feedback on the outcomes. **In general, the reporting requirements were considered to have been clear, straightforward and simple,** even though less experienced beneficiary organisations would have appreciated more substantial guidance and training on reporting requirements and forms. The Civil Dialogue Group, a specific feature of the EfC programme, provided meaningful inputs.

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme

The analysis of the efficiency criterion confirmed that, **to date, the benefits of the CERV programme outweigh the costs** borne by beneficiaries due to their participation.

The **main benefits** of the funding were directly project related (i.e. **the ability to implement the desired approach**), but also related to **increased networking and collaboration with partners in other countries**, and **enhanced visibility and recognition of the organisation** because it received EU funding. The opportunity to **test innovative approaches to address societal challenges**, involving new types of stakeholders and benefiting their target groups through greater capacity development, were also found to be important benefits of the funding. However, the cost-of-living crisis meant that the benefits of the funding were significantly reduced, with many beneficiaries struggling to maintain the planned project budgets and, in some cases, having to adjust the range of planned activities.

The main effects of the new implementation features³⁷ introduced by the Commission under the CERV programme have improved predictability, cut red tape, strengthened programme monitoring³⁸ and included more grassroots and smaller organisations through re-granting mechanisms³⁹. One exception to this overall simplification and cutting of red tape are unit costs. Their introduction at Commission corporate level appears to have added

³⁷ Multiannual work programmes, lump sums, re-granting mechanism, programme performance monitoring framework.

³⁸ A programme performance monitoring framework is in place and there are dedicated data collection tools for collecting indicators on outputs and outcomes.

³⁹ All stakeholders consulted for the evaluation confirmed that the introduction of re-granting to third parties (i.e. financial support to third parties) has helped to improve accessibility to EU funding for small and grassroots organisations through simplified application processes facilitated by 'intermediaries'.

complexity, especially as they do not reflect the actual costs of activities and raise challenging limitations on travel costs.

The application process is timely, with **information about the calls reaching applicants when they need it**. For project beneficiaries, **the main costs of the programme have been associated with the staff time and resources required to invest in the application process**, with large variability between smaller organisations, who perceived these costs to be a lot higher, and larger organisations with professionalised bid teams, for whom these costs appeared to pose less of a challenge. **The administrative burden has been identified as a risk for very small projects** (such as town twinning), including due to the challenges of using the eGrants system, which can deter applicants from applying when the effort required to apply is higher than the relatively limited grant amount expected.

While satisfaction with the feedback received from the Commission on applications was high, there appears to be room for improving consistency in the level of detail provided, and for making clearer what the Commission expects from applications⁴⁰.

On the approach to reporting, **notable improvements were made in the clarity of the reporting requirements compared with the REC programme**. For example, reducing the reporting requirements has enabled projects to be more results oriented.

The limited inefficiencies found related to reporting requirements for operating grant beneficiaries⁴¹. **The process of requesting budgetary amendments was also highlighted as burdensome**. Data collection through the EU Survey on Justice, Rights and Values – one of the programme’s monitoring tools – was also criticised for its lack of relevance for target groups, its length, and the requirement to collect equality data⁴².

The evaluation also identified the **eGrants system’s lack of user-friendliness** and technical issues as an important factor impacting the efficiency of the programme⁴³.

Finally, the small number of information and communications technology (ICT) tools contracted and granted, compared with other types of activities funded, indicates that there is scope to make even better use of digitalisation opportunities at project level.

2.3. Coherence

Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme

The evaluation confirmed the findings from the first part of the *ex post* evaluation that **the objectives and interventions of the REC programme were coherent with wider EU policies and priorities**. This was ensured through the nature of REC programming, where the priorities of the call for proposals were led by specific strategic developments and Commission priorities. The programme funded activities that focused on prevention, protection and victim support, including awareness-raising among the general public, training of professionals, and capacity building of organisations and structures working on these issues. It empowered LGBTIQ+ people, supported victims of hate crime and promoted their rights. Activities were funded to support people with disabilities and promote their rights, and to support Roma people and promote their inclusion and rights. The programme also funded activities to improve equality through economic independence, reconciling professional and private life and

⁴⁰ For example, applicants suggested improving clarity on the terminology and methodology used and introducing more specific examples and best practices to follow.

⁴¹ The timing of reports did not always align with the beneficiaries’ financial years, leading to requests for extensions. This was often due to the fact that the required data was not yet available at the scheduled reporting time, because it was dependent on the beneficiary’s financial year-end closure. The reporting template was also designed for project-based reporting, which may not be considered suitable by all types of beneficiaries.

⁴² The survey was adapted in September 2024 on the basis of previous feedback from beneficiaries.

⁴³ Although the system was recently revised, its effectiveness could not be assessed within the scope of this evaluation.

reducing the gender pay gap, but also activities aimed at ending gender-based violence. In addition, gender mainstreaming and the promotion of gender equality were integrated into the programme design: they had to be integrated and evaluated in all projects funded, ensuring that gender equality could be part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the activities.

The REC programme also contributed to the new Commission priorities⁴⁴ set by President von der Leyen for 2019-2024.

The REC programme complemented other EU funding instruments⁴⁵. Coherence was ensured through the different stages of the programme's lifecycle: from the objectives set by the Regulation, through implementation (annual work programmes), and until project kick-off. About a third of REC beneficiaries consulted for this evaluation declared that they had received funding from other sources⁴⁶. Beneficiaries did not report any lack of coherence or overlaps with these funding sources or with national, regional or local funds.

Europe for Citizens programme

The EfC programme was coherent with EU policies and priorities. As with the REC programme, the evaluation found that the EfC programme was aligned with the Commission's priorities for 2014-2020, but also demonstrated flexibility to adapt to the priorities of the new Commission for 2019-2024. Projects funded under the programme addressed critical issues such as fake news, media literacy and e-democracy. Many addressed solidarity and social inclusion, the use of digital tools to enhance democratic engagement, and the upholding of EU values. Overall, all projects sought to encourage stronger democratic participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, increased digitalisation further underscored this alignment. The annual work programmes consistently recommended to potential beneficiaries the proactive use of social media, with the aim of reaching out especially to younger generations, which paid off, as indicated by the high number of participants aged under 30 in the programme overall (i.e. almost half of the estimated direct participants). The programme facilitated bottom-up activities contributing to key EU priorities.

The programme supported the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) – a unique transnational instrument enabling EU citizens to engage directly in the legislative process – in line with the EU goal of enhancing participatory democracy. **The programme complemented other EU programmes⁴⁷,** supporting unique activities that enhanced its distinct contribution to EU goals. The programme's features effectively promoted networking and created new opportunities for synergies. This was especially valuable for enhancing cross-border cooperation, facilitating educational and cultural exchanges through other programmes such as Erasmus+, and advancing bilateral partnerships with twinned organisations. **The focus on cultural heritage and remembrance activities aligned with initiatives such as the European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018), thus highlighting the programme's role in promoting a shared European identity.**

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme

The CERV programme occupies a unique niche within the EU policy and funding landscape, addressing gaps where other funding is not available, as confirmed by beneficiaries and the public consultation. **The CERV programme offers advantages that cannot all be**

⁴⁴ [A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024](#)

⁴⁵ Such as: Erasmus+, the justice programme, Horizon 2020, AMIF, ESF, creative Europe and the European regional development fund.

⁴⁶ e.g. from United Nations' agencies or the Visegrad fund.

⁴⁷ Such as Erasmus+, creative Europe and the European social fund. Synergies between these programmes were exploited on the ground, notably through the occasional, informal cooperation of national structures such as EfC NCPs, the creative Europe desks and Erasmus+ national agencies.

found in other programmes, such as pan-EU coverage, a comprehensive range of themes, the possibility to secure independent sources of financing, a specific focus on EU values, grants of a significant size, operating grants and re-granting mechanisms. What emerges clearly overall is that the **CERV programme occupies what would otherwise be a largely empty space in the values and rights funding landscape.**

Nevertheless, as the funding gap is significant, beneficiaries – if they can – also use other sources of funding, such as the Visegrad Fund. For some specific topics, beneficiaries seek to complement funding under the CERV programme with funding from other EU programmes, such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, or with governmental funding (at national, regional and local level).

In terms of internal coherence across the four programme strands, no specific issues have arisen. Beneficiaries appear comfortable with the single architecture that has replaced the predecessor programmes and do not find the division of themes across the strands to be an issue. **The new programme architecture of the CERV programme – bringing EU funding in the areas of values, rights and citizenship under one single programme – was considered to foster coherence and synergies between different policy priorities and was found to have contributed to a more holistic approach to addressing societal challenges and promoting EU values.**

Programme implementation is coherent with the EU’s international commitments and objectives, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals. International commitments are systematically cross-referenced in calls. Results in EU budget performance measurement show only limited green budgeting on horizontal green priorities so far – which is also due to the nature of the programme – but there are nevertheless several projects with a climate change dimension.

2.4. EU added value

Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme

The evidence confirmed that **the results of the REC programme could only have been achieved by action at EU level. The programme contributed to the consistent and coherent implementation of EU law and wide public awareness about the rights deriving from it.** As already detailed above, increased knowledge and awareness was one of the main results reported by beneficiaries.

The REC programme contributed to **developing mutual trust among Member States and improving cross-border cooperation**, as clearly exemplified by the 157 transnational networks created between 2016 and 2020. The programme also helped to **prepare and disseminate best practice** and to **create minimum standards, practical tools and solutions that addressed cross-border or EU-wide challenges.** The outputs of these activities continued to be used after the projects had ended.

By providing independent funding, the programme enabled sensitive topics to be addressed that would not have been funded at national level. Nearly all beneficiaries interviewed confirmed that, **if the programme had not been sustained, national governments would have been unlikely to fill the gap.** The programme increased the capacity of a wide range of key civil society players and human rights organisations. Several operating grant beneficiaries highlighted that REC funding had been fundamental to their organisation, and that they would not have been able to remain operational otherwise.

Europe for Citizens programme

It is likely that the impacts identified through the EfC programme would not have been achieved without the programme's specific EU-level support. Many beneficiaries would have struggled to implement projects on a similar scale or with the same impact.

The programme particularly responded to the CSOs' challenges related to a lack of funding for work areas critical to European citizenship. **It was crucial for activities requiring cross-border cooperation and a broader European perspective, as no similar national or regional schemes could match the programme's scope and scale.** The programme funded activities that involved citizens and organisations from multiple participating countries, fostering a sense of European identity and belonging. It therefore continued to fill what would otherwise have been a gap and created a level playing field enabling an equal access to the programme to all except some smaller organisations.

These outcomes were quantifiable through the number of projects spanning multiple countries and the scale of cross-border collaboration achieved. The programme's ability to bridge national differences and promote a cohesive European approach was instrumental in addressing the varied challenges faced at national level. At programme level, 70% of projects included a transnational partnership. By facilitating cross-border partnerships and the exchange of best practice, the programme enabled CSOs of all sizes to engage in more inclusive and effective activities. This support was crucial in enhancing the capacity of organisations to operate on a larger scale or beyond their usual mandate. While most beneficiaries did not always consider the EfC funding to be critical, it was nevertheless instrumental in helping them achieve more than they could have done without it. The programme enabled organisations to carry out specific projects and reach broader audiences, particularly in areas where national or regional funding options have been limited. In some cases, the funding was essential for the survival of organisations operating in challenging funding landscapes.

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme

In the absence in many EU Member States of public funds in the thematic areas covered by the CERV programme, **CERV funding remains a major contributor to civil society work in these areas.** The programme adds value over and above that created by Member States acting alone.

Most stakeholders consulted considered the public funding for transnational projects addressing rights and societal challenges in Member States to be minimal to non-existent. Many CSOs also faced challenges to obtain national funds in the areas of equality and non-discrimination, and combating violence against women. In this context, **the opportunity to obtain direct funding from the Commission was underlined as a major contributor to fairness and independence.**

The evidence gathered suggests that, in the absence of the CERV programme, a negative effect would likely be observed, possibly impacting the already shrinking civic space throughout the EU and significantly slowing down progress towards gender equality and equality overall. Feedback from stakeholders also confirmed that a discontinuation of CERV funding would contribute to a further decline in the sense of European citizenship and identity, more barriers for persons with disabilities, an increase in violence against children, a rise in extremism and radicalism, and further divisions.

2.5. Relevance

Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme

The REC programme remained relevant by effectively addressing both existing and emerging needs within the EU, including persistent societal challenges, such as

discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, Roma, persons with disabilities and older people. Issues such as hate crime, hate speech and violence against women and children, which have arisen in specific contexts such as the online environment and the COVID-19 pandemic, were also at the core of the programme.

The pace of progress⁴⁸ to achieve full equality and fundamental rights across the EU emphasises the continued relevance of the programme's objectives, while the high application rates under various specific objectives confirmed the strong demand for support. The flexible programming ensured that the REC programme could respond to the dynamic socio-political landscape within the EU and remain relevant to the evolving needs of stakeholders and citizens.

The COVID-19 pandemic required the programme to show flexibility as regards procedures, timelines and activities. Beneficiaries were very positive about how the related challenges were handled and the fact that project progress was ensured. Beneficiaries felt that the programme was also responsive to political factors and, to a lesser extent, economic factors. As for challenges, inflation and limitations in eligibility criteria, particularly concerning non-EU countries, were noted as significant issues.

The REC programme effectively targeted marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as victims of violence, ethnic minorities and children, in line with the critical challenges facing EU society. **The programme demonstrated considerable relevance to its beneficiaries, as the funding matched their strategic goals, avoiding the need for disproportionate adjustments to their activities.** The focus on capacity building, knowledge sharing, and structural support effectively addressed beneficiaries' requirements⁴⁹. The programme also helped networks grow and consolidate, which was crucial for widening the activities' impact and fostering international collaboration.

Some beneficiaries suggested the following areas of improvement: more attention to intersectionality in addressing gender and social inclusion issues; a greater focus on emerging issues such as disinformation, mental health and early childhood development, and the inclusion of non-EU countries for better international cooperation.

Europe for Citizens programme

The alignment with broader EU policy goals and priorities, and the fostering of a sense of European identity that were achieved by the EfC programme remain relevant objectives. By supporting the ECI, the programme enhanced democratic life, enabling citizens to influence EU policies. The Commission's efforts to raise awareness and improve ECI accessibility demonstrated a practical approach to citizen empowerment. The programme also encouraged civic participation through grassroots initiatives, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual understanding among Europeans and providing platforms for meaningful dialogue and action on common issues. Town-twinning activities promoted cross-border interactions and cultural exchanges, fostering European identity and ongoing dialogue on integration and shared values, while projects on European remembrance contributed to a shared understanding of European history.

The EfC programme was relevant to its final beneficiaries and mostly addressed the needs and target groups in thematic areas that remain relevant today. The programme's structure

⁴⁸ For instance, the special Eurobarometer 535 revealed that discrimination remains widespread, with 42% of respondents agreeing to this statement on the grounds of religion or beliefs, 45% based on age, 49% based on disability, and 54% regarding the ground of sexual orientation. See: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2972>. In this context, it should be noted that EU legislation covers these grounds only in certain areas of life.

⁴⁹ For example, many beneficiaries of operating grants noted that capacity-building efforts supported their organisational development and long-term sustainability. Many beneficiaries also highlighted that the funding enabled them to undertake projects that they would otherwise not have been able to perform. This funding often served as a foundation for further project development and methodological advancements.

supported a broad range of initiatives in line with the needs and priorities of CSOs, allowing them flexibility to tailor projects to specific thematic areas.

The beneficiaries' primary focus on citizen engagement and participation highlighted the relevance of the programme, given its focus on citizens. CSOs were also a key target, reflecting the programme's commitment to fostering open dialogue and collaboration, which is crucial for achieving EU policy goals. Public authorities were targeted for advocacy, enhancing the programme's relevance by promoting effective dialogue between civil society and decision-makers. The inclusion of vulnerable groups also demonstrated the programme's dedication to addressing inequalities and incorporating marginalised voices into the democratic process.

There was a consensus among beneficiaries that the programme's priorities had aligned well with the greatest needs in Member States relating to civic engagement and remembrance. A significant proportion of respondents to the public consultation also considered that the programme objectives were still relevant to the current challenges and needs in their Member States. The continuation of projects funded by the programme further highlighted its relevance, as a significant proportion of recipients received funding for projects that built on earlier initiatives and previous results. This indicates that the programme's support was in line with past needs and priorities, ensuring that funding remained relevant over time.

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme

The CERV programme remains relevant, given its objectives as set out in Regulation 2021/692⁵⁰. The evidence gathered for this evaluation confirms the gaps identified in the impact assessment. The EU is facing significant challenges related to equality, rights and democracy. Despite progress in some areas, many EU citizens still experience discrimination, violence and inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have amplified these issues, particularly affecting vulnerable groups such as children, people with disabilities and women. Overall, these challenges highlight the need for increased efforts to promote equality, rights and democracy in the EU, including greater support for civil society and awareness-raising initiatives.

The evidence points to a **very strong alignment between the needs of the target stakeholders, including CSOs, and the actions funded under the programme**, thus contributing to the EU's capacity to respond to the above-mentioned challenges. This not only responds directly to beneficiary organisations' missions and strategies, but it also allows them to reach new target groups. The EU-wide dimension was also considered to respond to CSOs' ambitions and needs to pursue projects involving multiple countries to increase learning and impact.

Beneficiaries emphasised that CERV funding, as well as funding under the predecessor programmes, had been instrumental in addressing key priorities and initiatives that were crucial for the growth and sustainability of their organisations. The funding enabled them to implement projects that they would not have been able to implement otherwise, and these projects often created a basis for further project work⁵¹.

The thematic focus of the calls⁵² published between 2021 and 2023 was relevant to most stakeholders consulted for this evaluation: it is one of the key strengths of the programme. However, some gaps remain, mainly concerning greater inclusion of themes related to climate

⁵⁰ Regulation (EU) No 2021/692 of 28 April 2021, Article 2.

⁵¹ In terms of approaches and materials.

⁵² These included, for example, such topics as capacity building and awareness of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; fighting against any form of intolerance, racism, xenophobia and discrimination; equal participation and representation of women and men in political and economic decision-making and tackling gender stereotypes; promoting democratic participation through debating the future of Europe, and many others.

change and energy, intersectionality, service provision, disinformation, war crimes and victim support. The programme was also relevant to its final beneficiaries, ‘citizens’ being the most frequently identified group among those who benefited from it.

The programme has already demonstrated its flexibility in adapting to changing needs, both in terms of processes and procedures to respond to the COVID-19 public health restrictions and the consequences of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, as well as thematically.

There remains scope to further capitalise on opportunities brought about by digitalisation. The programme’s approach evolved to correspond to the pace of digitalisation, which is included in the broad definitions for funding provision. However, these aspects do not appear to have yet generated interest or capacity to respond to the opportunities presented, as only a small number of ICT tools were funded thus far.

3. Conclusions and lessons learned

3.1. Conclusions

Overall, **the EfC and REC programmes achieved their objectives while the CERV programme is also making good progress towards its objectives.** The objectives of the CERV programme remain highly relevant. Based on the findings of this evaluation, there is no reason not to carry forward the general and specific objectives of the CERV strands or to change the objectives, the approach to the strands or the redistribution of themes across strands.

Both the EfC and REC programmes supported projects which generated results with potential for long-term impacts⁵³. A significant number of beneficiaries in both programmes were also recurrent beneficiaries of action grants under the CERV programme.

Between 2021 and 2023, **the CERV programme reached 3 033 CSOs** with support and capacity building activities across all Member States. Overall, **projects awarded in 2021-2023 are expected to engage at least 44 million people. The projects are contributing to programme results in a sustainable way.** While it is too early at mid-term to make definitive judgements on the programme’s success and impact, the high degree of competition, the high level of project continuity and the close alignment between call documents and EU priorities hint at the fact that projects are contributing sustainably to achieving the programme’s objectives.

The **very high ratio of quality projects** is to the benefit of the fulfilment of policy objectives. However, **a funding gap on the strands for equality, rights and gender equality, and for combating violence against women and children, is present and may limit the ability to fulfil the objectives of these CERV strands.**

Although the predecessor programmes already covered all Member States, **the geographical balance has improved under the CERV programme**, with a higher proportion of projects in Eastern Europe. **NCPs and the services that they provide to potential applicants are a key strength of the programme.** Nevertheless, their delayed appointment or even their absence in some EU Member States has not led to an underrepresentation of beneficiaries from those Member States so far. **Visibility of the programme is still limited**, with the programme mainly well-known among larger organisations with EU-wide networks.

The CERV programme has made a strong contribution to promoting gender equality, with good practices that could be highlighted as a model to follow to promote gender

⁵³ Such as: the opportunity for young people to engage with the EU; increased fundraising and operational capacity of participating organisations; creation of sustainable outputs and project results which can be re-used and disseminated; and contribution to knowledge sharing and awareness raising on specific topics under the thematic scope of the programmes.

equality – and equality overall – through strategic funding and initiatives. This is linked to financial contributions, with every fourth euro of financing from grants having contributed strongly to gender equality. Around half of the grants funded projects closely intertwined with the promotion of gender equality. Nevertheless, the evidence pointed to the need to pay more attention to intersectionality in addressing gender and social inclusion issues.

External factors, such as COVID-19, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and specific national contexts, have had a limited effect on the CERV programme. COVID-19 impacted both EfC- and REC-funded project activities; even though the pandemic made adjustments necessary, it also encouraged beneficiaries to make better use of digital technologies and collaborate online.

The new features of the CERV programme have produced efficiency gains for the Commission and beneficiaries, by improving predictability, strengthening monitoring, and reducing administrative and reporting burden. These features have already reflected lessons learned from the EfC and REC programmes about the need for simplification and introduced changes being implemented across EU programmes. The application and reporting process under the CERV programme compares favourably with the REC programme but has added complexity for smaller organisations, such as towns and municipalities compared to the EfC programme (also due to the introduction of the eGrants system). The CERV programme introduced lump-sum funding to further reduce the administrative burden. The introduction of unit costs at Commission corporate level, however, appears to have added complexity, exacerbated by the fact that these unit costs do not reflect the actual costs of activities and impose unrealistic limitations on travel costs. **Re-granting mechanisms have led to the CERV programme being more inclusive than the REC programme by allowing the programme to reach smaller and grassroots organisations.** The lack of a robust monitoring framework for the REC programme was addressed under the CERV programme by streamlining indicators and introducing dedicated data collection tools.

The **main benefits of the CERV programme are directly project related** (i.e. the opportunity to implement a desired approach) but there are **also broader and societal benefits.** These include increased networking and collaboration across the EU, enhanced visibility and recognition of organisations that receive CERV funding, and the opportunity to test innovative approaches to address societal challenges, expand project target groups and improve organisations' capacities.

The EfC, REC and CERV programmes have all been coherent with wider EU policies and priorities and complementary in their objectives with other EU funding programmes. It is likely that the impacts identified through the EfC and REC programmes would not have been achieved without specific EU-level support: beneficiaries would have struggled to implement projects on a similar scale or with the same impact.

The **CERV programme occupies a space in the CSO funding landscape that would otherwise be vacant.** Its comprehensive range of themes, pan-EU coverage, specific focus on EU values, grants of a significant size, operating grants and re-granting mechanisms, all make the programme an essential source of funding for organisations promoting EU values and rights. One of the key advantages of the CERV programme is its ability to provide independent sources of financing, allowing organisations to maintain their autonomy and pursue their goals without undue influence. Nevertheless, as the funding gap is still significant, beneficiaries also use other sources of funding if they intersect with the CERV programme's topics and if synergies are possible.

The three programmes all filled roles in the funding landscape that Member States would in general not have had the capacity to fulfil.

The EfC and REC programmes' funding was crucial for activities requiring cross-border cooperation and a broader European perspective, as no similar national or regional schemes could match the programmes' scope and scale. The EfC programme funded activities that involved citizens and organisations from multiple participating countries, fostering a sense of European identity and belonging. The REC programme generated transnational results, notably the increased awareness and understanding of the rights and policies covered by the programme, creating or strengthening cross-border cooperation and partnerships, and creating best practices and tools that were used across different Member States.

The CERV programme, like its predecessors, provides clear added value. For many CSOs, it is their only possible source of funding in this area. **The effects of having no CERV programme would be negative and likely impact the already shrinking civic space in the EU.** Respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights and democratic dialogue, gender equality and disability rights would also be affected. Violence against children, extremism and radicalism would be likely to rise. The sense of being a European citizen would weaken. These conclusions are supported by the evidence collected for this evaluation⁵⁴.

There is a clear need for the CERV programme to continue because the challenges these programmes were set up to address persist and, in some cases, have got worse e.g. the increasing polarisation of society, the rise in populism and extremism, and the threat to EU values. Many of these gaps have been further amplified by challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn that followed. The needs that the EfC, REC and CERV programmes were set up to address **are therefore still very present** and seem likely to **persist** over the remainder of this multiannual financial framework.

3.2. Lessons learned

Based on the conclusions of the *interim* evaluation, some areas for improvements or follow-up could be addressed through the current implementation of the CERV programme.

The programme showed an excellent performance over the 2021-2023 period, with most results significantly exceeding the milestones and targets. It may be necessary to reassess and revise the targets set in the programme performance monitoring framework to better reflect the programme's actual capacity and impact.

The re-granting mechanisms demonstrated their effectiveness in addressing critical needs within the civil society sector and for the programme target groups. Besides the continuation of this scheme, it may be worthwhile considering its potential expansion and scaling up to further support the sector and generate an even greater impact.

The CERV programme has already reached a large number of people. However, it is primarily well-known among larger organisations with EU-wide networks, suggesting that its reach and recognition could be improved among a broader audience.

The programme's significant contribution to promoting gender equality is a notable achievement. This success could be highlighted as a best practice and showcased as a model for other programmes to follow, demonstrating effective ways to promote and advance gender equality – and equality overall – through strategic funding and initiatives.

Finally, there remains scope to further capitalise on opportunities brought on by digitalisation at activity level. Despite the possibility provided by the work programmes, these elements do

⁵⁴ Mainly sourced through consultation of stakeholders and experts, and desk research on relevant trends across the EU Member States.

not appear to have yet generated interest or capacity to respond to the opportunities presented, with only a small number of ICT tools funded thus far compared with other types of activities.