

EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)
– Strand 3 “Citizens’ engagement
and participation”



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EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) – Strand 3 “Citizens’ engagement and participation”

Abstract

This study provides an analysis of Strand 3, “Citizens’ engagement and participation”, of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. It analyses the early implementation of this programme Strand and provides a description of the barriers identified. The main finding is that the implementation has been successful overall, although several challenges should be addressed. The study concludes with a set of recommendations.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CERV	Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CULT	Committee on Culture and Education
DG JUST	Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FPA	Framework Partnership Agreement
NCP	National Contact Point
REC	Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme 2021-2027 (CERV) is the successor of two EU programmes: the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme 2014-2020 (REC) and the Europe for Citizens programme 2014-2020. Strand 3 of the four CERV Strands brings together the citizenship elements of the two predecessor programmes.

Strand 3 moreover promotes engagement with and participation of citizens in the life of the European Union – i.e. greater awareness of those rights and greater participation in civic life as an underpinning of democracy.

The policy aspects of implementation are the responsibility of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). The call and funding process is managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The work programmes also set out annual priorities and describe the content of forthcoming calls.

The CERV programme regulation was adopted in 2021, but this delay was reabsorbed at implementation stage by the end of 2021. Although the implementation is so far on schedule, taking into account the number of projects finalised, the CERV implementation is in its early stages. In 2021-2022, 2,675 proposals were submitted for 66 calls launched under the CERV programme, with 30% focused on citizen engagement (Strand 3) and a 55% success rate.

A fundamental strength of the CERV Strand 3 programme is that it has integrated all rights and values programmes into a single system. This has many benefits, as the fragmented nature and limited resources of the predecessor programmes had restricted the ability to respond to new and emerging challenges. The strong societal focus of the CERV programme, including Strand 3, means that CERV activities contribute to European social well-being.

CERV National Contact Points (NCP) are optimistic about the level of progress made by projects towards reaching their objectives. Another strength is that gender equality is well-integrated into the programme, according to both stakeholders and NCPs.

However, despite the Commission's measures, there is still room for improvement in terms of the administrative burden placed on applicants and on beneficiaries, especially related to the current IT tool. The economic crisis and high inflation have also impacted the effectiveness of the lump sums available for projects.

Another weakness is that one-third of the Member States do not have NCPs.

The following set of recommendations can be formulated based on the analysis carried out:

Recommendation 1: Establish a network of national contact points for CERV

It is recommended that a NCP is established for each Member State to ensure efficient and effective support for applicants, stakeholders and beneficiaries of the CERV programme. As of June 2023, some 20 Member States had established contact points. It is important for the Member States without contact points¹ to establish their own NCPs as soon as possible to enhance accessibility and support for all stakeholders involved in the programme. Contact points should serve as reliable sources of unbiased advice, providing valuable information and assistance throughout the application process. They should also be capable of providing clear and easily understandable information regarding

¹ Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, Poland and Slovakia

programme outcomes and of addressing inquiries related to partnering, training and other relevant procedures.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise communication and awareness-raising activities

The European Commission could prioritise communication and awareness-raising efforts for the CERV programme, as it is still a relatively new programme. To ensure effective campaigns, the European Commission could collaborate with local civil society organisations (CSOs) and programme operators since a partnership-based approach to communication is more likely to encourage potential beneficiaries in the CSO community to engage, leading to better organised and implemented information campaigns at the local level.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the network of CERV beneficiaries

The European Commission and the NCPs could help to coordinate and foster a stronger network of beneficiaries within the CERV programme, particularly emphasising the importance of knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practices under Strand 3. Encouraging beneficiaries to meet and establish a community dedicated to sharing experiences and expertise will enhance collaboration and facilitate the dissemination of successful approach. This network will contribute to the overall effectiveness and impact of the programme by promoting learning, innovation and the continuous improvement of projects and initiatives.

Recommendation 4: Simplify application submission procedures

CERV stakeholders express concerns that the small grassroots organisations targeted by the programme are unable to respond to Calls for Proposals under Strand 3 of CERV due to a lack of resources to handle the application procedures. To address this issue, the European Commission could consider conducting a thorough analysis to identify processes that can be further simplified. For example, the application submission platform should be made more user-friendly and supported with comprehensive tutorials to facilitate its use for applicants and beneficiaries.

Recommendation 5: Simplify and improve the adaption of the current IT tool

Building on Recommendation 4, the European Commission could also consider further adapting and simplifying the current IT tool, which both beneficiaries and NCPs say is cumbersome to use. In this regard, it would be important to first gain a better understanding of which elements of the tool and overall administrative procedures are a particularly high burden for applicants, beneficiaries and NCPs.

Recommendation 6: Review the adequacy of financial support available to beneficiaries

Although beneficiaries benefitting from CERV Strand 3 funding acknowledge and appreciate the efforts from the European Commission to increase the lump sums available for travel and conferences etc., the stakeholder consultations indicate that more support is needed to address the rise in inflation to ensure that funded projects can carry out their planned activities in full and avoid cancellations of activities in order to save costs.

Recommendation 7: Improve transparency of the portfolio of projects funded

The European Commission could consider increasing the transparency and searchability of the funding and tender opportunities portal (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area, SEDIA) where calls and funded projects are published to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse project data per programme. In its current format, very limited analysis can be carried out on Commission programme implementation, which limits the transparency of allocated funding of the CERV programme.

Recommendation 8: Foster participation of CSOs in the decision-making processes

Based on stakeholder feedback and the mentioning of the Civil Dialogue Group in the programme regulation, the European Commission could increase the frequency and timing of the group's activities. This engagement would enable CSOs to contribute to the oversight, evaluation and strategic direction of the programme, thereby strengthening its impact and ensuring its alignment with the needs and priorities of the civil society sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study analyses the implementation to date of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme 2021-2027. It is solely focused on Strand 3 of the programme, which is dedicated to 'Citizens' engagement and participation'. The study was produced as part of the research project EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in Culture, Media, Education, Youth and Sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives.

This study is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a descriptive overview of the programme design and background; Section 3 describes the early implementation of the CERV Strand 3 programme; Section 4 discusses the repercussions of external factors; Section 5 provides an analysis of some of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme Strand; and Section 6 presents the recommendations developed based on the findings of the analysis. Survey² findings are presented in Annex 1. An anonymised list of interviewees consulted is provided in Annex 2.

² An online survey targeting CERV Strand 3 National Contact Points and wider stakeholders including beneficiaries of CERV was carried out for this study. It received 47 responses.

2. PROGRAMME BACKGROUND

KEY FINDINGS

- The CERV programme is the successor programme to two EU programmes: the Rights, Equality and Citizenship 2014-2020 (REC) and the Europe for Citizens programme 2014-2020.
- Strand 3 of the CERV programme, one of four strands, promotes engagement with and participation of citizens in the life of the European Union – i.e. greater awareness of those rights and greater participation in civic life as an underpinning of democracy.
- The overriding specific objective for Strand 3 – the citizens' engagement and participation strand – is to "promote citizens' engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union and exchanges between citizens of different Member States, and to raise awareness of their common European history."

The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme 2021-2027 (CERV) is the successor programme to two EU programmes: the Rights, Equality and Citizenship 2014-2020 (REC) and the Europe for Citizens programme 2014-2020. Strand 3 of the four CERV strands brings together the citizenship elements of the two predecessor programmes.

In proposing a single programme, the Commission said that the fragmented nature and limited resources of the predecessor programmes had restricted the ability to respond to new and emerging challenges at a time when emerging movements were challenging the idea of open, inclusive, cohesive and democratic societies. Such societies are those "where civic participation and the enjoyment of rights make it possible to build a tolerant way of living together".³ Progress had been made in ensuring that citizens understood their rights⁴, but more is needed to make them aware of the benefits of EU citizenship, to encourage a greater level of participation in political life and society, and to have a better understanding of the Union, its history, cultural heritage and diversity. Those rights are to be found in the Treaties:

- **Article 20** of the Treaty on the Functioning of the Europe Union (TFEU) establishes the citizenship of the Union to which all persons holding the nationality of a Member State are entitled. It also lists the main rights and duties of citizens of the Union.
- **Article 9** of the Treaty on European Union recalls that all persons holding the nationality of a Member State are citizens of the Union. It requires the EU to observe the principle of the

³ EC, 2018, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Rights and Values programme*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52018PC0383> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁴ The European Citizenship Report 2020 pointed out that 9 out of 10 European citizens were familiar with the term 'citizen of the European Union', and turnout in the last European elections was at its highest in two decades, support for free movement was its highest in 12 years. See: EC, 2020, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of The Regions. EU Citizenship Report 2020*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0730> (accessed 29 June 2023).

equality of its citizens, who shall receive equal attention from its institutions, bodies, offices and agencies.⁵

The practical implications of those rights are summarised in Box 1.⁶

Box 1: EU citizens' rights

EU citizens' rights
<p>Citizenship of the Union gives people the right to⁷:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-discrimination on the grounds of nationality; - Travel and take up residence anywhere in the European Union; - Vote and stand as a candidate in European and local elections where they are living; - Diplomatic protection and consular support around the world from any other EU country if one's own country is not represented there; - Petition the European Parliament on any issue within the EU's responsibility; - Raise perceived cases of maladministration by any EU institution with the European Ombudsman; - Write to any EU institution in one of the EU's official languages and receive a reply in the same language; - Access Parliament, Council of the European Union and European Commission documents under certain conditions; and - Participate in public exams to enter the EU civil service.

Source: [TFEU](#)

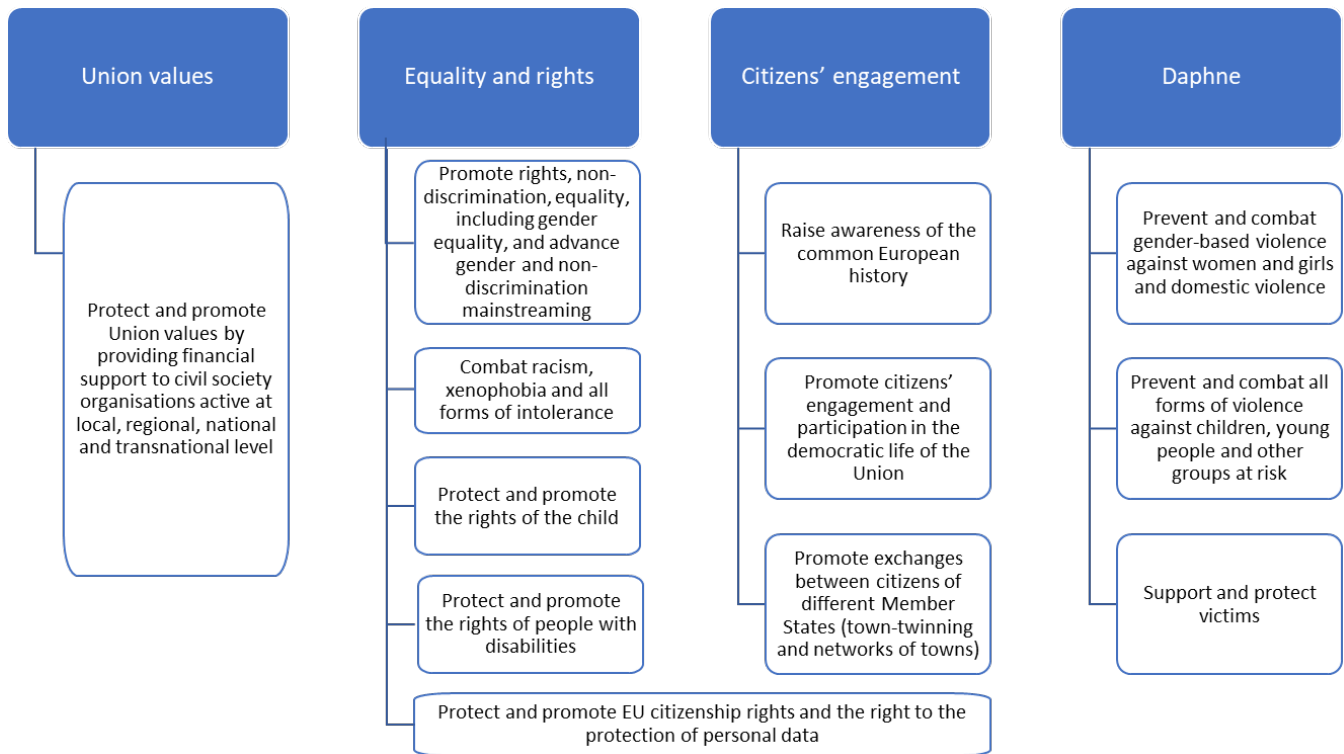
Strand 3 of the CERV programme, one of four strands, promotes engagement with and participation of citizens in the life of the European Union – i.e. greater awareness of those rights and greater participation in civic life as an underpinning of democracy. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the programme by strand.

⁵ Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, *Citizenship of the Union*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=legisum:a12000> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶ Human and fundamental rights under the Charter on Fundamental Rights are covered by the Values Strand of the CERV Programme.

⁷ See: Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and Article 9 of the Treaty on European Union.

Figure 1: CERV programme by strand



Source: EC, n.d., [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme \(CERV\). programme structure](#)

CERV has an overarching general objective, an overriding specific objective for each strand and specific objectives for each strand⁸. The programme's general objective is to "protect and promote rights and values as enshrined in the Treaties, the Charter and the applicable international human rights conventions, in particular by supporting civil society organisations and other stakeholders active at local, regional, national and transnational level, and by encouraging civic and democratic participation, in order to sustain and further develop open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies which are based on the rule of law".⁹

The overriding specific objective for Strand 3 – the citizens' engagement and participation strand – is to "promote citizens' engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union and exchanges between citizens of different Member States, and to raise awareness of their common European history".¹⁰

This aim is divided into three specific sub-objectives for Strand 3, which are to:

- "Support projects aimed at remembering defining moments in modern European history, such as the coming to power of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, including the causes and consequences thereof, and projects aimed at raising awareness among European citizens of their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their

⁸ EC, 2021, *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 390/2014*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0692>.

⁹ Op.cit.

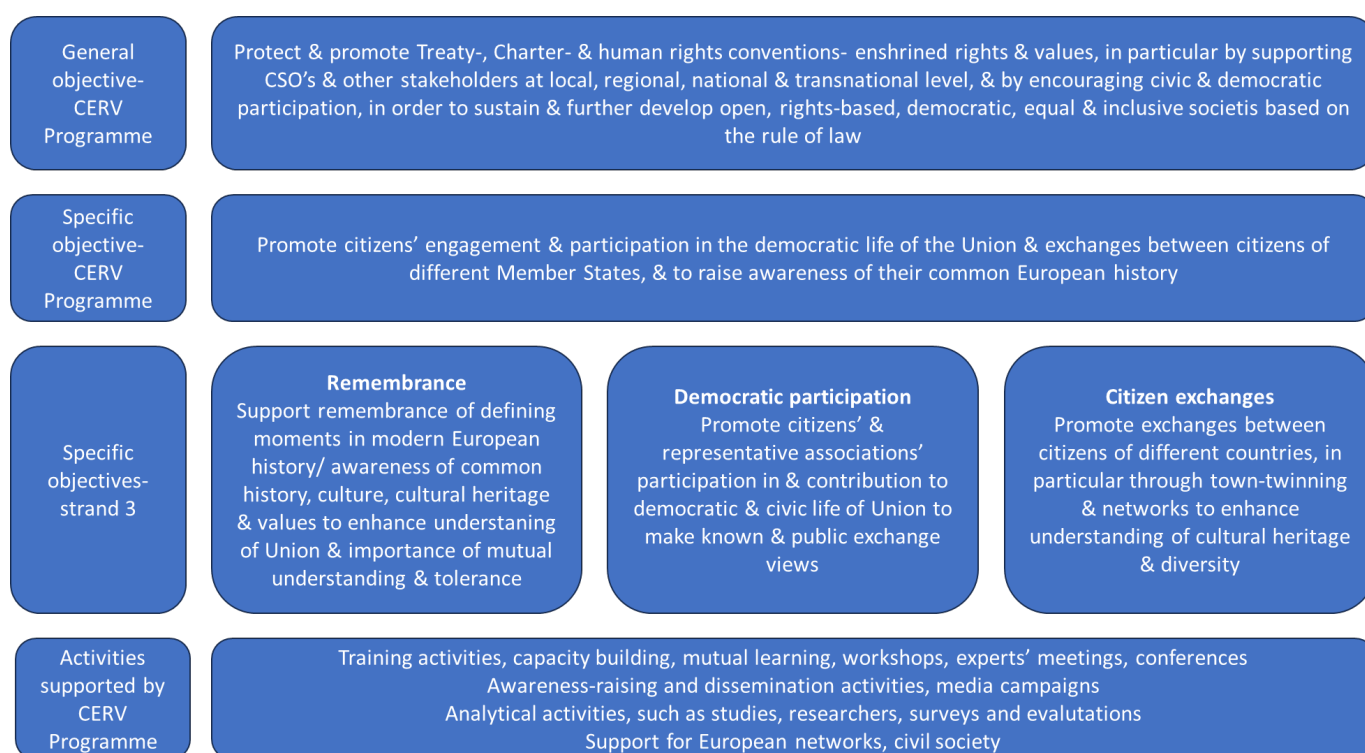
¹⁰ Op.cit.

understanding of the Union, of its origins, purpose, diversity and achievements and of the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance”;

- “Promote citizens’ and representative associations’ participation in and contribution to the democratic and civic life of the Union by enabling them to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action”; and
- “Promote exchanges between citizens of different countries, in particular through town-twinning and networks of towns, so as to afford them practical experience of the richness and diversity of the common heritage of the Union and to make them aware that such richness and diversity constitute a solid foundation for a common future.”¹¹

This is illustrated schematically in Figure 2, which summarises the very long list of activities that can be funded under the programme regulation.

Figure 2: Strand 3 within the CERV programme



Source: Own elaboration. [Breakdown of activities by type from EACEA](#)

The rationale for Strand 3 in the recitals of the programme regulation is “to bring the Union closer to its citizens and to foster democratic participation...European citizenship and European identity should be developed and advanced by encouraging citizens’ understanding of the policy-making process, and by promoting civic engagement in the actions of the Union”.¹² Remembrance activity makes “citizens, in particular young persons, aware of their common history and values [and lays] the foundation for a common future”. Raising European citizens’ awareness of their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values will enhance “their understanding of the Union, of its origins, purpose, diversity

¹¹ Op.cit.

¹² Op.cit.

and achievements and of the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance”.¹³ Town-twinning can make an important contribution to this goal as it increases “citizens’ engagement in society” and leads “ultimately to their active involvement in the democratic life of the Union”.

Strand 3 supports a wide range of EU policies and strategies (Box 2).

Box 2: Policies and strategies supported by Strand 3

Strand 3 of CERV supports a wide range of EU policies and strategies, including the European Democracy Action Plan¹⁴, the EU Citizenship report 2020¹⁵ and the forthcoming EU Citizenship Report 2023, the Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU¹⁶, the forthcoming Rule of Law Report 2023¹⁷, the EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life 2021-2030¹⁸, the EU anti-racism action plan for 2020-2025¹⁹, the EU Roma strategic framework on equality, inclusion and participation²⁰, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025²¹, the Proposal for a Directive on protecting journalists and human rights defenders who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings²², the Communication of 25 November 2021 on protecting election integrity and promoting democratic participation²³, and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child²⁴ – notably the establishment of the Child Participation Platform (CPP)²⁵.

¹³ Quotations in this paragraph are from the recitals of 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 390/2014, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0692>.

¹⁴ EC, 2020, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European democracy action plan*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790> (accessed 29 June 2023).

¹⁵ EC, 2020, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. EU Citizenship Report 2020 Empowering citizens and protecting their rights*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0730> (accessed 29 June 2023).

¹⁶ EC, 2020, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0711> (accessed 29 June 2023).

¹⁷ EC, n.d., *2023 Rule of law report*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/rule-law-mechanism/2023-rule-law-report_en (accessed 29 June 2023).

¹⁸ EC, 2020, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A Union of Equality. Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152> (accessed 29 June 2023).

¹⁹ EC, 2020, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A Union of equality. EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0565> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²⁰ EC, 2020, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0620> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²¹ EC, 2020, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Union of Equality. LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0698> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²² EC, 2022, *Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings (“Strategic lawsuits against public participation”)*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022PC0177> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²³ EC, 2021, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Protecting election integrity and promoting democratic participation*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0730> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²⁴ EC, 2021, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. EU strategy on the rights of the child*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0142> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²⁵ EC, n.d., *About the EU Children’s Participation Platform*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-child-participation-platform_en (accessed 29 June 2023).

The objectives of Strand 3 (and of the CERV programme) are achieved through action grants to projects, operating grants to civil society, and procurement and communication activities by the European Commission. The range of activities applies to all strands. This also includes funding of the NCPs in the Member States. NCPs are considered to be a new feature of the CERV programme, as they existed under the Europe for Citizens programme but not under the REC programme.

Another new feature is the creation of the Civil Dialogue Group to strengthen relations with stakeholders. A CERV Dialogue Week was held in May 2021 to launch the programme.²⁶

The CERV programme for the moment only funds projects in the Member States. EFTA countries which are members of the EEA (Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein) are eligible to take part but have chosen not to do so. Six acceding, candidate and potential candidate countries have expressed an interest in doing so, but this has not yet been formalised. They are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo²⁷, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine.²⁸

²⁶ Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2021, *Follow-up of the 1st CERV Civil Dialogue week*, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/717190/en> (accessed 29 June 2023).

²⁷ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

²⁸ EC, 2022, *List of Participating Countries in the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme*, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/cerv/guidance/list-3rd-country-participation_cerv_en.pdf (accessed 29 June 2023).

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF CERV STRAND 3

KEY FINDINGS

- The CERV programme regulation was only adopted in 2021, but this delay was reabsorbed at implementation stage already by the end of 2021. Although the implementation is so far within schedule, taking into account the number of projects finalised, the CERV implementation is in its early stages.
- In 2021-2022, some 2,675 proposals were submitted for 66 calls, with 30% focused on citizen engagement (Strand 3) and a 55% success rate.
- A monitoring framework has been established. Data to support the monitoring of CERV are also collected for Strand 3 via the survey EU Survey – Justice, Rights and Values.
- Not all Member States have a dedicated national contact point responsible for CERV.
- Digital tools appear to be a key issue in the development of the programme, as they are perceived as not user-friendly. They also hindered the participation of smaller-scale organisations in the programme that do not have the time and resources to go through the application process.

3.1. Overview

The policy aspects of implementation are the responsibility of the Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). The call and funding process is managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

The work programmes also set out annual priorities and describe the content of forthcoming calls. The overriding priorities set out in both the 2021-2022²⁹ and 2023-2024³⁰ work programmes are to:

- Help people make their voices heard;
- Increase inclusion and democratic and civic participation;
- Promote cultural diversity and European history; and
- Support exchanges between people of different countries to reinforce a sense of European belonging and identity.

In addition, perceptible shifts in focus occur every year to better address needs on the ground while still ensuring continuity in policy priorities – e.g. the focus in the 2021-2022 work programme³¹ was on

²⁹ EC, 2021, *Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2021-2022*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/1_en_annexe_acte_autonome_part1_v8.pdf, page 7

³⁰ EC, 2022, *Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2023-2024*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9836eadf-980c-4e75-be3b-1e4c51334999_en?filename=c_2022_8588_1_en_annexe_acte_autonome_cp_part1_v2.pdf, page 7

³¹ EC, 2021, *Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2021-2022*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/1_en_annexe_acte_autonome_part1_v8.pdf

the impact of COVID-19 and on projects which looked ahead to the 2024 European elections. Networks of towns were encouraged in 2021-2022 to propose ways to increase the turnout at the next European elections and to make candidacies more inclusive. The 2023-2024 work programme also mentions the legacy of colonialism and transnational migrations, a gender-balanced view of history and the Commission Recommendation on protecting journalists and human rights defenders who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings that were not included in the previous work programme.

The 2023-2024 work programme focuses for the first time on the civic engagement of children, with a call to “encourage children’s engagement and participation in the political and democratic life”.³² The climate and the environment, including energy-related issues, will be considered in proposals on town twinning and town networks. The 2023-2024 work programme also highlights under Strand 3 the European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity award, which recognises the work carried out by cities, towns, and regions in Europe on promoting inclusion and creating discrimination-free societies.

Member States have contact points for the programme that offer unbiased advice, helpful information and support to applicants, stakeholders and beneficiaries. This includes assistance with the application process, sharing easy-to-understand information about programme outcomes, and answering questions about partnering, training and other procedures.³³ It is not obligatory for a Member State to set up a contact point and only 20 had done so by June 2023. Member States without a contact point at that date were Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, Poland and Slovakia.³⁴

3.2. Monitoring

The CERV programme regulation outlines monitoring indicators that apply to all strands. These indicators measure the impact of various activities, such as training, mutual learning, exchange of good practices, awareness raising and information dissemination, by tracking the number of people reached. In addition, indicators keep track of the number of civil society organisations that have benefited from capacity-building activities, as well as the number of transnational networks and initiatives that focus on European memory and heritage.³⁵

Table 1 illustrates the current status of key indicators within Strand 3. The table reflects the dimensions being measured, the types of activities undertaken and the actual progress to date. While the figures for 2021 and 2022 are not fully available due to ongoing development in e-Grants, the overall trends detailed in the table show progress towards achieving the milestone targets in 2024 and 2027.

³² EC, 2022, *Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2023-2024*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9836eadf-980c-4e75-be3b-1e4c51334999_en?filename=c_2022_8588_1_en_annexe_acte_autonome_cp_part1_v2.pdf (accessed 29 June 2023).

³³ See: Article 21 of 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 390/2014.

³⁴ EC, 2023, *CERV 2021-2027 Programme – Contact Points*, available at: <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/CERV%20Contact%20Points%2013%20June%202023.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2023).

³⁵ See: Annex II of Regulation (EU) 2021/692 of 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 390/2014.

Table 1: Description and actual progress of indicators for Strand 3

Indicator	Dimension measured	Type	Actual progress*	Milestone (2024)	Target (2027)
The number of people reached by training activities	Support to the training of professionals for increase of knowledge of Union law and policies as well as of the rights and values underpinning the Union	Output	N/A	16 174	31 852
The number of people reached by mutual learning and exchange of good practices activities	Support to the mutual learning of professional for improving knowledge and understanding of Union law and policies, of potential obstacles to the exercise of rights and to promoting cross-border cooperation and enhancing mutual trust	Result	N/A	5 299	10 434
The number of people reached by awareness raising, information and dissemination activities	Support to raising awareness of the public, the policy-makers and the relevant practitioner	Result	N/A	402 858	793 347
The number of civil society organisations reached by support and capacity-building activities	Support to civil society organisations active in the areas of the programme at European, national regional and local level	Output	2021: 87 2022: 229	470	847
The number of transnational networks and initiatives focusing on European memory and heritage as a result of programme intervention	Support to co-ordinated transnational mutual learning activities to promote exchanges between citizens of different countries on the wealth and diversity of the common heritage of the Union	Output	N/A	24 618	84 181

* For indicators with N/A, 2021-2022 values are not fully available due to incomplete development in e-Grants.

Source: EC, 2023, [2021-2027 Indicator metadata set](#); and EC, 2023, [MFF Performance Results Reports](#)

In addition, a key performance indicator for DG JUST, "my voice counts", relates to the objectives of Strand 3, such as the citizen's perception of democratic participation.³⁶ The goal is to achieve a higher percentage than the 2019 baseline of 48%.³⁷ However, in autumn 2022, just under half of EU citizens (47%) agreed that their voice counts in the EU, a drop of 6 percentage points from the survey conducted before the Russian aggression on Ukraine.³⁸

The programme's performance is also assessed with help of the "EU Survey - Justice, Rights and Values", which is filled in by the participants during activities carried out by CERV-funded projects. However, CSOs emphasise that the need to distribute surveys imposes more administrative responsibilities on

³⁶ "My voice counts" survey data used in this context is based on Standard Eurobarometer 98 conducted in Winter 2022-2023, which covered 27 EU Member States and candidate countries. The survey employed face-to-face interviews as the primary method of data collection, with online methods utilized when face-to-face interviews were not possible or impracticable due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 26,468 completed interviews were conducted across the EU27, and the data was weighted to represent the population size of each country. The survey targeted individuals aged 15 years and above. More: [Standard Eurobarometer 98 - Winter 2022-2023](#).

³⁷ Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2022, *Annual Activity Report 2021*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/annual-activity-report-2021-justice-and-consumers_en (accessed 29 June 2023).

³⁸ Directorate-General for Communication, 2023, *Standard Eurobarometer 98- Winter 2022-2023. Public opinion in the European Union. Annexes*, available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872> (accessed 29 June 2023).

them, leading to increased administrative costs for programmes and is particularly problematic for smaller organisations, which often do not have the resources to carry out the demands.³⁹

A frequently highlighted issue regarding the scenarios relates to the anonymity of the responses. Unless a large number of smaller, grassroots organisations participate in the grant activities, participants can be easily identified based on their responses. Furthermore, problematic questions regarding age and gender, although not compulsory, (which may also facilitate identification of the respondent), as well as questions related to the degree of satisfaction with the government were highlighted.⁴⁰ Such questions may be problematic in countries where the freedom of action of CSOs is currently debatable.

3.3. Launch phase

The launch of the CERV programme was affected by the late adoption in 2021 of the programme's regulation by the co-legislators. However, this delay has been absorbed at implementation stage and the programme has been running according to schedule. Only a small number of projects in Strand 3 have been completed, but this is due to the time needed to launch and finalise calls for proposal and grant projects in line with the financial regulation. This also means that the programme is in the early stage of implementation in terms of projects finalised.

Based on data shared by DG JUST, there were 66 calls for proposals between 2021 and 2022. A total of 2,675 proposals were received, with 814 (30%) of them focused on Strand 3, which emphasises citizen engagement and participation. Strand 3 has a high success rate of 55%; within this strand, the success rate for citizens' remembrance calls is 27% compared with 81% for town-twinning and networks of towns (2021-2022).

Based on information received from the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the call CERV-2021-CITIZENS-REM on European Remembrance received 95 proposals. Ten proposals were inadmissible or ineligible, and one was withdrawn by its coordinator. Of the 84 submitted proposals, only 27 were approved for funding, totalling EUR 4,503,005.

The availability of public funding for civil sector organisations remains a challenge in several countries, hindering their crucial engagement in these key areas.⁴¹ Organisations underline that by ensuring that selected national and regional grant operators are sufficiently independent from Member State authorities, the European Commission can address the disturbing phenomenon of "shifting civic space". This ensures that funds allocated under the CERV programme will fill the funding gap for organisations committed to upholding EU values, even in countries where public funds have been diverted to entities that contradict these principles.⁴² In an open letter to the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, CSOs stated that to ensure impartiality of beneficiaries, the assessment of grant applications should involve experts who possess specialised knowledge and a demonstrable understanding of the sector. This is already the case in the implementation of Strand 3 and of the whole programme.

³⁹ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁴⁰ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁴¹ Narsee A., Negri G., 2023, *Fighting for democratic empowerment and resilience. Civic Space Report 2023*, available at: <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Civic-Space-Report-2023-European-Civic-Forum.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁴² European Economic and Social Committee, 2022, *The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space*, available at: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-07-22-057-en-n_0.pdf (accessed 29 June 2023).

Another issue underlined by the CSOs concerns regranting schemes and implementation of the projects. It was stressed that the scheme provided many opportunities and increased the quality and scope of support for CSOs. Moreover, it enabled CSOs in different countries to collaborate. However, for the specific regranting scheme applied to operating grants, the work programme under the regranting scheme lasts just a year and covers the entire process including the publication of the call, evaluation and other related activities. As a result, only a brief period of time is available to implement individual projects.⁴³

3.4. Budget and resources

The budget for the CERV programme 2021-2027 is EUR 641.71 million in current prices⁴⁴, with an additional 'top-up' of EUR 800 million from fines collected by the European Commission. As illustrated in Table 2, EUR 174.9 million up to EUR 191.4 million are available for Strand 3. At least 65% of the funds will go to democratic participation, and 15% will be allocated for remembrance activities.⁴⁵

Table 2: CERV Strand 3 budget 2021-2027

	Budget available in EUR	As a % of the total for CERV
Financial envelope for the programme	174,928,783	27.26%
'Top-up'	Up to 191,440,000	23.93%

Source: The CERV Regulation 2021/817

The budgets allocated for the initial four years of the present cycle is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Annual budget allocations for Strand 3, 2021-2024 (EUR million)

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total	13.98	39.67	32.15	55.67

Source: Multiannual Work programmes 2021-2022⁴⁶, 2023-2024⁴⁷

Funding is available for a two-year period through project grants or lump sums for smaller activities. Operating grants are also available within a four-year Framework Partnership Agreements (FPAs). Organisations funded under FPA agreements must submit a new application each year to continue receiving funding.

⁴³ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁴⁴ Term "current prices" refers to the monetary values expressed in nominal terms without adjusting for inflation or changes in purchasing power. It represents the actual prices prevailing at the time of budget planning and execution, without accounting for any future price fluctuations or adjustment.

⁴⁵ A deviation from these percentages of 10 percentage points is allowed.

⁴⁶ EC, 2021, *Commission implementing decision of 19.4.2021 on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme and the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2021-2022*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/1_en_annexe_acte_autonome_part1_v8.pdf (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁴⁷ Op cit.

Some funding is earmarked via restricted calls – e.g. for the NCPs. In the case of Strand 3, there are two direct contributions to UNESCO in 2023-2024. One is for an action to reach the public on the danger of Holocaust distortion and trivialisation and to train European educators, influencers, media, civil society organisations and stakeholders to recognise and counter Holocaust distortion and trivialisation. The other is for UNESCO's 'Routes of Enslaved Peoples: Resistance, Liberty and Heritage' project.

The findings from the online survey⁴⁸ of NCPs and wider CERV stakeholders carried out for this study indicate a general satisfaction with the overall budget available in their country. A total of 57.2% of NCPs responded that they were very or somewhat satisfied with the overall budget, while 42.9% reported being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. A smaller majority of wider stakeholders (55%) said that they were very or somewhat satisfied by the overall budget available in their country. By contrast only 7% were dissatisfied by the budget availability, while 38% showed to be indifferent.

However, a significant drawback in analysing the CERV Strand 3 budget and the use of resources at national level is that there is limited information published by the European Commission. Data on funded CERV projects are published on the Funding & Tender opportunities portal,⁴⁹ although the database is not particularly sophisticated in terms of data manipulation. For example, external stakeholders are not able to analyse the data in-depth (e.g. by Member State or type of beneficiary). This has a certain knock-on effect insofar as it limits the transparency of the programme implementation.

With regards to other budget features, during interviews, stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the possibility of showing volunteer time in the budget as an element of co-financing when applying, making it easier for volunteer-based organisations to apply. This means that although the co-financing rate for CERV is often lower than for other programmes (such as ESF+ where it is 90%), the actual co-funding rate is in practice higher than the official 80%-90%. Despite the existence of the volunteer time element, stakeholder feedback suggests that it is still sometimes the case that organisations drop out of applying for grants under the CERV programme. One potential reason is that the rate of co-financing varies under the programme with the higher co-financing applied for action grants than for operating grants.⁵⁰

3.5. Inclusion measures

Strand 3 of the CERV programme aims to increase inclusion and democratic participation of all citizens in Europe. Gender equality and the participation of grassroots organisations are two prominent target groups for inclusion in Strand 3.

Gender equality is also an objective in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the CERV Regulation, which states that the programme should support gender mainstreaming and the mainstreaming of non-discrimination in all its activities.⁵¹

This objective is operationalised at the project level. Each CERV project financed through grants is assessed in terms of its contribution to the promotion of gender equality and is attributed a score. While the programme has also started to introduce a gender perspective into procurement activities,

⁴⁸ See Annex 1

⁴⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home>

⁵⁰ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁵¹ EC, 2021, *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 390/2014*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0692>.

the data is not at the same level of granularity as the data collected for grants. Therefore, the estimate of the procurement activities' gender score is based on their programming.

CERV stakeholders are generally positive about the inclusion of gender equality in Strand 3. For example, CERV NCPs and wider stakeholders, who were consulted via an online survey, indicated that the gender equality aspect is very strongly addressed by the programme. When asked to provide further information on the priorities, survey respondents added that gender equality issues sometimes are "too concretely" integrated into the programme. One stakeholder provided the following example:

"In European Remembrance calls the application form is the same as in other CERV calls (same questions). But if we want to develop a project about the Holocaust, but the questions are about gender equality and not about European history, it can result in a morbid and unpleasant situation. We highly recommend that the agency adapts the application form to the needs of the exact calls with more topic specific questions. We understand it is much more work for the staff of the agency, but with this method they can receive more quality applications."

With regards to ensuring that grassroots organisations and small CSOs can participate in the CERV Strand 3 programme, there are direct references in the CERV Regulation to the "accessibility of the programme for civil society organisations at local, regional, national and transnational level, including local grassroots civil society organisations, as well as to the capacity of beneficiaries".⁵² Ensuring accessibility may include the provision of financial support.

Although CSOs consulted as part of this study recognise and appreciate the support given by the European Commission to facilitate the inclusion of small CSOs and grassroots organisations, it is generally perceived that there are still operational obstacles that constitute a barrier to participation. For example, in an open letter to the European Commission in February 2021, a group of CSOs emphasised that grant "application and reporting procedures should be user-friendly and accessible to all kinds of eligible civil society actors, including those with limited administrative capacity".⁵³

However, during the research carried out for this study (2023) it was still noted that CERV application and reporting obligations are burdensome for organisations and more resource-intensive than under the former programme, Europe for Citizens. For example, when applying for multiannual operating grants designed to support and enhance the operational capabilities of organisations, the application process follows a structure similar to that of project grants. This structure involves action-oriented work packages and requires yearly applications. Despite being a multiannual funding scheme, organisations that have secured partnership frameworks spanning four years still have to go through an onerous cycle of yearly applications and reporting.⁵⁴

⁵² EC, 2021, *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 390/2014*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0692>, page 7

⁵³ Ligue des droits de l'Homme, 2021, *Suggestions of civil society organisations as regards implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme*, available at: <https://www.ldh-france.org/suggestions-of-civil-society-organisations-as-regards-implementation-of-the-citizens-equality-rights-and-values-cerv-programme/> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁵⁴ Narsee A., Negri G., 2023, *Fighting for democratic empowerment and resilience. Civic Space Report 2023*, available at: <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Civic-Space-Report-2023-European-Civic-Forum.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2023).

With regards to other inclusion elements, during the interviews, CSOs also highlighted that EU-Survey distributed among all beneficiaries is not adapted to the needs of people with disabilities.⁵⁵

3.6. Effectiveness & added value

There is limited amount of published data on the effectiveness of CERV Strand 3 implementation to date, partly as a result of many projects still ongoing.

The survey of CERV NCPs and wider stakeholders, however, asked respondents to gauge the level of implementation in their country. Around 86% of the NCPs argued that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives, while a much lower percentage of wider stakeholders responded that they were on track (38%). Although the NCPs consulted via the survey have a close overview of implementation in their country, there may also be a degree of bias in their very positive response, given their responsibility to oversee the CERV programme.

However, stakeholders consulted via the survey and via interviews are positive about many of the main elements of Strand 3, which to them are important factors enabling effective implementation. In particular, stakeholders value the programmes' unique topics. It is a grassroots initiative that encourages collaboration between authorities and citizens, while the need to involve more non-EU participants was highlighted.⁵⁶ However, while national and cross-border partnerships among applicants are encouraged, they should not be given preferential treatment over applications submitted by individual CSOs. It is important to allow applicant organisations the flexibility to form partnerships with informal groups if they deem it necessary or beneficial for their proposed projects.⁵⁷ Additionally, in order to improve the implementation of the projects, more time between each edition of operating grants would be useful. It would enable all information on lessons learnt to be collected.⁵⁸

In the current context, the funding of projects that promote and protect EU values, including initiatives focused on raising awareness and providing education, holds significant importance. Nevertheless, in order for CSOs to effectively participate in such activities, it is essential for the programme to offer core funding that supports the existence and operations of CSOs. This support becomes particularly crucial for organisations operating at the local or national level. Additionally, the programme should aim to enhance the capacity of CSOs, while also providing assistance for their institutional development and resilience.⁵⁹

Finally, in its European Democracy Support Annual Review 2022, the European Democracy Hub mentioned that "concerns remain about CERV's relative lack of flexibility and high administrative burden, which could limit its effectiveness".⁶⁰

⁵⁵ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁵⁶ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁵⁷ Ligue des droits de l'Homme, 2021, *Suggestions of civil society organisations as regards implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme*, available at: <https://www.ldh-france.org/suggestions-of-civil-society-organisations-as-regards-implementation-of-the-citizens-equality-rights-and-values-cerv-programme/> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁵⁸ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

⁵⁹ Ligue des droits de l'Homme, 2021, *Suggestions of civil society organisations as regards implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme*, available at: <https://www.ldh-france.org/suggestions-of-civil-society-organisations-as-regards-implementation-of-the-citizens-equality-rights-and-values-cerv-programme/> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶⁰ Ligue des droits de l'Homme, 2021, *Suggestions of civil society organisations as regards implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme*, available at: <https://www.ldh-france.org/suggestions-of-civil-society-organisations-as-regards-implementation-of-the-citizens-equality-rights-and-values-cerv-programme/> (accessed 29 June 2023).

3.7. Digitalisation & IT tools

A main issue as far as the digital platform for the submissions of applications for funding is concerned is the technical complexity, which has led to the application process becoming more complicated. The platform was originally designed for the Horizon 2020 – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) and is insufficiently adapted to CERV applicants according to early interview feedback. It was noted that the platform is the same for operating grants and action grants. As a result the form is not appropriate for some types of projects.⁶¹

The survey findings compiled for this study also highlight issues with the IT tools. In particular, NCPs concluded that the IT tools could be very useful if they were simpler, especially for smaller projects and calls that are focused on attracting applications from small organisations including newcomers to CERV.

One NCP commented:

“Why force small-scale projects with a grant of EUR 8,000 to use an IT tool made for complex, multinational projects with big budgets such as Horizon Europe projects? There are examples how small grants can be applied for with little effort, such as the German-French Citizens Fund or even Solidarity projects within Erasmus+ Youth/ESC. Why not make use of smaller-scaled IT tools here?”

Other issues noted by CSOs included the presence of many bugs, such as the absence of confirmation of application, as well as the requirement to choose only one person as the contact. As a result, during holiday periods or sick leave, it is not possible to follow the application process or to answer any requests for information.

⁶¹ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

4. REPERCUSSIONS OF EXTERNAL FACTORS

KEY FINDINGS

- Brexit has had significant implications for the execution of projects, particularly in the context of town twinning and networks of towns. There have been reports indicating that the loss of EU funding is adversely affecting the ability of UK towns to sustain twinning activities.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected CERV Strand 3 projects, resulting in delays which required amendments. Smaller grassroots organisations in particular struggled with this issue. However, both the European Commission and EACEA implemented measures to support beneficiaries.
- Various initiatives and projects relevant to Ukraine have been implemented as part of CERV, such as offering fellowship positions for Ukrainian researchers directly or indirectly affected by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. At the project level, an inventory of CERV projects identified only one project that makes direct reference to Ukraine.
- CERV's introduction of unit costs was intended to increase flexibility during the recent times of high inflation and the wider cost-of-living crisis. However, given the unprecedented rise in inflation, the Commission's decision has not been fully sufficient to mitigate the consequences of high inflation and increased travel costs, which worsened the financial situation of beneficiaries.

4.1. The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)

The UK did not include the CERV programme in the list of programmes for which it sought to retain access. As a result, the Committee of the Regions has advocated establishing a dedicated fund at the EU level. This fund would support grassroots initiatives for bilateral and multilateral cooperation among regions across the EU and UK, ensuring the continuity of partnerships initiated during the previous programming period while also fostering opportunities for new relationships.⁶²

Brexit has had significant implications for the execution of projects, particularly in the context of town twinning and networks of towns. There have been reports indicating that the loss of EU funding is adversely affecting the ability of UK towns to sustain twinning activities.⁶³

For Irish organisations Brexit provided both opportunities and challenges. In interview with a CERV stakeholder, it was mentioned that the Republic of Ireland traditionally relied on the UK as a primary partner. The proximity and shared language between Ireland and the UK made collaboration seem easier. Brexit has driven Ireland to expand beyond the UK and seek new partners in other European

⁶² Shreeves R., 2023, *EU–UK civil society cooperation*, available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)749800](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2023)749800) (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶³ Op.cit.

countries. The Irish community tried to alleviate concerns about language barriers. This required some capacity building efforts to encourage people to reach out and explore collaborations. On the other side, as now the largest English-speaking country in Europe, Ireland became more popular as a project partner.

4.2. The COVID-19 pandemic and recovery

Extensive research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic did not primarily generate a multitude of new issues. However, it did shed light on and magnified preexisting problems.⁶⁴ According to the programme's Performance Overview Report for 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many ongoing projects, resulting in delays requiring amendments.⁶⁵ Smaller grassroots organisations, in particular, struggled with this issue.⁶⁶ Even though the Commission and agencies, including EACEA, have implemented measures to allow for increased and exceptional flexibility to help beneficiaries and CSOs during this challenging period, this may indicate that existing funding is still not sufficiently flexible to respond effectively to crisis scenarios.⁶⁷

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic had not only an impact on the implementation of ongoing initiatives, but also disrupted and compromised citizens' rights and participation in democracy.⁶⁸ As a result, the programme has identified addressing the impact of the pandemic on democratic debate and the enjoyment of fundamental rights as top priorities.⁶⁹

Lockdowns during the pandemic exacerbated disparities between different social groups and communities, such as the Roma community.⁷⁰ It also increased persistent gender inequalities and intensified discrimination against women, contributing to increased incidents of violence against women and hindering access to key sexual and reproductive health services. As a result, numerous CSOs issued an open letter to EU policymakers calling for the EU's long-term budget and reconstruction strategy to address the growing problem of violence against vulnerable groups.⁷¹

4.3. The Russian aggression against Ukraine

Given the ongoing aggression against Ukraine, European Commission affirms that it is of utmost importance to support the country's academic and think tank community. This support should encourage the production of academic and policy-relevant knowledge on topics that are key to the

⁶⁴ European Economic and Social Committee, 2022, *The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space*, available at: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-07-22-057-en-n_0.pdf (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶⁵ EC, n.d., *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme – Performance*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶⁶ Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2021, *CERV Civil Dialogue Week 2021. Final Report*, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/redirection/document/78238> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶⁷ Civic Space Watch, 2022, *Towards vibrant European civic and democratic space*, available at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/European-civil-society-strategy-report-2022-European-Civic-Forum.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶⁸ European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, EU, *Emergency powers and civic space. Strengthening the EU Rule of Law Review to monitor governments' measures*, available at: <https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/EU%20Emergency%20Powers%20and%20Civic%20Space%20Paper%281%29.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁶⁹ European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), 2021, *Citizens' engagement and participation. Call for proposals*, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/cerv/wp-call/2022/call-fiche_cerv-2022-citizens-civ_en.pdf (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁷⁰ Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2021, *CERV Civil Dialogue Week 2021. Final Report*, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/redirection/document/78238> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁷¹ European Disability Forum, 2022, *Open letter to EU Decision-makers: Funding the fight to end violence against women and girls*, available at: <https://www.edf-feph.org/newsroom-news-open-letter-eu-decision-makers-funding-fight-end-violence-against-women-and-girls/> (accessed 29 June 2023).

future of Ukraine, the EU and the protection of democratic values. Various initiatives and projects have been implemented as part of CERV, such as offering fellowship positions for Ukrainian researchers directly or indirectly affected by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. These should enable researchers to pursue EU-related research that is relevant for both EU and national policymakers.⁷²

An inventory of CERV projects supported by the current programme period found only one project that makes a direct reference to Ukraine. This is the Strand 3-funded project, the 'future of Europe in the context of the Ukrainian crisis', which is led by a Romanian organisation. The project aims to "assess the situation of EU citizens during this geo-political and economic situation, experience how [they] are facing the consequences in [their] every-day life and highlight the next steps [they] should make at individual level to tackle this type of crisis to hold Europe united".⁷³ The project is currently ongoing and is due to finish in September 2023. It is not known if there are further CERV projects approved (or not yet published) that have direct links to Ukraine and/or the Russian aggression towards Ukraine.

4.4. The economic crisis

The European Union has recently experienced the highest levels of inflation in decades. Inflationary pressure was exacerbated by the Ukraine conflict, which has contributed to increased energy and food prices. Russia's invasion also intensified the upward trajectory of consumer prices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions to global supply chains.⁷⁴ It had a significant impact on various sectors, affecting not only individuals, but also the operating expenses of CERV beneficiaries and applicants. In the case of ongoing grants, the fixed EU contribution specified in the grant agreement (for example, stating the ceiling costs for travel to/from the different EU countries) posed a challenge for beneficiaries in implementing planned activities. Creative solutions had to be developed on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁵

CERV's introduction of unit costs was intended to increase flexibility. However, given the unprecedented rise in inflation, the Commission's decision was not enough to mitigate the consequences of high inflation and increased travel costs, which worsened the financial situation of beneficiaries. It has also been difficult for beneficiaries to invite speakers to events as part of the project activities. Moreover, the discrepancy in travel cost ceilings between air and rail travel runs counter to efforts to reduce carbon emissions and is out of step with current realities. The majority of interviewed CSOs underlined that the impact of inflation on various cost elements, such as wages and services, should be carefully analysed, and the high co-funding requirement of 20% for operating grants should be reconsidered according to the current situation.⁷⁶

⁷² TEPSA, 2023, *Visiting fellowship for Ukrainian Researchers*, available at: <https://www.tepsa.eu/call-for-applications-visiting-fellowship-for-ukrainian-researchers-deadline-june-4/> (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁷³ *The future of Europe in the context of the Ukrainian crisis* (accessed 7 July 2023)

⁷⁴ Cesluk-Grajewski M., 2022, *Inflation in the wake of coronavirus and war [What Think Tanks are thinking]*, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729336/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)729336_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729336/EPRS_BRI(2022)729336_EN.pdf) (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁷⁵ EC, n.d., *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme – Performance*, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en (accessed 29 June 2023).

⁷⁶ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

5. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE CERV PROGRAMME (STRAND 3)

KEY FINDINGS

- Strengths of the CERV Strand 3 programme includes the integration of all rights and values programmes into a single system. This has many benefits, as the fragmented nature and limited resources of the predecessor programmes had restricted the ability to respond to new and emerging challenges. The strong societal focus of the CERV programme, including Strand 3, means that CERV activities contribute to European social well-being.
- Another strength identified was the integration of gender equality in the programme.
- CERV NCPs are optimistic about the level of progress made by projects towards reaching their objectives.
- Wider stakeholders are encouraged by the topics and priorities funded by Strand 3, including the Europe Remembrance aspect.
- Despite the Commission's measures, there is still room for improvement in terms of the administrative burden placed on applicants and beneficiaries, especially relating to the current IT tool. The economic crisis and high inflation has also impacted on the effectiveness of the lump sums available for projects.
- Another weakness is that one-third of the Member States do not have NCPs.

A fundamental strength of the newly established CERV programme is that it brings all rights and values programmes under a single umbrella by joining together elements of the REC and the Europe for Citizens programmes. The Staff Working Document (SWD) Impact Assessment, which accompanied the Commission's proposal and drew on the findings of evaluations of the programmes that were merged to form CERV, found that these were "small instruments, which have not yet reached critical mass and whose effectiveness is constrained by their relatively low budgets. Therefore, their joining under one framework would help increase their effectiveness through synergies and mutual reinforcement."⁷⁷

Nevertheless, within those constraints, the SWD found that they had a strong societal focus, were clearly related to European values and had contributed to European social well-being. In the area of citizenship, the SWD found that there had been increased awareness among people about their rights and their common history, and the predecessor programmes had "enhanced democratic and civic

⁷⁷ EC, 2018, *Commission Staff Working Document 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*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=SWD%3A2018%3A290%3AFIN> (accessed 29 June 2023).

participation of citizens at Union level but also a deeper understanding of and respect for different cultures, traditions”.⁷⁸

Gender equality is well-integrated into the programme, according to both stakeholders and NCPs. Gender mainstreaming in the CERV work programmes and Calls for Proposals info sessions is helped by the involvement of the Civil Dialogue Group.⁷⁹

The existing CERV NCPs are optimistic about the level of progress made by projects towards reaching their objectives – around 86% of the NCPs argued that their country’s projects were on track to deliver their objectives.

Wider stakeholders and beneficiaries are also encouraged by the way in which Strand 3 supports European remembrance, promotes cooperation between CSOs and the public sector, and the strong focus on historical and cultural aspects, especially in small and less developed communities. Another strength is the wide range of stakeholder groups that are eligible to participate in CERV.

The European Commission has made attempts to simplify and ease the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries. For example, the Commission has introduced lump sums for smaller projects, which will support the ambition to obtain a better geographic spread and funding for grassroots organisations. However, due to factors including the cost-of-living crisis, the measures – including the current unit cost ceilings – are not sufficient.

There are also challenges related to the bureaucratic procedures, language barriers (the application process is not available in all EU languages) and the distinction between core funding and project funding.

With regards to the wider coordination of the CERV programme, including Strand 3, stakeholder organisations involved in the Civil Dialogue Group would like to see more involvement of the group in advance of the work programme preparations. Another weakness relating to coordination is that around a quarter of the Member States do not have contact points.

Table 4 summarises the findings obtained from NCPs and wider stakeholders with regards to the overall strengths and weaknesses of the CERV programme.

⁷⁸ Op. cit.

⁷⁹ On the basis of interviews conducted with CSOs.

Table 4: Summary of the survey findings

Strengths	Weaknesses
Early implementation of the programme	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Putting civil society organisations at the centre of the implementation. – Content and topics funded under Strand 3. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Poor IT systems – Administrative burden – Lack of clarity in communications such as programme objectives, priorities and calls. – Wider stakeholders commented on the time-consuming process of understanding the funding rules.
Budget and resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Satisfaction over overall budget available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dissatisfaction with the processes of submission, preparation and timing of the grants in 2021-2027.
EU priorities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The integration of EU priorities into the application process, communications, evaluation process and objectives of the projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Gender equality aspect is strongly addressed by the programme, but more effort could be put towards better inclusion of the digital and green transitions.
Effectiveness & added value	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Europe Remembrance aspect. – Promotes cooperation between CSO and the public sector. – Various groups are eligible to participate. – Has a strong focus on historical and cultural aspects, especially in small and less developed communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Issues with the insufficient size of lump sums. – Documents such as the application forms, work programme, calls for proposals and annexes are not translated and available in all EU languages.
Application process	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Participants agreed that the efforts needed for a proposal submission were proportional to the volume of the funding required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Submitting a detailed budget at the application stage unnecessarily increases paperwork.
Digitalisation and IT tools	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Platforms are not user-friendly.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following set of recommendations can be formulated based on the analysis carried out:

Recommendation 1: Establish a network of national contact points for CERV

It is recommended that a NCP is established for each Member State to ensure efficient and effective support for applicants, stakeholders and beneficiaries of the CERV programme. As of June 2023, some 20 Member States had established contact points. It is important for the Member States without contact points⁸⁰ to establish their own NCPs as soon as possible to enhance accessibility and support for all stakeholders involved in the programme. Contact points should serve as reliable sources of unbiased advice, providing valuable information and assistance throughout the application process. They should also be capable of providing clear and easily understandable information regarding programme outcomes and of addressing inquiries related to partnering, training and other relevant procedures.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise communication and awareness-raising activities

The European Commission could prioritise communication and awareness-raising efforts for the CERV programme, as it is still a relatively new programme. To ensure effective campaigns, the European Commission could collaborate with local civil society organisations (CSOs) and programme operators since a partnership-based approach to communication is more likely to encourage potential beneficiaries in the CSO community to engage, leading to better organised and implemented information campaigns at the local level.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the network of CERV beneficiaries

The European Commission and the NCPs could help to coordinate and foster a stronger network of beneficiaries within the CERV programme, particularly emphasising the importance of knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practices under Strand 3. Encouraging beneficiaries to meet and establish a community dedicated to sharing experiences and expertise will enhance collaboration and facilitate the dissemination of successful approach. This network will contribute to the overall effectiveness and impact of the programme by promoting learning, innovation and the continuous improvement of projects and initiatives.

Recommendation 4: Simplify application submission procedures

CERV stakeholders express concerns that the small grassroots organisations targeted by the programme are unable to respond to Calls for Proposals under Strand 3 of CERV due to a lack of resources to handle the application procedures. To address this issue, the European Commission could consider conducting a thorough analysis to identify processes that can be further simplified. For example, the application submission platform should be made more user-friendly and supported with comprehensive tutorials to facilitate its use for applicants and beneficiaries.

Recommendation 5: Simplify and improve the adaption of the current IT tool

Building on Recommendation 4, the European Commission could also consider further adapting and simplifying the current IT tool, which both beneficiaries and NCPs say is cumbersome to use. In this regard, it would be important to first gain a better understanding of which elements of the tool and overall administrative procedures are a particularly high burden for applicants, beneficiaries and NCPs.

⁸⁰ Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, Poland and Slovakia

Recommendation 6: Review the adequacy of financial support available to beneficiaries

Although beneficiaries benefitting from CERV Strand 3 funding acknowledge and appreciate the efforts from the European Commission to increase the lump sums available for travel and conferences etc., the stakeholder consultations indicate that more support is needed to address the rise in inflation to ensure that funded projects can carry out their planned activities in full and avoid cancellations of activities in order to save costs.

Recommendation 7: Improve transparency of the portfolio of projects funded

The European Commission could consider increasing the transparency and searchability of the funding and tender opportunities portal (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area, SEDIA) where calls and funded projects are published to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse project data per programme. In its current format, very limited analysis can be carried out on Commission programme implementation, which limits the transparency of allocated funding of the CERV programme.

Recommendation 8: Foster participation of CSOs in the decision-making processes

Based on stakeholder feedback and the mentioning of the Civil Dialogue Group in the programme regulation, the European Commission could increase the frequency and timing of the group's activities. This engagement would enable CSOs to contribute to the oversight, evaluation and strategic direction of the programme, thereby strengthening its impact and ensuring its alignment with the needs and priorities of the civil society sector.

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ANNEX 1: SURVEY BRIEFING

KEY FINDINGS

- There is a perception discrepancy regarding the quality of the Commission's and the National Contact Points' (NCPs) communication activities. NCPs view the communication activities of the European Commission, as well as their own, more favourably than wider stakeholders. Wider stakeholders are also more critical than NCPs of the clarity of the CERV programme announcements and calls.
- This discrepancy is reversed in evaluations of the clarity of aims and objectives. Both NCPs and wider stakeholders are relatively positive about the clarity of the calls' aims and objectives, although most NCPs are critical of the clarity of the administrative requirements, while wider stakeholders were not particularly critical of this aspect.
- Several NCPs considered placing civil society organisations at the centre of the implementation as a strength of the programme. CERV's content and topics were also highly regarded.
- Most NCPs considered that several aspects require improvement, such as the poor IT systems, administrative burdens and a lack of clarity in communications on programme objectives, priorities and calls.
- The post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, Russia's war against Ukraine and Brexit were all considered important factors, but with some mitigation measures in place. Wider stakeholders were more critical about the effective implementation of these measures compared to NCPs.
- Most of the wider stakeholders (55%) said that they were satisfied with their country's overall budget. For NCPs, 57.2% responded that they were very or somewhat satisfied, while 42.9% expressed being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- NCPs were predominantly positive about the presence of inclusion measures in the application process, communications, evaluation process and objectives of the projects. Wider stakeholders were also positive about them.
- NCPs are more positive than the wider stakeholders on CERV reaching its objectives.
- Most NCPs are highly critical of the IT tools in contrast to wider stakeholders.
- There is a lack of information among wider stakeholders (who mostly are beneficiaries of the fund) on many features of the programme, such as platforms, available resources and financial aspects.

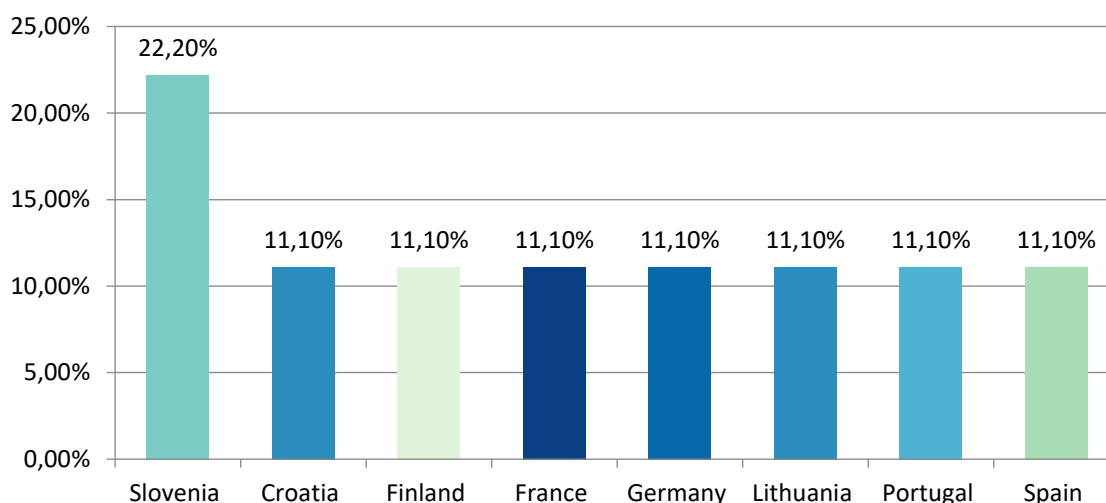
Background

The survey targeted a range of National Contact Points (NCPs), receiving responses from nine CERV NCPs. The survey was also aimed at wider CERV stakeholders, receiving 38 responses from this group of respondents.

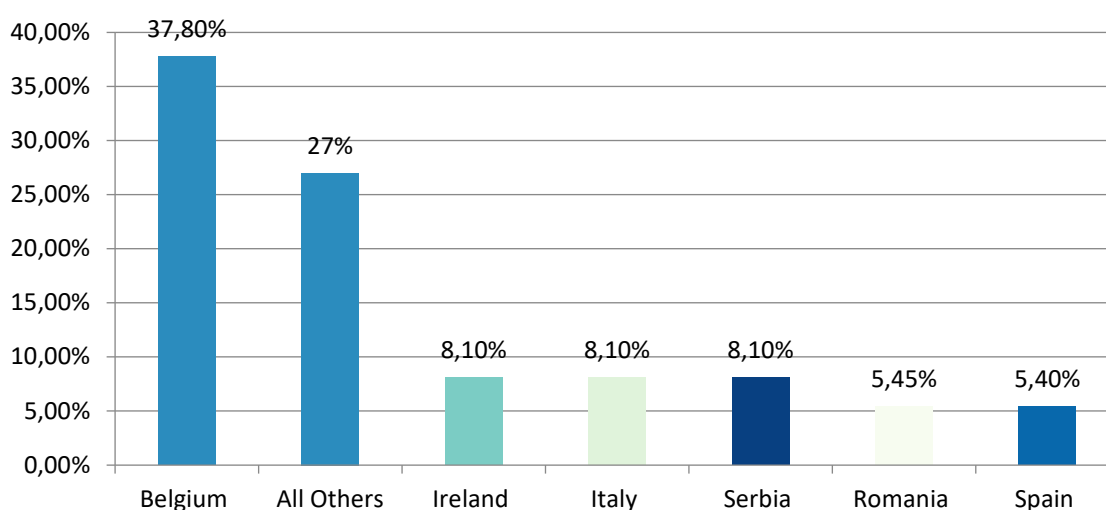
As shown in Figure 3, NCPs were from Slovenia, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Lithuania, Portugal and Spain. For wider stakeholders, the top country was Belgium with 14 responses.

Figure 3: In which country are you located?

National contact points



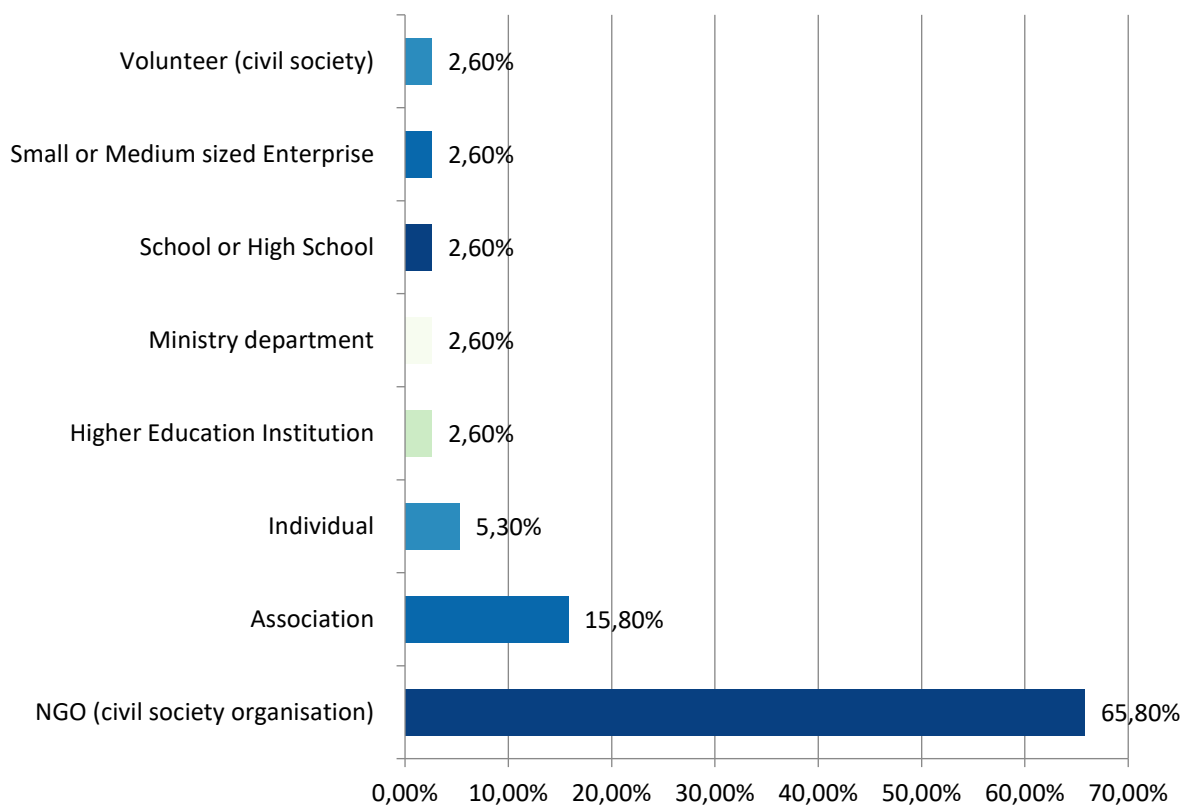
Wider stakeholders



For wider stakeholders, the survey enquired which of the options seen in Figure 4 best described their organisation. Most respondents answered that they represent an NGO (civil society organisation).

Figure 4: Which of the following best describes you or your organisation?

Wider stakeholders



From those who answered as individuals, their ages were 25 and 39. Regarding in which capacity wider stakeholders replied to the survey, 35 respondents classified themselves as a direct beneficiary (or equivalent), one as an indirect beneficiary (or equivalent), and two as indirectly involved in the programme as a relevant stakeholder.

Early implementation

This section describes the results obtained for the evaluation of the early implementation of CERV.

When consulted about the **quality of the Commission's communication activities** on the 2021-2027 programme, 86% of NCPs and 45% of wider stakeholders answered that they were satisfied to a large or very large extent.

When asked about their satisfaction with their **own communication activities**, 72% of NCPs answered to a large or very large extent. It should be duly recognised that the outcome of this question may contain a degree of subjectivity, since the NCPs are the ones assessing themselves. Nevertheless, this result indicates a recognition that there is room for improvement in their communication activities. On the other hand, 29% wider stakeholders responded to a large or very large extent. However, some 43% responded 'not applicable' and 14% responded to a limited extent or not at all.

Regarding the **clarity of the programme announcements and calls**, 72% of NCPs and 43% of wider stakeholders responded to a large or very extent. In terms of **the clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls**, NCPs perception decreases to 57%, but for wider stakeholders, it rises to 68%. For **clarity of the relevant funding opportunities over different programmes**, 57% NCPs and 39% of wider stakeholders responded to a large or very large extent (some 44% responded to a moderate extent).

When asked about the **clarity of administrative requirements**, the majority of the NCPs responded more negatively than for the previous questions, with 57% indicating to a moderate extent. However, this change in perspective was not recorded for wider stakeholders, of whom 43% responded to a large or very large extent. A reason for this discrepancy, when triangulated with the complementary interviews, could be that NCPs usually support the administrative requirements for wider stakeholders. Therefore, wider stakeholders (particularly beneficiaries) receive clarification from NAs, while NCPs are the ones seeking to understand the requirements. Similarly, 50% NCPs responded that the **information required in the administrative proposal** was proportional to a limited extent (and the remaining 50% responded to a moderate extent), while 61% of wider stakeholders responded to a large or very large extent.

The **user-friendliness of the proposal template** was the most criticised aspect, with 86% of NCPs and 35% of wider stakeholders responding that it is not user-friendly at all or to a limited extent. Regarding the **adequacy of its length**, 86% of NCPs answered that it was to a moderate or limited extent, and 43% of wider stakeholders responded to a moderate or limited extent or not at all.

Concerning the **evaluation** process, the response from NCPs was divided, with 43% of respondents saying that the **quality of the information on the process** was satisfactory to a large or very large extent and 43% responding to a limited or moderate extent. For the same question, 45% of wider stakeholders responded that the process was satisfactory to a large or very large extent.

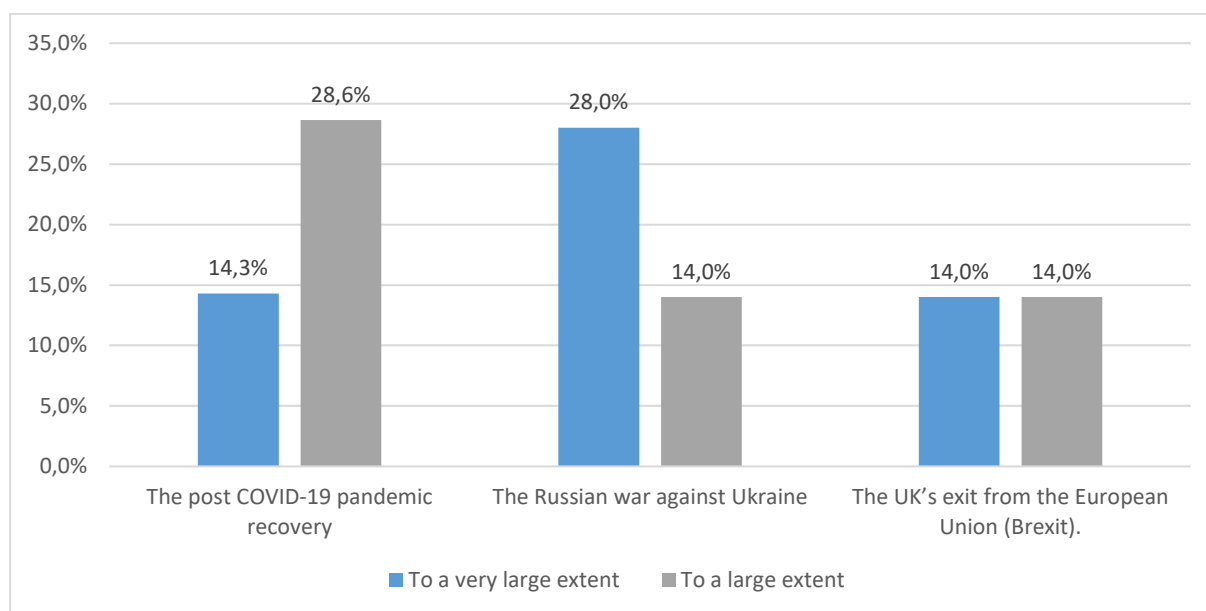
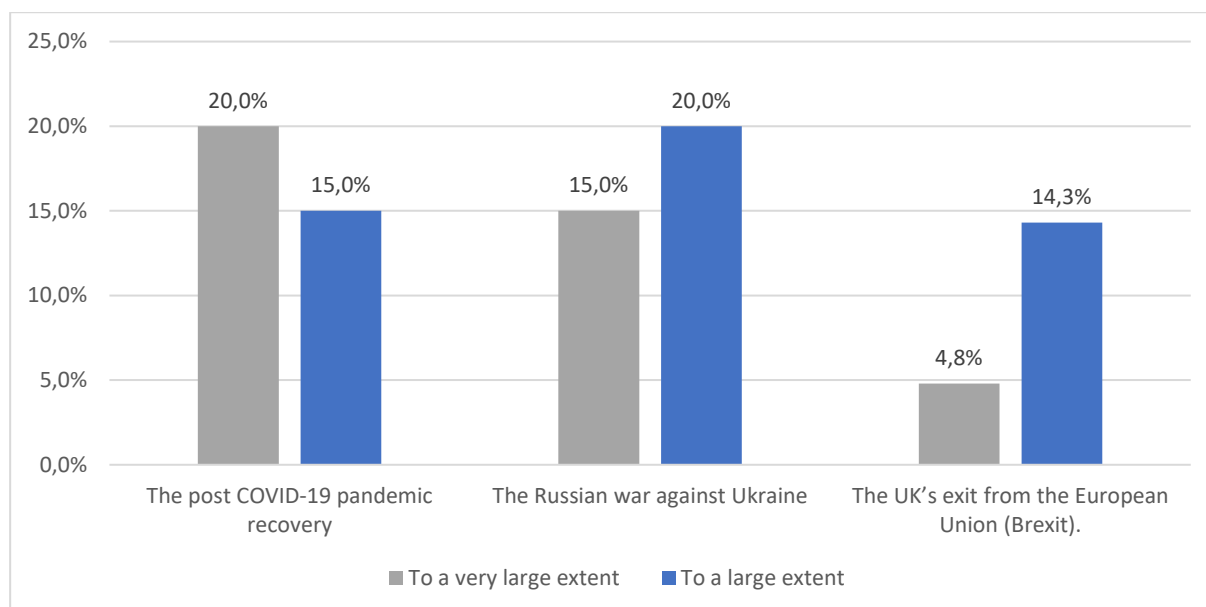
Regarding the **clarity of the award criteria described in the work programmes**, NCPs and wider stakeholders responded similarly, with 43% and 48% responding that it was satisfactory to a large or very large extent, respectively. However, when consulted about **the fairness of the evaluation process**, responses among both groups differ, with 28% of NCPs answering that it was satisfactory to a large or very large extent, compared to 55% of wider stakeholders. This trend repeats itself when evaluating **the transparency of the funding decisions**, where 43% of NCPs were largely satisfied,

compared to 35% of stakeholders. For this question, 43% of NA responded that it was not applicable to them.

As for the **completeness of the evaluation reports**, 29% of NCPs and 53% of wider stakeholders responded positively (for this answer, 43% of NA respondents found it not applicable). Lastly, the **decision-making process's timeliness** was regarded as satisfactory to a large or very large extent by 43% of NCPs and 45% of the wider stakeholder respondents.

As part of the survey, participants could comment on their overall impression of which aspects have gone well or could be improved within the programme implementation. Regarding strengths, NCPs considered the topics to be pertinent and engaging. Additionally, they highlighted that the programme put CSOs at the centre. Regarding its weaknesses, an aspect that was repeatedly mentioned by NCPs was the lack of clarity in the different communications, such as programme objectives, priorities and calls. Moreover, most documents are not translated into every language. They also said that the programme needs more visibility to reach more CSOs. Lastly, they mentioned that the Funding & Tenders portal is not user-friendly (especially for applicants of Strand 3 of CERV) and that the application form is too lengthy. Only one wider stakeholder commented on the question about the new funding rules, saying that it takes time to understand them and therefore apply for the funds.

For this section, participants were asked to determine to what extent the following external factors impacted the programme's implementation, as observed in Figure 5. For NCPs, the post-COVID-19 recovery was the factor that impacted the programme the most, with 42.9% of NCPs answering that it affected them to a large or very large extent. For wider stakeholders, the post-COVID-19 recovery and Russia's war against Ukraine were equally impactful factors, with 35% of them answering that they impacted the programme to a large or very large extent.

Figure 5: Impact of external factors**National contact points****Wider stakeholders**

Participants were also consulted about adjustments made to the programme to adapt to the impacts of these external challenges, as presented in the table below. NCPs said that the programmes have been adjusted to deal with the consequences of these external factors. Only to the question of the UK's exit from the EU were responses received that disagree with the statement. However, it is relevant to

consider that Brexit did not affect CERV as much as it did other programmes, such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps⁸¹.

However, this overall positive perspective towards the adjustments does not transfer to the wider stakeholders, which responded that there were no adjustments to the programme to alleviate the challenges of Russia's war against Ukraine and the UK's exit from the EU.

Table 5: In your view, has the implementation of the programme been adjusted in light of the above EU-wide challenges

National contact points

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	Russia's war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
Yes	100%	100%	57.10%
No	0%	0%	42.90%

Wider stakeholders

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	Russia's war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
Yes	54.30%	48.60%	48.60%
No	45.70%	51.40%	51.40%

When asked to comment on these issues, NCPs mentioned that the economic and social crisis deriving from the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery and Russia's war against Ukraine might have affected organisations in terms of travelling (reorganisation of meetings from face-to-face to online events) or prices (inflation can make it challenging to cover the costs of some projects). Furthermore, they mentioned that the impact on travelling also resulted in the exclusion of several CSOs, partners, membership organisations and suppliers.

⁸¹ [The UK and Erasmus+ | Erasmus+ \(europa.eu\)](#)

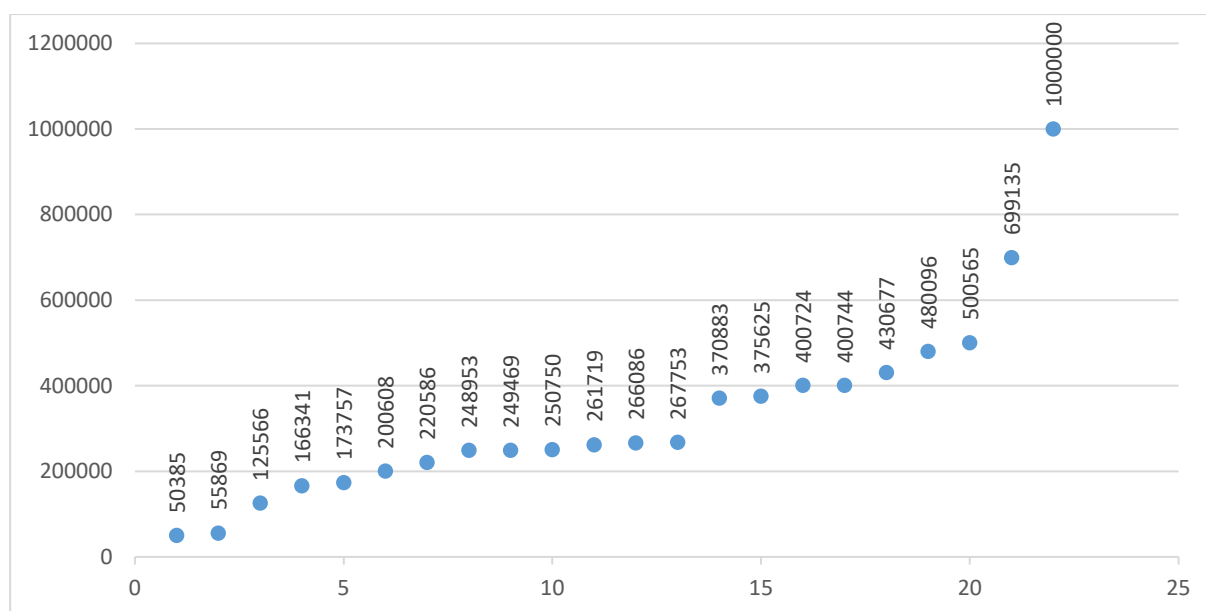
Budget and resources

This section describes the results obtained for the evaluation of the budget and resources distributed under CERV.

Wider stakeholders were consulted on the size of the EU contribution for the proposal. The majority of responses ranged between EUR 20,000 and EUR 60,000.

Figure 6: Size of the total requested EU contribution for the proposal

Wider stakeholders



When asked if there were financial measures to cope with the current economic situation and inflation incorporated by the European Commission and/or executive agencies and/or national agencies (national contact points), 57.1% responded positively. An example of a measure mentioned in the survey was for the Town Twinning action, to increase of the co-funding rate for the calculation of the lump sum and increase the maximum amount granted⁸². However, when wider stakeholders were consulted, 75.8% responded that there were not any measures put in place. When asked to elaborate on this issue, some wider stakeholders explained that the cost of travel has risen, and that the unit cost has not been insufficient to deal with it. Other wider stakeholders said that they were not aware of any measures, although they recognised that this did not mean they do not exist.

Around 37.5% of wider stakeholders consider the funding available to be sufficiently flexible to allow for the project activities to be carried out to a large or very large extent, while 28.2% responded to a limited extent or not at all.

In general, the majority of the wider stakeholders (55%) reported that they were very or somewhat satisfied with the overall budget available in their country. By contrast, only 7% were dissatisfied by the budget availability, while 38% seemed to be indifferent. For NCPs, 57.2% responded that they were very or somewhat satisfied, while 42.9% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

⁸² https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/cerv/guidance/lis-decision_cerv_en.pdf

The table below shows wider stakeholders' responses to questions about budget and resources aspects, which evaluate their overall satisfaction. The most common answers are highlighted. However, for all these issues, the answer that received the most responses was 'don't know'. The table also shows which answers were the second most selected, to quickly identify which areas were better regarded among those who did select an option. Wider stakeholders were the most satisfied with the time management of the contracting procedures, the clarity of the funding schemes and the size of the project grant. Wider stakeholders had neutral views regarding contracting procedures and the user-friendliness of tools (20.6%), the administrative and legal requirements (23.5%), the clarity of funding schemes (20.0%, and the flexibility regarding changing circumstances (20.0%) and consortium (17.1%).

Table 6: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Wider stakeholders

Value	The contracting procedures and tools were user-friendly.	The contracting procedures were managed in a timely manner.	The administrative and legal requirements were proportionate to the time needed	The funding schemes were clear
Fully agree	8.80%	21.20%	11.80%	11.40%
Partly agree	11.80%	9.10%	11.80%	20.00%
Neither agree nor disagree	20.60%	15.20%	23.50%	20.00%
Partly disagree	11.80%	3.00%	0.00%	2.90%
Fully disagree	2.90%	3.00%	2.90%	0.00%
Don't know	44.10%	48.50%	50.00%	45.70%

Value	The funding schemes were adequate	The size of the project funding was adequate	The project duration was sufficient	Sufficiently flexible adapting because of changed circumstances	Sufficiently flexible regarding changes in the consortium
Fully agree	8.60%	14.70%	23.50%	11.40%	11.40%
Partly agree	25.70%	14.70%	14.70%	5.70%	8.60%
Neither agree nor disagree	14.30%	11.80%	8.80%	20.00%	17.10%
Partly disagree	2.90%	8.80%	0.00%	5.70%	0.00%
Fully disagree	2.90%	2.90%	2.90%	2.90%	2.90%
Don't know	45.70%	47.10%	50.00%	54.30%	60.00%

Wider stakeholders and NCPs were asked to compare the 2021-2027 and the 2014-2020 programme.

Table 7: Comparison between 2021-2027 and 2014-2020 programme

Wider stakeholders

Value	The processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The processes of grant preparation in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The time from submitting the application to receiving the grant has substantially improved compared to the 2014-2020
Fully agree	8.10%	2.80%	8.30%
Partly agree	13.50%	13.90%	11.10%
Neither agree nor disagree.	16.20%	22.20%	19.40%
Partly disagree	2.70%	2.80%	8.30%
Fully disagree	2.70%	2.80%	0.0%
Don't know	56.80%	55.60%	52.80%

National contact points

Value	The processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The processes of grant preparation in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The time from submitting the application to receiving the grant has substantially improved compared to the 2014-2020
Fully agree	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Partly agree	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Neither agree nor disagree.	14.30%	14.30%	28.60%
Partly disagree	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Fully disagree	57.10%	57.10%	14.30%
Don't know	28.60%	28.60%	57.10%

As shown in the wider stakeholder's table, the most common responses were 'don't know' and 'neither agree nor disagree'. Similar to the previous question, there seems to be a lack of information or knowledge about the programme, which does not allow for wider stakeholders to provide an opinion in this regard. For those who had an opinion, there is a perception that the processes for proposal and grant preparation have improved and become simpler in the 2021-2027 period compared to the 2014-2020 period. Additionally, there is a perception that the time from application to receiving a grant has improved in the 2021-2027 period.

Conversely, NCPs have a clear preference for the 2014-2020 programme. NCPs are generally sceptical or uncertain about improvements in the proposal and grant preparation processes in 2021-2027 compared to 2014-2020. Most NCPs fully disagree with these statements, and a substantial portion (57.1%) expresses uncertainty about the time it takes to receive a grant.

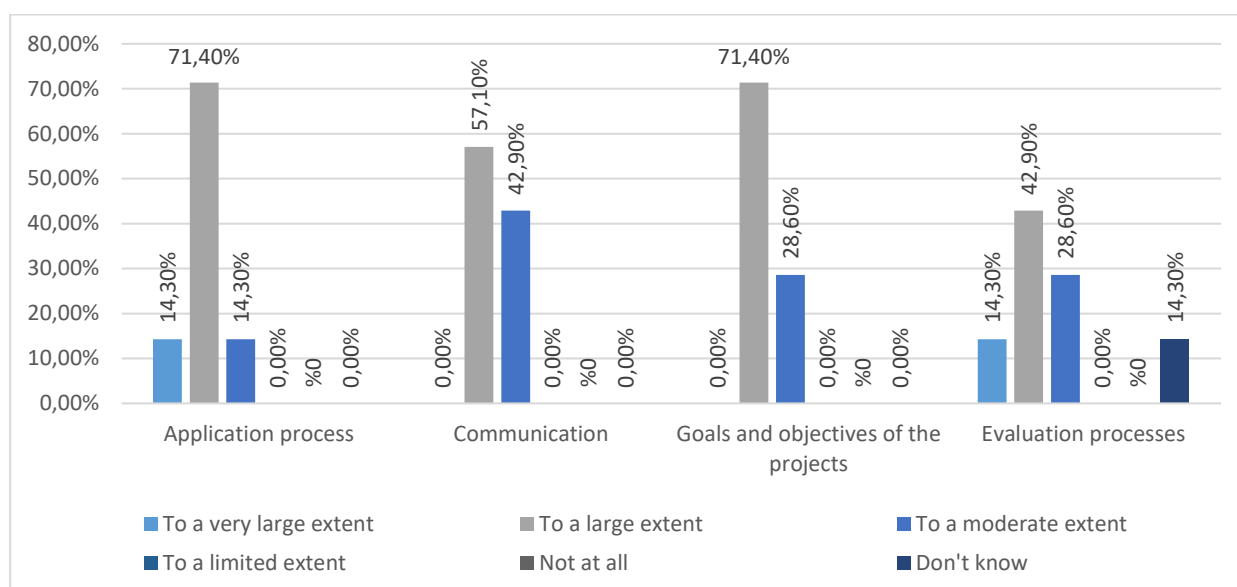
EU priorities

This section describes the results obtained for evaluating the presence of EU priorities (i.e. the Green Deal, digital transformation, gender equality) within CERV.

At a general level, NCPs were asked to consider the extent to which the priorities of the Green Deal, Digital Transformation and Gender Equality were present in aspects of the CERV programme, as can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 7: EU priorities within CERV

National contact points



As part of this section, the NCPs were asked to describe how the priorities could be more concretely integrated within the CERV programme. The comments received mentioned that the gender equality aspect is very strongly addressed by the programme, but more efforts could be made to include digital and green transitions aspects.

The following tables (8, 9, and 10) describe how wider stakeholders evaluate the extent to which different priorities are embedded into certain aspects of the programme. Similar to previous questions, the majority of responses for all priorities were 'don't know'. The following analysis will therefore focus only on the other responses.

Regarding the Green Deal priorities, stakeholders responded that there are present into the application process, communications and goals and objectives to a large or very large extent. They responded that they were present in the evaluation process to a moderate extent. However, a large number of 'Don't know' responses were received.

Table 8: Extent to which Green Deal priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the CERV programme

Wider stakeholders

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	13.3%	9.7%	9.4%	6.3%
To a large extent	10.0%	9.7%	12.5%	6.3%
To a moderate extent	6.7%	6.5%	9.4%	9.4%
To a limited extent	3.3%	3.2%	3.1%	6.3%
Don't know	66.7%	71.0%	65.6%	71.9%

Regarding the Digital Transformation priorities, stakeholders responded for all aspects that they are present to a moderate extent the most, showing a slight decrease in comparison with the Green Deal priorities.

Table 9: Extent to which Digital Transformation priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the CERV programme

Wider stakeholders

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	12.5%	12.5%	6.1%	9.4%
To a large extent	9.4%	6.3%	12.1%	3.1%
To a moderate extent	12.5%	18.8%	15.2%	15.6%
To a limited extent	3.1%	3.1%	9.1%	3.1%
Don't know	62.5%	59.4%	57.6%	68.8%

Lastly, for Gender Equality priorities, respondents felt more confident in answering, with the question receiving the least amount of 'don't know' responses. Stakeholders considered that the priorities are present in all the relevant aspects to a large or very large extent.

Table 10: Extent to which Gender Equality priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the CERV programme

Wider stakeholders

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	20.0%	12.9%	20.0%	12.9%
To a large extent	16.7%	19.4%	16.7%	9.7%
To a moderate extent	6.7%	6.5%	10.0%	6.5%
To a limited extent	6.7%	3.2%	0.0%	9.7%
Don't know	50.0%	58.1%	53.3%	61.3%

When asked to provide further information on the priorities, stakeholders added that gender equality issues sometimes are "too concretely" integrated into the programme. To illustrate this point, one stakeholder provided the following example:

"In European Remembrance calls the application form is the same as in other CERV calls (same questions). But if we want to develop a project about the Holocaust and the questions are about gender equality and not about European history, it can result in a morbid and unpleasant situation. We highly recommend that the agency adapts the application form to the needs of the exact calls with more topic specific questions. We understand it is much more work for the staff of the agency, but in this way they will receive more quality applications."

Effectiveness & added value

This section describes the results obtained when evaluating the effectiveness and added value of CERV.

Wider stakeholders were consulted on what extent their project achieved, or expected to achieve, a list of objectives. While the list included objectives related to all four funds, for this report only objectives that directly concern the CERV programme are presented in the table below. It can be observed that the most selected answer was 'don't know' for all the objectives. However, those who chose other options responded positively to all objectives, saying that the programme contributes to these objectives to a large or very large extent. The three objectives that received the highest number of positive responses were:

- Promoted inclusion and diversity (34.6%).
- Promoted participation in and contribution to the democratic and civic life of the Union (34.6%).
- Increased citizens' participation in the democratic life of the Union (33.3%).

Table 11: To what extent the project achieved, or is expected to achieve, the following objectives

Wider stakeholders

Value	Increased citizens' participation in the democratic life of the Union	Promoted inclusion and diversity	Promoted young people's participation in democratic processes	Increased communities' strength and resilience
To a very large extent	25.9%	30.8%	23.1%	19.2%
To a large extent	7.4%	3.8%	7.7%	7.7%
To a moderate extent	3.7%	7.7%	7.7%	15.4%
To a limited extent	7.4%	3.8%	7.7%	3.8%
Don't know	55.6%	53.8%	53.8%	53.8%

Value	Improved collective memory defining moments in modern European history	the of in	Promoted participation in and contribution to the democratic and civic life of the Union	Promoted exchanges between citizens of different countries (town-twinning and networks of towns)	Contributed to the digital transition
To a very large extent	19.2%		11.5%	11.5%	15.4%
To a large extent	3.8%		23.1%	15.4%	11.5%
To a moderate extent	7.7%		11.5%	3.8%	15.4%
To a limited extent	11.5%		0.0%	11.5%	3.8%
Don't know	57.7%		53.8%	57.7%	53.8%

Regarding their projects' objectives, wider stakeholders and NCPs were consulted if they thought they were on track to deliver them. Around 86% of the NCPs argued that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives. In comparison, 38% of the wider stakeholders responded that they were on track. The elements that were considered particularly successful by both groups included:

- The Europe Remembrance aspect;
- The inclusion of young people;
- The promotion of cooperation between CSO and the public sector;
- The eligibility of a range of groups to participate; and
- The strong focus on historical and cultural aspects, especially in small and less-developed communities.

As well as the heavy administrative burdens and the ineffective IT tools, which were highlighted in the early implementation chapter of this report, the NCPs identified the following shortcomings within the CERV programme:

- Certain activities, such as conducting national research, hardly fit into the lump sum system that considers only international events as acceptable expenses, although they are often crucial for the innovational aspect of the project;
- Documents such as the application forms, work programme, calls for proposals and annexes are not translated and available in all EU languages;

- The statistical results of the programme calls have errors and shortcomings, and it is thus difficult to extract data per Member State; and
- The difficulties in using of the Funder & Tender portal (partner search, application, browse awarded projects, etc.).

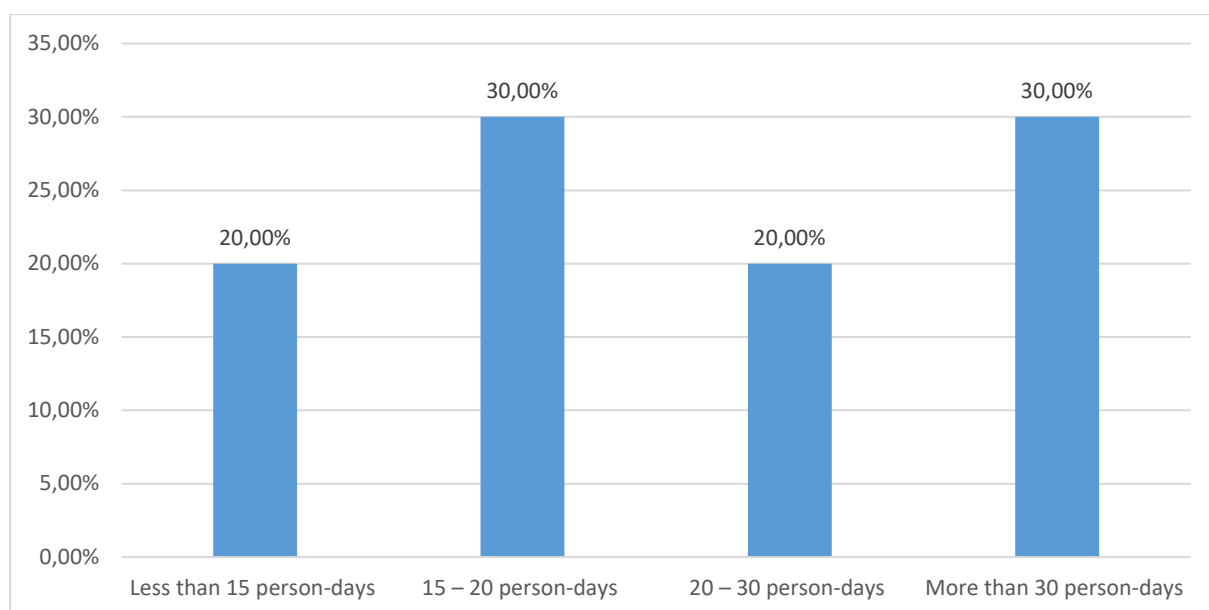
Application process

This section describes participants' perception of the application process; information on wider stakeholders was only collected.

Figure 8 shows that most respondents say that the proposal takes 15-20 days or more than 30 days.

Figure 8: Effort the proposal required from an applicant organisation in terms of person-days

Wider stakeholders



Wider stakeholders were also consulted on the efforts needed for a proposal submission, which can be seen in the table below. Along with the 'don't know' answers, most wide stakeholders viewed the different statements positively, responding that they satisfied to a large or very large extent to all of them.

Table 12: Efforts needed for a proposal submission

Wider stakeholders

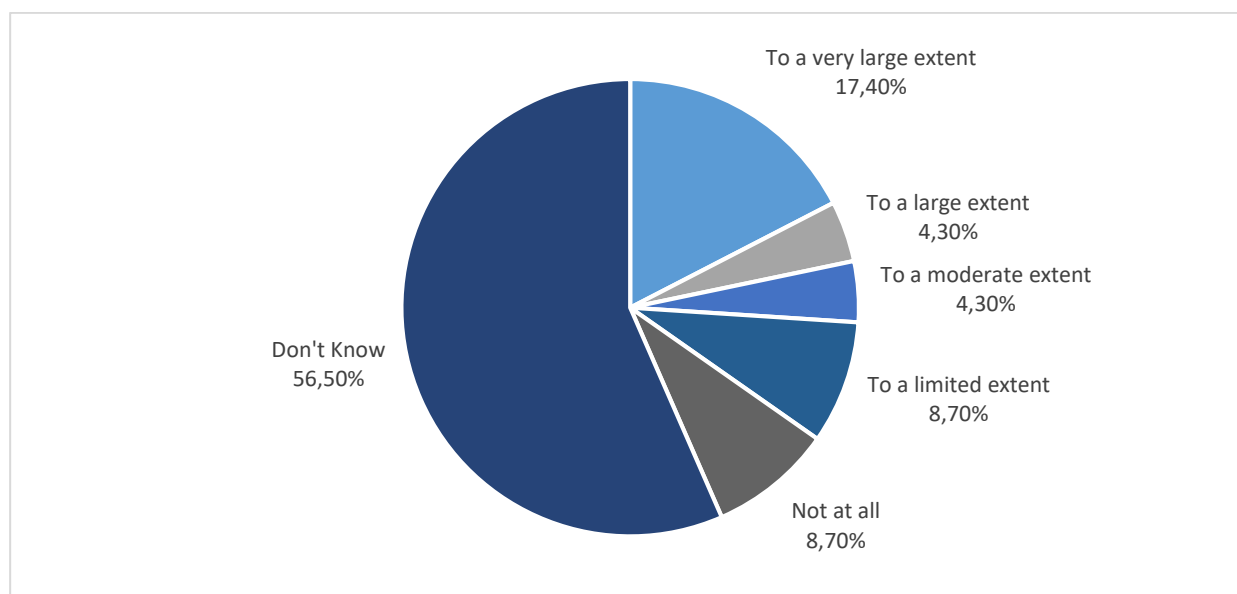
Value	The efforts needed were proportionate to the volume of funding requested	The efforts needed were proportionate to the complexity of the proposed project	The efforts needed were proportionate taking into consideration the number of partners involved	The efforts needed were proportionate to the strategic relevance/ interest in the topic/research	The efforts needed were not in proportion with the low chances of funding
To a very large extent	17.4%	9.1%	18.2%	18.2%	17.4%
To a large extent	17.4%	31.8%	18.2%	22.7%	17.4%
To a moderate extent	13.0%	9.1%	9.1%	13.6%	8.7%
To a limited extent	4.3%	4.5%	4.5%	0.0%	4.3%
Not at all	4.3%	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Don't know	43.5%	45.5%	45.5%	45.5%	52.2%

These results are in line with the results observed earlier in the report, where wider stakeholders' perception of the administrative burden was significantly more positive than for NCPs.

Wider stakeholders were also asked about the extent to which the two-stage proposal process substantially improved the efficiency of the proposal process for their organisation. The feedback is somewhat positive, with over 21.7% of responses indicating that is improved to a large or very large extent. However, over half of respondents indicated that they do not know.

Figure 9: Extent to which the two-stage proposal process substantially improved the efficiency of the proposal process for my organisation

Wider stakeholders



When consulted on single improvements that could be made to the application process, wider stakeholders suggested submitting a detailed budget after the project is approved, not at the application stage, in order to reduce paperwork.

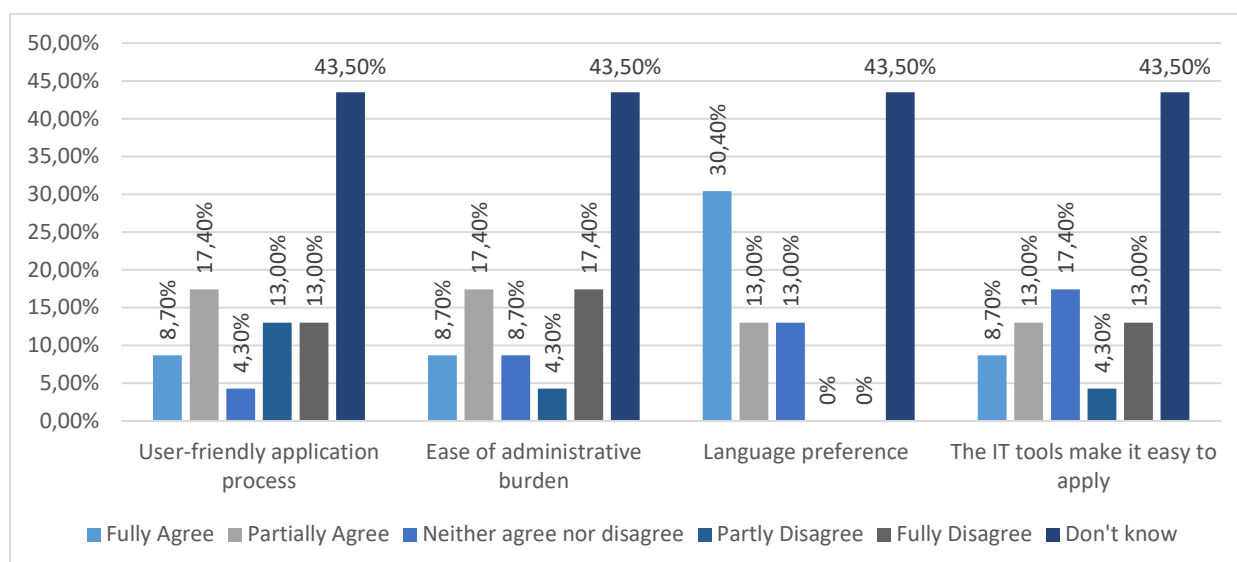
Digitalisation and IT tools

This section describes the results obtained in relation to the digitalisation and IT tools used by applicants of the CERV.

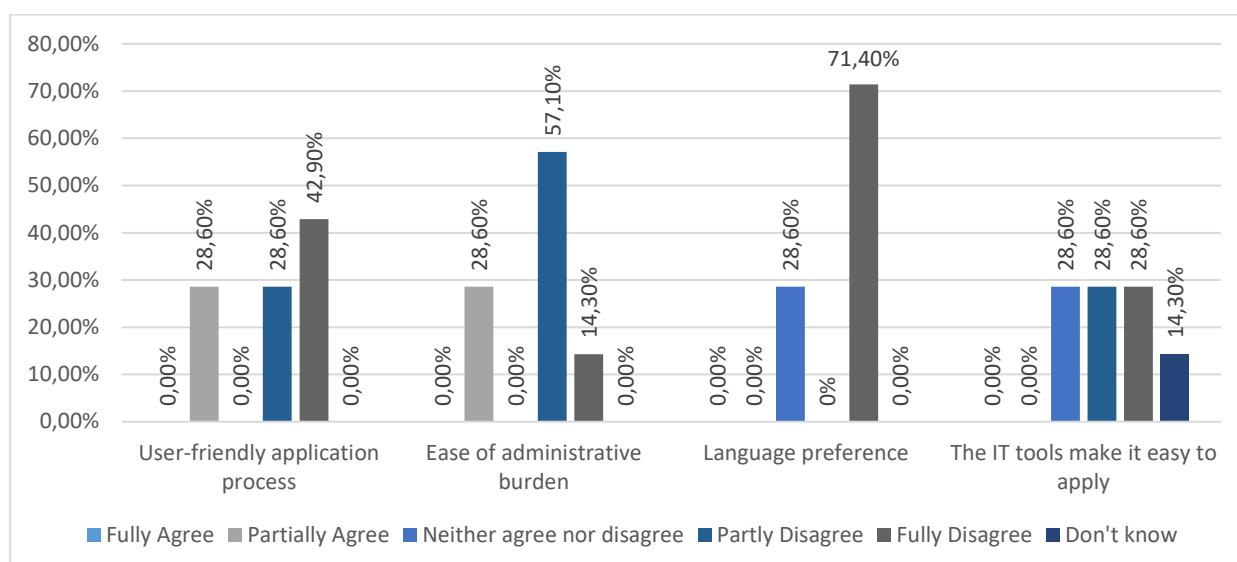
Figure 10 gives a summary of the effectiveness of IT tools in the application of a CERV programme:

Figure 10: IT tools effectiveness

Wider stakeholders



National contact points



As shown by the graphs above, stakeholders and NCPs have different perceptions of IT. For wider stakeholders, most responses are positive (disregarding 'don't know' responses), while IT tools are regarded as overall faulty by NCPs. By taking into account those who partially and fully disagree, around 71.5% of the NCPs considered the IT tools used for the programme's application process to not user-friendly, compared to a 26% of the wider stakeholders. Similarly, 71.4% of the NCPs considered that the IT tools fail to ease administrative burden, while just 21.7% of wide stakeholders shared this perception. Some 71.4% of NCPs also said that the IT tools are not in the applicants' preferred language, although 43.4% of wider stakeholders agreed that the tools are in their preferred language.

The survey also consulted participants on reporting platforms. When asked if they agreed that the platform is user-friendly, 42.9% of NCPs fully disagreed. Again, this contradicts the wider stakeholders' answer, where only 13% disagreed with this statement. Some 57.1% of NCPs partially agreed that the project management/monitoring reporting requirements are proportionate, while 30.4% of wider stakeholders either fully or partially agreed with this statement.

NCPs commented that many tools could be very useful if they were simpler, especially for smaller projects and calls that want to include small organisations, for which this may be their first project. Additionally, they often are required to repeat certain aspects, such as writing information in one specific place and then copying it into Sygma.

One NCP said:

"Why force small-scale projects with a grant of EUR 8.000 to use an IT tool made for complex, multinational projects with big budgets such as Horizon Europe projects? There are examples how small grants can be applied for with little effort, e.g. the German-French Citizens Fund or even Solidarity projects within Erasmus+ Youth/ESC. Why not make use of smaller-scaled IT tools here?"

Overall, they agreed that IT tools are not user-friendly.

Wider stakeholders were also asked a question about the extent to which Online Language Support and the Quality Label were deemed effective, and they were asked a question on the extent to which the Beneficiary Module and the Project Management Module were deemed effective. However, wider

stakeholders could not provide information on these four issues, with at least 80% of all responses being 'don't know'. It is relevant to keep in mind that these platforms/tools might be more widely used by other programmes and not so much for CERV.

Conclusions

The main preliminary conclusions from the CERV survey results are summarised below.

Early implementation of the CERV programme

NCPs have a more positive perception of the quality of the Commission's and their own communication activities than the wider stakeholders. This discrepancy can also be seen in views of the clarity of the CERV programme announcements and calls, with wider stakeholders expressing more criticism than NCPs. However, both NCPs and wider stakeholders are relatively positive about the clarity of the calls' aims and objectives.

When asked about the clarity of administrative requirements, the majority of the NCPs responded rather negatively, while wider stakeholders were not particularly critical of this aspect.

With regards to the fairness of the evaluation process, NCPs were more critical compared to wider stakeholders, who were overall positive about this aspect of CERV.

Regarding the programme strengths, several NCPs viewed placing civil society organisations at the centre of the implementation as a positive and unique aspect. CERV's content and topics were also highly esteemed.

NCPs considered several aspects in need of improvement, including the poor IT systems, administrative burdens and a lack of clarity in communications such as programme objectives, priorities, and calls. Wider stakeholders commented on the time-consuming process of understanding the funding rules.

The post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, Russia's war against Ukraine and Brexit were all considered important factors, but some mitigation measures were put in place. Wider stakeholders were more critical of the effective implementation of these measures than NCPs.

Budget and resources

In general, most of the wider stakeholders (55%) said that they were very or somewhat satisfied with the overall budget available in their country. By contrast, only 7% were dissatisfied with the budget availability, while 38% were indifferent. For NCPs, 57.2% responded that they were very or somewhat satisfied, while 42.9% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

No consensus was found on the progress of the CERV programme in becoming more efficient and user-friendly compared to previous iterations. Most NCP opinions were also negative, with dissatisfaction recorded on the processes of submission, preparation, and the timing of the grants in 2021-2027.

These views are reflected to a lesser extent in the responses received by wider stakeholders to the same questions. Wider stakeholders indicated that overall the processes were neither better nor worse than the previous programme.

EU priorities

NCPs were predominantly positive about the presence of EU priorities with regards to the application process, communications, evaluation process and objectives of the projects. Wider stakeholders were also positive about them.

Effectiveness & added value

NCPs were more positive than the wider stakeholders on CERV reaching its objectives. Elements that were particularly deemed to be successful within the NCP's country for CERV included:

- The Europe Remembrance aspect;
- The fostering of inclusion of young people;
- The promotion of cooperation between CSOs and the public sector;
- The eligibility of a range of groups to participate; and
- The strong focus on historical and cultural aspects, especially in small and less-developed communities.

Application process

Wider stakeholders were asked about their experience regarding the CERV application process. The majority said that overall the efforts needed for a submission of proposal were adequate.

Digitalisation and IT tools

NCPs were more critical than wider stakeholders about the IT tools.

Final remarks

This survey highlights the lack of information available to wider stakeholders (who mostly are beneficiaries of the fund) on many features of the programme, such as platforms, available resources and financial aspects.

ANNEX 2: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

A small number of semi-structured interviews were carried out as part of this study. The interviews were designed to support the development and validation of recommendations. Stakeholders consulted have been anonymised. The type of stakeholder group is indicated in the left-hand column.

Table 13: Anonymised list of stakeholders interviewed

Stakeholder type	Date of interview
Civil Society Organisation	19 April 2023
National Contact Point 1	18 May 2023
National Contact Point 2	18 May 2023
Civil Society Organisation	11 June 2023
National Contact Point 3	13 June 2023

This study provides an analysis of Strand 3 “Citizens’ engagement and participation” of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. It analyses the early implementation of this programme Strand and provides a description of the barriers identified. The main finding is that the implementation has been successful, overall, although several challenges should be addressed. The study concludes with a set of recommendations.
