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# **DRAFT REPORT**

on the implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme  
2021-2027 – citizens' engagement and participation  
(2023/2004(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

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## **EXPLANATORY STATEMENT - SUMMARY OF FACTS AND FINDINGS**

### **A Union based on democracy, equality, rights and values**

The complex and fast changing political, economic and social environment of the European Union requires strong, result oriented and evidence based policy responses focusing on citizens and based on democracy, equality rights and values.

Against this complex background, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme was launched in 2021 and was created along with the 2021-2027 Justice programme under the Justice, Rights and Values Fund to promotes rights and values enshrined in the Treaties.

The 2021-2027 Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme provides funding for citizens' engagement, promoting equality for all and implementing EU rights and values. It aims to protect and promote the rights and values enshrined in the EU Treaties, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (the 'Charter') and in the applicable international human rights conventions. It does this by supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) and other stakeholders active at local, regional, national and transnational level and by encouraging civic and democratic participation. This helps to sustain and further develop open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies based on the rule of law. It pays particular attention to encouraging the participation of national, regional and local civil society organisations.

Organised around four strands of activity, the programme seeks to:

1. protect and promote Union values (Union values strand);
2. promote rights, non-discrimination and equality, including gender equality, and advance gender mainstreaming and the mainstreaming of non-discrimination (equality, rights and gender equality strand);
3. promote citizens' engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union and exchanges between people of different Member States, and raise awareness of their common European history (citizens' engagement and participation strand);
4. prevent and combat gender-based violence and violence against children (Daphne strand).

According to an intercommittee agreement, the CULT Committee has the sole responsibility for Strand 3 - promote citizens' engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union and exchanges between people of different Member States, and raise awareness of their common European history (citizens' engagement and participation strand). Therefore, this implementation report will focus mainly on the Strand 3 of the CERV programme.

### **CERV – a new EU programme**

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

In 2020 the European Commission proposed to merge these two programmes into a single programme. This was a way to acknowledge that the fragmented nature and limited resources of the predecessor programmes have limited the ability to respond to new and emerging challenges. This is in particular the case in times when emerging movements were challenging the idea of open, inclusive, cohesive and democratic societies, which in general are guaranteeing the conditions for civic participation and the enjoyment of rights. This in turn would allow for the building of a tolerant way of living together. Progress had been made in ensuring that citizens are aware of their rights as well as 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: notably the common provisions (art 2 on values and art 3 objectives, art 6 charter of fundamental rights, and in the provisions on democratic principles, art. 10 and 11 on democratic participation and civil dialogue), as well as the implementing articles as part of the non-discrimination and citizenship provisions (art. 10 and 19 and 20 to 25) are establishing the citizenship of the Union to which all persons holding the nationality of a Member State are entitled. The Treaties also list the main rights and duties of citizens of the Union (Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the Europe Union (TFEU)<sup>1</sup> and Article 9 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

### **Overview of the CERV Programme and its Strand 3 “citizens’ engagement and participation”**

With the new CERV programme the Commission’s ambition was to further promote the values enshrined in the Treaties, the [EU] Charter [of Fundamental Rights] and the applicable international human rights conventions, in particular by supporting civil society organisations [(CSOs)] 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<sup>2</sup>.

The overriding specific objective for Strand 3 – the citizens’ engagement and participation strand – is to promote citizens’ engagement and participation of citizens in the life of the European Union. This is broken down further into three specific sub-objectives for Strand 3, which are to<sup>3</sup>:

- support projects aimed at remembering defining moments in modern European history, such as the coming to power of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, and projects aimed at raising awareness among European citizens of their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their understanding of the Union and of the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance;

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<sup>1</sup> [The Member States, ‘Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union’, 7 June 2016](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/692 \(CERV Regulation\), Art. 2 \(1\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [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, Art. 5](#)

- 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;
- 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.

The objectives of Strand 3 (and of the CERV programme) are achieved through action grants to projects, operating grants to civil society (financed under the “Union values” strand, and procurement and communication activities by the European Commission (this range of activities applies to all strands). The activities, which the Commission funds, include national contact points (NCPs) in the Member States. NCPs are considered an innovation in the CERV programme, as they existed under the Europe for Citizens Programme but not under the REC programme.

An innovation in the CERV programme 2021-2027 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.

For the moment, the CERV programme only funds projects in EU Member States. Six acceding, candidate and potential candidate countries have expressed an interest in joining the programme, but this has not yet been formalised. These countries are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine.

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 EACEA, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency.

The total budget for the CERV programme 2021-2027 is **€641.71 million in current prices plus a ‘top-up’ from fines the European Commission collects of €800 million**, i.e. more than the budget per se, albeit the amount is at 2018 prices. Of that about €357 million **are available for Strand 3**. At least 65 % of the funding is to be allocated to democratic participation and 15 % to remembrance activities<sup>4</sup>.

The implementation of CERV is based on two-year work programmes. This is an innovation compared to the predecessor programmes which worked with annual programmes. The goal is to give stakeholders better visibility of forthcoming priorities and calls for proposals, and thus facilitate their planning. The budgets for the first four years of the current cycle are in Table 17. The low budget for 2021 compared to other years is due to that the ‘top-up’ from fines was only added to the programme as of 2022. The work programmes also set out annual priorities and describe the content of forthcoming calls. There are perceptible shifts in focus from year to year to better address needs on the ground while still ensuring continuity in policy priorities, e.g. a focus in 2021-2022<sup>5</sup> on the impact of COVID-19 and on projects

<sup>4</sup> A deviation from these percentages of 10 percentage points is allowed.

<sup>5</sup> [C\(2021\) 2583 final, ‘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’, 2021](#)

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. In 2023-2024<sup>6</sup>, there are mentions of 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<sup>7</sup> that were not included in the previous work programme.

The Work Programme for 2023-2024 sees the first call on the civic engagement of children with a call to ‘encourage children’s engagement and participation in the political and democratic life.’ The climate and the environment, including energy-related issues, will be taken into account in proposals on town twinning and town networks. The 2023-2024 Work Programme also highlights under this strand, the European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity award which recognises the work done by cities, towns, or regions in Europe to promote inclusion and create discrimination-free societies.

As the delays in adoption of the 2021 -2027 MFF were known, the services at DG JUST anticipated and made all preparations for the launch of the programme in parallel (this is also the case of many other community programmes – eg. Erasmus +; Solidarity Corps) in a way that the first calls for proposals were launched already in April 2021. The fact that there are only a few projects that are completed is due to the life-span of the projects – most of them run for 2 years, some even longer. This comes in addition to the fact that a call for proposals itself takes time (some months to apply, then evaluation, then preparation of the grant agreements). Therefore, we have to acknowledge that the Programme is in the early stages of implementation, which can partially explain that there have been only a small number of completed projects in Strand 3. However, the specific number of completed projects is not currently accessible. Further, the European Commission has underlined that there are not enough final reports from beneficiaries to accurately evaluate results, especially at a specific strand level.

Programme contact points in the Member States are available to disseminate information about the programme and help with inquiries. They are responsible for providing impartial guidance, practical information and assistance to applicants, stakeholders and beneficiaries, including on the application procedure, dissemination of user-friendly information and programme results, and inquiries for partners, training and formalities. However, there is no obligation for a Member State to set up a contact point and only 17 had done so by May 2022. Member States without a contact point at that date were Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Poland, and Slovakia. However, according to data from EACEA, there were 18 contact points as of February 2023<sup>8</sup>.

Regarding the monitoring of the programme, there are monitoring indicators common to all

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<sup>6</sup> [C\(2022\) 8588 final, ‘COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION of 1.12.2022 on the Financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme and the Adoption of the Multiannual Work Programme for 2023-2024’, 2022](#)

<sup>7</sup> [European Commission, ‘Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2022/758 of 27 April 2022 on Protecting Journalists and Human Rights Defenders Who Engage in Public Participation from Manifestly Unfounded or Abusive Court Proceedings \(“Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation”\)](#), OJ L, vol. 138, 27 April 2022

<sup>8</sup> [EACEA, ‘CERV 2021-2027 Programme – Contact Points’, 15 February 2023](#)

strands and these are set in the Programme Regulation<sup>9</sup>. There is also a Key Performance Indicator for DG JUST set by Eurobarometer related to Strand 3 objectives, i.e. Citizens' perception of democratic participation, 'my voice counts'. The aim is to raise the 2019 percentage of 48 %.<sup>10</sup>

With regards to quantitative data on implementation, data from 2021 provides some further information on the current state of the CERV programme.

Between 2021 and 2022, there were 26 calls for proposals. Out of 2 675 proposals received, 814 (30 %) were for the Strand 3- citizen engagement and participation, of which 451 were successful. This corresponds to a success rate of 55 %.

### **Relevance of the programme and correspondence with EU priorities**

Your rapporteur believes that is important to critically assess the relevance of the CERV's Strand 3. The overarching finding with regards to its relevance is that the programme's objectives are well designed to address national needs and are well-aligned with European Commission's priorities, including policies on integration, civil engagement, and participation.

### **Digital transformation**

Digital transformation is highly relevant to the CERV programme, particularly for Strand 3. Even though it is not specifically mentioned in the 2023-2024 Work Programme (WP),<sup>11</sup> the programme supports and commits to different policies and strategies centring around digital transformation.

Under the CERVstrand – Citizens' engagement and participation – in the WP for 2021 - 2022, one of the priorities is funding 'innovative democratic approaches and tools to help citizens make their voices heard and publicly exchange views on all areas of EU action, notably digital tools ('e-democracy')'<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, the CERV WP commits to supporting the priorities specified in the EU Citizenship Report 2020<sup>13</sup> and the forthcoming EU Citizenship Report 2023<sup>14</sup>. These reports strongly emphasise digital transformation, empowering citizens' participation in the democratic process as one of the key elements of the report.

### **Green transition**

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<sup>9</sup> [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, Annex II](#)

<sup>10</sup> [DG JUST, 'Annual Activity Report 2021 – Justice and Consumers', 2022](#)

<sup>11</sup> [C\(2022\) 8588 final, 'CERV Multiannual Work Programme 2023-2024'](#)

<sup>12</sup> [EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND CULTURE and EXECUTIVE AGENCY \(EACEA\), 'Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme \(CERV\) Call for Proposals. Citizens' Engagement and Participation \(CERV-2022-CITIZENS-CIV\)', 2021, p. 7](#)

<sup>13</sup> [European Commission, 'EU Citizenship Report 2020. Empowering Citizens and Protecting Their Rights', 2020](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Directorate-General for Communication \(European Commission\) and Kantar, 'European Citizenship: Report' \(LU: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023\)](#)

The environment and the fight against climate change is a policy priority where also the CERV programme contributes, which highlights its relevance for the policy area alongside the digital transition. In fact, green and digital transitions are increasingly becoming more intertwined.

Overall, from the early implementation analysis it can be stated that the Strand 3 is relevant to the green transition challenge, by ensuring the participation and engagement of citizens in this field. It highlights the importance of a bottom-up approaches regarding the development of policies, as it seeks to involve grass-roots organisations into the process and aims to enable towns to engage citizens and communities in discussions and actions on the climate and the environment, including addressing energy-related issues, social solidarity and migration.

In the call for proposals to foster citizens' engagement and participation, it is stated that this priority should boost citizens' and communities' engagement in discussions and actions related to our climate and environment. In 2023 and 2024, a specific focus will be put in bringing citizens together to discuss actions on the climate and the environment, including energy-related issues, solidarity and sharing best practices, and thus contributing to increasing citizens' engagement in society and ultimately to their active involvement in the democratic life of the Union.

Regarding the number of related projects, there is a total of 79 projects that were funded under the Call Citizens' engagement and participation that make direct reference to supporting relevant activities.

### **Post- pandemic recovery**

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested European societies and economies. It has also disrupted citizen's rights and participation in democracy. As such, addressing the effects of the pandemic have been recognised as one of the priorities of the programme, stating that it will explore 'how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the democratic debate and the enjoyment of fundamental rights'<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, the effects of the pandemic became an intrinsic aspect of many calls and proposals.

Several projects under Strand 3 relate to post-COVID efforts including the projects: COVIDemocracy in the Baltics<sup>16</sup>; Encouraging Women Participation in Times of Pandemic<sup>17</sup>; and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on diverse democratic perspectives through gender perspective<sup>18</sup>.

The programme design for Town-Twinning's call for proposals incorporates post-pandemic recovery efforts. This programme promotes citizen exchanges between different countries

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<sup>15</sup> [EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND CULTURE and EXECUTIVE AGENCY \(EACEA\), 'Call-Fiche\\_cerv-2022-Citizens-Civ', p. 7](#)

<sup>16</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/43251589/101081520/CERV>

<sup>17</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/43251589/101081080/CERV>

<sup>18</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/43251589/101080161/CERV>



through town twinning, giving them practical experience of the Union's diverse heritage, which includes the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although post-pandemic recovery challenges are less present in the design of the programme, CERV remains relevant. Similarly, along with the digital and green transition and democratic life, protecting the most vulnerable groups from the consequences of the pandemic is one of the programme's priorities.

### **Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine**

CERV ensures that in 2023 a particular focus is given to projects aiming at addressing the consequences of the Russian aggression on Ukraine regarding the protection of democratic freedom and the enjoyment of fundamental rights for all, and in particular for people in the most vulnerable situations, such as women and children.

An important aspect regarding Strand 3 is that the Russian aggression on Ukraine and its consequences also emphasise the importance of a critical reflection on the past and the transmission of memory to future generations to tackle historical distortion and ensure European remembrance to avoid repeating past mistakes.

Moreover, tackling historical distortion and encouraging intergenerational work is a key focus in the WP 2023 by supporting 'projects that commemorate and educate about defining experiences in modern European history. These include the causes and consequences of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, resistance against these regimes, the Holocaust and other mass crimes, democratic transition and (re)-building democratic institutions, the legacy of colonialism, transnational migration and European integration'<sup>19</sup>.

### **Strengthening EU's democratic values**

According to your rapporteur, Strand 3 is deeply rooted in EU democratic values. It aims to help people make their voices heard and increase inclusion and democratic participation in line with the Commission's political priorities, including those specified in the EU Citizenship Report 2020 and the European democracy action plan.

As such, Strand 3 covers a significant portion of the strategy by promoting citizens engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union, exchanges between citizens of different Member States, and raising awareness of the common European history. It does so by developing activities that will focus on debating the future of Europe, on citizens' societal engagement, independent election observation, including monitoring by citizens, and innovative approaches and tools to help citizens make their voices heard and publicly exchange views on all areas of EU action. It upholds EU's democratic values by fostering the active participation of individuals and civil society in democratic processes, which are crucial for the future of Europe and democratic societies. Furthermore, Strand 3 indicates a strong commitment to strengthening European identity and values, as the legacy of recent European history is a crucial pillar of the values the EU.

The WP 2023 also mentions the Conference on the Future of Europe, a citizen-led series of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 8

debates and discussions that ran from April 2021 to May 2022 and enabled people from across Europe to share their ideas and discuss them in plenaries and working groups with the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the European Commission, National Parliaments, EU bodies, social partners and civil society in order to adopt common conclusions thus helping shape our common future.

All in all, the relevance of the Strand 3 in this area is clear, as it touches on the promotion of EU values through citizen engagement and participation, on the protection of human rights, and on the development of resilience to make the Union more robust and ready to face current social, economic, and political challenges.

### **Lessons learnt from early implementation**

At the programme level, it can be preliminary deduced that the main objectives of the CERV are still relevant and address some of the main EU challenges. The implementation of EU strategies such as the ones on climate change, digitalisation, autonomy, and others, are tackled through the democratic dialogue promoted by CERV. Designed as a bottom up programme, the CERV programme has a certain level of flexibility in implementation, which is positive considering its capacity to adapt and tackle new challenges.

The primary objective of the CERV programme strand 3 is to foster democratic engagement. Ergo, as part of project activities to reach this objective, participation across all of the challenges identified are relevant – including participation in green and digital transition topics, as it raises the awareness or level of engagement of the larger public.

The initial analysis of the CERV Strand 3 projects also seem to confirm that a significant number of projects are relevant to the three main challenges identified, i.e., to climate change, digitalisation, and addressing consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (see the Relevance and Coherence section for further detail).

Research evidence show that relevant national challenges are also addressed. An example are grass roots organisations operating in EU countries, where the space for civil society is narrowed or obstructed and for which CERV support is principally important.<sup>20</sup>

In addition the European Commission has explicitly incorporated some main challenge in the programme. In the 2023/24 programming period, COVID-19 and post-pandemic effects were also incorporated as a reference for the programme. Other challenges, like the war in Ukraine are partially addressed through the protect and promote the rights of the child call<sup>21</sup> and through the Daphne call<sup>22</sup>(victims of sexual violence against civilians in Ukraine war). However, challenges linked to the war in Ukraine could theoretically be further incorporated through the remembrance component which addresses the issues of wars and its impacts and totalitarian regimes, as well as in the democratic participation activities both through town twinning programmes between EU and Ukrainian municipalities as well as in supporting common projects between EU and Ukrainian civil society organisations on the activities of

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<sup>20</sup> <https://ecnl.org/focus-areas/european-level-policies>

<sup>21</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/cerv-2022-child>

<sup>22</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/cerv-2023-daphne>

the work programme.

The Commission has also highlighted that there is a lag in the implementation of the programme since the CERV programmes were adopted relatively late in 2021. DG JUST is thus still at the very beginning of the implementation.

To conclude, your rapporteur believes that although it has been confronted with a number of challenges the early implementation of the CERV programme can be cautiously deemed to be effective.

First, the programme was adopted in 2021, and most of the projects are still at the beginning of their implementation. The WP 2021-2022 calls were launched and concluded while the WP 2023-2024 calls for 2023 are ongoing. Even though the number of applications has suffered a decrease because of the pandemic, they are now picking back up.

The COVID-19 pandemic not only had an impact on the applications but also on implementation. Many projects suffered from operational issues, including ICT tools problems, which were factors of delay. Stakeholders explained that the programmes had been implemented as foreseen in the programming by the European Commission and that they were able to spend all allocated resources.

The programme is highly valued for its unique approach covering sensitive societal issues. Its top-down orientation is particularly appreciated as it seeks to work with grass-roots organisations, allowing for a good engagement between authorities and citizens. However, the programme application process requires significant review, as it was considered a limitation for small-scale organisations to participate. Specifically, the application portal is not considered user-friendly and demotivates organisations from applying.

Another issue the programme faces is the lack of a good programme-level communication strategy. National authorities mentioned that it is very challenging to raise awareness on the programme. This is also amplified by the fact that so far not all MS have appointed national contact points (NCPs).

Further challenges in the early implementation of the programme relate to the need for enhanced enabling institutional environment for the programme to better deliver on its objectives. For example, stakeholders have been asking for measures to counter shrinking civil spaces, but also to reinvigorate the civil dialogue promoting further the collective dimension of civic engagement.

## MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

### **on the implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme 2021-2027 – citizens’ engagement and participation (2023/2004(INI))**

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/692 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EU) No 390/2014<sup>1</sup>,
- having regard to the Commission staff working document of 30 May 2018 entitled ‘Impact assessment accompanying the document: Proposal for a Regulation establishing the Rights and Values programme, Proposal for a Regulation establishing the Justice programme, Proposal for a Regulation establishing the Creative Europe programme’ (SWD(2018)0290),
- having regard to the EU Citizenship Report 2020,
- having regard to the human and fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to the Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and to Article 9 of the Treaty on European Union,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 7 October 2020 entitled ‘A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation’ (COM(2020)0620),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 3 December 2020 on the European democracy action plan (COM(2020)0790),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 2 December 2020 entitled ‘Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU’ (COM(2020)0711),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 18 September 2020 entitled ‘A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025’ (COM(2020)0565),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 12 November 2020 entitled ‘Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025’ (COM(2020)0698),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 March 2020 entitled ‘A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025’ (COM(2020)0152),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 October 2021 entitled ‘EU

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<sup>1</sup> OJ L 156, 5.5.2021, p. 1.

Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life (2021-2030)  
(COM(2021)0615),

- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 March 2021 entitled ‘EU strategy on the rights of the child’ (COM(2021)0142),
  - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure, as well as Article 1(1)(e) of, and Annex 3 to, the decision of the Conference of Presidents of 12 December 2002 on the procedure for granting authorisation to draw up own-initiative reports,
  - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A9-0000/2023),
- A. whereas active citizen participation in political and cultural life is a fundamental right that should be equally accessible to all; whereas the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides for the right to participate in government and free elections, the right to participate in the cultural life of the community and the right to peaceful assembly and association, enabling full participation in society;
- B. whereas citizenship of the Union gives people various rights, in particular the right to petition Parliament on any issue within the EU’s responsibility, the right to raise perceived cases of maladministration by any EU institution with the European Ombudsman, the right to write to any EU institution in one of the EU’s official languages and receive a reply in the same language and the right to access Parliament, Council and Commission documents under certain conditions;
- C. whereas present and emerging systemic challenges, such as the climate crisis, global pandemics, the digital shift and migration, require the adaptation of structures and approaches granting active participation to citizens in society; whereas the active digital engagement of citizens should take into account and address the digital gap between generations;
- D. whereas citizen engagement must be understood as multi-level, encompassing local, regional, national, European and global processes; whereas the ongoing processes of globalisation and European integration will require the new generation of Europeans to be increasingly politically engaged at multiple levels in order to be able to live and work internationally and navigate difference in their daily lives; whereas societies are becoming more diverse, making respect for the diversity of cultures and origins and the rejection of any kind of discrimination towards women, LGTBIQ people or minorities ever more important within Europe;
- E. whereas socio-political changes observed in Member States, ranging from social polarisation and low institutional trust to democratic backsliding, the erosion of the rule of law, exclusionary nationalism and the instrumentalisation of Euroscepticism for political purposes, along with the rise of extremist movements and authoritarianism, may pose a serious threat to European democracies and destabilise the Union as a whole; whereas strengthening citizens’ active participation and engagement through formal, non-formal, informal and lifelong learning and education can play an important role in countering this trend;
- F. whereas the emergence of a European citizenship has been hindered by a knowledge gap and an emotional gap, and should therefore be accompanied and reinforced by a set

of mechanisms enabling citizen participation and intercultural dialogue; whereas a better understanding of our shared European history and stronger citizen engagement in social and political life can have a beneficial impact on an emerging European identity that complements citizens' multiple local, national, geographical, cultural or other identities;

- G. whereas insufficient citizen engagement, limited knowledge of the EU and poor understanding of its added value may contribute to the perception of a democratic deficit and may lead to Euroscepticism in Member States;
- H. whereas the shrinking of civic space in the European Union and other countries participating in the programme is affecting democratic participation and the ability of civil society organisations to act as checks and balances with regard to the rule of law; whereas actions to support and enable the participation of civil society, including grassroots-level organisations that have long track records and considerable experience, are paramount for defending democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Member States.

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

1. Firmly believes that the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme makes a unique contribution to enhancing civic engagement and participation from a fundamental rights perspective by effectively combining values, civil dialogue and citizenship, while also promoting gender equality and the fight against discrimination and violence; is of the opinion that the CERV programme is essential for addressing shrinking civic space and challenges to the rule of law across Europe.
2. Recalls that the implementation of the CERV programme is still in its early stages, as the regulation establishing the programme was only adopted in 2021; points out that for this reason, only a few projects in Strand 3 have been completed and there is little information available from beneficiaries to enable results to be evaluated accurately;
3. Underlines that the programme faced several challenges that hindered the initial stages of its implementation, many of which were external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, and that these disrupted and compromised citizens' rights and participation in democracy; notes, however, that implementation then picked up and is now going well;
4. Is concerned that the use and introduction of new digital tools for the implementation of EU funds (e.g. the eGrants tool) appear to be a key issue for beneficiaries with regard to the programme's development; regrets that complex procedures have also hindered the participation of smaller organisations that do not have the time and resources required to go through the application process; considers that the design of these tools limits the programme's ability to adapt to new developments and changing needs; calls for the elimination of the administrative burden and the simplification of the application, contracting and reporting processes;
5. Underlines that it is not obligatory for Member States to set up a CERV programme national contact point (NCP) that offers unbiased advice, helpful information and support to applicants, stakeholders and beneficiaries, including assistance with the



application process, while sharing easy-to-understand information about programme outcomes; notes with regret, nevertheless, that only 20 Member States had NCPs by June 2023;

6. Is deeply concerned that current inflation rates are affecting running costs for CERV beneficiaries; regrets that beneficiaries face challenges in implementing their planned activities, in particular regarding the unit costs for travel, accommodation and daily allowances, and may have to scale back some of the activities they initially planned in order to remain within the budget;

### **Policy recommendations for the future of the CERV programme**

7. Calls on the Commission to strengthen civil dialogue in such a way as to support a two-way process between institutions at all levels and all relevant stakeholders, and as part of the implementation of Article 11 of Regulation (EU) 2021/692, using civil dialogue as a tool to determine priorities for the two-year work programme and promoting further the collective dimension of civic engagement as a critical dimension of democracy and of the rule of law; recalls, in this regard, that innovative actions to support dialogue with civil society should be promoted, including with a view to fostering a culture of trust-based partnership with grantees; calls, in particular, for capacity-building actions to support the wide participation of civil society, particularly through links with other funding schemes provided through shared management, such as the technical support instrument;
7. Calls on the Member States that have not yet designated NCPs to do so as quickly as possible and calls on the Commission to continue working with the NCP network through meetings, training measures and dedicated exchanges, as these have been organised very successfully so far;
8. Takes note of the results of introducing different types of re-granting mechanisms under the CERV programme, which have been very encouraging so far; calls for a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the different re-granting calls with a view to possibly extending their use to the other strands of the CERV programme, where relevant, and in particular to Strand 3, in order to ensure that EU funding reaches grassroots-level civil society organisations that have long track records and considerable experience; urges the Commission to further simplify the administrative procedures and requirements for re-granting to give organisations applying for re-granting more flexibility vis-à-vis sub-grantees, ensuring appropriate working, healthcare and social protection standards; believes that the co-funding requirements could be revised with a view to adapting the rules to the beneficiary's situation in order to support a larger variety of beneficiaries and thematic fields; underlines that funding provided from the CERV programme in the field of rights, equality, values and civic engagement, for which other sources of funding are very scarce or absent, should cover a greater percentage of grant amounts;
10. Acknowledges that exchanges and participation in activities under the CERV programme are key for building the capacity of civil society organisations for civic engagement and the promotion of Union values in non-EU countries; underlines that active engagement and commitment to European values do not start with accession agreements and are the outcome of the long-standing work of activists and civil society organisations to promote these ideas and support local activists in non-EU countries;

calls, therefore, for the CERV programme to cover the participation costs of civil society representatives, at least those from candidate and associated countries, regardless of whether their country is involved in the CERV programme; stresses the need to address the challenges associated with the war in Ukraine by encouraging projects with Ukrainian partners through remembrance and democratic participation activities;

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

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