

Position Paper

**Contribution to the Mid-term evaluation of the
Europe for Citizens Programme**

Brussels, 5th April 2017

Background

This position paper is the outcome of a joint reflection promoted by the Task Force on the Europe for Citizens Programme held by the organisations listed below within the framework of Civil Society Europe. As beneficiaries of the programme, the subscribers exchanged their multi-annual experience in partnering up with the programme and identified a set of recommendations for its improvement.

The task force met on three occasions to prepare a common position to submit both to the survey launched by Deloitte and to the consultation promoted by DG HOME.

The organisations listed below contributed to this position paper:

LIST OF ORGANISATIONS

Active Citizenship Network

ALDA – European Association for Local Democracy

Culture Action Europe

CEV - European Volunteer Centre

ECAS – European Citizen Action Service

European Civic Forum

European Network for Education and Training - EUNET e.V.

With the support of Civil Society Europe (CSE)

The added value and distinctiveness of the Europe for Citizens programme

The Europe for Citizens (EfC) programme enables European citizens to work for the development of their **local communities** while meeting and connecting with their peers from all over Europe. Thanks to the programme, millions of European citizens from capitals, cities and villages, from urban and rural areas, gain understanding on **European history and policies, participate in civic life** and engage in **voluntary activities**, while European institutions listen to their ideas, needs, and concerns.

EfC is a unique programme insofar as it is a **listening exercise on civil society's debate**, as it stimulates critical thinking on the European project, its history and that of the movements and ideas that have promoted it and as it contributes to a **better knowledge of the European decision-making process**, improving the conditions for **civic and democratic participation at Union level**.

In an historical moment characterised by rising levels of Euroscepticism undermining the European project, EfC is the only EU programme that **tackles growing populism and nationalism**. By bringing together citizens to reflect on common problems and needs and formulate joint proposals, the programme is a key tool to **enhance mutual understanding and dialogue**, to promote intercultural dialogue and a **shared sense of composite European identity** and to reinforce the **ownership of the European project**. It is also a useful tool to enable citizens' participation in the ongoing discussions about the **future of Europe**.

The EfC Programme is unique insofar as it supports **citizen-led projects** in which ordinary citizens are the real protagonists of the action. It targets citizens of different age and social groups while putting particular emphasis on the participation of disadvantaged sectors of the society such as women, minorities, migrants, people with disabilities, etc.

EfC is distinct from other programmes in terms of its scope, objectives, activities and target groups. Very **few resources are available at the national and local level** to enable initiatives such as those funded by the programme. EfC is a unique source of support for actions promoting the European project through a **bottom-up approach**.

Recommendations

Legal aspects

1. We recommend that for the next programming period, the Commission addresses the issue of the legal base enabling the European Parliament (EP) to be involved in the adoption of the programme as a co-legislator under the ordinary legislative procedure.

Financial aspects

1. Despite the high impact and potential of the programme, the budget allocated is too small to achieve the programme's ambitious goals. The EfC counts for only 0,0171 % of the MFF and in the programming period 2014-2020 the budget was reduced by around EUR 29,5 million. Its current financial envelope of EUR 185,47 million, despite its distinctiveness in contributing to the European project, is extremely marginal if compared to programmes such as Creative Europe (1.46 billion) and Erasmus+ (14.7 billion). The high number of applications and the quality of the proposals highlights an increasing interest in the programme and its strong potential. The increased competition in all strands has reduced the success rate to about 6%. A relevant number of high quality proposals are not implemented because of lack of resources, in a context where very few alternative resources are present at the national or local level to support the actions. This causes frustration among candidates and discourages the participation of small organisations in particular. The insufficient financial allocation represents a key obstacle to the successful implementation of the programme.

We welcome the proposal of the EP to increase the allocated budget to 500 million, which represents a symbolic amount of 1 EUR per citizen. We call the EC to consider this proposal for the next MFF as a relevant step towards the reinforcement of the programme so as to unleash its potential.

2. We welcome the lump sum and flat rate mechanism and the simplification approach which encourages the participation of small organisations. We call for a rethinking of the pre-financing rate lowered in 2015 from from 50 % to 40 % for action grants and from 80 % to 50 % for operating grants and which never made it back to 80%. This hinders the participation of organisations with a limited financial capacity. We also call for a revision of the pre-financing guarantee requirement for grants of over EUR 60,000, as it can exclude the participation of small organisations with limited resources and cash flow.

3. The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) mechanism, launched by the EC in December 2016, should go together with a new and own budget line for the ESC, without taking away funds from the EfC programme which is already strongly undermined by the small funding envelope. The same applies for the ECI.

Communication

1. The programme clearly lacks the communication for it to be better known and increase the participation rate. A one-stop-shop platform bringing together all the information related to this programme as well as other actions, grants and structural funds that come under the umbrella of European Citizenship (i.e. ECI, European Voluntary Service) could be useful, as well as information days to present it and create networking opportunities for prospective applicants, as is the case with other EU funding programmes. Increased promotion must, however, go hand in hand with increased funding. Otherwise, it will only lead to more competition and a lower success rate, increasing frustration among applicants.
2. We welcome the creation of the platform collecting all the funded projects as an important step to create synergies among beneficiaries and recommend it to be further animated.
3. We call on the EC to consider additional ways to involve Member States in the promotion and dissemination of the Programme.
4. The feedback provided to the submitted proposals should be more accurate. The current feedback is an overall score with a breakdown by award criteria. It would be useful for applicants to receive more detailed feedback in order to increase their success chances in future applications.

Coordination

1. The current compartmentalisation of EU citizenship policies across different Directorate-Generals (DGs) (HOME, JUST, EAC, COMM, including the Secretariat-General) is weakening the programme. This makes it problematic to identify one interlocutor for EU citizenship policies, thereby negatively affecting the programme's understanding and visibility compared to other programmes that are assigned to a particular DG. Bringing all citizenship policies and actions under one single DG would strengthen the coherence and visibility of this programme and of other initiatives closely related to it, such as the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).

2. In recent years, civil dialogue meetings have been convened with less frequency (once per year) while in the past they used to take place more often (2-3 times). Having more frequent meetings would enable programme beneficiaries to engage in a regular dialogue with the Commission concerning the functioning of this programme, and they could be used more generally as a consultation platform to discuss issues related to EU citizenship and future priorities in this area. The format of such meetings should be revised in order to give participants the opportunity to actively contribute to the agenda and be a more exchange-orientated than a presentation-type exercise.
3. The centralised management of the programme by EACEA has proven to be very successful and is positively assessed. We call for the reinforcement of the Agency to better follow the implementation of the actions granted. Decentralised management or externalisation are likely to affect negatively the long-standing partnership between the EACEA and the beneficiaries.

Technical focus on the programme

1. The introduction of the multi-annual priority mechanism has been a positive step forward. This allows organisations to better plan their activities in a more long-term perspective and create stronger synergies with the EfC programme.
2. We welcome the simplification approach towards the programme. EfC has proven to be a frontrunner in removing the administrative obstacles to participation while maintaining the quality of the projects high. The easy-to-fill-in application is one of the added values of the programme regularly mentioned which strongly favours the participation of small organisations with limited administrative capacity.
3. The operating grants provided under the programme, to organisations which develop a regular flow of activities supporting the programme's objectives, are crucial to promoting EU citizenship and should be maintained and strengthened. The following reasons support this argument:
 - Operating grants contribute to the development and strengthening of the European public space and European civic identity as they enable civil society organisations to connect across borders in a systematic and sustainable way through partnerships, networks or platforms which multiply good practices, ensure learning curves and impact positively on the lives of their constituents and the policy-making process;
 - They make innovation possible, as they allow beneficiaries "a space" for thinking outside the box, experimenting and piloting innovative solutions to problems or forward-looking initiatives;

- They allow flexibility in CSOs' activities, enabling them, for instance, to react ad hoc to salient issues that could not be addressed through project grants
 - They preserve the integrity of CSOs in terms of independence from political and commercial interests, allowing them to set their own priorities;
 - By offering predictability and stability, they contribute to the sustainability of the recipient organisations as they support the development of long-term capacities and expertise by the CSOs in their priority areas, thus boosting their professionalism.
 - All those points above lead to a reliable and sustainable network of partners for the EfC programme and its administrative bodies in bringing Europe closer to its citizens and to provide feedback from the citizens to the European level. This can't be done with action grants.
4. While maintaining the simplifications introduced, more creativity can be brought into the action grant applications. For instance, in Strand 2 Networks of Towns, the obligation to organise at least 4 international events combined with the request of having 30% of international participants obliges beneficiaries to structure the project proposal around big international events with less room for creativity and alternative actions (also via ICT) at the local level. These criteria should be revised and aligned to those of the Civil Society Projects measure.



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