

Brussels,

Dear Petitioner,

The Commission is aware and concerned about the pressure and challenges experienced by civil society organisations in the EU. Civil society plays an essential role in promoting, safeguarding and raising awareness of EU common values and rights and, inter alia, in making institutions and governments accountable. This is why the Commission attaches the utmost importance to the existence of a strong, free and vibrant civil society in the EU.

Financial support is a crucial tool to empower civil society actors and to support them to perform their functions independently and effectively. The proposals for the new EU budget 2021-2027 and the proposed funding programmes show the firm commitment by the Commission to put people at the centre of the next Multiannual Financial Framework. It is in this context that, within the EU Budget cluster "Investing in People, Social Cohesion and Values", the Commission proposed a new Justice, Rights and Values Fund. This new Fund consists of two funding programmes, which will be managed directly by the Commission: the Rights and Values programme and Justice programme.

The Rights and Values programme will aim "to protect and promote rights and values as enshrined in the EU Treaties, including by supporting civil society organisations, in order to sustain open, democratic and inclusive societies". Thence, the role of civil society organisations is recognised at the highest level, in the general objective of the programme.

The proposals put forward by the Commission under the Justice, Rights and Values Fund aim to provide a very stable basis for successful partnerships in the future. It will allow full use to be made of all possibilities provided by the Treaty to support civil society organisations working in the areas covered by the Justice, Rights and Values Fund. It also takes into account the aim, objectives and concerns expressed by the European Parliament in its "Resolution on the need to establish a European Values Instrument to support civil society organisations which promote fundamental values within the European Union at local and national level"^[1].

As for the level of the budget allocations, the Commission has proposed to increase the budget for Justice, Rights and Values by 6% compared to the 2014-2020 period for the EU27. Furthermore, the Commission has conducted a thorough spending review of the current EU programmes with a view to unlock the full potential of the EU budget. The proposal to put together three existing EU programmes within the Justice, Rights and Values areas will allow for more coordinated and focussed EU budget intervention, thus maximising synergies. It will also allow for significant improvements in terms of delivery mechanisms to increase the

^[1] [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2018/2619\(RSP\)](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2018/2619(RSP))

effectiveness and efficiency of the support provided and improve access and conditions for beneficiaries.

Efforts have also been made to achieve simplification: Following extensive consultations with stakeholders including civil society organisations, the financial rules (which entered into force on 2 August 2018) were revised taking into account the feedback from responding organisations, and include a number of novelties making access to funding much easier.

Applicants for Union funding will need to provide less information than before and, once provided, the data will be re-used for a specific period. When verifying the financial capacity or technical expertise of future recipients, Commission services will be able to rely on available audits and assessments, already made by trusted partners such as international organisations and national agencies. This will significantly reduce paperwork. The new rules also take into account the value of volunteer's work as eligible - a long-standing request of the civil society.

To make implementation of EU funding even simpler, the use of simplified forms of grants such as lump-sums, flat rates and unit costs will be extended. There will be new forms of contributions, based on the results achieved, instead of the cost. Beneficiaries will be able to receive a fixed amount of money if they prove that certain actions have taken place. This will eliminate the need to check hundreds of invoices and receipts for costs and focus controls on the actual implementation of activities which have added value for citizens. Moreover lump-sums, flat rates and unit costs established by the Commission will not be questioned by ex-post verifications which increases the legal certainty for beneficiaries.

A debate on how to support and promote a strong and free civil society and public authorities' engagement with civil society actors will also be part of the discussions which will be held at the 2018 Colloquium on Fundamental Rights, devoted to the topic of "Democracy".

Maintaining a strong, independent and pluralistic civil society requires efforts from all actors at national, European and international level. Please be assured of the Commission's commitment to play its part in this regard.

Yours faithfully,

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