
Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe

How to Better CERV the Needs of Rule of Law & Human Rights Defenders in the EU: Tweaking the Funding Tool at the Mid-Term Review

December 2023

Executive Summary

The EU's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme has provided civil society organisations with critical funding since 2021. Resourced with more than a billion euros over seven years, CERV supports rule of law and human rights defenders promote EU values, equality, rights and gender, encourage citizens' engagement with the Union, and fight violence. Civil society has long called for the EU's robust support of democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights within its borders. CERV funds help make this a reality.

This paper, authored by the Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe alliance, which has concrete experience managing CERV projects, explores five opportunities to amend the programme in the next funding cycle. While much of the funding mechanism works well, we have found applying for grants to be unnecessarily burdensome, and propose ways to fund organisational resilience and foster stronger connections between CSOs and EU institutions.

Introduction

The [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values \(CERV\) Programme](#) has provided thousands of civil society organisations (CSOs) crucial funding to strengthen our work. More than a billion euros over seven years will go to CSOs to help protect and promote EU values; promote equality, rights and gender; encourage citizens' engagement and participation in the EU; and fight violence. Civil society has long called for the EU's robust support of democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights within the Union. The CERV programme is an important milestone in making this a reality, as recently recognized in the Defence of Democracy communication.¹

¹ European Commission, [Communication on the Defence of Democracy](#), 12 December 2023.

Members of [Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe](#) – a solidarity alliance of over 50 human rights defenders from 19 EU countries – lead and participate in various CERV-funded projects. The unique funding mechanism has helped us support human rights defenders within the EU, promote fundamental rights and good governance, encourage citizens to engage more actively with European institutions, prevent violence against women and children, and much more.²

When the European Commission carries out the programme’s mid-term review in 2024, we recommend altering the programme to reduce administrative burden, fund organisational resilience, and better connect civil society and EU institutions.

Findings

The CERV programme has provided European CSOs significant and critical funding to strengthen and amplify our work. The programme’s goals and scope closely mirror human rights and rule of law defenders’ work and have allowed our organisations to apply for ambitious projects. We have benefited from opportunities to collaborate with and learn from other EU-based CSOs as project leads, consortium members and subgrantees. While much of the funding mechanism works well, we have found that applying for and reporting on grants is unnecessarily burdensome, and there are opportunities to better fund organisational resilience and connections between civil society and EU institutions.

1. Reduce High Administrative Burden in the Application Process

CERV requires CSOs to prepare a full proposal to apply for funds. As the process is highly competitive, CSOs risk wasting significant resources on rejected applications. Nearly all CSOs are stretched thin, and this can prevent many organisations from applying in the first place.

In most EU External Action calls, applicants may submit a basic concept note to apply. A select number of applicants are then invited to submit a full proposal. Adopting a similar approach would allow CSOs to pitch projects without investing too many resources, help assure organisations that submitting a full proposal is worth the investment, and may free up resources within the European Commission. Asking for a 70-page application from the start of the process is too resource-intensive for both applicants and assessors.

² Several of our member organisations operate CERV grants, including: the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and Hertie School’s [Strategic Litigation for Rights in Europe](#) (STARLIGHT) and [Charterwise](#); the Netherlands Helsinki Committee’s [Catalyst of Change](#) and [Our Stories Matter](#); the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights’ Strengthening Lawyers’ Capacity to Respond to SLAPPs through a Practical Guidebook; Liberties’ [STRIVE 2023](#) network grant; Slovenia’s [Legal-Information Centre for NGOs](#)’ (PIC) Discussions and Actions on Climate and Environment and Linking Information for Adaptive and Accessible Child-Friendly Courts; and Spanish [Oxfam Intermon](#)’s Active Citizens for People and the Planet, and Wake Up from Inequality: Spanish CSOs Strengthening EU Rights and Values. Pending applications include Spanish CSO [Gentium](#)’s Standing Up for Rights in Europe, and the Belgium-based [Human Rights Cities Network](#)’s Boosting Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe (DeCiDE).

2. Fund Indirect Costs Equitably

The EU is only as strong as its civil society, and civil society is only as strong as its CSOs. Unfortunately, CERV projects insufficiently fund “indirect” costs. These, also called “core costs,” include all necessary and reasonable expenditures that are not directly attributable to a project. They are necessary to manage organisations, oversee activities, and create and maintain the policies, frameworks and systems that allow us to deliver on our missions.³

CERV grants allow 7% of the total direct cost amount to be spent on indirect costs, which is significantly below that of many private donors.⁴ This is unrealistic and runs the risk of draining, rather than strengthening, organisations at the end of a project.

Increasing this would allow CERV-funded CSOs to become more resilient, sustainable and prepared for the future. One helpful model was the EEA Active Citizens’ Fund Research programme, which allocated a flat rate of 25% for indirect costs.⁵ Our members were able to use this flexibility to ensure organisational resilience and impact well beyond their projects’ end, such as by building a new website and conducting an accessibility audit of their communications for people living with disabilities and implementing the recommendations.

3. Lower the Co-funding Requirement

CERV requires 10% of grants to be co-funded by applying organisations. While this is not excessive, we have found it poses a serious challenge for many CSOs. One of the useful aspects of the programme is that it funds areas of work that are otherwise very difficult to fundraise for. In the current context in which other funding sources are decreasing, the co-funding requirement prevents many from seeking CERV funding.

4. Strengthen Connections among CERV Grantees and with EU Institutions

As members of the RARE initiative, we can attest to the value of increasing our professional networks through in-person workshops. CERV has incredible potential to do this at a much bigger scale. Strengthening connections among CSOs and between grantees and EU institutions would help increase the impact of our work. The latter can learn about the potential need for reforms, while CSOs can make or strengthen relationships with representatives of EU institutions for future collaborations. Private donors have long held summits for grantees and the Commission used to hold an annual fundamental rights colloquium under the leadership of Executive Vice-President Timmermans.

³ Development Initiatives and UNICEF, [“Donor approaches to overheads for local and national partners,”](#) February 2023.

⁴ The IKEA Foundation and Hewlett Foundation allow grantees to calculate and propose their own indirect cost rate based on their actual expenditure. The MacArthur Foundation allows overhead costs up to 29%. The Ford Foundation increased their minimum indirect cost rate to 25%, which can go higher if costs can be proven, while the Casey Foundation has a sliding scale of 15-25% depending on a grantee's size. Development Initiatives and UNICEF, [“Donor approaches to overheads for local and national partners.”](#)

⁵ EEA and Norway Grants, [“Partnership Guide,”](#) 2014-2021.

The Commission could build on this and hold, for example, a week in Brussels for CSOs who work on similar topics to meet and learn from their counterparts in EU institutions and other CSOs, exchange best practices and receive guidance. This in-person exchange could also help CSOs find the right EU-based partners to apply for network grants. Currently, we are largely limited to the organisations we already know. The Fundamental Rights Agency’s annual online gathering and CERV grant search portal are helpful but cannot replace the in-person exchange that is needed to truly collaborate with new consortium partners to increase our impact.

5. Fund Critical Rule of Law Monitoring Work

In the same vein, CERV could be used to fund CSOs’ monitoring and reporting on developments concerning the rule of law. Anyone who works in a civil society organisation will testify that monitoring and reporting on what is happening in the field takes considerable staff time. Many of our members spend dozens of hours contributing to the Commission’s annual [Rule of Law report](#) alone, summarising hundreds of hours of practical experience. Combined with other requests for input, many staff members – particularly in countries where the rule of law is under threat – end up spending a large chunk of their time reporting on their country’s developments; however, this work is unfunded. By adding a “strengthen connections between civil society and the EU” objective to existing programme pillars, CERV could help fund the critical work that CSOs across the Union provide to policymakers in the field of democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

Conclusions

Since 2021, civil society has greatly benefited from the CERV programme. To increase its effectiveness, we call on the Commission to create a two-step application process, increase funding for organisational resilience, lower co-funding requirements, facilitate in-person exchange between EU institutions and grantees, and reimburse rule of law monitoring work. With these tweaks, we are confident the funding mechanism will continue to enable ambitious, impactful and significant projects across the Union.

Recommendations

As the EU approaches its mid-term review of the 2021-27 CERV programme, we recommend the Commission:

1. **Create a two-step proposal process** to reduce CSO and Commission efforts in applying for/reviewing applications. As is typical in most EU External Action calls, this would allow organisations to express interest with a basic concept note and submit a full application upon review and invitation to do so.
2. **Increase the percentage allocated for indirect costs to 25%**, to be spent by CSOs on “organisational resilience” as they see fit. This will help EU civil society organisations become more resilient, sustainable and prepared.

3. **Host in-person summits for CERV grantees** that work on similar topics to benefit from peer-to-peer exchange and networking opportunities, and meet and learn from their counterparts in EU institutions and other CSOs. As we have seen in the RARE initiative, in-person exchange will increase the impact of all of our work to promote CERV's – and the EU's – goals.
4. **Lower the 10% co-funding requirement** that prevents some organisations from applying for CERV grants.
5. **Add a “strengthen connections between civil society organisations and the EU” objective to existing programme pillars**, which should fund CSOs' critical work to inform policymakers about rule of law and other developments in member states.