

ECAS' Position Paper on the Europe for Citizens Programme

Submitted as a contribution to the ongoing mid-term evaluation

Background

As a beneficiary of this programme under its democratic engagement and civic participation Strand, the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) was actively involved in consultations with the MEP responsible for preparing the European Parliament's position on this Programme, adopted in March 2017. ECAS also participated in a stakeholder meeting with beneficiaries organised by Deloitte in February 2017 to contribute to an external evaluation for the European Commission. As part of its stakeholder engagement activities with civil society, ECAS had previously launched a public survey in July until September 2016 to gather views from its members, partners and other programme beneficiaries about the strengths and challenges of this programme. These views were compiled in a document and shared in all consultations in which ECAS subsequently participated. They were also presented to relevant representatives of the EU institutions and can be accessed [here](#).

This document summarises the main strengths and challenges of this Programme and puts forward some suggestions for its improvement. While the document has been drafted entirely by ECAS, and therefore represents the views of our organisation only, most of the points are shared by a majority of respondents to our survey.

Programme's strengths:

A unique programme supporting EU citizenship and participation across Europe

The Europe for Citizens Programme is the only existing EU programme supporting the values and benefits of EU citizenship and enabling citizens to have a public space where they can learn about and debate EU policies, through the citizen-driven projects it funds. It is, therefore, a programme of utmost importance for the EU, especially in times of growing Euroscepticism and threats constantly looming over the European project, whether based on claims of democratic deficit or on the very questioning of some of its key achievements. Indeed, Europe for Citizens supports citizens' awareness-raising about the rights and benefits of European citizenship, while offering them a place to have a say on the debate about the present and future of Europe. Based on responses to our survey, there are very few (if any) resources at national and regional level to support activities of this kind, which reinforces the added value of this programme. The programme also promotes international cooperation across Europe, which further strengthens the European identity while also preserving and promoting the existing diversity.

A programme adaptable to changing needs

Another strength of this Programme compared to others relates to its flexible approach with regard to the scope of the projects funded. While the Programme does have general and specific objectives, in addition to fixed multiannual priorities since 2016, the fact that they are relatively broad enables applicants to adapt their ideas to the prevailing challenges and needs at the time of applying, thereby making projects that are more relevant and impactful. The fact that priorities are now set for a multiannual timeframe, as opposed to the annual priorities scheme applied until 2016, is highlighted as a positive step towards more consistent and predictable funding.

A user-friendly application procedure

Another positive aspect of this Programme is its straightforward and not too burdensome application form compared to other EU funding programmes. This allows small organisations with limited human resources to submit and lead projects, and favours emphasis on results and outcomes by lowering pressure on reporting and other administrative requirements.

The added value of its operating grants

The operating grants provided for under this 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:

1. 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;
2. 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;
3. 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
4. They preserve the integrity of CSOs in terms of independence from political and commercial interests, allowing them to set their own priorities;
5. 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.

Challenges and recommendations for improvement:

Symbolic financial allocation hampers its potential

The biggest challenge of this programme, which severely hampers its potential, is the limited funding available compared to other programmes (i.e. EUR 185 million for a 7-year time span compared to EUR 1.46 billion allocated to Creative Europe or EUR 14.7 billion allocated to Erasmus+). This makes

competition very high across all its strands and discourages participation as many valuable projects are not being selected on financial grounds only (in some measures the success rate is of about 6%). This conclusion is backed by the EPRS's implementation assessment¹ of this programme, which acknowledges the reduced funding allocated to this programme as a fundamental challenge and confirms that this *"inevitably led to the rejection of a number of very good initiatives."*

ECAS calls on the Commission to revise the funding allocation to this programme and to increase it substantially in order to make a difference in terms of both participation and impact. The Parliament's proposal to raise the current funding envelope to EUR 500 million, a symbolic figure which would mean investing EUR 1 per each EU citizen, would be a first step in that direction.

More awareness-raising and communication activities needed

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 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.

No clear champion for this programme at EU level

The programme focuses on the theme of "EU citizenship" which is scattered across several Directorate-Generals (HOME, JUST, EAC, COMM) in addition to the EACEA. This makes it problematic to identify one interlocutor for EU citizenship policies, thereby negatively affecting the programme's 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).

Easier financial requirements for small organisations

The financial guarantee requirement for grants of over EUR 60,000 in case of pre-financing should be revised as it can exclude the participation of small organisations with few resources, which are not able to provide such a guarantee upfront. The reduced rate of pre-financing equally poses a problem for small organisations with a small cash flow.

Better quality feedback on submitted applications

A challenge of the programme reported by respondents to our survey relates to the feedback received on the applications. While the centralised management of this Programme by the EACEA is positively assessed, a recurring criticism, also shared by us, has to do with the non-specific feedback received, which is limited to an overall score and a breakdown by award criteria. It would be useful for participants to receive more detailed feedback beyond quantitative terms in order to build their capacities and increase their success chances in future applications.

¹European Parliamentary Research Service (2016), *Europe for Citizens Programme 2014-2020: European Implementation Assessment*, July 2016 [online] Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/581418/EPRS_IDA\(2016\)581418_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/581418/EPRS_IDA(2016)581418_EN.pdf).

Civil Dialogues: more regular meetings with real involvement opportunities

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.

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