



AMPLIFY CERV TO PROTECT RIGHTS

***Briefing Paper On Why Rights & Values Funding
Should Be Raised To 0,5% In The Post-2027 EU Budget***



July 2025

INTRODUCTION

The **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)** is essential to ensure the protection of rights across the EU, and support those on the frontline of human rights protection. As the post-2027 Multi Annual Financial Framework is negotiated (MFF) CERV needs to remain at the centre of rights protection. This requires CERV to remain as a dedicated EU managed fund with an expanded budget – and a rights-based lens to be applied across all EU funding.

The CERV programme was launched in 2021¹ to shore up support for rights and values across the Union. As stated by the then Vice-President Commissioner Věra Jourová:

“The rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy are the foundation of our Union – they are not optional. Through CERV, we are investing in the people and organisations that protect these values every day.”

Among the EU’s diverse funding streams, CERV is the only fund dedicated to ensuring that organisations have the tools to act as watchdogs and protect the rights at the EU’s core. At the time, and amidst worrying signs of democratic backsliding, it was collectively recognised that building and maintaining strong and vibrant democracies required expanded support and funding. For decades, funds had never been explicitly dedicated to nurturing European values, and civil society was largely without the resources necessary to address abusive governments and stand up for rights and values.

Unfortunately, in many countries, by 2021, it was already too late for preventive action and since CERV was launched – despite crucial work, that has likely stalled some of the most severe violations – it is inescapable that negative trends have been entrenched and replicated. At this moment, it is crucial to **reinforce and amplify CERV to counterbalance what is a dangerous trajectory** away from broad respect for EU rights and values.

PRELUDE TO THE MFF

The run-up to the start of the MFF negotiations has been concerning, characterised by polarised and in some instances worrying actions from within the EU institutions.

The Polish Presidency of the EU has taken a strong stand and highlighted the importance of funding to promote fundamental rights. The March 2025 Council Conclusions on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights states that CERV has been:

“a paramount source of direct funding for a broad range of actors, in particular CSOs, including organisations active at national, regional, local and grassroots level.”

It stresses the need to continue the funding, highlighting the importance of “*an open and transparent dialogue with civil society and human rights defenders*” and the need for “*multiannual funding*” that allows for “*long-term planning*”.

The European Parliament’s first report on the MFF adopted on 7 May 2025 emphasises:

“the importance of the Union budget and programmes like Erasmus+ and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values in promoting and protecting democracy and the Union’s values.”

And stresses the importance of:

“an active dialogue with civil society, which is vital for fostering an active civic space, ensuring accountability and transparency and informing policymakers about best practices from the ground.”

The report also calls for a stronger link between the rule of law and the Union budget, highlighting that compliance with Union values and fundamental rights should be an essential prerequisite to access EU funds.

At the same time, however, Members of the European Parliament, in part, through the Budget Control Committee, have pioneered an insidious, sustained [campaign against civil society](#). They have sought to cast organisations as a ‘shadow power’ and undermine the critical role of advocacy in holding governments and the EU institutions to account. The campaign has been underpinned by actions related to the [budget discharge](#) and the [Court of Auditors Report](#). Neither found wrongdoing by NGOs, yet three European Parliament groups continued to push, eventually getting agreement to set up a [working group on NGO financing](#) inside the Budgetary Control Committee.² The timing can only be seen as an attempt to delegitimise the role of civil society ahead of the MFF negotiations. The EU institutions as a whole need to remain steadfast, living up to the long-standing legal and moral commitments

to support civil society as an essential pillar of our democracies.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is increasingly under attack while trying to uphold its critical watchdog role to ensure a thriving democracy. Over the last years, the European Commission’s Rule of Law Reports and Civic Space Reports by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) have documented a consistent decline in the free and open space for civil society, and in May 2025, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights called [the state of human rights in Europe the worst in his professional life](#), noting that what is new, and disturbing is the “*extent to which people in power are willing to distance themselves from human rights obligations*”.

This concerning decline is exacerbated by an increasingly precarious funding situation – which, at a global level, is clearly intended to weaken, and in parts even silence, the voice of those upholding human rights. [The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and the FRA have both highlighted the impact of the US AID funding freeze on human rights work. According to FRA’s most recent survey, 44% of respondents reported they had experienced an unexpected reduction, cut or freeze of funding over the past 12 months.³

Despite attempts to question the receipt of funds by civil society organisations, the right is clearly articulated in international and

regional human rights law. [The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#) articulates in Article 13 the right to “*solicit, receive and utilise resources for the express purpose of promoting and protecting human rights*” – a right that has been affirmed by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and cited in the 2020 judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) on [Hungary’s NGO law](#). The CJEU referred to ECHR case law and the arguments of the Commission that “*the capacity to receive financial resources is essential to the operation of associations*”.

Civil society in numbers

11.5 million employees

5% of the active population

4.3 million organisations

Civil society is also an integral and important part of Europe’s broader economy. The civil society sector employs more than 5% of the active population in the EU.⁴ This amounts to 11.5 million people working for more than 4.3 million social economy entities.⁵ In addition, civil society relies heavily on volunteers and in many Member States, with their contribution amounting to more than 2% of the GDP.⁶

CERV IN A NUTSHELL

CERV is designed to protect and promote the rights and values enshrined in the EU Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and various international conventions on human rights and is structured under 4 pillars:

1. Union Values
2. Equality, Rights and Gender
3. Citizens' Engagement and Participation
4. Daphne - to prevent and combat all forms of violence, particularly gender-based violence and violence against children.

For the period 2021 to 2027, the planned budget is €1.55 billion. From 2021 to 2024, the Commission reports that over 5000 civil society organisations have been supported and an estimated 60 million people reached – roughly 13% of the EU population.

This works out at approximately 0.13% of the total EU budget, with projects varying from framework partnership agreements to grassroots projects supported under the regranting schemes. This multitude of instruments is a critical element of CERV and allows for different levels of impact from grassroots to EU policies.

However, 0.13% of the EU budget is a tiny fraction and insufficient to drive the change that is needed.

CERV in numbers

€1.55 billion

Over 5000 organisations supported to date

0.13% of the EU budget

60 million people reached – 13% of the EU

CASE EXAMPLE

Unlocking the Potential of the Charter of Fundamental Rights

10 years after the adoption of the Charter, the EU recognised that it remained an under-utilised tool for the protection of rights and aimed to change this through a renewed Charter strategy and dedicated funding. Over 20 projects have been funded to train and provide materials for lawyers and NGOs across the region. Dedicated new resources include a [Litigation Handbook](#) and a report on [Litigation of Judicial Independence](#). Training programmes include the [STARLIGHT programme](#), [FOCUS Project](#), [STELLAR Rights](#) and [LITIS Project](#), focused on litigating charter rights from the rule of law to migration, environment and disability rights.

There is now a strong body of lawyers and practitioners with the skills and knowledge to better apply the Charter. However, the calls for proposals exclude support for litigation itself and so, organisations still struggle to secure funding to litigate Charter rights and ensure their protection. Several other procedural [changes](#) would facilitate access to the CJEU.

CASE EXAMPLE

Reaching Out – Funding through Intermediaries

To reach smaller, remote or community-based organisations, CERV has deployed funding through intermediaries – which has become a core pillar of the CERV toolbox.

Taking the Slovenian-Croatian NGO Consortium and their Impact4Values project (I4V) as an example: the Consortium was allocated €4.25 million, of which at the moment €2.35 million was re-granted to provide support to grassroots and emerging CSOs – up to €60,000 per organisation. The remainder was dedicated to capacity building, mentoring, training and project management. According to the project evaluation, the project:

- reached over 20,000 citizens
- provided direct services to over 9000 citizens
- services included legal advice, counselling and informal education
- influenced 19 national or local policies
- supported the filing of 19 human rights cases

In an environment of increasingly scarce resources and threats to civil society organisations, this re-granting mechanism is even more relevant and consequential.

UNMET NEEDS

CERV is unique and has huge potential, and over recent years, skilled and innovative civil society organisations have demonstrated their capacity and resourcefulness. However, the Commission also recognises that strong proposals are inevitably rejected. For example, in 2024, under 13 calls for proposals with a total budget of more than €206 million, 2,865 project applications were received, of which only 279 were awarded funding. Thus, only 9.7% received funding.⁷

In 2024, only 9.7% of CERV applicants were awarded funding.

- The EU needs to invest in CERV to amplify the programme and tackle current and emerging challenges.
- The EU cannot rely on one of the smallest funding programmes to create the change that is needed and counter the prevailing trends of populism and rule of law backsliding.

**TO REALISE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS
ACROSS THE EU, COMMITMENT NEEDS TO
GEAR UP FROM 0.13% to at least 0.5%.**

CASE EXAMPLE

Strengthening networks and their national impact

The Liberties' STRIVE project includes a re-granting programme to support and enhance the impact of member organisations. From 2022-2025, 17 members received grants ranging from between €10-45,000. Two examples highlight national impact:

PILP Foundation, the Netherlands

PILP carried out research and organised legal clinics on the use of the Charter to protect fundamental rights, focused on the right to peaceful protest. This resulted in:

- organisations and protesters better understanding their rights
- knowledge which led to six legal cases aimed at enforcing Charter rights
- engagement with municipal authorities in Amsterdam over a controversial six-day protest ban, resulting in policymakers taking action to strengthen legal protections for protestors in compliance with the Charter.

Anti-SLAPP Coalition Romania

APADOR facilitated the creation of the coalition to coordinate between NGOs, lawyers and citizens, and to monitor and assist with the transposition of the EU's anti-SLAPP Directive. They have taken several steps to ensure effective transposition and to expand the scope to include domestic cases.

In a short period of time the strength of the network has been harnessed through the re-granting programme, ensuring policy change and implementation of rights at the national level and a strong link between EU and national action.

KEY ELEMENTS OF A NEW CERV PROGRAMME

FOUR AREAS TO RETAIN AND STRENGTHEN

FOCUS ON THE CHARTER

The Charter provides a strong base and should remain the central focus for CERV. The four pillars also remain relevant, ensuring a strong focus on the first pillar of Union values. This should ensure flexibility and the ability for organisations to i) foster a strong and broad respect for rights across the Union; ii) focus on under-served areas and iii) respond to emerging challenges.

INCREASED FUNDING AND LARGER PROJECTS

To create change, funding needs to be increased and larger, longer projects supported. In the current climate, organisations both need the ability to plan to ensure lasting impact and greater reach, as well as the capacity to respond to unexpected events. A shift to genuine multi-annual, flexible core funding, eliminating the burdensome yearly application and reporting cycle, would be an important first step.

Support should ensure a combination of cross-border cooperation and regional networks, alongside support to local and national initiatives to ensure both transnational and local impact.

STANDALONE UNDER DIRECT MANAGEMENT

Given the unique and targeted nature of CERV, it should remain a standalone fund under direct management of the Commission. This is to ensure both a continued dedication to rights and values, and to ensure that support reaches all organisations without political interference. Organisations working on rights and values are often the most targeted and marginalised – in many cases, targeted by their own governments.

FLEXIBLE REGRANTING MECHANISM

Re-granting is essential to enable a variety of organisations to receive support, including smaller grassroots organisations working at a community level. Further simplification would be useful, in particular to limit the amount of work required before any funding is received.

TWO UNDER-DEVELOPED AREAS

There are two areas that require particular attention under the new CERV programme.

FUNDING FOR STRATEGIC LITIGATION

While funding to support the development of litigation has been critical – funding for litigation itself is missing. Court cases are the ultimate way to challenge rights violations and secure the implementation of the Charter. All other actions fall short in the face of systemic or even individual violations. A feasibility study commissioned by the European Commission in 2020 recommended a number of funding

models - these should be revisited to contribute to a fund for strategic litigation, ensuring that organisations across the Union are not only able to prepare themselves to litigate, but also take the next step and bring cases. This should be accompanied by a stronger emphasis on the enforcement of judgments and the creation of a dedicated unit to monitor and follow up on implementation.

AN EU PROTECTION MECHANISM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

As this and other papers demonstrate, individual human rights defenders (HRDs) and civil society organisations have found themselves increasingly under attack, yet there is no rapid response funding for HRDs within the EU. HRDs within the EU are not eligible to seek support from the EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism (ProtectDefenders.eu), which supports HRDs from outside the EU. The need for improved protection within the EU

has been recognised by the Commission and the options mapped by civil society. Additional funding should be allocated within CERV to support the development of a Protection Mechanism for civil society and HRDs within the EU that includes:

- **Monitoring and Reporting** – to identify trends and early warning signs and ensure HRDs are able to officially register threats and attacks;
- **Rapid Response** – to ensure rapid, holistic protection for HRDs and civil society at risk;
- **Reform** – to instigate changes to prevent future attacks and ensure an enabling environment for HRDs and civil society.

To build a stable and reliable protection mechanism, dedicated, long-term funding is required, ensuring the mechanism is known, trusted and evolves based on developed expertise.

In sum, to create the change that we know is needed, we need to build on and amplify CERV – while at the same time ensuring rights-based approaches are infused through other funds. The opponents of strong, open societies act with rapidity and flexibility – civil society needs to be able to do the same while planning for the long-term. **Dedicating 0.5% of the EU budget to CERV would be a strong step towards achieving this.**

For further references, see the papers we contributed to:

Strengthening and shielding European democracy with the upcoming MFF

Common Civil Society Position Paper on the Outline of the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework

Endnotes

- 1 Building on the Europe for Citizens programme and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) programme.
- 2 The three groups were the European People's Party (EPP), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Patriots for Europe (PfE)/
- 3 FRA Civic Space Consultation 2024.
- 4 European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Bywater, M., Jefferies, I. and Kitchener, M., Civil society landscape in the European Union – Research in support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023.
- 5 European Commission, Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU social economy, 2024.
- 6 EESC (2021), Volunteers – Citizens building the future of Europe (own-initiative opinion).
- 7 See: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/pr\[...\]ti-zens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/pr[...]ti-zens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en)

Contact

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a non-governmental organisation promoting the civil liberties of everyone in the European Union. We are headquartered in Berlin and have a presence in Brussels. Liberties is built on a network of 21 national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU.

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