

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA

STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE EFTA STATES

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EEA EFTA Comment on the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Rights and Values Programme

Executive summary

- The EEA EFTA States – Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein – share the fundamental European values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the respect for human rights. They therefore strongly support the objectives of the Rights and Values Programme.
- In the opinion of the EEA EFTA States, active participation of civil society at all levels is a cornerstone for upholding the above-mentioned values. It is therefore essential that the Programme supports civil society – not only at European but also at local level.
- The EEA EFTA States are currently in the process of examining their possible participation in the Programme and therefore welcome that the Programme is open for EEA EFTA participation in accordance with the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA).

Support to the objectives of the Programme

1. The EEA EFTA States share the European values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, as well as the goal of peace. The EEA EFTA States therefore welcome that the EU takes an active stance in the creation of an area of justice and fundamental rights based on mutual trust, a deeper and fairer Internal Market and a Union of democratic change, growth and jobs, and that it combats and prevents racism, xenophobia, hate speech and violent extremism.
2. The EEA EFTA States acknowledge the programme's emphasis on fundamental rights and equality – equal treatment and equal opportunities - for every European citizen, independent of gender, ethnicity, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation (LGBTIQ), including the rights of the child.
3. The EEA EFTA States therefore strongly support the goals and objectives of the Rights and Values Programme starting in 2021 and are in the process of examining their possible participation in the Programme.

Participation of civil society at local and European level

4. In the opinion of the EEA EFTA States, a strong civil society is a cornerstone of a vibrant, well-functioning democracy and is essential for safeguarding fundamental human rights. When civil society itself is under threat of being silenced, it is important to stand firm in support of civil society and common European values of human rights and democracy. The EEA EFTA States believe that civil society is essential in promoting a secure, free and economically strong Europe.
5. The EEA and Norway Grants are one of the direct ways in which Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway promote fundamental European values of democracy, human rights and equality. The EEA EFTA States will make available more than EUR 200 million to support civil society through the Active Citizens Funds in 15 EU Member States. There is a need for additional support to civil society, from national and EU sources, particularly for independent Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working on democracy, fundamental rights, advocacy and watchdog activities. While our funding contributes to making the sector stronger and more sustainable, it is crucial that all European states take the responsibility to support and strengthen their civil society. From this perspective the EEA EFTA States welcome the Justice, Rights and Values Programme and stress that the Programme must support civil society at local and European level. The EEA EFTA States support the proposed amendment 9 by the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) Committee.
6. Citizens' engagement and active participation is a building block for a functioning democracy and a prerequisite for good outcomes. The means to ensure such participation and engagement will vary through time and across European countries, including the EEA EFTA States. We are looking for new ways to engage citizens that reflect societal and technological changes - be it through e-democracy, new dialogue forms between government at all levels and citizens and new meeting places for discussion and decision making. It is therefore important that the program fosters the dissemination of best practice in citizens' engagement and active participation, for instance through twinning and partnership initiatives. It is also crucial that participation is addressed at all levels of government, not just at European level.

Legal basis for participation

7. The EEA EFTA States welcome the fact that the Commission proposal in Article 7(1) is open for participation of the EEA EFTA States in accordance with the EEA Agreement. This is also acknowledged in several recitals in the Commission proposal.¹
8. It is of central importance for the EEA EFTA States that the Rights and Values Programme is understood to allow for their full participation, and that these provisions are well known by everyone involved in the implementation of the Programme. The EEA EFTA States underline that the legal basis of their participation and association provides for equal access to all parts of the Programme, the same rights and obligations to partner institutions, undertakings, organisations and nationals, as well as the same rights and obligations regarding dissemination, evaluation and exploitation of results for EEA EFTA States, as those applicable to the EU Member States.

¹ See recitals 20 and 25.