

To the President of the European Commission, Ms. Ursula Von der Leyen
To the President of the European Council, Mr. Charles Michel
To the German Presidency of the EU, Ms. Angela Merkel
To the President of the European Parliament, Mr. David Sassoli

Cc: Vera Jourova, EC Vice President on Values and Transparency

18 June 2020

Re: Europe's recovery after the pandemic and Civil Society

Honourable President,

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on both personal daily life and to how our economies and societies work across Europe. Many have lost loved ones, there have been severe economic as well as social consequences. Unemployment has risen, participation in social life has decreased, there have been restrictions in access to education, social and health services, culture or even to our basic rights.

Civil society organisations together with volunteers have been able to react swiftly and in the most flexible way to the pandemic and have engaged in solidarity actions supporting and, at times, even replacing public institutions. Many organisations, exercising their watchdog role, have also been present in giving a voice to citizens' concerns and make recommendations to governments on how to best chart the right course through the pandemic, and take the best decisions for their citizens and their wellbeing. This includes, for instance, the timely advice provided by many civil society organizations on how to ensure that any forms of 'track and trace' fully respects citizens' privacy, the production of reports and recommendations on how to address the needs of the most vulnerable in society and for the protection of the environment, disseminating information about the epidemic and making them accessible. Civil Society has also been at the forefront of analysing the impact of emergency measures on people's rights including access to justice, free movement, media freedom, as well as initiatives to counter disinformation and fake news. All this shows the critical importance of an independent, vibrant and pluralist civil society. As huge sums of public money are channeled into recovery plans, with the obvious risks of abuse, misallocation, discrimination and environmental harm, civil society's watchdog function will be particularly vital and will be required to provide active scrutiny in the coming period.

In a Post Covid 19 Europe that, as stated by the European Commission, will face a large increase in unemployment, hardship and inequality, continuing to support the existence of a strong civil society is critical. A vibrant civil society is also an integral part of the system of checks and balances in any democratic society, which is necessary to ensure that the exceptional measures set in place in a framework of emergency situations are progressively lifted when no longer necessary and proportionate, so that a fully functional rule of law environment is re-installed in all the Member States as soon as possible.

Furthermore, civil society is not only an advocate and a watchdog but also a major employer. According to a recent EU funded study¹, almost a third of EU employment is in the not for profit sector. If not for profit associations were a country, it would be the 5th largest economy in the world². Civil society organisations have been strongly hit by the crisis in practically all sectors, having to reduce or furlough staff and reduce activities, and the effects of this on their long-term operation will be felt for many years to come. The European Commission has identified the proximity and social economy sector as among the top sectors suffering output losses.³ Only a very few Member States have developed measures to support the civil society sector or have included civil society organizations in measures targeting SMEs.

While we welcome the proposal for a European Recovery Plan to support and boost our societies in the aftermath of the pandemic, we deeply regret that the Plan does not acknowledge and address the needs of the civil society sector as part of the Plan's identified priorities and response measures. We regret in this context that the initiative was not supported by a needs and impact assessment on fundamental rights and democracy, and that no consultation with the civil society sector has been carried out in preparation of this Plan. Yet, civil society actors, given their concrete engagement and knowledge of the situation on the ground, could have provided useful input to devise some creative solutions to pressing challenges despite time and public health restrictions.

This gap is all the more concerning in light of revised Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 (MFF) making substantial cuts to funding programmes which were meant to allow the EU to invest in democracy and human rights, such as the future Justice, Rights and Values Fund. Yet, the need for the EU to provide real and concrete help to actors which can grow grassroots support for EU values across all Member States is now more urgent than ever, ensuring consistency between the EU internal and external agenda.

Against this background, we call on you to:

- Ensure the recovery is rights-based: Implement a rights-based approach to the recovery, focusing on ensuring full access to rights in the long-term, rather than addressing short-term needs. Strengthen the place human rights occupy in our societies, starting by giving a more central focus to the equal enjoyment of social, economic, and cultural rights, as well as civil and political.
- Ensure that the proposed recovery measures that will be implemented as part of the Recovery Plan also duly take into account the urgency of supporting the civil society sector and not just the for profit economic sectors and addressing pressing challenges to democracy and fundamental rights. This should include making sure that support to governments is used to maintain and reinforce public funding to NGOs for both service

¹ <https://thirdsectorimpact.eu/documentation/tsi-working-paper-no-12-size-scope-third-sector-europe/>

² <http://ccss.jhu.edu/> The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/assessment_of_economic_and_investment_needs.pdf

delivery and advocacy work. Also eligibility criteria of the calls for the new instruments should explicitly include not for profit organisations as eligible funding recipients.

- Ensure that relevant funding programmes within the future MFF, and in particular within sub heading 7 of Cohesion and Values, are allocated an adequate budget envelope. This would require, at the very least, that the European Commission reverses its decision to lower the - already insufficient - budget envelope allocated to the different programmes in its proposal, and revise it up instead, in line with the figures proposed by the European Parliament in the context of the programme's negotiations with the Council. This funding should be targeted to benefit civil society organizations which work to promote and realise EU values at national and local level, supporting their work beyond short-term project grants.
- Establish a dialogue with civil society organisations in the context of the implementation of the Recovery Plan and the negotiations of the future MFF.

We are at your disposal for facilitating the organisation of a dialogue with civil society organizations on the matter in the coming weeks, to further discuss and support the implementation of the above recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

List of organisations (in alphabetical order)

actalliance eu









And supported by



the European Federation of Public Service Trade Unions representing workers in public and social services, the social economy and many civil society organisations