

OPINION OF CIVIC ALLIANCE LATVIA REGARDING THE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EEA AND NORWEGIAN FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS IN LATVIA (2024)

The Association Civic Alliance – Latvia (CAL) appreciate the crucial support from Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein. Given the challenging financial landscape for CSOs in Latvia, the EEA/Norwegian financial instruments have been indispensable for the sustainability and growth of civil society. These funds have enabled CSOs to significantly improve the lives of those in need and develop into competent partners across various policy areas. However, CAL has some suggestions regarding the planning and implementation of the EEA and Norwegian Financial instruments in Latvia.

1. Key role of civil society organizations:

CSOs are vital to building a strong, independent, and democratic society focused on public good and social impact, while also enhancing societal resilience. Their role is particularly critical during crises, as they mitigate rising social tensions, prevent the escalation of crime and violence, curb the spread of diseases, and safeguard vulnerable groups. CSOs are also key partners for public institutions, offering indispensable support in informing and educating the public during such crises.

2. Increased support for CSOs Fund:

We commend the decision to increase funding for the civil society fund (CS Fund) in the upcoming period. This increase is vital, given the persistent lack of adequate financial support from national and local governments, combined with the significant inflation of recent years that has exacerbated operating costs for CSOs.

3. Alignment with new priorities:

Latvian CSOs fully support the identified priorities for the next period, including the European green transition, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, social inclusion, and resilience. These priorities are highly relevant to Latvia, particularly in light of the current geopolitical situation.

4. Continuation of strategic support program:

We strongly recommend continuing the piloted "Strategic Support" program, which provides funding to organizations whose core activities align with the goals and outcomes of the CS Fund and are based on multi-year strategic plans. Alternatively, a dedicated program could be created to support the implementation of these organizations' strategies.

5. Additional support for unforeseen or crisis situations:

It is also essential to maintain a flexible competition framework for unforeseen or crisis situations, including a continuous project competition. This would allow for swift support of advocacy initiatives that address pressing public issues recently emerging on Latvia's political and social agenda, where rapid responses are necessary.

6. Simplified cost approach:

We propose the introduction of a simplified cost approach. This could include three types of simplified costs: flat rate, standard scales of unit cost, and lump sum payments. These costs could be determined using either an output-based or result-based approach, or a combination of both. Implementing this approach would:

- Reduce the administrative burden on project implementers in cost accounting and documentation for payment requests.
- Decrease the workload for the CS Fund operator in verifying cost documentation.
- Minimize the risk of errors in both the preparation and verification of financial documentation.
- Accelerate the circulation of CS Fund financing, reducing the time needed for preparing, reviewing, and approving payment requests.

- Shift the focus toward achieving objectives and results, promoting more efficient use of funds.

7. Inclusion of civil society in all support areas:

Civil society representatives must be actively involved in discussions regarding all priority areas of support, not only in relation to CSO funding, but across all programs funded by the EEA and Norwegian financial instruments.

8. CSO involvement in Ukraine-related projects:

For projects addressing challenges resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, CSOs should be included as key partners, alongside public institutions and businesses. Since the start of the war, Latvian CSOs have been at the forefront, providing direct support to Ukraine and Ukrainians. CSOs can also assist in building the capacity of Ukrainian civil society, sharing their expertise in advocacy at the local, national, and EU levels. By offering strategic planning tools and best practices developed in Latvia, CSOs can help Ukraine's civil society navigate the complexities of EU accession, fostering collaboration between civil society and public institutions.

Latvia's experience of joining the EU 20 years ago provides valuable lessons for Ukrainian CSOs. Latvian CSOs can offer practical insights into the pre-accession process, the impact of EU integration on civil society, and how to effectively engage in policy-making. This support will enhance Ukraine's civil society's readiness for EU membership, facilitating the development of coalitions, platforms, and collective advocacy efforts.

In conclusion, the Civic Alliance Latvia strongly supports the continued collaboration through the EEA and Norwegian financial instruments and emphasizes the need for strategic, flexible, and simplified funding mechanisms to ensure the resilience and growth of civil society, both in Latvia and in the wider region.