

Vera Jourová, Vice-President for Values and Transparency
Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality
Didier Reynders, Commissioner for Justice
Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs

15 April 2021

Dear Commissioner Vera Jourová,

Re: Disbursement of Project Funding to Alliance Citoyenne

We are writing, as civil society organisations working at the European Union level, to raise concerns about the request of the French Minister of Interior for the Commission and DG JUST to withhold funding to Alliance Citoyenne. We are concerned by the possible political interference by a Member State in the Commission's funding of important anti-discrimination work in a way that risks creating a chilling effect on the work of civil society.

On 29th April 2020, the civil society organisation Alliance Citoyenne submitted, jointly with two other organisations, a grant proposal for the project "Muslim Women standing for making tolerance a rule" under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020 of the European Commission.

The funding call from DG JUST, under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, relates specifically to a project focused on empowering Muslim women and challenging discrimination in access to sport and professional training, areas in which Muslim women often face exclusion.

On 6th October 2020, the European Commission completed the evaluation of the project through its reviewing procedure which established that the project fell within the scope of the programme, and was in line with Article 2 TEU and Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. The review process scored the project 89.5 out of 100. The European Commission subsequently informed Alliance Citoyenne about the positive outcome of its proposal, highlighting that a final decision would be taken at a later stage.

On 25th March of this year, media sources reported that the French Minister of Interior had sent a letter to the European Commission advising the Commission to review its decision regarding the funding of Alliance Citoyenne. The Minister alleged that the organisation Alliance Citoyenne carries out activities "to promote rules compatible with Sharia law." As an example, the Minister referred to peaceful activities contesting the prohibition on wearing the burkini in swimming pools. The Minister also referred to some comments made by a woman, whom he considered a spokesperson of the organisation, after the violent attacks against the magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2015. Alliance Citoyenne has clarified that this individual was not a national spokesperson for Alliance.

The request of the Minister could have the effect of deterring organisations working to challenge discrimination against Muslims in France. It must be seen against the backdrop of a wider effort by the French government to characterise groups which raise concerns about discrimination against Muslims as "identarian", "separatist", or acting contrary to "republican values", which has also led to the dissolution of NGOs. Moreover, we are alarmed by the use of national security and public order concerns to withdraw or restrict funding unnecessarily or disproportionately, which could amount to a violation of the right to freedom of association.

Any further delay or a negative decision could also set a dangerous precedent of allowing a Member State to control and decide which groups should be recipients of EU funding on the basis of discriminatory grounds. It would risk emboldening governments, within Europe and beyond, to challenge the dissemination of vital EU funds provided to human rights defenders, civil society organisations and media actors. It is important that the EU is resolute in its commitment to upholding rule of law and human rights, and consistent and coherent in its internal and external efforts to provide a safe and an enabling environment for civil society.

Allowing a Member State such a veto could also give rise to accusations of double standards where the EU seeks to ensure third countries do not impose unfair restrictions on civil society.

We believe that the Commission should stand by its rigorous independent assessment process for the allocation of EU funding to non-governmental organisations and distribute the funds as initially recommended following the internal and external assessment of the project.

We also encourage the Commission to assess whether the demands of the French government to terminate funding to Alliance Citoyenne are consistent with the aims of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025 adopted last September and that encourages Member States to create a strong partnership with civil society actors to promote social inclusion, fundamental rights and equality.

We hope that you consider our concerns and suggestions when you make the final decision on the disbursement of the funding.

Yours sincerely,

Amnesty International

European Civic Forum

European Network Against Racism (ENAR)

European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL)

Equinox Initiative for Racial Justice

Human Rights Watch

Vox Public



EUROPEAN NETWORK AGAINST RACISM
The voice of the anti-racist movement in Europe

