

Conference: Hand in hand: Solidarity and Volunteering. Learn and promote the European Solidarity Corps initiative¹

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More than 80 participants from 13 countries attended the international conference on European Solidarity Corps (ESC) held on 12 December 2017 in Budapest, Hungary. This conference report provides a brief overview of insights and discussions that transpired during the event as well as conference results addressing current and future development challenges of the ESC.

It was in September 2016 that the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, first advanced the idea of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC):

“Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together. [...] The Commission is proposing today to set up a European Solidarity Corps. Young people across the EU will be able to volunteer their help where it is needed most.”²

Less than three months later, in December 2016, the ESC was formally launched. At the time of the first anniversary of the initiative, the European Commission was keen to highlight the success and the achievements of the ESC: out of 42.745 young people from all Member States who signed up for the initiative, 2.166 started their placements at 1.434 organisations. The press release of the EU Commission³ details the enthusiasm of some EU-politicians following the first success:

“Young people will work on key projects, make life-long friendships and do something good for our society under the quality label of the European Solidarity Corps.” (Günther H. Oettinger, Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources).

“I am delighted that so many young people around Europe believe in solidarity and are committed to volunteering, training or working to support others. One year after the launch of the European Solidarity Corps, many of them are already making a difference, bringing relief and hope to those who need it. We now need to see a swift adoption of the dedicated legal base and budget for the

¹ Held in Budapest, 12 December 2017.

² European Commission, Speech (Strasbourg, 14 September 2016): State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends. URL: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-3043_en.htm

³ European Commission - Press release (7 December 2017): European Solidarity Corps: one year since launch. URL: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5031_en.htm

coming years to make the potential benefits of the European Solidarity Corps a reality.” (Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport).

But does the European civil society share this enthusiasm? How much does the European public know about the ESC? Is there a need for a wider discussion about the initiative? Moreover, what is the initiative heading for?

Shortly after the first anniversary of the ESC’s launch, it seemed more than timely to come together in order to disseminate information, exchange experiences, advance various perspectives and further contribute to the development of the European Solidarity Corps initiative.

An international civil society conference was organised in Budapest, Hungary, titled “Hand in hand: Solidarity and Volunteering. Learn and promote the European Solidarity Corps initiative”. The conference took place in the framework of the project “Practice solidarity and shape Europe”. It was supported by the Europe for Citizens programme and implemented through various civil society organisations from Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. The National Network of Civil Society (Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement, BBE) is the German project partner.

Over 80 participants represented 13 countries. The agenda of the conference focused on two main objectives: Briefing participants about the ESC initiative, and fostering the proposals that further develop and enhance the ESC structure.

What do we need to know about the ESC? – Pavel Trantina, President of the Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship Group (SOC) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opened his presentation with this line.

Mr. Trantina explicated the ESC’s timeline, legal base and budget, followed by a detailed account of the initiative’s work in practice. He went into the details of the volunteering and occupational dimensions of the ESC and expressed his confidence in the programme’s exceptional potential to kick-start a wider volunteering strategy in the EU and to contribute significantly to increasing the solidarity across the union.

Dr. Albert Royaards, the president and founder of the Smiling Hospital Foundation, further elaborated the need for increased solidarity in the EU and discussed the “Hungarian solidarity as seen by a European living with us.” He shared his personal story – a man from the Netherlands, the “proud Dutchman” as he calls himself, moving to Budapest.

After presenting current statistical data on volunteering in Hungary, Mr. István Sebestény, the representative of the Hungarian Central Statistics Office (HCSO),

divided the conference participants into two groups. Both groups were asked to foster lively debate on everyday solidarity in Hungary and in Europe, and to emphasize the incentives of volunteering. Consolidated opinions were later included in the draft proposal that was adopted at the end of the conference.

Coffee breaks can be productive parts of a conference as well: a relaxed atmosphere after thought-provoking sessions provided an opportunity to converse with experts in a rather informal setting, and to discuss the strengths and limitations of the conference over a cup of coffee. The host organisation European House was pleased by the overwhelmingly positive feedback: “Lively debates”, “vivid exchange”, “good range of presentations”, “Top-notch speakers”.

However, among the participants, a rare skeptical tone was also heard: The representative from Italy resorted to Italian wisdom to express his opinion: “Between saying and doing many a pair of shoes is worn out.” So, what were the tangible outcomes of the conference?

With an objective to evaluate the accomplishments of the conference, the participants carefully examined all opinions that had been expressed and designed the draft proposal ameliorating the key weaknesses of the ESC initiative:

- “The European Solidarity Corps as a new initiative of the European Commission deserves support; however, in many aspects it is still in the making and serious efforts are needed to make it a full success during the 2018-2020 period; the experiences and results of the current first phase should be built in;
- the ESC’s focus on young people aged 18-30 is vital for the future of Europe; through concrete activities they learn what European citizenship and identity is and how to respect and put into practice commonly shared European values; in this regard, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU promoting and protecting human dignity deserves special attention;
- overlapping with other already functioning and well-defined EU programmes (e.g. European Voluntary Service or EU Aid Volunteers) should be avoided; ESC programmes should clearly demonstrate their independent, value-added character;
- not neglecting the European dimension and character of the ESC initiative activities on local level, in local communities have special importance;
- the funding of ESC as a new initiative cannot be done at the detriment of current youth and/or volunteering programmes; today’s provisional arrangement should be replaced by a new budget line with “fresh money”;

- ESC volunteers should be connected with each other both online and offline thereby increasing the exchange and learning potential of their participation prior, during and after their ESC involvement;
- stakeholders including civil society organisations should be invited in the management and monitoring process of the ESC; the entire system should be kept simple and transparent”.

What awaits ahead? Undoubtedly, disseminating information and increasing recognition of the ESC is pertinent for the initiative’s further success. In this regard, an intensive communication strategy, as it is included in the proposal, is paramount for the ESC’s success. The conference in Budapest provided vital opportunity to inquire the critical aspects of the European Solidarity Corps deeper and to reconcile different positions aiming for a converging institutional design – a right step in the right direction. Miklos Barabas, the Director of the European House, concluded: “I am very happy that participants positively evaluated the role of the European House as host organisation and were of the opinion that similar programmes should be organised in other Member States.”



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