

European Solidarity Corps: Summarizing Opportunities and Risks of a new Initiative

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1. Introduction

Many young people already volunteer in a variety of contexts and fields in Europe. The reality is, however, that more young people could contribute to society in this way and, at the same time, develop important competencies and an increased engagement and attachment with their communities. The development of the *European Solidarity Corps* (ESC) marks an important turning point in European Union (EU) policy in this regard.

The ESC is an initiative launched by the EU with the aim of creating new volunteering and employment/traineeship opportunities for young people. In this article we outline the main characteristics of this initiative, highlight some of the main risks and opportunities connected with it and provide some recommendations for successful implementation in the future. The input is based on extensive involvement in the consultation process in collaboration with other interested stakeholders and building on CEV's broad knowledge and experience of volunteering and solidarity initiatives in Europe.

2. Background Information

The ESC initiative is intended to “bring together young people to build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding to societal challenges. It will offer an inspiring and empowering experience for young people who want to help, learn, and develop”². All young people between 18 and 30 years old can register their interest to take part in the ESC by filling in an online form and expressing their preferences concerning the topics, projects and area of their interests. After that, the individual is included in an online database that organisations can use in order to find possible volunteers or trainees.

- 1 The European Volunteer Centre (Centre européen du volontariat, CEV) is the European network of over 70 national, regional and local volunteer centres and volunteer support agencies across Europe. Through our network we work together to promote and support volunteering through advocacy, knowledge sharing and capacity building & training. In this way we reach out to the many thousands of volunteers and volunteer organisations who see volunteer centres as a source of support bringing the European dimension to their work. This article was written in May 2017.
- 2 *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Solidarity Corps*, COM(2016) 942, p. 4, Brussels, December 7th, 2017, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0942&from=EN>

Following the official announcement from European Commission (EC) President Juncker in the State of the Union address in autumn 2016 about the intention to establish a European Solidarity Corps, an EC Communication was issued on December 7th 2016³ with an accompanying press release. Since then, a website with fact sheets, FAQs and other information has been made available by the EC⁴.

The main focus in the original announcement, and then the Communication and press release, was on providing opportunities for young people to “devote a period of their lives to helping others” and to “put the core EU value of solidarity into practice” with “solidarity-minded activities once they are matched with an organisation or have been accepted as a volunteer”. It will be possible for young people to engage in volunteering, trainee, apprentice or job placements as ESC activities. To reflect this, the Corps is divided in two strands: Volunteering and Occupational.

With regards to how it will be financed it is stated that: “Financial costs linked to cross-border mobility and subsistence abroad will be largely covered by EU support, under already existing structures such as the European Voluntary Service and the Youth Guarantee Scheme”⁵. There is little information about how the in-country placements will be funded although the EC expresses the intention “to explore financing possibilities for the ESC also through shared management programmes”⁶.

Whilst it is stated on the one hand that the EC’s intention is to create a single, centralised funding mechanism for ESC. “[...] The European Solidarity Corps, in its entirety (volunteering and occupational strands), should be financed through its own budget-line on the basis of a separate legal basis, to be proposed by spring 2017, and possible budgetary adjustments within the existing financial framework. The Commission will make the necessary arrangements in that respect [...]”⁷. It is also being explained that, in addition to the placements offered with this funding, it will be possible, and even encouraged, that different organisations operating in “solidarity related sectors”⁸ will be able to offer ESC placements, particularly

³ *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Solidarity Corps*, COM (2016) 942, Brussels, December 7th, 2017, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0942&from=EN>

⁴ More information about ESC are already grouped by CEV and available at <http://www.cev.be/european-solidarity-corps/>

⁵ All quotes from: European Commission – Fact Sheet, *Questions and Answers on the European Solidarity Corps*, Brussels, 15 September 2016, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-3062_en.htm, last seen April 3rd, 2017.

⁶ *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Solidarity Corps*, COM(2016) 942, Brussels, December 7th, 2017, p. 11, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0942&from=EN>

⁷ Ivi, p. 8.

⁸ European Commission – Fact Sheet, *Questions and Answers on the European Solidarity Corps*, Brussels, 15 September 2016, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-3062_en.htm, last seen April 3rd, 2017.

under the occupational strand, and be able to cover the costs themselves without recourse to EU funds.

It is mentioned that NGOs, local authorities or private companies (social enterprises) active in expressing solidarity and addressing societal challenges can use the ESC portal to contact and recruit members of the Corps. It is also clarified that “all organisations involved in volunteering activities need to hold a valid accreditation which guarantees their compliance with the European Voluntary Service (EVS) Charter⁹ to ensure they abide by the necessary quality standards”¹⁰.

How the quality of placements will be ensured under the occupation strand of the Corps is currently less clear from the existing information. There is, however, a fundamental understanding from all stakeholders, including the EC, that this is needed. The Commission is consulting stakeholders and the general public to define key priorities and shape the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps. This public consultation builds on an initial, targeted consultation of a selection of key stakeholders in late 2016. The questions of the targeted consultation were broad, focusing on the potential and the challenges of creating a European Solidarity Corps¹¹.

3. Criteria for Developing the ESC Legislative Proposal

Different opportunities and risks concerning the ESC can be grouped under three main topics: contribution to solidarity actions meeting needs in society; contribution to employment and employability of young people; contribution to the development of the EU project through cross-country exchange and expressions of EU values.

3.1 Contribution to solidarity actions meeting needs in society

The vast majority of volunteering happens outside of the support and funding of the EU programmes and needs to be supported by an enabling legal and financial environment. The ESC provides an opportunity for increased attention to solidarity organisations and volunteering, resulting in greater recognition and additional support for these activities.

⁹ European Voluntary Service Charter (Version 1), European Commission DG Youth, Brussels, February 2015, available at http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/library//evs-charter_en.pdf

¹⁰ European Commission – Fact Sheet, *Questions and Answers on the European Solidarity Corps*, Brussels, 15 September 2016, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-3062_en.htm, last seen April 3rd, 2017.

¹¹ The results of the initial targeted consultation are briefly summarised in *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Solidarity Corps*, COM(2016) 942, Brussels, December 7th, 2017, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0942&from=EN>

A risk, however, comes from the fact that not all welfare and social services are provided on the basis of being in solidarity with others – some of it is simply providing services for profit. A variety of actions with identified beneficiary groups, e.g. asylum seekers, are motivated by security policies and are not solidarity related. Care must be taken to focus on the organisational and activity aims and not simply the beneficiary group in order to ensure that the ESC members are truly engaging in *solidarity related* activities.

3.2 Contribution to employment and employability of young people

A clear link with the implementation of the Council Recommendation of 20th December 2012 on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/C 398/01)¹² will ensure that any placement in either the volunteering or the occupational strand can contribute to the increased employability of young people. The ESC implementation and focus should also ensure a better implementation of the Recommendation.

However, the skills development and the employability of the young people involved as members of the ESC could become the primary focus and the actual community impact of the solidarity action could become secondary or even completely overlooked. This is particularly important for the volunteering strand where community need and the service to others must be the driving force for the engagement in order for the specific unique characteristics of volunteering to be protected and maintained.

3.3 Contribution to the development of the EU project through cross-country exchange and expressions of EU values

What ESC offer in the development of EU values is that:

- Citizens will be more aware of the importance of solidarity for the EU project;
- the good use of EU funds in supporting solidarity causes;
- assisting young people in increasing their opportunities for learning and employment;
- and providing a structured way for young people to express their European values and solidarity with others.

¹² Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/C 398/01), Brussels, December 20th, 2012, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=O-J:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

However, a reputational risk to the EU remains if the programme is perceived, e.g. to be exploiting young people in low paid and low quality activities or contributing to activities that go against the common good or global standards of human rights. If not properly implemented, it could be used to stoke additional and increased anti-EU sentiment.

4. The European Solidarity Corps in practice

4.1 Scope and complementarity with existing schemes

Care should be taken that all placements are in support of non-profit solidarity actions to meet identified community needs. When implementing the ESC, a clear distinction should be made between volunteer placements and trainee and work placements in order to maintain the fundamental differences between traineeships and volunteering, i. e. whether the primary focus is on the needs of the beneficiaries of the action (the community) – volunteering, or on the training and development needs of the participating ESC member – traineeship.

To make the ESC a success, the Commission should integrate it in a wider policy strategy aiming at creating an enabling environment for solidarity and volunteering in Europe, while avoiding overlapping but rather strengthening successfully operating existing initiatives, such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and the immense efforts contributed by the wide variety of volunteering and solidarity focussed citizens and organisations active in Europe. Doing so, equal consideration for free-time volunteering that can be undertaken alongside work or studies should be taken into account as this is by far the more common form of volunteering and citizen engagement and will enable greater outreach and scope as it will make the ESC accessible to all young people irrespective of their situation. It will make a greater contribution to solidarity in Europe as it involves continued volunteer engagement over a longer period of time than the fixed-term, full time placements such as those provided under the EVS scheme.

4.2 Placements and support

The vast majority of volunteering and solidarity actions takes place at the local level, meeting local needs, and the European Solidarity Corps should focus on locally based volunteering and jobs rather than primarily on cross-border opportunities that require international mobility. This is the reason why participating in hosting ESC members should not add any administrative burden for individuals or participating organisations and should rely as much as possible on the existing and well-established volunteering opportunities and traineeship/employment opportunities already provided by solidarity-focussed organisations.

The volunteering strand should be underpinned by a clear understanding of the principles of quality volunteering such as those outlined in the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (PAVE)¹³ and the European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers¹⁴.

It is crucial that host entities for the occupational strand should subscribe to a quality Charter comprising agreed objectives and standards such as those outlined in the European Quality Charter on internship and apprenticeship¹⁵: guaranteeing mentorship for young people during their placement; adequate payment; health insurance; clear educational objectives.

For both strands there should be a clear link with the implementation of the Council Recommendation of 20th December 2012 on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/C 398/01)¹⁶ in order that any placement can contribute to the increased employability of young people.

Concerning resources, funding and support should be made available to national and regional volunteering infrastructure organisations in member states in order to act as multipliers and capacity builders for existing and future ESC hosting entities by informing about the opportunities available, advising on legal frameworks, quality frameworks, providing volunteer mentors etc.

4.3 Implementation Structure and Budget

Sufficient administrative and financial support should be provided to hosting entities from both strands to cover direct costs of placements but also in terms of knowledge and skills to be able to properly host ESC members. The volunteering infrastructure organisations in Europe should be supported and strengthened to be able to properly contribute to capacity building for host entities in this respect. In addition, participation in the ESC should not be limited to opportunities funded under the specific EU budget line for ESC, but should also include placements made available under other centrally managed EU funds, or those managed by the Member States directly, such as the youth guarantee and ESF. Opportunities for volunteers and trainees acting in frameworks outside of initiatives funded by the EU should also be provided.

¹³ *Policy Agenda on Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.)*, EYV 2011 Alliance, Brussels, 2012, available at http://www.cev.be/uploads/2015/10/EYV2011Alliance_PAve_copyfriendly.pdf

¹⁴ *Volunteering Charter. European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers*, European Youth Forum, Brussels, 2012, available at http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/volunteering_charter_en.pdf

¹⁵ *European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships*, European Youth Forum, Brussels, 2014, available at http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/04/internship_charter_EN.pdf

¹⁶ *Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/C 398/01)*, Brussels, December 20th, 2012, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=O-J:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

In order to guarantee a fluid structure, budgets for preparatory and supportive actions should be allocated such as for study on legal frameworks for volunteers and trainees in different member states and for the training of a pool of mentors. Making funding available to be able to capitalise on the wealth of experience of older people in Europe to act as volunteer mentors to young ESC members would also develop and encourage a valuable intergenerational aspect to the ESC and solidarity actions in Europe more generally.

It should also be recognised that civil protection and humanitarian aid cannot be dependent on young people via the European Solidarity Corps and the development of the ESC should not negatively impact on the continued investments in structured civil protection and humanitarian aid in Europe.

Another aspect to take into account is that support that businesses already give to NGOs through donations or volunteer time should not be threatened through an encouragement to directly hire young people in the framework of the ESC. Any mechanism that would enable businesses, through the ESC, to implement their own solidarity-focussed programmes therefore bypassing and without reference to existing and potential partner NGOs should be avoided. If businesses have funds available to employ young people directly then they should be given every possibility and incentive to do this but this should be outside the scope of the ESC.

Regular involvement of stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of the initiative will be crucial for the continued development of the Corps. To fully support this process the EC should introduce a single focal point for coordination of EU volunteering policies and programmes, including both those provided under the ESC and those in other frameworks and funding programmes such as the Europe for Citizens Programme.

5. Conclusion

The opportunities offered by the European Solidarity Corps to enable more young people to volunteer and express solidarity in Europe will be wide and varied. It should be ensured, however, that unreasonable expectations are not placed on volunteers. The main focus of EU volunteering policy should be on the development of local volunteering to meet identified needs, and to increase the resilience and capacity of local communities to cope with future needs. Volunteers bring hope to Europe every day through their 'helping hands', taking into account the elements identified, the European Solidarity Corps will facilitate the mobilisation of many more in the years to come.