



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/566
European Solidarity Corps

OPINION

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Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps and amending Regulations (EU) No 1288/2013, (EU) No 1293/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1305/2013, (EU) No 1306/2013 and Decision EU No 1313/2013

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Consultation	European Commission, 30/05/2017
Legal basis	Article 165(4) and Article 166(4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	27/09/2017
Adopted at plenary	19/10/2017
Plenary session No	529
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	124/0/1

1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the European Commission's proposal, recognising it as a good start for a broader discussion, but with a lot of elements to clarify and improve. We are happy to see that some of the priorities that were highlighted by the civil society organisations in the various stakeholder consultations organised by the Commission were included in the legal basis (i.e. more funding, local volunteering, focus on improving access for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or with specific needs, focus on quality assurance of placements, simplification of administrative procedures).
- 1.2 The EESC considers that the added value of projects financed by the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) lies in their message of European solidarity. Compared with the previous initiatives, the ESC projects seek to establish among participants and the communities hosting them a full awareness of European citizenship and a sense of belonging to one Union. In the Committee's view, the innovative aspect of the ESC – which consists in the fact that it is founded on values linked to the European identity and that these values are woven into project design and translated into practical achievements – is of key importance. These values are clearly set out in the EU Treaty: they are the values of peace, respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, human rights – including those of minorities –, tolerance, non-discrimination, equality between women and men, the rule of law, and respect for and application of the principles of a social market economy.
- 1.3 The EESC welcomes the announcement of this new investment in young people, but is concerned that it has been achieved largely through the reallocation of the European Voluntary Service budget from Erasmus+ from 2018 onwards. It believes that investment in the ESC budget must not come at the expense of successful programmes already offering invaluable opportunities to young people, particularly Erasmus+, which is already underfunded. We therefore ask for more "fresh money" to be invested in the programme.
- 1.4 The EESC is very concerned about the merging of the ESC goals with youth employment policies. It therefore suggests that the inclusion of job and traineeship placements in the programme should be reconsidered. The EESC suggests that the job and traineeship placements part should be offered through other already existing EU programmes focusing on employment and traineeships, the solidarity aspect of which should be strengthened. Concentrating the ESC on the voluntary "strand" alone would enable greater clarity and focus and would help avoid confusion with the other EU programmes available to young people.
- 1.5 Following a broad consultation with key stakeholders, the EESC has come up with the following suggestions for improving the draft legal basis (see section four for greater detail):
 - the definition of volunteering and solidarity actions should be changed;
 - provision of placements should be limited to non-profit organisations, foundations and social enterprises;

- the internet registration portal must become a genuinely effective interactive and management instrument;
- more support and preparation should be provided for young people, including the disadvantaged, before their placement and youth organisations should be supported in providing such preparation;
- youth organisations and social partners must be involved in the co-management of the ESC;
- contrary to the current approach of Erasmus+, accessibility must be enhanced, administrative burdens lowered and the approach of national agencies changed so as to make them more user-friendly.

Details of EESC proposals, as well as other suggestions, are set out below.

2. Summary of the Commission initiative

- 2.1 The establishment of the initiative now known as the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) was announced by the European Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, in his "State of the Union" speech in September 2016. He identified solidarity as one of the building blocks of the European Union and expressed his willingness to engage more young people in solidarity actions and volunteering.
- 2.2 The ESC was officially launched on 7 December 2016 with the aim of welcoming the first 100 000 participants by 2020. The key objective of the European Solidarity Corps is to strengthen cohesion and foster solidarity in European society by allowing young people to participate in a wide range of solidarity-based activities, e.g. helping to deal with emergencies such as the refugee crisis, but also when ad hoc action is needed (for instance, in the case of natural disasters).
- 2.3 If approved, the ESC will be (re)launched on 1 January 2018 with a budget of EUR 341 million to be divided among three main activities:
- Solidarity placements, which will support young people carrying out volunteering activities for up to 12 months, traineeship placements for 2-6 months on average, and job placements, in compliance with relevant national legislation, for 2-12 months. Volunteering team placements in groups of 10-40 young volunteers from different countries for a period of between two weeks and two months will also be supported.
 - Solidarity projects will allow small groups of at least five registered participants to set up and implement solidarity projects at the local level on their own initiative, for 2-12 months.
 - Networking activities will enable the exchange of good practices between registered participants and participating organisations, provide post-placement support and establish alumni networks.

These placements will be available to young people aged between 18 and 30. Currently, the programme is restricted to the EU28 only.

- 2.4 The programme will last for three years, from 2018 to 2020. 80% of the ESC budget will be allocated to volunteering placements and 20% to job placements (i.e. jobs and traineeships) Of

the EUR 341 million allocated to the programme, almost 58% (around EUR 197.7 million) will come from Erasmus+. The vast majority of this money (EUR 191 million) will come from the European Voluntary Service (EVS).

- 2.5 Registered participants are asked to create a profile on the internet portal with an indication of their preferences for areas of work/type of placement and will receive placement offers from public or private entities or international organisations that have been awarded the ESC quality label. To receive the ESC label and access the database, the organisation will have to go through an accreditation process (similar to that of the EVS) proving its compliance with the requirements of the ESC Charter¹ (i.e. ensuring inter alia skills development, safe and decent working conditions and adequate training).
- 2.6 The European Commission and the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) will oversee the implementation of the ESC at EU level, and the Erasmus+ National Agencies will monitor its implementation at national level.
- 2.7 For volunteering placements, living expenses (food, accommodation), travel, insurance and around EUR 155 per month will be provided to all participants. For job and traineeship placements, the employment contract, wages and traineeship written agreements and remuneration will be set according to national law. Financial support for travel is anticipated for these placements.
- 2.8 A financial top-up for disadvantaged young people is envisaged and some costs to hosting organisations (i.e. administrative, management, support) may also be covered. Pre-placement support (i.e. language learning) will mostly be provided online but organisations are free to complement this with their own support systems. ESC resource centres will be set up in Erasmus+ national agencies to provide support to participating organisations.

3. **General comments on the European Solidarity Corps**

- 3.1 The EESC welcomes the creation of a new programme focusing on youth, and particularly on youth volunteering, which is lacking in the current EU structure. It likewise welcomes the variety of the types of placements that the ESC offers, such as "solidarity projects" at local level, recuperating an element of the former Youth Initiatives, which were very successful.
- 3.2 The EESC hopes that through this programme a wider volunteering strategy at EU level can be developed not only for the 100 000 young people in the programme, but for around 100 million young and adult EU citizens currently engaged in volunteering across Europe. As the EESC already stressed it its opinion on EU policies and volunteering², a more coordinated approach towards volunteering policy is needed from the EU institutions. It should be recognised as a cross-cutting policy area and co-ordinated by a special unit within the European Commission,

¹ https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity/charter_en.

² EESC opinion on *Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU*, OJ C 181/150, 21.6.2012, p. 150.

boosted by the required policy structures in other EU institutions. To this end, the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (PAVE) offers a number of inspiring proposals for the further development of volunteering at EU and Member State level, as well as for social partners and NGOs. The ESC could also strengthen and foster the creation of national structures of volunteering and break down the many obstacles that still exist for cross-border volunteering.

- 3.3 The European Solidarity Corps should contribute to European social values. The EESC is very concerned about the merging of the ESC goals with youth employment policies. Such an approach risks replacing paid work with unpaid labour for Europe's young people. In this regard, the EESC is concerned that the definition of "volunteering" put forward by the legal basis document of the European Solidarity Corps (full-time, unpaid voluntary service carried out continuously, five days a week for seven hours a day) is very close to the description of a job placement. However, volunteering is not usually a full-time job, but rather takes place in the volunteer's free time.
- 3.4 The EESC suggests that the employment and placement part should be offered through other already existing EU programmes focusing on employment and traineeships, the solidarity aspect of which should be strengthened. Concentrating the ESC on the voluntary "strand" alone would enable more clarity and focus and would help to avoid confusion with other EU programmes available to young people.
- 3.5 If, however, job and traineeship placements are kept in the ESC, the EESC would like quality standards (European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships, the forthcoming Framework of Actions for Apprenticeships, jointly agreed by the European social partners) to be observed and remuneration to be fully aligned with national legislation on wages and/or applicable collective agreements. Likewise, placements should be limited to non-profit organisations, foundations and social enterprises. It would also be necessary to provide job coaching for apprentices and trainees, contracts that cover health and social insurance and clear objectives in the field of education and training.
- 3.6 The implementation of the ESC should be monitored with the participation of youth organisations and social partners, both of which should play a special role in ensuring that a clear distinction is made between volunteering activities and any possible job placements.
- 3.7 The EESC is convinced that the ESC should be fully implemented under Erasmus+, rather than by establishing an entirely new programme administered by Erasmus+ bodies. This could also help to fully align the conditions for the remaining part of the EVS with the ESC. Moreover, it would mean that the programme would not be under threat after 2020. In any event, however, additional funding and support are needed.
- 3.8 In light of the experience it has gained in the past, the EESC considers it important to:
- ensure that all initiatives in support of non-profit solidarity activities should match real, clearly identified needs in the target community;
 - avoid duplication, administrative burdens and obstacles to well-functioning systems such as the European Voluntary Service;

- give priority to grassroots initiatives that fit in with the needs of local communities, rather than transnational ones that call for more preparation and training and a longer period for settling in;
- contemplate lowering to sixteen the minimum age for participants in these initiatives, as well as in other activities;
- approve volunteering activities only if they conform to the quality criteria established by the Policy Agenda on Volunteering in Europe (PAVE) and the European Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers;
- issue certificates upon completion of the activities carried out, as stated in the recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning to promote employability;
- provide support measures for organisations and individuals so that they can develop their capacity in terms of organising volunteering activities;
- safeguard flexibility through the ESC by offering part-time activities to allow volunteers with disabilities or those with fewer opportunities for travelling to participate in local projects;
- identify possible synergies between ESC projects and local/national programmes;
- involve key stakeholders in the preparation, running and evaluation of the programme;
- facilitate access to the programme for those with health and social disadvantages (including young people leaving children's homes, living in remote areas, etc.);
- pay particular attention to the safety standards in programmes involving working directly with children;
- give the programme broad and effective support so it reaches those who would otherwise not have sought it out for themselves.

4. **Specific comments on the European Solidarity Corps**

4.1 Definition of volunteering and solidarity actions

The definition of volunteering in the present document is restrictive and does not reflect the diversity of volunteering in Europe. It currently defines volunteering as "a full-time [i.e. an activity carried out continuously, five days a week for seven hours a day] unpaid voluntary service for a period of up to twelve months". One way to solve this issue could be to use the word "volunteering" to describe all actions where young people are acting as volunteers (for example volunteering placements, group volunteering, or free-time volunteering initiatives).

The definition of solidarity actions is equally vague and very broad, raising questions about the types of projects that will be hosted under the ESC.

4.2 Provision of placements

The current proposal does not formally distinguish between volunteering and job or traineeship placements, thus creating unnecessary confusion between two distinct realities i.e. volunteering and work. The same quality criteria being applied to all activities and to all participating organisations also raises questions regarding the quality assurance of offers, since the same

criteria would be used to accredit for-profit companies, civil society organisations and other public and private organisations. The EESC is therefore convinced that provision of placements should be limited to non-profit organisations, foundations and social enterprises.

4.3 Impact of ESC on Erasmus+

The EESC welcomes the announcement of this new investment in young people, but is concerned that it has been achieved largely through the reallocation of the EVS budget from Erasmus+ from 2018 onwards. This leads us to question where the priorities of the Commission lie at a time when the success rates of applicants in other parts of the current Youth Chapter of Erasmus+ are rapidly decreasing and many quality projects remain unfunded (as was also discovered in the EESC's information report on Erasmus+³). The EESC believes that investment in the ESC budget must not come at the expense of programmes already offering invaluable opportunities to young people, particularly Erasmus+ which is already underfunded. Moreover, the future of the Erasmus+ programme, with its broad life-long learning dimension bringing together formal and non-formal education, could be at stake.

4.4 An internet registration portal as a genuinely effective interactive and management instrument

The EESC believes that an internet registration portal may indeed simplify procedures and make the ESC easier to access for more young people. Nevertheless, the overreliance on the portal for registration, selection of participants and pre-placement support is not enough to ensure the quality and fairness of the selection and follow-up procedures. The passive nature of the selection process (i.e. participants needing to wait to be contacted by accredited organisations) is disempowering, creates an unbalanced relationship between participants and hosting organisations, and is a potential source of frustration with the ESC programme.

The EESC therefore suggests significantly changing the portal in such a way as to make it interactive for both sides and enable it to support simplification of administration throughout the lifecycle of the project – from the initial registration of interest, through an active search for hosting organisations, application, selection, preparation, performance and evaluation, and even networking opportunities for alumni. No data should need to be entered twice.

Equal opportunities must be ensured for all, including those who do not have easy access to the internet. For these, offline support must be available.

4.5 Pre-placement preparation, including support for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds

Simply providing online training before a placement is insufficient to guarantee a successful experience. The EESC believes that more support and preparation should be provided young people – especially those disadvantaged in any way – before their placement and that youth

³ [SOC/552: Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation, adopted on 31 May 2017.](#)

organisations, with their expertise, are able to act as supporting organisations in all phases of the programme and should receive appropriate incentives to do so.

4.6 Involvement of youth organisations and social partners in the co-management of the ESC

In order for the programme to be a success, key stakeholders must be involved in its design from the very beginning. Currently the proposal does not provide for the involvement of youth organisations and other volunteer organisations, or social partners, in the implementation, co-management and monitoring of the ESC. The proposal gives priority to the Erasmus+ national agencies in managing the programme with a structure very similar to that of the EVS programme. The allocation of the budget according to key activities will also be decided by the Commission's annual work programmes following their own set of criteria. The EESC continues to believe that youth organisations and other CSOs, including social partners, should be regularly consulted in the programming, implementation and monitoring of the initiative, through advisory groups and other formal and informal means. Young people should also be involved in the monitoring and evaluation process at all levels (EU, national and local), for instance by means of a tool for rating their experience.

4.7 Accessibility, administrative burden and national agencies

As the EESC pointed out in its information report on the mid-term evaluation of Erasmus+⁴, "applying for and participating in Erasmus+ is still a challenge for volunteer-based organisations that are not fully professionalised. The absolute amount of work involved might not always be excessive, but limited human and financial resources mean either that these organisations do not try or that they look for alternative approaches that are less onerous". It is therefore of utmost importance that the National Agencies change their approach in the most user-friendly way possible in order to attract and support potential ESC applicants and their potential hosting organisations in their efforts. Less formal controls and more informal guidance would help a lot in making the programme a success. National Agencies must be properly supported to this end and given additional funding for staff to support applicants.

4.8 Other issues for consideration

- a) How can we guarantee that information about the initiative reaches all young people, all regions and all organisations for newcomers, particularly those in more vulnerable situations? Or will this be a kind of "closed shop" for the lucky few?
- b) How can we ensure that young people with fewer opportunities will really be able to access the programme? It is crucial to provide financial support for outreach activities aimed at organisations involved in the programme. The role of supporting organisations would be key to maintaining outreach activities and supporting subsequent engagement. The programme should also enhance young people's engagement in serving society beyond the activity of the ESC.

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[SOC/552: Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation](#): last paragraph of the section "Has the administrative burden of managing Erasmus+ projects in your field of work been reduced?" in the technical appendix.

- c) The quality of the programme for the participants should be ensured, but how will we evaluate the quality of solidarity (the outcomes of the individual projects)?
- d) Should we mainstream the ESC to other European programmes? A dimension of local volunteering could also be included in the Erasmus+ student mobility programmes and could be linked to the ESC.
- e) What objective criteria will be used by the Commission to annually adjust the budget available for each specific action? Adjustments based on the level of demand for each activity would help avoid pressure on some activities on the one hand and assist in preventing disengagement of young people and participating organisations on the other.
- f) How can we ensure that funding applications will be flexible enough for volunteering organisations and youth groups? A simplified process would be helpful in ensuring that micro grants (under EUR 5 000) could be submitted at any time with no fixed deadlines and with a simplified application form.

Brussels, 19 October 2017

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The president of the European Economic and Social Committee
