European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/603
European Solidarity Corps

OPINION

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Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Solidarity Corps programme and repealing [European Solidarity Corps Regulation] and Regulation (EU) No 375/2014
[COM(2018) 440 final – 2018/0230 (COD)]

Rapporteur: **Michael McLOUGHLIN**

Referral	European Parliament, 02/07/2018 Council of the European Union, 10/07/2018
Legal basis	Articles 165(4), 166(4), 214(5) and 294 of the TFEU
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	26/09/2018
Adopted at plenary	17/10/2018
Plenary session No	538
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	184/1/3…

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC welcomes the commitment to the renewed European Solidarity Corps (ESC) with an increased budget and target for participation.

1.2 We welcome the full and new legal basis for the ESC, a dedicated budget and the merging with the EU Aid Volunteers[1].

1.3 There is a need for a new comprehensive EU volunteering policy which will address all relevant issues and engage with the Member States beyond the concept of the European Solidarity Corps.

1.4 We welcome the budget breakdown prioritising the volunteering strand and wish to see a continued emphasis on this.

1.5 In the future, the EU needs to develop two independent support programmes, one for youth and one for volunteering, while accepting there will be some overlap.

1.6 Attention must be given to ensuring that EU foreign policy priorities particularly at the harder end do not influence the ESC after the merging with the EU Aid Volunteers.

1.7 Robust statistics, including on the community impact of the ESC actions, must be produced in a timely manner to assist in evaluation and decision making on the ESC, and even if these are negative they should be public.

1.8 The employment strand needs to be subject to strict regulation and regular review to ensure commitments made in relation to it are met.

1.9 Consistent with a lifelong learning approach, there should be no age restriction on the ESC as it should be a support for volunteering.

1.10 We reiterate our view that the ESC should be restricted to the not for profit sector and this value should be maintained regardless of who delivers projects.

1.11 Sharing best practice on volunteering needs to be facilitated and prioritised and this should involve EU Member States so as to gather all relevant information and facilitate more policy development in this area.

1.12 National Agencies should be provided with enhanced support to deal with the employment strand and labour market issues.

1.13 The major documents on ensuring fair treatment of people on internships, traineeships and other measures outlined in this report should be utilised and reported on in the monitoring of the ESC.

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1 https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/echo/eu-aid-volunteers_en/

1.14 The main civil society platforms in the field (the European Youth Forum (YFJ) and the European Volunteering Centre (CEV)) should be centrally involved in the regulation and oversight of the ESC.

1.15 The simplification and streamlining of the programme is welcome.

1.16 The EU needs to show its willingness to invest in other forms and types of volunteering beyond the ESC.

2. Background

2.1 The European Commission proposes to set the overall budget for the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) at EUR 1.26 billion in current prices, for the period from 1 January 2021 until 31 December 2027. This would allow for about 350 000 young people to participate between 2021 and 2027, in addition to the 100 000 participants the Commission aims to support by the end of 2020.

2.2 As there is potential to further develop solidarity with victims of crises and disasters in non-EU countries, this proposal provides for extending the scope of the European Solidarity Corps to include support to humanitarian aid operations in non-EU countries, including those located in the EU outermost regions' neighbourhood.

2.3 The European Solidarity Corps aims to strengthen the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities. It is a means to strengthen cohesion, solidarity and democracy in Europe and abroad and to address societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with a particular focus on promoting social inclusion.

2.4 The ESC shall enable participants to strengthen and validate their skills and facilitate their integration into the labour market.

2.5 The programme shall offer activities that can be undertaken in a country other than the country of residence of the participants (cross-border activities and volunteering in support of humanitarian aid) and activities that can be undertaken in their country of residence (in-country). The programme shall be implemented under two strands of action:

- Strand 1: participation of young people in solidarity activities addressing societal challenges: the actions shall contribute in particular to strengthening cohesion, solidarity and democracy in the EU and beyond, while addressing societal challenges, with particular efforts to promote social inclusion.
- Strand 2: participation of young people in humanitarian aid related solidarity activities (European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps): these actions shall contribute in particular to providing needs-based humanitarian aid, aimed at preserving lives, preventing and alleviating human suffering and maintaining human dignity, as well as strengthening the capacities and resilience of vulnerable or disaster-stricken communities.

2.6 Any public or private entity established in a participating country as well as international organisations may apply for funding under the European solidarity corps. A quality label shall be obtained by the participating organisation as a pre-condition for receiving funding or implementing any self-funded actions under the European Solidarity Corps.

2.7 Special attention shall be given to ensuring that the activities supported by the European Solidarity Corps are accessible to all young people, notably the most disadvantaged ones. Special measures shall be put in place to promote social inclusion, the participation of disadvantaged young people, as well as to take into account the constraints imposed by the remoteness of a number of rural areas and of the outermost regions of the European Union and the Overseas Countries and Territories.

3. General comments

3.1 We welcome the commitment to the renewed ESC with an increased budget and target for participation. We do believe however there are still issues to be addressed and many were raised in our previous opinion[2] on the issue. There are also some other developments and potential issues relating to the merging with the EU Aid Volunteers entailing the expansion of the volunteering strand to neighbourhood countries, pre accession countries and the outermost regions of the European Union.

3.2 This opinion particularly focusses on what is new or novel in the latest proposal. Effectively the latest communication provides for a full and new legal basis for the ESC, a dedicated budget and effectively merges the EU Aid Volunteers. The European Solidarity Corps becomes one entity under the proposals as opposed to the sum of eight different ones heretofore, which is welcome.

3.3 There were several requests in our previous opinion on the European Solidarity Corps[3], which we believe remain valid. As many of these were not acted upon, some need repetition and others need systems and structures to guard against the outcomes we were concerned about at that time. Some of these requests refer to:

- Ensuring quality control for participants entering the ESC
- Ensuring quality control for projects and people in local communities
- The role of online resources in supporting volunteers
- The question of "fresh money"
- The role of organisations other than not for profits
- The definition of volunteering
- The role of youth organisations
- The need to support participants in their preparation to take part in the ESC

2 OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 160

3 OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 160

– The support and follow-up actions that will contribute to ensuring that engagement with the ESC has a higher likelihood of leading to life-long volunteering and other actions expressing solidarity.

3.4 It is important for us that relevant civil society organisations platforms like the European Youth Forum and the European Volunteering Centre are formally included in the monitoring body of the ESC so as to ensure that the voice of civil society is included and that feedback from the ground and users of the programme are included in the programme management.

3.5 It is important to examine the merging of the EU Aid Volunteers. This is a very different type of action. While there may be a lot to be said for simplifying and streamlining the process there are different and specific issues when it comes to development issues in relation to culture, power and project type. This challenge is recognised in the proposal. It is important not to rush these just for administrative convenience.

3.6 EU Aid Volunteers is a relatively small programme, however it catered to more than young people and the proposal appears silent on this. As the external evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers found, it possessed a European standard of volunteer management, so such learning or systems should not be lost to the ESC.

3.7 Data from the ESC Portal[4] needs to be analysed to begin to examine the impact even of its early operation. Evaluation and feedback systems will be critical. Even beyond these, formal compliance systems such as access to the European Ombudsman should be ensured for both participants and other stakeholders.

3.8 Support for volunteering

3.8.1 Support for volunteering can take many forms and much of it will continue to lie with Member States. The Commission points out that the European Solidarity Corps is only one programme and one aspect. However, it has come to be seen as a headline measure with a lot of political capital attached to it. This may take away form the potential for a more dedicated approach to volunteer support.

3.8.2 There will naturally be a concern that the ESC may attract people away from other forms of volunteering. Similarly, while we always welcome support for civil society organisations, there may also be a greater attraction to choose a civil society organisation over a public authority or perhaps individual volunteering, or to choose transnational volunteering over local volunteering.

3.8.3 Volunteering is a very diverse concept. It can be extremely limited in time or it can be quite extensive. It can involve differing degrees of altruism, enthusiasm and most particularly time. Volunteering is undoubtedly a public good and at the same time can serve vital social and economic interests in terms of taking the pressure off the State and ensuring vital tasks get done often in a very local concept. The State then needs to support volunteering as does the EU. While the European Solidarity Corps is only one programme, its focus on effectively full-time

4 https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en

volunteering in a transnational context highlights this approach. Thus other types of volunteering may not get the same attention, even with the best will in the world.

3.8.4 Public support for volunteering must be diverse, it needs to cover the world of work, flexible social security arrangements, certification, the approach of public authorities in the field of health and education, the issue of compensation where relevant, training and much more. The EU needs critically to signal that all these issues are involved and while it may not have competences in all fields it needs to be careful in prioritising one form over another in the funding it provides. A broad ranging and comprehensive policy on volunteering is needed rather than one programme, no matter how welcome or well funded it is.

3.8.5 Even with the new proposals and after some initial bedding down, there remain some overall questions about the rationale and objectives. At the highest level it needs to be established whether the European Solidarity Corps is a volunteering programme or a support for young people's development. Straddling both objectives can create difficulties.

3.8.6 It may be preferable then to separate out the logic and rationale for volunteering support, which may take various forms and for youth programmes which may be supported under the youth strategy. Their mixing or overlap should be a matter of design and principle rather than history and available funding. Effectively for the future it would seem more appropriate to have stand-alone programmes to support young people and volunteering even if there would be some overlap. This might be the approach if we were, for example, to start with a "blank page".

3.8.7 There are a considerable number of objectives for the European Solidarity Corps. We need to constantly ask what is the rationale for the programme and whether it is the best way to deliver on this. Generally, we still believe the ESC should be for not for profit organisations only. This may involve partnerships with for profit organisations but the activity should clearly be carried out through a not for profit organisation and where necessary be governed by a legally enforceable agreement in this regard.

3.9 The employment strand

3.9.1 The employment strand of the European Solidarity Corps receives a lot of attention. It is our belief that it needs extremely tight regulation and most certainly should only be offered by not for profits. It appears to entail a lot of work and effort to create it for a very small number of places and needs to be kept under constant review. With the best will in the world, the National Agencies (the same ones as for ERASMUS+) cannot be expected to have enough knowledge on occupational and labour market issues.

3.9.2 If an employment strand is to continue to feature it must then accord with the highest standards in that field. A variety of standards and external documents in the field of volunteering, work and young people continue to be relevant here and we continue to endorse them and recommend them to the Commission, the Executive Agency and the National Agencies, namely:

1. The Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (PAVE)[5]
2. The European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers of the European Youth Forum[6]
3. The European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships of the European Youth Forum[7]
4. The European Parliament' Bureau decision on unpaid internships[8]

3.10 A Youth Programme?

3.10.1 Understandably there is a major focus on the experience, welfare and progression of young participants and we endorse this fully. There must also be an equal focus on the quality of the interventions, whether these are meeting their objectives, if they observe the relevant expectations and standards in their respective fields. There is no trade-off between project quality and quality of the outcomes for the participant, they are equally important.

3.10.2 While volunteering for young people is a specific aim and priority at this point in time it may also in the context of life-long learning be time to begin to debate whether there should be any age limit to the ESC and related activities. Many people across society have something offer and indeed something to learn and solidarity between generations can be equally important.

4. Specific comments

4.1 It is not clear that the data on progress to date has been sufficient to make further decisions about consolidation and merging with new areas. There was a clear logic to the European Voluntary Service (EVS)[9] as a youth programme. We are not convinced that sufficient impact assessment was carried out on EVS before the European Solidarity Corps was introduced. While much of EVS has now become the European Solidarity Corps, there may be a fear that the available budget has driven this process as opposed to a vision for volunteering. We also are unclear about the amount of youth involvement in the decision making on this change.

4.2 The merging of EU programmes for humanitarian aid and voluntary service needs to have a clear and explicit logic. Increasingly there is a focus on security in some of the EU's external policies and the refugee crisis has also impacted. This may also contribute to a change in the nature of the European Solidarity Corps if it is used as part of the EU's External Action. Also this merger introduces an age cut off point for the humanitarian dimension which was not present before.

5 http://www.kansalaisareena.fi/EYV2011Alliance_PAVE_copyfriendly.pdf

6 https://www.youthforum.org/charter-rights-and-responsibilities-volunteers

7 https://www.youthforum.org/european-quality-charter-internships-and-apprenticeships

8 https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/unpaid-internships-european-parliament-and-elsewhere-must-be-banned-say-sds

9 https://europeanvoluntaryservice.org/

4.3 The new EU Youth Strategy's[10] objectives relating to increasing volunteering engagement in Member States beyond the ESC could find greater expression in the proposal. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 seems to have more ambitious targets in terms of encouraging Member States to strengthen volunteering policies and strategies to encourage more young people to be active. It would be important that specific funding is also included for offering Member States spaces to share best practices related to volunteering policies and strategies, for example to re-establish the Expert Group on Youth Volunteer Mobility. In particular, we are hoping that the recognition of learning outcomes instrument of the ESC could be used in all forms of volunteering engagement outside the ESC programme. The legal basis of the proposal does not exclude it but it would be useful to set up a broader target on this.

4.4 The new proposal promises the simplification of procedures and this is welcome. More detail would be useful for stakeholder in this regard. The local solidarity projects are a most welcome development and should be prioritised.

4.5 Some of the promotional material related to the European Solidarity Corps focusses very much on individual opportunities and development. While this needs to be part of the offer it is of course of utmost importance that the end product and result of volunteering is equally highlighted and promoted. Allied with the DiscoverEU initiative[11], we might need to be careful that a perception does not develop that EU support is prioritised for "gap years" and more well off young people.

4.6 We strongly endorse the indicative split of 90% for volunteering in the budget set-up of the programme and the prospect of more mentoring for the disadvantaged. The budgetary breakdown for the strands should be maintained except where lack of demand entails shifts across budget lines by National Agencies. Generally the allocation should be made based on the demands of participating organisations.

4.7 There will be a need to resource National Agencies sufficiently, particularly to meet any challenges of delivering further on the occupational aspect of the European Solidarity Corps and for their cooperation with labour market agencies and other relevant national schemes.

4.8 The European Voluntary Service (EVS) had a strong framework for formal and informal training. The concept of ERASMUS for cultural workers has been developed and could be valuable for the European Solidarity Corps. Non-formal learning is a critical area. The Pisa Approach where students can get credits for practical ERASMUS-type work should be examined.

4.9 There is a follow-up dimension to the European Solidarity Corps but it is only envisaged relating to the sharing of knowledge. There is a need to strive for a more long term engagement in solidarity actions, including the (most common) part-time volunteering in free time of participants, beyond the volunteering opportunity offered by the ESC.

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10 https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

11 https://europa.eu/youth/discovereu_en

4.10 It is important to analyse and respond to the uptake of the occupational element to date. Some of the effectiveness measurements in ex-ante evaluation – focused more on output than outcome and future evaluations should address this.

Brussels, 17 October 2018

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