

CULT Committee Public Hearing on European Solidarity Corps (ESC)
Summary of input – Piotr Sadowski, Secretary General of VolonteurEurope

Concern with reallocation of EVS budget from Erasmus+ 2018-2020, to ESC; next Multiannual Financial Framework, successor to Erasmus+ and allocation to EVS

We are concerned with the reallocation of EVS budget from Erasmus+ in the period 2018-2020. This causes our members and partners serious concern about diverting funds from programmes such as EVS, or potentially others in the future, like EU Aid Volunteers, which are already offering extremely positive, valuable and often life-changing volunteering opportunities and experiences for young people.

We are worried about further negative impact on EVS when it comes to the negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, and what allocations would be provided to EVS activities.

Some of our members and partners have expressed that, for them, a really sad message is being sent out by this situation. They rightly feel that volunteering is not something that just happens, but it needs to be properly resourced and planned.

It would be awful to see the huge wealth of experience and knowledge within sending, co-ordinating and hosting organisations, diminished or lost with a shrunk EVS programme.

ESC reaching out to young people with fewer opportunities? Only online training?

So far we do not feel that it has been communicated in detail how all young people, including those with fewer opportunities, from disadvantaged backgrounds, furthest away from volunteering and employment, will benefit from ESC.

We doubt that, without further investment in the design of ESC, which includes civil society organisations and the voluntary sector more in the co-production process, disadvantaged young people will be able to access ECS easily, or whether they will be guaranteed a high quality experience through the programme.

We would therefore call for much better and proactive engagement of the voluntary sector, at different levels, as well as young people themselves, in the design and delivery of the ESC, particularly in the context of the volunteering strand placements, as well as trade unions in the context of employability placements.

We also have a problem with the idea of only providing online training before a placement, as this is insufficient to guarantee a high quality, successful experience – and this would be an even stronger case for young people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Volunteering vs Occupation

We agree with the criticism that some quality jobs risk being replaced by unpaid volunteering. We would therefore argue that placements under the volunteering strand should be funded to voluntary sector, civil society, youth organisations, not-for-profit foundations, social enterprises, rather than the private sector, as this would reduce this risk. These organisations, under a quality label, work in the ethos of not replacing jobs with full-time volunteers.

There should also be a distinction in the quality label for volunteering placements and for the occupational strand. In terms of the for-profit sector, it should participate in the employment strand, however, social partners, job centres or equivalent employment services should be engaged in the design and monitoring of the strand, to ensure that the work offered is quality and rewarding work.

Furthermore, we also believe that the way that volunteering is currently defined does not reflect the vast diversity of volunteering in Europe, something that was so strongly showcased already back during the 2011 European Year of Volunteering. We would therefore argue that volunteering should describe all types of volunteering, in different settings, formal, informal and non-formal. This would help to create a further and stronger distinction from the employment strand placements.

Placements in disaster prevention

The EU Aid Volunteers Programme already offers excellent opportunities for young people (as well as volunteers of other ages), in disaster prevention volunteering, outside of the borders of the EU. Therefore, the lessons and practices from the EU Aid Volunteers programme could be adapted to such solidarity activities in the context of ESC, within the borders of the EU.

Will we reach 100,000 ESC participants in 2020?

Partly, EVS in itself for a long time has not been inclusive enough of young people with fewer opportunities, who could have seriously benefited from participation in EVS. It was not properly understood that in order to reach out to more young people, from disadvantaged areas, more was needed in terms of the structure, preparation, monitoring and engagement with volunteers in EVS placements. This has been changing for the better.

In the context of ESC, we think that, unless there is a major engagement of all relevant stakeholders and especially the civil society and voluntary sector in the co-production, implementation and monitoring of ESC, the target of 100,000 young participants in 2020 will not be reached.

What could help to increase the numbers would be to lower the eligibility age from 18 to 16, not least to offer the opportunities to larger cohorts of young people, as well as to reflect that volunteering in Europe happens also before the age of 18.

Quality label and co-management

We believe that the process of establishing quality would need to be further defined and clarified in the current offer of the ESC, as it is rather limited at the moment. Furthermore, as previously stated, there should be two different and clearly defined quality labels for the volunteering strand and for the employability strand, and different stakeholders should be consulted and engaged in the establishing and monitoring of the label. In the volunteering strand, therefore, civil society and voluntary sector should be engaged, while in the employment one also social partners such as trade unions, employment services and potential other stakeholders, to ensure high quality and rewarding work placements, rather than precarious and low-paid jobs.

In terms of co-management, to make sure that ESC offers the best possible experience for young people, whether in volunteering or employment strands, there is a need for co-design, co-management and co-delivery with experienced and relevant stakeholders.

There should be more focus on offering resourced opportunities for the voluntary sector, youth organisations, civil society, as well as social partners, to be regularly engaged in the consultation, implementation and monitoring of the programme.

Above all, young people themselves should be able to have their voice heard in the monitoring of the success of the programme at all levels, and they should be able to feedback on their experience in a manner that can be visible and accessed by others.

Positive effect on the labour market

Potentially, the ESC could have a positive effect on the labour market thinking specifically if employers are targeted at the same time as the programme is being implemented, with an encouragement to recognise the experience gained by ESC participants in the volunteering strand as genuine skills that make a young person more job-ready. Here, again, there should be concerted effort of all relevant stakeholders, not least employers who are already market leaders in recognising the value of skills gained through volunteering amongst their prospective employees.

Civil society organisations who are experienced in working with the corporate sector in employee volunteering schemes should be also actively engaged in this process. The use of excellent tools such as ProfilPASS, re-developed through a project in which Volonteurope's host organisation, Volunteering Matters, is involved – EUROVIP (<https://volonteurope.eu/project/eurovip/>), should be encouraged.