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REPORT

on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027
(2023/2018(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

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EXPLANATORY STATEMENT – SUMMARY OF FACTS AND FINDINGS

1. Introduction

This report examines the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme in the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, covering the years 2021 until 2023. The programme succeeded the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme, which was a part of Erasmus + until 2018. Then the programme went through a three-year pilot period as the European Solidarity Corps 2018-2020.

The current self-standing programme stands as an EU flagship programme for volunteering. It provides a single entry point for volunteering activities for young people across the EU and beyond and constitutes an enriching experience in a non-formal and informal learning context.

Moreover, it has evolved from pure learning mobility of volunteers into a programme focusing on solidarity and community impact. After all, volunteering is the expression of solidarity, and it has clear benefits for society, civic participation, and active citizenship, but it is also an opportunity for participants to develop relevant skills and competences.

As it stands in Regulation 2021/888: *“The Programme is designed to open up new opportunities for young people to undertake volunteering activities in solidarity-related areas, as well as to devise and develop solidarity projects based on their own initiative. Those opportunities contribute to enhancing the personal, educational, social, civic and professional development of young people.”*

This report captures the ongoing implementation of the programme’s objectives and activities, highlighting the successes and possible gaps in providing solidarity opportunities to young people.

In the framework of the work on the implementation report, the rapporteur organised a stakeholder meeting on 23 May 2023. Overall, 11 stakeholders provided feedback, including National Agencies (NAs), international organisations and NGOs. Apart from the meeting, the rapporteur has acquired several written statements from other organisations involved in the programme.

The rapporteur has also used an EPRS study (referred to from here on as the ‘EPRS study’) and a study commissioned by the Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies (referred to from here on as ‘the study’), evaluating the early implementation of the programme.

2. Context of the programme’s implementation

The late adoption of the MFF 2021-2027 and of the Regulation establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme in May 2021 resulted in some delays in implementation, as many organisations could not submit a project over the summer 2021. Moreover, many organisations had their projects from 2019 and 2020 delayed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis hit the mobility aspect of the programme – some activities were diverted to an online environment, but many placements had to be cancelled.

The programme's added value and resilience were shown on the brink of 2022 with the Russian military aggression against Ukraine and the resulting inflow of refugees fleeing the war. The European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ provided opportunities to refocus activities to support relocated people from Ukraine. The European Solidarity Corps introduced a special policy priority to contribute to relief/assistance to Ukrainian refugees. This allowed for ongoing European Solidarity Corps projects (Volunteering projects and Solidarity Projects) to adapt their scope and activities, on a voluntary basis, towards this objective. Moreover, many supported projects addressed a series of extreme weather events and natural disasters throughout 2021 and onwards.

Despite the obstacles, the European Solidarity Corps Programme proved to be a unique gateway for European solidarity and a tool for community building, as many volunteers joined volunteering activities during the pandemic or to help the Ukrainian refugees. This only confirms that the European Solidarity Corps is a genuinely European programme offering a way to face current challenges and cope with crises.

3. Objectives and activities

The general objective of the programme is to enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities, primarily volunteering, as a means to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond, addressing societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with a particular focus on the promotion of sustainable development, social inclusion and equal opportunities.

The specific objective of the programme is to provide young people, including those with fewer opportunities, with easily accessible opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities that induce positive societal changes in the Union and beyond, while improving and properly validating their competences, as well as facilitating their continuous engagement as active citizens.

Towards this end, the programme sets up two strands of actions:

- (a) the 'participation of young people in solidarity activities' strand; and
- (b) the 'participation of young people in humanitarian aid related solidarity activities' strand (the 'European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps').

Actions under the first strand consist of volunteering, including Volunteering Teams in Higher Priority Areas, and solidarity projects. Both strands have common actions of networking activities (NET) and quality and support measures.

The competence over the second strand lies with the European Parliament's DEVE Committee, which published its opinion on the subject.

The report describes how the objectives and activities are being met. The implementation evaluation is based on comparing the programme's objectives and achieved results, while using quantitative and qualitative indicators. These indicators entail the official figures provided by the European Commission (EC), specifically DG EAC and DG BUDG, studies'

results and evaluation and feedback from various stakeholders.

4. Solidarity Activities

According to the DG BUDG Programme Performance Statement covering the period until 31 January 2023, the programme envisions providing opportunities for at least 185 755 young people between 2021 and 2027. This is, however, a revised number against the estimated 270 000 opportunities at the start of the programme in 2020. Nearly 330 000 young people expressed interest in the first two years. Despite the initial complications and following crises, the programme awarded more than 42 903 young people in 2021-2022, out of the requested nearly 80 000 in the submitted applications. The interest of young people in the programme is substantial and rising.

About 85% of European Solidarity Corps volunteering opportunities are for long-term activities. The initial estimation was 65% for long-term and 35% for short-term. Long-term activities are more resource intensive. This explains, together with the inflation and high levels of participation of young people with fewer opportunities, the relatively lower number of participants in short-term activities compared to the initial forecast.

The following parts will reflect on this situation and other aspects of the programme regarding individual programme activities, visibility and budget implementation. Each part provides a descriptive overview of achievements and challenges that should be tackled.

4.1. Volunteering

This action remains the most popular among applicants, with 27 507 awarded participants in 2021-2022.

One of the main policy priorities is including young people with fewer opportunities. In 2021, the Commission adopted an implementing act aimed at a more inclusive and diverse participation in the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ programmes for the 2021–2027 period. Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1877 should enable more people to volunteer in their country of residence or in another country, by reaching out to increasing numbers of people with fewer opportunities.

The total number of participants with fewer opportunities in projects awarded under the 2021/2022 calls were 14 060, with individual volunteering of 8 622 and Volunteering Teams of 5 438. These figures exceed the original intention of the programme's inclusive dimension and prove that the programme is truly inclusive. Overall 35% of participants in 2021 and 2022 were young people with fewer opportunities.

Further efforts should be made to make the programme even more inclusive, by considering the suggestions identified in the Council Recommendation 2022/C 157/01 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union.

Young people can participate in as many Volunteering Teams as they want. However, individual volunteering is limited to a maximum of 12 months. A more flexible and inclusive approach should be considered, such as a strategy where participants can mix and match countries, topics or experiences, instead of limiting it to only one long-term mobility. This inclusive approach would open up more opportunities to those who cannot commit to a longer

period of time.

The sending organisations (supporting) are integral and fundamental to the preparation and follow-up phases. The Programme Guide defines their role as follows: supporting, preparing and/or training participants before departure, a mediation between them and their host organisations and/or providing support to participants upon return from their activity as well as project management and coordination.

The title “supporting organisation” gives an unclear description of the role and responsibilities. One suggestion is to name them “sending organisations” (as in the previous European Voluntary Service) and make their involvement obligatory in the volunteering actions.

The European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps is a centralised action, which follows a different logic than the decentralised volunteering. These different circumstances lead to a lot of confusion among beneficiaries. Hence, the activities and communications of both decentralised and centralised volunteering could be better aligned and coordinated.

Among others, a solution is needed to address visa challenges for European Solidarity Corps’ volunteers from non-Schengen countries, as host organisations cannot support the volunteers in acquiring visas. This should include financial and legal assistance for placements involving third-country nationals, young people from Erasmus+ Programme and Partner Countries, as well as young refugees. One possible solution is the development of a special visa category with a fast track and free procedure for European Solidarity Corps participants.

4.2. Solidarity Projects

The solidarity projects registered a positive trend across all four priority areas: inclusion and diversity; digital transformation; participation in democratic life; environmental protection, sustainable development and climate action. The total awarded projects in 2021 were 1948 and 1877 in 2022. Overall number of awarded volunteers between 2021 and 2022 is 12 548.

Many projects were also initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing for example on the most vulnerable groups or fostering the use of digital tools. Moreover, an increased interest was registered in projects aiding Ukrainian refugees. Last but not least, a significant number of project were also dedicated to the environment and climate change (397), green skills (267), and democracy and inclusive democratic participation (200).

Despite this trend, solidarity projects remain to be of lower interest among volunteers as also the awareness about these projects is relatively low (see 6.1.).

The feedback received by stakeholders also highlighted that the minimum of five people for solidarity projects is too high. This could be solved by lowering the threshold to three or four people in the next programming period. Moreover, several organisations believe that the minimum age limit for solidarity projects (in-country) could be lowered to 16, as in the case of Erasmus+ Youth participation activities the limit is even set at 13 years.

4.3. Networking activities

Networking activities (NET) are support activities aimed at improving the implementation of

the Programme in qualitative terms and building closer links with policy developments. A key source for assessment is the SALTO dedicated analysis covering the years 2020-2022.

Based on the information from the Planning Board, it is clear that the planned activities are evenly divided, covering the European Solidarity Corps programme in general, Quality Support and Quality, Skills and competence development. Some key topic activities, however, are still under represented: digital transformation, climate action & sustainability, and youth participation.

The COVID-19 pandemic primarily impacted these activities, as the majority of them had to be held online. On the one hand, the transition was successful and made the related activities more flexible. On the other hand, the online activities had their toll on keeping the participants motivated and committed. In any case, the challenging situation demonstrated the flexibility of NAs and NET officers to adapt to unforeseen challenges.

4.4. Quality and support measures

The quality and support measures have been attracting significant attention, as they ensure a high quality of the volunteering activities and conditions for the participants. These measures include primarily quality labels (3 987 organisations hold a quality label), insurance, language learning opportunities, an IT support system and the European Solidarity Corps Portal.

Effective and efficient tools are crucial for the implementation of the programme. Overall, the functioning of IT tools needs to be improved, and procedures have to be simplified for the programme's success.

These conclusions are confirmed by the conducted study, in which 55% of the NAs consider IT tools for the application process not user-friendly. Moreover, 45% of the NAs deemed the IT tools to complicate the beneficiaries' application process. Similar figures were also registered among the wide stakeholders.

There are ongoing issues and glitches in IT tools, e.g. the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) system. The OLS system is essential, as it prepares the volunteers for their journey abroad. In this regard, the quantity and quality of the courses in some languages are insufficient, and the move to the EU Academy still has its flaws and needs to be revised. As such, only 6.5% of wide stakeholders, questioned for the survey, saw the OLS as improving language knowledge, while over 50% considered it ineffective.

Some systems, such as PASS, are not intuitive and do not offer basic functions like filtering and searching potential applicants; a better sorting and filtering tool should be provided, to allow organisations to select candidates. The Beneficiary Module is also experiencing technical issues, such as restricted access to participants' reports.

The new Quality Label (QL) still requires simplification, especially the whole process of receiving the QL. In particular, the application form should be shortened and simplified, and it should be available in all EU languages. Moreover, organisations would welcome more frequent deadlines and a shorter time for re-accreditation. More data is needed on whether some organisations failed to reapply and/or receive the label compared to the previous programming period.

Moreover, recognising learning outcomes (Youthpass) from the volunteering experience is crucial. A suggestion would be to also record the experience in the Europass, and to encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to award ECTS credits for volunteering experiences, such as those undertaken in the framework of the European Solidarity Corps. By recognising learning outcomes, qualifications, professional and life skills, the European Solidarity Corps can effectively contribute to the overarching goals of the European Education Area.

5. Humanitarian Aid Volunteering

The former EU Aid Volunteers programme has been integrated into the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027, with significant changes in its design so that it could fit as a separate strand: the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps. The DEVE Committee is responsible for the assessment of the implementation of the humanitarian strand. The programme is available for young people of 18-35 years old, for a duration as an individual from 2 to 12 months or in teams from 15 to 60 days. The budget for 2023 is set at EUR 6.8 million. The Humanitarian Aid strand registered over 59 000 expressions of interest by July 2023, with the most interested group of young people aged between 18 and 23 years old.

The humanitarian strand is still at an early stage of implementation. In December 2022, grant agreements with the first 11 selected consortia were signed; as of March 2023, the first fully trained volunteers became available and the first deployments on the ground were in June 2023. For these reasons, the strand can only be partially assessed.

The volunteer training process is centralised and managed by the Executive Agency (EACEA). It includes three stages: self-assessment, online training through EU Academy, and a five-day in-person training. The allocation of places in the training courses process is not confined to a specific timeframe, but the unexpected amount of applications received now allows only the “fast applicants” to access the in-person training. The inadequacy of the budget compared to the interest limits the number of spots for the in-person trainings, causing a waiting time between the online and in-person trainings of up to 6 months, hence delaying deployments.

Furthermore, around two thirds of the selected projects for 2023 for the humanitarian strand are development-centred. This situation has been the same already in the predecessor programme managed by DG ECHO. There is a need for a more balanced humanitarian-centred approach for future selections.

6. Further considerations and recommendation

6.1. Visibility

As any new EU self-standing programmes, the European Solidarity Corps faces visibility issues. There are many misconceptions and a need for clarity among potential participants. The programme is being confused with Erasmus+ and other programmes. Moreover, the differences between the programme and other voluntary schemes are often unclear.

Despite the original shortcomings with its implementation, the programme has registered a high demand by young people, especially for volunteering activities, as these projects have fully absorbed the budget.

After two years of the programme running, the abilities of the programme to support young people in their activities could be improved. The higher demand is directed towards long-term volunteering activities, which are more costly, while short-term (solidarity projects) activities attract less interest.

Improving promotion and communication about the programme and its added benefits is needed, for example, through targeted national campaigns for European Solidarity Corps, the self-standing programme and its activities, such as volunteering and solidarity projects, in order to achieve a wide recognition as in the Erasmus+ instance.

Visibility for short-term activities should be enhanced and endorsed in cooperation with the EC, NAs and volunteering organisations.

A way towards greater visibility would be to make 2025 the European Year of Volunteers, as suggested during the Conference on the Future of Europe and by various organisations. This initiative would strengthen the focus on volunteering, active civic engagement, and raise awareness about the programme.

6.2. Budget

The European Solidarity Corps is still a new programme. With a dedicated budget of over €1 billion for the 2021-2027 MFF, it is relatively small compared to the Erasmus+ budget. Despite this, participation in the programme exceeded original expectations, and proper funding is necessary.

The overall budget of 1,033 billion EUR for 2021-2027 has a relatively linear and flat profile. With a maximum of 20% for in-country volunteering, the indicative distribution of the budget shall be 94% for volunteering and solidarity projects and 6% for volunteering under the Humanitarian Aid Corps. These budget lines indications are being met.

The first two years of budget implementation faced several challenges: late adoption of the legal basis for the programme, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian military aggression against Ukraine and following high inflation rates in the EU.

A common request by all NAs, volunteering organisations and other stakeholders was to increase the annual budget, pocket money, and other budgetary expenditures to ensure sufficient finances to manage the programme.

According to the study, only 30% of NAs are satisfied with the overall budget available in their country, while the remaining were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (20%), somewhat dissatisfied (25%) or very dissatisfied (25%). The feedback from wider stakeholders was fairly negative.

Therefore, the most pressing issue is to increase the allocated budget for the programme. It is clear that high demand for more costly long-term activities, rising prices due to inflation and other budgetary aspects of the programme cannot be satisfied within the current programme budget and its flat rates.

In this regard, a review of unit costs for 2023 grants was introduced, which is highly welcome. However, the flat rate trend for the following years still remains an issue. There

needs to be more than the introduced flat rates for organisational support and pocket money, especially in light of rising inflation.

Data available from the first two years of the current programming period shows very high demand and a 100% absorption rate associated with high levels of oversubscription. Even the year 2022, with its top-up of 3 million EUR for European Year of Youth activities, finished with 100% budget execution in commitments. First results on payments can be expected at the end of 2023.

The number of people who can be supported with the available budget is lower than anticipated. This is primarily due to an uneven split between short-term and long-term activities (see 4, 6.1.), given short-term activities (2 weeks to 2 months) cost, on average, about 8 to 10 times less than longer mobilities.

Securing regular funding for label holders for long-term planning purposes would be welcome, as organisations need to have financial security, for example with fix commitments or quotas over several years.

More data is needed on the current funding cap for coordination costs for organisations. Stakeholders have asked for an increase of the current maximum funding limit, to make the programme more appealing to larger organisations and networks.

Moreover, they also recommended that there should be a minimum amount that host organisations pay to their partner/sending organisations, for example to organise preparation, trainings, or other activities.

There is clearly a need for more centralised calls to utilise the potential of European organisations and networks in the programme. These organisations have called for specific centralised grants managed by EACEA for them and their networks to apply for individual volunteering and solidarity projects. Such organisations and networks, which have a pan-European nature, should not be requested to prove their local impact in centralised grant applications.

There are discrepancies among National Agencies in how they handle applications, which further contribute to budgetary problems. More flexibility should also be ensured through National Agencies being able to transfer unused funds, within the limitations imposed by the Financial Regulations.

Overall, it is clear that the programme requires adequate funding to accommodate the large number of participants and enhance its activities and support.

7. Conclusion

After just three years of implementation, focusing on monitoring, highlighting problems and evaluating first outcomes is important. The European Solidarity Corps is a unique European volunteer and solidarity project programme. It is also relatively new, and as such, it experiences a number of shortcomings across several areas.

However, it is too early to evaluate the implementation and performance of the whole 2021-2027 programme period. The upcoming MFF mid-term review is due to be finalised by the

end of 2024 and shall reflect on the above-mentioned problematic areas of the programme and adequately address them while consulting all interested parties.

Towards the next programme period, several new aspects should also be considered, such as a mix and match volunteering option, online/blended volunteering, a more inclusive and flexible and less bureaucratic approach.

The European Solidarity Corps has the potential to become the most successful EU tool for solidarity and volunteering. As such, it will most importantly need a sufficient budget to meet the expectations and demand.

MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027 (2023/2018(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular to Articles 165(4), 166(4) and 214(5) thereof,
- having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the EU in 2010,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme and repealing Regulations (EU) 2018/1475 and (EU) No 375/2014¹,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013² ('Erasmus+'),
- having regard to the Implementation guidelines: Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, published on 29 April 2021,
- having regard to the Council recommendation of 5 April 2022 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union³,
- having regard to the resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Member States meeting within the Council of 5 June 2019 establishing guidelines on the governance of the EU Youth Dialogue – European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027⁴,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 11 December 2019 entitled 'The European Green Deal' (COM(2019)0640),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 March 2020 entitled 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025' (COM(2020)0152),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 1 July 2020 entitled 'European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience' (COM(2020)0274),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 18 September 2020 entitled 'A

¹ OJ L 202, 8.6.2021, p. 32.

² OJ L 189, 28.5.2021, p. 1

³ OJ C 157, 11.4.2022, p. 1.

⁴ OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 1.

Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025' (COM(2020)0565),

- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 entitled 'Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 – Resetting education and training for the digital age' (COM(2020)0624),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (COM(2020)0625),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 November 2011 entitled 'Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027' (COM(2020)0758),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 3 December 2020 on the European democracy action plan (COM(2020)0790),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 4 March 2021 entitled 'The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan' (COM(2021)0102),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 March 2021 entitled 'EU strategy on the rights of the child' (COM(2021)0142),
- having regard to Decision (EU) 2021/2316 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 December 2021 on a European Year of Youth (2022)⁵,
- having regard to Decision (EU) 2023/936 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on a European Year of Skills⁶,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 September 2020 on effective measures to 'green' Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps⁷,
- having regard to its resolution of 10 February 2021 on the impact of COVID-19 on youth and on sport⁸,
- having regard to its resolution of 8 March 2022 on the role of culture, education, media and sport in the fight against racism⁹,
- having regard to its resolution of 6 April 2022 on the implementation of citizenship education actions¹⁰,
- having regard to its resolution of 19 May 2022 on establishing the European Education Area by 2025 – micro-credentials, individual learning accounts and learning for a sustainable environment¹¹,
- having regard to its resolution of 23 June 2022 on the implementation of inclusion

⁵ OJ L 462, 28.12.2021, p. 1.

⁶ OJ L 125, 11.5.2023, p. 1.

⁷ OJ C 385, 22.9.2021, p. 2.

⁸ OJ C 465, 17.11.2021, p. 82.

⁹ OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 15.

¹⁰ OJ C 434, 15.11.2022, p. 31.

¹¹ OJ C 479, 16.12.2022, p. 65.

measures within Erasmus+ 2014-2020¹²,

- having regard to its resolution of 13 September 2022 on the impact of COVID-19 closures of educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people in the EU¹³,
 - having regard to its resolution of 24 November 2022 on the European Year of Youth 2022 legacy¹⁴,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure, as well as Article 1(1)(e) of, and Annex 3 to, the decision of the Conference of Presidents of 12 December 2002 on the procedure for granting authorisation to draw up own-initiative reports,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Development,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A9-0308/2023),
- A. whereas the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) is a self-standing programme designed to open up new opportunities for young people to undertake volunteering activities in solidarity-related areas, as well as to devise and develop solidarity projects;
- B. whereas solidarity activities should present European added value, benefit communities and foster participants' personal, educational, social, civic and professional development; whereas volunteering, both within and beyond the EU, is an enriching experience in a non-formal and informal learning context, while promoting solidarity, European values and equal opportunities;
- C. whereas the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mobility aspect of the programme and delayed several projects; whereas interest in the programme was not affected, which highlighted the programme's potential and proved the importance of young people's engagement on the ground in solidarity activities, including blended volunteering;
- D. whereas the ESC provided opportunities to refocus activities in order to support people fleeing Ukraine and introduced a special policy activity to contribute to relief and assistance for Ukrainian refugees;
- E. whereas quality and support measures are essential for providing high-quality volunteering activities; whereas these measures face many difficulties; whereas effective and efficient tools are crucial for the programme's implementation;
- F. whereas the visibility of the programme is still relatively low, particularly among regional and local youth organisations; whereas the European Year of Youth in 2022 proved to be a unique opportunity to enhance the programme's visibility; whereas it is therefore necessary to employ sufficient means to promote the programme more widely and create a recognisable brand;
- G. whereas youth work and the education of youth workers are not recognised in all

¹² OJ C 32, 27.1.2023, p. 58.

¹³ OJ C 125, 5.4.2023, p. 44.

¹⁴ OJ C 167, 11.5.2023, p. 83.

Member States, which results in discrepancies in the ESC and in other youth programmes; whereas recognising youth work and the education of youth workers will ensure a minimum degree of harmonisation of young people's realities across the EU and could have a positive impact on the quality of projects in the ESC programme;

- H. whereas the programme intends to provide opportunities for at least 185 755 young people by 2027, having so far awarded funding to almost 43 000 young people of the nearly 80 000 who submitted applications; whereas 85 % of ESC participants apply for long-term volunteering activities, compared to the initial estimate of 65 % for long-term volunteering and 35 % for short-term volunteering;
- I. whereas the ESC has great potential to develop a common European sense of belonging by providing learning opportunities for volunteers to become active citizens, thus contributing to building better societies, fostering cohesion, advancing peace and preventing violence;
- J. whereas one of the main policy priorities is including young people with fewer opportunities; whereas in 2021-2022, a total of 14 060 participants belonged to this category, of whom 8 622 were awarded places as individual volunteers and 5 438 were awarded places on volunteering teams; whereas inclusivity, including in rural areas, should remain a key priority for the programme and more efforts should be devoted to ensuring a geographical balance in the participation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds across the EU; whereas continuous efforts should be made to reach out to youth and provide them with the support they need; whereas, in some cases, the ambiguous use of the term 'inclusion of people with fewer opportunities' can create challenges and affect meaningful implementation;
- K. whereas the last publicly available ESC annual report refers to the 2018-2019 period; whereas the EU Youth Strategy affirms that evidence-based youth policy-making and knowledge building are essential and contribute to the wider public debate; whereas the dashboard created for the Youth Strategy and the datasets available on Eurostat are fragmented, non-comparable and not easily accessible; whereas age-disaggregated and gender-disaggregated data is key for fostering understanding of the needs of different groups of young people; whereas sensitive data about the participation of volunteers should be processed in full compliance with national and European legislative frameworks on privacy and the protection of personal data;
- L. whereas the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps, the humanitarian strand of the ESC, offers young people opportunities to gain and develop skills while fostering innovation, resilience, solidarity and livelihoods across societies globally; whereas principled humanitarianism underpins humanitarian volunteering;
- M. whereas the implementation of the ESC humanitarian strand is still in an early stage, with the first deployments taking place in June 2023, which means it can only be partially assessed;
- N. whereas the high demand for the programme exceeds the financial resources allocated to it, which significantly affects the participation of young people and the number of projects awarded funding;
- O. whereas young migrants and refugees face structural barriers to participation in the

programme, particularly because of their administrative status;

- P. whereas there is no fixed and structured process involving civil society organisations in the design and implementation of the programme;
- Q. whereas the importance of the programme's objectives – namely contributing to social cohesion, fostering understanding among Europeans and preventing conflict through solidarity – has proven the value of the ESC programme as a self-standing programme that merits a larger budget to enable it to live up to its true potential; whereas the overall budget of EUR 1.033 billion for 2021-2027 has a flat-rate profile and cannot cope with the high demand, the rising costs of living, inflation rates and other challenges; whereas budget constraints may damage the quality and inclusivity of the projects and may make the programme less attractive;
1. Reminds the Commission, the Member States, the national agencies (NAs) and volunteering organisations to implement and develop the ESC programme in line with the measures and activities identified for it, while helping to simplify procedures and enhancing visibility;
 2. Calls on the Commission and the NAs to strengthen the regular exchange of best practices, enhance common understanding of programme procedures, deepen cooperation and improve the promotion of the programme; stresses that all relevant stakeholders, including at local and regional levels, should be involved in regular consultation on matters falling within their competence; stresses the importance of ensuring that resources are available to a diverse range of organisations; recommends resuming the practice of regularly convening an advisory council of knowledgeable and experienced stakeholders, including youth organisations, coordinated by the ESC Resource Centre;
 3. Urges the Commission, the Member States, the NAs and engaged organisations to raise awareness about the programme and its individual strands, to further build its brand and to reach out to more youth organisations and young people, particularly the most disadvantaged in society, including those with disabilities and with fewer opportunities; calls on the Commission to provide NAs with expertise and guidance to enable them to promote the programme; underlines that effective communication, targeted support measures, regular monitoring and reporting play an important role in this regard; highlights that increased communication and greater awareness about the programme must be complemented by an increased budget to cover new applicants and avoid a low success rate;
 4. Calls on the NAs to develop and implement more tailored communication activities to reach out to young people, while ensuring that they are understandable and accessible, to utilise the potential of youth organisations, particularly those led by and addressing young people with fewer opportunities, and to increase the support they provide to applicants; stresses the importance of setting up an information campaign specifically targeting this audience to create more awareness and of designing compulsory training programmes appropriately;
 5. Believes that the programme's upcoming 10th anniversary in 2026 and the possibility of designating 2025 the European Year of Volunteers should further improve the visibility of volunteering and of opportunities for active youth engagement, as creating a Year of

Volunteers is particularly important following the multiple crises that Europe has been through, during which volunteers and their work were immensely valuable;

6. Notes that solidarity projects attract less interest and are less visible, resulting in uneven budget distribution; calls on the Commission, the NAs and volunteering organisations to promote short-term activities;
7. Notes that the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the programme should be more resilient in anticipation of force majeure; notes that young people's needs and social trends are changing; invites the Commission to explore new volunteering formats for the next programming period, such as part-time or blended volunteering, and to provide participants and organisations with a sufficient budget; emphasises that these formats may be used as a valuable complement to physical mobility in specific situations, but do not provide the same quality of experience and benefits and are not a substitute for meaningful interaction on the ground;
8. Believes that in-country activities are relevant for young people with fewer opportunities; calls on the Commission to lower the age limit and the mandatory minimum number of five participants per solidarity project for in-country activities in the next programming period, following the example of Erasmus+ youth participation activities;
9. Urges the Commission and the Member States to strengthen the European civic mobility or transnational volunteering capabilities of the ESC, thereby acting as a driving force for cooperation and recognition between national volunteering schemes or civic services that offer European mobility experiences;
10. Recognises that supporting organisations are crucial for preparing volunteers, but notes that their role remains unclear; calls on the Commission to recognise and strengthen the specific supporting role of participating organisations, providing them with financial incentives and making their involvement mandatory in volunteering actions;
11. Believes that supporting organisations should have the option of conducting preparatory seminars for their volunteers themselves, and that organisations should be able to choose whether their volunteers take part in seminars organised by themselves or by NAs; underlines the importance of proper training for volunteers who have committed to work with vulnerable people, particularly children; highlights the need to facilitate the administrative procedures, in particular for smaller organisations and organisations that have not yet dealt with European programmes; calls on the Commission to issue further detailed guidance and technical assistance for applicants, in order to avoid discouraging organisations from engaging with the programme;
12. Welcomes the programme's inclusive objectives and the implementation guidelines for its inclusion and diversity strategy; urges the Commission and the Member States to implement the strategy with the utmost care and attention, in particular to support organisations in reaching out to more participants with fewer opportunities, and to monitor its implementation carefully; calls on the Commission and the NAs to strengthen their support to applicants and to develop mechanisms and tools to ensure the effective and meaningful inclusion of people with fewer opportunities, in particular by facilitating networking between organisations working with these groups and by offering training and language courses, insurance, administrative and post-activity

support to participants;

13. Calls on the Commission to consider adopting a more flexible approach to individual volunteering, enabling participants to mix and match countries, areas of activity and experiences; notes the inadequacy of the current search and match tools on the platform, which do not allow it to use its potential sufficiently;
14. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to include specific initiatives for EU volunteers to contribute to the post-war rebuilding of Ukraine;
15. Urges the Commission to ensure that the digital tools and systems currently used to manage and implement the programme are working properly and to their full potential and invites it to tackle, without delay, the persistent serious issues with the ESC IT tools, which are a significant obstacle not only to the participation of smaller organisations and of young people with fewer opportunities, but also to the participation of all kinds of beneficiaries; calls on the Commission to simplify the process for the IT tools and make it accessible to all groups and more user-friendly, and to test IT tools on a sufficiently large scale before they are rolled out further; notes that Erasmus+ and other EU-funded programmes have encountered similar issues with IT tools;
16. Insists that volunteering within the ESC must include learning and training components; notes that a very limited number of actions have dealt directly with citizenship education; calls for volunteers' knowledge of the European Union to be enhanced, including through a module on European citizenship, which should be taken as a training course before or in parallel to the solidarity experience, in order to reinforce the European added value of the programme; calls on the Commission to deepen the solidarity experience by encouraging visits by volunteers to sites of memory in the host country, particularly to sites of special significance for the history of the EU;
17. Urges the Commission to improve the quality and quantity of online linguistic support for participants, to integrate better sorting and filtering tools into the placement administration and support system, to simplify and shorten the application process for the new Quality Label, to set more frequent re-accreditation deadlines and to reduce the time and administrative burden involved in re-accreditation;
18. Recalls the importance of data collection and reporting in order to assess and communicate the impact of the programme and make available data on its implementation, while fully respecting the fundamental rights to privacy and the protection of personal data, including data on participants, disaggregated by relevant categories such as age group or gender, and the types of organisations engaging with the programme;
19. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to facilitate the expansion of mutual recognition of learning outcomes from volunteering activities, including soft and professional skills, by registering them in Europass, by encouraging higher and vocational education institutions to award credits for these activities, including under the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS credits) and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET credits) and, where possible, by recording volunteering experiences as digital credentials or micro-credentials; calls for more cooperation with educational institutions in creating these synergies; reiterates that volunteering is not a substitute for traineeships or jobs and

must not be equated with employment;

20. Underlines the need to support the transition of volunteers into the labour market; emphasises, in this context, the need to increase the resources for long-term support and capacity building for vulnerable volunteers;
21. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to increase the recognition of youth work, youth workers' education, and non-formal education in order to harmonise youth workers' realities across the EU;
22. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to introduce a special visa category for ESC participants from non-Schengen countries, as host organisations cannot assist them in acquiring visas;

European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps

23. Emphasises the importance of volunteering in humanitarian aid operations in promoting European values, along with the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, the 'do no harm' approach and based on the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, which provides the framework for EU responses to humanitarian crises; recalls that, as defined in the Grand Bargain, EU volunteering programmes in humanitarian contexts must work in line with the localisation agenda;
24. Welcomes the improvements in comparison with the EU Aid Volunteers initiative, particularly on simplified financial reporting and the duration of the projects available;
25. Welcomes the high number of young people interested in the humanitarian aid strand, with over 42 000 expressions of interests received by May 2023;
26. Calls on the Commission to maintain the importance of adequate training, security and protection of volunteers, which should be subject to regular information sharing and risk assessment, particularly in areas considered to be unstable;
27. Is concerned about the lengthy volunteer selection procedure, in particular with regard to waiting times for mandatory in-person training, which could lead to candidates dropping out and losing interest; stresses that volunteers should be able to complete their mandatory training at the beginning of their deployment so that they can become operational faster; underlines, however, that the selection procedure must be carried out in full respect for the principles of non-discrimination and equality; stresses the need to ensure the efficient selection, training and deployment of volunteers in order to respond faster to local needs and improve support to local organisations; underlines that humanitarian operations require an adequate learning and training phase tailored to the local context, which must be in line with humanitarian aid principles and linked to projects in which volunteers will be involved to the benefit of both volunteers and hosting organisations; emphasises, in this context, the value of local staff and volunteers to ensure the continuity of the work in the organisations; insists that humanitarian volunteers should not replace or duplicate the work of national staff in host organisations or carry out roles that could be filled by local volunteers, but rather strengthen the work of national staff and local volunteers instead;

28. Recognises the need to carefully and properly check the organisations taking part in the programme, both for the safety of participants and the provision of quality skills training; calls on the Commission to allow organisations which were holders of a label certificate under the EU Aid Volunteers initiative, and organisations which are signatories to a framework partnership agreement between NGOs and the Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations to benefit from a simplified procedure for obtaining the Quality Label required by the new programme; takes note of the complexity of the Quality Label application process, in particular for the humanitarian strand and for organisations not familiar with EU funding programmes;
29. Notes that around two thirds of the selected projects for 2023 are development-centred; calls for a more balanced humanitarian-centred approach for future selections; calls on the Commission to consider the possibility of revising the regulation to allow volunteering in safe zones of conflict-affected countries, subject to clear security and safety protocols, appropriate training, background checks or other measures with a view to ensuring volunteers' safety and the fulfilment of the duty of care for volunteers during all stages of the volunteering activity; insists that the deployment of volunteers be focused on pre-disaster preparedness and post-disaster recovery settings, where the conditions are more favourable for access and impact without the risk of negatively affecting the support offered by regular humanitarian staff to the affected populations;

European Solidarity Corps programme budget

30. Calls on the Commission and the Member States, given the unfulfilled demand for the ESC, the increasing requests for solidarity after recurrent crises and the cost-effectiveness of actions to foster peace and prevent conflict, to provide the ESC with an adequate budget that will be able to accommodate increasing interest in the programme, and to allow more flexibility in the budget's allocation between the project strands so that the programme can address unexpected challenges, such as rising inflation and higher living costs; calls, in this regard, for the budget of the ESC to be at least doubled in the next multiannual financial framework (2028-2034);
31. Calls on the Commission to address grant funding delays and suggests creating a centralised platform where grant holders can upload contract amendments and thus avoid delays in project implementation;
32. Asks the Commission to assess options for a more integrated approach to youth activities across EU programmes; calls on the Commission to facilitate the creation of more synergies with other EU programmes, notably Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, and to explore the development of synergies with the European Social Fund and with EU actions on disaster relief;
33. Calls on the Commission to address other budgetary issues, such as discrepancies between NAs in handling applications, by establishing specific centralised grants, managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, for individual volunteering and solidarity projects for European organisations and networks, by recommending a minimum amount to be paid by host organisations to their partner/supporting organisations, by removing or increasing the current funding cap for coordination costs, by adjusting flat rates and lump sums to take into account inflation,

the country where the project is taking place and the social and economic context of potential applicants, and by securing regular funding for quality label holders for long-term financial planning purposes; believes that these measures will help organisations and NAs to provide more opportunities and fulfil the programme's potential;

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34. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the national agencies and youth and volunteering organisations.

ANNEX: LIST OF ENTITIES OR PERSONS FROM WHOM THE RAPPORTEUR HAS RECEIVED INPUT

The following list is drawn up on a purely voluntary basis under the exclusive responsibility of the rapporteur. The rapporteur has received input from the following entities or persons in the preparation of the report, until the adoption thereof in committee:

Entity and/or person
Centre for European Volunteering
Network of European Voluntary Service Organisations
European Youth Forum
Erasmus Student Network
SALTO European Solidarity Corps Resource centre/OeAD
Czech National Agency for International Education and Research
JUGEND für Europa, German National Agency
Gdansk Volunteer Centre
Compagnons Batisseurs
The Ecumenical Diaconal Year Network
COMECE

OPINION OF THE COMMITTEE ON DEVELOPMENT

for the Committee on Culture and Education

on the implementation of the current European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027
(2023/2018(INI))

Rapporteur for opinion (*): Beata Kempa

(*) Associated committee – Rule 57 of the Rules of Procedure

SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Development calls on the Committee on Culture and Education, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution:

- A. whereas the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps, the humanitarian strand of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), offers young people opportunities to gain and develop skills while fostering innovation, resilience, solidarity and livelihoods across societies globally; whereas principled humanitarianism underpins humanitarian volunteering;
- B. whereas the implementation of the ESC humanitarian strand is still in an early stage, with the first deployments expected in June 2023, which means it can only be partially assessed;
 - 1. Emphasises the importance of volunteering in humanitarian aid operations in promoting European values, along with the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, the ‘do no harm’ approach and based on the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, which provides the framework for EU responses to humanitarian crises; recalls that, as defined in the Grand Bargain, EU volunteering programmes in humanitarian contexts must work in line with the localisation agenda;
 - 2. Welcomes the improvements in comparison with the EU Aid Volunteers initiative, particularly on simplified financial reporting and the duration of the projects available;
 - 3. Welcomes the high number of young people interested in the humanitarian aid strand, with over 42 000 expressions of interests received by May 2023; strongly supports the efforts to increase engagement, as effectively as possible, among vulnerable young people, with particular attention to the most disadvantaged in society, including those with disabilities and with fewer opportunities; calls for concrete action to ensure these young people are included in a meaningful way, in particular by offering training and language courses, insurance, administrative and post-activity support to participants, as

well as the validation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through their European Solidarity Corps experience; stresses, in this regard, the importance of targeted communication campaigns to create more awareness and the appropriate design of compulsory training programmes, including capacity building, in order to reinforce their impact and the subsequent placements, making sure that both are accessible to all citizens; underlines the need to support the facilitation of networking between organisations working with vulnerable young people and participating organisations under the European Solidarity Corps, as well as the transition of volunteers into the labour market; emphasises, in this context, the need to increase the resources for long-term support and capacity building when engaging vulnerable volunteers;

4. Notes that the last publicly available ESC annual report refers to the 2018-2019 period; recalls the importance of data collection and reporting in order to assess and communicate the impact of the programme; encourages the Commission to publish annual reports for the current programme, including but not limited to, gender-disaggregated data on participants and the types of organisations engaging with the programme, also with a view to assessing its inclusivity;
5. Calls on the Commission to maintain the importance of adequate training, security and protection of volunteers, which should be subject to regular information sharing and risk assessment, particularly in areas considered to be unstable;
6. Is concerned about the lengthy volunteer selection procedure, in particular with regard to waiting times for mandatory in-person training, which could lead to candidates dropping out and losing interest; stresses that volunteers should be able to complete their mandatory training at the beginning of their deployment so that they can become operational faster; underlines, however, that the selection procedure must be carried out in full respect for the principles of non-discrimination and equality; stresses the need to ensure the efficient selection, training and deployment of volunteers in order to respond faster to local needs and improve support to local organisations; underlines that humanitarian operations require an adequate learning and training phase tailored to the local context, which must be in line with humanitarian aid principles and linked to projects in which volunteers will be involved to the benefit of both volunteers and hosting organisations; emphasises, in this context, the value of local staff and volunteers to ensure the continuity of the work in the organisations; insists that humanitarian volunteers should not replace or duplicate the work of national staff in host organisations or carry out roles that could be filled by local volunteers, but rather strengthen the work of national staff and local volunteers instead;
7. Recognises the need to carefully and properly check the organisations taking part in the programme, both for the safety of participants and the provision of quality skills training; calls on the Commission to allow organisations which were holders of a label certificate under the EU Aid Volunteers initiative, and organisations which are signatories to a framework partnership agreement (FPA) between NGOs and the Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations to benefit from a simplified procedure for obtaining the Quality Label required by the new programme; takes note of the complexity of the Quality Label application process, in particular for the humanitarian strand and for organisations not familiar with EU funding programmes; underlines the need to facilitate the administrative procedures, in particular for smaller organisations and organisations that

have not yet dealt with European programmes; calls on the Commission to issue further detailed guidance and technical assistance for applicants, in order to avoid discouraging organisations from engaging with the programme;

8. Notes that most applicants are between 19 and 23 years old; is of the opinion that the age limit should be removed to allow more experienced candidates with proven skills and experience in the field of humanitarian aid to participate without significantly affecting youth engagement in humanitarian operations; insists that the initiative should be accessible for any EU citizen or long-term resident of 18 years or over; invites the Commission to re-evaluate the age limit in this regard during the interim evaluation of the programme;
9. Notes that around two thirds of the selected projects for 2023 are development-centred; calls for a more balanced humanitarian-centred approach for future selections; calls on the Commission to consider the possibility of revising the regulation to allow volunteering in safe zones of conflict-affected countries, subject to clear security and safety protocols, appropriate training, background checks or other measures with a view to ensuring volunteers' safety and the fulfilment of the duty of care for volunteers during all stages of the volunteering activity; insists that the deployment of volunteers be focused on pre-disaster preparedness and post-disaster recovery settings, where the conditions are more favourable for access and impact without the risk of negatively affecting the support offered by regular humanitarian staff to the affected populations.

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

Date adopted	20.9.2023
Result of final vote	+ : 17 - : 2 0 : 0
Members present for the final vote	Hildegard Bentele, Stéphane Bijoux, Dominique Bilde, Christophe Clergeau, Ryszard Czarnecki, Mónica Silvana González, György Hölvényi, Rasa Juknevičienė, Karsten Lucke, Erik Marquardt, Janina Ochojska, Michèle Rivasi, Miguel Urbán Crespo, Bernhard Zimniok
Substitutes present for the final vote	Frances Fitzgerald, Marlene Mortler, Patrizia Toia, Carlos Zorrinho
Substitutes under Rule 209(7) present for the final vote	Róza Thun und Hohenstein

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

17	+
ECR	Ryszard Czarnecki
PPE	Hildegard Bentele, Frances Fitzgerald, György Hölvényi, Rasa Juknevičienė, Marlene Mortler, Janina Ochojska
Renew	Stéphane Bijoux, Róza Thun und Hohenstein
S&D	Christophe Clergeau, Mónica Silvana González, Karsten Lucke, Patrizia Toia, Carlos Zorrinho
The Left	Miguel Urbán Crespo
Verts/ALE	Erik Marquardt, Michèle Rivasi

2	-
ID	Dominique Bilde, Bernhard Zimniok

0	0

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

Date adopted	24.10.2023
Result of final vote	+ : 22 - : 1 0 : 0
Members present for the final vote	Asim Ademov, Christine Anderson, Andrea Bocskor, Tomasz Frankowski, Hannes Heide, Petra Kammerevert, Niyazi Kizilyürek, Victor Negrescu, Peter Pollák, Diana Riba i Giner, Monica Semedo, Andrey Slabakov, Michaela Šojdrová, Sabine Verheyen, Theodoros Zagorakis, Milan Zver
Substitutes present for the final vote	Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová, Chiara Gemma, Marcel Kolaja, Salima Yenbou
Substitutes under Rule 209(7) present for the final vote	Theresa Bielowski, Isabel García Muñoz, Thomas Rudner

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

22	+
ECR	Chiara Gemma, Andrey Slabakov
NI	Andrea Bocskor
PPE	Asim Ademov, Tomasz Frankowski, Peter Pollák, Michaela Šojdrová, Sabine Verheyen, Theodoros Zagorakis, Milan Zver
Renew	Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová, Monica Semedo, Salima Yenbou
S&D	Theresa Bielowski, Isabel García Muñoz, Hannes Heide, Petra Kammerevert, Victor Negrescu, Thomas Rudner
The Left	Niyazi Kizilyürek
Verts/ALE	Marcel Kolaja, Diana Riba i Giner

1	-
ID	Christine Anderson

0	0

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention