

Towards the European Solidarity Corps: Opportunities and Risks

The ESC evolvement: From the Juncker-initiative to the official launch in 2016

The idea of a European Solidarity Corps was first raised by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, in his State of the Union address “Towards a better Europe” in September 2016:

“Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together. (...) The Commission is proposing today to set up a European Solidarity Corps. Young people across the EU will be able to volunteer their help where it is needed most. (...) By voluntarily joining the European Solidarity Corps, these young people will be able to develop their skills and get not only work but also invaluable human experience. I want this European Solidarity Corps up and running by the end of the year. And by 2020, to see the first 100,000 young Europeans taking part.”

Less than three months after this announcement, the European Solidarity Corps was formally launched. On 7 December 2016 an EC Communication was issued with an accompanying press release. Since then, a website with fact sheets, FAQs and other information has been made available by the EC¹. In this first step it is possible for young people to register as volunteers/participants. They could be selected and invited to join a wide range of projects, such as helping to prevent natural disasters or rebuild afterwards, assisting in centres for asylum seekers, or addressing different social issues in communities. Projects supported by the European Solidarity Corps can last from two to twelve months.²

The main focus in the December-Communication was on providing opportunities for young people to “devote a period of their lives to helping others” and to “put the core EU value of solidarity into practice” with “solidarity-minded activities once they are matched with an organisation or have been accepted as a volunteer”. Practically, it will be possible for young people to engage in volunteering, trainee, apprentice or job placements as European Solidarity Corps activities.

To reflect this, the Corps is divided in two strands: Volunteering and Occupational.

¹ https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en

² Like many other organisations, the European Volunteer Centre CEV has created a dedicated page on the website in order to facilitate information to different stakeholders, especially those in the volunteering sector.

With regards to how it will be financed it is stated that “financial costs linked to cross-border mobility and subsistence abroad will be largely covered by EU support, under already existing structures such as the European Voluntary Service and the Youth Guarantee Scheme.”

Until then there was little information about how the in-country placements will be funded although the EC expresses the intention ‘to explore financing possibilities for the European Solidarity Corps also through shared management programmes’. Whilst it is stated on the one hand that the EC’s intention is to create a single, centralised funding mechanism for ESC. ... “The European Solidarity Corps, in its entirety (volunteering and occupational strands), should be financed through its own budget-line on the basis of a separate legal basis, to be proposed by spring 2017, and possible budgetary adjustments within the existing financial framework. The Commission will make the necessary arrangements in that respect...”

It is also being explained that that in addition to the placements offered with this funding it will be possible, and even encouraged, that different organisations operating in ‘solidarity related sectors’ will be able to offer ESC placements, particularly under the occupational strand, and be able to cover the costs themselves without recourse to EU funds.

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

How the quality of placements will be ensured under the occupation strand of the Corps is currently less clear from the existing information. There is however a fundamental understanding from all stakeholders, including the EC, that this is needed.

The spring consultation: The view of stakeholders

In spring 2017 – with the deadline being the 2 April 2017 – the Commission was consulting stakeholders and the general public to define key priorities and shape the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps. This public consultation built on an initial, targeted consultation of a selection of key stakeholders in late 2016. The questions of the targeted consultation were broad, focussing on the potential and the challenges of creating a European Solidarity Corps³.

One main aspect were opportunities and risks related to this new initiative. In the view of many European civil society networks such as the European Youth Forum and the European Volunteer Centre, opportunities and risks can be grouped in three aspects:

³ The results of the initial targeted consultation are briefly summarised in the Communication "A European Solidarity Corps" [COM(2016) 942 final].

1. Contribution to solidarity actions meeting needs in society.

Opportunity: The vast majority of volunteering happens outside of the support and funding of the EU programmes and needs to be supported by the enabling legal and financial environment. Increased attention to solidarity organisations and volunteering as a result of the ESC should hopefully result in greater recognition and additional support for these activities.

Risk: Not all welfare and social services are provided on a basis of being in solidarity with others - some of it is simply providing services for profit. A variety of actions with identified beneficiary groups eg asylum seekers are motivated by security policies and are not solidarity related. Care must be taken to focus on the organisational and activity aims and not simply the beneficiary group in order to ensure that the ESC members are truly engaging in solidarity related activities.

2. Contribution to employment and employability of young people

Opportunity: A clear link with the implementation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/C 398/01)⁴ will ensure that any placement in either the volunteering or the occupational strand can contribute to the increased employability of young people. The ESC implementation and focus should also ensure a better implementation of the Recommendation.

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

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

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

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

⁴ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>
25 years supporting volunteering in Europe

Positions of the European Volunteer Centre CEV

Within the consultation, the European Volunteer Centre has taken stand and positions within three areas of discussions:

1. Scope and complementarity with existing schemes

- a. All placements should be in support of non-profit solidarity actions to meet identified community needs.
- b. When implementing the ESC, a clear distinction should be made between volunteer placements and trainee and work placements in order to maintain the fundamental differences between traineeships and volunteering i.e whether the primary focus is on the needs of the beneficiaries of the action (the community) - volunteering, or on the training and development needs of the participating ESC member - traineeship.
- c. to make the ESC a success, the Commission should integrate it in a wider policy strategy aiming at creating an enabling environment for solidarity and volunteering in Europe, while avoiding overlapping but rather strengthening successfully operating existing initiatives, such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and the immense efforts contributed by the wide variety of volunteering and solidarity focussed citizens and organisations active in Europe.
- d. Equal consideration for free-time volunteering that can be undertaken alongside work or studies should be taken into account as this is by far the more common form of volunteering and citizen engagement and will enable greater outreach and scope as it will make the ESC accessible to all young people irrespective of their situation. It will make a greater contribution to solidarity in Europe as it involves continued volunteer engagement over a longer period of time than the fixed-term, full time placements such as those provided under the EVS scheme.

2. Placements and support

- a. the vast majority of volunteering and solidarity actions takes place at the local level, meeting local needs, and the European Solidarity Corps should focus on locally based volunteering and jobs rather than primarily on cross-border opportunities that require international mobility.
- b. Participating in hosting ESC members should not add any administrative burden for individuals or participating organisations and should rely as much as possible on the existing and well-established volunteering opportunities and traineeship/employment opportunities already provided by solidarity-focussed organisations.
- c. The volunteering strand should be underpinned by a clear understanding of the principles of quality volunteering such as those outlined in the Policy Agenda for Volun-

teering in Europe (PAVE)⁵ and the European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers.⁶

- d. Host entities for the occupational strand should subscribe to a quality Charter comprising agreed objectives and standards such as those outlined in the European Quality Charter on internship and apprenticeship⁷; guaranteeing mentorship for young people during their placement, adequate payment, health insurance and clear educational objective.
- e. For both strands there should be a clear link with the implementation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/C 398/01)⁸ in order that any placement can contribute to the increased employability of young people.
- f. Funding and support should be made available to national and regional volunteering infrastructure organisations in member states in order to act as multipliers and capacity builders for existing and future ESC hosting entities by informing about the opportunities available, advising on legal frameworks, quality frameworks, providing volunteer mentors etc.

3. Implementation Structure and Budget

- a. Sufficient administrative and financial support should be provided to hosting entities from both strands to cover direct costs of placements but also in terms of knowledge and skills to be able to properly host ESC members. The volunteering infrastructure organisations in Europe should be supported and strengthened to be able to properly contribute to capacity building for host entities in this respect.
- b. Participation in the ESC should not be limited to opportunities funded under the specific EU budget line for ESC but should also include placements made available under other centrally managed EU funds, or those managed by the Member States directly, such as the youth guarantee and ESF. Opportunities for volunteers and trainees acting in frameworks outside of initiatives funded by the EU should also be provided.
- c. Budgets for preparatory and supportive actions should be allocated such as for study on legal frameworks for volunteers and trainees in different member states and for the training of pool of mentors. Making funding available to be able to capitalise on the wealth of experience of older people in Europe to act as volunteer mentors to young ESC members would also develop and encourage a valuable intergenerational aspect to the ESC and solidarity actions in Europe more generally.

⁵ http://www.cev.be/uploads/2015/10/EYV2011Alliance_PAVE_copyfriendly.pdf

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/volunteering_charter_en.pdf

⁷ http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/04/internship_charter_EN.pdf

⁸ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

- d. Civil protection and humanitarian aid cannot be dependent on young people via the European Solidarity Corps. The development of the ESC should not negatively impact on the continued investments in structured civil protection and humanitarian aid in Europe.
- e. Support that businesses already give to NGOs through donations or volunteer time should not be threatened through an encouragement to directly hire young people in the framework of the ESC. Any mechanism that would enable businesses, through the ESC, to implement their own solidarity-focussed programmes therefore bypassing and without reference to existing and potential partner NGOs should be avoided. If businesses have funds available to employ young people directly then they should be given every possibility and incentive to do this but this should be outside the scope of the ESC.
- f. Stakeholders should be regularly involved in the implementation and monitoring of the initiative and the EC should introduce a single focal point for coordination of EU including those provided under the ESC and those in other frameworks and funding programmes such as the Europe for Citizens Programme.

Next steps: The proposal of the Commission and the implementation process to come

Like many other civil society organisations, the European Volunteer Centre has welcomed the proposal for the establishment of a European Solidarity Corps announced by the European Commission on 30th May 2017.

The following elements of the proposal are considered particularly positive:

- ESC will enable in-country placements and offer possibilities for part-time volunteering. This makes the programme more accessible to young people with fewer opportunities and to be responsive to needs for solidarity and support to solutions for common challenges as they occur at the local level.
- The explanation of solidarity activities and the clear distinction between volunteering and occupational placements in terms of focus and primary purposes of each.
- The opportunities offered for European networks to contribute to the development of the ESC through the provision of 'networking activities' for ESC participants and organisations.
- The openness for synergies with existing opportunities offered by volunteering and solidarity focused organisations at the local and member state level.
- That the opportunities for non-EU programme countries to participate in EVS projects will continue after the establishment of the ESC.

CEV will contribute to the process to develop the final legal basis for the ESC and will explore in particular the following aspects of the proposal with EU Policymakers and other concerned stakeholders.

- How does the development of the ESC fit into the wider EU volunteering policy strategy, the strategy for youth and the promotion of intergenerational solidarity?
- How will the ESC contribute to strengthening the volunteering and solidarity / NGO sector that has been so badly impacted on by increased need and demands and reduced budgets and grants from public funds due to austerity measures?
- What are the requirements for organisations offering placements to prove that what they are doing, and what the ESC participant will do, is on the basis of solidarity and not for example profit-making or PR.
- How will the total numbers of placements be divided between Volunteering and Occupational strands? Do they correspond to the split of budget i.e. 80/20?
- How will the quality and sustainability be ensured in the 'Own initiative' projects where an organisation is not required to be involved?
- How it will be possible for recipients of other EU funds to offer ESC placements and opportunities.
- What will be the role of volunteering infrastructure organisations (volunteer centres and support agencies) in ensuring the success of the initiative.

Author

Gabriella Civico is the Director of the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) and initiated the Employee Volunteering European Network (EVEN) in 2013. She has worked closely with CEV since July 2010 in her role as Project Manager for the EYV2011 Alliance until the end of the project in March 2012 when she became CEV Director.

Contact: gabriella.civico@cev.be

Redaktion

BBE-Newsletter für Engagement und Partizipation in Europa

Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (BBE)

Michaelkirchstr. 17/18

10179 Berlin

Tel.: +49 30 62980-114

europa-bbe@b-b-e.de

www.b-b-e.de