



For a better European Solidarity Corps

Position approved by
the Board of the
European Youth Forum



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is the platform of youth organisations in Europe. Representing 104 youth organisations, both National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, we believe youth organisations are the tool through which we empower, encourage, involve, represent, reach out and support young people. The Youth Forum brings together tens of millions of young people from all over Europe, organised in order to represent their common interests.

The Board Position on the European Solidarity Corps lays down the European Youth Forum position on the European Commission's proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC)¹.

The European Youth Forum welcomes the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) and its focus on creating more opportunities for young people to engage in quality volunteering and professional experiences across Europe. As a rare example of fully cross-sectorial youth policy-making, the ESC has the potential to build upon the success of previous programmes such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and increase the capacity of youth organisations and other organisations to provide meaningful experiences to even more young people.

In order to reach the high standards that the European Commission has set for this initiative, the European Youth Forum believes that young people and youth organisations must be involved in the implementation, co-management and monitoring of the ESC at national and EU level from the very beginning.

The following document is the result of several online and face-to-face discussions held with Member Organisations of the European Youth Forum and outlines its main political demands towards the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union for the development of this new programme. The Youth Forum's main claims for a better ESC include:

- ✓ Involvement of youth organisations in the co-design and joint monitoring
- ✓ Ensuring the inclusivity and accessibility of placements for all young people
- ✓ Facilitating the participation of European Non-Governmental Youth Organisations
- ✓ Inclusion of the non-EU Erasmus+ Programme and Partner Countries
- ✓ Developing a more coordinated approach to volunteering policy in Europe
- ✓ Limit volunteering placements to non-profit organisations, foundations and social enterprises and specific rules for occupational placements
- ✓ Ensuring that the future ESC as well as Erasmus+ link with the next EU Youth Strategy

ON THE ESC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The European Youth Forum welcomes this new initiative and its focus on creating more opportunities for young people to engage in quality volunteering and professional experiences across Europe and increase the capacity of youth organisations and other organisations to provide these meaningful experiences. The proposal highlights the role of young people and youth organisations in the promotion and defence of European values, the role of volunteering in strengthening our communities and in the personal and professional growth of young people. This initiative is also a welcomed but rare example of fully cross-sectorial youth policy-making. Following its announcement by the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, the proposal was further developed and funded with the involvement of several Commissioners and Directorate Generals². Unfortunately, essential stakeholders, in particular young people and youth organisations were not sufficiently involved during the first phase. Therefore, for the next steps to be successful and in line with the European Youth Forum Quality Standards for Youth Policy³, the process needs to be both cross-sectorial and participatory.

The European Youth Forum appreciates that the proposal aims to provide different paths for young people to engage in the programme. The European Youth Forum sees the ESC as a great opportunity to rethink the European Volunteering Service (EVS), to build upon its successes and to make sure that more young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – have access to quality volunteering experiences across Europe.

Nevertheless, by trying to be accessible to a very broad range of organisations, the current proposal raises several questions regarding the kind of placements that can and will be provided to young people and how to make sure that all those placements contribute to the core goals of the ESC of promoting the engagement of young people and organisations in the solidarity sector, strengthening cohesion and solidarity in Europe, supporting communities and responding to societal challenges.

Lastly, the ESC does not sufficiently strengthen volunteering and employment policy coordination at European level and does not give enough guarantees to ensure the quality of the placements, especially the occupational placements.

ON INCLUSION OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN THE ESC

As a new youth initiative, the European Youth Forum believes it is fundamental that young people and youth organisations should be involved in the implementation, co-management and monitoring of the ESC at national and EU level. While the European Youth Forum recognises the expertise of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action National Agencies and welcomes the choice of not creating a new structure to manage the ESC, we strongly believe that young people and their representatives should have an effective say on any youth related policy or programme.

The European Youth Forum also believes that, due to the wide scope of the ESC, all relevant stakeholders (including trade unions and other social partners) should be involved in the management of the new programme in order to ensure its success. Without using the expertise of youth organisations and other key partners, the ESC will not be able to achieve the goal of providing quality placements to 100,000 young people by 2020. This is particularly true in the case of occupational placements since the Erasmus+ Youth in Action National Agencies have not been responsible for this kind of placements before.



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The European Youth Forum recommends:

✔ **Provide the ESC with a more focused orientation for solidarity activities** The legal base should include a less expansive and more concrete definition of which solidarity-related areas is possible to have an ESC placement. Narrowing it down would help young people and participant organisations better understand the aims and objectives of the new programme and ensure that the proposed placements are of quality and in line with said objectives. Youth work needs to be included in the list of solidarity activities.

✔ **Clearer and broader definition of volunteering** The fundamental differences between a volunteering and an occupational placement must be clearly distinguished. The diversity of volunteering in Europe (i.e. the difference between full-time, part-time and free-time volunteering) must also be reflected in the regulation.

✔ **Develop a more coordinated approach to volunteering policy in Europe** The EU should focus on developing, supporting and maintaining proper inter-service and inter-institutional coordination regarding volunteering in Europe. It should ensure that the rights of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations are recognised and respected and that the adoption of restrictive legislation that would create barriers to volunteering and volunteer-involving organisations is avoided.

✔ **Reduction of the minimum age for access to ESC and of the minimum duration of placements** In the case of volunteering solidarity placements and solidarity projects and done with the sufficient legal guarantees, the age limit to access the ESC should be lowered to 16 years in order to reflect the reality of volunteering on the ground as well as open up new opportunities for more young people to engage in volunteering. For volunteering team placements, placements should be of minimum 1 week in order to allow for greater flexibility of formats and events to be organised under this category.

The European Youth Forum recommends:

✔ **Involvement of youth organisations in the co-design and joint monitoring of ESC** The European Youth Forum should be included as permanent observer without voting rights in the Programme Committee responsible for the management of the ESC. Its presence needs to be laid out in the rules of procedures of the relevant Committee. At the national level, the bodies in charge of implementing the programme should include representatives from the country's National Youth Council in their governing structures and evaluation processes. Representatives from social partners such as trade unions should as well be given a role in the governance of the ESC as well, particularly where occupational placements are concerned.

✔ **Qualitative Criteria and Impact Measurement for assessing the ESC** Youth organisations should also be involved in the monitoring process and criteria for the success of the programme should include qualitative data (such as participant feedback) as well as an impact assessment of the ESC sponsored projects.

✔ **Youth friendly evaluation mechanisms for young people who benefited from the ESC** Participants should be allowed to publicly rate their experiences on the online platform and provide anonymous complaints through the system. This feedback should be used in the periodical re-assessments of the hosting organisation's ESC accreditation.

ON THE OCCUPATIONAL AND VOLUNTEERING PLACEMENTS

The European Youth Forum sees the diversity of the activities of the ESC as one of the main strengths of the current proposal, particularly the possibility of doing either an in-country or cross-border placement. This will provide more flexibility for both participating organisations and participants to engage in activities with a strong local dimension and open the possibility for young people who do not have the possibility to travel abroad to fully take part in the ESC. The European Youth Forum also welcomes the possibility for young people to launch their own projects and ideas as a “solidarity project”, building upon the great experience of a similar action of the former Youth in Action programme.

The European Youth Forum believes that the possibility of providing traineeships and job offers under the ESC could result in positive outcomes for young people. However, the current proposal lacks coherence and needs major changes in order to deliver on its promises. As it stands, the current proposal creates unnecessary confusion between two distinct realities (i.e. volunteering and work) and creates a potential risk of quality jobs being replaced by volunteers. Furthermore quality measures of the ESC should be reinforced, particularly for the case of occupational placements.

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The European Youth Forum recommends:

- ✓ **Clearer definition of a quality offer under the ESC** A clear definition should be included on what a quality offer under the ESC means and entails in terms of volunteering, interns' rights⁴ and employment rights⁵, access to social protection, minimum income, stability, employment protection and mental and physical health.
- ✓ **Volunteering placements limited to non-profit organisations, foundations and social enterprises** In order to prevent replacement of quality jobs by volunteers, the possibility of offering volunteering placements should be restricted to non-profit organisations, foundations and social enterprises that received the ESC quality label.
- ✓ **Implementation of different evaluation frameworks for the ESC quality label** Two different procedures for the ESC quality label should be put in place, one for volunteering placements providers and another for occupational placements providers, according to the type of organisation and the kind of placements the organisation is aiming at providing under the ESC. Similar to EVS, organisations should have the possibility to, at later stage, make changes to their ESC accreditation and those who previously received an accreditation from another EU programme (such as EVS) should have access to a simplified procedure. For the occupational label, involvement of social partners, Public Employment Services and the EURES⁶ network is recommended.
- ✓ **Specific rules for occupational placements** Occupational placements under the ESC should have specific rules in terms of quality learning objectives for trainees as well as in terms of how many placements an organisation can simultaneously host over a certain period of time to prevent the replacement of a effective work placement by a precarious job position.
- ✓ **Ensure synergy between the ESC Certificate and other existing EU certification** The ESC certificate should be made fully compatible with Europass and Youth Pass and be set up in accordance with national developments regarding the implementation of the 2012 Recommendation on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning.

ON THE ACCESSIBILITY OF ESC AND SUPPORT PROVIDED TO ESC PARTICIPANTS

The European Youth Forum is pleased to see that the ESC has a clear focus on simplification of administrative procedures, making sure that the programme is as accessible as possible. As an organisation that believes access to quality volunteering and quality employment opportunities are rights not privileges, the European Youth Forum also welcomes this focus and the intention to reach out to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Regrettably, the European Youth Forum also believes that the measures included in the proposal are insufficient to ensure that all participants have an equal chance in accessing and benefiting from the ESC to the fullest extent.

As demonstrated by the EVS experience, support provided by a participating organisation before, during and after the placement was a core element of the success of the programme. Such support is particularly necessary for those participants coming from more disadvantaged backgrounds, as it helps them in overcoming additional barriers and obstacles they may experience. The European Youth thus considers that simply providing online training before a placement is insufficient in order to guarantee a successful experience and does not replace EVS sending organisations' role in preparing and supporting the participant before, during and after their placement.

The European Youth Forum also believes that the overreliance on the online platform for registration and for selection of participants not only fails to adequately ensure the quality and equity of the selection and follow up process, but it may potentially hinder vulnerable young people's chances to participate in the programme. Access to the online platform might not be available to everyone, and the platform itself might not be accessible for all. As it stands, the selection process is mostly passive (i.e. participants need to wait to be contacted by accredited organisations) and opaque (i.e. no feedback is given to participant if not chosen) which is disempowering and creates an unbalanced relationship between participants and organisations. Without systems in place to ensure that the selection process is equitable, open and non-discriminatory, we create a risk of creating an opportunity gap where beneficiaries are the ones who need these opportunities the least while leaving disadvantaged young people with a narrower access to the ESC and in the end, with even less opportunities.



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The European Youth Forum recommends:

- ✔ **Complement online training with offline pre-, during and post- placement preparation provided by youth organisations** Face-to-face support and preparation for young people before, during and after their placement should be provided. Youth organisations, with their expertise, should be the ones providing such support. Pre-departure training should be available to all participants and not only those in a cross-country placement. Post-placement support for volunteering placements should also prioritise the continuous civic engagement of the ESC participant in their community, guiding them towards local organisations or projects to engage with after the placement.
- ✔ **Specific financial opportunities for youth organisations to provide support and training for ESC participants** Specific funding should be allocated for youth organisations to provide seminars or workshops in tandem with other organisations and the corresponding Youth Erasmus+ National Agency to prepare ESC participants before and after their placements.
- ✔ **Involvement of youth organisations in the development of ESC training and support materials** Youth organisations and other organisations should be involved in the development and evaluation of the online and offline learning and pedagogical resources created by the ESC Resource Centre as well as in the development of the ESC certificate.
- ✔ **Ensuring the inclusivity and accessibility of ESC placements for all young people** The ESC should build upon the experience of EVS in creating the conditions for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disabilities to fully participate in the programme. On top of the financial support for participants and hosting organisations, practices from EVS such as advanced planned visits, reinforced mentorship and covering exceptional costs should be kept and expanded upon. The website should be built according to the standards established by the 2016 EU Web Accessibility Directive. This should be coupled with additional measures to prevent discrimination during the selection process and the ESC placement based on age, gender, religion or belief, ethnic origin, colour of skin, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, physical appearance, health status, social origin, language, economic status, refugee/asylum seeker status, statelessness, or other relevant status.
- ✔ **Making the online portal more youth-friendly and transparent** The ESC portal should be a useful tool for both participants and organisations alike. Participants should have access to information on which organisations are viewing their profiles and other information on ESC accredited organisations (i.e. latest placements, website, contact person, etc.).
- ✔ **Creation of an easy to use Programme Guideline for ESC** The ESC Programme Guideline should be concise and easy to use by young people and organisations that are interested in joining or would like to know more about the ESC. A FAQ and an online indexed version of the Programme Guideline should be included in the Learning Resources of the ESC online dashboard.

ON FUNDING

The European Youth Forum welcomes the announcement of new investment in youth and the increased possibilities for youth organisations to gather more funding for their initiatives such as the “solidarity projects” and the “networking activities”. The European Youth Forum also fully supports that the majority of the funding (80%) of the ESC goes towards supporting volunteering opportunities.

Nevertheless, the European Youth Forum remains concerned that these changes were achieved largely through the reallocation of EVS budget from Erasmus+ from 2018 onwards (until 2020, within the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)). From the 342.76 million€ allocated to the programme, almost 58% (around 197.7 million €) will come from Erasmus+. The vast majority of this money will come from EVS (191 million €) with the rest coming from the VET (Vocational Education and Training) part of Erasmus+ (6 million €), other EU programmes (50.5 million €) and the Global Margins for Commitments (86.5 million €).

This questions where the priorities of the Commission are at a time when success rates in other parts of the current Youth Chapter of Erasmus+ are rapidly decreasing and many quality projects go unfunded. The European Youth Forum believes that investing in the ESC budget must not come at the expense of programmes already offering very valuable opportunities to young people, particularly the Erasmus+ programme, which is already underfunded and under pressure from very high demand, as well as the Youth Employment Initiative. The European Youth Forum is also concerned about the potential impact of the ESC on the upcoming negotiations of the next Multiannual Financial Framework as well as on the Erasmus+ successor programme.



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The European Youth Forum recommends:

- ✔ **Allowing strategic actions and cooperation projects to be funded as a networking activity**
The ESC should support strategic partnership developments in the solidarity sector. The new networking activities should be conceived as a way for youth organisations and other ESC participating organisations to strengthen their partnerships on strategically relevant projects in the field of solidarity. Projects supported under this action could include a mix of the different activities available under the ESC and should encourage organisations to propose creative and innovative approaches.
- ✔ **Simplified budgetary rules and deadlines for solidarity projects**
Simplified application procedures and open deadlines should be introduced for solidarity projects with budgets under €5000.
- ✔ **Facilitate the participation of European Non-Governmental Youth Organisations in the ESC**
Grant requests for placements organised by Europe-wide or international organisations should be submitted to and managed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission.
- ✔ **Reinvest in the Youth Chapter of Erasmus+**
Extra funding is needed to ensure that 10% of the Erasmus+ budget remains invested in non-formal education and youth work activities as initially decided by the co-legislator. This part of the Erasmus+ is particularly underfunded compared to other sectors and additional resources are needed to continue supporting quality projects carried out by youth organisations.
- ✔ **Limit the access to funding for volunteer placements to youth organisations and other civil society organisations**
In order to ensure that resources previously earmarked for youth under Erasmus+ will still be accessible under the ESC, funding opportunities for volunteering placements should be restricted to accredited youth organisations and other youth related civil society organisations.
- ✔ **Allocate ESC budget annually according to demand for different activities**
ESC budget should be allocated following the needs and demands of beneficiaries for the different activities offered by the programme. Therefore, the budget allocation within the Annual Work Programmes of the ESC should be defined on the basis of the needs and demands of beneficiaries.
- ✔ **Ensure the compatibility of the ESC with the upcoming Erasmus+ Successor Programme**
The existence of the ESC and its continuation should not be detrimental to the Erasmus+ successor programme and, particularly, on the non-formal education and informal learning dimension of the programme.
- ✔ **Ensure that the future ESC as well as Erasmus+ link with the next EU Youth Strategy**
On the one side, the future ESC as well as the Erasmus+ programme should be seen as tools to achieve the successful implementation of the next framework for European cooperation in the youth field after 2018, also called EU Youth Strategy. On the other side, the EU Youth Strategy should become a supportive and complementary policy framework for these initiatives regarding in particular volunteering, employment, mobility, intercultural-, non-formal and informal learning of young people.

ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION OF ESC

The European Youth Forum believes that every person has the right to travel, volunteer and work anywhere in Europe and that Europe, as an entity, should not remain confined to the borders of the European Union. This is why the European Youth Forum regrets the decision of the European Commission to limit the participation of young people who are national or legally residing in EU Member States. While young people from non-EU Erasmus+ Programme and Partner Countries will continue to have the possibility to engage in cross-EU volunteering projects through Erasmus+, they will need to wait for a bilateral agreement between the EU and their home countries to enjoy the ESC in its fullest extent, creating an unnecessary opportunity gap between these two groups of young people.



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The European Youth Forum recommends:

- ✔ **Inclusion of the non-EU Erasmus+ Programme and Partner Countries into the ESC**
The ESC should include the non-EU Erasmus+ Programme Countries as well as countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership from its start as from January 2018 in order to promote equality of opportunities between young people from EU and non-EU countries.
- ✔ **Facilitate the participation of third country nationals and legal residents in the EU in the ESC**
Specific financial and legal support should be provided for ESC placements and projects involving third country nationals or legal residents in the EU, young people from Erasmus+ Programme and Partner Countries as well as young refugees. This support could also include the development of a special visa category for ESC participants with fast-track, free of charge visa procedure.

1. Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps and amending Regulations (EU) No 1288/2013, (EU) No 1293/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1305/2013, (EU) No 1306/2013 and Decision No 1313/2013/EU
2. Mainly Commissioner Navracsics (DG EAC), Commissioner Oettinger (DG BUDGET) and Commissioner Thyssen (DG EMP) with also the involvement of DG HOME, DG SANTE, DG ENVI/AGRI and DG REGIO.
3. <http://www.youthforum.org/8-standards/>
4. Based on the European Quality Charter on internships and apprenticeships of the European Youth Forum - http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2013/10/0595-10_European_Quality_Charter_Internships_Apprenticeships_FINAL.pdf
5. Based on the 2013 YFJ Policy Paper on Quality Employment - http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/06/0166-13_PP_Employment_Final1.pdf
6. The European Job Mobility Portal
7. DIRECTIVE (EU) 2016/2102 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies

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