

Feedback on the new European Solidarity Corps programme

The Network of European Voluntary Service Organisations has been working with the European Voluntary Service Programmes for years, previously the European Voluntary Service and from the beginning the European Solidarity Corps.

We have followed the launch phase of the new programme with great attention and describe here the challenges we have faced and our proposals for change. Feedback has been received both from large coordinating organisations and from organisations working as host projects with 1-2 volunteers.

Programme launch and application deadlines

The programme guidelines were published on 15 April and a deadline of 28 May was set for applications.

This short deadline posed a major difficulty for applicant organisations, especially as important information was missing. This was apparently not made available to the National Agencies in time by the European Commission. We saw a great effort by the National Agencies in the different countries to support the applicant organisations in the best possible way. However, the programme in its modified form was also completely new for the National Agencies and the implementation was sometimes overwhelming. The even earlier application deadlines chosen by some National Agencies themselves made the situation more difficult.

Some National Agencies opted for one application deadline this year, others for two. We would like to see two application deadlines in all countries in the future to give more organisations the opportunity to participate. One of the two application deadlines should be in February so that organisations can plan relatively early. At the same time, it should also be possible to apply for both application deadlines. This would make it possible to flexibly accept more volunteers if needed.

It would be a great wish to make the distribution of the budgets to the individual application deadlines and also the distribution of points in the applications transparent. If the providers knew how this distribution is organised and how the points are distributed, they could adjust to it and work accordingly. This would also contribute to better planning and preparation of the organisations.

Application and approval procedure, visas

Due to the delayed start of the programme, the funding decisions will be sent out late, which poses a challenge for small and large organisations in planning and designing the selection and preparation phase.

The deployment of volunteers requires a considerable amount of organisational lead time, the placement sites need planning security - even if the volunteers only take on supplementary, supportive tasks - and the pedagogical support, to which particular importance is attached in the new application forms, must also be planned with regard to the deployment of staff, among other things.

It was announced that a start of the programme on 01.09.2021 is possible with applications from the May deadline. As some of the National Agencies had not yet sent the contracts to the organisations, this date could not be met in many countries.

One of the consequences of starting the ESC from 1.9. was that many volunteers started their ESC without having received their CIGNA insurance confirmation in time.

The resulting postponement of the start of the programme was an additional challenge for many organisations and volunteers, especially as the costs (rent, preparation seminar etc.) had already been incurred. Volunteers who could not wait any longer have changed project/organisation to a project already accredited in 2020. We ask that these be reimbursed to the organisations.

Some national agencies and also Salto are so overloaded that it takes at least 4 months to process the Quality Label. Without a positive decision, the organisations cannot send volunteers. The associated planning uncertainty causes immense problems for the organisations on the one hand, and on the other hand it confronts interested young people with the question of whether they hope to be able to start a voluntary service with the organisation (in time).

This planning uncertainty has consequences for travel costs, housing in the home and host countries, visas and contracts, among other things. Especially in Eastern European countries, the basis for motivating young people to participate in the programme is missing. Therefore, processing deadlines should be respected and appropriate staff should be employed in order to meet the requests of young people and organisations.

One of the consequences of late responses to applications is that visas can no longer be applied for on time. The promise in the Guideline that the National Agencies will support the organisations with visa applications does not help either. The consequence is that volunteers can no longer be sent to countries outside the EU. In this way, the programme no longer lives up to the claim of solidarity expressed in its name with people and societies outside the EU. Young people, for example, should be able to participate in the ESC. Another challenge in applying for visas is that many embassies are not aware of the ESC. This is where the organisations need support. We see this as a task of the European Union through the National Agencies.

Limitation of the funding amount

The determination of a maximum application and funding amount per organisation means that larger organisations in the ESC have no incentive to expand their programme, enter into cooperation with other (e.g. ecological) host organisations, further develop their profile, make their work more professional and ultimately enable more young people to do voluntary service. In addition, the ESC is sometimes uneconomical for organisations due to the maximum funding amount and the subsequent limitation of the number of participants.

This leads to organisations dropping out of the programme or shying away from starting a new one. At the programme level, this can lead to funding not being fully utilised.

We plead for abolishing the maximum funding amount or increasing it to at least 10% of the annual budget of the respective national agency.

Budget

In the new programme, sending organisations have to organise an exit seminar for the volunteers. However, there is no separate budget for this. Practical experience shows that 100€/day/participant would be an appropriate amount of funding to be able to organise a high-quality seminar.

The funding programme does not specify the amount of the lump sum that the host organisation pays to its partner organisation that organises the sending. This often leads to conflicts. We would like to see a fixed amount that is not less than 7% of the budget.

Insurance

It is not clear from the Guideline which insurance will work for the ESC in the next programme round and what exactly is insured. The scheme at the end of the Guideline is not self-explanatory to us. We ask that both the name and the insurance benefits are indicated.

Application forms and guidelines

A concession of the European Commission on the administrative side is the extension of the validity of the Quality Label, which we are grateful for.

Contradictions appear in the applications, such as that coordinating organisations do not yet have to know their host projects at the time of application, which we welcome, but in the financial application, percentages must be given for the various goals of the projects (sustainability, inclusion, digitalisation, etc.). It is not clear how the points for the percentages, which are important for the further procedure, are distributed. More transparency would be very helpful and important in the assessment of the applications.

It would be desirable for the coordinating organisations to be able to present their educational concept for the individual points as an alternative to the information on the projects. The fulfilment of the objectives through the educational concept should be equivalent to the fulfilment of the objectives through information on the projects.

In addition, the ESC should be generally inclusive in its application process and translate the application forms and guidelines into different languages so that they are not only available in English. It makes the application process more difficult for many and is not understandable in a European programme.

Specific questions in the application

Inconsistencies occur in the applications, such as that coordinating organisations do not need to know their host projects at the time of application, which we welcome, but in the financial application percentages for the different objectives (sustainability, inclusion, digitisation, etc.) have to be given. It is therefore important that the coordinating organisations can also present their educational concept for the individual points as an alternative to the information on the projects. The fulfilment of the goals via the educational concept should be equated with the fulfilment of the goals through information for the projects.

We would like the ESC to have a more uniform structure that is similar throughout the EU. As already described in other opinions, it is very difficult to make young people and organisations understand why a programme funded by the EU is implemented so differently in the countries. Especially during the Corona pandemic, this became very clear, also in the distribution of funding. This meets with incomprehension and is not conducive to a positive image of the EU.

We would like to see more clarity and more uniformity here.

Finally, we would like to call for host and sending organisations to be consulted in the planning phase for new programmes, so that their many years of know-how can be incorporated. As in this case with the ESC, it becomes apparent that otherwise regulations and requirements collide with the requirements from the practice of the organisations and the volunteers. This can be avoided through early participation, which ultimately contributes significantly to a successful start of new programmes.

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