

European Solidarity Corps: Ensuring Quality, Impact and Inclusion

Eurodesk Position Paper addressing the European Commission's proposal to the Parliament and the Council for the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps - September 2017

Eurodesk is a network of more than **1000 mobility multipliers in 34 countries** in Europe with the mission to ensure **free access to quality information about European opportunities**. As an official support organisation of the Erasmus+ programme and as content manager and helpdesk of the European Youth Portal, we strongly welcome the priority that has been given to provide more opportunities to young people as part of the Youth Initiative¹.

Eurodesk appreciates the fact that the European Solidarity Corps aims to be both ambitious and complementary to other programmes such as the Erasmus+ programme. From the point of view of youth information providers, such **coherence** will ensure that young people and organisations will get a **clear picture of the opportunities offered** to them and that everyone can find their way to the programme. We welcome the fact that the European Commission has taken on board some of the comments made in regards to inclusion, especially the possibility to do local and short-term placements. However, in our contribution to the public consultation we have also raised the importance of ensuring that the programme is based on quality and equity principles through professional and competent information and support mechanisms. We regret to see that the proposal is not fully covering those aspects whereas they are key to its successful implementation.

Since the launch of the Corps, we have been **answering thousands of enquiries** by young people via our face-to-face and online channels, including the European Youth Portal that hosts the Corps (with an increase of 83%²). This shows that there is a **huge interest** for the programme but also a **strong need for information and guidance** from young people, organisations and by competent and experienced information providers alike. We are concerned that this role is not clearly elaborated in the current legal basis. Although *"Complementarity with existing Union level networks pertinent to the activities under the European Solidarity Corps, such as the European Network of Public Employment Services, EURES and the Eurodesk network, should also be ensured"* is mentioned in the preamble (point 6), no further mentions are made as to how this will be concretely ensured.

Eurodesk concerns are about **making sure all young people are informed about the opportunities offered and that they can benefit from quality placements** (with measures before, during and after the mobility). Eurodesk calls upon the European Institutions to clarify important elements within the legal framework for the European Solidarity Corps. In addition Eurodesk asks the European Parliament and European Council to take into account the following adjustments and clarifications to ensure a qualitative proposal in view of the current negotiation procedures.

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the EESC and CoR «[Investing in Europe's Youth](#)», 7.12.2016.

² Enquiries received per month via the European Youth Portal (europa.eu/youth) "Ask a question" service since June 2016 until June 2017. 83% is the increase between the total number of enquiries received 6 months before the launch of the ESC and the 6 months that followed.

I. Improving governance: no participation without information

Youth mobility is an opportunity that reaches only the very few and the evaluation of the **EU Youth Strategy**³ in 2016 shows that the **challenges identified a decade ago still remain today**. The evaluation refers to challenges such as availability of information, outreach to disadvantaged young people, linguistic support and simplification of application procedures. In addition, the results of a recent Eurodesk Survey shows that **almost 40% of young people believe that the information available on mobility opportunities for young people is limited or non-existent** in their countries⁴. Having access to the right information at the right moment supports a more equal distribution of mobility opportunities. We believe that the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps needs an **innovative and comprehensive approach to information provision** that has high ambitions in reaching young people and especially those from disadvantaged groups.

Present in all Programme Countries, and coordinated at European level by the Eurodesk Brussels Link Office, the **Eurodesk network is ready to offer enquiry answering services, funding information, events and publications about the Corps**. It could also contribute to the animation of the European Solidarity Corps Portal and to related networking activities such as the Alumni Network. Eurodesk has a **long experience** in promoting Erasmus+ for young people and youth workers, especially the European Voluntary Service. It **reached 1,596 000 young people**, answered **295,523 enquiries** and counts **665,365 social media subscribers and followers** in 2016 ([Annual Overview](#) p. 14-15).

The Eurodesk network can be of great added value to the implementation and development of the European Solidarity Corps. Through many years of expertise in youth information and counselling and in supporting professionals working with young people, Eurodesk:

- Is a **specialised information service on mobility**, it has a great know-how in addressing young people who are, most of the time, in transition towards employment and adulthood. Eurodesk has a vast experience in offering them targeted and youth-friendly information, translating complex information into a communication that is easy to access and understand. Eurodesk also provides them with guidance and support in building mobility projects adapted to their needs.
- **Eurodesk services are youth-oriented** and aim to ensure that all young people have access to information around all possible European opportunities (e.g. participation in various bilateral, European and international mobility programmes but also in the EU structured dialogue). This supports a **comprehensive and holistic approach to youth information across Europe**.
- Eurodesk **collaborates closely with National Agencies for Erasmus+** for the purpose of providing information to young people and those who work with them (directly or indirectly)

³ Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU, ICF, 2016

⁴ Eurodesk Survey. Youth information: supporting you in going abroad! 2016. Question: According to you, what's the level of information available on mobility opportunities for young people (such as Erasmus) in your country? Based on 939 answers, from 34 countries (Erasmus+ programme countries), collected from 11 April to 10 September 2017.

about the different parts of the Erasmus+ programme and the opportunities that arise from them.

- Eurodesk manages a **network of more than 1000 multipliers** who are in daily contact with young people including NEETs, and organisations working for and with young people. The multipliers are not-for-profit, located in cities and rural areas and are **open to the general public**. This allows us to reach out broadly to young people at the grassroots level, with a special focus on those that are further away from mobility opportunities.
- The network benefits from a **strong coordination body**, Eurodesk Brussels Link, which ensures coherence within the network, sharing practices and tools, offering training and quality and monitoring processes while being in close relationship with the European Commission.
- The network **shares and carries the values of solidarity** fostered by the ESC. Its aim is to "*raise awareness among young people on learning mobility opportunities and to encourage them to become active citizens*". Beyond mobility, its national Eurodesk centres and multipliers run initiatives related to inclusion, solidarity and active citizenship (see [Eurodesk Awards 2017](#)).
- We are aware that not all young people who have registered on the Portal can be offered a placement through the European Solidarity Corps. Eurodesk **has the experience and competencies allowing its network to search for and suggest alternative options to young people** (in line with Recital 5 of the legal basis). This will contribute to activate young people willing to contribute to their communities while at the same time helping with managing potential frustrations.
- Eurodesk **works in partnership** with different actors at local, national and European level such as specialised information services EURES, Euroguidance, ERYICA, Europass and EYCA, Youth Councils and youth NGOs. Our local partners are essential in reaching out to a wide variety of the youth population, and especially to disadvantaged young people including NEETs. Our established network of multipliers and partners ensures a wide outreach at grassroots level.

Eurodesk calls on the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council to **add a point under the Articles 8 and 16 of the Regulation regarding information, outreach, guidance and support.**

Eurodesk also calls for additional **operating costs** to the Eurodesk network in order to match the new services offered for the Corps, to maintain the quality of its services and to further increase its capacity to reach out and engage young people and organisations in the ESC at national and local level⁵. Today Eurodesk National Centres receive an average annual grant of 56.000 EUR per country (varying from 5.931 to 150.554 EUR). The budget allocated is not matching the political will to ensure that all young people are informed about such opportunities.

⁵ Eurodesk implements "10 Key Principles" when it comes to youth information delivery and answering enquiries; it is for instance about delivering individualised and neutral answers in less than 3 open days. The Eurodesk network monitors its performance through a Quality Catalogue and provides capacity building and training activities to its members.

II. Ensuring quality support

The support provided by Eurodesk' local, national and European offices, from enquires received face-to-face, through the European Youth Portal, social media channels and e-mails, amounts to around **300.000 answers every year**⁶. When comparing the activity on the European Youth Portal six months before and six months after the launch of the European Solidarity Corps, our reports show an **83% increase on the average amount of enquiries received from young people and organisations**. The increase of work, as shown in our trend reports, require a legal framework that sets the ground for a **comprehensive information strategy**, by using best practices learned from other programmes and **empowering specialised youth information providers**, such as Eurodesk.

Eurodesk is also concerned about the proposal of removing the essential managerial component being the **sending organisations**. In our 27 years of experience in supporting young people, we recognise the important role of sending organisations and their very **responsibility of support provision and preparation**. The possibility of having a contact person in your own country, a familiar face that you can turn to in case of sensitive questions or of mediation with host organisations, someone who communicates in your language, is an indispensable security for a young person and their family. **The current framework falls short in addressing the need for pre-departure preparation for all participants**. Limiting the provision to individual cross-border placements and pre-departure trainings to disadvantaged young people, neglects the importance of training provision to all young people. Solidarity activities of different nature may require different types of support, but adequate preparation is always key to a good mobility experience.

According to the Eurodesk Survey , **over 90% of young people perceive personal guidance to be an important feature in preparing for their mobility period abroad**. They rank "coaching and individual guidance", "empathy and active listening" and "support in preparing grant applications" as the three most important aspects of a mobility advisor. The results clearly show the importance of preparatory support and individual connection. The role of information, counselling and support services in providing mobility opportunities is essential. **We believe that removing the structure of the sending organisations without offering an alternative support mechanism, will jeopardize the volunteering experiences of many young people**.

With regards to the envisioned support to be provided through the **Resource Centre**, we acknowledge the importance of the objectives of the centre itself, however we are concerned with the proposed scope of activities and the missed attempt to find more synergies with existing structures. Over the course of three years, 400.000 EUR is allocated to its development and maintenance. In consideration of the ambitions set out for the Centre, we believe this budget is not sufficient to ensure a comprehensive and qualitative tool. We therefore ask for **further clarification** on how the European Commission foresees to cover training activities, training materials, an administrative back-end, communication materials, funding for network activities and certification, all processed through the Resource Centre.

⁶ Eurodesk 2016: https://issuu.com/eurodesk_ebl/docs/eurodesk_2016

Eurodesk calls on the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council to **re-evaluate the support mechanisms provided to young people** and the risk of re-delegating this extensive responsibility. We believe that a **combination of online and face-to-face information**, together with the delivery of **support and guidance services** would better ensure the quality of support provided to the prospective young people participating in the European Solidarity Corps.

In addition, Eurodesk calls for thorough **training** to be provided to National Agencies and youth information providers such as Eurodesk multipliers, who are central in outreaching and engaging *all* young people, as soon as the programme is adopted to make sure the programme is communicated and implemented in a coherent way across Europe.

III. The go-to point for youth information: a comprehensive European Youth Portal

In order to reach out to a vast majority of young people, we have to be innovative in our approach. A good dissemination strategy takes into account the strengths of current platforms and channels and finds synergies that can amplify one's message. The proposal of the legal framework mentions the use of a European Solidarity Corps Portal "*a web-based tool that will provide the online services to the European Solidarity Corps participants and participating organisations.*"⁶ Eurodesk sees a **great potential to make use of the synergies this portal can have with already existing tools such as the European Youth Portal (EYP).**

The EYP is a well-established brand, a platform that started with great ambitions to serve young people with comprehensive information on the many opportunities Europe has to provide. Today the portal supports the European Voluntary Service, the European Solidarity Corps, the European Youth Week and many more EU initiatives. We suggest that the European Commission take on a **strategic and youth-oriented approach aiming at unifying and simplifying the channels created to and for young people.** The EYP has served as a go-to point for young people to find opportunities in a youth friendly and relevant approach. An investment in the European Solidarity Corps database, hosted on the European Youth Portal, represents a great opportunity of completely revamping the Portal as a **single entry point to European information for young people.**

Eurodesk calls to **maintain the ESC Portal on the European Youth Portal** and to take this unique opportunity to modernize the European Youth Portal with the full support of the Eurodesk network and the involvement of youth organisations.

Eurodesk also calls for further **clarifications on the budget** allocated to the ESC Portal (4 million EUR). The current « Ask a question » function should be maintained, further developed and included in the functionalities of the ESC Portal.

IV. A youth-friendly programme: ensuring coherence and consistency in line with the EU Youth Strategy

In view of informing young people and organisations about the opportunities offered by this new programme, we see a **risk in terms of coherence and clarity**. This is especially true for the **European Voluntary Service** as this action will be split into two programmes with two different names and geographic scopes. This will be difficult to explain to the Corps target groups.

Eurodesk also strongly **regrets the decision to restrict the participation in the European Solidarity Corps to the 28 member states**. This creates difficulties in terms of clarity and coherence but also sends a negative political message to Erasmus+ partner countries. For years, young people from the Erasmus+ partner and programme countries have had the great opportunity to strengthen the intercultural fabric of the EU.

By changing the name of the action, the ESC is **not building on the branding** developed around the EVS. Alongside other stakeholders, the Eurodesk network has been disseminating information about the EVS for 20 years with a particular emphasis during the 20th anniversary in 2015. Youth workers and youth organisations know this programme very well. The loss of the EVS name will create a **loss in terms of branding and visibility**.

EVS supports very successfully young people to express their solidarity also beyond the borders of the EU. The European Solidarity Corps as the expression of European solidarity should follow the principle of EVS and aim for projects in **EEA countries, candidate and neighbourhood countries**.

Eurodesk calls on the European institutions to **keep the EVS branding and geographic scope under the Corps**. This will ensure greater visibility and coherence for the programme and ease the work of youth information providers in attracting both organisations and young people in joining the Corps. Therefore, Eurodesk proposes that the **EVS brand is kept as a sub-action of the ESC Programme**.

In line with the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps, the review of the Erasmus+ programme and the discussion of the future Multiannual Financial Framework, we urge the European institutions to be ambitious yet comprehensive in outlining a **sustainable European Youth Strategy for the future**. A youth strategy that recognises the essential role of youth information provision, in a world where the digital era has a significant impact on the social and political developments of our societies; a youth strategy that has a strong financial footing to invest in the EU and that is strongly supported by Member States; and lastly a youth strategy that gives a clear direction, where initiatives developed build on synergies and good practices of its predecessors and allow a more sustainable approach to a youth-friendly Europe.

Eurodesk offers to strongly support the European Commission in designing and implementing the best possible European programme supporting young people, and beyond, supporting a Europe built on shared values and solidarity.