

European Solidarity Corps Programme – new opportunities and challenges for organizations in Western Balkans

The potential for implementation of ESC projects in South Eastern Europe (or the Western Balkans, as the region has been called lately) is determined by the number of accredited organizations in each country. The table below compares the current situation (spring 2020) with the same period three years ago:

Country	Number of accredited organizations (2017)	Number of accredited organizations (2020)
AL	19	16
BA	18	27
ME	3	5
RS	39	36
XK ¹	11	15
HR	63	74
MK	41	59

The table shows that there have not been any major changes in the number of organizations that held a valid Quality Label at the beginning of the last year of the ongoing Programme (except for Bosnia and Herzegovina which has seen a significant increase of exactly 50 percent). However, it is not apparent if they still keep their active accreditation from the EVS Programme or have been granted a new Quality Label from the ESC Programme. The transition of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) as an integral part of Erasmus+ to a separate programme led to some challenges for this study. EVS projects were called Erasmus+ Volunteering projects for a transitional period after the launch of the European Solidarity Corps at the end of 2016, until it became an independent programme in 2018. During this period, the beneficiaries in the Western Balkans region were often confused about the name of the programme to refer to.

In order to address the opportunities and challenges of these organizations, I would initially like to refer to the findings and recommendations of a recent study compiled by the SALTO SEE Resource Center in Ljubljana, Slovenia – *“IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ERASMUS+: YOUTH IN ACTION PROGRAMME IN THE PROGRAMME’S PARTNER COUNTRIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS”*² which aims to serve as a basis for further development of cooperation with Western Balkan partner countries within the new generation of EU youth programmes, including the European Solidarity Corps Programme. It is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including desk research, a survey and focus groups. The collected data used in the study refer only

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

² <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/erasmus-study/>

to the period until 2018 (and therefore only to Erasmus+), but the survey respondents and participants in the focus groups refer to their experience with and expectations of both programmes.

In the Western Balkan partner countries, around 70% of the beneficiaries of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme are youth organisations and NGOs working predominantly with young people. More than a half of them are small organisations or organisations working only with volunteers, and the vast majority of them is to a small or very small extent (under 25%) dependent on the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme.

One of the main findings of the study related to volunteering projects (EVS/ESC) is that these projects have been less demanded by organisations in the Western Balkan partner countries. The main reasons for the comparatively low demand seem to stem from a generally rather low interest and limited capacity of local organizations to host or send volunteers. The focus groups confirmed these challenges, in particular the lack of financial and human resources of many organisations needed for a long-term engagement, while they also highlighted the issue of the long timeframe between accreditation/Quality Label and the actual project implementation. As regards benefits of the programmes, volunteer exchange projects received the lowest scores in the survey. However, organisations run primarily by volunteers still mentioned them as relevant and beneficial. Besides, projects of this type tend to be significantly more successful in receiving grants than others. Accessibility of funding is therefore not perceived as a main obstacle by the beneficiaries.

The conclusion of the study indicates that the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme has become more accessible over the years. However, this does not apply to all types of organisations equally. In fact, the programmes have become increasingly more accessible for organisations with greater resources than for smaller organizations with lesser capacities, which constitute the majority of beneficiaries. To counter this trend, in addition to increasing the success rate of applications, it is highly recommended to simplify the procedures and requirements related to project applications and implementation, and, in particular for the European Solidarity Corps to simplify and shorten the procedures and the timeframe between the Quality Label application and the actual project implementation.

In order to improve the accessibility of the EU youth programmes (including the ESC Programme) for organisations in Western Balkan partner countries, it is recommended to facilitate more networking & partnership-building activities at two levels:

- for organisations at the national and regional (Western Balkan) level, in order to facilitate networking and peer-learning, and
- for organisations involved in the Programme and Western Balkan partner countries to overcome the experienced difficulties in finding suitable partners, especially for Western Balkan organisations that do not belong to international networks.

Furthermore, it would be desirable to introduce specific support measures that would be available within the European Solidarity Corps to support organisations that are already (or are planning to become) active and, most importantly, to reach out to potential new beneficiaries.

There is an environment where youth organizations and the organizations which target young people manage to address only a very small number of young people. Quite often, those are young people who are already involved in non-formal education and volunteering. Unfortunately, those whom the programme would benefit the most often remain without appropriate access to information about the opportunities, as the organizations lack the necessary resources and/or skills to engage them effectively. In addition, the influence of current technological developments and the use of internet, smart phones and social media create new types of role models among young people, while an increasing number of young people become egoistic and interested primarily in the personal profit. On top of this, the programme priorities are changing too frequently because of the evolving problems and needs of the European society. However, organizations find it difficult to respond to these priorities appropriately. They need to change the themes and methodology of their work with young people accordingly

in order to be eligible for funding. Unfortunately, allocating resources to implement the changes affects the quality of projects, which fail to meet real expectations of the young people, support them in their needs, and drive their interest in getting involved.

From my personal experience and observations and according to the opinion of my colleagues from the WB region, organisations face multiple challenges:

There is only one application round for the Balkan window with capped funds, which limits the number of approved projects and organizations that can implement a project. As a result, many organizations are disappointed. The next application round takes place the following year. Organizations are hardly motivated to work on preparations of projects that may be implemented in a year and a half.

The European Commission has introduced a concept of reduced bureaucracy in the application process together with an intention to grant greater amounts of money to the projects. This directly decreases the number of projects and indirectly prioritizes bigger and more experienced organizations, so smaller youth organisations have yet smaller chances to receive support.

The program priorities are often created top-down to address global issues, but are not necessarily based on the real needs of local communities and local NGOs. For example, there is a priority to fight growing unemployment and to improve employability of young people. However, many young people who participate in the program do not mention this as the main motivation for their involvement.

Local, grassroots organizations lack resources, experience, connections and opportunities to be able to plan their specific involvement in the program.

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