

EVS / European Solidarity Corps – experience of young Turks

For young people in Turkey, participating in EVS / European Solidarity Corps (ESC) projects is a way to find a job as well as to gain some status in their respective communities. Since the youth unemployment rate stands at 26.10 %, many young people suffer from severe depression. They think that they are useless. They see that having a university diploma after studying for many years means nothing. They encounter EVS / ESC and they dream about participating in one of the volunteering activities abroad.

However, it is not an easy goal to accomplish as they encounter many challenges. First, a big advantage is to have at least medium-level English skills, alongside a higher education degree. In our experience, many hosting organisations require a certain level of English even before the volunteer joins his or her project. However, most young people do not speak or understand spoken English very well. This is because the education system requires them only to pass tests. They therefore lack practical skills, which causes them to fail in interviews for the volunteering activities.

Second, there are fewer projects than the number of applicants. They must therefore compete with many other candidates for the positions. Most of them are rejected or even do not receive an email about their rejection without being invited for an interview. People should not be surprised to see hundreds of applications from Turkey because there are 17 million young Turks between 18 and 30 years, which is incomparably more than in European countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Czech Republic, etc. From the population perspective, Turkey is like a “China of Europe”.

Those who overcome all the challenges and get a volunteer job, feel as if they have travelled to another planet in the Universe. First they experience a cultural shock. There may not be a huge difference for a Spanish volunteer to engage in a volunteering activity in France, for instance. But there is an enormous cultural difference between Turkey and European countries. So, the Turkish volunteers will have to climb all the steps of Bennett’s Stages of Intercultural Sensitivity – denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In order to create something and work as if it were their own job in their hosting organisation, they need to achieve the integration level, which is an ability to stay true to yourself and your own worldview but also to move in and out of different cultures appropriately and easily. The volunteers should be able to adapt and take on multiple perspectives within the hosting culture with little to no stress to themselves or the people within these different cultures due to an atrophied self-identity.

Another priceless gain from EVS / ESC activities is the acquisition of multiple foreign language skills. The volunteers who already speak English improve their English skills and develop knowledge of the native language of the hosting country. They improve their foreign language skills along with the Bennett’s stages. They learn the language and the culture at the same time. They learn how to order a coffee in the coffee shop, read correctly the facial expression of the old lady waiting at the bus stop, etc.

They find an opportunity for introspection. They examine their thoughts and beliefs. They open their minds with contemplating all the information they receive. They feel more confident in interacting with people in the society. So, the activity they are engaged in fosters their self-growth. They become more aware of social issues and find solutions. They become more active citizens. They feel more European than before. Because feeling European is more unlikely in Turkey, which has been a candidate country devoid of many of the opportunities that EU citizens enjoy.

An improvement in occupational competences is another benefit of the volunteering activities. Volunteers gain work experience. They have office skills, they learn public relations, they have operational experience, they learn how to use hand tools, they develop their digital competences, they learn more about technology and science, etc. They also broaden their perspective of the traditional and contemporary art of the culture they live in. They discover the new World with all their senses. They stimulate their learning functions all the time.

At the end of their volunteering activity, they return as very different individuals – revived, skilled, mature, transformed and experienced in working abroad. Their CVs become so enticing that employers cannot decline their applications. That means that a wide range of attractive job opportunities opens to them. This also means added value for the national economy of the country they choose to live in.

Within the volunteering projects of my two organisations, we have seen many positive stories of the young people. Here are some of them:

- Berfu Yüksel participated in a volunteering activity in Tarrega, Spain, from 2013 to 2014, working with disabled people. Now she works in Zara headquarters in Istanbul.
- Şeyda Yalçın participated in a volunteering activity in Maribor, Slovenia, from 2015 to 2016. She worked in the field of arts & culture. Now she works for a company in Canada.
- Sündüs Öztürk participated in a volunteering activity in Warsaw, Poland, from 2015 to 2016. She worked with disabled kids as a nurse and a volunteer. Now she works in the American Hospital in Istanbul.
- Zeynep Akbaba participated in a volunteering activity in Tarrega, Spain, from 2017 to 2018. She worked with disabled people. Now she has a job as a flight attendant with Turkish Airlines.
- Nazlı Çelik participated in a volunteering activity in Maribor, Slovenia, from 2017 to 2018. She worked in the field of arts & culture. Now she works as a flight attendant with Turkish Airlines.

Volunteering is not only crucial for personal development of young people but also for the survival and sustainability of activities of the organizations involved. Small and medium-sized organisations in particular need staff and innovative ideas to meet the needs of their target groups / areas. Volunteers fill in this need. They bring fresh ideas, energy, enthusiasm and hope. Volunteering also sends a message of personal engagement and collaboration to the society. Once a few people engage in a collective effort, others start join in. The societies will grow stronger as long as civil contribution and volunteering persists.

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