Position

DNK Demands on the European Solidarity Corps

Introduction

The DNK is following the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps with scepticism. From our point of view, the basic requirements for a successful youth policy project have not been met, even if voluntary services for young people are now a top level responsibility at the EU Commission. In July, the 2017 Employment and Social Developments in Europe Review showed once more that young people face significantly worse prospects than their parents. For example they do not find a job or work under atypical and precarious contracts entailing a low level of social security. Thus, young people need working social and youth policies instead of gesture politics curing only the symptoms.

In the current political situation, the EU should have been concentrating on existing political instruments such as the EU Youth Strategy, the programme Erasmus+ and the Youth Employment Initiative, and ensure their further development. Focusing on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps must not impede the re-development of the European youth policy into a new, strengthened EU Youth Strategy after 2018. Increasing the opportunities for participation for young people and youth associations within the Structured Dialogue must be a focal point.

The programme and the legal basis have been published and the Web portal went live without consultation and without the appropriate involvement of the member states and the civic stakeholders working in this policy field. The negotiations on the proposal are due to be closed by the end of 2017; the according EU regulation can thus come into effect on 1 January 2018. The DNK requests that all important stakeholders involved in this political process. It is especially important that the ESC Committee structures include the youth associations and the civic stakeholders already working within the framework of the European Voluntary Services or similar formats, such as national or international voluntary services. At national level, the German National Committee needs to be involved in the steering committees and the evaluation process.

No losses for existing and working EU Youth Programmes

The European Solidarity Corps must not put a dent in existing youth exchange and volunteer programmes. Without an overall increase in the youth and education budgets, the fragmentation of the budget and the intended reallocation from other EU funds will weaken working programmes like YOUTH IN ACTION. As long as no specific budget item is assigned to the European Solidarity Corps and as long as the European Voluntary Services are funded through Erasmus+, the funding for Erasmus+ YOUTH IN ACTION must therefore be increased to continuously ensure that 10% of the Erasmus+ budget are dedicated to non-formal education. The annual ESC budget must be determined according to the needs of the agencies working in the field. In order to make previously promised funding available under the ESC programme, only youth and civic associations should be considered as agencies for the ESC voluntary services, as they provide the largest experience and best expertise in the field. At the same time, this can’t inhibit additional youth organisations to participate to the programme.
Strict separation of occupational and volunteering parts, and the National Agency’s role

The DNK rejects the exploitation of young people committing themselves on a voluntary basis. The current draft could lead to subsidising precarious employment with no prospects for young people. The DNK advocates a strict separation between employment measures and voluntary services. Different quality standards are requested in order to improve the separation between the two ESC strands. The ESC’s main purpose must be neither young people’s employability nor the EU disaster relief. Voluntary services need to be defined as a time of education and orientation. The long-standing difficulties young people have been encountering in the European job market request effective and sustainable measures at European level. They request changes in employment and economic policies. A mix-up with voluntary services is acceptable neither in form nor content. The Youth Employment Initiative needs to be further developed and its implementation improved.

According to the current draft, the National Agencies are responsible for the ESC implementation under Erasmus+. The ESC must not be a project of the National Agency alone: In countries where the structures for voluntary services are currently weak or non-existent, the European Solidarity Corps should involve and empower youth associations and NGO structures. The implementation should be adapted to the existing structures and circumstances in the respective countries. The National Agency does not have adequate competences in the field of employment policy. With regard to their experience, the social partners, the employment agencies network and the EURES agencies should be involved as well.

High quality standards and the inclusion of disadvantaged young people

The existing requirements for the European Voluntary Services must provide a reference for the ESC quality framework. The draft must clearly define a good offer with adequate social and labour rights within the European Solidarity Corps. Preparatory, intermediary and final workshops should be included as an educational programme in the EU Commission draft. Non-formal education plays a decisive part in acquiring personality and key skills (social competence, civic competence, language and learning competences) as well as in opening minds for cultural diversity, inclusion and in growing tolerance and solidarity. Being experts in youth and voluntary work, youth associations are the best stakeholders to offer those workshops. This requires additional funds for the youth associations to be able to act as agencies organising the educational support programme.

The following criteria must be met in order to achieve a strict separation between employment and voluntary services:

- Different quality requirements for different types of agencies: private, profit-oriented agencies must not replace good jobs with voluntary work.
- The Solidarity Corps cannot bypass national regulations on temporary contracts.
- European standards on voluntary services, internships and good labour practice must be met in order to acquire the quality label.
- Involvement of youth associations in the development and evaluation of materials for the ESC Resource Centre as well as in the development of the quality label; existing models like Europass or Youth Pass must be used as references.

We approve of the focus the EU Commission’s draft puts on disadvantaged young people. There is a special need for educational supportive measures here. To rely solely on an online platform cannot guarantee the quality of the activities and the inclusion of disadvantaged people, though. Therefore, further measures are needed in addition to the educational support programme to ensure inclusivity. Criteria must be established in order to make sure the process is transparent and non-discriminatory. According to the current draft, the registration as well as the choice of participants is supposed to happen online, meaning that young people will have to wait an indefinite time until they are chosen by an agency. The involvement of young people should be improved; the platform should be interactive for both sides. Young people should be able to choose their agency or activity themselves. They should be able to see which organisations view their profile. They should rate their experiences publicly. These ratings must be taken into account for the regular evaluation of the agencies. Moreover, these data should be incorporated in the general quality check within the ESC monitoring and evaluation process.
Our vision of Voluntary Services

The framework and the definitions of the Solidarity Corps need to be adapted urgently. All ESC activities need to have a European focus either through their format or the topics covered. Young people from an age as young as 16 years should be given access to voluntary activities with the European Solidarity Corps.

In the current draft the definition of voluntary services as “full time for a duration of 12 months max.” is too restrictive. For many volunteers, this does not reflect their reality and increasingly leads to a mix-up with employment measures. In contrast, the list of solidarity activities is too broad; youth associations as main stakeholders are not mentioned. Youth work agencies – youth associations and other civic organisations – need to be involved at all levels of the development and implementation. The funding of youth exchanges must not be a by-product but the goal of a good European youth policy. With the European elections in 2019 in mind, it is of special importance that this project be convincing and sustainable. It must effectively cater for the needs of young people.

The position was unanimously adopted by the Executive Board of the DNK on 6 October 2017.

The DNK is a working group of the German Federal Youth Council (DBJR), the German Sports Youth (dsj) and the Council of Political Youth Organisations (RPJ).

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