

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU’

COM(2011) 568 final

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Rapporteur: **Mr TRANTINA**

On 20 September 2011 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU

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The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 29 February 2012.

At its 479th plenary session, held on 28 and 29 March 2012 (meeting of 28 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 134 votes to 3 with 11 abstentions.

Foreword

Volunteering is an important expression of active citizenship; it builds social capital, contributes to social cohesion and solidarity, provides valuable economic benefits to society and enables individuals to realise their potential. Volunteering ‘refers to all types of voluntary activities which are undertaken of a person's own free will, choice and motivation, and is without concern for financial gain’⁽¹⁾. In view of the current crisis in Europe, demographic change and related challenges, it is important to recognise the key role volunteering plays for individuals as a facilitator for inclusion, empowerment, skills building and networking. However, volunteering needs to be clearly distinguished from paid employment and should by no means replace it.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was the first EU institution to propose a European Year of Volunteering in 2006, supporting the efforts of the EYV 2011 Alliance members and followed by others. The achievement of this objective in 2011 has provided the opportunity to raise awareness of the added value of the voluntary sector and has helped to make volunteering organisations more effective players at local, national and European levels. The European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship 2011 has also directly contributed to the recognition of the role of volunteering as a resource for societal problem-solving and confidence-building.

1. Recommendations

1.1 In order to provide an effective, sustainable environment for volunteering, the EESC recommends that the EU institutions and Member States take steps to ensure that national and EU legislation enables and encourages volunteering, protects volunteers and removes legal impediments to their activities.

1.2 However, regulation that restricts or prevents volunteering by being too descriptive or showing a lack of understanding of local volunteering traditions should be avoided and volunteering organisations should be directly involved in formulating such legislation. While in some countries the absence of a legal framework is not an obstacle, in some it hampers the lives of volunteers and volunteering providers, and in other countries volunteers face limited access to volunteering opportunities as a result of restrictive legal frameworks.

1.3 The European Commission should encourage the establishment of an efficient, well-organised infrastructure for volunteering at the level of the EU and Member States (such as facilities for volunteering organisations, recruitment, training, support for applying for funding), and boost the facilities of volunteering organisations and volunteer centres for providing information and training and for coordinating activities between volunteers and organisations.

1.4 The EU and Member States should ensure accessible, reliable and sustainable conditions for funding the voluntary sector and help volunteering organisations to adapt to the new funding environment. The EESC also calls upon the European Commission to increase financial support for volunteering in EU-funded programmes and the Structural Funds.

1.5 The EU institutions and Member States should allow and support volunteering as a contribution in kind for co-funding. The EESC also calls on the EU institutions and Member States to ensure that VAT legislation does not create any additional administrative burdens for volunteering organisations.

⁽¹⁾ Council Conclusions The role of voluntary activities in social policy from 3 October 2011.

1.6 In order to maintain momentum in the future, the EESC suggests that some practical steps be taken to maintain the legacy of the European Year of Volunteering beyond 2011 and to keep volunteering on national and European public agendas. The EESC requests the European Commission to begin with a consultative process (for instance, through a White Paper or any other effective means). This process could be considered to be the legacy of the European Year of Volunteering, as it would ensure that the volunteering agenda maintains a high profile at EU level. The 2012 and 2013 European thematic years should be also used well in this respect.

1.7 A more coordinated approach towards volunteering policy is needed from the EU institutions. It should be recognised as a cross-cutting policy theme and co-ordinated by a special unit within the European Commission, boosted by the required policy structures in other EU institutions⁽²⁾. This would ensure continuation of cooperation between the National Coordinating Bodies, a responsible unit in the Commission, an Intergroup or a Committee in the European Parliament, a clearly responsible Council formation and volunteering organisations at all levels.

1.8 Moreover, all stakeholders should make efforts to continue focusing on actively promoting volunteering among all citizens, and, depending on national situation, specifically focus on young people and senior citizens. Support for employer-backed volunteering should be increased in future, with Member States introducing measures to this effect (e.g. investigation into possible tax relief) and encouraging partnerships with the voluntary sector.

2. General comments on Volunteering

2.1 A volunteer-based/centred approach towards volunteering must be implemented in order to ensure quality, recognition, protection and access, without any kind of discrimination. The rights, dignity and responsibilities of volunteers should be recognised and respected and volunteers and their organisations should be aware of them⁽³⁾.

⁽²⁾ As the National Coordinating Bodies for the European Year of Volunteering 2011 expressed in their Warsaw Declaration for Sustainability of Action on Voluntary Activities and Active Citizenship (DESAVAC) on 1 December 2011: 'The European Commission is invited to develop – respecting the national, regional and local competences and needs – adequate structures for exchange and cooperation of all stakeholders and civil society in the field of volunteering beyond the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship 2011. A focal point on volunteering within the European Commission is needed.'

⁽³⁾ Since 2006 the EESC has supported discussions on the creation of a European Charter for Volunteering, which would establish the common basic principles for the rights and responsibilities of volunteers and their organisations. Such a charter would also help to guide improvements to the legislative environment for voluntary activities.

2.2 Specific attention should be given to volunteering recognising it as a tool for achieving the EU 2020 targets. It is therefore vital that volunteering is also included in the National Reform Programs to ensure its support.

2.3 The coordination of the voluntary sector, in order to drive forward its own agenda, the exchange of good practice and the creation/consolidation of volunteer platforms with the participation of all relevant stakeholders (employers, trade unions, other sectoral bodies, national authorities and the EU), should be maintained beyond 2011. The EESC appreciates the work of the EYV 2011 Alliance⁽⁴⁾, culminating in the adoption of its Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.)⁽⁵⁾, which offers a number of inspiring proposals for the further development of volunteering at EU and Member State level, as well as for social partners and NGOs.

2.4 In order to raise awareness of the socio-economic value and contribution made by the voluntary sector, the EESC deems it important to broadly collect and disseminate information on the social and economic impact of volunteering. As a first step, it is necessary to get agreement on and implement the use of the ILO manual on the measurement of volunteer work as a way to harmonise the methodology for collecting data on volunteering in Member States. However, the EESC also highlights the need for collating national data going beyond GDP, such as data on 'social indicators' as a measure of social wealth.

2.5 It is important to address the needs of all volunteers who are active in formal structures or undertaking voluntary activities on their own. The EU institutions and Member States cannot and must not ignore those who make themselves personally available to carry out volunteer work to help society. Their direct and indirect work with voluntary organisations should be highlighted. Also many areas of volunteering (besides youth, sports or the social sector) should be addressed in greater detail.

3. General comments from the EESC on the Commission Communication

3.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering. The EESC supports the definitions and challenges suggested.

3.2 The EESC is, however, concerned about its somewhat hasty publication and a lack of public consultation and impact assessment. A number of proposals by civil society were not included, notably those proposed later in the P.A.V.E.

⁽⁴⁾ www.eyv2011.eu.

⁽⁵⁾ http://www.eyv2011.eu/images/stories/pdf/EYV2011Alliance_PAVE_copyfriendly.pdf.

3.3 The Commission rightly lists a number of obstacles to voluntary activities and says that 'Member States made some progress on these issues in 2006 when they committed to cooperating on overcoming obstacles (...) But there is still a lot of work to do.' The Communication could be much more ambitious in bringing specific proposals for development in the field.

3.4 It is important to recognise that the EU Commission's responsibility is to act as a catalyst for the development of volunteer policy, although it would have a particular focus on the issues of cross border volunteering and mobility of volunteers within the EU. Whilst the responsibility for developing regulatory frameworks, good practice guidelines and strategies lies with the Member States, the Commission should play a role in collecting data, extending the Open Method of Co-ordination to ensure that volunteering is included in National Reform Programmes, as well as ensuring that EU funding regimes are inclusive of volunteering.

3.5 The EESC welcomes the fact that the 'Commission may introduce proposals that specifically cater for volunteering in the EU's employment strategy, its fight against poverty and social exclusion and in the context of the Commission's "New Skills for New Jobs" initiative.' However, the dangers of turning volunteering into an instrument for political objectives should be recognised and the core values of volunteering be respected and protected.

4. Specific comments on the Commission's proposals

4.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission's commitment to raising awareness amongst EU citizens and stakeholders about the different funding programmes that can be used by volunteers and for voluntary activities. Besides project-based funding, the possibilities for funding volunteering should be widened, for instance by introducing core funding, smaller grants and contract packages. Volunteering as a contribution in kind for co-funding should be permitted and preferably mandatory.

4.2 Given the current proposal to merge the Lifelong Learning programme and the Youth in Action programme into one single 'Erasmus for All' programme, the EESC fears that non-formal learning through participation in voluntary activities could be jeopardised – both content-wise and by limiting the resources. The EESC therefore asks the Commission to guarantee the independence of the current Youth in Action programme and its appropriate funding, and to continue with all its beneficial actions, including the European Voluntary Service, along with Youth Initiatives and support for European structures in the field of youth.

4.3 The EESC agrees with the Commission that appropriate follow-up of initiatives 'promoting cross-border volunteering in

the context of the 2013 European Year of Citizens' would be necessary. However, it is not sufficient to mention only cross-border volunteering; all volunteering should be included. The scope of the 2013 European thematic year should be extended to the year of Active Citizenship in order to serve this purpose and attract the attention of European citizens.

4.4 The EESC is closely observing the Commission's work on a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning that includes the volunteering dimension and the European Skills Passport. In order to record the learning achieved through volunteering in an appropriate way, the passport should not be a series of new separate certificates but, rather, a comprehensive document listing all practical experience, training, soft and vocational skills acquired through life-long learning, including those gained through volunteering, if desired by the volunteer.

4.5 In 2012, the Commission will make proposals for further developing the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU. The EESC believes the Open Method of Coordination could usefully be extended to the entire field of volunteering in Europe. This would make it possible to keep volunteering high on the EU agenda in a structured way.

4.6 In the case of sport, the EESC welcomes the proposal for new EU funding targeting this area and stresses the need to support volunteer activities, especially at grassroots level.

4.7 The EESC believes that awareness should be raised about the various ways in which employers could support the individual voluntary activities of employees, as an expression of their corporate social responsibility schemes. The social partners should have a say on different employee volunteering schemes, which should always be based on the principle of the voluntary nature of employee involvement.

4.8 The EESC is aware of several initiatives that seek to promote volunteering amongst staff of EU institutions and civil servants in the Member States. Based on the positive experiences of EESC staff, the EESC would recommend that special attention be given to the Solidarité Proposal⁽⁶⁾.

4.9 The EESC was expecting a much stronger response from the Commission towards civil society's call for the simplification of visa procedures for volunteers coming from third countries. Amendments to Council Directive 2004/114/EC should be presented, coming up with a special visa category for volunteers, equal to those for students.

⁽⁶⁾ <http://www.solidariteproposal.eu/>.

4.10 The EESC welcomes the idea of establishing the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (EVHAC) (7), however it has doubts about the truly volunteer-oriented nature of the EVHAC. A proper evaluation of pilot projects currently running should be undertaken before the introduction of the final proposal for EVHAC. Since the Commission appreciates the work of non-governmental organisations in development cooperation, the EESC therefore suggests that EU support for these mostly volunteer initiatives be further strengthened in order to improve their impact.

4.11 Regarding the links between volunteering and health/welfare, the EESC would like to stress that volunteers should not replace the paid staff in social care in their ordinary, core, day-to-day jobs. However, they might contribute added value to the services provided by professionals.

5. Summary of EESC activities during the European Year of Volunteering 2011

5.1 To prepare for the European Year of Volunteering and manage its activities, the EESC established the Coordination group on EYV 2011, chaired by Mr Pavel Trantina (Group III). Through a series of public hearings, the EESC also sought to open a discussion between employers, trade unions and non-governmental organisations on how to facilitate volunteering at EU level. The Coordination Group worked in close cooperation with the Commission Taskforce for EYV 2011, the EYV 2011 Alliance, the European Parliament's Interest Group on Volunteering and a number of other stakeholders, who took part in the EESC events.

5.2 During 2011, the EESC Coordination Group for EYV 2011 held five meetings, **four of which were combined with public hearings**, each devoted to a special topic concerning volunteering, in order to encourage dialogue between the various stakeholders in the field. The main partner for the hearings was the EYV 2011 Alliance, providing speakers from its working groups on particular topics, and the Commission Taskforce for EYV 2011.

1. Value and recognition of volunteering (23 March)
2. Quality of volunteering and infrastructure for volunteering (23 May)
3. Legal framework for volunteering (27 September)

4. Employee volunteering (9 November)

5.3 The EESC co-hosted several events, namely:

- 2nd EU Level Thematic Conference (23-24 May), organised by the European Commission – the EESC hosted the discussions related mainly to employee volunteering;
- 2nd Volunteering Convention and Stakeholder Conference (7-8 September) – organised by the European Youth Forum in the premises of the EESC and the European Parliament;
- The EYV 2011 Alliance coordination meetings were held in the EESC premises on 17 March, 19 May and 29 September 2011;
- The European Judging Process of the European Employee Volunteering Awards in February 2011.

5.4 The EESC's Group III organised a major conference on volunteering to mark the first ever Polish Presidency of the European Council and the European Year of Volunteering 2011 in Warsaw on 30 September 2011 in the Presidential Palace, attended by the President of Poland, the EU Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs and the Polish Social Policy and Labour Minister, among other key speakers. The overarching theme of the conference was *Europe of active citizens: volunteering*.

5.5 The president of the EESC and the president and members of the Coordination Group for EYV 2011 addressed many specialised meetings, including:

- Opening conference of the EYV 2011 in Budapest,
- 2nd EU Level Thematic Conference on Volunteering in Brussels,
- Closing conference of the EYV 2011 in Warsaw.

5.6 The EESC is preparing a book on Active Citizenship, which will illustrate the wide range of activities undertaken by EESC members in the professional, political and voluntary spheres.

Brussels, 28 March 2012.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON

(7) According to the Article 214, TFEU.