

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — on Investing in Europe's youth and the European Solidarity Corps**

(2017/C 306/04)

**Rapporteur:** Paweł Grzybowski (PL/ECR), Mayor of Rypin

**Reference documents:** Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — 'Investing in Europe's youth'

COM(2016) 940 final

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — 'A European Solidarity Corps'

COM(2016) 942 final

#### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

1. underlines that despite efforts to reduce youth unemployment, this problem continues to not only represent a major socioeconomic challenge but also undermine fairness, equality and solidarity, which underpin the European project;
2. welcomes the efforts made by the European Commission, which arise out of the concern expressed by the President of the European Commission about the difficult situation currently being experienced by many young people hard hit by the crisis, and which are taking shape in the form of the 'Investing in Europe's youth' and 'European Solidarity Corps' initiatives;
3. emphasises the importance of the involvement of local and regional authorities, as well as other actors, including the private sector and third-sector bodies, for the delivery of measures to ensure young people's integration into the labour market;
4. calls on the institutions of the European Union to cooperate with the private sector and third-sector bodies, and also calls for programmes that aim to improve the fit between labour market needs and employees' skills to be developed with the participation of the private sector and the third sector;
5. emphasises that youth unemployment has ramifications at local, national and EU levels and underlines that education, professional training and youth matters are within the competence of the Member States and that the European Union, in accordance with Article 6 TFEU, must support, coordinate and supplement national measures given that boosting employment is a matter of common interest. Thus, the success of relevant EU measures, which must comply with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, depends on the cooperation with local and regional authorities;

#### **Investing in Europe's youth**

6. reiterates that ensuring equal opportunities, promoting social inclusion and improving the competitiveness of young people on the labour market, while fostering youth participation and ownership of their educational and career path, the strengthening of youth work, non-discrimination and intercultural understanding, should remain the key objectives of the EU's youth policy; points out, in this regard, that access to transportation facilities and access to information are also important factors in enabling equality of opportunities and this needs to be taken into account;
7. is in favour of an integrated incentive for active partnership at all government and local and regional authority levels that are responsible for working with young people and youth organisations;

8. is also convinced that measures are needed to ensure a better start for young people in their working life, by investing in their technical knowledge and behavioural skills, and professional and social interaction, skills and experience as well as helping them to enter the labour market, by creating their own work or by recruiting them to jobs matching their profile or investing in a model which fosters opportunities to retrain, opening the door to new work opportunities;

9. proposes that one specific measure should be to develop and support workshops for young people, where they would get to experience different kinds of profession and thus potentially find a new area of work that interests them;

10. is of the opinion that various forms of investment in young people — in both formal and non-formal training — lay the groundwork for a fair, open, inclusive and well-functioning democratic society characterised with social mobility, intercultural integration, and sustainable development and growth; is also convinced of the importance of creating opportunities for our youth that would enable them to have due access to the common goods created by the EU as well as enabling them to contribute more actively to solidarity projects and to shaping Europe's future;

11. although the situation of young people on the labour market has markedly improved in many Member States in recent years, the 4 million young unemployed are cause for deep concern, with marked divergences not only amongst Member States but also within the same State; notes that, despite measures and projects undertaken at European and national level in recent years aimed at improving the labour market integration of young people and increasing their employment rate, continued Member States and EU actions are required;

12. it is particularly troubling that very many young people's education does not correspond to the challenges of the contemporary labour market and that there is insufficient support for developing entrepreneurial projects, innovation and research, as changes made to Member States' education systems are not keeping up with dynamic economic and social developments. Many young people therefore enter the labour market unprepared to meet social and personal expectations;

13. it is extremely worrying that research has shown that more than half of young people in Europe consider themselves to be excluded from social, economic and political life, while at the same time expressing a strong desire to participate in these areas in their countries; the Committee would also point out that, in parallel with this, young people are showing an increasing degree of passivity with regard to social problems, the economic situation and politics;

14. welcomes the fact that the European Commission understands that measures in this area need to be focused on the Member States. The Committee agrees with the view that it is primarily up to Member States and their regional and local governments to find sufficient ways and means to achieve the expected objectives. Therefore the Commission should provide the maximum support for these measures and should efficiently and effectively coordinate steps taken by individual countries so as to augment the positive effects of these measures across the entire EU;

15. in this context, draws particular attention to the fact that local and regional authorities must play a key role in implementing the planned measures within individual countries;

16. this conviction arises from the fact that it is these structures, due to their proximity to pressing social issues, that have the best knowledge of the specific, local, supra-local or regional characteristics of these issues. They also have generally well-functioning institutions already in place that have been tackling challenges in this area for years. Concentrating efforts and resources via these tried and tested institutions which enjoy democratic legitimacy among their local communities is the most effective way to step up planned measures as quickly as possible;

17. welcomes the scope of the measures carried out under the Youth Employment Initiative, the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. Expects that the upcoming revision of the MFF will continue paying due attention beyond 2020 to the EU's multiple social challenges, including education, youth employment and social inclusion, and that it will pay particular attention to the least favoured regions, as outlined in Article 174 TFEU;

18. also welcomes the European Investment Bank's measures to support young entrepreneurs and underlines the importance of access to finance, urging for the continuation of such measures;

19. reiterates its support for the 'Youth Guarantee' scheme. In light of some local and regional challenges faced, calls on the Council to work towards simplified procedures for remuneration of internships so as to ensure that the procedures do not act as a disincentive;

20. calls on the European Commission to take the views of local and regional authorities into account when revising the post-2018 EU Youth Strategy;

21. also emphasises that the European Commission's efforts to guarantee high-quality vocational education, and the establishment of training systems to help young people enter the labour market, should also factor in the issue of young people's acquisition of knowledge and (especially practical) skills by means of participation in contexts of non-formal and informal education. Reiterates in this respect its call for cooperation developed on the basis of partnerships between national, regional and local authorities, companies, employees and employee associations, as well as civil society players, with the aim of taking more account of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning<sup>(1)</sup>; is also convinced that it is important to adopt uniform validation systems which enable the transferable skills gained through non-formal education to be recognised and formalised, and to work to ensure that the labour market recognises the value of such skills alongside formal educational qualifications;

22. particularly welcomes the fact that the European Commission acknowledges the importance of the ERASMUS+ programme as one of the most important instruments for developing young people's international activity and providing them with educational and personal skills training, as well as shaping their awareness of Europe and the global market; welcomes the international activity of all of the key players involved in promoting this exchange, including the schools and vocational training institutes; emphasises the need to develop this programme even more intensively, including by increasing the funds available under the programme within the existing budgetary framework. At the same time, the Committee points out that strengthening the role of higher education establishments and tertiary sector bodies (which are directly responsible for implementing this programme) must be one of the ways to enhance the impact of mobility and (formal and informal) training instruments under ERASMUS+. The Committee therefore recommends those solutions that will enable higher education establishments and NGOs to design even more effective tools so as to develop international mobility and training instruments;

### **European Solidarity Corps**

23. welcomes the idea of establishing a European Solidarity Corps (ESC) and greatly appreciates the modern way of recruiting people interested in the activities offered by the European Solidarity Corps, based on registration via a dedicated website. It should be possible to complement this means of registration with other tools that ensure and facilitate the participation of all young people, especially those in the most vulnerable situations. This method should serve to disseminate the ideas of the ESC, especially the importance of solidarity as the principal value that binds the European community together. The Committee also stresses the need to find solutions that will ensure that young people can join the ESC regardless of their socioeconomic situation and level of training. Solutions must also be found to enable young people with limited access to the internet to take part in the ESC;

24. calls on the European Commission to swiftly establish the legal basis of the ESC and to propose a sustainable way to finance it beyond 2017 so as to avoid overburdening existing funding programmes such as Erasmus+ and to be able to respond to the expectations of a fast growing number of young people applying to join the ESC;

25. points out that this initiative must not create any undue red tape for young people willing to participate and should involve existing youth organisations in the Member States, as well as existing institutions — especially at local, supra-local and regional level — that are responsible for youth policy and supporting youth organisations;

26. draws attention to the need to promote the European Solidarity Corps by putting in place an administrative system that would simplify participation in volunteering activities, both for participants and for civil society organisations;

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<sup>(1)</sup> CoR opinion on 'A new Skills Agenda for Europe' (COR-2016-04094).

27. emphasises that the two strands of the European Solidarity Corps (volunteering and occupational) should be complementary but clearly demarcated in order to be able to implement the necessary mechanisms to prevent undeclared employment; at the same time, the ESC should not be used for replacing paid jobs with unpaid volunteering;
28. points out that the ESC Charter should lay special emphasis on the practical dimension of European solidarity: forging lasting ties between the societies that make up the European community while strengthening the sense of European identity;
29. welcomes the emphasis on the benefits of interregional and cross-border cooperation, but underlines that the ESC must also focus on local volunteering. A large majority of voluntary work takes place where volunteers live. Focusing on this type of voluntary work that benefits local communities can help to build a more robust job market, prevent social exclusion and counteract migration from rural to urban areas;
30. expresses its support for the ESC's goal to help those who are in need. Local communities' needs and expectations should be an important criterion when evaluating the quality of projects;
31. draws attention to the need to develop a common framework for cooperation between the ESC and the United Nations Volunteers programme, the United States Peace Corps, and other similar organisations;
32. stresses that the ESC's activities need to be designed so as to enable the existing potential of youth organisations in Europe, and the voluntary work they carry out, to be harnessed. The ESC must not be an institution that will take over or supersede the work previously carried out by these organisations — rather, it should supplement it. The Committee notes that involving youth organisations active within European countries and thereby encouraging them to work with the ESC will be a key factor for the ESC's success. Furthermore, stresses the need to recognise the extremely important role of the experience accumulated over several decades by European youth organisations in the fields of volunteer management and community development — and to make use of this knowledge base — when drawing up the European Solidarity Corps strategy;
33. stresses the need to establish tools to monitor and support the young people participating in order to ensure the quality of the activities offered by the European Solidarity Corps, and also to ensure the young people are trained and prepared for their participation in the various activities offered by the Corps. Furthermore, hosting organisations involved in the occupational strand, especially regarding internships and apprenticeships, should follow the principles and standards such as those outlined in the European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships in order to guarantee quality jobs placements;
34. the future relationship between the ESC and the European Voluntary Service (EVS) also needs to be clarified in order to avoid overlaps and ensure continuity and efficiency as regards the opportunities provided by the EU;
35. points out that the establishment of the ESC should also be accompanied by the development of a system to recognise the skills acquired through ESC voluntary work, both in the public and private sectors and in higher education institutions. Such skills are a component of informal education, something which is currently not reflected in a proper system of official certification of qualifications;
36. emphasises that enabling young people to acquire additional skills by means of work and volunteering benefits both the public and private sectors, as it enhances young people's employability, creating a more competitive talent pool for them to hire from; in this connection, calls for cooperation with the private sector so as to explore how the skills acquired can better match the needs of the labour market.

Brussels, 11 May 2017.

*The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Markku MARKKULA

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